

NOTES

THAI POETRY TRANSLATION: A REVIEW AND SOME NEW EXAMPLES

In the January 1977 issue of this journal, in the Review Article "On translating Thai poetry", I put forward some questions on the basic principles of poetry translation. In the present article I pursue the theme of problems in translating poetry, and sketch some further examples in approaching the subject. To recapitulate the essentials:

(a) Should poetry be translated at all? Some authorities say that it is impossible to translate poetry from one language into another without losing the essence of the poem. Perhaps so, but the context implies that the best poems lose their excellence, while surely doggerel in one language can become good poetry in translation. So certainly poetry should be translated.

(b) Should poetry be translated into prose? No—the lingo of poetry and of prose are not the same, and prose cannot catch the essence of poetry. However, if poetry really must be translated into prose, at least the translation must be accurate. We want to know what the poet says and not what high-flung thoughts the translator may have.

(c) How should poetry be translated?—as poetry in the language translated into. If Thai poetry is translated into, say, English, should it be in blank verse or rhyme? Rhyme, I think. Rhyme is such an inherent quality in Thai poetry that anything unrhymed would not be considered poetry in Thai.

(d) Should Thai poetry be translated with end-rhymes, or should the original rhyme scheme be retained? This is a difficult question, because retaining the original form is more difficult than using end-rhymes. In my previous article I made the case that the Thai *kloang* (โคลง) should be translated into its own *kloang* form; I have tried a few examples which could even be chanted to the Thai tune, but I thought the exercise impossible until Geoffrey de Graff translated a sequence of 13 quatrains from the Ayudhya period (printed as an annex to my previous article). As for the other Thai genres, I made no commitment because at that time there were not enough examples to give an opinion.

(e) In translating rhymed poetry with rhymes it is virtually impossible to retain the entire sense of the original. Paraphrase must be used; the question is how much should be allowed. This depends on the ability of the translator and what he wants to retain. This point will not be discussed here for lack of space.

With these premises in mind, I would like to turn to the recently published volume *Three Thai Poets*, a short anthology of Thai poetry with translations commemorating the regional poetical get-together "ASEAN Poetry '78", held at Jakarta

(publ. by Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, Bangkok, 1978). Three Thai poets went there—Angkarn Kalyanapong, Naowarat Pongpaiboon and Wityakorn Chiengkul. In the booklet produced for the occasion appear brief biographical notes on the poets, as well as a few short pieces translated by various hands.

Wityakorn Chiengkul is a Thammasat University poet of the agitation period. Five of his pieces are reproduced, with translations by Vagn Plenge and Michael Wright. I doubt if Wityakorn can be classed as a poet at all, or at any rate a Thai poet. A poet must produce and continue producing. I do not know Wityakorn's work, but from the brief note given in the booklet he would appear to have written a few short journalistic pieces which have been collected with his prose writing. Not enough for a poet. As for being a Thai poet, Thai poetry has many forms, all of which can be sung or at least chanted. Wityakorn writes free verse which is not chantable, so he should not be considered a Thai poet.

Naowarat Pongpaiboon is another Thammasat poet, older than Wityakorn. He is a classicist with 20 years' production behind him, having published two volumes of collected short pieces and two of long poems in the *kloang* form, each of 500 quatrains. Among his earliest pieces he produced some lovely lyrics in the *glon* (กลอน) and *garp* (กาพย์) genres, but with the production of his two long pieces he became known as a modern master of the *kloang*, while his *glon* and *garp* went through a period of decline. Five pieces are given and translated in the booklet, but they all come from the second volume of collected poems and contain no *kloang*.

Angkarn Kalyanapong, the eldest of the three, is a poet and painter from Silpakorn University. Seven pieces are reproduced of which six are translated, three by S. Sivaraksa and H. Woodward, and one by Allen Ginsberg. Angkarn is a romantic with 30 years' writing and painting behind him. He has produced three books of poems, and has a fourth ready for publication. As a poet Angkarn is controversial; some people deny that he is a poet at all. So he has not attained the same wide acceptance that Naowarat has. But it needs only be remembered that he is a poet and artist combined, like William Blake, and his poetry becomes easy to understand. He uses the *kloang* form most competently, but his main work is done in a combination of *garp* and *glon*, something unorthodox and quite unacceptable to academics and traditionalists. His best work was done while still a student at Silpakorn. Since then he has produced nothing fresh, only baroque repetitions mixed with childishness when he forgets that quantity does not necessarily mean quality. The six pieces translated include one of his best and one of his worst pieces. Even his admirers admit that Angkarn is poetically dead on his feet, and has been so for a long time; but, being an optimist, I still have hopes that his new book will show some much-needed advance.

Poetry translated into prose :

We return to the booklet under review and, quoting one of the selections by Angkarn and two translations of it, look into some of these problems again by starting with the second, namely whether poetry should be translated into prose.

วักทะเล

วักทะเลเทใส่จาน
เออมเก็บบางดวงดาว

คุบหอยเรียงระบำ
กังกากงกอนัน

คางคกขานวาทอง
องอ่างไปด้วยกัน

ใส่เดือนเที่ยวเกี้ยวสาว
ทุกอุทินทรีย์มีบำ

เทพไต้เบื่อน่ายวิมาน
ชมอาชมวาม

บาสุมทุมพุ่มไม้
ขเลอยละเมอท่า

ใครวิเศษสวยฟ้า
กาลสมัยมอมมันเมา

รับประทานกับข้าวขาว
ไว้คลุกเคล้าชาวเกลอกิน
เต็นรำทำเพลงวังเวงสน

ไปกินตะวันและจันทร์
ลอยล่องท่องเที่ยวสวรรค์
เวทदानนหน้เข้ากะลา

ชาวอัสรนอนชั้นฟ้า
เข็ดหน้าได้ดิบได้ดี

ทะยานลงดินมากินขี้
รสวิเศษสุดที่จะกล่าวคำ

พูดได้ปรัชญาลึกล้ำ
คำนวณนาหนักแห่งเงา

ใครอยู่หล้าเลวโง่เขลา
โลกเอาเถิดประเสริฐเอย

*by Angkarn Kalyanapong, translated by
S. Sivaraksa and H. Woodward*

Scoop up the sea, pour it in a bowl,
and dine on it and rice,
reach out, gather some stars,
and mix them with salt to eat,

Look at crabs and oysters dancing with joy
and playing nostalgic songs,
or chameleons and galley worms flying
to eat the sun and moon!

A toad climbs on a golden palanquin
and floats around Heaven on special tour.
He goes together with a bull frog,
and the angels there escape, into the shell
of a coconut.

Earthworms woo maids,
the Apsaras who sleep in Heaven,
and every amoeba
sticks up his nose because of his very
high status.

The gods are bored with celestial abodes
so leap down to eat the dung on earth.
This waste matter they praise,
for its taste is most splendid and can't
be described.

Groves of trees and forests
can talk deep philosophy.
Sawdust in its sleep
can calculate the weight of shadows.

Anyone who doesn't go up to Heaven
and remains below on earth is stupid,
for the heavy would be light,
and the world is very, very drunk.

by Angkarn Kalyanapong, translated by Allen Ginsberg

Take seawater Put in a plate Eat it with white rice
Collect some stars mix with salt for eating
Watching crabs and shellfish dancing and singing pretty
Insects crawling on two feet flap upward to eat sun and moon
Wart toads high on gold palanquins fly up to see Heaven
Smooth frogs going along on the trip while devas hide in conconutshells
Rain worms make love with girls Sleeping nights with them in the sky
Millions of cells and amoebas lift their heads and get rich
The angels are sick of their skies and jump down to earth to eat shit
Enjoy faeces the taste, They can't find words for it
Forest creepers and trees talk about deep philosophy
Sawdust in the dream calculates the weight of shadow
Those who are afraid to go Heavenly and stay down on earth are acting silly
As the heavy stuff gets lighter there'll be the greatest drunkenness.

These translations have been made in what might be called the 'Can you lend me a dictionary, please, sir?' manner. Thai poetry is terse, and in the best examples extremely precise, so why all this verbosity? It is true that Angkarn himself is verbose, and the first verse can be translated simply 'Eat seawater and white rice mixed with salted stars', but Angkarn's verbosity is no reason for all the excess verbiage produced.

Then take the last verse :

กาลเวลามอมมันเมา

โลกเอาเถิดประเสริฐเอย

I have said that translations into prose must at least be accurate. I see nothing about being drunk or drunkenness in this verse. “มอมมันเมา” here means something like ‘to be made addicted to’; and where has the word ‘greed’ (โลภ) disappeared to? The last line says ‘Time creates addicts, (so) be superbly greedy.’ True, this doesn’t make sense, but the original had no sense anyway, and Angkarn himself would have difficulty in paraphrasing his own rubbish.

It is true that poetry can be obscure, but it must be allied with euphony (such as Dylan Thomas’s); however, Angkarn is not euphonic considering his reputation. Poets create with their inner ear (such as Naowarat does), but Angkarn chants his lines as he composes; and people who read but do not chant poetry find Angkarn’s combination of obscurity and cacophony unbearable. This is one reason, and a good one, for people not accepting that Angkarn is a poet at all. If you tell these people that Angkarn’s verse must be chanted or sung, they will ask, perhaps with justification, then why doesn’t he write a song instead of a poem? They even question whether Angkarn knows how to write orthodox *garp* or *glon* at all. (In all fairness to Angkarn, though, while the verse selected here is probably his very worst piece, he has produced some very, very nice pieces on art and archeology—subjects he knows well.)

Of the translators, Allen Ginsberg is a poet of considerable stature in his own right, and he knows the rhythm of language better than laymen. It is generally accepted that the best translations of poetry are those made by poets, and on this score Ginsberg qualifies. But he doesn’t know the Thai language, so is it not an insult to Thai poetry that he should translate Angkarn at all? Imagine me translating a Jewish poem!

A case could easily be put forward that Thai poetry is better than English poetry. I do not expect anybody to accept this unless, of course, he has written poetry in both languages himself. Then he will know without being told, but I will say so anyway. Of course, Siam and the West lie on different sides of the globe, so no real comparison can be made. But superficially, all the immemorial themes of universal poetry—love, death, time, beauty of nature and the profounder emotions, as well as nursery rhymes, are to be found in Thai poetry—to say nothing about a pretty substantial dose of humour.

But Thai poetry can also be used for all sorts of things not found in English poetry. Take religion, for instance. I do not know of any archbishop or pope giving sermons in verse, but any Tom-Dick-and-Harry monk can produce or chant a sermon with no difficulty. And some religious pieces are among the glory of Thai poetry.

Then take a poem in *garp* like the Phra Chaya. Suriya story by Sunthorn Phu. Until recently this was a primary reader for children of kindergarten age; and some of Phya Sri Sunthorn Wohan’s pieces, particularly the long “Waipot praban”, is a virtual dictionary in verse and is still unsurpassed today.

One more point, namely that Thai is a monosyllabic and tonal language. The tones automatically make Thai poetry euphonic no matter in what dialect it is written, while monosyllables make the poetry concise.

All this does not mean that Thai poets are better than English poets, but simply that Thai poetry is better than its English counterpart.

Translation into verse

Professor Walter Vella of Hawaii University was in Bangkok a couple of years ago to do research on Sunthorn Phu. He is writing a biography of the poet, and will make translations. We had a few discussions on the subject, and Vella mentioned in particular the difficulty of translating Thai monosyllables while making the exercise compact. He put forward as example the word กล้วย which becomes 'banana', a word of three syllables. He wrote a *kloang* in Thai on the subject which unfortunately I have forgotten; but as I remember the sense and the wit, I will rehash it in my own words, and at the same time make a quick translation of the quatrain.

๑ โคลงคำฝรั่งเรื่องกล้วย	ยากนัก หนานา
มากพยางค์ข้างหนัก	อกข้า
อย่างไรไม่รู้จัก	บรรจ ใต้แฮ
กล้วยवानานาหน้า	หมดสนศรัทธาฯ
English words in a Syllabic'ly long Terseness in the song Such as Banana	Thai kloang by far is lost and not Gluey.

Quatrain by Sri Praj

๑ ออกปากไว้กับเจ้า	เป็นสัจ
ดั่งหนึ่งเหลี่ยมเพชรรัตน์	ยอดตง
ขอร่วมภริมย์สวัสดิ์	เสมอขพ
จงแม่เชื่อเรียมครึ่ง	หนึ่งนลองดูฯ

Quatrain by Sri Praj, translated by Geoffrey de Graff

True my every vow	to thee
As a jewel would be,	set high
Come, love, share with me	life's bliss
Come, believe me, try	me just this once.

Quatrain by Sri Praj, translated by Premchaya

A true vow of love for thee I swear
That like a jewel set on high doth shine
Come live with me, this love of ours we'll share,
Believe this, once tried, forever thine.

From Sunthorn Phu's "Nirat phu khao thong"

๑ ถึงหน้าแพแลเห็นเรือท่น	คิดถึงครั่งก่อนมาน้ำตาไหล
เคยหอมรับกับพระจมนไวย	เมอลงในเรือท่นบัลลังก์ทอง
พระทรงแปลงแต่งบทพจนาคถ์	เคยรับราชโองการอ่านฉลอง
จนกลิ่นสิ้นแม่น้ำและลำคลอง	มิได้ข้อมเคืองขัดพระหัตถ์ฯ ๑

Translated with end rhymes

In front of the wharf I saw the King's boat—
Tears came to my eyes at the memory,
When Phra J'muen Wai and I were afloat,
By the golden palanquin would we be.

The King was wont to compose poetry,
Which it was my duty to recite
Through the long, long Kathin ceremony,
To his satisfaction and my delight.

๑ เคยหอมบไกลได้กลิ่นสุคนธ์ตระหลบ	ลองอบรสชื่นน่านาสา
สิ้นแผ่นดินสนรสสุคนธา	วาสนาเรากสิ้นกลิ่นสุคนธ์
คูในวังยังเห็นหอพระอิฐ	ตงสติเต็มถวายผ่ายกุศล
ทงปิ่นเกล้าเจ้าพิภพอบสกล	ให้พ้องพินภัยสำราญผ่านบุรินทร์ ๑

Translated with original rhyme scheme

Near to, I could smell the King's scent,
Sweetly rend'ring the air at hand:
The King died, tasteless became the land—
He died, and scentless my own fate.

In the Palace His ashes in an urn,
I in turn my merit dedicate
To Him, and the Majesty in state
For a great and glorious reign.

This passage is tricky. The poet is playing with the words 'taste' and 'smell' in a sort of sense-pun. In the reign of King Lertla, who was a poet himself, Sunthorn Phu was a royal scribe and the King's favourite. When the King went on his royal

business by water, Sunthorn Phu would be in the same boat, near to the King; to while away the time the King would compose poems and Sunthorn Phu, as scribe, would write down or read back the verses. He was near enough to get the full whiff of the scent that the King used—and imagine how strong would a king's scent be! When King Lertla died, Sunthorn Phu became ordained, during which time he wrote this piece; so he said that his destiny, as a monk, was without scent—the scents of a layman. As a monk the poet attained merit, which merit he transferred to the late and regnant monarchs.

To summarize briefly, let us note the following points.

(a) Inaccurate, dictionary-prose translations degrade Thai poetry. Rather than produce such translations it is far better not to translate at all.

(b) Regarding translation in rhyme, we have seen in Premchaya's translation an example with end-rhymes that is adequate, but not wholly satisfactory (too sugary for Sri Praj, though probably suitable for Sunthorn Phu's *glon* and even Narindra In's *kloang*). The pentameter line is very easy, perhaps as easy as the *garp* forms which schoolboys learn in their early teens, and to add end-rhymes does not make the exercise any more difficult than, say, writing *glon*, which again schoolboys learn when young. So there is no reason for translating without rhymes and losing the main characteristic of Thai poetry.

(c) Translation into original forms is more difficult but not impossible, as we have seen from de Graff's translation of Sri Praj's *kloang*. This translation is wholly accurate, an ideal contribution where the sense, sound and even spirit of the original have been retained. But it is not possible to translate like this all the time; in translating poetry as poetry, which is a different operation from making accurate prose translations, a certain amount of paraphrasing is necessary. For instance, my translation of Vella's *kloang* is more a rewriting of the quatrain than a translation, yet the general sense is there. Of course it is possible to sharpen the accuracy, by changing the Thai or English, but there seems to be no reason to do so. But the problem of when a translation is translation, and when it is paraphrase, cannot be dealt with in this short paper.

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