



Translating Japanese Haiku and Tanka from English

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Abstract

Literature in translation on a world stage is becoming of more and more consequence. The approach to literature as a “unifying”, “worlding” power as defined by Pheng Cheah, is gaining the momentum. On a broadest scale, literature is evolving from translation (Rebeca Walkowitz), a phenomenon whose value should not be judged by external political, economical and similar approaches (Pascale Casanova) and an object whose verbal expression and meaning may not be explained by totally focusing on its linguistic character (multilingual approach). Linguistic value of the work of literature is interpreted as a separate function in the construction of a literary work and its posterior translation (Jeremy Munday). A publication of translation of 6 Japanese poets from English into Lithuanian is a case study to see the function of the above ideas. Alfonsas Andriškevičius, a Lithuanian poet, essayist, literary and art critic undertook this endeavour with the feeling of the lack of “poeticity” in the present haiku and tanka translations from Japanese into Lithuanian.

Keywords: World Literature, Multilingualism, haiku, tanka, poetry translation

1. Introduction

Reading and judging about literature in translation is a practice that has been formed since ever so long. In fact, to quote an American scholar Walkowitz “there is nothing older than translation” (Walkowitz, 2015, p. 6). Classical samples of literature are well known for their successful or unsuccessful translations; aesthetic influences of these translated masterpieces have been shaping imaginations of readers of many generations. The value of translation for the humanity worldwide is high, to quote Borges “translation is a more advanced stage of civilization,” or “a more advanced stage of writing.” (Borges, 2000, p. 9.) Thus, the license to take translations for the object of study in place of the original is already established with many names to support this approach. The global circumstances of the existential momentum, the possibilities for encountering and reading a text originally coming from any linguistic or cultural background and which is revealing of new or lost truths have been changing at a great speed within last several years. More, the demand for translation becomes a marketing force. For example, London Book Fair (LBF), a massive book market influencer in the modern literary publishing and distribution business keeps announcing the Market Focus Event calling for translations of diverse cultures. In 2022 the Market Focus celebrated Emirati writers, Sharjah event, in 2019 - Indonesian writers, and in 2018 the Baltic States –Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian. Translations of works from Baltic national languages were commissioned, critical reviews appeared in online journals *Asymptote*, *Vagabond Voices*, *Words Without Borders*. Another salient sample of a global outreach for literary translations in the present world is seen in the Dublin Literary Award day at the LBF. Dublin Literary Award is the prize for international fiction proposed by the libraries, in other words by the college of readers worldwide and it has been on since 1966. Dublin Literary Award treats translated books on a par with books originally conceived and written in English. The 2024 award went to “Solenoid”, a novel by a Romanian writer

Mircea Cărtărescu translated into English by Seán Cotter. Translation into English gave a global perspective for “a major European writer who is still relatively little known to English-language readers [...] opening up Cărtărescu’s work to an entirely new readership.” (O’Donoghue, 2024)

The above examples show positive results of literatures from different countries and in diverse languages joining the world creative content arena. However, the instrumental dominance of the English language is also questioned and disputed in various post-colonial narratives. This important discussion will not be part of the present paper. The position of the paper is rather drawn from Pascale Casanova’s proposition to overcome such criticism of literature that “runs the risk of reducing the literary to the political, [...] over the actual aesthetic” (Casanova, 2005). This approach she calls “external” criticism and calls, instead, for the “internal” criticism in her article “Literature as a World”. Casanova, speaking of the phenomenon of a World Literature, seeks to look into aesthetics of a literary work considering it “another world, whose divisions and frontiers are relatively independent of political and linguistic borders.” (Casanova, 2005) Casanova’s position is supported by a Berkeley University professor’s, Pheng Cheah’s statement that World Literature can be seen as “an active power in the making of worlds” and this “worlding” power he holds responsible for keeping the world together (Hall, 2020). The universality of literature above “external” features which separate literary works into language, geography, readership dependent material comes through in this line of approach.

Another important factor in approach to literatures in the world is the existing cultural ecology of multilingualism, which stresses not only the presence of a linguistic diversity, but also brings forward the concept of meaning in literature and, particularly, in poetry, as “always to an extent extralinguistic, working through association image and sensory memory” (Capildeo in Gilmour, 2021). To a certain extent, this understanding of literature holding a value outside the languages it may be rendered, translated to recalls the classical theories of translation. As an example a more recent statement by Jeremy Munday that in translation process the translator changes an original written text in original verbal language into a written text in a different verbal language (Jannessari, 2008) could be brought to attention. Munday’s approach indicates the changeable perspective in a translation effect but the value, meaning, stand out as unchanged and unchangeable and are held above the written text in one verbal language.

The possibilities, potential and the processes that take place in the consolidation of what is becoming World Literature can also be seen in the following situation of Japanese *haiku* presence and translation in contemporary Lithuanian literature.

1.1 Japanese Haiku in Lithuania

The history of translations from Japanese to Lithuanian is long and rather successful. The oldest translations from Japanese to Lithuanian appear as early as the first years of Lithuanian independence (1906, 1907 etc.), and the translators of the first texts from Japanese into Lithuanian were political and cultural functionaries that gave visibility and weight of these translations in building Lithuanian national state, culture and ideology (Ritoja, n.d.). However, a special form of Japanese poetry, *haiku* and *tanka*, won the spot in the poetry loving hearts of Lithuanian readers, poets and translators alike. Leading Lithuanian poets such as Sigita Geda, Romualdas Neimantas, Jonas Jakštas, Vytautas Karalius, Kostas Korsakas, Vladas Baltuškevičius and others were translating Japanese poetry mostly from intermediary languages (Russian, English, French, Spanish, German, Italian etc.) A Lithuanian poet Artūras Šilanskas is a known *haiku* poet who writes and publishes in several languages, Japanese among them, e.g. in *Mainichi Daily* (Japan), *Still* (England), *Ulitka* (Russia) (Ritoja, n.d.).

In the period following 2015 Vilnius University had successfully prepared many young translators from Japanese: V. Devėnaitė, I. Susnytė, J. Polonskaitė (Ignotienė), I. Baronina, G. Enciūtė, D. Kučevičiūtė, K. Šešelgytė, M. Kriaučiūnas among them. The readers in Lithuania could enjoy numerous and rather successful publications in Lithuanian of Japanese folk tales, poetry, contemporary prose writings, predominantly those of Haruki Murakami. However, in 2022, Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, a writer, an essayist, an art historian and a researcher, a critic, a poet and an individual with refined and sensitive taste in art and literature published a collection of 6 Japanese *haiku* and *tanka* poets translated from English.

1.2 Andriuškevičius’s approach and translation of 6 Japanese haiku and tanka poets

Andriuškevičius’s apology in the introduction to the selection of translations says that despite of his long time admiration of Japanese poetry, of which he became familiar through Russian, later English languages, he finds most of recent Lithuanian publications wanting in poeticity “... aiškiai mačiau, kad poezijos jiems kartais trūksta... O juk poetiškumas, ne

tikslumas, mano galva, yra svarbiausia poetinio kūrinio vertimo vertybė./ I could clearly see that they sometimes lack poetry... And after all, poeticity, not accuracy, is, in my opinion, the most important value of a translation of a poetic work.” (Andriuškevičius, 2022, p.10).

Andriuškevičius’s ‘sensory memory’ of *haiku*, to mention Capildeo’s concept, is that of “Lakonika. Griežtumas (poetinis). Buitinė detalė, paskui save velkanti gelmę. Ir, žinoma, vienatvės bei melancholijos prieskoniai./ Laconicism. Rigour (poetic). A mundane detail, carrying depth with it. And, of course, a touch of solitude and melancholy.” (Andriuškevičius, 2022, p.9)

Andriuškevičius’s selection for the book is very rich, he translates Chiyo-Ni (1703-1775), Taneda Santoka (1822-1940), Saito Mokichi (1882-1953), Kitahara Hakushū (1885-1942), Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), and Nakajo Fumiko (1922-1954) from English collections which are listed at the back of his translation book. The translations appeared in American publishing houses, mostly associated with Columbia University Press, Purdue University Press and Tuttle Publishing, in the period of 1989- 2007. Andriuškevičius is a sensitive and educated translator well versed in *haiku*

575 (number of syllables per line) and *tanka* 57577 codes and *kireji*, the cutting word (Marshall, 2008), presence, its impact on the linguistic and visual meaning production of the poetry.

1.3 Comparison of one haiku and one tanka translations

Nakajo Fumiko’s *tanka* translated into English by Makoto Ueda and published in “Modern Japanese Tanka. An Anthology” in 1996 by New York: Columbia University Press and a Lithuanian *tanka* translated by Alfonsas Andriuškevičius and published in his collection “6 japonų poetai” published by Apostrofa, 2022.

*sharing the gentleness
two unrelated beings feel
toward each other
a grazing cow and I
in the setting sun*

*Dalijamės švelnumu
Kurį jaučia viena kitai
Dvi nesusiję būtybės:
Rupšnojanti karvė ir aš
saulėlydy*

The English translation is following the traditional 57577 code of *tanka* while Lithuanian version is, basically, trying to imitate a graphic vision of the English *tanka* lines, the number of syllables in Lithuanian translation is 78884 and exceeds the total number of *tanka* syllables 31 by 4. Lithuanian *tanka* is 35 syllables. However, the order of conceptual imagery per line: gentleness, feel, each other, cow and I, the setting sun - is faithfully followed in Lithuanian translation: švelnumu, jaučia, dvi, karvė ir aš, saulėlydy. The “poeticity” which Andriuškevičius is after in his translations is undeniably present: the intimate bond between two beings declared in the first three lines is ironically questioned by the fourth line and all situation is returned to the sad lyricism by the fifth line. The surprise and the memory of “a grazing cow and I” carries on beyond the banality of the situation and opens up universality of the experience.

Chiyo-ni *haiku* in English is published in “Woman Haiku Master” in 1998 by Tokyo, Boston, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing as translated by Patricia Donegan and Yoshie Ishibashi and a Lithuanian *haiku* version is translated by Alfonsas Andriuškevičius and published in his collection “6 japonų poetai” by Apostrofa, 2022.

*again the women
come to the fields
unkempt hair*

*ir vėl moterys
išeina laukuosna
nešukuotais plaukais*

The English *haiku* lines here have the following syllable structure 543 while Lithuanian is 566. Strictly following 575 code does not happen in either of the translations. The English and the Lithuanian *haiku* translations both secure an inexplicable sense of longing, repetition of something of importance to the poet, the observer (again...../ ir vėl...) or,

perhaps, an indication of a season when the fields are peopled (įšeina laukuosna). Both versions end in the line of “unkempt hair/nešukuotais plaukais” which in its simplicity and yet representational value appears to “carry depth” that Andriuškevičius mentions in his introduction and that appeals to multiple readership in very private or public meanings.

2. Conclusions

World literature concept changes the presence of literature as a phenomenon of our cultural, geographical, historical and ideological experiences. World literature is seeking to estrange itself from “external” aesthetics (Casanova, 2005) by not placing the emphasis on the linguistic or formal belongings of a literary work, but rather looking for the “internal” aesthetics.

From the position of the multilingual ecology, the meaning in literature is always somewhat outside the *linguae* (Capildeo in Gilmour, 2021). Translation theories also second Capildeo’s approach to the meaning by reducing the translation only to the substitution of one verbal written language by another verbal written language while the meaning is not part of the translation.

Lithuanian collection of translations of 6 Japanese poets compiled and translated by Andriuškevičius in 2022 is an attempt to secure the poeticity of Japanese *haiku* and *tanka* in his translations from English texts. The attempt reveals the possibility to secure the subtlety of the attitude and the intimacy of the experience in the poetic forms of *haiku* and *tanka*, though the form itself, the number of syllables per line, may bend to the specificity of each verbal language.

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