

The Moment the Junco Flew Past -- Robert Hass on Translation of Poetry

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Abstract

Robert Hass is a renowned contemporary American poet, Pulitzer Prize winner, poet laureate, and translator, who co-translated several volumes of poetry with Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz and authored one volume of translation of haiku. The author of the paper visited University of California at Berkeley in 2015, attended lectures given by Professor Hass and interviewed him. Based on the interviews, the following paper is on Robert Hass' cooperation with the late Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, and his understanding, writing and translation of poetry, in particular, Asian poetry.

Keywords

Robert Hass; Czeslaw Milosz; Haiku; Asian poetry.

1. Introduction

When I started the doctorate research program at Central South University, I was informed of the Poet Laureate Robert Hass (1941-) and his friendship with China. I was particularly impressed by the fact that in 2003 when SARS was prevalent, Hass came to China despite of the obvious risk. It was the first time I heard of Hass. Later, I was able to go to the University of California at Berkeley as a visiting scholar. During the stay, I attended Prof. Hass's lecture and interviewed him in regarding his translation of haiku poems and cooperation with Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004). The following is taken from the interview. The interlocutors' opinions are represented by "Q" and "A" respectively.

2. Robert Hass on the Co-Translation of Milosz's Poetry with Milosz

Q: You have newly returned from your trip to Poland, would you please talk about your visit to Poland this May (2015)?

A: I visited Poland six times. This was the 6th time. The first 4 times were to visit Milosz. I have only been to Krakow. And then the 5th time was to attend his funeral. And the last time was to go back there once more and put flowers on his grave and participate Milosz Festival, an annual activity to celebrate his life, work and poetry in general. For the Americans of my generation, one of the reasons why Milosz is so interesting is the worst of the horror, that holocaust happened in Poland, as well as in Germany. Of course, Poland was under German occupation during the war. Auschwitz, the worst of the concentration camps, is only about 35 miles from Krakow. Different cities mean different things. Paris means beauty and art and is the capital of the world. London means Charles Dickens' London and Sherlock Holme's London and London that is powerful and capital, while New York means energy, Krakow means holocaust. But it's rather beautiful and wasn't ruined in the bombing. And it was just coming back to life at that time I visited.

Q: Would you please introduce the cooperation between you and Milosz? Do you think your translation have paved the way for him to win the Nobel Prize?

A: We were colleagues. He taught at the university, and we were neighbours. He lived not far from the St. Babara Road, another higher of the hill place called Grizzly Peak Blouvard. As a very young poet, he has trouble finding a publisher to publish his books of poems in English translation. I called my editor and said that this guy Milosz was supposed to be a great poet. And I hear there is a book of his poems that he can get published. It was in mid-1970s. Then my editors called him and looked at his books and published his books of poems. So that my editor came out to Berkeley to meet Milosz, and that was when I have seen around and that was probably 1976, or 1977. So that was when I met Czeslaw and we became friends. Then I asked him if I could translate some of his poems I have read about. He agreed. At that point I did not think about publishing. I just want to read them, to see what was there and some of the poems were written in Warsaw where he was living then. So that was how I started, and then a couple of years later, he won the Nobel Prize, and everybody wants to publish his poems. He still wrote a lot, and we fell into a pattern of meeting every Monday morning for an hour, and he would have done the first translation of his poems and we will work for a couple of hours.

Q: Translators paved the way for the Nobel winners, do you think your translation has done contribution to Milosz's poetry to get the Nobel prize? What is your theory in translation?

A: No, we just began our work when he won the Nobel Prize. I think for the Nobel Prize, the important influence would be the Sweden translator, because it is the Swedish Academy to give the prize. Most of my works on poetry came after he won the Nobel Prize. I have started working before, but I don't think my work have influence in that way. But, you know from 1980 to 2003, 23 years, oh actually started from 1977, 25 years, well, but translators' job really is in my opinion, to be invisible, meaning you don't try to impose your personality, your way of seeing things on the poem you are trying to translate. And his English is very good. His first translations would sound in English a little like Polish grammar, stiff. So, lots of my job was just to make the language flow more naturally. Sometimes actually I have to do inventively, to create things, but a lot of times, for me was a great chance to learn poetry. And I don't have a theory. Firstly, the reason for translating is to bring across something original into a new language, that's the main thing you need to do. To find the equivalent music in another language is difficult. Images can be translated easily. I think it is much easier to get the imagery than the music.

Q: What do you learn from the translation of his poetry?

A: Many things. For a person born in the middle of the 20th century as I was, growing up in the 60's 70's 80's, look back on that war, I don't know if there is any equivalent for you, there are some movies, after the war, the books appear about the holocaust, books appear about the decision of bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, books appear about the English and American and Germans using the bombing of civilian populations as an attack of the war. Bombing of the civilian populations we now call terrorism, at time the way was the war as the way, and the little boys are raised with the heroic American soldier, so by the time I was 20 years old, the Vietnam War is starting up, and suddenly, which things are wrong. Then being a soldier, a hero suddenly becomes a problem, and there is other tradition. Someone got from the Beats the path of non-violent resistance, non-violent resistance of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, civil rights movement. My way of thinking about moral issues and political issues was formed, partly in relation to World War II. He had to deal with the problem of evil. That was one thing he had to do. But often, you know, critics like there to be an outcome. Here, the struggle, here, what he decided. Often, artists don't solve their problems, they just change the subject. That is to talk about something else. He hates the idea that there was no final justice, no final meaning. And we just are just dying or forgotten. And so he wrote poetry to save the world, and by saving the world, he was intensely aware how inadequate language is to any writes about all the time. So I learned from watching that struggle, an attitude toward the work of poetry. Another thing I learned is that he thought differently about nature than I did, or other American poets Emerson, Whitman, Gary Snyder did. Milosz thought that nature was an awful process, because it kills us.

Nature kills us. One time, there was an environmental protest in San Francisco. And I think they were going to build a new power plant near an earthquake fall, crazy thing and someone say will I give a poetry reading at this thing. And I say: "Yeah, I will give a poetry reading." I asked Czeslaw if he wants to come and give a poetry reading, and he said: "I don't like this. I don't like anti-nucs. And I said: "why not?" And he said: "why don't they protest blue hair, wrinkles and blue hair?" And I said: "What do you mean?" European women when their hair gets gray, you know how they put rinse on their hair to look like a little bit blue. What he said is why they don't protest against aging? He thought that Darwin's nature was all cruelty. We abuse animals and beasts, so animals eat other animals. He thought nature was horrible. And I said: "You were just up the Yosemite Valley, and you describe the light coming down over the mountain and snow." And he said: "Beauty is not nature." For him, nature and history are all the same thing, submitting to the process of nature. Where is the goal of human beings? Anyway, I learned from this passionate man what the work of poetry was.

Q: Does he mean that it is no use to protest?

A: No, he says if at the end of the world, if after I die, it turns out that there is no other world, that a bird in the tree is just a bird in the tree, that none of the wrongs had been done in the world, All the violence, all the killing, all the cruelty in the world never makes any sense. Then at least one voice goes out through the intra-stella spaces, outing, crying out to protest. He thought himself as a single rebellious voice against the whole structure of reality. He is like an angry, fighting Thomas Hardy, also someone who loves to laugh, loves to eat, loves women and has this big, rich, generous sense of the world. I think there are generally two in one way of artists one assumes to push perfection. He admires the perfectionist poets, and he thought he did not live in a land where you could be that kind of poet. He did like French poetry, for he thought that all the French poets want to write perfect poetry. I could talk about it for hours, because there is so much to be interested and learn from the processes.

3. Robert Hass on the Composition of Poetry

Q: What is Milosz's influence toward your poetry composing? Are you pursuing perfectionism in your poetry?

A: He taught me to go ahead and try things. And he taught me not be afraid of writing badly about hard subjects.

Q: When you write, are you influenced by your emotion, or you keep aloof of the emotion?

A: That's really an interesting question. I think for me the emotion pushes the form, but something else is also watching the emotion.

Q: In an interview, you have said "Gary Snyder was the writer who was most important to me. He was the first of the poets I read who made it seem possible to write poetry about California". It is about 1990's. How do you view the influence of Snyder on you?

A: Well, I love his poetry, and it was when I was in graduate school in Stanford around 1965, I first read Gary Snyder. I think he had come back from Japan. I just met him for the first time, but his poems got me going. A lot of other writers influence me as well, you see, but he was very important for me. He was the first of the poets I read who made it seem possible to write poetry about California. When I first start to write, there is the rhythm of the classical poetry, in my head: the meters of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Eliot and so on. But if you pick up the Snyder poem, it is like going down the valley with small cases for three days of sun after three days of writing. I thought that it was something he learned from Chinese poetry: clear presentation, without a lot of abstract generalization and philosophy.

Q: I read that both you and Milosz wrote poems about yellow bicycle. I felt amazing about that. Obviously, you did it before Milosz. Did he get inspiration from your poem?

A: He was in Sweden actually at the time when he was getting on a little bus, and he walked in a park with one of our friends and there was beautiful autumn day and they were walking in the park. They saw the yellow bicycle and they almost thought about my poem "The Yellow Bicycle". So he wrote a poem about he and his friend seeing the yellow bicycle. That poem was my first experiment of mixing poetry and prose. I felt like I need also to say no in a poem.

Q: What do you mean by "to say no" in a poem?

A: Like this poem, the tone of which is purely playful, purely cheerful, purely, you know, isn't it, and then I thought you can't say something this pretty without having some shadow cast in the poem. And I thought about this old woman I had seen on the street, and I just stop back in there.

Q: So, you mean the function of the essay is to provide the background.

A: No, contrast. Back in this poem, contrast, I was interested in this sort of happy writing, and then this happy couple. But there is a world that is miserable.

Q: Apart from the experiment in form in this poem, have you made some other experiments?

A: No, I don't think so. I thought that at the time that yellow was a cheerful color. It's a bright, sunshine color. Bicycles are wonderful inventions. This woman says what she wanted was a yellow bicycle. I thought she has very clear but modest desires that she wants a good way to live. You don't want the bank of Singapore. You just want a yellow bicycle.

4. Robert Hass on Asian Poetry

Q: How do you view the relation between the translating and composing of poetry? Does your translation of haiku and Milosz influence your writing of poetry?

A: Yes, both, very much. Translation is a very intensive way of saying other poets, and I think in every art, poets, musicians, painters. They study the people, the work they love. And they learn from them. There is something inner that I want, you try to get, you are not trying to imitate, but you try to get for yourself what you value in them. With the haiku poets, it was the combination of their simplicity of awareness. I felt like it teaches me how to be in this moment as I go through my life, looking at the body of the sky. In one way, philosophically, Busho thought all that was in each moment has, so that little junco just flew past us.

Q: Simplicity is also the feature of Chinese poetry. Japanese haiku learns from Chinese poetry but is simpler.

A: Buson, an 18th century haiku poet, did not live very much behind the way of the ideas about poetry. One story survived. Someone said to him: "Is there secret to write haiku?" And he said: "Yes." "What is the secret?" He said: "The secret of haiku is that plain without being vulgar." The guy asked: "Can you learn how to do it?" And he said: "Yes. Read Chinese poetry." They were influenced by Tang poets, especially by Du Fu. They knew that the poetry educated them. The whole anthology of the Japanese haiku is about or based on Chinese poems.

Q: What have you learned from your translation of the haiku poets? Can you talk about your understanding of Buddhism, including Ginsberg and Snyder? How do you view this? How do you view the relation between religion and poetry?

A: I was raised a Roman Catholic. And I went to Catholic school through primary school, middle school, high school and university, St. Mary College, a Christian college. I am like a sponge absorbing Catholicism. That's my other side of translation. Milosz has been raised a Catholic like me. After World War II, he was very tormented by the idea that how could there be a God who let those terrible things happen. The big problem of the monotheism is the problem of the evil. Where did it come from? Well, I will answer that question by saying I don't think there is one God who makes this world. One of the interesting things is about Ezra Pound, Gary Snyder, they try to revive polytheism. Pantheists have the same problem. If all of nature is God, then God is partly good and partly evil. You do like the good part, but do not like the bad part. How I

answer the question for myself? I felt like maybe it is the poem that I am trying to write about. So, I think I loved many things about Christianity. I love stories about Jesus. I love the idea that we should be kind to one another. And I love he spoke about peace. I love the rituals and I love the nuns, sisters who were teachers and very sweet and kind to me. Then by the time I was in high school and college, after reading science, reading all the modern European writers who were atheist, agnostic, I came to think about that probably there is not a God. And then I felt the loss of the sense of the secret of the great drama of forgiveness and redemption within Christianity. That was when I started studying haiku, probably it is a way to study Buddhism, to see if I could get the sensibility of haiku which is to honour every moment of life. I admire Christianity but I don't believe there is a God. I could have a kind of poetic Buddhist, transcendentalist religion. Then I am sort of working with Milosz who was very tormented by that, because he wanted to be a Christian, but he has trouble with it. So that was interesting when I thought I don't need to think about Christianity. We became friends. I worked with him for 20 years. I have thought about all those questions. And I am still unresolved about that. Part of the reason that I rebel against the Christianity was all the talking of afterlife about hell and sin, which did not make any sense to me.

Q: Have you tried on any hard subjects as a poet?

A: Well, when I was starting to work with Milosz, I was in the middle of translating haiku. And I thought that just trying to catch them, the world in moments was enough.

Q: How do you translate Haiku poems? How do you compare your translation of Haiku poems with your precursor's translation, such as Kenneth Rexroth's? Have you tried hand at the translation of some Chinese poetry?

A: I was not particularly looking at Rexroth's translations. I was looking at mostly the translations of Bly's and Anderson's. But mostly I started trying to make translations because when I read translations by Bly, Anderson and several solutions by Rexroth. And not knowing, at that point, I knew no Japanese. Some of them were trying to keep the 5 syllables-7 syllables-5 syllable patterns. If you do Japanese, it means you have to add words,

Q: I think your translation of haiku uses less than 17 syllables, why?

A: It's almost always the case, because English words are shorter than Japanese words. For example, "hana" which means blossom has 2 syllables in Japanese; but in "ohana", the "o" can be counted as a syllable, so this word has 3 syllables. "Blossom" in English has 2 syllables. "Mitshi" has 2 syllables in Japanese, while "road" has only one syllable. If you translate word for word, you get fewer syllables in English than in Japanese. When I started, I didn't think of myself as translating, because I knew little Japanese, I thought myself studying the poem. I would look at them, I bought books, and I took night school Japanese class. I attended the night school in late 1970s. I just wanted to understand the grammar. Usually I would start with a poem, one example is Issa's: "spiders in the corner, / it goes, / don't worry, I am not going to sweep now". My version is looser: "Don't worry, spiders, / I keep house / casually". So there is a simple way of saying this, gets the weight and the playfulness of the Japanese. I did this a couple of years ago, so I can remember that. I firstly learned some Japanese and understand the grammar. I also consulted the previous translations. In these two ways, I can try to find a way. But I always stared with other English translations by Bly, Anderson and Rexroth. Then I will go to the original, and go to the Japanese dictionary, look up each word and try to figure out what the grammar was. I decide that this is what the original meaning is by intuition. Reading the scholarship, I just try to feel my way to it. When I was younger, there is a frame on my work. There was a course in the 1920s in the University of Chicago about how to learn classical Chinese by learn to read poem. I worked in those books trying to just memorize some characters, some stanzas, but it was too hard. So maybe if I ever retire from teaching, I want to learn Greek and Chinese.

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