On Professor Zheng Min’s Translation of John Keats’ “Ode to Autumn”

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Abstract: This paper is to analyze Professor Zheng Min’s translation of John Keats’ “Ode to Autumn” in terms of musicality (meter, scheme rhyme, structural device and sound devices) and images (sense devices and diction) of the poem.

Introduction

Although brutally attacked and widely depreciated during his short lifetime, John Keats (1795—1821) becomes well-known after his death and is often considered to be one of the greatest English poets and one of the major figures of the English Romantic Movement. In his short writing career, John Keats has produced various poetic works including epic, lyric and narrative poems ranging from allegories to sonnets and odes. However, his odes have been generally regarded as his most important and mature works, among which “Ode to Autumn,” his last and also the shortest ode is thought of as his lyric masterpiece. One of his letters to John Reynolds written from Winchester September 21, 1819 provides the background in which he wrote the poem. In the letter he writes:

How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never liked stubble-fields so much as now—Aye, better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow, a stubble-field looks warm in the same way that some pictures look warm. This stuck me so much in my Sunday’s walk that I composed upon it (qtd in Sheats 213).

In this poem, John Keats describes the pictures of good harvests of fruit and grain in Autumn as well as his melancholy and sorrow over the transience of human joy and the beautiful season when taking a walk one day in the countryside. This poem is rather sensuous, colorful with vivid and rich images expressing the acuteness of Keats’ senses, such as sight, sound, smell, taste and touch etc. and revealing his mastery of form and depth of feeling. All these factors make the translating of the poem rather difficult. The Chinese translation discussed here is by Zheng Min (1920- ), professor of Beijing Normal University and famous Chinese contemporary woman poet, scholar and poetry theorist who is crowned as the “Evergreen of Chinese Parnassus”. This paper is to analyze Professor Zheng Min’s translation of John Keats’ “Ode to Autumn” in terms of musicality (meter, scheme rhyme, structural device and sound devices) and images (sense devices and diction) of the poem.

Critique of the Chinese Translation by Professor Zheng Min

Musicality of the Poem

Generally speaking the musical quality of a poem is achieved mainly through meter, rhyme scheme and other poetic devices. Unlike Keats’ other odes which are all composed of ten-lined stanzas or dixaines “Ode to Autumn” is made up of three eleven-line stanzas written in iambic pentameter with the first stanza rhymed ababcdedc, and the other two ababcdecde including the imperfect rhyme of “fruitfulness” and “bless” in Line1 and Line 3 and “too” and “hue” in Line 24 and Line 26 respectively. The variation, according to H. W. Garrod, “is probably due to mere inattention” (87).

Besides the meter and rhyme scheme, John Keats also uses other poetic devices such as structural
devices especially repetition, and sound devices mainly alliteration, assonance, end rhyme and onomatopoeia to achieve the musicality of the poem. There appear two kinds of repetition in the poem, the lexical repetition, for example, “hours by hours” (22), and the syntactic repetition, for instance, “Where are the songs of Spring? Aye, where are they?” (23) including the repetition of the same or similar sentence patterns especially in the first stanza:

[... to load and bless 
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run; 
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees, 
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core; 
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells 
With a sweet kernel [...]]

The sentence patterns repeated here are “to + with + noun + noun” and “to + noun + with + noun” which make the reading quite fluent and fluid and also add to the musical beauty of the poem. The poem is also rich in alliteration such as “season— sun” / “mists—mellow—maturing” / “fruitfulness—friend” (1-2), “sometimes—seeks—sitting” / “find—floor” (13-4), assonance such as “music— too— bloom— hue” / “clouds—touch—stubble” (24-6) / “cricket—sing—with—whistles—twitter” (31-3), end rhyme such as “still—until—will” / “shells—cells” (7-11) / “soft—croft” (31-2), and onomatopoeic words such as “bleat” (30), “whistles” (32) and “twitter” (33). These sound devices render the poem more rhythmic and vigorous.

In her translation, Professor Zheng applies the popular methodology of replacing the metric feet of the original text by dun (sound group or modern Chinese phonetic pauses) which according to Mr. Liu Zhongde is put forward by Bian Zhilin and others in one of their essays on artistic and literary translation in 1950s (170). Mr. Yang Deyu whose translation of Byron’s 70 Poems is regarded as the representative work supporting the dun system (154) has once talked about two possible things “both of which will help produce the musical beauty of the original (such as the even, regular and harmonious rhythm and the graceful rime scheme suiting the needs of the ideological content) as much as possible in another language.” “The first thing is to make the number of dun of each line in the translation equal to that of metrical feet in the original and the second is to arrange the rimes in the same scheme as in the original” (qtd in Liu Zhongde 155). Professor Zheng Min’s translation consists of eleven lines each stanza as well, with a rhyme scheme that runs ababcdecdde in the first stanza, ababcdedde in the second and ababcadcaad in the third keeping the line indentation of the original text. Except the second stanza whose rhyme scheme agrees with that of Stanzas 2 and 3 in the original texts, the other two stanzas both use irregular rhyme scheme with only the first five lines rhymed ababc in accordance with the source text and each line is made up of five dun with exception at some places, such as four dun in “尔后/小虫们/ 唱起/ 哀歌” (27), and three dun in “全看/ 风势的/ 大小” (29). Moreover, Professor Zheng’s also uses alliteration (in Chinese called 双声) and end rhyme (叠韵) or both in her translation, for example “季节” (1), “斑驳” (5); “祝福” (4), “葫芦” (7), “苍黄” (28); and “层层叠叠” (3), “湿漉漉” (11), “团团” (25), together the onomatopoeic words “咩咩地” (30) and “啾啾地” (33) to strengthen the sense of musicality. Lexical and syntactical repetition can also be detected in her translation, such as “鸣叫” (30-3) “无忧无虑” (14) “雾的季节,成熟和结果的季节,” (1) “春天的歌儿在哪里? 啊,在哪里?” (23) “时而高,时而低” (28) and so on. Nevertheless, she doesn’t keep the balanced sentence patterns mentioned above in the original text:

. . . . . . . 怎样在农舍屋檐外层层叠叠 
让果实挂满藤蔓,带来祝福的时候, 
苔藓斑驳的农家果树被苹果压弯, 
每一只果实都打心里熟透;
Instead, she mixes the passive voice and the active voice together which largely lessens the degree of smoothness and fluency and sometimes makes the reading rather obscure and awkward-sounding, what's more the characters “打心里” are rather informal and colloquial words which create discord to the exquisite and graceful style of the original poem. As for the onomatopoeic words, the two mentioned are ok, but another one “吹哨”，the Chinese equivalence she has found for “whistles”(32) is not so reasonable, as the redbreast or robin is a kind of bird, we may not possibly imagine that a bird can “吹哨”，perhaps “啼啭” will be better.

**Images of the Poem**

As is mentioned above, John Keats’ “Ode to Autumn” is abundant of detailed and vivid images such as the vines running round the thatch-eves, the moss'd cottage-trees full of apples ripe to the core, swollen gourds and plump hazel shells with a sweet kernel in Stanza 1, and barred clouds, rosy stubble-plains and full-grown lambs bleating loudly from hilly bourn in Stanza 3 and so on. These images are brought about by Keats through various sense devices and careful diction. Autumn in his poem is personified and he even directly addresses him and asks him questions in the last two stanzas. He also uses metaphor comparing Autumn to “Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun” (2) and simile by saying “And sometimes like a gleaner [...]” (19), actually both figures of speech belong to personification. He also personifies the bees who can think (9-10), the “barred clouds” who “bloom the soft-dying day, /And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue” (25-6), and ‘the small gnats” that “in a wailful choir [...] mourn / Among the river sallows [...]” (27-8). Keats has got so fertile and strong an imagination that he seems to have the power to enter the natural world including that of the insects and natural substances.

The animated and visual images he created also ascribe to his careful and deliberate diction or choice of words. The nouns in his poem are often compound-nouns or modified by various attributes such as adjectives, compound words, gerunds and past participles etc. which helps him impose accurate meanings and profound feelings on the things he describes. Here are some typical examples: “stubble-plains” (26) and “hedge-cricket” (31); “mellow fruitfulness” (1), “clammy cells” (11) and “hilly bourn” (30); “half-reaped furrow” (16) and full-grown lambs (30); “soft-dying day” (25), “maturing sun” (2), “winnowing wind” (15) and “gathering swallows” (33); “barred clouds” (25), “twined flowers” (18), “moss'd cottage trees” (5) and “laden head” (20). All these nouns or noun phrases can convey very strong and impressive static or dynamic images. The verbs and verbal phases in his poems are also well weighed and painstakingly chosen, take the first stanza for example, there are verbs such as “conspire,” “load,” “bless” and “bend” (3-5) etc. and verbal phases such as “To swell the gourd, plump the hazel shells” (7) etc. and in other places such as “(While barred clouds) bloom the soft-dying day / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue” (25-6), and “(the light wind) lives or dies” (29). John Keats seems to have endowed every word with intense passions and overwhelming emotions. In doing so, he has brought the readers into a dreamy and an imaginary world full of natural beauty and human joy.

Generally speaking, Professor Zheng’s translation can faithfully express the true colors of the original text, but there is still improper addition, omission and distortion in her translation of the images although the first two are usually necessary and useful methods in translation. Her translation of the last stanza in which she writes

肥壮的羊群咩咩地在山溪边解渴；
篱下的蟋蟀鸣叫，红胸脯的知更唤你
用它温柔的高音吹哨，在田园里
天空上燕子集合了，在啾啾地鸣叫（30-3）。
is quite unsatisfactory in that on one hand she has made the originally quite balanced sentences somewhat out of place and on the other she has made some willful addition and omission, for example, she says the lambs are drinking water in the brook “在山溪边解渴” and the original line is “And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn” (30) which doesn’t mention drinking at all but their “loud bleating.” Obviously “解渴” is her own interpretation and addition, but why are the lambs supposed to drink in the brook, perhaps they are just grazing along the brook where grass flourishes or just crossing the brook, what’s more she omits the adverb “loud.” She may as well change “篱下的蟋蟀鸣叫” into “篱下的蟋蟀在鸣唱”by adding a character “在”to make the reading more flowing and to keep in accord with the balanced sentence patterns and changing “鸣叫” into “鸣唱”to avoid the dull and unnecessary repetition of the word that also appears in the last line. “红胸脯的知更唤你 / 用它温柔的高音吹哨, / 在田园里” These two lines seem to have been translated into three inconsistent fragments which also does great harm to the unity and harmony of the whole poem, and the last line “天空上燕子集合了,在啾啾地鸣叫”seems as if she does not grasp the connoted meaning, the “gathering swallows” means the swallows are flying in groups to the south for the winter. This image together with the other images in the stanza creates a kind of melancholy mood, the poet bewails the transience of human joy and the beauty of Autumn and the fast approaching of winter, what’s more, as we know at that time Keats had caught tuberculosis and his health was worse and worse and he died in the February of 1821, so most probably he also mourns over the brevity of his life. Therefore, if we translate the first part of last line as “群飞的燕子从秋空中掠过” it will possible better manifest his dreariness and loneliness and the gradual disappearance of the warmth that he has sensed written in his letter.

Professor Zheng’s distortion or at least misinterpretation of the original text is also revealed in her translation especially that of the word “conspiring” (3) and “sallows”(28), the former which means to plot something bad is often used in a derogatory sense, but surely the poet doesn’t mean so, but maybe the readers who do not have much knowledge in English language won’t think so, thus it is necessary to make it commendatory for example we can translate if as “携手” or something like that; the latter which is put into “苍黄的” is completely out of sheer inattention or misinterpretation. The word “sallow” is a multi-sense word which besides its adjective form as a kind or color, can be used as a verb meaning “to make something sallow” and as a noun meaning something like the willow. Here in this case, “Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn / Among the river sallows” (27-8), as “among” is a preposition, sallows can not be its single verb form of as an adjective which has no plural form, the only meaning available is a kind of “willow”, therefore its correct equivalence is “柳树” rather than “苍黄的.” Her translation at some other places also needs to be improved, for instance, “让葫芦变大,榛子丰满” (7) (“To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells”), in the first stanza and “当一天将结束, 团团的晚霞飘起/ 将割过的田地交给玫瑰色的黄昏” (25-6) (“While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue”) in the third stanza. We can call her translation of these two places is a great failure in that she doesn’t pay enough attention of the underlined words of the original text, which bear the vigorous and animated pictures in themselves, for example, we can put them more lifelike and make them personified as well like this: “让葫芦肚皮滚圆, 让榛子丰腴饱满;” we can also put “bloom” and “touch” into “使绽放” 和 “抹上” both translations can make the poem more expressive and closer in style to the original text. As for “时而高,时而低/ 全看风势的大小” (28-9) (“[…] borne aloft/ Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies”) we can make it more rhythmic and readable by some addition and change of the word order such as “随着轻风的起落,时而高昂,时而低沉,” and the new translation also interpret the lost image of “light wind” (轻风) in Professor Zheng’s translation. Actually, she has omitted many important images in her translation such as “雾的季节,成熟和结果的季节” (1) (“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness”); “你的头发任轻风微微飘起” (15) (Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; and “有时你像在田里拾穗 / 涉过小溪田头将谷穗托举” (19-20) (And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden
head across a brook): mellow” which means “甘美” is translated into “成熟和结果的” which is rather irrelevant to the word itself, or maybe we can change it to “果实甘美”, while the images of “the winnowing wind”, “keep steady thy laden head” and especially the image of “the stubble-plains” which John Keats stresses several times in his letter seem to have totally disappeared which is rather irresponsible and inexcusable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Professor Zheng Min has made great effort to keep the musical quality of the poem by using the translation method of replacing the English poetic meter with dun and by creating a certain rhyme scheme although an irregular one, and has made great attempt to convey the vivid visual images of the original text. However, her translation is unsatisfactory at some places where she makes unnecessary addition, unreasonable omission and unbearable distortion. When discussing the translation of Catullus’ sixty-fourth poem in his article “Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint”(1975), Andre Lefevere introduces seven different translation strategies pointing out both their advantages and disadvantages, namely, phonemic translation, literal translation, metrical translation, prose translation, rhyming translation, blank verse and interpretation (Gentzler 94-5). Professor Zheng obviously has adopted somewhat the method of metrical and rhyming translation with his own interpretation at certain places. Although she does not abide by each of them very strictly, it does make sense to some extent. However, Susan Bassnett, who also discusses Andre Lefevere’s seven strategies in her work Translation Studies shows the deficiency of translation focusing only on one aspect and insists that we should not split the form from content and according to her, one central purpose of translation is to reproduce it as a living work, but unfortunately she doesn’t show how (81). No matter what kind of method we may use in translation, it is strongly advised that we conform to the three principles “faithfulness, expressiveness and closeness” defined by Mr. Liu Zhongde on the basis of Yan Fu’s “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”, which means to be faithful to the content of the original text, to be as expressive in wording as the original and to be as close in style to the original as possible (24-7).

References