Yoel Hoffmann as haiku Translator

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1. Translating poetry

All those who have attempted it would no doubt acknowledge that translating poetry can be as frustrating as it is exciting. All the well-known difficulties which plague the act of translation from one language to another become even more acute when poetry is considered. Those in the know often repeat the famous statement attributed to Robert Frost that "poetry is what gets lost in translation", or Roman Jakobson's dictum that "poetry by definition is untranslatable". The case is even stronger when translation of Japanese poetry is considered. The great Arthur Waley, who published several volumes of Chinese poetry in English translation, as well as translations of classical Japanese prose literature, including its crown jewel, *The Tale of Genji*, produced only one slim volume of Japanese *tanka* poems in English, stating that "Japanese poetry can only be rightly enjoyed in the original" (Waley, *Uta* 12). He therefore recommended that his readers learn to read Japanese and offered them an eight-page long grammar introduction, promising that "a few months should suffice for the mastering" of classical Japanese (and he probably meant it in earnest).[1] Waley also promised to deal with haiku poems later on, but never did.

Every translation reflects the norms and sensibilities of its time, as we learned from the late great Gideon Toury. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Japanese tanka were often translated into English as rhymed couplets, and even a great scholar with fine poetic sensibilities such as Basil Hall Chamberlain adhered to this folly. As for haiku (which Chamberlain sometimes misleadingly dubbed "epigrams"), all manners of translation were attempted, and the age-old arguments apply here once again: should a creative translation by a gifted poet be preferred, even at the price of faithfulness? Or should the translation strive to be as faithful as possible even at the price of beauty? Or could the two paths be somehow merged into one at the hands of a gifted translator? These are only some of the questions which are always on the minds of poetry translators and their readers.

Yoel Hoffmann, who in his later phase revealed himself to be the gifted author of what might be termed poetic prose, carving for himself a unique place in modern Hebrew literature, published earlier in his career three books of poetry translations, two in Hebrew and one in English, the latter paralleling one of the Hebrew books. These books demonstrate admirably his gift for language and

translation, no less than his deep insight into Japanese culture and his vast scholarly erudition in the fields of religion, philosophy and literature. Although not considered a poet *per se* he succeeded, as I will try to show, by merging poetic creativity with scholarly abilities, in creating some remarkable translations of Japanese poetry.

2. Hoffmann's books of poetry translations

Hoffmann's first Hebrew book of haiku translations was titled *Le'an ne'elmu hakolot?: sipurei zen veshirei haiku*, or (quoting the information in English on the back of the title page): "*Where did the Sounds Go? Zen Stories and Haiku Poems*, Translation from Japanese and Chinese, introduction and commentary by Yoel Hoffmann" (Massada, 1980). The book was printed on high quality paper, in hard cover and attractive design (all of which were already uncommon in Israeli publishing at the time, and have become even rarer since then), and also includes some Zen paintings and calligraphy. It contains 48 Zen stories (some with short annotations) and, on the page facing each story, one, two or three translated haiku are printed, 85 in all. The haiku are also transliterated in vocalized Hebrew script at the back of the book, including macrons to indicate long vowels. In his 25-page-long introduction Hoffmann first explains the world-view of Zen Buddhism and then the form and nature of haiku poetry. On the final two pages of the introduction he also imparts his opinion on how better to translate haiku, to which I will return later on.

Hoffmann's second book of poetry translation, that of Japanese "death poems", was published first in Hebrew and soon afterwards in English (later on, German and Spanish versions were also published). Although basically similar, there are also some conspicuous differences between the two versions, which must have been prepared in close proximity.

The Hebrew version was published in 1985, once again in a fine edition by Massada. Surprisingly, unlike the first book, and contrary to standard publishing custom, the back of the title page does not include any information in English. However, at the end of the long introduction (p. 61) it is stated (in Hebrew, except for the publisher's name): "An English edition of the book published by TUTTLE, Japan 1986". The Hebrew title is different from the English one, and is considerably more poetic: '*Omrei shir 'al saf hamavet*, "Utterers of poem on the threshold of death", with the subtitle "A selection of Japanese poems and an introductory essay" (my translation). On the back of the title page there is a dedication which is missing in the English edition: "For Etka, of blessed memory". The acknowledgments, which in the English edition appear first after the title and contents pages, appear here following the bibliography and are shorter, including: "… my wife, Varda, who helped me in translating the poems into Hebrew" (p. 61). In the English edition, on the

other hand, Hoffmann thanks "… my father, Abraham Hoffmann, who read through the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions", as well as "Mr. Lavern Lenz, with whose invaluable help this book now appears in English". Hoffmann also acknowledges "the assistance of the staff of the Charles E. Tuttle Company, who were able to refine many points of detail throughout the manuscript" (p. 8). I assume that Hoffmann translated the book from Hebrew (and the poems from Japanese and Chinese) into English himself, and received assistance in editing it.

The English title of the book is: *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death*. Like the Hebrew version it is divided into three parts, but close inspection reveals several differences. In the Hebrew version the first part, which is an introductory essay, is somewhat longer, and repeats some of the material from the introduction to the earlier *Le'an ne'elmu hakolot*? The English version of the introduction is arranged more methodically (historically and thematically); many paragraphs and poetic examples have been moved around, and the whole text is divided into shorter paragraphs with additional explanatory subtitles. Some sentences and several poetic examples in the Hebrew introduction are not included in the English version. For example, the death poem of Mishima Yukio, for which Hoffmann appends a sarcastic remark (p. 37 in the Hebrew edition), was omitted. Also missing are several other modern poems (by the mother of Matsunaga Goichi, p. 42; by Katō Shūson and by Iida Dakotsu, both p. 57). I would venture a guess that these poems were omitted due to copyright concerns, which may have been disregarded in the Hebrew edition but could not be ignored in the English one issued by Tuttle in Japan. It should also be noted that while some parts of the Hebrew text were omitted, as far as I can tell nothing was added to the English version of this part.

The second part of the book contains death poems by Japanese Zen monks written originally in Chinese, some accompanied by short or more elaborated explanations. In both versions the poems are organized alphabetically according to the Buddhist names of the monks, and since the Hebrew and English alphabets are quite different in order, so is the order of the poems in each edition. Had the poems been arranged historically this discrepancy would not have occurred. Another fact that stands out is that in many cases the transliteration of the names is considerably different; for example: Enni Ben'en in the English edition (p. 96) is called Shōichi Kokushi in the Hebrew version (p. 88); Bassui Tokusho (p. 91) is Battai Tokusho (p. 68), and so on (at least 12 poets' names are transcribed differently). This is not very surprising. All those familiar with the Japanese writing system are well aware of the enormous problems one faces when trying to read personal names correctly, and in particular some of those obscure Buddhist names (which are also different from the original personal names of the poets). It is possible that the English edition is more accurate,

because it came after the Hebrew one and benefitted from the assistance of the publisher's staff. Another difference is that the Hebrew edition contains 46 poems, two of which are missing from the English one (Taigu, p. 73, Seiju, p. 82), while the English edition contains 45 poems, one of which is not included in the Hebrew one (Doyu, p. 95). So on the whole the two editions are similar but not identical.

The third part of the book contains the translations of death poems by haiku poets, once again organized in alphabetical order of the poets' pen names and often including explanatory remarks. If I counted correctly, there are 333 haiku poets represented in the Hebrew edition, compared with 325 in the English one; in both cases some poets are represented by more than one poem, so the number of poems is considerably larger. However, while the problem of the transcription of poets' pen names is marginal in this part, there is an even bigger difference in the identity of the poets than in the two versions of the second part of the book. In the Hebrew version there are 29 poets who do not appear in the English one, most of them modern ones, including several who died in the 1950's and 1960's and up to 1980. Among them are the celebrated author Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (died 1927), and the famed haiku poet Kyoshi (died 1959). Once again I assume that the reason for the absence of these poets from the English edition was due to copyright concerns. To compensate, the English edition includes 16 poets, mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries, who do not appear in the Hebrew book. Evidently the nature of the two editions is different: while the Hebrew one includes much modern material bringing examples of haiku poetry up to our time, the English one is limited to older periods, with very few early 20th century examples.

There are a few more differences between the two books. The English version has the names of the poets also in *kanji*, which the Hebrew one lacks, but on the other hand, the macron indicating a long vowel is not printed in the Romanized version of the poets' names, while in the Hebrew book it is. The English book has an index of poetic terms as well as a general index, both of which are missing from the Hebrew version.

3. Hoffmann's policy of translation

As I mentioned earlier, Hoffmann dedicated the last two pages of his introduction to his first Hebrew book of poetry translations (preceded only by his Hebrew translations from Chuang-Tzu), *Le'an ne'elmu hakolot*? to the question of translation (pp. 30-32). This text was lifted almost verbatim – with a few short additions and while omitting most of the poem examples – into the introduction of *Death Poems*' Hebrew version (pp. 14-15). It was in turn translated in the English version (pp. 22-23). Hoffmann first gives an example of a translation maintaining the 5-7-5 syllables

rhythm of the original Japanese haiku (the same poem is translated in both versions), but then proceeds to reject this method of translation and explain his reservations and priorities in a short paragraph which I will quote fully while dividing his arguments into numbered points:

> [1] Haiku are sometimes meticulously translated into English with exactly seventeen syllables, often at the expense of accuracy. [2] But even when such a translation remains as true to the original as a free rendering, the poetic achievement is slight, for the reader who has not been raised in a haiku-saturated culture is unlikely to appreciate the poem's peculiar 5-7-5 beat rhythm as keenly as one who has. [3] Other translators forgo the convention of counting syllables and replace it with another convention, rhyme. A successfully rhymed haiku may indeed contribute to the beauty of the translation, but because of the extreme brevity of the haiku style, rhyming more often than not makes a jingle of the poem. [4] The translations in this book are nearly all in free verse. The one structural precept adhered to throughout is that each haiku is translated in three lines – usually a short, a long, and a short one again.[2] [5] While free style lessens the number of formal constraints on the translator, it demands greater attention to the choice and arrangement of words.

So Hoffmann is basically in favor of free translation, but he is aware of the great responsibility and difficulty in choosing the right words and putting them in the right order. He also makes sound arguments against insisting on the 5-7-5 rhythm in translation or the use of rhyming. In the following I will examine briefly Hoffmann's stated principles as implemented in some of his translations.

3.1 Brevity

In the above-quoted paragraph Hoffmann mentioned "the extreme brevity of the haiku style"; undoubtedly, brevity is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Japanese haiku, and ideally this should be reflected in the translation. And indeed, anyone reading Hoffmann's Hebrew translations cannot but be struck by their brevity (in most cases) and by how condensed they are, especially compared with many English (and some other Hebrew) translations. The nature of the language is an advantage in this regard; in Hebrew, pronouns can be indicated by the form of the verb, the definite article is attached to the noun, and the construct state allows the linking of two nouns without a preposition. These and other features create what writer Amos Oz once called the "stone quality" of Hebrew. Still, Hoffmann excels others in putting these advantages to good use, and in some cases he manages to be even briefer than the original. For example, see the following haiku by Issa:

秋の風一茶心に思ふやう　　一茶
Aki no kaze / Issa kokoro ni / omou yō

Here is an English translation by R. H. Blyth (V. 3, p. 949):

The Autumn wind;
There are thoughts
In the mind of Issa

Hoffmann makes do with five words in two lines (*Where*, p. 79):

רוח סתיו:
מחשבות בלב איסא

It is more difficult for Hoffmann to be so brief in English; for example, here is a haiku by Masahide, one of Bashō's disciples:

蔵焼けてさはるものなき月見哉　　正秀
Kura yakete / sawaru mono naki / tsukimi kana

In Hebrew (*Where*, pp. 25 & 39) Hoffmann was able to limit his translation to seven words, as in the original:

המחסן נשרף:
דבר אינו מסתיר
פני הלבנה

Note that he avoided using the direct object preposition [את] which other translators might have included (although the original poem does not have it either); however in English (p. 240) he had to use 12 words:

Now that my storehouse
has burned down, nothing
conceals the moon

I would argue that this translation is not as successful as the Hebrew one, perhaps due to the redundant addition of the opening words "Now that my", information which in the original poem is only implied and the Hebrew version did without.

In the introduction to the English edition of *Japanese Death Poems* (p. 23) Hoffmann has another

translation of this poem, in which he maintained the 5-7-5 rhythm (in order to explain why he does *not* use it regularly), and which has 13 words:

My storehouse burned down –
now nothing stands between me
and the moon above

Obviously, in order to achieve the 5-7-5 rhythm in English (a language known for its many monosyllabic words), he had to add even more words and again include information which is not specified in the original, only implied (my, me, above). So all in all, the translation gains in brevity what it loses by avoiding the 5-7-5 rhythm.

Just as he experimented with two-line translations, Hoffmann also offered some four-line versions of haiku, but again managing to maintain extreme brevity in some cases. The following haiku is by Ryōta, an 18th century poet:

追はれては月に隠るゝ蛍かな　　蓼太
Owarete wa / tsuki ni kakururu / hotaru kana

Once again here is the English version by R. H. Blyth (V. 3, p. 807):

Being chased,
The fire-fly
Hides in the moon

Hoffmann's experiment limits the Hebrew version to four words, one on each line (*Where*, p. 135):

גחלילית
נרדפת
מסתתרת
בירח

The vertical shape of the printed poem creates a story in itself, expressing visually, to some extent, the flight of the fire-fly. This is another example for Hoffmann's imaginative creativity and his daring as a translator of haiku, particularly into Hebrew.

3.2 Choice of words

Choosing the right word, especially when translating from one culture to another, can be a daunting task. Hoffmann sometimes makes surprising choices that may reflect his creative nature,

sometimes even at the expense of faithfulness. His choices also demonstrate the well-established fact that any translation is also an interpretation, and that when translating haiku, the meaning of which can sometime be somewhat obscure, the translator must make a choice between different interpretative options. I will offer a few examples in which a certain choice or interpretation stand out.

The first example is a celebrated haiku by Bashō:

静かさや岩にしみ入る蝉の聲　　芭蕉

Shizukasa ya / iwa ni shimiiru / semi no koe

Out of the dozens of English translations of this poem, here again is the one by R. H. Blyth (v. 3, p. 816):

The silence;
The voice of the cicadas
Penetrates the rocks

This straight-forward translation (compared with some much more elaborate ones by other translators) still contains an amount of interpretation. Due to the lack of a plural indicator in Japanese, the translator must decide which form to use: one rock or many rocks? And what about the insect? The sound of a singular cicada, as anyone who has experienced the Japanese summer can testify, conveys a very different feeling than that of a multitude of them. Blyth opted for the plural, but Hoffmann preferred the singular in both cases, and he even made one more daring choice (*Where*, p. 59):

דממה:
קולו של הצרצר
נספג בסלע

Apparently, since the cicada is a relatively rare insect in Israel, and most readers of Hebrew would not be aware of its distinct sound, Hoffmann replaced it with the grasshopper, thus making a cultural interpretation. Is this choice justifiable? It is a matter of personal preference, although as a translator I would probably not go that far. Interestingly, however, Donald Keene also replaced the cicada with locusts (Keene, p. 99).

No less challenging for the translator is another haiku by Bashō, which conveys a deep mysterious feeling:

蛸壺やはかなき夢を夏の月　　芭蕉

Tako tsubo ya / hakanaki yume wo / natsu no tsuki

First, here is Blyth's translation (V. 3, p. 680):

The octopus trap:
Fleeting dreams
Under the summer moon

Octopus traps are clay pots which fishermen place on the bottom of the sea and pull up by a rope after an octopus, looking for a place to hide, has entered them. Interpreters speculate whether Bashō saw such pots lying on the shore in Akashi where the poem was composed, or perhaps he was in a boat out at sea and saw the floating wooden markers attached to the ropes or even some traps being lifted out of the water (Ueda, pp. 201-2). Blyth did not commit himself in his translation (although he opted for a singular trap and for dreams in the plural), but Hoffmann made a more daring choice (*Where*, p. 61):

תמנון במלכדת
חלומות ריקים
ירח של קיץ

Hoffmann goes a step further, translating "an octopus *in* the trap" (first line) which he contrasts with "empty dreams" (second line). Again, is this justifiable? Bashō mentions the trap (or traps) which may or may not contain the octopus already, but Hoffmann makes a concrete choice, although the question of who is dreaming under the moon of the short summer night remains open: the octopus? The poet? All of us?

The third and final example is also by Bashō, one of the last poems he composed in the final month of his life:

秋深き隣は何をする人ぞ　　芭蕉

Aki fukaki / tonari wa nani wo / suru hito zo

Apparently the meaning is simple, but it turns out that the final line could be open to interpretation; autumn deepens, and the man next door: "what does he do for a living?" (Ueda, p. 411); "how does he live?" (Blyth, V. 3, p. 896); "what is he doing now?" was also suggested. But Hoffmann takes the meaning a little deeper (*Where*, p. 79):

עמוק הסתיו:
אני תוהה
השכן ממול – מיהו?

Rather than wondering what he does for a living or what is he doing now, Bashō in Hoffmann's version wonders about the neighbor: "who is he?". Also in this version the neighbor isn't next door, but opposite. It is very hard to explain, but unless I'm gravely mistaken, this little change somehow makes the situation more natural to Hebrew readers. In Japan *tonari* usually means literally next door, to either side of where one lives; in the Israel in which Hoffmann grew up (but perhaps less so today) the people in the opposite tenement or house, seen through the windows and verandas open to the sea breeze in towns and cities along the Mediterranean coast, were more conspicuous and also more mysterious. It is therefore possible that by adding the preposition *mimul*, Hoffmann once again made a cultural translation.

Hoffmann is a conscientious translator who strives to be faithful to the haiku he rendered into Hebrew but the above examples show him also to be a daring translator with a great amount of self-confidence and a unique way of interpreting his material. His translations demonstrate that once he believes he has caught the spirit of a haiku he conveys it in his translation in a way that fits it best. Just as Bashō's haiku often leave us deep in thought when reading them in the original, so do Hoffmann's Hebrew versions of them, which is the highest praise for a translator.

3.3 Arrangement, or the order of words

When translating, it is often difficult to preserve the order by which information is conveyed in a poem. The usual order of words in a Japanese sentence is more or less the reverse of the order in an English or a Modern Hebrew one, so when translating a Japanese sentence into Hebrew or English translators start from the end and work their way back. This may happen in poetry as well, and in some cases cannot be avoided, but translators should be sensitive to this point. It could be asked: why is the order important, especially in a haiku which is read in one breath? However, I maintain that the order by which information is conveyed even in the short haiku is one of the tools of the poet, and therefore one should try to remain faithful to it in translation as well. To illustrate this see the following example of a haiku by Issa:

寝て起きて大欠して猫の恋　　一茶
Nete okite / ōakubi shite / neko no koi

In Lewis Mackenzie's translation (p. 73):

Sleeping, waking
Giving such tremendous yawns –
The cat goes courting!

In this case, if the order is reversed, much of the charm and power of the haiku is lost. Indeed, I feel that Hoffmann lost something by reversing the order and starting with the cat, although his translation still has a lot of charm:

החתול קם משנתו
ובפהוק גדול
יוצא להרפתקת אהבים

Going through the haiku translated in *Where did the Sounds Go*? I found that in a little more than half the cases Hoffmann was loyal to the order of information in the original poems, but in many cases he was not. For example, the line *aki no kure* (autumn evening) appears in five of the haiku translated in the book; in one case (p. 111) it appears as the first line of the poem and was not changed by Hoffmann, but in three other cases (pp. 43, 81, 113) although it appears as the last line, Hoffmann translated it as the first one. Only in one case (p. 85) did he leave it as the last line. There is no real consistency, and in some other poems where a certain season is explicitly named, Hoffmann sometimes maintained the original order, but in other cases he turned it around. It must be assumed that he tried different translations for such poems, and chose the one which to his ears sounded the best in Hebrew. So for Hoffmann "the arrangement of words", the importance of which he indicated when explaining his translation policy, does not mean being faithful to the original order of words, but to the preferable order in the target language as uncovered by the translator.

4. Conclusion

It is difficult to judge Hoffmann's influence as a translator of poetry. In Israel his later literary output may have overshadowed his earlier work as translator, although all those interested in Japanese poetry are no doubt aware of his work and appreciate it. In my personal view he remains the best translator of haiku into Hebrew we have ever had. *Where did the Sounds Go?* was reprinted and may still be in print; the Hebrew version of *Japanese Death Poems* is on sale on second hand booksellers' sites on the Internet for a considerable price. The English edition is still in print, and it must have had a much wider impact than the Hebrew one. Recently I happened to encounter some

evidence that illustrates the book's longevity and wide appeal. The Australian novelist Richard Flanagan won the prestigious Man Booker Prize of 2014 for his novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a title obviously copying that of one of the numerous translations of Bashō's classic haiku diary, *Oku no hosomichi* [奥の細道]. The narrow road in Flanagan's book is the notorious train line built by British and Australian war prisoners and local laborers through the jungles of Thailand and Burma under the command of the Japanese army during WWII. The novel describes the life of some of the Australian prisoners and Japanese military men before, during and after the war. The main protagonist is an Australian officer and doctor; many years after the war he receives a copy of a book "of translations of Japanese death poems" (p. 28), in which he is especially impressed by the "death poem" of Shisui, who painted only a circle with his brush before he died. This circle is reproduced both in Hoffmann's book (p. 295) and in Flanagan's (p. 28). Although the circle may be the same and is wordless in itself, we should be aware that it underwent translation along the way from the old Zen master to the contemporary Australian author through the intermediary work and inspiration of Yoel Hoffmann.

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Transliteration and literal English versions of Hoffmann's Hebrew translations

In the following literal translations, English grammatical rules are not maintained; "[of]" is added when the construct state is used in the Hebrew; "-" between English words indicates that in Hebrew it is one word.

רוח סתיו:
מחשבות בלב איסא

ruaḥ stav: / maḥashavot belev issa

(wind [of] autumn: / thoughts in-the-heart [of] issa)

המחסן נשרף:
דבר אינו מסתיר
פני הלבנה

hamaḥsan nisraf: / davar eino mastir / pnei halevana

(the-storehouse burned: / thing none hide / face [of] the-moon)

גחלילית
נרדפת
מסתתרת
בירח

gaḥlilit / nirdefet / mistateret / bayareaḥ

(firefly / chased / hide / in-the-moon)

דממה:
קולו של הצרצר
נספג בסלע

demama: / kolo shel hatsratsar / nispag basela

(silence: / the-voice of the-grasshopper / absorbed in-the-rock)

תמנון במלכדת
חלומות ריקים
ירח של קיץ

tmanun bamalkodet / ḥalomot reikim / yareaḥ shel kayits

(octopus in-the-trap / empty dreams / moon of summer)

עמוק הסתיו:
אני תוהה
השכן ממול – מיהו?

'amok hastav: / ani tohe / hashachen mimul – mihu?

(deep the-autumn: / I wonder / the-neighbor opposite – who-is-he?)

החתול קם משנתו
ובפהוק גדול
יוצא להרפתקת אהבים

haḥatul kam mishnato / ubepihuk gadol / yotse leharpatkat ahavim

(the-cat wake-up from-his-sleep / and-with-yawn big / go-out for-adventure [of] love)

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Notes

1 Indeed, when translating *Genji* Waley tackled hundreds of *tanka* (poems of 31 syllables in 5 lines), but in most cases he incorporated them into the text, offering translations that are markedly different from his earlier ones in his *Uta* book.

2 This last sentence does not appear in the introduction to *Where did the Sounds Go*? As we shall see below, Hoffmann experimented with form more freely in his early Hebrew translations.