Why Wright will endure

Geoffrey Dutton

Judith Wright Collected Poems
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In 1956 A Book of Australian Verse, edited by Judith Wright, was published by Oxford University Press. Her choice of her own poems included ‘Bullocky’ and a couple of others, the over-antologising of which, at the expense of her other work, was later understandably to provoke her exasperation.

Reading them again today, in her Collected Poems, pleasure is not diminished by familiarity. The 426 pages of her work in this new edition confirm her position as the richest and most rewarding of living Australian poets.

Of course, she is also of much wider than local importance. I remember, in the late 1960s, hearing the Russian poet, Yevtushenko, telling a huge audience for a poetry reading in Georgia, in what was then the USSR, that the two greatest living women poets were Bella Akhmadulina and Judith Wright. (Yevtushenko, who is very well read in English and American poetry, was demonstrating a freedom from the London-New York axis not shared by most English or Americans. I have been unable to detect the name of a single Australian poet in Margaret Drabble’s Oxford Companion to English Literature.)

Judith Wright’s long introduction to her 1956 anthology provides some interesting background to her poetic thinking. In it she writes:

The difficulties of Australian poets have been many, and are still formidable enough. The most important has been the lack of any living link with the country itself. Australia was settled, in the first instance, by convicts and soldiery transported against their will, and in the second, by enterprising and materially-minded men anxious to make money and return to England as soon as possible. For many years a conception of Australia as a country to be loved or valued for itself was rare and difficult to uphold among such men and their descendants.

Within a mere ten years the great US wave had washed over Australian poetry, and it would have been anathema for most of the poets collected in John Tranter’s The New Australian Poetry to be caught out giving a damn for ‘any living link with the country itself’. The situation was more like that in Rae Desmond Jones’s ‘The Poets’:

they speak to a vast audience consisting mainly of one another all of whom nervously shuffle manuscripts & wait their turn meantime the masses who are as usual deaf blind & stupid just keep walking to the bus or into the office reading newspapers & quite obviously don’t give a fuck.

But somehow Judith Wright’s poetry itself has never gone out of fashion. There are some controversial ommi-
sions and short-changings in John Tranter and Philip Mead’s *Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* but, after Robert Adamson and Francis Webb, Judith Wright runs third, together with Kenneth Slessor and James McAuley.

Judith Wright has never abandoned her ‘living links with the country’; indeed, they have agonisingly burnt into her flesh. But she has also been the poet of so many other themes and moods. Some of her best poems are love poems—love between woman and man, mother and child, people and country. Her gaze is not one-way: ‘Lord, how the earth and the creatures look at me.’ So when she writes about birds or trees or, most painfully, a flying-fox caught on barbed wire, she is in touch with currents of energy that go beyond

There is plenty of irony in Judith Wright, a wry sense of what’s gone wrong behind the posturings of success, but she has no time for the evasions of the smart poet who stands apart. She is linked (not technically, of course) with poets as wildly dissimilar as Keats or Whitman—for her it has to be proved upon our pulses, she has to have suffered, to have been there. A lot of verses might well have listened to her ‘Advice to a Young Poet’:

*There’s a carefully neutral tone you must obey; there are certain things you must learn never to say.*

...Don’t stamp or scream; take the Exit door if you must; no hurry.

ORETURN to the theme of love, Judith Wright has never let go of that need, enunciated in the Introduction to her 1956 anthology, to love and value Australia for itself. But more and more, especially as she turned back to her ancestors’ pioneering history, the proud kinship of Generations of Men became the bitter complicity in guilt of *Cry for the Dead*. In her article ‘The Upside-Down Hut’, published in *Australian Letters* in 1961, she took the two basic Australian themes to be exile and hope. But even then, in the same article she quoted some ferocious lines about this country, from Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*: its heart is made of salt; it suddenly oozes from its burning pores, gold which will destroy men in greed, but not water to give them drink.’

In ‘Australia 1970’ she picks images of rage and hatred and says:

*For we are conquerors and self-poisoners more than scorpion or snake and dying of the venoms that we make even while you die of us.*

Near the end of *Collected Poems*, in ‘For a Pastoral Family’, she makes a kind of peace with her brothers and ancestors:

*We were fairly kind to horses and to people not too different from ourselves*  

But still, they remain a hair shirt to her, as Patrick White’s similar pastoral heritage was to him. She cannot forgive the wrongs done to the Aborigines and to the environment. Perhaps she has taken too much upon herself. One remembers the Psalm:

*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever.*

What saves Judith Wright is that she never loses that further vision of Herakleitos. In one of her last poems, ‘Counting in Sevents’, she goes through the joys and tragedies (although she does not mention the terrible affliction of her deafness) throughout the seven-year intervals of her life. The poem, published when she was seventy (she is now seventy-eight), ends with a simple thought that reaches beyond age or personal history:

*Yet with every added seven, some strange present I was given.*

Perhaps, even though a couple of years late, that present is this volume of her poems, which is also a present to all who love her work and a sure token that it will endure.

*Geoffrey Dutton’s autobiography, Out in the Open, is published next month by UPQ.*

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In the November Refrain poetry review

Reviews of

Andrea Sherwood

Lily Brett

Geoff Page

Kate Llewellyn

Plus

Seamus Heaney

and Yevtushenko

at the Melbourne Writers Festival
Getting Wright right

Any one who has had the experience of trying to translate a poem across even a fairly low-density language barrier (say German or French into English) will have tasted the despair of finding oneself in danger of killing that in the creature that one most wanted to save. Sometimes it feels like cutting down the tree and whistling from the wood a mere mock replica of it — the sap goes, the leaves in all their lively beauty disappear, and at best there's an artifact which cleverly reproduces the mere outlines of what was once brimming with life.

Luckily, this is not the only or the inevitable experience of translating poetry. Given the great difficulty of the task, the pleasure when you get it right is that much the greater — marvellously random felicities of equivalence across languages that you can happen on, or better still, a way of catching the deepest 'sense' of a word or line (as distinct from its dictionary meaning) so neatly that it adds new riches that the original language wasn't capable of carrying. On good days, translating a poem can go as excitingly right as writing one can.

And in the end, despite all that can be said about the impossibility of translating poetry, it is surely better to try and fail than not to try at all. I don't imagine anyone would argue with the idea that even a literal translation of a poem by Lorca or Basho or Pushkin, through which one can at least attempt to feel something of the original poem, is preferable to never knowing their work at all. Indeed the fact that it was anyway worth a go was more or less our only starting point when Sakai Nobuo and I first decided to undertake the challenge of translating Judith Wright's poetry into Japanese. The end was of course unsure; some if not all of the translations might prove to simply not 'work', mostly for reasons to do with the vast gap between the two languages and cultures. But most certainly we would learn a great deal in the process, and if the outcome was good, so much the better.

I don't think 'co-translation' of poetry is ever really possible for two people working out of the same native language. Even in translating literary prose, questions of personal style dictate the choice of words at almost every turn. A successful poem translation must necessarily be to some extent an individual re-creation of the poem. Just to what extent it should be so is of course a matter for debate (and thus potentially for argument between co-translators), but even once this question is cleared up, the final choices have to be made according to highly personal and even idiosyncratic taste, for the poem to really come alive in translation. The final translations of these poems are entirely the work of Mr Sakai. The process of translation, as distinct from its end product, was one of long and delicate negotiation between us.

We began by each separately preparing a translation of the poem, and comparing them carefully word by word. Mr Sakai's translations were of course far superior to mine, since Japanese is not my native language. However, there were often points at which our approach to a line or a word would differ greatly, through differing responses to nuances or understandings of the original. We would spend fascinating hours working through a poem together in this way, and the result was always a more or less massive rewriting which integrated the two readings. Then we put the poem aside and went on to the next one.

Much later, Mr Sakai would return to the translation and this time work to make it come alive as a poem in Japanese. This was in fact the most difficult point in the process, as we faced the inevitability of the need for certain sacrifices of the English in order to allow the Japanese poem to come to life. There were many wranglings over just where and how to wield the knife, but interestingly, it was often precisely at these points of contention that the
Japanese translation would come suddenly into a new kind of ‘true’ with the original poem. For some reason, it seems often to be the case that something which slips too glibly from one language into another remains somehow lustreless in the translation. The result of the tensions of our two differing loyalties to native languages was, I think translations which largely achieve the difficult feat of containing in intricate balance a sense of the life of both. If our approach can truly be called ‘co-translation’, then in this case co-translation seems to have worked.

The process of selecting from among our many translations the fifteen which go to make up The Flame-Tree was largely dictated by the National Library’s request that we choose poems with an eye to the theme of ‘nature’, which would presumably make the book more attractive to the Japanese reading public.

This involved us in several problems, not the least of which was the question of the often vast differences between a Japanese experience of ‘nature’ and an Australian one. A poem in which egrets wade in ‘a pool, jet-black and mirror-still’ (‘Egrets’) is all very well — after all, there are white egrets and dark pools in Japan too — but what of the paperbarks which crown the pool’s edges? And what can be done about the flower of the wonga vine, or for that matter a flame tree? And of course there is the more intractable problem of translating the Australian landscape itself. A poem such as ‘Train Journey’, with its ‘small trees on their uncoloured slope... under the great dry flight of air’ requires a powerful act of imagination on the part of many Japanese readers. But this can after all be said equally of many British readers, for instance, and indeed eliciting this sort of imaginative leap is surely part of the point of introducing poetry across cultural and geographical divisions. In the end we could only leave the imagery to make its own way into the different imagination of its readers.

Altogether we have put together some sixty translations, over a number of years of fortnightly meetings, and the process has inevitably involved a growing sense of intimacy with both the individual poems and the poetry as a whole. As a way of really reading something, the act of translation is hard to beat. I grew up with many of these poems in a particularly intimate way, since they were written by my own mother, and are often deeply identifiable with my own experiences and memories. But I realized only quite recently that in fact I had never really read them — there was a sense in which they were always too close for me to be able to face them directly.

The process of translating them into a foreign language ‘liberated’ the poems for me in powerful ways which I could never have anticipated. For that reason, as much as for the deep pleasures and satisfactions of the translation process itself, the experience which led to this small book has been perhaps disproportionately intense.

A very fine Japanese poet

Leith Morton

Judith Wright Aogiri no Uta / The Flame-Tree translated into Japanese by Nobuo Sakai and Meredith McKinney, National Library, $19.95, 0642-10595-4

The translation of foreign-language poetry into Japanese has an exceedingly long history. If we overlook Japan’s millennia-old borrowings from Chinese poetry and focus only on the modern era, then it can be argued that modern Japanese poetry actually began in 1882 with the translation of fourteen English poems into Japanese. The translators of this selection were all scholars rather than poets but the shock inflicted upon the moribund world of traditional Japanese verse by the revelation of Western-style poetry was dramatic.

Only twenty-three years later, the poet Ueda Bin transmuted Paul Verlaine’s ‘Chanson d’automne’ into a liquid, lyrical Japanese that remains one of the great landmarks of modern Japanese poetry. Bin’s exquisite Japanese rendering typifies the absorption of Western poetry, and in particular French poetry, into the mainstream of Japanese verse. Until quite recently virtually all notable Japanese poets had either graduated from French departments at university or were themselves professors of French.

Scholarly rather than poetic translation tended to be left to the rather more prosaic world of English-language poetry, designed more for school syllabuses than poetry-readings at jazz cafes. Of course, the translation of foreign-language poetry into Japanese covers the entire spectrum, from heavily-annotated explanatory renderings to versions so free that even Robert Lowell’s famous imitations might be considered faithful. Professor Nobuo Sakai and Meredith McKinney’s versions of fifteen of Judith Wright’s poems attempt to strike a balance between the two extremes of dry-as-dust
'literal' renderings and more poetic transformations.

Judith Wright's poetry presents particular difficulties for the translator. The complex exchange that Wright creates between abstract, metaphysical rhetoric and simple, relaxed statement has often been praised by critics. These shifts characteristically occur in poetry almost neo-classical in its tight, formal rhythms, although her tone can just as easily be dry and stringent. How does the translator render such complex rhythms, which disarm in their apparent simplicity, into Japanese?

The only other example of translation of Wright's poetry into Japanese with which I am familiar is Yasuko Claremont's versions in her book, Nijussaki Osutaria Shi Shokai / Twentieth Century Australian Poetry, published in 1984. Claremont's renderings of 'Bullocky' and 'The Bull' are scholarly attempts at exegesis rather than poetic remakings, as Claremont herself notes. Sakai and McKinney try to capture the music of Wright's verse as we can see in their version of 'Five Senses' where rhyme, rarely used in Japanese poetry due to its ridiculous ease (and the subsequent loss of tension) is employed to shape the Japanese into a simulacrum of the English form. The sixth and seventh lines: 'in me this dark and shining / that stillness and that moving', become in Japanese, 'Kono in to yo / Kono sei to do'. The sixth line is also interesting in that 'in' and 'yo' are the Japanese readings of the Chinese characters 'yin' and 'yang' and contain all their mystical Daoist overtones. The second and third lines of the original, 'gather into a meaning / all acts, all presences', are made into heavily alliterated Japanese: 'Koi no subete, sonzai no subete o atsumete / Hitotsu no i ni naru'. This uses half-rhyme as well to try to capture fluid concision of the original. The translation employs a full-stop at the end of line three which has the effect of interrupting the line of thought while the original uses a semicolon as a pause in order to preserve the narrative line.

Close examination such as this reveals both the felicities and infelicities of a brave attempt to turn the distinctive music of Wright's English into a different musical scale in Japanese. Sakai and McKinney seem to me to cleave more to the tradition of English rather than French-language translation into Japanese — they favour scholarly over free renderings. The motive impulse appears to be to capture all possible shades of meaning rather than to select some to make poems in Japanese. But the translators deserve our congratulations on their efforts (which must have cost them hundred of hours of unremitting labour) to combine both the music and meaning of Judith Wright's poetry into a Japanese that mimics the form as well as the content of the original.

That the result does not much resemble the mode of expression adopted by most twentieth-century Japanese poets is not a matter of great concern. Poetry is, after all, more often than not a process of de-naturalisation followed by re-naturalisation. Translation thus intrudes into the native space but by its intrusion redefines the boundaries of that space. So, with translations such as these, the possibility exists that one of our finest Australian poets may one day become one of the finest of Japanese poets, just as Verlaine now occupies a prominent place among the founding fathers of modern Japanese verse.

As well as translating it, Leith Morton tries occasionally to write Japanese poetry.