

Translating Korean-ness: Thoughts on Korean Poetry in Translation

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The essential “Koreanness” of Korean poetry is also its most certainly untranslatable feature. What gets lost in translation is, inevitably, its specifically “Korean” quality, much more than any abstract “poetic” quality it might have. This is at the most superficial level quite obvious. Korean poetry is (almost by definition) written in Korean language. Translated Korean poetry is not. When poetry originally written in Korean is translated into English, it loses one primary aspect of its Korean identity, its Korean language. Whatever is considered “poetic” about the original poem by its original readers is thereby strongly compromised, indeed it is utterly “lost in translation.” It is not so easy to say in what sense a Korean poem, once it has been translated into English, is still a “Korean poem.” In idealistic terms, of course, a poem is a poem universally, it has no national identity. But Koreans are intensely aware of national identity issues, perhaps precisely because Korean identity is so hard to define.

At the immediate level, it is not only the vocabulary and the grammar which have changed in the process of translation; no matter how hard the version may strive to be “conservative” or “faithful,” almost always there will have been radical changes in the sequence of words and phrases in the attempt to create a “poem” in the target language, to say nothing of rhythms and sounds. Moreover, certain vital words in the original may have been found to have no equivalent in the target language. Languages and cultures are sometimes so very different. After all, the translation of poetry as poetry is inevitably a struggle to provide a completely new poetic quality in place of the lost original poetic features; the nearest we can come to satisfaction will be if we feel we have managed to produce what Paul Ricoeur called an “adequate equivalent.” As a translation, it must still be recognizably “the same poem,” yet it can never in any real sense be “the same poem.”

Now the Korean language is certainly not all that is meant by the “Koreanness” of a Korean poem. The life-experience or “culture” embodied in a Korean poem is usually very specifically Korean, in often really untranslatable ways. I will start with 2 examples so that we can see what this means. Here is a commented translation of a poem by Lee Si-Young, designed to explore as fully as possible the full range of difficulties confronting the translator.

뚜부네

Ttubu-ne

For a Korean the title probably feels homely, it being an old-style, rural, woman’s nickname with implications of low status, possible lack of a husband, and an (unclear) relationship with tofu. As a proper name, it demands to remain unchanged in translation, but none of these implications will be apparent to a non-Korean, who will not recognize that “Ttubu-ne” is a person’s name.

달착지근하고 포실포실한 기장떡을 만들어 파는
뚜부네는 굴속 같은 외침잇들에 살았다

Ttubu-ne, who sold the succulent, spongy millet cakes she made,
lived in Oechimeutteul, a god-forsaken hole.

The poem begins with two pieces of biographical information, telling us something of what this unknown person, “Ttubu-ne,” did and where she lived. The past tense in line 2 suggests that these are memories from the past. The translation of Korean food names is always

immensely problematic and *gijang-tteok* (*tteok* being usually translated as “rice-cake” but that is not a western-style cake baked in an oven, and this one is made using millet) is unfamiliar even probably to many urban Koreans; there is clearly no English word that could evoke an equivalent food; this is the realm of Proust’s “madeleines” and yet more. The poet focuses mainly on the taste and texture of the *gijang-tteok* but it also indicates something of Ttubu-ne’s social and economic poverty, suggesting that making and selling it (on the streetside or house-to-house, perhaps) is her sole source of income. The two adjectives chosen to characterize the ‘cake’ could not be more Korean and untranslatable. The first, 달착지근하다 ‘dalchakjigeun(hada)’ is one of a set of characteristic, pseudo-onomatopoeic words indicating degrees of ‘somewhat sweetish’—달차근- (dalchageun-), 달짝지근하다’- (daljjakjigeun-) being variants. The second, 포실포실하다 (posilposil-hada, also written as bosilboshil), is likewise a purely Korean word (with no Chinese root) using onomatopoeic sound quality to suggest a feeling of spongy softness. Here the standard dictionary is of no help; it defines the word 포실포실하다 either as referring to something over-dry and hard to crumble, or light rain / snow falling, or puffs of smoke rising . . . Neither of the two Korean words is quite usual and neither have any possible direct English equivalent.

The second line centers on the (clearly very small and remote) rural locality where Ttubu-ne lives, called Oechimeuitteul, described as being “like the inside of a cave,” an existing Korean idiom (ie not a new image created by the poet) usually applied to a dark, pokey, gloomy room, but here perhaps better translated as “god-forsaken.” Again, the feeling conveyed by the name of the place will not be apparent to the non-Korean reader.

키가 장대한 그 아들은 일찌기 집을 나가
역전과 읍내 사이를 오가며
태비를 받고 짐을 실어 나르는 말몰이꾼이었고
이름이 생각나지 않는 그 손녀는 썩은새 무너져내리는 추녀 밑에서
손 한번 써보지 못하고 밀이 빠져 죽었다고도 한다
Her towering son, a pack-horse driver,
left home early on, earned a few pennies transporting loads
between station forecourt and township center;
her grand-daughter, I forget her name, died under a sagging roof of rotten straw ,
helpless, suffering from a chronic prolapse.

The poem passes on from Ttubu-ne to her son without any more information about her. This unnamed son “left home” early in his life, perhaps (we imagine) because there was no work for him there. The father of the son remains unmentioned. The son, we are told, moved all the way to the nearby township, almost two miles away, where he could earn some money. It might be helpful for the reader to know that the railway station of the township of Gurye, where Lee Si-Young grew up, was built by the Japanese a couple of miles away on the far side of the town, meaning that on market days transport of loads of goods being brought in for sale would be essential. An indication that Ttubu-ne is already elderly is given by the fact of her having had a grand-daughter who was no longer a child when she died; there is no information about the son’s wife.

Another challenge for the translator or non-Korean reader comes with the description of the house where the grand-daughter lived and died. The roof is made of “*sseogeun-sae*” and has “sagging, drooping, about-to-collapse eaves.” The reader has to be familiar with the appearance of poor housing in the rural Korea of times gone by. The roofs were covered with a thatch of rice-straw which projected beyond the low mud-walls to provide shelter (the eaves). Rice-straw rots easily and these roofs had to be re-covered virtually every year if they were to remain bright and waterproof; poor people could not afford the cost of the straw and therefore their roofs grew black in summer rains and winter snow, the rotting thatch would sag and droop toward the ground.

The speaker recalls only the grand-daughter’s life and death, not her name, in two ways. First, her helplessness, there was nothing she could do (“she could not once use her

hands” he says), and her physical suffering. The “prolapse” (a rather awkward medical term in the English, there being no colloquial term corresponding to 밀이 빠져, “bottom-fallen”) she endured was, the poet says, common among poor rural women who were never able to eat properly and suffered severe constipation from their poor diet, which might include tree bark. Traditionally women could only eat whatever was left over after the men of the family had finished. So the story of Ttubu-ne’s family’s life is one of extreme poverty. Yet she has somehow survived and the poem’s main story, for it is a narrative, then develops as a childhood memory.

오랫길 학교에서 돌아와 다리가 아프다고 하면
어머니는 사람을 놓아 뚜부네를 불러 잔밥을 메기게 했다

If I said my leg was hurting after walking the mile home from school,
Mother would summon Ttubu-ne and have her offer food to the spirits.

Here the poem’s speaker turns to his own direct memory of childhood, in which Ttubu-ne figures. He recalls his schooldays; from his home to the school was, he says, using traditional measurement, “five *ri*” (about 2 kilometers). “Kilometers” is not a word that works well in poetry, compared with “miles.” By the time the poem’s memory-persona came walking back home from school, he would not (we might think) be very eager to go out and work in the fields, so he might complain (falsely?) that his legs were hurting (children do that). The translator’s (and the reader’s) problem comes with his mother’s response. Instead of scolding or threatening the child, she would send a servant to fetch Ttubu-ne, to “have her feed hulled rice.” The poem does not explain, the reader just has to understand that Ttubu-ne was considered a kind of shaman or healing-woman, who knew the traditional spells. In the south-western region especially, the simplest kind of spell for relieving pain consisted in filling a bowl with hulled rice and wrapping it in a cloth. The wise-woman / shaman would recite a prayer to a spirit, either the family / house spirit or one coming from outside to cause trouble, then rub the affected place with the wrapped rice. This Ttubu-ne does in what follows.

얼굴이 까무잡잡하니 뽀뽀 얽은 뚜부네가
공기에 입쌀을 잔뜩 넣고 청베에 감아 다리를 쓱쓱 문지르면
거짓말처럼 아파던 다리가 낫고
대신 탕탕하던 공기에 쌀이 줄어 있었다

Ttubu-ne, her face swarthy, pock-marked,
would fill a bowl to the brim with hulled rice,
wrap it in a blue hemp cloth and rub my leg hard with it,
at which, like a lie, the leg that was hurting would get better.
Instead, in the bowl that had been packed full, the rice would grow less.

At the start of this passage, we are given a glimpse of Ttubu-ne’s face, looming over the little boy with the aching leg; she is not simply dark-skinned, the poem uses another couple of intensely Korean pseudo-onomatopoeic words, ‘까무잡잡하니 *kkamujajjip(-hada)*’ expressing her swarthy, dark complexion from constant outdoor labor, and ‘뽀뽀 얽은 *ppakppak eoggeun*’ a conventional combination used to evoke the pits and scars left by smallpox. For a child, this might have made a strong and frightening impression, a face from the remote Korean past. The rest of the process is fairly simple, and the pain vanished, the poet says, “like a lie,” words which might suggest that his leg had not really been hurting to begin with. The child that he was seems impressed to see that the rice, which had been heaped up under the cloth, seems to be diminishing, as though being eaten by a spirit, or (of course) being shaken out of the bowl into the folds of the cloth.

참새떼 줄줄이 내려와 을씨년스런 석양빛 쬐는 저녁
뚜부네는 마당네 코를 뿜 풀며 재갈거리는 참새떼들은 탁 내쫓고는
치맛자락에 잔밥 메기던 쌀을 싸 안고
올바자 너머로 돌아가는 것이었다

At evening, when flocks of sparrows came flying down,
pecked in the bleak sunset glow ,
Ttubu-ne would blow her nose noisily in the yard as she drove away
the chattering sparrows,
then she would head homeward beyond the fence,
holding the rice she'd offered wrapped in the hem of her skirt.

The poem ends with a kind of epilogue of a peaceful rural evening, Ttubu-ne performing the usual service of driving away the sparrows that would eat anything they could find, before heading home, carrying the rice from the ceremony she had been given as a payment for the exorcism.

The “Koreanness” of this poem exists in part, then, at the level of its very specifically Korean vocabulary, with vivid, expressive words from colloquial popular speech which have no equivalent in boring literary English. The Koreanness equally exists at the level of the millet cakes, the appearance of the house, the social realities. Above all, though, it exists in the folk religion of magic spells and simple exorcisms, which is already in contrast to the modern world in which children go to school to study. Over all, the poet recalls a rural childhood surrounded by a Korean culture that very largely no longer exists, in even the most remote village, while he is no longer a child but an elderly poet, and lives in Seoul. He does not idealize or expect nostalgia for the poverty and the ignorance, yet he invites the readers to share his fond memory of childhood evenings full of chattering sparrows, and celebrates the memory of a special woman, the like of whom one cannot find today.

Many modern Korean poets exploit memory, as Lee Si-Young does, and their memories are also set in specifically Korean contexts of various kinds. Some other aspects of Koreanness appear in the poem “Masan-po” by Kim Soo-Bok:

마산포
Masan-po

Here, too, the title is problematic. This is a real, sea-side place name (-po means harbor) on the west coast of Korea just south of Incheon, but of such obscurity that few Koreans have heard of it. It lies in Songnan-myeon, Gopo-ri, and was used as an alternative landing-place to Jemul-po (Incheon) by the Chinese in the later 19th century. The ending -po means “harbor” but if we translate the title as “Masan Harbor” that will cause confusion with the large and well-known city and port of Masan on the south-eastern coast near Busan.

The challenge in translating this poem lies in the very great difference between Korean and English grammar and word-order. Especially the first stanza, if seen in its Korean word order, seems incoherent:

마산포에는 이제 바다가 없습니다 그 풍성한 젖가슴까지 드러내 놓고 누워 있던 저녁바
다로 가는 길 안개는 걷히고 길 안으로 온몸을 밀고 들어서던 선창집 마당 발목을 적셔
주던 저녁바다는 없습니다

“In Masan-po now sea is not. / That ample breast exposed used to lie / to the evening sea
going path / fog clearing / into the path whole body thrusting / used to enter / wharf tavern
yard / ankles used to soak / evening sea is not.

This is a particularly vivid example of the way in which Korean word-order and grammar do not at all correspond to standard English word-order and grammar. It is only after much pondering that a possibly acceptable, more coherent phrasing emerges in English:

“There is no sea now in Masan-po. The path leading to the evening sea, which used to lie with its ample breast exposed and then, as the fog cleared, come surging boldly up the path to the wharftside tavern yard and there soak my ankles, that evening sea is no more.”

The poet has explained that in the 1970s, when he was teaching in a rural school, he used to go there and watch the tide come flooding in till he was up to his ankles in water. The poem begins with an unexplained elegaic note of loss: there is now no sea in Masanpo. There, as in many places along the west coast of Korea, reclamation of wetlands and other large-scale works have cut former harbors off from the sea. But there is also a wider sense of lost youth, lost vigor which does not require any very clear explanation. The rest of the poem requires less of a struggle but the poem as a whole has an overall Koreanness which distinguishes it clearly from any kind of English poetry I can think of. It is a fine example of a Korean poem in which the words are not being used in a poetic manner, not exactly the standard way. I consider it my task to reproduce the oddness, without necessarily thinking that I “understand” exactly what is being said.

저녁 불빛으로 먼 섬들을 밝히고 섬들의 마음까지 나누어주던 마산포 저녁바다, 사람들은 밀물이 들던 저녁까지 파도의 젖은 노래에 젖었다가 바다를 안고 내륙의 몸으로 돌아갔으나 이제는 아무도 돌아오지 않습니다

The evening sea at Masan-po used to shine on distant islands with an evening glow, sharing the islands' very hearts, and people, after bathing in the waves' soaking songs until evening, when the tide came in, would return as inland bodies embracing the sea, but now no-one returns.

바람에 흔들리는 發船의 등 뒤 갈대숲 사이로 안개 새들이 발목을 적시는 마산포 바다, 사람들이 바다를 가슴에 안고 돌아갔다가 돌려주지 않아도 분노하지 않는 마산포 바다, 수줍어하던 가슴도 잃어버린 메마른 젖무덤만 갖고 있는 마산포 바다,

The Masan-po sea where fog-birds used to soak their ankles between the reed beds behind the backs of departing boats rocking in the wind, the Masan-po sea that was never angry though people who had embraced the sea returned then failed to return, the Masan-po sea that now has only dry teats, having lost those breasts that were once so bashful.

먼 파도와 초승달에게 이제 젖을 물릴 수도 없는 마산포 바다, 마른 바람의 얼굴을 만지며 갈대숲 사이로 새들은 저녁바다의 젖무덤 속으로 쓰러져 들어가 죽었다가 저녁 노을로 번지는 마산포 바다,

The Masan-po sea that cannot now suckle distant waves and the new moon, the Masan-po sea where between the reed beds, stroking the dry wind's face, birds used to go falling into the evening sea's breast and die, then spread as a twilight glow,

하혈로 빈 몸이 되어 일어서지도 못하는 바다 하나 누워 있습니다

One sea lies there, its body drained of blood, unable to rise again.

In both these examples, my final English version is obviously working very hard to be as “faithful” and “literal” as I can make it, but the second example remains even more distinct from the Korean original than the Ttubu-ne poem. It has to try to be “close,” first, because that is the pressure I am constantly under from Koreans, whether they be the poets or the general public. “That is not exactly what the Korean says,” usually means “this is no good.” As it happens, I am more than happy with this because I simply have no idea at all what else I might do. The general public has recently been invited by *Modern Poetry in Translation* to create “versions” in English of a Spanish poem about olives on a plate; that is one thing,

perhaps. A Korean poem about feeding spirits with rice to cure sore legs is quite another. But you might disagree. I do not consider in any case consider a translation I have made to be “my poem;” I want it still to be “the Korean poet’s poem” even if the poet cannot speak English very well. That is what I am troubled by in very freely rendered versions which are still called “translations” of a “poem by xxx.”

There is, surely, no one “correct” way of translating anything, and especially poetry. There is no one right way, even, of comparing one translation with another and declaring that one is “better” than the other, assuming that the versions are not full of basic grammatical errors, I suppose. Everyone does as they like when they translate, and then they tend to formulate “translation theories” to prove that their approach is the only correct one and everyone else is wrong. However, generally speaking, I would be inclined to say that often people who are native Korean-speakers or almost bilingual Korean-English often seem to be much less careful to be “accurate” when translating from Korean into English than those who, like me, look up almost every word in the dictionary. This will be because they reckon they know at a glance what a Korean text is basically saying; as a result, almost-bilingual translators tend, I think, not to look very hard at just how it is saying it, at the precise weight and rhythm and nuance given by each of the words and phrases used. Instead, they rapidly formulate an approximate equivalent in the English side of their brain. The approximation is then justified as being the way an English speaker might say more or less the same thing. This usually becomes even more rapid and even less precise when the translating mind is strongly native-speaking Korean, because Koreans tend to assume that they understand anything written in Korean (which is not true, of course) but since they are not fully bilingual, the English side of the equation is then usually far from equal to the task of finding adequate equivalents. “I know what it means, so I can translate it” is the source of more bad translations than anyone could count. I am struck to see how many Koreans who have lived for many years overseas write what is really rather poor English, without apparently realizing it.

My own pet “theory” of translation is that the process of literary translation involves an ongoing “close reading” of the source text, with intense respect for each of the words that the poet has decided to use. The difference between the Korean and English languages is such that “word for word” is not a useful term for the translating process, but still I believe that a translator is not allowed to go skipping blithely over words, ignoring them or replacing them as if they do not matter. There are, of course, those who even insist that a “good” translation should reproduce precisely the rhythms and sounds of the original; the Russian poet-in-exile Josef Brodsky is the prime example of that, in the translations he insisted on making of his own Russian poems. In Old Testament translation, too, there have been those who insist that the grammar of the translation should be the grammar of the sacred Hebrew text, not the natural grammar of the target language. This is not, I think, a good idea, but it should be mentioned once, if only to be rejected, because in poetry translation there are compelling reasons for not being bound by the rhythms and sounds and grammar of the original; they are normally secondary and essentially “untranslatable.”

I want to comment here on a very important aspect of the process of poetry translation. Poems are often very unlike fiction in the way they use words and grammar. Modern Korean poetry is often extremely difficult to understand, even for Koreans. This is especially the case with younger poets’ work. I myself certainly do not have a total Korean dictionary in my head, and there is no really complete dictionary of colloquial Korean in the bookstores. That means that no matter how hard I try, I will either fail to understand things or (worse still) misunderstand things that I think I understand. Even if I see there is a problem, what am I to do? If I ask an “ordinary” Korean to explain a really difficult poem or line or word, s/he will often not be able to. I cannot be phoning to the poet every 5 minutes, and poets are really not good at explaining things either. That is why I am immensely grateful to the rare skilled Koreans whom agree to read through my translations, comparing them with the

original, pinpointing mistakes and suggesting corrections. They need to have a high level of literary English, and at the same time to be very experienced readers of modern Korean poetry. Without them I would be lost. And for translators into English whose native language is Korean, well, the need is the opposite. No matter how hard they have studied English or how long they have lived overseas, English is not their first, native language. Some are really very good, but they are rare, and usually the challenge of translating from Korean steers their English away from what is natural, the Korean exercises a strong “interference” and the result is in “translationese.” So my message is that we should try not to have to work alone. Translation should always involve working as a community. And my basic message is that one can only really translate well into one’s native language

The “foreign-ness” of Korean poetry is thus well assured, despite its historic rootedness in European Symbolism or Modernism. The subjects of the poems in Ko Un’s *Maninbo*, of Shin Kyong-Nim’s *Nongmu*, of many of Lee Si-Young’s poems, and a host of others, derive from specifically Korean experiences of life and history, loss and humiliation, joys and relationships. The Korean poet confronting experiences of human life after Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, division, dictatorship, social transformation, does not stand on the same ground as a British or American poet, just as an Irish poet does not, even though writing in the same language. Korean poetry has a totally different tradition and offers a totally different canon, it does not have the same audience or readership in mind, does not speak in the same way. Recent Korean feminist “confessional poetry” may claim to look to Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath but that does not mean it is doing the same thing as they did, or that the Korean female poets are expressing the same responses to the same experiences.

I should perhaps add here that the translation of fiction is not at all the same kind of exercise as the translation of a poem. The scale is different, and so is the focus of the writer’s endeavors. Fiction tells stories and fills many pages; the reader’s attention is not focussed on each individual word in the same way as with poetry. Moreover, fiction is far more of a commercial product than poetry; it is published in the hope of being sold in large quantities. Therefore good publishers are going to insist on editing any comparatively “faithful” translation in order to make it more easily “readable.” A well-known example is the considerable rewriting undertaken before the publication of the Korean novel “Please Look After Mom.” It is my opinion that a translator should not be expected to act as editor, and should certainly not be editing at the same time as translating. The stylistic editing of a novel will always be best done by someone who cannot refer back to the original.

Another way of evoking the specific task of the translator is to stress that a poem is written by an individual poet; it is the result of a creative process which happens in the mind of a particular individual using a particular language and set of literary conventions. The resulting poem is inevitably composed of words and meaning, sound and sense, which are bound to be a unity since nobody can produce meaning without words, while the words of a poem are normally chosen for considerations of both sense and sound, insofar as poetry in most cultures, as in Korean, retains an oral, spoken character, with links to song in many cases. There are, of course, many ways in which the relative importance of sound and sense can vary, since there are different kinds of poetry in most or all cultures. Lyric poems usually depend more on the harmonious sounds of the words and their flow, while satirical or philosophical poems, as well as narrative poems, rely more heavily on the meaning of the words chosen. The skill of a poet is revealed by the way in which a poem is made, no matter whether it emerged complete directly from the poet’s mind / imagination in a flash or was the result of long polishing and revision. We must always remember that the word “poet” originally meant “maker.”

Now that is the essential difference between an original poem and a translation of it. The words of a translation cannot emerge in the same free, creative flow; instead, they are bound to be the result of a more or less laborious negotiation as we read and re-read,

attempt to understand, imitate and re-create the poem (at the semantic level, first of all, almost inevitably) using the words and grammar of another language. The translator is not the original poet, and calling the resulting poem a “version” instead of a “translation” still does not justify betraying the poet and hijacking his work. Great poets are Great Poets, in a way that talented translators can never be “great” translators, I think. The translator does not dispose of total creative freedom, not even when he is called Ezra Pound or John Dryden and is, like them, consciously refusing to be “faithful.” We are always, inevitably, under the shadow of the original, struggling with the demand to recreate it “exactly” as it was, yet knowing that, no matter what we do, we are going to produce a radically new poem, which will have totally different sounds and rhythms, words and grammar; yet we also know that it should still be somehow identical with the original, knowing that the published text will be attributed first and foremost to the original poet, not the translator. There is a sense in which the work of translation is closer to pastiche and parody than to “creative writing.”

I suppose I should find comfort in a dictum by Vladimir Nabokov: “The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase.” He and Joseph Brodsky are the great enemies of the free recreations of Russian poetry and fiction sometimes justified as “versions” or “adaptations.” Nabokov was scathing: “Adapted to what? To the needs of an idiot audience? To the demands of good taste? To the level of one’s own genius?” Nabokov strongly advocated what he termed “literal” translation (as opposed to “the paraphrastic” and “the lexical”) “rendering as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation.” We should recall that whenever we are tempted to “improve” on what a close, faithful translation yields in the name of “readability.” The results of Nabokov’s and Brodsky’s wish to see the original Russian language still perfectly embodied and embedded in their English translations have provoked furious debate, but it is important not to reject their challenge too readily.

The dichotomy between “faithful” and “readable” in translation cannot, in fact, be finally resolved. Fitzgerald’s 19th-century version of the Persian poem *Rubaiyat* of Omar Kayam is probably the most famous or notorious example of “free translation,” of what today is known as “domestication.” It is also the most enduring and successful single translation ever published in English, after the Bible, with Amazon listing some 20 editions currently in print, even after 140 years. “Everyone” knows the famous quatrain 12 (from the 5th edition, 1889):

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Yet the same text, translated in 1988 by an outstanding Persian translator, Karim Emami, with a desire to be faithful to the original reads:

In spring if a houri-like sweetheart
Gives me a cup of wine on the edge of a green cornfield,
Though to the vulgar this would be blasphemy,
If I mentioned any other Paradise, I'd be worse than a dog.

Few readers of English are going to prefer that second, “faithful” version on esthetic grounds, although it is certainly interesting to be able to glimpse the extent of Fitzgerald’s creative freedom. He himself clearly expressed the options he took in letters written to a friend: “My translation will interest you from its form, and also in many respects in its detail: very un-literal as it is. Many quatrains are mashed together: and something lost, I doubt, of Omar’s simplicity, which is so much a virtue in him” (letter to E. B. Cowell, 9/3/58). And, “I suppose

very few People have ever taken such Pains in Translation as I have: though certainly not to be literal. But at all Cost, a Thing must live: with a transfusion of one's own worse Life if one can't retain the Original's better. Better a live Sparrow than a stuffed Eagle" (letter to E. B. Cowell, 4/27/59).

There, I believe, we can find our consolation. If our translations do not set out to soar like eagles in their own right but humbly flutter as sparrow-signposts indicating the existence of another kind of poetry in another kind of culture and language, we should be happy. It does not matter what we do, there will always be nasty people who will find fault and criticize. We must not let that afflict us. Sparrows do not worry about not being able to soar like eagles, because they know that at least nobody will be out trying to shoot them down to have them stuffed as trophies on the mantelpiece. If a translator simply says, "Translation is an impossible project but I have done all that I could to produce something worthy of my original," that's enough. Translation is not self-promotion but a humble service. Chapman had to wait centuries for Keats to wax ecstatic over his version of Homer, and so make him immortal. Who wants to be a stuffed eagle, gathering the dust, after all? We should simply let our live sparrows chirp as they can, and not look for any other reward. So long as the poems we have translated live!