

## Shaping Multiplicities: Reviewing the Poetry of Yoshimasu Gōzō in Translation

**Gregory Dunne**

It is hard to get one's head around the poetry of this contemporary and seminal Japanese poet, Yoshimasu Gōzō. Although *Alice Iris Red Horse: Selected poems of Yoshimasu Gōzō* (New Directions) was published a few years ago in 2016, it remains a fresh and singular achievement that is deserving of further attention. Yoshimasu's work is distinct, innovative, and difficult to access and yet, for all of that, it is a poetry that radiates a vitality and energy that readers will find themselves refreshed by, and swept up into. The book, edited by the poet Forrest Gander, matches Yoshimasu's innovative poetry with innovative approaches to translation. Rather than relying on one or two translators, the book brings forth a number of "crack" translators from the United States and Japan, who each work to translate poems taken from the poet's various collections. This approach yields a rich tapestry of translations allowing readers to experience the poetry through a variety of poetic sensibilities. The approach opens a fruitful conversation on the topic of translation itself, as its subtitle indicates: "A Book in and on Translation." This comprehensive approach to the translation of Yoshimasu's poems compliments the multifaceted complexity of Yoshimasu's poetry.

Yoshimasu Gōzō was born in Tokyo in 1939 and has given performances worldwide and received many cultural awards. He has been inspired and influenced by Orikuchi Shinobu (1857-1953), a Japanese ethnologist, linguist, folklorist, novelist, and poet. Yoshimasu has also been influenced by such artists as Paul Klee, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cezanne, William Blake, John Cage, and Patrick Chamoiseau, the French author from Martinique known for his work in the *créolité* movement which attempts to describe the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of places like the Antilles and, more specifically, the French Caribbean. Like Chamoiseau, Yoshimasu's work spans a variety of forms and genres.

Yoshimasu's approach to poetry is said to "consist of writing, reading, shooting videos, taking photographs, and traveling." The poems are often multilingual, blending elements of a number of

languages and featuring cross-linguistic and typographic wordplay. They blend and bend genres (especially prose and poetry). His poems engage intimately with experience, geography, and history, “layering encounters in the present with a keen awareness of the past.”

Forrest Gander elegantly elucidates the power and grace of Gōzō’s poetry in his introduction, helping to orient the reader and check her compass before setting out upon a most remarkable journey. Gander asserts that Yoshimasu is “Undoubtedly. . . one of the most distinct, innovative, and influential poets of our time.” But his work is also so complex in its use of language, place, history, myth, and time, that it is nearly a language unto itself. In commenting on the challenges of translating this poetry, Gander offers the following insightful and instructive comment: “It might be observed that this poetry has *not* (my emphasis) been translated from the Japanese so much as it has been translated from Gōzō Yoshimasu.”

And yet, for all of this, Gander notes that Yoshimasu’s poetry still develops out of Japanese poetics and thus remains informed by it, even as it moves forward. Gander illustrates the point by mentioning how Yoshimasu, like Matsuo Bashō before him, explores “moments in journeys that are both physical and spiritual.” He travels, for example, to places that have been impacted by historic events, places that have become a part of the Japanese collective memory, and writes poetry from those locations, those sites. We see this in his writing on Hiroshima and in his poems about Namie, the city that was devastated by the Fukushima earthquake on March 11, 2011, and the subsequent nuclear meltdown. Similarly, he visits the town of Rikuzen Takata City, another notable example, a town which was completely demolished by the tsunami, dislocating more than twenty thousand people.

Yoshimasu is working out of a poetic tradition that extends further back than the 17<sup>th</sup> century Bashō. In reading Yoshimasu’s poetry, one hears echoes of Ki no Tsurayuki (872-943 CE). Tsurayuki’s poetry negotiated the territory between the physical and the spiritual worlds as is evidenced in the Preface to the *Kokinshū* (905 CE), the first anthology of native verse compiled by royal command:

The poetry of Japan has as its seed the human heart and flourishes in the countless leaves of words. Because human beings possess interests of so many kinds, it is in poetry that they give expression to the meditations of their hearts in terms of the sights appearing before their eyes and the sounds coming to their ears. Hearing the warbler sing among the plum blossoms and the frog that lives in the waters – is there any living thing not given to song? It is poetry that, without exertion, moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of gods and spirits invisible to the eye, softens the relations between men and women, calms the hearts of fierce warriors. (Miner 84)

In his speaking of poetry's ability to stir "spirits invisible to the eye," Tsurayuki prefigures Yoshimasu's own belief in poetry's power to reach beyond time and place, and to be inspired by and through time and place. Yoshimasu also understands poetry as being created out of multiplicities and linguistic depth, analogous, perhaps, to Tsurayuki's understanding of poetry as being created out of "countless leaves of words." In sum, there is cultural, historical, and poetic connective tissue to be found in Yoshimasu's poetry that carries us far back in time.

Yoshimasu's poetry is marked by the related interesting and attractive element that Gander refers to as an "ethical inclusiveness." That is to say, Yoshimasu acknowledges the voices of others – the presence of others – in his poems. These others might be alive or dead. If, for example, Dante entered his mind while he was composing, and he felt himself in a kind of conversation with Dante, he might acknowledge Dante's inspiration or presence in the poem's making. With a similar sense of ethical inclusiveness, he will "ceremonialize" the people, and even the animals, that contribute to the making of the poems, citing a puppy for example, as "His Dogship." He cites others that may have been with him during the poem's conception or composition, and often in considerable detail: "In Kasumi, with Sato Masayoshi-san, last Year of the Rat—December 2009—31st, at three o'clock, just at year end....'." Why, one might reasonably ask, does Yoshimasu do this – and why does he do it in such a "scrupulous" manner (to use Gander's word)? According to Yoshimasu himself, in one of the several interviews contained in the book, he does this, "Partly. . . out of shyness." To which Gander also comments, noting how Yoshimasu, "readily yields his own voice in order to allow for other voices." Perhaps the "shyness" that Yoshimasu acknowledges stems from

his belief, his poetics, that poetry is an art that constantly draws from the springs of multiplicities that are intrinsically a part of the fabric of language and story.

In the interview, “Post-3/11: Believing and Doubting Poetry,” Yoshimasu comments tellingly on the limits of language and poetry and the role he envisions the poet playing within the community nevertheless. In speaking of visiting the ravaged area of Rikuzen Takata City following the earthquake and tsunami, he relates the following:

*Last year, I visited Rikuzen Takata City in Iwate Prefecture. The blue sign from a convenience store, tatami mats, New Year's Cards were scattered about. Bulldozers' giant hands were raking out the rubble. At that time, they those were unnamable things, things you can neither film nor express. You simply have to hang your head. I heard their voice.*

*Many people simply find their mouths clenched shut at with the pain of deep experiences that can't be expressed, put into everyday words. There are voices that cannot arrive via television images or scholarly remarks.*

*The Irish poet Yeats said, “In dreams begins the responsibility to write poetry.” [Translator's note: Yeats writes “In dreams begin responsibilities.”] When I listened to a young student who was struck by the tsunami and lived to tell [the] tale, I too thought that I must take responsibility, spend a long time, and touch that child's voice within a dream. I felt I could actually see the table in the child's room whispering to the child “let's run away together!”*

*Paul Valéry called poetry a “hesitation between sound and meaning.” Somewhere in the depths lurk the spirits of sounds. In turn, various lights draw near. Some presaged by a shimmering, sweet smell, others as surprise attacks. The faint voices of the spirits I make into sound, I pursue the new meanings that emerge next to the sounds, blending sound with meaning.*

*Until I reach that point, I have to stare at that desperate, desolate landscape time and again, circling the underworld. Smashing my own words to bits, I ~~put forth~~ proffer totally new voices. Poetry is that labor done even when labeled unintelligible.*

This might be the best summation we have of Yoshimasu's *ars poetica*, or at least a helpful way of approaching what his poetry aims to do. Yoshimasu intuitively feels that something must be said in the face of unspeakable tragedy, a response is called for: "At that time, they those were unnamable things, things you can neither film nor express. You simply have to hang your head. I *heard* (my emphasis) their voice."

But how does the poet respond, find the words? And what words will suffice? Whose words?

Yoshimasu relates the agony and pain that silenced the people of Rikuzen Takata before he goes on to speak of his method, his approach to poetry in the face of such tragedy: "Many . . . simply find their mouths clenched shut at with the pain of deep experiences that can't be expressed, put into everyday words." Yoshimasu's approach can be characterized as one of responsible action that involves listening and patience: "When I listened to a young student who was struck by the tsunami and lived to tell [the] tale, I too thought that I must take responsibility..." Feeling that responsibility to "proffer" words, Yoshimasu listens more carefully and explains, "Somewhere in the depths lurk the spirits of sounds. . . The faint voices of the spirits I make into sound, I pursue the new meanings that emerge next to the sounds, blending sound with meaning." In this way then, he creates a language, a language he understands may not always be intelligible; after all it is derived by pursuing new meanings that emerge next to sounds. He is blending sounds with meaning and smashing his "own words to bits." In order to put forth, "[to]proffer" totally new voices. Nevertheless, he is reconciled in his radical approach to find words to say in the face of the unsayable even if the poetry so created is difficult initially for readers to comprehend for, "Poetry" he asserts, "is that *labor done* (my emphasis) even when labeled unintelligible."

Yoshimasu's idea of the poet and the poet's labor seems to be an ancient one, one that places the poet as a visionary occupying a space between the physical and the spiritual beyond. An

understanding that places responsibilities upon the poet to negotiate the distance between those worlds and create works that bring those worlds together within the reader.

The job of translating this poetry is immense. In the poem, “Namie, or the Blue Door,” we glimpse partly what the translator, in this case, Okamoto Sayuri, is up against. Apparently, she is herself well known to Yoshimasu for she is mentioned in the poem. Her notes on the poem make for a one and half page essay. Without going into too much detail regarding the extensive notes that Okamoto provides, I would point out, by way of example, what Okamoto relates concerning the Yoshimasu’s use of the “Japanese script” in the poem, that is, how the use of hiragana, katakana, and kanji contributes to the readers experience of the poem. Okamoto writes the following:

By spotlighting the multiple and simultaneous connotations of Japanese script, Gozo’s poetry investigates the complexity of Japanese language and extends the limits of the linguistic art. Gozo’s language is so extreme that, paradoxically, it forces a translator to think about elemental questions such as what constitutes the Japanese language and how is it different from other tongues. (Yoshimasu 26)

Here is the poem:

### **Namie, or the Blue Door**

---

and I, too, hear an inaudible whistle, *wo* . . . . /shi/

*watakus h i* I, .....white wolf, *Loup !* . . . *lóng*, dragon, *Ryu !* . . . /shi/

is the mist of the sea, *louuu*———, *ryuuu*———

“Fuku/shi/shima Daiich Nuclear Power Plant (tô-tower), is violet, .....”, a voice, a

whisper,,, who is this !

is the mist of the sea, *louuu*———, *ryuuu*——— and I too, hear, an inaudible whistle, *wo* . . . .

reads

*Ukk ヽ Kett ヽ, Tott ヽ, (U-ke-to,,) . . . is, . . . BlueDoor, . . .*

leads

*Blue Door, . . . i s Wisteria blue, Violet Apron, ne, Isn't it, 'Van Gogh?' . . . . .*

*Mo, Ke tt (mo-u, mō) . . . , anymore (mo-u, mō),,, whether it's a tidal bore or a roar, I*

or the imploring color, the violet、 、 、 , **a i** just dunno!

is the mist of the sea, *louuu*———, *ryuuu*——— and I, too, hear an inaudible whistle, *wo* . . .

15MAR2013 .....Speaking of this manuscript....., no, I don't like this and I'm rephrasing it,..... I was living in, or lingering on, a different time for a while ..... In a sense, I spent another phase of time ....., no, 'spent' is not the word ....., I 'came across' or I 'had entered' a new phase, face, or tense, of *the time* in these ten days ..... I'd promised Sayuri Okamoto-san in London,.....to complete my latest *Ciné* on Namie in Fukushima, along with this manuscript, to present at a poetry festival which I would be attending in July in the UK. And the promise, or the fact that I'd made the promise with her, had grown and metamorphosed into a streak of light that affected the movement of? / altered the modality of? my writing-hand. . . . . And finally, finally, . . . . . this morning,,, the poetry quietly took its complete shape. ....On looking back, a poem of the late Yoshimoto-san which I'd transcribed from his "*Hidokei-hen*" ("*Sundial*", *a collection of his early poetry*) *ten days ago* —or more precisely, the words 'violet' and apron' in his poem—,,, were grafted onto my poem by my writing-hand; they emerged to my surprise ——although I might have expected that to happen somehow ..... Or "*The Letters of Van Gogh*", which I've been rereading devotedly these days ....., or the light of his letters, might have prompted my hand too ..... The color 'violet' or 'whisteria' and an 'apron', .....and the faint image of a woman (who passed away in Namie .....), or her invisible vestige (yet-to-see), had all been imprinted on the retina of my mind and were standing by [*a côtés of*] this poetry, . . . . .

This multilingual poem exemplifies Yoshimasu's: ethical inclusiveness, his intention to listen with patience, his blending of genres (poetry and prose), and a certain partaking of the Japanese poetic tradition of the *haibun* travel journal: he follows the poem with a patch of prose that provides

narrative detail related to the foregoing poem. While the above poem may appear “unintelligible,” to use Yoshimasu term, it is a poem that is felt, a poem that breaks through the unsayable to respond to a tragic event with a human cry that says “I too hear” what is “inaudible.”

Yoshimasu’s poetry is large and it gives us a challenging world to lose and find ourselves within. What the American contemporary poet Robert Hass said to readers of poetry, in speaking of the “difficulty” of John Ashbery’s, is apropos here: “You do not have to like it. That’s why there’re at any one moment different kinds of art. But if you are going to read a writer or look at a painter, what you owe them is looking long enough to see what they’re doing. And, especially if you don’t like what they’re doing, the moment when you actually get it - which always comes as in intuition, a slipping into the other’s skin, rather than a clear thought – you’ve learned something.” There is much to be learned in reading this volume, much to be felt, of poetry and of the art of translation.

#### **Works Cited:**

Miner, Earl. *Comparative Poetics*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

Hass, Robert. *Now and Then*. Berkeley, Counterpoint Press. 2009.

Yoshimasu Gōzō. *Alice Iris Red Horse, Selected Poems of Yoshimasu Gōzō*

New York. New Directions Press. Translated by Okamoto Sayuri et.al.,

Ed. by Forrest Gander. 2016