

Raw and Cooked



Pinacoteca Civica di Brescia/Scala/Art Resource

Antonio Rasio: *Allegory of Summer* in the style of Giuseppe Arcimboldo, circa 1685-1695

How can I judge a translation if I don't know the original language? Time and again fellow reviewers have raised this question with me. We can tell if a book is fluent or not, elegant or not, lucid or not, but how do we know if the original is like this?

Conversely, if we can't judge the translation, how can we arrive at an opinion about the book itself? It seems poorly written, but perhaps that is just the translator. Or vice versa of course. Are we reduced simply to saying that we like or don't like the package, without any notion of who we should praise or blame?

This would seem to have been the conclusion of those who designed the new Man Booker International Prize. Until recently given for a life-time's literary achievement to any author whose work is available in English, this year the rules changed and the prize is now awarded to a single foreign novel translated into English, the money involved—£50,000 (\$72,000)—being shared equally by author and translator. 155 books were in the mix for this edition, representing, the organizers claimed, “the finest in global fiction.” Orhan Pamuk, Elena Ferrante, and Kenzaburō Ōe were all on the short list. The winner, however, *The Vegetarian*, came from outsider Han Kang, a Korean woman in her forties, and was translated by Deborah Smith, who is English. In an interview, Smith explains how, having completed a degree in English literature, she decided to become a translator. Monolingual until then, she chose Korean “pragmatically,” because she had heard there was a lively literary scene in Korea and far fewer translators than for European languages. She herself proposed *The Vegetarian* to an English publisher who accepted it. It is the first novel she has translated.

None of the judges for the prize appear to know Korean. Nor do I. So the novel provides an excellent opportunity for asking whether we can get any separate impressions of the achievements of writer and translator.

A premise. The Hogarth edition of *The Vegetarian* comes complete with thirty-four blurbs and review quotations to prime us, as it were, before we tackle the text. We are told that the book is “gracefully written,” “elegant,” “assured,” “poetic,” “beguiling,” “understated,” “spellbinding,” “precise,” “spare” and “devastating.” Playwright Deborah Levy praises its “cool, still, poetic but matter-of-fact short sentences, translated luminously by Deborah Smith, who is obviously a genius,” while author James Morrow tells us that “Han Kang’s slender but robust novel addresses many vital matters—from the politics of gender to the presumptions of the male gaze, the conundrum of free will to the hegemony of meat—with a dark élan that vegetarians and carnivores alike will find hypnotic, erotic, disquieting, and wise.”

It all sounds very promising.

Unable to compare translation and original or even to check single English words against the corresponding Korean, since I cannot distinguish one Korean character from another, I have but one resource. I must consider the relationship between content and style in the English translation. In a literary text a certain content manifests itself in a certain style. There is no separating the two. The difficulty with translation is always to reconstruct that relationship. The danger is that one winds up with a voice that may be fluent, but that sits uneasily with the content.

The Vegetarian is divided into three sections initially published as separate stories and written in quite different styles. Each has a simple plot. The first is narrated by a crass young man who has deliberately chosen for himself a plain, quiet, obedient wife in line with his limited but determined business ambitions. He is entirely happy with his choice until, one morning, he finds her throwing out all the meat from the fridge. Following an ugly dream, she has decided she will never again eat or cook meat. Unwisely, our narrator drags her to dinner with his business associates, who treat her with contempt. This part of the novel ends with a dramatic encounter with the wife’s family during which her father first tries to force meat into her mouth then slaps her violently. She cuts her wrists.

The reader’s sympathies of course are entirely with the wife, who is a victim of a rigid, uncaring, unthinking society, suffocating in its ancient traditions. We learn that she was beaten as a child by her ignorant, patriotic father, a Vietnam veteran. All in all it is a savage indictment of Korean culture. Oppressed by unhappy memories and denied all sympathy, the wife stops speaking and eating altogether. At one meal she “didn’t so much as stick her chopsticks into the mouth-watering salad.” It seems strange that our intensely carnivorous narrator, who is generally uninterested in his greens, should describe the salad as “mouth-watering.”

The voice of the story, the unpleasant husband’s, is stiff and formal, in line with this traditional and conventional mindset that his wife experiences as a straitjacket (along with her vegetarianism she also refuses to wear a bra, because she finds it constricting). So we have phrases like “Ultimately, I settled for a job where I would be provided with a decent monthly salary in return for diligently carrying out my allotted tasks.” There is a rather nineteenth-century ring to it, as if we were reading an old translation of a Chekhov short story. Combining this stiffness with a determination to keep the prose “spoken” and idiomatic leads to some uneasy formulations. “However late I was in getting home,” the husband tells us “she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss.”

“To take something upon oneself,” the Cambridge dictionary tells us, is “to accept responsibility for something without being asked to do so.” Does this make sense next to the idea of “kicking up a fuss” about a husband’s later return? Is this Han Kang indicating the husband’s limited grasp of idiom, or a translation issue? There is always a danger, when translating a spoken voice, of opting for the idiomatic at the expense of precision. During the

unpleasant dinner with the husband's business associates, for example, we are told that "awkward silences ... were now peppering the conversation." One can imagine a conversation peppered with obscenities perhaps, but aren't silences just too long to be peppery? Earlier, complaining of his wife's reading habits, the narrator talks of her "reading books that looked so dull I couldn't even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers." Is that "looked"/ "look" repetition in the original? And the overkill of "even bring myself to so much as look at"?

Sometimes this mix of the uptight and the colloquial creates an awkwardness at the limits of comprehensibility. Here the narrator is regretting that he didn't marry his healthy, meat-eating sister-in-law:

Taking in her nicely filled-out figure, big, double-lidded eyes, and demure manner of speaking, I sorely regretted the many things it seemed I'd ended up losing somehow or other, to have left me in my current plight.

Do old-fashioned literary formulas like "demure manner of speaking," "sorely regretted," and "current plight" correspond to the Korean here? Is the original equally muddled syntactically? I am honestly not sure how the grammar works at the end of the sentence. Despite the wife's "vulgar curses" in response to his attempts at lovemaking, the narrator tells us, in what now seems a caricature of insensibility, that finally "I managed to insert myself successfully." However, a few lines later he speaks of his wife remaining mute at breakfast "as per usual," a specifically English (rather than American) idiom from quite a different register, contemporary and ironic rather than formal and old-fashioned.

If these things look to me like translation niggles, other incongruities are more likely the author's responsibility. When the narrator finds his wife alone in the kitchen at night, he first describes what she is wearing and how she is standing ("ramrod straight"), then, confusingly, tells us the kitchen was "pitch black." So how did he see her? After which "Her profile swam toward me out of the darkness." This swimming out of darkness seems rather more literary and poetic than we would expect of our small-minded husband. A little later we hear of her retreating figure being "swallowed up beyond the door," when in fact she has simply gone into a room and closed the door.

This occasional concession of a novelistic, sometimes even poetic tone to the boorish husband is most blatant when the wife grabs a knife and attempts suicide in her family's presence:

Blood ribboned out of her wrist. The shock of red splashed over white china. As her knees buckled and she crumpled to the floor, the knife was wrested from her by [her sister's] husband, who until then had sat through the whole thing as an idle spectator.

The fancy metaphor of blood "ribboning" seems totally out of line with our narrator's expressive abilities. Was it there in the Korean? As for the detail of the "shock of red" splashing on the white china, the less said the better. "Buckled," "crumpled," "wrested from," all seem standard novelese. How puzzling, though, to see the common and critical collocation "idle spectator" applied to the brother-in-law, who, understandably, has not been involved in the argument between the wife and her parents. Wouldn't "spectator" be enough?

Perhaps the explanation is that Han Kang hungers for melodrama so that the constraint of the narrating voice she has chosen sometimes seems as uncomfortably tight for her as bras seem for the wife. Indeed, the husband's story is sporadically interrupted by brief sections in italics that we take to be the wife's internal monologue, her dreams, her memories.

Try to push past the meat, there's no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.

In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood.

Sometimes these thoughts seem to go well beyond what we would expect of the wife, as she has been described, an ordinary young woman with a limited cultural background and no experience at all of expressing herself in words;

A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victim's head ... the shadow that crumpled and fell gleams cold in the darkness.

They come to me now more times than I can count. Dreams overlaid with dreams, a palimpsest of horror. Violent acts perpetrated by night.

And so it goes on, a repository of melodramatic cliché. This can hardly be the translator's fault. (Though at the end of this section of the novel, after the husband has dreamed he is killing someone, he reaches out to his wife—the two are in the hospital—and touches her “philtrum.” Is it just me, or is that word as rare as I suspect? In any event I had to look it up; it means the groove between upper lip and nose. Again it would be interesting to know if the Korean word used here was equally unusual.)

We could easily continue with example after example from the second and third parts of the novel where a third person narrator tells first how the wife's artist brother-in-law paints flowers and plants all over her naked body in an attempt to see the birthmark on her buttocks, and second how her sister despairs as the Vegetarian starves herself to death in an attempt to become herself a plant (often standing on her head imagining shoots emerging from her crotch). But there would be little point.

Looked at closely, the prose is far from an epitome of elegance, the drama itself neither understated nor beguiling, the translation frequently in trouble with register and idiom. Studying the thirty-four endorsements again, and the praise after the book won the prize, it occurs to me there is a shared vision of what critics would like a work of “global fiction” to be and that *The Vegetarian* has managed to present itself as a candidate that can be praised in those terms. Ideologically, it champions the individual (woman) against an oppressive society (about which we know nothing, except that it seems “worse” than our own). Emotionally, it allows us to feel intense sympathy for a helpless victim, which is always encouraging for our self-esteem. Aesthetically, it offers moments of surrealism—typically in the wife's heated and unhappy imaginings, or the brother-in-law's fantasies of vegetable couplings—which we can see as excitingly exotic and a guarantee of a lively imagination. In this regard, the slightly disorienting effect of the translation can actually reinforce our belief that we are coming up against something new and different. But above all the writing must be *accessible*. The foreignness and exoticism must in no way present a barrier to easy reading; “matter-of-fact short sentences,” Deborah Levy said. Some element in the work that allows the word “erotic” to be dropped in can only be positive.

Once it has been decided that the book fits the bill, all evidence of its unevenness and opportunism is set aside and thirty-four authoritative quotations are placed as guardians front and back, defying the reader to disagree. And of course if the novel is the real thing then the translation must also be excellent, instead of just perhaps okay. Curiously, this barrage of praise and prizes begins to feel, for the independent reader, rather like the strait-jacket of conformity that Han Kang's unhappy heroine is determined to throw off.



Han Kang (right) with translator Deborah Smith after winning the Man Booker International prize in 2016. Photograph: Alastair Grant/AP

Claire Armitstead



A row over Han Kang's award-winning novella *The Vegetarian* highlights the unavoidable difficulties of importing a novel from a very different language – but literal translation too often results in poor books

Another week, another round in what I shall henceforth refer to as Han Kang-gate – though Smith-field might be more accurate, evoking the London meat market, since the centre of this literary scandal is not the Korean writer but her English translator.

It began last summer [in the New York Review of Books](#), when the writer Tim Parks laid into Deborah Smith's translation of *The Vegetarian*. He professed himself mystified that it had won the Man Booker International prize, when “the prose is far from an epitome of elegance, the drama itself neither understated nor beguiling, the translation frequently in trouble with register and idiom.”

Parks was clear that he didn't like the novel in English, but he was also clear that he didn't know Korean, so couldn't make a direct comparison with the original. Weeks later, he was joined by academic Charse Yun, writing in [Korea Exposé](#). The *Vegetarian* was originally published in three parts and Yun reported upset among

the students at his Korean university. According to one speaker at a 2016 conference, he said: “10.9% of the first part of the novel was mistranslated. Another 5.7% of the original text was omitted. And this was just the first section.”



[Han Kang and Deborah Smith: ‘It is fascinating to ponder the possibilities of language’](#)



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Yun conceded that “it’s important to keep in mind that niggling errors occur even in the best of translations, and any scanty, cherry-picked, line-by-line comparisons from a 200-page book will inevitably appear trivial, if not petty, when posted.” The niggles included using “foot” (*bal*) for “arm” (*pal*) in a door-shutting scene that he conceded may even have been improved by the substitution. More serious “mistranslations” include the novel’s opening line: Han writes that the protagonist’s husband never really thought of his wife as “anything special”; Smith renders this as “completely unremarkable in every way”.

Most serious of all, Yun wrote – [reprising his attack in the LA Times](#) – were the stylistic differences between the English and Korean versions of the novel: “I find it hard to come up with an adequate analogy, but imagine the plain, contemporary style of Raymond Carver being garnished with the elaborate diction of Charles Dickens”.

Last week, Smith herself [responded in the LA Review of Books](#), arguing that “to say that my English translation of *The Vegetarian* is a ‘completely different book’ from the Korean original is, of course, in one sense, entirely correct. Since there is no such thing as a truly literal translation – no two languages’ grammars match, their vocabularies diverge, even punctuation has a different weight – there can be no such thing as a translation that is not ‘creative’.”



Korean literature's historic problem has been “professional translators” who have throttled the literary life out of it

Part of the narrative that now surrounds Han's international celebrity is that Smith only started learning Korean three years before taking on *The Vegetarian*. Never mind that they negotiated every word of the translation, and that Han herself stands by it: this remarkable history makes Smith a sitting duck for the sort of intellectual condescension that is revealed in Yun's assertion that “the number of mistranslations ... is much higher than one would expect from a professional translator”.

But Korean literature's historic problem, in my experience, has been those same “professional translators” – nearly always translating into their second language – who have throttled the literary life out of it, preventing sophisticated and important writers such as Hwang Sok-Yong or Yi Mun-Yol from taking their rightful place on the world stage.

Reviewing a new translation of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* a few years ago, *New Yorker* critic James Wood remarked: “Literary translators tend to divide into what one could call originalists and activists. The former honour the original text's quiddities, and strive to reproduce them as accurately as possible in the translated language; the latter are less concerned with literal accuracy than with the transposed musical appeal of the new work. Any decent translator must be a bit of both.”

The dominance of “originalists” in the Korean tradition has left half a century of classic literature, from one of the world's most fascinating, and politically critical, regions languishing in dusty academic editions that are virtually impossible to read.

It is a literature that poses cultural as well as linguistic challenges. An ironic precedent to Han Kang-gate was the translation of Yi's 1987 novella *Our Twisted Hero*, in which a schoolboy is manipulated by a despotic school prefect, with the blessing of their teachers. One of Korea's few international successes at the time, it was translated by an Irish priest, [Kevin O'Rourke](#), introducing a powerful allegory of dictatorship to generations of US schoolchildren – but as a simple, anti-bullying

parable. (So rare are fluent and committed translators on the peninsula that O'Rourke and a Cornish monk, Brother [Anthony of Taizé](#), have pretty much put south Korean poetry – the jewel of its literature – on the international map over the last half century.)

“Translating from Korean into English involves moving from a language more accommodating of ambiguity, repetition, and plain prose, to one that favours precision, concision, and lyricism,” writes Smith, who has now translated two further works by Han – [Human Acts](#) and [The White Book](#). To which one can only respond, God help those English language readers who find themselves battling through the repetition and plain prose to decode the ambiguities unaided by the imaginative ministrations of an “activist” translator like Deborah Smith.

“Translations should be critiqued, absolutely; lively, informed critical engagement is all part of a flourishing translation culture,” she says, conceding that she has worked with Han to correct any errors for subsequent editions of *The Vegetarian*.

But as she also writes: “Without taking into consideration how translation norms vary between countries and contexts, and how this might shape individual approaches, it’s hard to move on to the *point* of difference rather than just pointing it out.” As Franz Kafka might say, there’s more than one word for beetle.