Translating Tibetan Poetry

A Case Study of Gendun Chöphel’s Tibetan Alphabet Acrostic

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Introduction: The Philosophy of Translating Poetry

“When we translate, we always to some extent betray the text we are translating. That is why translation is so hard and thankless. All you can do is to fail in the least egregious way possible.”

The prevailing view of the field of specialists within academic Tibetology is to see formal equivalence, or what I’ll also here call the philological method of translation (a method heavily influenced by Grammar-Translation principles), as the appropriate method for absolutely all source material.2, 3 “Philological” translations, ironically enough, inspire no affection for the beauty of the written word, as they are often in the precarious position of sacrificing literary

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2 On “specialists” in academia, see Raffel, vii: “… Their training, their life’s work as scholars, and their work as teachers all tend to reinforce specialization. But translation is by its very nature an interdisciplinary subject, whether one is practicing, theorizing about, or evaluating it.”
3 Kenneth Bauer writes that IATS conference proceedings confirm Tibetan Studies is dominated by historians, religious scholars, philologists, and (more recently) the social sciences. Though it’s nowhere explicitly stated that the philological method is the preferred method for all material, the majority of published works, especially academic published works, seem to reflect those ideals: Accessed on 14 March 2013.
quality for grammatical accuracy.\textsuperscript{4} They are of high fidelity, yet low transparency. This opaqueness artificially constrains their potential audience, for all intents and purposes, to other academics, and more specifically to Tibetologists, or even Tibetologists within academia whose method of study is philology or some related field (a very small circle indeed); for anyone who is not a bit proficient in the Tibetan language, nor adequately familiar with its culture, has difficulty sustaining interest in (much less enjoying) such a formal translation style.

While I concede that this may be the appropriate method for some textual translations in some circumstances, I’d suggest this single standard ought not be applied unilaterally, especially in light of the fact that many translation specialists of literature and poetry hold other measures and standards to be perfectly relevant methods of analyzing the accuracy of translation. What this traditional model of translation fails to recognize is that poetry is a unique subset of a culture’s literature which encodes meaning not merely by its grammar and syntax, but also via its regular linguistic patterning; its words’ sounds, semantic nuances, and associations; its emotional viscerality; and its sub-textual messages.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, over-emphasizing the literal in translation robs poetry of the figurative, expressive, and abstract meaning of its artform; for it is primarily created to be experienced, not merely understood, and to communicate feeling, not fact.\textsuperscript{6}

Thus, even among academic circles, such an even-handed and singular approach to any and all texts (especially poetry) does not necessarily produce, on the whole, the most accurate portrayal of the source material possible; for to be grammatically accurate in a detailed manner comes at too high a cost when one considers the essential features of what makes poems poetry. That is, what something means is less what it says, and more how it says it; in this way, poetry is specific to a language in ways that prose is not.\textsuperscript{7} What is not “carried over” by this traditional method of translation, then, is an actual equivalence—an understanding of how artistic expression interacts with language to create symbolic meaning that is beyond the bare essentials of its words. To paraphrase Robert Frost, even if poems are translated into texts that

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 Andre Lefever in Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blue-print writes that "literal translation may transfer a sense of the semantic content, but often by...sacrificing literary value."
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 See Nida, p. 177
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 Raffel, p. 18
\end{flushright}
resemble poems, the *poetry itself* is lost.⁸

In other words, translating lines of poems as if they were merely terse sentences misrepresents a poem by subtracting its literary artistry, and it results not in a poem but in loose, verse-like writing that merely *resembles* a poem. While this translation method may be a helpful technique if one wishes to analyze a work from the perspective of bare meaning (for example, in a philological context), it must be acknowledged that the resulting translation is only one of infinitely possible, and equally legitimate, versions. The brightness of all translated language is mediated by a lens; the question becomes *which* wavelengths are transmitted by the lens (and, if a reader is bombarded with those wavelengths, *how it moves them*) and thus *why* a particular lens may be more suitable to some particular contexts than others. The problem with the lens of literal translation (especially as it relates to poetry) is that it grants importance to one aspect of the translation task, that of faithfully rendering content, to the manifestly obvious neglect of all others.⁹ Indeed, the view of many poet-translators and their critics since at least the twentieth century has been toward a more balanced approach between faithfulness and transparency, while being sensitive to the poetic features of the source text.¹⁰

It is in this vein that Burton Raffel goes so far to say that “the translator of poetry *must* himself be a poet” (emphasis ibid).¹¹ For if not, the result is an uncooked, albeit exact, recipe—despite the fact that all the ingredients are accounted for, the reader is left clueless as to how the original dish actually *tasted*. What I am suggesting here is that while a calculated recipe is exactly what an aspiring cook may want (and is someone who may find value and inspiration in such a wonderfully precise piece), a digestible and aromatic dish is more suitable for just about everyone else. To carry the metaphor further, if you’ve ever cooked your own cuisine in a foreign country, you realize you have to adapt your recipe (occasionally using creative license) to the ingredients, cooking methods, utensils, and appliances (or lack thereof)

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⁸ For a discussion on Frost’s opinions on poetry and translation, see Robinson, p. 25
⁹ Robinson, p. 43.
¹⁰ The task at hand then seems to be the middle way between the extremes of poetry translation which have been debated: As Robinson describes them, “appropriation in the name of poetic freedom” and “a dogmatic theory of devotion to the literal meaning of the original.” (p. 42).
¹¹ Burton Raffel, *The Art of Translating Poetry*, The Pennsylvania State University, 1988. Quoted from the preface, page viii wherein the author continues by saying, “most academics are virtually indifferent to literary quality in translations... they seem usually to to feel that prose translations of poetry are better (more ‘faithful’)”—and this is a “problem.”
available to you, or even to the climate or altitude. While the resulting recreation is not-quite-right, trying to follow a recipe down to the T using a whole new set of foreign ingredients in a whole new foreign context is exactly what can cause the result to be inedible. This is what Patterson meant when he described the art of translating poetry as that of using a detailed ground plan to build a “robust home in a new country, in its vernacular architecture.”

Recognizing that no two languages are perfectly equivalent, and thus all translation (even ones which attempt to be as faithful as possible) are imperfectly equivalent, it therefore becomes the translator’s job to compose a new poem, one that is reasonably faithful to the original, as well as successful in its own right. Peter Robinson calls this a system of “faithfully imitative approximation,” and writes: “Creatively aware that what is being attempted is the rendering of a poem, such imitative activity includes the ambition that, faithfully approximating, the work ought to result—to the best of the poet-translator’s abilities—in a poem.” Furthermore, the primary linguistic facts which are measured in analyzing the success of such a translation (from a perspective of transparency) are then the linguistic facts of the target language, for a good translation ought not read like a translation at all.

The suggestion here isn’t that the high-fidelity style of translation be abandoned for solely transparency-based translations from now on, but simply that there is room for more than one machine in the shed. The existence of a diverse set of translation tools for translating poetic works could only enrich the field of Tibetology, increase interest in Tibet’s great textual history of literature and poetry, and create a more nuanced and fuller picture of those works of art than a single method of translation ever possibly could; that is, the contrasting translation methods of formal equivalence, fidelity, and metaphor on the one hand and functional equivalence, transparency, and paraphrase on the other may serve to counterbalance each other in an effort to gain the most authentic picture of poetry-in-translation possible.

In order, then, to clarify this translation philosophy fully and practically as it relates specifically to Tibetan poetry, and also to demonstrate how this approach gains more than it

12 In Robinson, p. 31
13 Nida, p. 177
15 Robinson, p. 32
16 C.F. Hockett in Raffel, p. 11
loses (and is thus on balance a more appropriate approach to poetry translations for most people in most contexts), I’ve analyzed a version of an alphabetic acrostic poem by the 20th century scholar Gendun Chöphel below that was translated with these specific points in mind, where I’ve taken care to retain features such as meter, verse, and acrostic.\(^{17}\) I readily admit, however, that in this exercise I have probably fallen prey to what Vladimir Nabokov calls the “poet who... does not know the original language and calmly relies upon the so-called ‘literal’ translation;” for I certainly lack the scholar’s precision and the professional translator’s experience so necessary to carry out this task.\(^{18}\)

The learned scholar I am indebted to, in this case, is the preeminent translator Donald Lopez for his own clear and poignant rendition of the poem that I’ve translated here, which served as a reference point for my own; quite honestly, without his translation, mine would not exist (and this is one way in which contrasting translation styles may inform each other). His work *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom* is certainly one of the best available resources for anyone with even a passing interest in the scholar Gendun Chöphel. As a student of Tibetan studies, I’ve read more Lopez than I can remember, and forgotten more of what I ought to have gained from it than I care to admit; his contribution to the field is unquestionable.

### The Translation

*Anyone, wherever they’re from,*

*Be it Beijing, Calcutta, the snowy*

*City of Lhasa or Nepal; I’ve*

*Discerned they’ve all the same nature.*

*Even if they shy from clamor, and*

*Fashion themselves modest, they cast for*

\(^{17}\) Gendun Chöpel’s “Alphabetical Poem Expressed Sincerely in the Common Language,” from 1963, is cited and taken from: Donald S. Lopez Jr., trans., *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), no. 54, pp. 99-100

Garments, goods, and coin—just as haggard fishermen angle for their catch.

In flattery, blue-blooms take pleasure; Joy for blue-collars is dishonesty & deceit; Kids dig the swagger, and the style, Like the trendy savor smokes & beers.

Merely some bizarre pageantry, No matter how it’s dressed, be it Offerings of food and drink, or Priestly garb, pendants, or marquees.

Quiet austerities for meals; Reciting scriptures for alms; Seeing prestige in pilgrimage; Thinking clearly, it’s all for wealth.

Unformed-minds of all these crowds: View them as so many cattle, Wedded to their pedigree, Xenophobic, chock-full of disdain.

Yet here we are, helplessly earth-bound, Awaking in this joyless,
Animalistic enclosure;\textsuperscript{21}

Zephyrs of flesh & bone, up to ruin...

If I speak honestly, it’s so; My,
How it gets under everyone’s skin!

The Regular Linguistic Patterning of Meter & Prosody

As a highly syllabic language, Tibetan poetry generally follows a very precise per-line syllable count. English, on the other hand, is traditionally more flexible in regard to metric prosody, and rhythm can be maintained without such a strict interpretation of line length since, as a stressed language, patterns of emphasized syllables (as opposed to total syllables) may be used to achieve rhythm. Gendun Chöphel uses a strict nine-per-line syllable count; although an exact replica isn’t a natural format for the English, a very close corollary attempting approximately four emphasized syllables per line was employed (generally totalling eight to ten syllables). Thus the translation mostly follows a basic tetrameter, usually in two-syllable form, and alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, for example:\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{quote}
Anyone, wherever they’re from,\textsuperscript{23}
Be it Beijing, Calcutta, the snowy\textsuperscript{24}
City of Lhasa or Nepal; I’ve
Discerned they’ve all the same nature.
\end{quote}

Although it is inconsistent by alternating the patterns of stress (that is, it is mostly, though not strictly, playing between iambic and trochaic variations), the overall pattern retains a rhythmic and metric feel as the stressed syllables come at evenly spaced intervals, i.e., in a stress-timed rhythm (and let it be noted that stress-based patterns, such as iambic pentameter,

\textsuperscript{21} Literally “goat sheds and dog houses.”
\textsuperscript{22} For a discussion of translating similar prosodies, see Raffel’s preface in The Art of Translating Poetry.
\textsuperscript{23} “\textit{Those people existing anywhere}” is a semantically odd expression in the English, so is here adapted as the adpositional phrase “\textit{anyone, wherever they’re from}.” The line in the original means something to the effect that everyone everywhere is the same; hence, whether they are “from” anywhere or “of” anywhere (by virtue of “being” there) amounts to much the same meaning. What seemed the more natural English phrasing was chosen.
\textsuperscript{24} “\textit{Be it}” is added here merely to fill out the line length and maintain rhythm (by adding a syllable of emphasis); the addition of the verb of existence and the impersonal pronoun, being redundant, doesn’t alter the meaning.
need not necessarily be strict). This pattern is used as consistently as possible throughout the translation. Analyzed here within the first line, you can see the tetrameter (four feet per line):

\[
\begin{align*}
/ & x / & x / x x / \quad (8 \text{ syllables, 4 stressed:} 4 \text{ unstressed}) \\
\text{Anyone, wherever they're from}, & \\
/ & x x / & x / x x / & x & (10, 4:6) \\
\text{Be it Beijing, Calcutta, the snowy} & \\
/ & x x / & x / & x / & x & (9, 4:5) \\
\text{City of Lhasa or Nepal; I've} & \\
x / & x / & x / & / & x & (8, 4:4) \\
\text{Discerned they've all the same nature.}
\end{align*}
\]

Also note that this first stanza, beyond rendering the verse in meter (as opposed to merely using the source language’s lines as a guideline for comma placement) additionally retains the alphabetic acrostic which is such an essential and indispensable feature of the original poem. This has lead to some different word-choices for a couple of the lines, i.e. anyone instead of “these people” and discerned instead of “seen,” but these minor differences don’t radically alter the meaning of either verse. (Future verses will be more problematic in this regard; each inconsistency from the literal is mentioned by at least a footnote, and the particularities of the acrostic in translation is discussed in full below).

Cultural Considerations: Meaning Beyond Grammar

Language is not only about the literal words used, and the grammatical structure they are placed within: readers who are actively engaged in a text are actually bringing a wealth of experience to the printed words on the page, and actively interpreting texts using top-down processing informed by their culturally-based language experience. Within the second stanza, for instance, the language of the translation is heavily influenced not by the words (and

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25 Reference Raffel, pg. 21-22, and Chapter 4, for discussions of stress-timed and other prosodies in various languages.
grammar) of the original, but instead takes into account the meaning they actually symbolize. For the question in translation ought not be, “Is the grammar of the translation a replica of the original’s grammar?” but, “Does the translation convey the meaning by similar symbolic gestures as the original, and does it do so effectively?”

Even if they shy from clamor, and
Fashion themselves modest, they cast for
Garments, goods, and coin—just as
Haggard fishermen angle for their catch.

In this verse, one may read the Tibetan as simply saying that people have minds no different than an old fisherman—yet without any commentary, what meaning does that retain for the reader? What is the relation? What is the subtext of the line?28 The implication is that they have “set their sights on” (mthong) those goods and coin just as a fisherman has his mind set on (sems), or an appetite for, or the goal of, fish29—just the sort of meaning that an overly literal translation is like to leave out. The question is, if a native speaker of the source language understands that this is the implication, but the native speaker of English may miss it, ought not it be the translator’s duty to occasionally translate beyond the bare, literal meaning of some turns of phrase in order to flesh out the implicit meaning found therein?30 Language is more than simply its words and its grammar, it is also a linguistically encoded perspective deeply rooted in culture.31

An additional point raised by this verse comes when the terms tea and butter are glossed by goods—for these are the goods of a cultural and historical context in Tibet—and the specific goods in question are inconsequential to the import of the verse. Genden Chöphel’s insistence to a Tibetan audience is that wherever he goes, people are the same. As an English writer writing for an English-speaking audience, the meaning of the verse in context is clear:

28 Again, poetry encodes its messages via subtextual language. See Francis R. Jones, p. 2
29 To get a better sense of what the associations for the word “fisherman” is in Tibetan, we may, for example, browse some of its synonyms: A fisherman is a “water-sitter” (chur ’jug, also a name for waterbirds who fish), a “net-holder” (dra ba ’dzin), who “grasps fish” (nya ’ching pa) because he is “sustained-by-fish” (nya yis ’tsho ba).
30 Something I myself would have missed, and a line that had me confounded, before working with a native speaker to understand the meaning behind some of the vagueness often found in Tibetan poetry, an even terser mode of literature in an already terse language.
31 Indeed, culture seems to be fundamental to the basic cognitive perceptions which make up the foundations of our psychological world—see, for example, Henrich, Joe, “Why Americans are the Weirdest People in the World.”
people, wherever they’re from, are obsessed with material gain, i.e., *goods* (people wherever they’re from, and especially those from English-speaking countries, are actually *not* obsessed with *tea* and *butter* specifically). The point is that any given reader approaches a work of literature from a psychological perspective that automatically interprets certain contextual and cultural information.

In other words, if the work in question comes from a cultural or historical perspective that the translator is especially privy too, certainly one of his or her duties is bringing the reader up-to-speed, without falling to the extremes of either expedience for expedience’s sake, nor that of over-explaining this-or-that turn of phrase. What I mean by that is, if the subtext of a line is difficult or obscure in the source language, a translator need not break his back to do *all* the interpretive work for the reader—but a certain dose of clarification to shift cultural modes of expression is only natural. A moderately intelligent audience assumed, a footnote or some other brief explanatory apparatus should suffice to elucidate any curious reader to the nitty-gritty differences of the literal versus the translated versions.

**Idiomatic Language & Stylistic Considerations**

*“An English translation ought to be idiomatic and interesting, not only to the scholar, but to the learned reader.”*[^32]

In his introduction of Gendun Chöphel from the anthology *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom*, Lopez illustrates the issue of idiomatic or figurative language in traditional translations quite vividly when he translates *gdung* as *family* within a poem, only to describe in the following sentences that the term literally means *bone*, and is used there in a sense very much the same as the English *blood*, in reference to familial lineage.[^33] What makes this example so confounding is that this wonderfully functionally equivalent metaphor that very closely maps the source language is available in the target language (ie, *blood* or *blood-line*), yet *family* was chosen over *blood* for the poem’s translation. This epitomizes how extreme the traditional model’s repellency of figurative and idiomatic speech is in translation: even closely related corollaries tend to be translated formally, not to speak of more liberal renderings of meaning. Below, a contrasting approach is taken with regard to such language:

[^32]: Jowett 1891, quoted in Nida, 164
[^33]: Lopez, p. 11-12.
In flattery, blue-bloods take pleasure;
Joy for blue-collars is dishonesty & deceit;
Kids dig the swagger, and the style,
Like the trendy savor smokes & beers.

A major stylistic feature of Tibetan poetry is its use of repetition, which serves as both a method of thematic emphasis and as a phonological marker of symmetry (it is “phonological” in that poetry is not only about words and their meanings, but also about words and their sounds). In this stanza, Gendun Chöphel employs repetition by ending each line in *dga’*, *to like*. The technique is employed throughout the poem, such as in the fifth stanza with *don*, and again with the phrase *phyogs la* in the second and fourth stanzas. Repetition of whole words like this is generally an inappropriate technique for the English language, wherein it sounds obvious, artificial, or clumsy, and is generally considered a sign of weak writing.\(^\text{34}\)

Instead, English literature gravitates toward the use of synonyms, alliteration, and/or word-play in place of bare repetition, and rhyme as a phonological marker often ends lines in poetry. So although exact “phonological peculiarities” in exact places are not transportable from source to target language,\(^\text{35}\) we can at least attempt an approximation of those peculiarities, a translation technique that I’ll call “creating parallel phonological peculiarities” (as Raffel notes, devising equivalents such as these is somewhat arbitrary since Tibetan and English are completely unrelated languages).\(^\text{36}\) In this case, the phonological repetition of exact words in the source text will be avoided but replaced by more natural-sounding functional equivalents in the English: here the usage of *blue-bloods* and *blue-collars* to describe *nobility* and *commoners*, respectively, creates symmetry by idiomatic word-play, whereas “*dishonesty and deceit*” and “*swagger and style*” both use alliteration while translating their respective lines. Meanwhile, the direct repetition of the word *like* is avoided by using synonyms or synonymic phrases: i.e., “*to take pleasure in*,” “*joy for...*,” “*dig*,” and “*savor.*” The goal here is to retain literary technique—in this case phonological repetition—but in a way that is natural to the target language, English.

\(^{34}\) See, for example, David Irving: *The Elements of English Composition*, Georgetown, James Thomas, 1825, p. 57-59, 80-81 (or Geraldine Woods: *Wiley AP English Literature and Composition*, p. 51.), etc.

\(^{35}\) Raffel, p. 25.

\(^{36}\) ibid, preface.
As for the choice of terminology within this verse, nobility is a dated term for aristocracy; the culturally-equivalent blue-bloods, however, expresses much the same sentiment for modern English-speakers: ie, someone who is privileged, upper-class, and born into wealth.\footnote{Readers of the original text read the language of their own time,” so “unless the author...deliberately imitated an archaic mode,” there’s no use for dated terms in modern translation. See Barnstone, Willis. “An ABC of Translating Poetry.”} Note, too, that the original alliterative phrase gyo dang sgyu la dga’ is translated by a parallel alliterative phrase, dishonesty & deceit. Similarly, commoners is given as blue-collars to capture the modern sense of “working class” as well as to enhance the parallel phonological peculiarity of repetition which is found in the original. Swagger and style, meanwhile, translates mchor sgeg nyams, where sgeg nyams can have the connotation of arrogance or haughtiness (just as swagger does), as well as a flashiness, or bejeweled-ness (style). Language choices throughout adhere to a similar sense of style in order to maintain consistency throughout the poem.

Retaining the Formal Equivalence of the Alphabetic Acrostic Format

Though the problems of rendering the Tibetan alphabetic acrostic as an English alphabetic acrostic seem insurmountable upon first glance,\footnote{Lopez opines it as an unfortunate impossibility, p. 15.} a slight loosening of the bonds restricting and constraining the translator’s use of natural, idiomatic English provides space for creative problem solving. As discussed above, translation of poetry can never be completely isomorphic; the best it can do is strike a reasonable balance between retaining the poetic features of the original (it can adapt the form and linguistic features of the original) and retaining the meaning of the original (it can adapt the content of the original’s message). Thus, a good translation must convey both meaning and form, and form in poetry includes structure, meter, scheme, or in this case, acrostic.\footnote{See Douglas Hofstadter's 1997 book, Le Ton beau de Marot, pg. 52} The traditional model is imbalanced from this perspective, preferring to focus purely on content, without giving form its due consideration. The techniques used to capture form in this case (and drawbacks thereof) are discussed with reference to this fourth stanza:

*Unformed-minds of all these crowds:*
View them as so many cattle,
Wedded to their pedigree,
Xenophbic, chock-full of disdain.

The fourth and the sixth stanzas have been switched in my translation for purposes of retaining the alphabetic nature of the acrostic, which was possible since changing verse order in this case doesn’t significantly alter the message of the poem: each stanza, other than the introductory and concluding stanzas, is fairly self-contained and independent other than being tied loosely to the larger theme of the poem (the singular nature of humanity and their unreflective biases based on superficialities). Finding corollaries, then, for problematic letters like “X” and “Z” becomes a bit freer task, and this stanza in particular was ordered within the acrostic primarily for the convenient way in which it solves the problem of the “X:” The phrase “pha rol rigs mi mthun la sdang ba” is reflected by the English line “xenophobic, chock-full of disdain.” The importance of retaining form in translation, it may also be noted, was taken seriously by the Tibetans themselves, who typically translated Sanskrit verse into Tibetan verse. That the Tibetan authors took the time to render Sanskrit verse as Tibetan verse, to consider the psychological effects of language-in-use, and to transpose meter in such a way as to fit the Tibetan language, speaks volumes about the importance of format and style in traditional poetry. Translating without regard to traditional aesthetic appeal, then, does a disservice not only to translation, but to the art of poetry itself.

The Emotional Viscerality of Poetry

“In principle, [Tibetan poems] are supposed to evoke one or more of the traditional affect-states (nyams ’gyur) of Sanskrit aesthetics: charm, heroism, disgust, merriment, wrath, fear, pity,

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40 View could be here interpreted in the English as an imperative, an unfortunate side-effect of needing the letter “V” to begin the line. Though the imperative isn’t the verb’s case in the source, the essence of the passage is that the nature of all human minds is cattle-like; since this is the message that the author is communicating to the audience implicitly if he states that he sees it, or if he writes that it is seen (in general), stating it explicitly instead (i.e., telling the audience to see it) doesn’t radically alter the meaning. Though the form takes precedence here, upon examination, the cost seems reasonable.

41 Xenophobia, of Greek etymology, is literally the fear or hatred of someone foreign or strange, which correlates nicely with the Tibetan pha rol rigs mi mthun: hating outsiders or foreigners who don’t conform, or are inharmonious, or incongruent, or alien, to oneself. Disdain was added to emphasize the sdung ba, or “hatred” of the original (as phobia may be interpreted as only “fear”), whereas chock-full is an adaptive qualifier merely added to fill out the line length.

42 Cabazon, Jackson, et el, in “Tibetan Literature,” p. 376
wonderment (or) peace, and to display the formal and verbal ornaments (rgyan) that help to produce those states."43

The formal and verbal ornaments of poetry (rgyan) cited above have already been discussed in detail in the previous sections: those literary aspects of idiom, prosody, meter, and so forth. In these concluding lines, the element of poetry I’d like to focus on is the emotional viscerality of its language, its pathos, or how the language of poetry is meant to evoke within the reader an emotionally visceral state of being by the expression of its words (nyams ’gyur).

Yet here we are, helplessly earth-bound,
Awaking in this joyless,44
Animalistic enclosure;
Zephyrs45 of flesh & bone, up to ruin...
If I speak honestly, it’s so; My,
How it gets under everyone’s skin!

The question, then, is how does the poem here use imagery to evoke a certain feeling? And how can overly-literal language be avoided in order to maintain some sense of style, or to endow the poem with poetic-ness? One strange line comes within these final stanzas when Gendun Chöphel writes that life is like “arriving in a goat house or a dog house.” Analyzing the line from the standpoint of transparency, it becomes immediately clear that a literal rendering of the line will not suffice, as an English poet would never pen such an odd turn of phrase. The question for the translator, in this case, is what is the meaning behind this imagery? Is there a more elegant solution that is both poetic and retains the sense of the original? The imagery that this line is employing is one of “coming to” inside a cramped, dirty enclosure surrounded by animals—which is why it’s been here translated as “animalistic enclosure.” Whether or not the feeling of the original has been replicated, I cannot say: my Tibetan language simply isn’t to the point yet where I can always sense the natural flow and feel (or “taste,” rasa) of the literary

43 Cabazon, Jackson, et el, in “Tibetan Literature,” p. 374-377
44 Missing in this translation due to meter and space is that the “mountains and valleys,” la lung, are the places without joy; the actual meaning is that all places are without joy, but again, a non-Tibetan audience may be living in places other than mountains and valleys, i.e., seashores and forests, so this omission doesn’t affect the line’s actual meaning.
45 “Zephyrs” here translates gyu ma’i lus, literally “illusory body;” wind is similarly without substance, apparitional, and phantom-like.
language. However, I do not think the success or failure of the translation could possibly invalidate the points which have been raised herein. We must begin addressing these sorts of translation issues in the Tibetan language world, and come to some understanding of how meaning in language is conveyed and how precision is evaluated:

In sum, a translator is always balancing a number of desiderata: semantic range; grammatical construction; lexical resonance; sometimes rhyme and metre; technical register; resonance to particular philosophical systems. Getting one right means getting others wrong. So, distortion of some kind enters the moment one translates.46

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46 Garfield, Jay L. “Buddhist Howls.”