

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSLATION OF TWO POEMS

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In 1984, at the CAANS Learned Societies meeting in Guelph, we again scheduled a session on the translation of poetry, during which, for one hour, we discussed the merits of the ~~various translations~~ ^{submitted for the poems}. It was most enjoyable and provided good insights, and we should certainly do it again. The remarks that follow, needless to say, are the result of this collective discussion.

The organizer and chairman of the session, Adrian van den Hoven, had offered two poems to our members; to our great pleasure, six people responded, and they all tackled both. Let us look at the texts separately, however.

Here is the first, with ^{its} the six versions:

MELOPEE

(Paul van Ostaïjen: Music-Hall, Den Haag: Daamen NV, 1955, p.157).

Onder de maan schuift de lange rivier
 Over de lange rivier schuift moede de maan
 Onder de maan op de lange rivier schuift de kano naar zee

Langs het hoogriet
 langs de laagwei
 schuift de kano naar zee
 schuift met de schuivende maan de kano naar zee
 Zo zijn ze gezellen naar zee de kano de maan en de man
 Waarom schuiven de maan en de man getweeën gedwee naar de zee

Here is John Michielsen's version:

Melopee

Beneath the moon the long river slips by
 Above the long river the tired moon slips by
 Beneath the moon on the long river the canoe slips by to sea

Past the high reed
 Past the low field
 slips the canoe to sea
 slips with the slipping moon the canoe to sea
 Thus together they go to sea the canoe the moon and the man
 Why do the moon and the man meekly together slip off to the sea?

Remkes Kooistra has:

Melopee

Low under the moon the long river grovels
 Over the river the moon wearily grovels
 Low under the moon on the long river a canoe grovels on to the sea

Along high reeds
 Along low grasses
 the canoe grovels to the sea
 the canoe with the grovelling moon grovels on to the sea
 Thus they are comrades on their way to the sea: the canoe, the moon
 and the man
 Why do the moon and the man grovel tamely together to the sea?

*Blank
line*

(As alternatives to "grovel" Remkes offers "creep" and "crawl").
 Gus Dierick has:

Melopee

Beneath the moon the long river glides
 Above the long river glides worn-out the moon
 Beneath the moon the canoe upon the long river glides to sea

Along the high reeds
 Along the low meads
 the canoe glides to sea
 glides with the gliding moon the canoe to sea
 Thus are companions to sea the canoe the moon and the man
 Why do the moon and the man meekly glide together to sea?

*Blank
line*

Adrian van den Hoven has:

Melopee

Under the moon glides the long river
 Over the long river glides the languid moon
 Under the moon on the long river the canoe glides to the sea

Past the high reeds
 Past the low meadow

The canoe glides to the sea
 Glides the canoe with the gliding moon to the sea
 That's how they go together to the sea the canoe the man and the moon
 Why do the man and the moon glide like a meek twosome to the sea.

Basil Kingstone has:

Chant

Under the moon the long river glides on
 Over the long river the moon glides wearily
 Under the moon on the long river the canoe glides to the sea

Past the tall reeds
 past the flat fields
 the canoe glides to the sea
 the canoe glides with the gliding moon to the sea
 Fellow-travellers down to the sea the canoe the moon and the man
 the moon and the man both drift unresisting down to the sea

And Maria Jacobs has:

Song

The long river drifts beneath the moon
 The weary moon drifts over the long river
 Beneath the moon the canoe on the long river drifts to sea

Past high rushes
 Past low flats
 the canoe drifts to sea
 drifts with the drifting moon to sea
 And so the companions are off to sea, the canoe, the moon, the man
 Why do the moon and the man drift meekly together to sea

The reader can tell at once that this is not a narrative poem of the kind we have tackled in previous years (e.g. De idioot in het bad), but predominantly an exercise in rhythm and sound. Hence the title. In English a melopoeia is simply a melody (Webster), but in French it is "a vague monotonous song or melody" (Robert), and that seems closer to the sense here.

We see a flat colourless moonlight scene, not so much frozen in time as stretched out in it, continuing but unchanging, with a human being present but characterless, a figure in the landscape. Only at the end is there a psychological note, when the poet questions the man's "meekly" drifting. The translation has somehow to convey the

colour (or absence of colour) of the picture, by capturing the rhythm and sound. The rhythm of any English version will obviously be different from that of the original -- kano is stressed differently from "canoe", for example, and rivier from "river" -- but any strong even rhythm should do the trick. However, I doubt that to this end one can begin 11.6-7 with a verb; English syntax rebels against such a practice.

Obviously also one should keep the repetition of key words, preferably choosing those with a suitable sound. ("Tired" and "weary" both make good combinations of sounds with "moon"). In this connection "glides" may be more apt than "slips", since it keeps the slow sound I hear in schuift and reinforces the dreamlike mood, while "slip" almost suggests an accident, and "slip off" seems not so much meek as sneaky. Indeed, "off to sea" should be jolly, an adventure. The opposed pair hoog and laag can either be "high/low" or "tall/flat", the latter pair having a sort of visual assonance; this can be reinforced with the assonance "reed/field" or the rhyme "reed/mead" (but is "mead" too 'poetic' a word, drawing attention to itself?)

If we keep close to the syntactical order of the original (where possible), and are constant in our repetitions, and capture the sound, we can render this poem well, and our translators did. The second poem is a different kettle of fish. Its rhythm and to some extent its sound are also important, but so is its complex meaning. Here it is, together with the six versions:

STANDBEELD

(Gerrit Achterberg: Voorbij de laatste stad, Den Haag: Bert Bakker, 1967, p.57)

Een lichaam, blind van slaap,
staat in mijn armen op.
Ik voel hoe zwaar het gaat.
Dodepop.
Ik ben een eeuwigheid te laat.
Waar is je harteklop?

De dikke nacht houdt ons bijeen
en maakt ons met elkaar compact.
"Om Godswil laat mij nie meer los:
mijn benen zijn geknakt,"
fluister je aan mijn borst.

Het is of ik de aarde tors.
En langzaam kruipt het mos

over ons standbeeld heen.

For this John Michielsen has:

Statue

A body, tired with sleep,
now gets up in my arms.
I feel its heaviness
Deadweight.
Too late by an eternity
Where is your heartbeat now?

The thick night makes us one
and encloses us completely.
"For God's sake don't let go again:
for broken are my legs,"
you whisper at my chest.

It seems as if I bear the earth.
And slowly the moss creeps
all over our statue.

Remkes Kooistra has:

STATUE

A body blind with sleep
Stands straight in my arms
How heavily it bears me down
This death doll
I am an eternity too late
Where is the sound of the beat of your heart?
The thick night keeps us together
and makes us compact in our union
"For God's sake, please, don't drop me --
My legs are fractured,"
you whisper upon my chest.

It seems that I shoulder the earth
And slowly moss creeps
up and across our statue.

Gus Dierick has:

Monument

A body, blind with sleep,
sits itself up in my arms.
I feel how strenuously it moves.
Dead doll.
I'm late by an eternity.
Where is the beating of your heart?

The heavy night keeps us as one,
compactly presses us together.
"For God's sake never let me go:
My bones are cracked,"
you whisper at my breast.

It is as if I tote the world.
And slowly over our monument
the mosses crawl.

Adrian van den Hoven has:

STATUE

A body blinded by sleep
ascends in my embrace
I sense how difficult it is.
Inanimate toy.
I came an eternity too late,
and have lost your heartbeat.

The heavy night unites us
and condenses us into one.
"For God's sake don't let me go again!
My legs have snapped,"
You whisper in my chest.

It is as if I bear the earth.
And slowly our statue is
covered with a growth of moss.

Basil Kingstone has:

STATUE

A body, blind with sleep,
 Is risen in my arms.
 I feel that slumping weight.
 Dead doll.
 I'm an eternity too late.
 Where is your beating heart?

The dense night holds us close
 we two become as one.
 "For God's sake never let me go,
 I have no strength to stand,"
 You whisper to my chest.

I bear the world upon my shoulders.
 And slowly mosses creep
 over our statue.

And Maria Jacobs has:

Monument

Sleep-blind, a body
 rises in my arms.
 I know that heaviness.
 Death's doll.
 I'm eons late.
 Your heartbeat -- where is it?

The impenetrable night
 holds us welded together.
 'Dear God, don't ever let me go:
 my legs have given up,'
 you whisper at my chest.

I seem to lug the earth
 And slowly moss steals
 over our monument.

It is hard to reconcile the needs of the meaning with those of the rhythm. One can, of course, adopt one's own terser rhythm, as Maria Jacobs does. The urgency of "Waar is je harteklop?" is perhaps best conveyed by her panicky line "Your heartbeat -- where is it?" Otherwise some lines here must either be padded (diluted) or left too

short; either way the intensity is lost. Thus "over our monument" is better than the sawn-off "over our statue" (it's also a more correct translation); but even then, "-ment" cannot really bear the stress that the rhythm seeks to put on it. The opposite problem occurs with "Het is of ik de aarde tors". Nobody put the full translation - "it is as if I bear the earth on my shoulders" (or "upon", for the rhythm), but what does one cut out? Most versions kept "It is as if" (Maria Jacobs' "I seem" is nice and compact), but what verb will convey "tors"? "Tote" and "lug" are too familiar.

All this before we really look at the meaning. Both sex and death seem present here. It is known that Achterberg shot a woman he loved, and that he spent some time in an asylum. Is the woman in the poem dead, a ghost filling the poet with remorse? Indeed, in ll.1-2 what flesh does the poet feel rise up in response to memory? Or is the woman's body so present to him in sex he no longer sees her as a live person, although she speaks? Ll.9-10 are a crux: a dead person would presumably have no strength, but the woman's words could be wrung from her by climax. Either way, "never let me go again" is plausible; you could say he "let her go" into death when he shot her. And in either case, what can one put for "Mijn benen zijn geknakt" that is plausible and not a mere gloss ("I have no strength to stand") nor too familiar? Then there are the line's connotations. The Resurrection is a subtext in this poem (hence "is risen" and "ascends" in two versions at l.2): Christ's legs were broken on the Cross. The woman does seem to have returned from the dead -- but not really to life, or no more life than ghosts and vampires have. And then bonen knakken is some-thing laughably everyday: to snap beans, preparing them for cooking. The poet's experience, memory, dream, nightmare, whatever, is absurd as well. But can one bring out subtexts without distortion?

There are other unclear points in the poem: for example, does "compact" imply complicity (in what?), a formal bond (of marriage?), or simply physical closeness? Other lines are perfectly clear, but have the common poetic quality of polysemy (multiple meaning). Thus "Ik voel hoe zwaar het gaat" combines the sense of 'the body is heavy to hold up' with something akin to het gaat zwaar vandaag, 'I'm having a rough day' -- in other words, the body is having a tough time standing up, is making a great effort. The six versions concentrate on different aspects of the idea. Ll.7-8, apparently so simple in style (but we have seen that they contain an ambiguity), give rise to a similar variety of renderings.

Most curious, however is the line "Dodepop", for it is one word and not two. "Dead doll" falls short, and so does the gloss "Inanimate toy". Is she death's toy? Is she a doll representing death? There is a children's game where you throw a doll in the air; there is a Goya painting where the doll being tossed is lifesize. But any reference to

the game would be an ironic antiphrase, for the woman is too heavy to lift. William Rueter suggested "doll of death", which is nicely ambiguous (death owns the doll, or she is death's representation, or even in some sinister way its messenger or agent) and keeps the hammering rhythm (heartbeat?).

What nobody attempted is the rhyme scheme. It is sufficiently irregular that one may not even notice it, yet it plays an important part. The insistent repetition of the first stanza -- ababab -- suggests the insistent return of the body, like that of Therese Raquin's drowned husband. In the remaining eight lines, three rhyme-pairs are set inside each other like Chinese boxes: borst-tors inside los-mos inside bijeen-heen. The scheme generates a feeling of being trapped, and also of the same insistent eternal return. The poem is a highly irregular sonnet, presented sestet first, and sonnets are traditionally love poems; the returning rhymes symbolize the return of longing. In this case that love is bound up with the poet's old, deep, continued suffering. But anyone who tries to reproduce any rhyme scheme, as we know from experience, tend to have to write a new poem. My own version would have been better off with no rhymes than one (weight-late). Indeed, one might well be better off to avoid a regular line-length, keeping the lines short and cogent, and hope the readers fail to notice the presence of a sestet and a (split) octet and don't wonder about the absence of rhyme, taking the poem as the translator presents it.

Altogether Standbeeld is a dense, obscure, difficult, uncanny poem. Our translators (leaving myself out of it now) provided good lines and often achieved a rhythm that held the poem together, and in the main successfully walked the tightrope between pedantic precision and unduly popular speech. Considerable achievements, commendable attempts at the impossible. If they had stopped at the end of the first, more accessible and more transferable poem, we would have understood why.