

TRANSLATION: THE ART OF COMPROMISE

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A translator of poetry discovers quickly that he is on a road with many diverging paths. If he doggedly insists on holding to the main road he soon discovers that it possesses forks and that, like the protagonist in Frost's "The Road Not Taken," he must select one direction or another.

In didactic poetry the direction is relatively clear: the message is primary, the means by which the message is conveyed is secondary. Its translator must focus on communicating the thesis and sacrifice, when required, such matters as sound patterns and imagery.

The task of the translator becomes more demanding and complex when the formal elements of the poem, rhyme scheme, meter, imagery, alliteration, or assonance, seem to be its primary value. Not only must he know the original and the target language well to communicate the poem's themes, he must also be adept at handling the formal elements and in fact, it helps if the translator is himself a poet. In the case of the sonnet the task of the translator is to pay particular attention to formal elements without compromising meaning. For example, sonnets in the Petrarchan or Italian tradition possess a clear break between the octave and sestet. The translator must therefore be sensitive to this because here there is usually a shift in meaning and also in the rhyme scheme: *abba/abba* in the octave and *cdecde* in the sestet. He must also try to respect the metre, which is often a clearly accented iambic pattern with five beats per line. The translations by Kathleen Nott, James S. Holmes, and Christopher Levenson of M. Vasalis' sonnet "De Weg Terug" published by *Delta* in 1971 illustrate some of these difficulties.

M. Vasalis: "De Weg Terug"

De avond kwam; de avondspin
had ons onmerkbaar ingesponnen.
Alles stond stil en de geronnen
minuten stroomden niet meer in.
We lagen naar het plafond te kijken,
dat was ook leeg; ik werd zo bang,
ik had een strakke koude wang,
we lagen roerloos als twee lijken...
Toen, in dit strak-gespannen niet,
opeens van zeer dichtbij de regen
stil slikkend langs het raamkozijn.
Ontdooien van het vast verdriet

en o de pijn om te bewegen
om niet meer dood te mogen zijn.¹

Vasalis elected to write in the Italian sonnet tradition, but the rhyme of the second quatrain parallels rather than echoes the rhyme of the first quatrain: her rhyme scheme for the octave is *abba/cddc*, and for the sestet *efgefg*.

Kathleen Nott's translation in 1949 entitled "The Way Back" attempts to follow Vasalis' rhyme scheme and her octave departs from the Italian sonnet tradition in the same way as Vasalis' sonnet. However, in the sestet Nott sacrifices the original rhyme pattern and concludes with an *effgg* arrangement.²

Kathleen Nott: "The Way Back"

And twilight came—the twilight spin
insensibly had us inward spun.
The world stood still and the time run
never more came streaming in.
And we lay staring towards the ceiling
which was void too. And in my dread
I had one chill cheek, and like two dead
we lay there, without stir or feeling.
Then like something left outside
this taut suspense, silently rain
smeared all at once the windowpane.
And so it was the stiff grief thawed
and oh the pain with which we stirred
and deemed no more that we had died.³

The first four lines of Nott's translation reveals some of the difficulties she encountered in incorporating Vasalis' rhyme scheme and meter. As in Vasalis' poem, the first two lines are strongly iambic and the third and fourth lines are somewhat less regular in meter. The compromises Nott makes are in meaning rather than form. They take several forms. First, she translates "de avondspin" not as "the spider of evening," but as "the twilight spin." It is easier to find rhymes for "spin" than for "spider," and it also provides the ending of the first line with a strong beat to parallel Vasalis' first line, and this may have been Nott's rationale. Next she translates "onmerkbaar" as "insensibly" and places the word directly after "spin," creating the impression that the spider enmeshes the characters of the poem unwittingly. Vasalis places "onmerkbaar" directly after "ons" to suggest that it is the characters themselves who are

unaware of being enmeshed. Thirdly, Nott translates "geronnen minuten" as "time run" making time appear to be the adjective and "run" the noun rather than the reverse.

These examples do not indicate that Nott lacks sensitivity. In fact, her departure from a literal translation in her opening phrase suggests the opposite. She does not translate "De avond kwam" as "The twilight came," because she wants to heighten the mood of the poem somewhat and to place the reader within the action. Opening the poem with the conjunction "And" also gives the poem more immediacy.

Nott chose to preserve the meter and rhyme of the original. However, this had negative consequences for the imagery and syntax. James S. Holmes' translation in 1955 presents us with a more balanced commitment to these competing aspects of the poem.

James S. Holmes: "The Way Back"

The evening fell: unnoted,
the evening spider spun us in.
Everything stopped and the clotted
minutes ceased to run.
We lay and stared up at the ceiling; it
was empty too. I was so weak,
so scared; I had one taut cold cheek;
we lay like double corpses, motionless...
Then, in that taut-stretched nothingness,
all of a sudden, quite close by, the rain,
softly seeping along the window-frame.
And then to unfreeze from that hard distress,
and oh the ache to move again,
no more allowed the right of being dead.⁴

Holmes attempts to retain some elements of the original rhyme pattern but also uses "slant" or "imperfect" rhyme. For example, in the first quatrain, not only "unnoted" and "clotted" but also "in" and "run" can be seen as slant rhyme. As a consequence the rhyme scheme for the octave becomes abab/cdde; for the sestet it is effeg. He compromises somewhat on rhyme but, like Nott, he maintains a reasonably iambic meter for the first quatrain. Holmes is more committed to preserving the imagery and the first quatrain is nicely rendered. He does depart from strict translation in order to provide an additional rhyme. In the second quatrain, he adds "so weak" to "ik werd zo bang" in order to obtain a rhyme for "cheek." However, this image is consistent with the primary thrust of the line: the protagonist's being frightened.

Holmes appears to give equal weight to imagery and sound patterns, and the net result, even if it is compromised somewhat, still reflects the sense of Vasalis'

original and acknowledges its character as a sonnet. Christopher Levenson published a markedly different translation in 1971.

Christopher Levenson: "The Way Back"

The evening came; the spider of evening
had enmeshed us imperceptibly.
Everything stood still and the congealed minutes
no longer surged in.
We lay looking at the ceiling
that was also empty: I became so afraid,
I had one taut, cold cheek,
we lay motionless as two corpses...
Then in this tautly stretched oblivion
from close by suddenly the rain
was quietly gulping across the window-frame.
A thawing of the frozen grief
and then what agony to move,
allowed no longer to be dead.⁵

His images are quite consistent with Holmes', but Levenson elects to escape both the strictures of rhyme and the metrical pattern. His free verse makes his primary commitment to imagery and to a line-by-line correspondence with the original. He takes slight liberties with language - cf. his translation of "en o de pijn" as "and then what agony" for the sake of consistency of tone. As a result his images are generally a bit more precise, his syntax crisper, and his language less artificial. An excellent example is the twelfth line. "A thawing of the frozen grief" provides a tighter blend of imagery and rhythm and renders Vasalis' line very well.

The differences in the three translations result in part from changes in poetic idiom between 1949 and 1971. However, I feel that Levenson and Holmes have come up with more felicitous phrasing and a truer translation, because they allowed themselves sufficient freedom from the formal elements of the original and concentrated on its poetic essence, whereas Nott sacrificed substance in order to remain true to form.

Holmes honored the formal elements to a more substantial degree than Levenson. We are conscious of the sonnet structure partly because of his minor departures from it; his translation remains readily identifiable as a sonnet and pays tribute to the form.

Levenson, on the other hand, departs sharply from the standard sonnet. He presents a fourteen line poem with an identifiable octave and sestet, but he forsakes rhyme scheme and metrical pattern in order to capture the mood of the original. As a result his phrasing is more fluent and his imagery is clearer.

Ideally a translation should be accurate in its appropriate phrasing, and consistent with the structure of the

original poem. Holmes comes close to achieving that. But because compromise is unavoidable, I believe the elements we can least afford to sacrifice are accuracy and appropriate phrasing. Levenson illustrates that both can be preserved. His translation is accurate and the range of imagery, alliteration, assonance, and consonance is such that he presents us with a equivalent of Vasalis' original.

NOTES

¹"Triple Confrontation: Three Translations of a Poem by M. Vasalis," *Delta XIV*, No. 2 (Summer), pp. 74-75.

²It is, of course, possible to see "thawed" and "stirred" as "slant" or imperfect rhyme, thus assigning the sestet a fairly conventional rhyme pattern: effgge.

³"The Way Back," tr. Kathleen Nott, *Adam: International Review* (London), XVII, No. 196 (July 1949; Netherlands Number), p.19.

⁴"The Way Back," tr. James S. Holmes, *News from the Netherlands: Radio Nederland* (Hilversum), 4/5 July 1955 (James S. Holmes, "Dutch Poetry, 7. The Late Thirties"), p. 3.

Reprinted in *De Kim* (Amsterdam), No. 5 (1955; Dutch Poetry Number), p. 6.

Reprinted in *Delta XIV*, No. 2 (Summer 1971), p. 75.

⁵"The Way Back," tr. Christopher Levenson, *Delta XIV*, No. 2 (Summer 1971), p. 75.