

## TRANSLATING POETRY: THEORY AND PRACTICE

## A JOINT PAPER

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and  
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Basil Kingstone and Adrian van den Hoven both delivered papers to the November 1980 Seminar on Netherlandic Studies on the translation of poetry. Dr. Kingstone reflected on his translations from Dutch into French which appeared in the Journal I 2 and II 1. Dr. van den Hoven confined himself to the two poems in II 1, by Slauerhoff and Marsman, but dealt both with Dr. Kingstone's version and with Christopher Levenson's translations into English.

Dr. Kingstone began as follows:

These remarks are strictly a practical account of the problems I encountered while translating into French the free verse poems of Maria Jacobs and Kees Snoek (published in the Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies I, ii) and, secondly and separately, the regular verse poems by J. J. Slauerhoff and Hans Marsman (published Ibid. II, 1). I offer no general theories about translating poetry, though no doubt I could, and no generalisations about Dutch poetry, because I couldn't. I am new to the field. My translating experience hitherto has been limited (outside of classes) to translating Quebec short stories into English.

The most important requirement of free verse, I feel, is brevity. And that means a short line. Maria Jacobs' Vijfenvijftig Sokken is a good story, but such a long free line seems a risky form to me. It's been done in French by perhaps only one poet, Laforgue, but in the 20th century free-versists have gone back to the short line.

Now, it is hard to keep the translated line short for a number of reasons. Firstly, one must complete French syntax. Lines may be disconnected from one another - a disconnection often emphasized by absence of punctuation - but only if they are complete sentences. It is all right to write (as I have):

Ses parents ont été pris  
Et ses frères  
Elle a dix-huit ans  
Elle doit rester ici (I, 2, p. 120)

but

Hij duikt onder en onder  
drie jaar lang  
geen zonlicht  
geen waaiwind  
geen kletsregen (I, 2, p. 108)

is another matter. I cannot put "pas de" for geen. "Sans" would have been neat, i.e., brief, but "se cacher sans quelque chose" sounds odd, and even odder when repeated; so I settled for "loin de."

The line I have just quoted - hij duikt onder en onder - illustrates another difficulty: French can rarely modify the meaning of a verb with a particle. Still less can you repeat the particle. In principle, whatever you put, either a simple verb or a whole phrase, you have to repeat it all. Luckily, "il se cache, il se cache," being a simple verb, is still brief.

One also has to expand compound nouns into phrases of the variety noun + de + noun; render complex prepositions by prepositional phrases; and add articles. All of which we may illustrate with one line, from Kees Snoek (I, 2, p. 139)

rode kratten	bovenaan	de brandtrap.
<u>des</u> caisses rouges	en haut de	l'échelle de sauvetage.

"En haut de" has no more syllables than bovenaan, but "l'échelle de sauvetage" has five syllables as against three for de brandtrap. And all the parts of the line are longer on the printed page in French. This destroys the concentrated intense feeling just as much as greater length in pronuncia-

tion, even for those readers who read aloud, and even more-so for those who don't.

The two factors, grammatical difference and longer words, both work against rendering neatly Maria Jacobs' line describing the couple Jo and Lena, lying "vork tegen lepel in het smalle bed." (I, 2, p. 110). This is an image the French don't have, though they would no doubt see the idea quickly enough. They have no comparable image for sleeping close together that I know of. So I translated literally. This in turn raised our two problems:

1) The image is an adverbial phrase and had to be related grammatically to the subject with a verb or a verbal, so I put "Etendus" before it. \* "Epoux fourchette contre cuiller dans le lit étroit" sounds no more complete than, say, \* "Epoux inconfortablement dans le lit étroit." Result: more length.

2) The three words "fourchette contre cuiller" take up more space than the three words vork tegen lepel. French has a problem with length of words because of the number of letters having no phonetic value even if they are phonetically necessary. Here the -ou-, -ch-, -on- and -ll- are all cases of needing two letters to transcribe one sound: and the final mute -e- of "contre" and the -te- of "fourchette" are also excess baggage. Obviously, many languages fail to render one sound by one letter every time - Dutch itself has its problems with vowel sounds - but French perhaps fails more.

Once in a while, to be sure, a line or part of a line will come out shorter when translated. Thanks to this, one can sometimes solve the problem of a serious spillover.

If we take lines 4-6 of Vijfenvijftig sokken (I, 2, p. 112, 124) part by part, for example, we shall see what I did:

Ruilhandel kon nog  
L'échange allait toujours

- no trouble so far -

maar wie wilde er nou  
mais qui voulait à présent

- good, it fits on one line -

zo'n bruidssprei  
d'une telle courtepoinde de mariée?

- oh, dear! Three syllables have become seven, even if we read the French as in everyday speech, which with free verse we are entitled to do -

nu zelfs de noodzakeligste kleren

- let us omit nu "alors que," which will only lengthen the line further: it is still impossible to fit in "même les vêtements les plus essentiels." So let us look ahead at the next line, in the hope of finding spare space:  
voor geen geld of goede woorden te krijgen waren?

There is nothing in French corresponding to this expression. At most we can speak of "charité." The idea of goede woorden is taken up in the rest of the stanza and opposed to the need to survive. "Charité," then, is the word to underline, by putting it in either of the prominent positions in a line of French verse: at the beginning or the end. So we need a short piece of this clause to fill out the line, and we can put its noun phrase in the next line. The short piece will have to be some sort of subject, so that the noun can be the object and thus come later without a stylistically wrong inversion. How about

on n'avait même pas  
Les vêtements essentiels à vous offrir

- I chose that verb as covering both give and sell. And we nicely have room left for the item which will then be developed:

même par charité.

Not that every opportunity to be briefer than the original should be eagerly seized. In the poem Verbrande Boterbloemen, after the man has explained why he tore up the buttercups in fury, the child comments:

Maar hij houdt me niet  
voor de mal. (p. 108)

The authoress herself writes in English "But he doesn't fool me." It's correct. Likewise, I could have put in

French "Mais il ne me trompe pas." But why the longer phrase in Dutch, if not to emphasize how completely the little girl understood? So I made it a longer phrase:

Mais il ne me  
fait pas marcher. (p. 120)

I should have made it one line anyway, though. "Mais il ne me" is an awful line. Ideally one verbal form should be on each line. But

Mais il ne me fait pas  
marcher

seems justified only if "marcher" is a surprise, like the one I was able to slip into Vijfenvijftig sokken:

Ma mère s'est mise en route sur sa bicyclette  
Sans pneus . . . (p. 124)

But in the present case "marcher" is not a surprise, since the whole phrase is an idiomatic expression. It had to be, in order to be of the right length and rhythm (not to mention the right level of language, which is another factor in translation, too vast to go into here) to render the idiomatic expression of the original.

Rhythm, indeed, is important. Let me show you a case where I failed to respect it. Translating a Dutch verb + particle by a simple French verb, when possible, makes for that desired density, but on reflection I wish I hadn't done it where Maria Jacobs said of the buttercups:

Hun hartjes brengen  
Pijnlijke herinneringen  
Van boter boven (p. 108)

and I put

Leurs coeurs évoquent  
des souvenirs pénibles  
de beurre. (p. 120)

The short last line may reinforce the pointe, but the rhythm is broken.

Let me return now to Kees Snoek's poems. I have already identified line length as a problem in translating his fine dense poems, but he set me others, which were more fun. Sound, for example. What can be done with the

wail "weer woei de nacht door dit huis!"? Well, I didn't do much. "La nuit a envahi cette maison de nouveau" has two / i /'s in the first half, but it doesn't add up to a shriek. It's also too long.

Related to sound effects, of course, is the question of word play. The untitled poem ends with the lines  
 ik schep mij een eiland, een ei  
 land.

This isolated place so full of riches and potential, presumably a nascent poem, cannot be represented in French (or English, for that matter) by a pun. So I put "une terre oeuf" and left the reader to reflect on what that might mean. In any case, I don't know if the French like puns as much. Despite claims by their phoneticians, I don't believe they can occur so easily in French. The existence of inflexions, distinguishing nouns from verbs and so forth, surely works against their occurrence.

(It will be apparent from Dr. Kingstone's remarks above that he feels he by no means rendered all the elements of the poems. He was therefore in substantial agreement with Dr. van den Hoven, who began his paper thus:)

Once again I would like to raise the question of the validity of translating poetry, because sometimes I receive the impression that every budding translator wishes at least once to try his hand at translating poetry, and to give a faithful rendition of a poem even though he knows that this is the genre which specifically resists translation.

The reason why poetry resists translation resides in the fact that unlike prose, poetry appears to be language and culture specific, because it has as its purpose to express what is most unique about a specific language and culture. Therefore, even when dealing with questions of a universal import, poetry trains its specific light on these questions, and it is this fact which makes "translation" unadvisable. Poetry depends for its signification on the extent to which its material aspects - rhyme, rhythm,

alliteration, metaphor, metonymy - interact to generate meaning and as these elements are language and culture bound, the translation of a poem becomes by definition problematical. As a result, if you wish to render a poem in another language, your primary concern should be to create poetic effects which are effective in and germane to the target language, and all considerations of exactness, faithfulness, and correct rendering of meaning should take second place to that concern.

(From here on we will give Dr. van den Hoven's comments on the two translations of each poem, followed by Dr. Kingstone's explanation of the variations or omissions in his versions. It would have been most valuable, of course, to have Christopher Levenson present as well, to talk about the difficulties he experienced.)

In Slauerhoff's poem (II, 1, p. 34) the speakers distinguished the following features:

1) Van den Hoven:

Slauerhoff's poem possesses the following rhyme scheme: ab ab. That is to say, alternate rhyme or "rime croisée." Neither Levenson's English translation nor Kingstone's French version respect this rhyme scheme.

Kingstone:

Both Slauerhoff's and Marsman's poems are in iambic pentameter, a metre which English also has but French doesn't. In fact, French does not have regular metrical feet at all. The equivalent, because standard and classical, line, the Alexandrine, has twelve syllables, with four stresses - or more correctly four pauses with lengthening of the sound and a distinctive pitch. One stress falls at the end of the line, of course, and until 1830 another was supposed to fall on the sixth syllable; the others were variable. It is useful metre to translate ten-syllable lines into, because you have two spare syllables for (as far as scansion is concerned) mute e's and (as far as grammar is concerned) the inflexions and little function words which we have seen to be a problem.

The Alexandrine has one great drawback, however; it has to rhyme. Marsman's poem doesn't. Slauerhoff's does, but I have never succeeded in writing anything in French regular verse, let alone with rhymes. Those who do produce rhymed translations (for operas, for example) have to take liberties with the meaning, and I took my job to be above all the rendering of the meaning.

So should I forget the Alexandrine? Not entirely. I began by grumbling about the difficulty of keeping the translated line short, and here's the same problem again. The Alexandrine is long, longer than the pentameter, both in the time it takes to say it and on the printed page. Luckily the intensity it loses by being long, it regains by its regular rhythm. Therefore, I had better stick fairly closely to that rhythm if my version is to have anything going for it at all.

So I avoided the Alexandrine, but kept its length as a guide for the length of my lines. I even allowed myself some Alexandrines and half-Alexandrines (hemistiches) as a bit of ear-teasing. My justifications for this are that, firstly, Christopher Levenson has done the same thing in his English version - his Slauerhoff has six regular lines and six irregular ones - and secondly, that some French poets experimented with near-Alexandrines about a hundred years ago: it makes for a softer, more musical effect. I can't match Paul Verlaine to be sure, but I feel that Slauerhoff's poem displays a neo-romantic sensibility not unlike Verlaine's. They both, indeed, wrote poems describing scenes which are but mirrors of their own feeling.

2) Slauerhoff creates long compound words to weigh down the lines and set a sombre mood:

morgenrood (the first red light of day - l'aurore)

ontzweeft (drifts across - sort de la baie)

jonkenvloot (convoy - une flotte de jonques).

Especially striking are his compound past participles.

Three of the four occupy prominent positions in the poem,

namely the beginning of the first line, of the first line of the last stanza, and of the last line. The fourth is in the first line of the second stanza to keep the mood evenly spread throughout. The problem is that French cannot create such compounds. This is akin to the problem of translating particles, which we have already seen. Either one must put more than one word - geheimgehouden "gardée secrète," and the fine slow word traagzeilende "voquant très lentement" - or the picturesque detail cannot be rendered - opengespaakt "fendus" and not "fendus ouverts." As good luck has it, however, uiteengeweken may be rendered by "éparpillés," and since French does not put subordinate verbs, past participles and the like at the end of clauses, it came naturally at the beginning of the second stanza, so that at least one participle in the French version has the requisite weight and is in a suitably prominent position.

3) Van den Hoven:

Slauerhoff also uses what I would consider pseudo-archaic language and poetic contractions, such as:

- a) donkre heuvlen (dark hills - les sombres collines)
- b) den schoot der neevlen (the folds of mist - le giron  
de la brume)
- c) Eerst 't duister (not until dusk - seul le crépuscule).

Once again neither translator attempts to follow Slauerhoff's example in this regard and it would have been unwise to have done so.

Kingstone:

German neo-romantics of the turn of the century used similar contractions. I have not attempted to write lines which would be regular if you didn't count the mute e's. This has almost never been done in France. The generation of poets who got tired of the mute e rule (it has not been pronounced in speech for a few centuries) also abandoned regular verse altogether. Such a system, if applied to what I have felt to be the most accurate rendering, produces hardly any more Alexandrines than there were before (three instead of two).

This omission is also a feature of poetic language akin to using archaic words. Now, no Coleridge arose in France to reintroduce archaisms into poetry. Some graveyard romantics in the 1830's imitated Villon and therefore revived fifteenth-century terminology a little, but that was in prose. Revival of interest in Renaissance and Baroque poetry led to imitation of their themes but not of their language. Verlaine failed to see Villon's art and thought he was imitating him by versifying slapdash colloquial usage - quite the opposite of historical reconstruction. So I have no model for using archaisms (or any other "poetic" style) in my version, and I didn't.

4) Van den Hoven:

Finally, Slauerhoff deliberately places the subject of the first stanza: "een stille jonkenvloot" (a silent convoy - une flotte silencieuse de jonques), at the end of the sentence and of the stanza. Dutch syntax allows for this; an attempt to emulate this procedure in English or in French would have resulted in a ungrammatical first strophe.

To conclude our discussion of Slauerhoff's poem: it is clear that those features that are most characteristic of the poem in Dutch are absent from the English and the French versions. Had the translators attempted to incorporate these features, the result would have been a bad poem in English and in French. Evidently, then, to the extent that these translations can be considered good poems, they must be considered as having done violence to the original and as having been created as unfaithful renditions of the same.

Let us now consider H. Marsman's poem De Zee (The Sea - La Mer) (II, 1, pp. 72-4).

Kingstone:

Marsman's poem again poses the question of whether to use a regular metre. Again I said no. I carefully did not translate the first line as "Que l'on n'écrite point si ce

n'est dans l'esprit . . ." lest the reader should then expect the whole poem to be in Alexandrines, and therefore rhymed. I have one rhyme (croix - voix), but it is as accidental as I believe Marsman's only rhyme to be (sprak - brak).

Van den Hoven:

Marsman's poem can be considered a literary and cultural manifesto. The poem does not make use of rhyme but rather it depends on alliterative patterns, rhetorical devices, and repetition in general to convey its message. Even though this poem may seem to be more easily translatable, the English and French renditions must perforce be unfaithful again because they cannot match word for word Marsman's deliberate exploitation of Dutch syntax and most specifically his elaborate alliterations. To wit:

1) Marsman's opening verse: "Wie schrijft, schrijv' in de geest van deze zee" becomes in English: "He who writes, let him write in the spirit of this sea," and in French: "Qu'on n'écrive point si ce n'est dans l'esprit de cette mer" . . . In both translations, the immediacy of the message as well as its impact are lost.

Kingstone:

In French the opening repetition could only be done in parallel clauses, so I omitted it. It would have been very long anyway:

Que celui qui écrit écrive dans l'esprit de cette mer  
Ou qu'il n'écrive point: voici le récif de pierre de lune  
would be two monstrous lines of sixteen syllables each. And "droomt . . . den droom," cannot be rendered as "rêve . . . le rêve." This construction, with the object the same word as the verb, is rare in French.

2) Van den Hoven:

Marsman's poem pivots around the adverb "hier" which he uses in a persistent and consistent manner. However, Levenson's rendition does not put "here" consistently at the beginning of the line, while Kingstone begins with "voici" and then switches to "ici."

## 3) Kingstone:

The sustained style of this preachment generates large numbers of subordinate clauses, the verbs of which come at the end. Indeed, he chooses strong past verb forms, to end his lines strongly (twelve of the twenty-six lines end thus). But in French the verb of a subordinate clause doesn't come at the end. Ll. 7-8, 9-10 and 12-13 are subordinate clauses running for two lines; luckily the verb only comes right at the end in the last case, so only then do I have a verb which must occur one line earlier, with no possibility of putting something else in its slot. This causes one overly long line (14 syllables) followed by one overly short one (8 syllables):

Qui rôdait des Piliers d'Hercule jusqu'à l'Hellespont  
Et de Damas jusqu'à l'Etna.

On reflection I should have transposed the lines. The same passage gave trouble to Christopher Levenson. He backed up into the line before:

Here lashes

the night . . .

but it takes him four more run-on lines to come out even again; and Marsman's poem derives much of its dignity and force from its end-stopped lines, every line a pronouncement. (This remark is not intended to cast an aspersion on Christopher Levenson's translation.)

## 4) Van den Hoven:

As has already been stated, neither translator can match Marsman's complex interplay of vowels and consonants. But it is not just alliteration that matters; what counts is his ability to interject dissimilar sounds into sound patterns which depend on similarity. Let us look then at the first two lines: "Wie schrijft, schrijv' in den geest van deze zee of schrijve niet; hier ligt het maansteenrif." In terms of vowels we perceive the following pattern:

ie	ij	ij	i	ɛ	e	a	e	ə	e
o	ij	ə	ie	ie	i	ɛ	a	e	i

where the "o" obviously functions to break up excessive clustering of related sounds.

The consonantal pattern (initial and final) is as follows:

w schr ft schr vg st z z  
f schr nt hr gt ht m st rf

The pattern of repetition is obvious but it is the intricate variations that matter just as much. In that regard, both translations are deliberately prosaic.

4) Even in the realm of metaphor and metonymy, where in addition the cultural component surfaces, translations cannot be faithful. The sentence: "en regenbogen naar de kusten wierp van de moskee, de tempel en het kruis," refers, respectively, to the Muslim, the Jewish, and the Christian faith. In English, the sentence "and hurled its rainbows against the coasts of mosque, temple and cross," misses by a hair because it shifts the focus to "the coasts" as does the French version: "En jetant des arcs-en-ciel vers les côtes De la mosquée, du temple et de la croix" shifts it to "les côtes."

A similar problem arises in the case of the compound noun "kruishout" which refers to the cross as well as to the wood of which the cross is made. The latter element goes missing in the English and the French rendition: "the reckless dream in which the wooden cross sprouts branches like a vine" and "le rêve téméraire où la croix pousse comme une vigne." Admittedly, however, the English version does establish a link between the wood of the cross and its metamorphosis into the tree of life.

Conclusion: Dr. Kingstone attempted no general conclusion. This was Dr. van den Hoven's:

What can we state with certainty and what alternative do we offer? First of all, both translations succeed only to the extent that they ignore what is characteristic in the original. Secondly, had the translators attempted to be faithful to the original, their renditions would simply have been bad copies. Consequently, only one solution

imposes itself clearly. When translating poetry, priority should be given to the poetic resources of the target language because the successful translation creates a new poem which is neither a transliteration, an imitation, nor even an adaptation of the original. Of this new poem it can be said only that the original poem served as an inspiration. The new rendition stands and falls on its poetic qualities not as they are perceived by, for example, the Dutch reader who knows the original and who wishes to judge the English and the French renditions by Dutch literary standards, but as these poetic qualities are perceived by the informed reader of the target language, in our case, English and French. All considerations which would take into account the poetic demands made on the poem in the original language would of necessity have to be considered harmful and destructive of its poetic qualities in the target language.