

## M. VASALIS' DE IDIOOT IN HET BAD: FIVE VERSIONS AND SOME COMMENTS

Basil D. Kingstone

At the Learned Societies conference at Ottawa in May 1982 it was proposed to have a discussion of various translations of Vassalis' poem. Unfortunately our timetable was too ambitious, and this discussion had to be cancelled to leave time for other events. In lieu of that, we give here the original poem, the five translations we received from members (many thanks to them all for tackling it!) and some thoughts of our own. One person's reactions, obviously, are far less valuable than those of a roomful of people, but perhaps we will provoke further commentaries.

Here, together with the original, are the five versions:

### DE IDIOOT IN HET BAD

Met opgetrokken schouders, toegeknepen ogen,  
haast dravend en vaak hakend in de mat,  
lelijk en onbeholpen aan zusters arm gebogen,  
gaat elke week de idioot naar 't bad.

De damp, die van het warme water slaat  
maakt hem geruster: witte stoom...  
En bij elk kledingstuk, dat van hem afgaat,  
bevangt hem meer en meer een oud vertrouwd droom.

De zuster laat hem in het water glijden,  
hij vouwt zijn dunne armen op zijn borst,  
hij zucht, als bij het lessen van zijn eerste dorst  
en om zijn mond gloort langzaam een groot  
verblijden.

Zijn zorgelijk gezicht is leeg en mooi geworden,  
zijn dunne voeten staan rechtop als bleke bloemen,  
zijn lange, bleke benen, die reeds licht verdorden  
komen als berkenstammen door het groen opdoemen.

Hij is in dit groen water nog als ongeboren,  
hij weet nog niet, dat sommige vruchten nimmer  
rijpen,

hij heeft de wijsheid van het lichaam niet verloren  
en hoeft de dingen van de geest niet te begrijpen.

En elke keer, dat hij uit 't bad gehaald wordt,  
en stevig met een handdoek drooggewreven  
en in zijn stijve, harde kleren wordt gesjord  
stribbelt hij tegen en dan huilt hij even.

En elke week wordt hij opnieuw geboren  
en wreed gescheiden van het veilig water-leven,  
en elke week is hem het lot beschoren  
opnieuw een bange idioot te zijn gebleven.

M. Vasalis

### THE IDIOT IN THE BATH

His shoulders hunched, his eyes squinted  
Almost running and often stumbling on the rug  
Ugly and awkward, leaning on a nurse's arm  
The idiot goes to his bath once every week.

The vapors rising from the warm water  
Make him feel better: white steam ...  
And as his clothes come off one by one  
He is captivated more and more by an old, dear dream

The nurse lets him down into the water  
He folds his thin arms upon his chest  
He sighs as when slaking his first thirst  
And round his mouth slowly dawns a great joy.

His worried face now looks open and fair  
His thin feet reaching up like pale flowers,  
His pale long legs shriveled up already slightly  
Shine like stems of birches through the green.

He is like an unborn child in this green water  
He doesn't know yet that some fruits never ripen  
He hasn't lost the wisdom of the body  
And doesn't have to grasp the matters of the mind.

And every time he's pulled from the bath  
And firmly rubbed with a towel  
And pushed back into his stiff, harsh clothes  
He fights back and then cries a while.

And so every week he is born again  
And cruelly separated from the safe water-life  
And every week he is struck by his fate  
That he remained again a fearful idiot.

Translated by Remkes Kooistra

### THE IDIOT AND HIS BATH

With hunched up shoulders, squinting eyes,  
almost trotting, often catching in the mat,  
ugly, awkward, bent on nurse's arm,  
the idiot goes each week to take his bath.

Vapour rising from the heated water  
makes him more peaceful: hot white steam ...  
and with each piece of clothing she removes,  
he's more and more ensnared by an old familiar dream.

The nurse now slides him in the water,  
he folds thin arms upon his chest,  
he sighs as with the quenching of his natal thirst  
and great rejoicing slowly dawns about his mouth.

His squinty face becomes serene and beautiful,  
his skinny feet stick up like faded flowers,  
his long pale legs, already slightly withered,  
loom up like birchtree trunks through green.

In this green water he's still as though unborn,  
as yet he doesn't know that some fruits never ripen.  
he hasn't lost the wisdom of his body  
and needn't comprehend things with his mind.

And each time he's taken from his bath  
and with a towel rubbed down dry  
and lashed into his stiff, hard clothes,  
he struggles, then he cries a moment.

And each week he's born again  
and cruelly sundered from his cozy waterlife  
and each week fate calls him forth  
to be once again a fearful idiot.

Translated by Ray M. Wakefield

### THE IDIOT IN THE BATH

Shoulders hunched, his eyes shut tight,  
Trotting almost and often catching in the mat,  
Hooked into the siste's arm, awkward and ugly,  
The idiot goes for his weekly bath.

The damp which rises from the water  
Calms him down: white steam...  
With every piece of clothing he discards,  
slowly an old, familiar dream envelops him.

The sister slides him in the water,  
Thin arms folded before his breast  
He sighs, as though his first thirst he is quenching,  
Around his mouth there slowly dawns a great rejoicing.

Empty and handsome his anxious face has turned.  
The narrow feet stand straight as if pale flowers,  
His long, white legs, already slightly wilted,  
Loom up like birch-tree trunks among the green.

In this green water he is as yet unborn,  
He does not know that certain fruits can never ripen,  
The wisdom of the body not yet lost,  
He need not understand the objects of the mind.

And evertime they come and fetch him from his bath,  
And dry and rub him briskly with a towel  
And haul him roughly in his rigid clothes  
He cries a little and protests in vain.

And every week he is reborn  
And cruelly parted from his sheltered water-life,  
And every week fate plays its game with him  
And leaves him what he is: a fearful fool.

Translated by A.P. Dierick

### THE IDIOT IN HIS BATH

With shoulders hunched and eyes squeezed  
nearly shut  
trotting almost, feet catching in the rug  
ugly and awkward, crooked on nurse's arm  
the idiot goes to his weekly bath.

The vapour rising from the warm green water  
quiets him down: a white embracing cloud...  
and with each piece of clothing he discards  
an old dream gradually takes hold of him.

The nurse helps him to slide into his bath  
he folds his thin arms on his narrow chest  
he sighs as though he's quenching his first thirst  
and round his mouth a great bliss slowly spreads.

His troubled face has grown empty and fair  
his thin feet stand upright like livid flowers  
his long pale legs, already somewhat withered  
seem to loom up as birch trees through the green.

In this green water he's as if unborn  
doesn't yet know that some fruits don't mature  
he has not lost the wisdom of the flesh  
and does not need to grasp things of the mind.

And every time he's taken from his bath  
and rubbed down firmly with a terry towel  
and dressed in his coarse and unyielding clothes  
he tries to struggle free and whimpers briefly.

And each week he is born again anew  
and parted cruelly from his safe water-life  
and every week he's destined to remain  
a poor and fearful idiot again.

Translated by Maria Jacobs

### THE IDIOT IN HIS BATH

With shoulders hunched and squinting  
At a hobble, feet stubbing the rug  
A grotesque crooked on nurse's arm  
The idiot's off to his weekly bath.

Vapours from the warm green water  
He's settled down: embraced in a cloud...  
And as each piece of clothing is shed  
He's slowly enfolded in an old dream.

As nurse eases him down in the tub  
He folds thin arms on his pigeon chest  
Sighs like he's slaking a thirst  
And his spreading mouth is great bliss.

The disordered face grows empty, bland  
Slim feet stand erect like flowers  
And withered legs, long and pale  
Loom like birches through the green.

In his bath fetus in a womb  
He can't know some fruits won't ripen  
He hasn't lost that sense of the flesh  
And cannot grasp an idea of things.

Whenever he's taken from the tub  
And dried with nubble of terry towel  
And dressed in institutional clothes  
He struggles for freedom and whimpers.

Each week he's reborn and reborn  
He's torn again from his water-safe world  
And each week his destiny's fulfilled  
He trembles and is an idiot again.

Translated by Maria Jacobs  
Imitation by Richard Lush

In approaching any task of translation, we have to decide what must survive in our version. In the case of a poem, which is perhaps the most challenging kind of text to try to render in another language, the content is reinforced by a form, a pattern of sounds and rhythms and lines which can heighten aspects of the content by repetition, symmetry and sheer beauty. The form is what makes a poem

and is the hardest aspect to convey. If we decline to insist on a form, we will create a different and possibly less good text. One solution, of course, is to let the best translation of the content that we can arrive at, dictate a new form; this can be regular or free in nature, though a regular form in the original form seems to call for a regular form in the translation. If both languages have the form in common, as is the case here, one may wish to keep it.

It is easier to discuss content and form separately, though of course the translator must tackle everything at once, for the poem is an indivisible whole. Content first, then, and first of all the canonical division, which applies here, into three parts.

The opening stanza is everybody's first superficial picture of the idiot, a sad and even repulsive sight. Indeed, the negative judgment we might make in our ignorance, is made for us: he is ugly and awkward.

However, as we watch him, his obvious pleasure at taking a bath draws us towards him. Then the poet interprets for us what we see: the idiot is back in a pleasant dream. Of what? of not yet being born. Life for him is suffering.

The bath is not only amniotic fluid, however: a further meaning emerges from the insistence on the word **groen** in 1.16-17. It is the green of some primeval paradise where we were all happy animals. The "first thirst" is probably the longing for that first home of man. But immediately an ironic meaning reveals itself in the statement that some fruit never ripens: the idiot will remain green. Man has not remained in a paradise of stupidity, therefore stupidity is no paradise for him. The idiot was just born a million years too late.

Even in the middle section, then, where the idiot's experience is pleasant and indicated by pleasant words, there is – if I dare say so – a sour note, so that we never lose sight of the harsh reality of his life. Indeed, here we have the most chilling fact of all: his legs are withering **already**. Clearly his mental state is due to some creeping illness. It is chilling as opposed to pathetic. He can only get worse.

By the last two stanzas we could not possibly be led back to looking at the idiot with distaste: we are on his side. The contrast is therefore between dream and reality, no longer as we see it, but as he feels it. The drying is rough, his clothes are stiff and hard – institutional towel and clothing – and to take him out of the bath, to make him live in reality, is cruel. Now, instead of being afraid of him, we want to spring to his defence.

The invariant in the content, then, what we wish to appear in our translation, is the progression from an objective or negative view of the idiot, via the interpretation of his pleasure at being in the bath, to sympathy with him. The poetry – to grossly misuse a quotation – is in the pity. The translator must thus make his readers see the scene and share the emotions, as the readers of the original do, by well chosen vocabulary.

Those who have read translations of poems by poets know how much liberty they sometimes take. Our first three translators, being academics, have not been so licentious, and nor has our first poet, Maria Jacobs. Richard Lush is a little freer, but not so much as the term "imitation" might suggest: a paraphrase could be freer. (Even so, one sees in his vocabulary the effect of wishing to create first and foremost a poem, in the fact that he picks up precisely those expressions which Maria Jacobs, also a poet, has added to the original.) Thus all are agreed that the idiot's shoulders are hunched, his eyes squint or are squeezed shut (**squ-** makes vigorous verbs, it seems), and the majority of versions have him trotting, which is how Vasalis saw his movements. He is ugly and awkward in every version except Lush's, where the word "grotesque" gives him the (to my mind) unsuitable tinge of a work of art.

Line 8 gave rise to some interesting variations. "An old dream" needs to be qualified, I am sure. "Familiar" is a correct translation of **vertrouwd**, but its overtone of "dear" may indeed be exactly what should be put. As for **bevangt**, it seems an emotional word, since all the variants – captivated, ensnared, envelops, takes hold, enfolded – are effective.

**Zijn eerste dorst** (1.11), as the reader will have gathered already, is an emotive allusive evocation of something not clearly defined. "First thirst" is an unfortunate jingle in English, "natal thirst" is unclear. Lush avoids the issue, as an "imitator" is entitled to. Some word like ancient or primeval might be good, though we don't want to insist on what Vasalis merely hints at. **De dingen van de geest** (1.20) is another mere hint best left as is; "matters of the mind" is unclear, "objects of the mind" seems self-contradictory. Ray Wakefield's line is a good gloss, which is one way to tackle obscurities.

One must not play down the undercurrent of bleak comment on the idiot's appearance, which flows especially strongly in the fourth stanza, ferrying us from the opening picture to the final harsh perspective of his future. His face, when not frightened, is empty. His feet

may be like flowers, but they do nothing more romantic than stick up. And it is a medical fact that his legs are already slightly withered. "Somewhat" is pulling one's punches, "wilted" is a term for the vegetable kingdom, and the participle, for which nothing has prepared us, needs to be in the stressed position at the end of the line, all the better to hit us.

The harshness of the last two stanzas, on the other hand, was well captured. I like the word "briskly", even if I'm not sure about drying the idiot and then rubbing him down: perhaps the nurse is applying the old idea that the friction is good for your blood circulation. **Gesjord**, in its strong position at the end of the line, seems to call for a strong word to render it; "lashed", despite its ambiguity, is effective. "Tied" or "strapped", perhaps?

Oddly enough, the mention of fate (1.27) seems to have triggered Romantic responses in our translators. Of the versions offered, "he's destined" seems the most accurate, if unemphatic, and "fate plays its game with him" is overdoing it but certainly true. "Separated", in the previous line, can by all means be replaced by a more emphatic and shorter (for the rhythm) word; "torn again" and "sundered" are not too strong. And to complete this trot through the vocabulary, we should mention the trap of **bange**, which is indeed "fearful", but "a fearful idiot" could be misunderstood, by this British mind anyway. "Frightened" is safer.

Turning to questions of form, we may note the unusual amount of anaphora (parallel syntax with the same word beginning a series of lines), and the great simplicity of the repeated words: **en, hij, zijn**. This reinforces the impression of simple speech (contrived by the poet's art, of course) and helps to characterize a simple mind. Our translators have all respected this whenever they could (it seems to have been harder in stanza five). Interestingly enough, Lush, more conscious of writing a poem, uses less of this simple repetition.

The line length is irregular: 1.8 has only four stresses, the rest have five or six. The happier middle part of the poem (11.11-20) consists entirely of hexameters, which seem to make the idiot's relaxation audible. Opinions seem divided, among our translators, as to whether or not to reproduce this effect. Remkes Kooistra has adopted a freer rhythm and Richard Lush a shorter, less traditional line. Ray Wakefield and Gus Dierick reproduce the lengthening line as far as possible; Maria Jacobs sticks firmly to the pentameter. There is certainly no one right way, excluding all others, to solve such problems.

Even so, one would like to reproduce the effect of the extra stress in the very last line, which reinforces the paradoxical **pointe**: the renewal is no renewal, there is no change, just

the same eternal disappointment. Syntactically the line could end at **te zijn**, but we know the rhyme has to come, as inevitably as fate, whose parting shot it is. Remkes Kooistra and Maria Jacobs reproduce this with the paradoxical alliteration "remain again".

The hardest element of any word, line or poem to render into another language is of course the sound. Nobody here has attempted to rhyme; if one does, the rhyme words tend to dictate a new and different poem, and it is probably best to give them their head. Within the lines, however, it is desirable to make some attempt to reflect major sound effects. Thus 1.2, with its series of long a's ending abruptly with a short one, reproduces the sudden halt that results when the idiot stumbles. "Catching in the mat" and "stubbing the rug" both nicely convey the halt, if not the erratic progress that precedes it. The long vowels in lines 8 and 12 reinforce the feeling of happy relaxation suggested by the longer line. And various other sound clusters heighten the visual effect of certain images: **zorgelijk gezicht, bleke bloemen and bleke bene, reeds verdorden, door het groen opdoemen, stevig - gewreven...** These effects sometimes reappear in our English versions: "pale/livid/faded flowers", "long pale legs", "slightly shrivelled" (which works visually) and we can congratulate the authors of these finds.

Sometimes a poem will give rise to a wide variety of close translations, free versions, paraphrases and imitations. Here, on the contrary, it has inspired a high degree of faithfulness to its actual wording and form. Even Richard Lush has been quite modest in asserting his right to produce a poetic English text, though his language is a little denser and his rhythm a little more marked (with a regular metre one need not insist on it so much). Maria Jacobs has taken the opposite tack on the question of metre, insisting on regularity, and the others have come as close to that as a faithful translation of the content would let them. This latter consideration, which has been overriding, tends to rule out great success in reproducing sound patterns, though all our translators have achieved some good results on this score; it has ruled out rhyme entirely. Total success being most likely impossible in the translation of poetry, everyone has to make tradeoffs of this kind.

The editor won't let me call this article "Five Idiots." None the less it is an occupation not all the world can understand, to attempt, for no reward except satisfaction, to reproduce a poem in another language. And so again I thank the authors of our five versions, and congratulate them on their successes.