

## WATSON KIRKCONNELL'S TRANSLATION OF VONDEL: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION<sup>1</sup>

Beert Verstraete  
Acadia University

The late Watson Kirkconnell's translations of three major biblical dramas by Vondel — *Lucifer*, *Adam in Ballingschap*, and *Samson of Heilige Wraeck* — represent only a small portion of his total enormous output of verse-translations from a prodigiously wide range of European literatures, both ancient and modern.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, when one considers how little Dutch literature has been traditionally known and appreciated in the English-speaking world, his translations of these plays constitute a very notable achievement in the eyes of anyone keenly interested in the promotion of Dutch literature beyond its narrowly circumscribed linguistic boundaries. It was quite fitting, therefore, that in May 1981 CAANS signified its appreciation of Professor Kirkconnell's contribution to Netherlandic studies by presenting a commemorative scroll in his honour to Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where he served as president from 1948 to 1984; the scroll is on display, along with numerous other honorific insignia from all over Europe and the Americas, in the Watson Kirkconnell Room at the Acadia University Library which houses his library and papers.

This paper is focussed upon the literary qualities of Professor Kirkconnell's Vondel translations, with particular concentration on his translation of *Lucifer*, which is probably the best known of Vondel's biblical dramas and which has, over the past century, received a few other translations into English, including the translation by Leonard Charles Van Noppen published in New York in 1898 and a lesser known translation by Jehancir Mody which appeared in his study *Vondel and Milton*, published in Bombay, India, in 1942.<sup>3</sup> These two other translations (samples of which are reproduced in the appendix) supply the reader with a useful base of comparison in making an evaluation of Professor Kirkconnell's work.

The translations of *Lucifer* and *Adam in Ballingschap* appeared in *The Celestial Cycle* published in 1952 by the University of Toronto Press.<sup>4</sup> This work, to which Kirkconnell devotes a separate chapter in his 1967 autobiography, *A Slice of Canada*,<sup>5</sup> is a massive work of scholarship, tracing the themes of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in world literature; it provides a descriptive catalogue of all the significant analogues in the Euro-

pean literatures and offers translations of the major analogues, including Vondel's two tragedies and also a Latin drama, *Adamus Exul* (Adam in Exile), published in 1602 by the young Hugo Grotius and drawn upon by Vondel for his *Adam in Ballingschap*. The translation of *Samson of Heilige Wraeck* appeared in Professor Kirkconnell's *That Invincible Samson*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 1964.<sup>6</sup> This work is organized along similar lines as *The Celestial Cycle*, tracing the theme of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in world literature by means of a descriptive catalogue and offering translations of the major analogues.

Professor Kirkconnell's work as a translator of Vondel should be set in the context of his professed principles of good translation (especially verse-translation) to which he adhered throughout his long and productive career. In the introduction to his *European Elegies*, a collection of superb and highly acclaimed verse translations made by himself of lyric poems from more than fifty European literatures and published in 1928, marking his quite phenomenal entry into the exacting discipline of verse translation, Kirkconnell offers some lengthy reflections on this art.<sup>7</sup> The final paragraph sums up his main principles:

The translator must cope with a complex incantation of verbal cadences in another language; he must consider the meaning and the imaginative significance of the original; and above all he must seek to communicate the power of emotional experience. The deficiencies and idiosyncrasies of English render the adequate reproduction of the incantation almost impossible; a literal rendering of phrase and figure may result in dish-water insipidity; but if the translator is inspired with the emotion of the original, or better still reinforces it with analogous experience of his own, he can trust to the genuine sincerity of his emotion to produce work of value.<sup>8</sup>

This statement was meant to apply principally to the translation of lyric poetry. In the chapter on verse-translation in his autobiography, from which we quote this passage, Professor Kirkconnell alludes to the fact

that it was his special personal situation, namely the death of his wife in childbirth in 1925, that lent such a powerful emotional inspiration to the composition of the *European Elegies*, which was dedicated to her memory.<sup>9</sup> However, such inspiration no longer applied to the work of verse translation he undertook subsequently: "The impulse of kindred emotion was gone, and in any case I had come to realize that emotion was not enough."<sup>10</sup> This was especially true because he was now beginning to tackle quite different verse-forms such as narrative verse or verse drama. Kirkconnell recalls that, in order to obtain a firmly grounded proficiency in verse-translation, it was necessary for him to acquire a thorough mastery of the rules and principles of metrics and versification that had been developed in the history of English literature; and that, for this reason, he made a close study of the great poets, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Dryden, and Byron.<sup>11</sup> Professor Kirkconnell always remained rather conservative as a verse-translator and was quite critical of the freer and looser style of translation pioneered in the English-speaking world by Ezra Pound. In the same chapter on verse-translation, he refers with approval to the three major postulates of translation that were put forth by Alexander Fraser Tytler in his *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, which he read to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1790. These are: a) the translation must not omit any part of the original; b) the style and manner of the translation must reproduce those of the original; and c) the translation should have all the ease of the original poetry.<sup>12</sup> But of the methodology of translation espoused by Ezra Pound and his school, Kirkconnell speaks as follows: "In this new school, Tytler's first two principles are tossed out of the window and the primary aim is to produce a substantially new poem, demonstrating the brilliance of the 'translator' but not necessarily reproducing the meaning or the manner of the original."<sup>13</sup> Kirkconnell's ideal of verse-translation, indeed of all literary translation, may be best summed up by the phrase 'faithfulness to the original'. Such a fidelity to the original text, of course, should not be confused with literal translation, which will frequently do violence to the target-language, especially if that language is very different from the source-language in its linguistic and literary characteristics and in its socio-cultural setting, as is the case, for instance, with English and classical Latin. Even between English and Dutch, especially the seventeenth-century baroque Dutch of Vondel, the dissimilarities are sufficiently great to rule out any possibility of literal or at any rate fairly close translation that has the ease of original poetry.

However, while Kirkconnell can be called fairly conservative in his methodology as a verse-translator, his work does certainly reflect one of the most noteworthy and, in my judgment, genuinely progressive changes that has taken place in the theory and practice of verse-translation in the course of this century, namely the large-scale abandonment of the highly archaic poetic idiom which was *de rigueur* in the English-speaking world for such a long period of time. This change was undoubtedly the effect of the radical and far-reaching developments that took place in the style and manner of English poetry during the first half of this century. As a classicist, I see the fact of a new, more contemporary idiom of translation most strikingly demonstrated in the great outpouring of fresh translations that have been made, for the past half century or so, of the Greek and Roman classics: compare, for instance, the translations of Greek tragedy by Gilbert Murray early in this century<sup>14</sup> with almost any translation that has been made over the past few decades — one can indeed speak here of a revolution in verse translation. Kirkconnell does not entirely abandon the older poetic idiom, but his language is generally less archaic than that of Van Noppen and Mody.

As I have already indicated, Professor Kirkconnell attached great importance to the verse translator's technical mastery of all the metrical resources available in the target language, and in the chapter on verse translation in his autobiography, he discusses at length the considerable challenge in finding suitable renderings for the wide variety of metrical principles and structures he encountered in his source-languages.<sup>15</sup> Although he does not explain in detail his decision to render the large majority of Vondel's French-style alexandrine couplets in blank verse, he implies that a use of the original metrical scheme would have been too constricting for his translation.<sup>16</sup> His choice of blank verse was, I believe, a sound one. The use of rhyming couplets in English slips too easily into creating a ballad-like effect which is not always appropriate for narrative verse and even less appropriate for verse tragedy. When used with great skill and verve, as, for instance, by Alexander Pope in his *The Rape of the Lock* and *Essay on Man*, the heroic couplet can be effective stylistically as a device of wit and pointedness, but in most narrative verse and verse drama such a literary effect is not called for in any sustained manner. In Vondel's rhymed alexandrines, the rhyme functions as a purely formal rhythmic device contributing to the requisite stately flow of the language in both dialogue and monologue. Such a rhythmic flow

is most simply and effectively achieved in English by the use of blank verse, and thus it is not surprising that, since the Elizabethan period, blank verse has been the preferred medium for epic and tragic poetry.

In the choruses, in which it is important to reproduce something of the stanzaic structure and hymnic intonation of the original, Professor Kirkconnell has done well to use a variety of metrical schemes and to reproduce Vondel's stanzaic patterns, which at times follow the strophe, antistrophe, and epode sequence typical of the chorus in classical Greek tragedy.

In general, I would judge that it is the rhythmic flow and vigour which represents the most pleasing quality of Kirkconnell's translations. The poetic diction and idiom are generally felicitous, but there are times in *Lucifer* when I prefer the renderings by Van Noppen or Mody, as Kirkconnell's translation seems somewhat flat.

It is worth emphasizing that Professor Kirkconnell has valiantly resisted the great temptation of making Vondel sound like Milton. Both Van Noppen and Mody are at times guilty of this mannerism, especially the latter. The Miltonic epic style, characterized among others by a pervasive Latinism of idiom and syntax, becomes in less skillful hands a ponderous affectation. In his autobiography's chapter on the Milton projects, Kirkconnell rightly heaps ridicule on a particularly bad nineteenth century translation of Grotius' *Adamus Exul* which is full of this pseudo-Miltonic artifice.<sup>17</sup> Kirkconnell's Vondel translations are free from any affectation and overwriting; they bear the unmistakable stamp of a skilled and experienced verse-translator.

The reader may compare the merits of Kirkconnell's, Van Noppen's and Mody's Vondel translations by examining their respective renderings of a passage from Act I of *Lucifer* where Beelzebub pictures the tempting beauties of the Garden of Eden, especially its luscious fruit.<sup>18</sup>

Vondel, *Lucifer*, Act I (Verwey edition, 1987)  
(Beelzebub speaking)

Ik zie de goude bladen,  
Met perlen van de lucht, den zilvren dauw, geladen,  
Hoe lieflijk riekt dit loof, dat zijne verf behoudt!  
Hoe gloeit dit vrolijk ooft van karmozijn, en goud!  
't Waar jammer zo men dit ontwijdde met de handen.  
't Gezicht bekoort den mond. Wie zou niet watertanden  
Naar aardse lekkernij? Hij walgt van onzen dag,  
En hemels mann', dit 't ooft der aarde plukken mag,  
Men zou ons Paradijs om Adams hof verwensen,

't Geluk der Engelen moet wijken voor de mensen.

Translation by Leonard Charles Van Noppen (1898)

I see the golden leaves, all laden with  
Ethereal pearls, the sparkling silvery dew.  
What sweet perfume exhale those radiant leaves  
Of tint unfading! How alluring glows  
That pleasant fruit with crimson and with gold!  
'Twere pity to pollute it with the hands.  
The eye doth tempt the mouth. Who would not lust  
For earthly luxury? He loathes our day  
And food celestial, who the fruit may pluck  
Of Earth. One would for Adam's garden curse  
Our Paradise. the bliss of Angels fades  
In that of man.

Translation by Jehancir Mody (1942)

Do I not see the golden leaves aglint  
With orient pearls, the gemmy dew?  
Hesperian gilds the fadeless leaves that spill  
Breath odoriferous! How gorgeous still  
The crimson fruit with burnished rind of gold!  
What if its grace be shed ev'n as we hold  
It in our hands? These earthly dainties tempt  
Angelic palate sore. He feels contempt  
For our ambrosial food and balmy air,  
Who earthly fruit may pluck! We Eden fair  
Accept for Paradise, and Adam's bliss  
Makes pale the bliss of Heav'n.

Translation by Watson Kirkconnell (1952)

I see the golden leaves,  
Soft with ethereal pearls, the silver dew.  
How lovely smells the bright-hued foliage!  
Here glows the laughing fruit of red and gold!  
'Twere shame to desecrate it with one's hand.  
Its aspect tempts the mouth. Who would not lust  
For these terrestrial luxuries? He would spurn  
Our manna, who could pluck the fruits of earth.  
For Adam's court, we'd curse our Paradise:  
Th' Angelic bliss must yield to that of man.

#### NOTES

<sup>17</sup>This article is based on a paper presented at the annual meeting of CAANS at the University of Windsor in May 1988.

<sup>18</sup>For a complete conspectus of Watson Kirkconnell's translations and other writings, see J. R. C. Perkin and

James B. Snelson, *Morning in His Heart: The Life and Writings of Watson Kirkconnell*, Hantsport: Lancelot Press, for Acadia University Library 1986.

<sup>3</sup>*Vondel's Lucifer*, translated by Leonard Charles Van Noppen, New York & London: Continental Publishing Co., 1898; Jehancir P.R. Mody, *Vondel and Milton*, Bombay: K. & J. Cooper Educational Publishers, 1942. A fresh translation of *Lucifer*, written by Noel Clark, was used for a performance in London, England in the summer of 1987, but unfortunately, has not been published as yet.

<sup>4</sup>Watson Kirkconnell, *The Celestial Cycle*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952.

<sup>5</sup>Watson Kirkconnell, *A Slice of Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Acadia University, 1967, ch. 17, "The Milton Project."

<sup>6</sup>Watson Kirkconnell, *That Invincible Samson*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

<sup>7</sup>Watson Kirkconnell, *European Elegies*, Ottawa, Graphic Publishers, 1928. For a detailed discussion of Kirkconnell's methodology of verse translation, see the excellent article by J.R.C. Perkin in *The Journal of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association* 5 (1983), 16-32.

<sup>8</sup>*European Elegies*, 24.

<sup>9</sup>*A Slice of Canada*, 71.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>For critical evaluation, including T.S. Eliot's acerbic comments, of Gilbert Murray's translations of Greek tragedy, see Duncan Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM 1866-1957*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 195-200.

<sup>15</sup>*A Slice of Canada*, 71ff.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>18</sup>The Dutch text is taken from Vondel: *Volledige Dichtwerken en Oorspronkelijk Proza*, ed. Albert Verwey, Amsterdam: H. J. W. Brecht, 1937. For a sample of (generally favourable) Dutch critical reaction to Kirkconnell's *The Celestial Cycle* and *That Invisible Samson*, including the translations of Vondel, see the reviews by W.A.P. Smit in *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 1954, 111-114 and 1985, 337-340.