THE TRANSLATABILITY OF POETRY

Henrietta ten Harmsel and Martin Bakker
Calvin College
presentation and commentary by
Basil D. Kingstone, University of Windsor

Like our sister journal *Dutch Crossing*, we are greatly interested in the translation of Dutch and Flemish poetry, and we have published a good deal of it,[1] sometimes in three languages (Dutch, English, French). In 1981 we carried a discussion of this exercise by Adrian van den Hoven and myself.[2] In addition, at many of the annual Learned Societies conferences, CAANS has had a poetry translation workshop, and more than once we have published the versions presented there, with a commentary.[3] And lastly, papers delivered at these conferences may also be about translation.

I am happy to offer our readers one such paper, or more rightly a joint presentation by the well-known translator Henrietta ten Harmsel and her colleague Martin Bakker, made to the conference held at the University of Windsor, looking afresh at this topic. They did so with an example in hand, namely the sonnet "Hij droech onse smerten" by Jacobus Revius (1586-1658), comparing the original with an English version by Prof. ten Harmsel. Both are on the next page.

Martin Bakker, in the most friendly spirit, made the following comments:

Rather than to try to answer the question whether translating poetry is possible or not, it appears that one has to conclude that translating poetry is both possible and impossible depending on one's definition of the term.

According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, "to translate" means to express the sense of a word, a sentence or a book in another language. The word "poetry" is conspicuously absent in this mini-series of literary terms. Added to the list of three, the definition of "to translate poetry" would be "to express the sense of a poem in another language". I assume that that is indeed what the translator of a poem always tries to do: to express the sense of a poem in another language, in this case to express the sense of Revius' poem "Hij droech onse smerten" in English.

There seems to be a logical order in the words given in the definition in the C.O.D.: a word, a sentence, a whole book. To translate a word seems, generally speaking, a relatively easy task, i.e. as long as the word does not appear in a literary context. Placed in a literary context, even the simplest looking word can become a big problem for a translator. Marga Minco called one of her latest books *De Val*. "Val" in Dutch means both "Fall" and "Trap" in English. It seems to me next to impossible to translate that title in such a way that the "sense" of the

HY DROECH ONSE SMERTEN

T'en sijn de Joden niet, Heer Jesu, die u cruysten,
Noch die verradelijck u togen voort gericht,
Noch die versmadelijck u spogen int gesicht,
Noch die u knevelden, en stieten u vol puysten,

T'en sijn de crijchs-luy niet die met haer felle vuysten
Den rietstock hebben of den hamer opgelicht,
Of het vervloecte hout op Golgotha gesticht,
Of over uwen rock tsaem dubbelden en tuyschten:

Ick bent, ô Heer, ick bent die u dit heb gedaen,
Ick ben den swaren boom die u had overlaen,
Ick ben de taeye streng daermee ghy ginct gebonden,

De nagel, en de speer, de geessel die u sloech,
De bloet-bedropen croon die uwen schedel droech:
Want dit is al geschiet, eylaes! om mijne sonden.

HE BORE OUR GRIEFS

No, it was not the Jews who crucified,
Nor who betrayed you in the judgment place,
Nor who, Lord Jesus, spat into your face,
Nor who with buffets struck you as you died.

No, it was not the soldiers fisted bold
Who lifted up the hammer and the nail,
Or raised the cursed cross on Calvary's hill,
Or, gambling, tossed the dice to win your robe.

I am the one, O Lord, who brought you there,
I am the heavy cross you had to bear,
I am the rope that bound you to the tree,

The whip, the nail, the hammer, and the spear,
The blood-stained crown of thorns you had to wear:
It was my sin, alas, it was for me.

Dutch word is expressed. Also a prose text can cause problems: Harry Mulisch's *De Aanslag* (The Assault) begins with the sentence "Ver, ver weg in de tweede wereldoorlog;" the translator begins the prologue with: "Far, far back during the Second World War," obviously missing the important trick of combining the dimensions of time and space into one phrase: "ver *weg* in de tijd." Obviously the English translation should have been something like "Far, far away," or "way, way back...", etc.

Also the cultural context in which a given word, sentence, book or poem is placed can influence its "sense," making it very difficult to translate: the word "friendship," for instance, has a different meaning for Dutch and American users, simply because the two cultures concerned and thus human relationships and concepts like "friendship" are different. This probably accounts for the fact that certain authors are quite popular in one language but not at all appreciated in another. Examples of this seem to be writers like Campert and from an older period van Schendel.

I think few people would deny that poetry is the most complex form of literary expression and therefore the most difficult to translate. In a poem a poet expresses something by means of a complex of elements that combine and interrelate in a manner that is so unique that changing one word, or even changing the position of one word, causes a change in the total effect, i.e. the sense of the poem. Translating a poem theoretically perfectly, i.e. rewriting it in a different language, in my opinion, causes a change that forces a person to speak of two different poems that at best have certain elements in common, but are different in many other respects. In that sense poetry is untranslatable. Elements or components that cannot be transposed are rhyme, usually metre and rhythm, puns, and imagery expressed by means of contrast, hyperbole and other figures of speech. In most cases the sound of even the simplest words is different in different languages; and sound is an indispensable element of poetry.

I would like to assume that the poem "Hy droech onse smerten" has been translated perfectly, theoretically speaking. I would then like to look at some of the more obvious changes that the translator had to make of necessity and to determine what the result was for the poem the translator called "He Bore Our Griefs."

A few words about the Dutch poet would probably not be out of place. Jacob Revius lived from 1586 to 1658. This makes him a contemporary of some very reputable Dutch poets such as Vondel, Hooft and Huygens. Revius is considered to be the most outspoken exponent, a rather intolerant and very high-spirited representative, of a certain form of Calvinism. He is said to have had two main passions: his religion and his country. He is also said to have been totally convinced that the God of Calvinist Holland of the 17th century was the only true God and Holland the only good Christian nation. He was, in fact, quite fanatical in both religious and national matters. These qualities make him, at least potentially, a writer of good baroque poetry. He collected his numerous poems in a book he called *Overijsselsche Sangen en Dichten*, published in

1630, just before Vondel wrote his *Gysbrecht van Amstel* and some time after Hooft wrote *Granida* and *Gerard van Velsen.* Revius' book consists of two parts, the first being a kind of history of God's kingdom on earth, beginning with creation, followed by a description of the history of the Jews, the birth of Christ, the development of Christianity and, finally, the day of judgement. The dominating theme concerns the dogmas of sin and redemption and Christ's suffering. "Hy droech onse smerten" is typical of this group of poems. As a poem it is a classical example of a traditional sonnet, more specifically a baroque sonnet. In Dutch literary terms this means that its most prominent quality is its dynamism, a quality that in 17th century poetry, more particularly 17th century sonnets, is expressed by means of very effective sound expressions, a lofty rhythm, suggestive word choice, hyperbolic imagery, a forceful and loaded sentence structure, exclamations, rhetorical questions, puns, and paradoxes. Quite a number of these qualities are found in "Hy droech onse smerten." For modern readers the "sense" of this poem is conveyed by the following qualities (I cannot judge what impression it made on readers in Revius' own time):

1. *The archaic language*, which is apparent from:

a) the spelling, for example of each of the four words in the title and of about every second word in the rest of the poem. A few obvious examples are smerten/ smarten; Jesu/ Jezus; cruysten/ kruisigden; togen/ sleepten; versmadelyck/ smadelijk; gericht/ gerecht; stieten/ staken or sloegen; spogen/ spuwden; crijchsluy/ soldaten; ghy/ u; ginct/ ging; many more could be quoted. Some of the words are spelled differently and others have become completely obsolete in the form we see here. The translation is in modern English which constitutes a fundamental difference between the two poems and, in my opinion, a significant loss because much of the power and value or meaning of the poem is related to the archaic language. Words like smerten, togen, spogen, crijchsluy, puysten, taeye streng, geschiet, and eylaes are much more dramatic than their modern Dutch and English counterparts: they are different words with different meanings. A word like "crijchsluy," for example, is very different from "soldaten" and "soldiers". I can believe that "crijchsluy" crucified Christ; "soldaten," i.e. the men who now make up the Dutch army, wouldn't have done it, or, anyway, didn't do it. "Crijchsluy" were dressed differently, spoke differently, in short, were different people. What I am saying is that the word "crijchsluy" brings the action closer to the real action of the crucifixion, thus making the poem much more dramatic. A similar argument can be made for words like "rietstock," "nagels," etc.

b) Special mention under this heading should be made of the archaic double negative in Dutch, which Vondel and other poets of the period did not use any more, although it was quite common in medieval texts. "T'en sijn ... niet" in lines 1 and 5, i.e. the first lines of the two quatrains, is a complete construction, each negative a half of a whole, whereas "No ... Not" in the translation constitutes a repetition of a negative and has a

value and meaning which differ considerably from the Dutch construction.

c) Two examples of archaic grammatical forms are "haer" instead of "hun" in line 5 and "daermee" instead of "waarmee" in line 11.

2. *Sound Expression.*

a) The Dutch verse is in regular alexandrines with the caesura in each line neatly in the middle between the 3rd and 4th metrical foot, ed. "Noch die u knevelden,// en stieten u vol puysten." This metre is considered to be typical of Dutch 17th century baroque poetry; it was used by Vondel and Hooft, and a century or so later by Bilderdijk who became quite famous or infamous, depending on one's taste, for the use of this kind of metre. Baroque poetry, which is dramatic by definition, owes much of its effect to the use of the alexandrines. The English translation is in less regular pentameters and thus seem to me to be less dramatic, or at least of a different quality, and to convey a different atmosphere. The very titles of the two poems concerned demonstrate this difference, the Dutch title consisting of three trochees, the English of two iambic verse feet.

b) *Rhyme*
Much can be said about the rhyme in the two versions of the poem or the two poems concerned:

i. Final rhyme. The rhyme scheme in the Dutch poem is very regular; for the two quatrains the scheme is abba abba; and for the sextet it is ccd eed, which makes for a very tight, solidly constructed sonnet typical of classical poetry. In the English poem, the translator has succeeded in preserving the rhyme scheme in the first quatrain, which is thus also abba, but in the second quatrain the transposition of the rhyme scheme is a little less successful, if I may call it that: the scheme is still basically "omarmend," but on new rhymes (cddc). In the sextet the scheme is dde in the first tercet and rather irregular in the last tercet.

ii. Middle rhyme. Revius' poem is quoted in some school books as an example of a poem using middle rhyme, a poetic technique quite common in 17th century Dutch poetry. I am referring to the words "verradelijck" in line 2 and "versmadelijck" in line 3 and to "togen" and "spogen" in the same lines. It binds the lines together, draws attention to the words and the actions they stand for and strengthens the construction of the poem as a whole and, more specifically, of the first quatrain. This element was lost in the English translation, which does not mean to say that the translator did not compensate for it in other ways.

iii. Alliteration. There are three good examples of this in the Dutch poem. I am referring to Joden/ Jesu in line 1, versmaedelijck/ spogen/ gesicht in line 3 and especially to "felle vuysten" in line 5. In the English poem there is a very effective case of alliteration in line 7 which is

therefore, for this and other reasons, which I will mention later, a very good poetic line.

iv. Front rhyme. This is found in equal quantities and with the same effects in the Dutch and English poems: Noch/ Noch/ Noch in Dutch became Nor/ Nor/ Nor in English, etc.

3. Imagery

If I include under this heading realistic and hyperbolic or dramatic descriptions of all sorts, I think I can say that the poem in its translated form suffered most in this respect. This is especially regrettable in view of the fact that it is this element that accounts primarily for the baroque quality of these kinds of sonnets, and Revius' poem is especially strong in this. In line 2 of the Dutch poem we read that Jesus was *dragged treacherously* before "'t gericht" (the law). In the English version Jesus is betrayed in "the judgement place." There is no physical action at all, let alone violent physical action such as in the Dutch poem. Obviously this constitutes a serious loss. In line 3 of the Dutch poem we read that they (the "crijchsluy") "versmaedelijck" (scornfully) spat in Jesus' face. In the English version the adverb, the word that expresses the emotion which accompanies the action and which, it seems to me, is so essential to the "message," is unfortunately missing. In line 4 we read that the soldiers, or rather the "crijchsluy" first *tied* or *bound* (knevelden) Jesus and then beat him till he was full of welts -- plenty of action in other words. The description of the action makes this quatrain very powerful, and as dynamic as the best in 17th century poetry, reminiscent of famous baroque paintings by Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Rubens and Rembrandt. The tying of Christ is absent in the English version and the beating does not result in welts, which means that that visual aspect was not transposed. Instead we read that the soldiers struck Jesus "as he died." This seems to me the most serious deviation from the Dutch text in the whole poem, obviously performed in an attempt to convey the "sense" of the Dutch poem. (Or maybe as a result of an attempt to find a word that rhymed with "crucified" - which is quite in order, of course.)

Line 6 in the Dutch poem is quite weak because the grammar really suffered: probably in order to get the caesura in the right place the finite verb "hebben" was put in a very unnatural place in the sentence. The corresponding English line does not have that problem,but the noun "rietstock" was not translated, which is a pity because once again its presence makes the action much more visible, tangible almost. Line 7 is the best line in the English poem, firstly because of the alliteration on three words: "cursed/ cross/ Calvary"; secondly because of the pronunciation of "cursed" which thus becomes the only more or less archaic word in the poem and finally I find the word "to raise" (a cross) much better than "stichten." I doubt that the word was found very effective even by contemporary readers, although the word does mean something like "to set up" or "to erect" -- obviously "to raise" is much more descriptive. In line 8 the word "tsaem" is also missing in the English translation. The soldiers gambling "tsaem" (together) form a

group in opposition to Jesus whose loneliness is thus accentuated in the original poem. The words "tuyschten" (twisten - to quarrel) in line 8 and "sloech" in line 12, both very active or dynamic words, also have not been translated at all.

The various lines of the sestet, and thus this part of the poem as a whole, seem to have been more successfully translated than the octave, except for the rhyme which has already been discussed. The word "bloet-bedropen" in line 13 became "blood-stained" in the English version, a word which conveys no motion at all, in fact creates the impression as though some time had already gone by since the action, and is therefore in my opinion less effective in terms of baroque poetry than the Dutch. Something similar can be said about "geschiet" in the final line, a word that is much more active, or at least less passive, than the comparable construction in the English poem, which does not convey any action. We may also notice in this context that the very first verb in the Dutch poem, "sijn," is rendered in English by the past tense. I fully realize that the English verb in the present tense would sound quite awkward; this does not change the fact that the present tense serves to create the impression that the poem relates to the Jews of all times, including our own, and that the people who "did it," who crucified Jesus, are we. The present tense, in other words, brings home the accusation much more forcefully than the past tense in the English poem.

4. *Word position*

As a result of the character of the construction of Dutch sentences in general, no fewer than nine of the fourteen lines that comprise a sonnet end in verbs in the Dutch poem; in the English version this is the case in only four lines. I would think that having verbs, especially such dynamic words as those in the Dutch poem, at the end of verse lines, i.e. in what in Dutch literary terms is often called a "gereleveerde" (accentuated) position, is undoubtedly conducive to the dynamic quality of the poem as a whole. More or less the same can be said about the place of the word "niet" in Revius' poem. The octave makes a negative statement: "It was not the Jews ...," in contrast to the positive statement of the sextet. The usual place of the "niet" would be after the verb: "T'en sijn *niet* de Joden..." The same applies to line 5: "T'en sijn de crijchsluy niet ..." The final line of the English version contains an important deviation from the Dutch original: I think the final "me" in a poem in which a man points an accusing finger at himself must be regarded positively were it not for the "for" just before it. The Dutch "om" implies "guilt" for the death of Christ: Christ was crucified *because of* my sins; the translation *for me* seems to suggest that Christ allowed himself to be crucified *in my interest*, which may be correct but is not the fact that is stressed in the Dutch poem. In a way it makes "I" the object rather than the cause of Christ's suffering. This deviation may be considered an improvement or a loss, depending on one's point of view, but it certainly accounts for a departure from the original, and could perhaps even be regarded as a conscious or unconscious expression of a more modern, 20th century, individualistic form of Calvinism and can serve as a final indication of

the dangers involved in transposing a three-hundred-year old poem from one cultural ethos into another.

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The foregoing comments by Martin Bakker are most interesting, and before pursuing our discussion further I will take the liberty of summarizing his remarks. He lists the features of this 17th century poem that he, as a 20th century reader, wishes to see preserved. The first, as we might expect, is the archaism of word forms, including the double negative "en... niet." The second is the sound, specifically the sonnet rhyme scheme, internal rhyme, alliteration and anaphora (repetition of words at the beginning of lines or stanzas). The third is the imagery, which is less violent and physical in the English sonnet, at least compared with the octave of the Dutch one. And the fourth is the importance of the choice of rhyme words. On most scores (but not on anaphora) he finds the English version wanting.

If we turn back to the 1981 article in this Journal, in which Adrian van den Hoven pointed out the shortcomings of the English and French versions of a poem by Slauerhoff and one by Marsman - poems which did not even pose problems of being far removed from us in time - we shall see that his criticisms were very similar. On the score of rhyme, Dr. van den Hoven had special reason to be critical: the translated versions dispensed with it. He also pointed out the loss of sound effects, of pseudo-poetic language, and of the effects produced by so manipulating the syntax as to place key words in strong prosodic positions, including the placing of verbs denoting action as rhyme words. And, just as Prof. Bakker speaks of cases where the translator had to "compensate [...] in other ways," Dr. van den Hoven observed that one must needs, since one is creating a new but equivalent poem, find different but equivalent devices in the target language. Bearing these things in mind, we can now look at Prof. Bakker's strictures on the version before us.

On the score of archaisms, of course, opinions may differ. A translator may chose to capture an archaic style or to create a modern one; the former is difficult and most translators choose not to, but it has been done, and there is room in the receptor literary canon for such creations. In this case, a sonnet in the style of the Metaphysical poets is perfectly conceivable. It seems worth saying, however, that Revius was painting a perfectly contemporary picture on which to meditate. Thus "crijchsluy" was the ordinary term in his day for soldiers; paintings of his time show them in contemporary armour and not in Roman armour. To be sure, a professional soldier in the Thirty or Eighty Years' War was necessarily more hardbitten than a present-day conscript, who might well regard as unlawful an order to publicly execute a man who was not a criminal, merely inconvenient to the state. But the English word for him has always been "soldier." As for the English double negative "no, not...", I agree that it is not equivalent to the archaic Dutch "en ... niet," but I think that the translator is rather emphasizing the sonnet's structure.

In the matter of sound, all the theorists are agreed that it can seldom or never be preserved. André Lefevere[4] remarks of an attempt to translate Catullus' Poem 64 and keep all the sounds of the original that some of the time it is close to them but is gibberish, and the rest of the time it is comprehensible but not faithful to them.

I mention this great Flemish theorist and practitioner of literary translation at this point because the work I am referring to, his 1975 study *Translating Poetry, Seven Strategies and a Blueprint*, remains the most challenging book there is on this subject. Challenging and at first sight surprising, for we might suppose that the most desirable feature in a translation, the one which will ensure faithfulness, is literalness. Not so. Firstly, it is impossible; secondly, translators who think that is their aim are in fact liable to replace literary values of the original, at random, with values of their own; and thirdly, because the translated version is intended to delight people who speak only (say) English and not the language of the original, and it should therefore read like English. Neither literalness nor the other six strategies (phonemic, metrical and prose translations, rhymed poetry, blank verse, free version) are satisfactory once they become goals, because they all concentrate on the words of the original text at the expense of the other elements.

For one has to consider also the style, and above all the elements of time, place and tradition - in other words, the literary, social and cultural background that produced the original treatment of the theme, that explain why the poet wove some variations on it and not others. One has to consider these things in order to decide which of the elements unique to the original are essential to its structure - those you keep and explain - and which are not - those you replace with equivalents meaningful to one's readers. What one is doing, indeed, is reinterpreting for one's own time the theme interpreted by the original poet. To this end one has to weigh the "communicative value" of the words, phrases and images of the source text, that is to say, decide how far they are distinctive in that text, distortions of normal usage (of language, of the theme), and recreate these distortions. All this is necessary in order to interpret the theme so that it affects the reader the way the original interpretation affected its readers. It will be clear that the details - the precise wording, the rhyme, the rhythm, etc. - may be different.

If we apply this criterion of communicative value to the present translation, it may be that the detailed questions of differences of sound and vocabulary, and perhaps even the inevitably archaic quality of Revius' sonnet, come to seem secondary. What, we ask ourselves, is most strikingly original about this treatment of the theme of the Crucifixion? Of the features discussed by Martin Bakker, my own attention (and there is no way to avoid a subjective element in this; neither literary criticism nor translation is an exact science) is drawn to the insistence on the violence of the insult offered to the Son of God. As it happens, we have ready access to another English translation of this sonnet, by Christopher Levenson[5], which insists more on this violence. Hendrika Ruger

reminded us of it at our Windsor meeting, and I thank her, and thank the Netherlandic Press for permission to reproduce it here:

> It was not the Jews, o Lord, who crucified you,
> Who treacherously dragged you before the court,
> Nor who contemptuously spat into your face,
> Who pinioned you and struck you full of sores.
> It was not the soldiers who with their fierce fists
> Raised up against you the hammer or the scourge
> Or erected the cursed wood at Golgotha,
> Or, dicing together, haggled for your cloak.
> I am the man, O Lord, who did all this,
> I am the heavy tree that weighed you down,
> I am the tough rope with which you were bound,
> The nail, the spear, the whip that pierced and struck you,
> The blood-drenched crown you bore upon your skull,
> For this all happened, alas, because of my sins.

Of the differences between the two versions, I will mention only one. Henrietta ten Harmsel clearly considers that the sonnet form itself has communicative value (is an invariant, must be kept); whereas Levenson, as he himself says in his preface, keeps the rhyme schemes of the poems he translates only where they seem to him to "make the poems memorable," and he is above all concerned to "keep as much as possible of the flavour of the Dutch seventeenth century."

Martin Bakker, clearly, sees other features as having equally great communicative value. Perhaps he is reacting to the translation of this sonnet which he has known and revered since childhood, as he would to a modern version of the Bible: it is not the original (or not the Statenbijbel, or in my case not the Authorised or King James Version). True, and regrettable, but inevitable. It is the price paid for the introduction of a work into another language and another culture. But the reverse of this coin is that translated works take on a new life in the receptor culture, indeed they often found a new culture (as happened all over Europe at the Renaissance), generate other versions of the same original, inspire new genres, become intertexts in all the texts produced in that culture forever thereafter. And to make that transplanting as successful as possible, as Adrian van den Hoven remarked in the 1981 article I referred to above:

> The new rendition stands or 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 by Dutch literary standards, but as these poetic qualities are perceived by the informed reader of the target language (p.90).

We stand on the shore and see the frail craft sail off to the new world, and we may have every reason to worry if it is seaworthy, but we should

not forget what is solid about it and we should think of what it will achieve in its new home.

Notes

[1]*CJNS* I i p. 49 (Marsman); I ii p. 107-24 (Maria Jacobs) and p. 136-9 (Kees Snoek); II i p. 34 (Slauerhoff) and p. 72 (Marsman); II ii p. 91-2 (Kees Snoek, translated by the author); III i-ii p. 59-63; and see note 3.

[2]"Translating Poetry: Theory and Practice," *ibid.* II ii p. 77-90.

[3]*Ibid.* IV ii - V i p. 50-53 (on M. Vasalis' "De idioot in het bad"); V ii p. 62-70 (on Paul van Ostaijen's "Melopee" and Gerrit Achterberg's "Standbeeld").

[4]André Lefevere: *Translating Poetry, Seven Strategies and a Blueprint*, Assen: van Gorcum, 1975. I summarize here the second, "Prescriptive" chapter of his study.

[5]*Light of the World, an Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Religious and Occasional Poetry*, tr. Christopher Levenson, Windsor: Netherlandic Press, 1982, p. 45.