KOOS DALEY, ADAMS STATE COLLEGE

On Translating Huygens

Inspired by Huygens translations — in 1630 and 1633 — of some nineteen poems written by John Donne, I decided to try my hand at rendering some of Huygens work into English. Since my undergraduate days, I had struggled with and loved Donnes poetry, and Huygens sheer audacity in attempting to translate a man known for his profundity, his complex use of language, and his irony awakened in me an admiration for Huygens, a poet with whom I was not at all acquainted even though we shared the same language. I was not alone in my amazement that someone would even consider such an impossible task; upon hearing of Huygens endeavors, King Charles I is said to have exclaimed that "he could not believe that anyone could acquit himself of that task with credit." Huygens confidently replied that the King surely was unaware of the richness of the Dutch language "that can with ease and grace express the thoughts of people in various countries."[1] Equally conscious of the richness of my mother tongue and confident in my knowledge of my adopted language, I set out — albeit with trepidation — to render Huygens graceful verse into English. After a short introduction to Huygens, I offer three of Huygens religious sonnets followed by some reflections on the intricate process of poetic translation.

******

Born in The Hague in 1596, Huygens embodied the Dutch culture of the seventeenth century, an age often called Hollands Golden Age. It was the age that saw the fledgling Dutch nation come to maturity as a political power that would leave its stamp on all the corners of the world, the age of the great Dutch poets such as Vóndel, Huygens, Cats and Hooft and painters such as Rembrandt, Hals, Van Goyen, Vermeer and Steen, the age aptly characterized by J.H. Huizinga as the age of "wood and steel, pitch and tar, colour and ink, pluck and piety, fire and imagination."[2] Huygens was born in the springtime of the Republic, in the year that saw a treaty signed between France, England and The Dutch Republic which acknowledged the free Netherlands as a sovereign state; he died in its autumn in 1687 at the age of ninety, having contributed fullheartedly to his countrys greatness.

Politically, Huygens served his country as secretary to two generations of Princes of the House of Orange. An astute diplomat, he spoke several languages fluently and travelled extensively as secretary and translator to sensitive political missions. Huygens was a prolific poet, writing each day whether in the field with his Prince during the eighty year war in Spain or at home with his family enjoying some peace in a hectic life. A difficult poet, he stretched the limits of the Dutch language and wrote in a powerful and unusual style. Huygens loved language in all its complexities and possibiliities. Punning, exploiting, combining, experimenting, he wrote to awaken his readers to the pure excitement of being alive. His keen eye and razor-edged pen celebrate his own life and that of his fellow Dutch citizens: scolding and consoling, praising and attacking, crying and laughing. His secular poems hold up a mirror

in which the whole world, including himself, is reflected.

Huygens was a deeply religious man and celebrated his steadfast faith in the unfailing and free grace of God in a series of religious poems that belong among the finest European metaphysical poems written in the seventeenth century. His poems are metaphysical both on the level of language and on the level of content. Huygens employs a conversational tone, harsh language, startlingly abrupt questions and difficult comparisons. At the level of content Huygens explores what Warnke has termed "the insoluble contradictions between man as creature of sense and man as an immortal spirit, between the aimless flux of time and the changeless moment of eternity, between the transient beauty of earth and the permanent glories of heaven."[3] Within the framework of these wider concerns, Huygens also explored his personal relation as a believer to his God, a God he saw as merciful and steadfast in His love for him. He painted this relationship blending language with metaphor, conceit, paradox, irony, and wit in order to express the paradoxical basis of religion and the contradictory nature of himself as an always repentant sinner.

Nowhere is Huygens metaphysical pen so powerful and personal as in his sonnet sequence *Heilighe Daghen* (Holy Days), nine sonnets celebrating the important feast days of Christianity. He wrote the nine sonnets within a week, starting on New Year's Eve 1644 with a moving reflection on the Lord's Supper that he was to celebrate the next day; this sonnet, *sHeeren Avontmael* (The Lord's Supper), was to take the last place in the finished sequence. In his fine introduction to the poems, Strengholt proves the following order for the sequence: Sunday, New Year, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Christmas, and The Lord's Supper, an order coinciding with the original numbering in Huygens' own manuscript but far from clear since many of the early printings show different orderings.[4] Starting with Sunday, the always returning feast day, Huygens places Easter, Christ's triumph over physical and spiritual death, as the crucial central sonnet. He closes the sequence with "The Lord's Supper," the single most important expression of his faith. In 1645, three of the nine feast days celebrated occurred on the same day: New Year's day fell on a Sunday, the day that Huygens' Church celebrated one of its communion services. The sequence balances the tension between time and timelessness; the chronological progression through the calendar year is transcended by the cyclical nature of the sonnets that start and end with Sunday as the commemoration of the eternal renewal of God's grace.

Humility and faith are the cornerstones of Huygens' poetic voice, no matter in how complex and manipulative a manner he works within the medium of language. And even language is transcended by the only language that needs no translation, the only expression fitting to honor the mystery of the *Logos:* silence, as Huygens testifies in the sonnet celebrating the miraculous virgin birth. Huygens abruptly breaks his poetic line in the middle of a thought with an endstopping period and kneels down in silent adoration of the eternal Word made flesh: "En gaet niet voort, / mijn ziele, maeckt een end van dongerijmde Rijmen / ons beste seggen waer ootmoedelick beswijmen." (Do not go on, my soul, let unrhymed rhyming cease, Our best speech would be a humble fainting [12-14]). Honoring the spiritual ordering of the sonnets, I have translated the first, middle, and last of the nine sonnets, celebrating Sunday, Easter, and The Lords Supper.

1. Sondagh.

Is tSabbath dagh, mijn Ziel, of Sondagh? geen van

tween.

De Sabbath is voorbij met sijne dienstbaerheden:
En de sonn die ick sie scheen gisteren als heden.
Maer die ick niet en sie en schijnt niet soo se scheen.
Son, die ick niet en sie als door mijn sonden heen,
Soon Gods, die desen dagh het aerdrijk weer betreedden,
Fier als een bruijdegom ter loop-baen ingereden,
kSie Sondagh sonder end, door dijne Wonden heen.
tZij dan oock Sondagh nu, men maght Gods Soon-dagh noemen,
la, en Gods Soen-dagh toe. Maer laet ick ons verdoemen,
Waer ick van drijen gae ick vind ons inde Schuld.
God Son, God Soon, God Soen, hoe langh duert dijn geduld?
Hoe lange lijdt gij, Heer, dijn Soondagh, Soendagh, Sondagh,
Ondanckbaerlick verspilt, verspeelt, verspelt in Sond-dagh?

7. Ian. 1645.

1. Sunday[5]

Ist Sabbath day, my soul, or Sunday? Neither one.
The Sabbath is no more with its constricting chore:
And the sun I see today shines as it did before.
But thone I do not see shines not as it has done.
Sun, whom I only see through the sins that I begun,
Gods Son, who on this day dost visit earth once more,
Bright as a bridegroom who comes striding out of door,
Through thy Wounds I can see an endless shining Sun.
Even though tis Sunday now, Gods Son-day be its name.
Yes, and Gods Sum- day too. But let me give us blame,
No matter which of three, I find us in the wrong.
God Sun, God Son, God Sum, thy patience lasts how long?
How long dost suffer, Lord, thy Sonday, Sumday, Sunday,
Ungratefully mislayed, misplayed, misspelled in Sinday?

5. Paeschen.

Den Engel is voorbij: de grouwelicke Nacht
Der eerstgeborenen is bloedeloos verstreken:
Ons deuren zijn verschoont; soo warense bestreken
Met heiligh Paeschen-bloed, dat duitgelaten macht,
Die Pharaos kinderen en Pharao tonderbracht,
Doorgaens verschrickelick, verschrickt heeft voor het teeken.
Wij zijn door troode Meer de slauernij ontweken,
Aegypten buijtens reicks. Is all dingh volbracht?
Is tschip ter hauen in? Oh! midden in de baren,
De baren van ons bloed, veel holler dan dat meer.
Den Engel komt weerom, en tvlammighe geweer
Dreight niewen ondergang. Heer, heet hem ouer varen.
Merckt onser herten deur, o leew van Iudas Stamm,
En leert ons tijdelick verschricken voor een Lamm.

6. Ian. 1645.

5. Easter

The Angel hath passed by: the terrifying Night
Of the firstborn children hath bloodlessly been spent:
Our very doors are saved; they were struck to such extent
With holy Easter-blood, that all the discharged might,
Which brought Pharaohs children and Pharaoh to Deaths blight,
Fearsome in general, did fear the sign God sent.
We scaped through the Red Sea thraldoms imprisonment,
Outside of Egypts reach. Are all things done aright?
Is the ship safe into port? Oh! amongst the billow,
The billows of our blood, welling up much higher.
The Angel comes again, his damning sword afire
Threatens another death. Lord, tell him not to follow.
Mark the doors of our hearts, O lion of Judas Clan,
And teach us in good time to fear a Godly Lamb.

9. s Heeren Auondmael.

Is tweer dijn hooghe Feest, en ick weer van de gasten?

Maer, Heer, het bruijloftskleed daer in ick lest verscheen
Is ouer haluer sleet, jae ten gelijckter geen,
En ick sitt moedigh aen als of t mij puntigh pasten.
Hoe waer de wraeck besteedt, soo Ghij mij nu verrasten,
En uijtter deure dreeft in teewighe geween!
Noch borght ghij mij tgelagh, en, op Geloof alleen
En wat boetveerdigheids, en laet mijn ziel niet vasten.
Dits dan tboet-veerdigh Hert. maer tveerdigh gaet niet veer:
Tis geen begonnen werck. Wanneer wilt boetigh wesen
Voor nu, voor gisteren, en voor den tijd naer desen,
Eens boetigh voor altoos; en wanneer wilt Ghij t, Heer?
Is t altijds weer op niews, en altijd weer op t ouwe?
Oh dat mij tholl berouw eens endtelick berouwe!

Ult. die Anni 1644
prid. sacr. comm.

Est et haec nonnulla paenitentiae
species, ob hoc ipsum sibi displicere,
quod minus paeniteat scelerum.
Erasm. Exomolog.

9. The Lords Supper

Is it again thy feast, and I again thy guest?
But, Lord, the wedding suit in which I came before
Is now almost in rags, and looks like one no more,
But I sit proudly by as if it were my best.
How right thy vengeance, Lord, if thou caughtst me at last,
And threwst me out of doors into the eternal groan!
Yet thou still payst my debt, and on my Faith alone
And a bit of remorse, and save my soul its fast.
Thhearts ready for remorse. But readiness is short:
Its work not yet begun. When will it show its sorrow
Today, or yesterday, the day coming tomorrow,
Once rueful for always; when dost thou want it, Lord?
Must I always rue again, my old sins start anew?
Oh, let me at last repent my vain and hollow rue!

The last day of the year 1644
The day before the Holy Supper

This, too, is a kind of penance: to
disapprove of oneself because one has not enough remorse for ones misdeeds.

(Erasmus, *Exomologesis sive modus confitendi*)

Postscript

Questions about the possibility — or impossibility — of literary translations are surely an exercise in futility. Ever since that awesome, mythical moment of the confusion of tongues, we have had an urge to understand one another across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The act of translation illustrates the effort at once to uncover similarities in our shared human experience and to celebrate our cultural differences.

Why do I translate? Is it because I exist in the liminal space between my native Dutch tongue and my adopted American English speech, a shadowy figure marked by linguistic difference on either side of the threshold? And when did it happen that I lost the ability to speak my native language without an accent? Schopenhauer argues that "a complete mastery of another language has taken place when one is capable of translating not books but oneself into the other language, so that without losing ones own individuality one can immediately communicate in that language, and thereby please foreigners as well as ones countrymen in the same manner."[6] I would counter that such mastery is impossible without losing ones individuality since that is inextricably tied to ones cultural roots; one could ask whether such a translator is the foreigner or the countryman. I also deem such ability undesirable since we then lose the linguistic tension between words and concepts that dont have quite the same semantic equivalence; and it is this tension that excites us to the art of translation.

I chose to translate Huygens because of my admiration for my countryman who had the courage to translate John Donne. In

translating Huygens into English, I became acutely aware of all the difficulties inherent in translating poetry. No matter how well we think we know both the source and target languages, how do we carry across the finer poetic nuances such as assonance, rhythm, meter, rhyme, alliteration? We cannot but weaken the way the words play off each other, building up tension with puns, echoes, repetitions, and irony so that the poem becomes a time bomb, ticking away, waiting to explode whenever sensitive readers touch it. Translating such pulsating power must always risk a defusing, a watering down until the translated poem only gives off a small whimper, if anything at all.

Nevertheless, I have tried to infuse these translations with a bit of the original power. I have chosen to retain the slow-moving hexameter line of Huygens. After all these are serious reflections between Huygens, his soul, and his God. The poems abound with exact and weighty caesurae after crucial questions or statements, inviting the reader to pause momentarily and grasp the larger religious issues at hand. I have syntactically and rhythmically tried to emulate these. Also fitting to the mood of contemplation, and this is especially noteworthy in the sonnet "Sunday," is the weight Huygens gives to his lines by employing monosyllabic words that echo each other in puns and wordplay. I have tried to mirror this by relying on the Anglo-Saxon roots of English, the language that shared close linguistic ties with Dutch but that underwent earthshaking changes after the Norman conquest in 1066. Huygens himself defended the monosyllabic character of the Dutch language, a language that is loath to suffer any foreign borrowings. Translation into a language that sucks up multisyllabic foreign words like a sponge, is more difficult.

In his dedicatory poem to his Donne translations, Huygens developed a series of witty metaphors trying to illustrate the translational processes. Calling translations mere shadows of splendid bodies, he nevertheless rescues these shadows from total eclipse, arguing in rapid succession that although shadows are like the night, they are still daughters of light; although they are crooked, some of the original form remains; although they are dark and obscure, it is a poor reader who is not able to see through them; although they are cool, they hide — just like pepper — fire inside; although they are nothings, they are embodied nothings and like daydreams feed on reality. And although he invites the reader to share this meal "op schaduwen, op scheef, op swart, op koel, op niet" (of shadows, crookedness, black, cool, nothing),[7] he closes the poem with the humble reflection: "Mijn onmacht beefder voor" (I trembled in my impotence); I echo his sentiment.

NOTES

[1] Huygens, *De gedichten van Constantijn Huygens*, ed. J.A. Worp (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1893) VI: 338.

[2] J.H. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 104.

[3] Frank Warnke, *European Metaphysical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) 23.

[4] Leendert Strengholt, Introduction to Huygens *Heilighe Daghen* (Amsterdam: Buyten Schipperheijn, 1974). I have used this edition both for the text of the sonnets I have translated and for the excellent notes that Strengholt provides in explicating the seventeenth-century Dutch.

[5] For the translation of the Dutch "soendagh" as "Sumday"I am indebted to Frank Warnkes translation of this sonnet (included in *European Metaphysical Poetry*). Huygens puns with Sondagh — Soondagh — Sonddagh, three of which have English analogs: Sun — Son — Sin; Warnkes rendering of "sum" for "soen" (expiation or atonement) is happy indeed.

[6] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Language and Words," trans. Peter Mollenhauer, in *Theories of Translation*, eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 34.

[7] Huygens, *Gedichten*, II: 267-268.