

GREETINGS FROM THE GERMANIC GLORY-HOLE: On Translating the Poetry of P. C. Boutens

It is relatively easy to prove that translation is a virtual impossibility. The translation of one isolated poem, Boutens' 'Perelaar', into other Germanic languages - although first and second cousins - means excluding much valuable information. So much so, that the word-plant has been uprooted from its soil: Dutch culture in general, that of the early 1920s in particular, Boutens' earlier poetry and poems which he wrote and published at approximately the same time as the one under scrutiny.

In Boutens' case the translation of the poem from its original language, and the consequent lack of background knowledge, has a direct bearing on the use of vocabulary and imagery. Boutens tended to use certain everyday words extremely frequently - a good handful of these occur in 'Perelaar'¹ - and certain of these frequently used words reach a high-point in the collection which contains the poem, *Bezonnen Verzen*². This fact, coupled with Boutens' recurring use of complementary pairs, either juxtaposed or with implied resolution, his concentration on points in time and space when such apparent opposites are held in mirroring balance³ and his all-pervasive theme of constant renewal of innocence for some and dynamic striving towards renewal for others⁴, make isolation of a single poem a hazardous affair.

In the following translations of 'Perelaar' into English, Danish, German and Swedish⁵ many additional hazards become manifest. In an attempt to minimize losses and maximize the suggestiveness of Boutens' images I have established the following priorities: to adhere strictly to the metre and scansion, loosely to the rhyme-scheme, in spirit to the imagery. What is translation? A new creation, a re-creation, a post-creation? Decide for yourself. The muse is back in the glory-hole. The four translations are followed by my own musings on possible successes and failures. And after these musings, bearing in mind Komrij's exhortation 'Laat af van vertalen als je niet dichten kunt'⁶, I offer, in gratitude and affection, a final translation to the teacher and friend who, a quarter of a century ago, first introduced me to the original poem.

PERELAAR

De bloesemwitte perelaar
Laait uit de dunne schemering
In vlamme verheerlijking,
Geen boom in bloei meer, maar

Een naakte stofontstegen hulk
Omhuifd en overstraald
Met vuren sneeuw ontdaald
Aan blankbestervende avondwolk -

Herkent ge uzelf weerspiegeld, ziel,
Die staat in aardich geluk ontdaan,
Uw bloed in bloesem opgegaan
Tot dauw die uit den hemel viel?

Nog aardewortlend aardevrij,
O glimlach lach- en tranenblind,
Die liefdes wegen open wint
Aan leven en aan dood voorbij...

Stil, achter dooven spiegelbrand
Vangt ijmker nacht den dagverloren zwerm
Der sterrebijen aan den hemelberm
In de gekorfde schaduw van zijn hand.

PÄRONTRÄD

Ett päronträd står vitt i blom,
Blossar nu upp i skymningen,
Fullbordad är förvandlingen:
Trädet förnimmes som

Ett naket skepp med dunlätt skrud
Och kåpa övertänd
Av eldsnö återvänd
Från kvällens moln, som suddas ut -

Värnlösa själ, av lycka tänd,
Ser du din egen spegelbild,
Ditt blod som stigit blomsterlikt
Dalar som manna från sin färd?

Trots sina rötter nästan fri,
Leende blint av skratt och sorg,
Som öppnar kärleksstogens port
Och glider liv och död förbi...

Lugnt, bakom facklans matta brand,
Samlar biodlarn natten in sin svärm
Av stjärnbin, glimmande vid himlens bräm,
I kupad skugga av sin välvda hand.

PÆRETRÆET

Det blomsterhvide pæretræ
Flammer med ét i skumringen,
Fuldbyrdet er forvandlingen:
Træet forandret til

Et nøgent skib med fjerlet skrud
Og hætte, overklædt
Med ildsne dalet ned
Fra aftensky, som viskes ud -

Ser du dig selv genspejlet nu,
Værgeløs sjæl i paradís,
Dit blod, der steg som blomsterdis
Og dalede som himmeldug?

Trods sine rødder næsten fri,
Smil som er blindt af fryd og sorg,
Som åbner kærlighedens port
Og glider liv og død forbi...

Blidt, bagved faklens matte brand,
Fanger nu natten med sin vogterånd
I kuppelskyggen af den hule hånd
Sin stjernebispværm tæt ved himlens rand.

DER BIRNBAUM

Durch eine leichte Dämmerung
Flammt jetzt in weißer Blütenpracht
Der Birnbaum auf, der, kaum vollbracht,
Aus Baum in Blüte in

Ein kahles Schiff verwandelt steht,
Umhüllt und überstrahlt
Von Feuerschnee, genährt
Von einer späten Wolkenschicht -

Hast Du Dein Spiegelbild erkannt,
Wehrlose Seele, weich vor Glück,
Dein Blut, das blütenähnlich stieg
Und mannagleich den Heimweg fand?

Noch erdverwurzelt erdbefreit,
O Lächeln lach- und tränenblind,
Das nun den Liebesweg gewinnt
An Leben und an Tod vorbei...

Still, hinterm fahlen Spiegelbrand,
Fängt Imker Nacht den tagverlornen Schwarm
Der Sternenbienen an dem Himmelsrain
In den gekorbten Schatten seiner Hand.

PEAR-TREE

Through the approaching evening shade
Blazes a pear-tree, blossom-white,
Transfigured in its flaring light,
A tree no more, remade

A vessel, whose ethereal shroud
And hood is sequin-cloaked
With fiery snow invoked
From banks of fading evening cloud -

Is this a mirror to your eye,
Soul, unconcealed in earthly bliss,
Your soul in rising blossom-mist
As dew descending from on high?

Still earthbound, yet from earth released,
Smile that is blind from tears and joy,
Gaining an entrance to love's ways
Past life and death's extremities...

Calmly, behind the gutting brand,
Does night the keeper hold at heaven's verge
The swarm of star-bees, lost to daytime search,
Cupped in the hivelike shadow of his hand.

COMMENTS

To my mind the poem falls into three sections: lines 1-8, where the pear-tree/ship is perceived by the senses; lines 9-16, where the 'in-between' nature of the tree is linked by analogy to the dual nature of the soul; lines 17-20, where the physical is given a cosmic, metaphysical extension. Each of these three sections will be treated separately. I have chosen to write two commentaries, one on the Scandinavian translations, the other on their western cousins.

The Scandinavian Translations.

Let us start with a gross over-simplification: Swedish, in terms of grammar, is close to German, whereas Danish is more like Dutch. Although the grammatical solutions are on the whole identical in the two translations, in certain cases Swedish resorts to compression and suffixes, where Danish uses more words, i.e. is more analytical. More immediately striking is that many everyday words are unlike each other in the two languages, or, if similar, have different length or stress. This can be illustrated by the title itself: Da.'pæretræ' is as prosaic as 'pereboom' in Dutch (which Boutens avoided), whereas Sw.'päronträd' has a poetic ring to it. This abruptness can possibly be mitigated by adding the definite article in Danish. Even so, a different atmosphere has been created before we have even reached the poem itself.

Section One (lines 1-8).

The grammatical constructions are similar, but line 1 presents us with a problem in the Swedish translation. Du.'bloesemwit' cannot be translated directly, nor can

the definite article be used, since an attributive adjective entails doubling the definite article, viz. 'det vita päronträdet'. The change to Sw.'står vitt i blom' is to a poetic, somewhat old-fashioned style of language, which entails an impure rhyme in line 4. Du.'verheerlijking', a word which Boutens was fond of at that time (see footnote 3), has the biblical overtones of 'transfiguration', but Da.'forklaring', Sw.'förklaring' are too technical - furthermore they mean 'explanation' in everyday use. Da.'forklarelse' is less disturbing, but I simply could not find a rhyme for it. I have chosen to suggest the biblical by using a word which means 'transformation', together with a past participle meaning 'accomplished', 'consummated'. The earlier Sw.'Med ens sker omgestaltningen' ('Suddenly the transformation occurs') was later rejected, because the final word is too trundling and clumsy.

The level of compression of line 4 in Dutch led to the excision of Du.'bloei', since the central idea is that the pear-tree is no longer perceived as a tree, but rather as a ship. This change of central image can be registered either as a negation of the tree, or seen as a change of perception. The Da.'forandret' stresses change, the Sw.'förmimmes' change of perception. Both tend to underplay the active role of the observer.

Section Two (lines 9-16).

The first problem, which also affects the translation of line 13, is that Du.'aardsch' (line 10) is awkward to translate. This problem is the more important in that the earth/heaven word-pair is constant throughout Boutens' poetry. This juxtaposition is lost in the Scandinavian translations.

The next problem arises out of the word Du.'dauw' (line 12). Da.'dug' can also mean 'cloth', pronounced /du:/, whereas the meaning 'dew' is pronounced /dug/. This means that the rhyme favours the wrong interpretation. Apart from this, Da.'himmeldug' is the name of a flower, the sundew. The Swedish word for dew is 'dagg', a most unpoetic sounding word, to my mind. For this reason I have chosen the word for 'manna', with its biblical connotations⁷.

Du.'ontdaan' (line 10) is rendered in Swedish by 'consumed by happiness' and in Danish by 'defenceless in paradise', both of which are far from the original, but which try to convey the state of the soul at this point. Sw.'som stigit' ('which has risen') makes use of the fact that one can form the perfect tense without an accompanying auxiliary verb and thus helps to save syllables, whereas the Danish translation follows the Dutch closely, except for the idea of mist, an image also added in the English translation.

The balance of line 13 is lost in the Scandinavian translations, as is the word for 'earth' - Da./Sw.'jord' almost lets you taste the soil. This loss is regrettable.

In line 15 the relative pronoun is virtually floating-free and the Scandinavian 'som' ('which') is non-committal as regards gender, covering both Du.'die'/'dat'. The rest of lines 15-6 turns out badly. An object for the verbs Sw.'öppnar', Da.'åbner' ('opens') is needed, so that the idea of a gate or portal has to be introduced. The Danish word for love is so long that Du.'wegen' (line 15) has to be omitted. The verb Da./Sw.'glider' ('glides') is a compromise solution and the positioning of 'life and death' before Sw.'förbi', Da.'forbi' is far-removed from everyday speech.

Section Three (lines 17-20).

Since Sw.'biodlare' and Da.'biavler' stress more the idea of breeding rather than of tending bees, I have been reluctant to use them to translate Du.'ijmker' (line 18), but have relented in the case of Swedish. The change from Sw.'Samlar nu

natten in sin spridda svärm' ('its scattered swarm') led unfortunately to the exclusion of any hint of Du.'dagverloren'. The apposition is also difficult to spot for the unwary Swedish reader. The idea of the keeper and of the caring nature of night has been translated into Danish by Da.'vogterånd' ('guardian-spirit'). This solution gives me a rhyme for Da.'hånd', but it results in a reversal of the rhyme-scheme, which is a pity, since the poem has a natural decrescendo down to Du.'hand'.

Since I found it difficult to retain the image of a mirror in Du.'spiegelbrand' (line 17), an image I found enigmatic (unless the soul's dual nature is being stressed), I have chosen to introduce a new image, that of the torch of day being extinguished by the approaching night. Du.'hemelberm' (line 19) had originally been translated by Sw.'himlens dom' ('the dome of heaven') until it was pointed out to me that Sw.'bräm' existed, a poetic word which comes from Low German.

The German and English Translations.

The English translation was the first undertaken, the German the last. Since the English translation had already been published⁸, I was loth to alter anything, but decided to change 'returning' (line 12) to 'descending', to replace 'Despite its roots yet almost free' (line 13) with 'Still earthbound, yet from earth released' and, reluctantly, to remove the word 'mirror' (line 17), since I wanted to retain the scansion of the original poem. The German translation is interesting to compare with the English as regards aspect; where English uses -ing forms to convey immediacy, German uses adverbs (e.g. 'jetzt', 'kaum', 'noch', 'nun').

Section One (lines 1-8).

Delaying the subject seems the only satisfactory way of translating the first lines into English and German, partly due to the fact that E.'pear-tree', G.'Birnbäum' have only two syllables and stop the reader in his/her tracks. This leads to a reversal of the first two lines, which doesn't disturb me, since it heightens the expectation. The German version keeps the reader in suspense until line 3, rounding off with a separable prefix in typically Teutonic resolution. Since Danish alone could manage to translate Du.'bloesemwit', I let myself go in German and added a noun which is overpowering, but which sounds good. Since half of line 3 has now been used up, I need to compress. Originally I wrote G.'der, nach und nach,/ Aus einem Lüster in', but this brought in another image, which seemed confusing. The next version, G.'der, nach und nach,/ Durch dieses Leuchten in', was an attempt to render something of Du.'vlammende'. The final solution has the biblical flavour I wanted, plus the idea of the tree's form emerging through the twilight, scarcely becoming stable before it is perceived as something else.

Boutens has used two difficult words in Du.'stofontstegen' (line 5) and Du.'omhuifd' (line 6). The English translation tries to convey something of the almost non-material nature of the ship by E.'ethereal' and the capelike image of the shroud and hood. The dynamic Du.'overstraald' (line 6) is rendered by E.'cloaked' and strengthened by the image of sequins (small, glittering metallic discs sewn on clothes for their shimmering effect). The German translation changes Du.'naakt' (line 5) to G.'kahl', since G.'nackt' disturbed native-speakers, who saw wreckage rather than an unrigged ship. G.'abgetakelt' would be technically speaking correct, but is sterile - and a terrible mouthful.

Section Two (lines 9-16).

Once more there is difficulty involved in translating DU.'ontdaan' (line 10). The Dutch word conveys (to me at least) ideas of vulnerability, of being revealed, unable to conceal one's true nature. The Swedish and German translations stress the vulnerability, the English the lack of concealment, and the Danish version has

changed earthly bliss to a paradisaical state. Danish and English versions use the image of mist; Swedish and German stress the blossom-like nature of the ascent. The German version, here as elsewhere, is possibly somewhat like Stefan George in tone - but then I am trying to recapture the feel of Boutens' language. Unfortunate is the loss of the earth/heaven word-pair in all translations. Attempts to improve the original G.'Trotz seiner Wurzeln beinah frei' (line 13) were many. Some promising candidates had to be rejected for lack of a possible rhyme (e.g. 'der Erde los', 'erdgelöst').

Section Three (lines 17-20).

Only German has the term G.'Imker' to correspond to Du.'ijmker' (line 18). E.'keeper', is good enough, since swarms of bees are later mentioned. Only German can keep Du.'spiegelbrand' (line 17) unaltered. But G.'Sternbienen' and Sw.'stjärnbin' are stumbling-blocks. Native-speakers assure me that G.'Sternenbienen' and Sw.'stjärnebin' are possible. The German alternative has been adopted. The Swedish and German translations retain most of Boutens' rhyme-scheme; but this was initially at the cost of changing the verge of heaven to the dome of heaven, until I was introduced to G.'Rain' and Sw.'bräm'. The use of G.'gekorbt'en', rather than G.'gewölbt'en' is the result of pressure from native-speakers and from Dutch translators of German poetry. I have found their argument that this translation is truer to the spirit of the original convincing, despite, or maybe because of, the unusualness of the German word.

pear-tree

spring evening
white phosphor beads
cling to black branches
a ship
unmoored

this time
a shimmering
of transient soul-moths
alighting
or in flight

and out of time
a firmament
of star-bees
recovered
by the night

NOTES

¹E.g. bloesem, schemering, bloed, sneeuw, avond, wolk, ziel, spiegel, aarde, geluk, bloed, dauw, hemel, lach, traan, blind, liefde, open, leven, dood, brand, nacht, dag, ster, schaduw.

²E.g. bloed, hart, schaduw, blind, open, schijn (excluding the meanings 'appearance', 'deception'), zalig, zuiver.

³In 'Perelaar': hemel/aarde, dag/nacht, bloed/dauw, wortlend/vrij, leven/dood; /bloesem/, /spiegel/, /schemering/, /ster/, /avond/.

In Bezonnen Verzen:

Doorbrekend Eden waar in bloei van rozen
Al tijdelijk schoon tijloos verheerlijkt staat.
(*'Avondgloeden'*)

In liefdes avondklaren
Straalt heel de wereld tentoon:
Eén bloei, één openbaren,
Eén tuin van verheerlijkt schoon.
(*'Ziende trouw'*)

⁴Take, for example, the words heard at the border between desire and love in 'Droom' from the collection Carmina:

'Gezegend zij de ziel die sterk en schoon
Breekt in éenzelfde levens kort getij
Ten tweeden male in liefdes witten bloesem.
Haar oogenglans kan liefdes waarheid zien
En haar verduren en haar overleven...'

For a more detailed discussion of these themes I would refer to my article in Dutch Crossing, April 1986, pp.22-37.

⁵I would hasten to point out that these translations have come into being with more than a little help from colleagues and friends. Their constructive suggestions have been invaluable.

⁶De Muze in het Kolenhok, Amsterdam 1983, p.59.

⁷This link between dew and manna is made in Strofen uit de nalatenschap van Andries de Hoghe (1919), XVIII, lines 3-6.

I am indebted to Prof. dr. W. Blok for pointing this out to me and for his many astute suggestions for possible improvements to the German and English translations.

⁸Dutch Crossing, 28 April 1986, p.35.