

On translating 'The Carillon' by Ida Gerhardt

Het carillon

Ik zag de mensen in de straten,
hun armoe en hun grauw gezicht, –
toen streek er over de gelaten
een luisteren, een vleug van licht.

Want boven in de klokketoren
na 't donker-bronzen urenslaan
ving, over heel de stad te horen,
de beiaardier te spelen aan.

Valerius : – een statig zingen
waarin de zware klok bewoog,
doorstrooid van lichter sprankelingen,
'Wij slaan het oog tot U omhoog.'

En één tussen de naamloos velen,
gedrongen aan de huizenkant
stond ik te luist'ren naar dit spelen
dat zong van mijn geschonden land.

Dit sprakeloze samenkomen
en Hollands licht over de stad –
Nooit heb ik wat ons werd ontnomen
zo bitter, bitter liefgehad.

Oorlogsjaar 1941

The last round of the David Reid translation prize featured three poems, one of which was by the Dutch poet Ida Gerhardt. It is a poem with a significant date (War Year 1941). The poem describes the effect of the carillon coming from the steeple of a church, which is playing an old hymn included in the *Valerius Gedenck-Clanck* of 1626: *O heer, die daar des hemels tente spreidt* (*Op de komst van de Engelsen in 1585*). It is an appeal to God in time of need – highly appropriate in the context of the poem.

As usual, Gerhardt tightly interweaves form and content, forming a poetic whole that is hard to get across into English, since the ABAB pattern of the rhyme scheme corresponds to 9898 syllables, i.e. half the rhymes are feminine rhymes – a problem that has been fairly constant throughout the rounds of the competition. Since I felt from other Gerhardt translations attempted that this fusion is so crucial to her work, my first priority was to insist on these two factors, though with the usual English latitude as to what constitutes a rhyme.

I am a sketcher. I always do a preliminary sketch and then try to refine it. This has advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage is that you can catch the mood – you create a portrait that is recognisable. The main disadvantage is that you choose solutions that deviate from the original text. These may have to do with the actual content of the lines, but can equally well be compromises made in order to meet the formal constraints mentioned above.

In this particular case, I ended up with 22 versions of the translation. The main task was to remove my own pyrotechnics and get back to the original text and the flavour of that text. It is

interesting to look at the similarities between the first and the final versions. I have marked alterations by XXX. The number of Xs does not reflect the space occupied by changes:

The carillon

The people in the XXXXX looked stricken,
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, –
then XXXXXXXXXXXXX features quicken
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX,
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX,
the carillonneur began his pounding
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

Valerius: – a solemn singing
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
and flickerings of lighter ringing:
'We raise our eyes to XXXX high .'

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX,
I listened to XXXXXXXXXXXXX
that sang XXXXX my XXXXXX.

This speechless gathering, beyond us
the city with Dutch light above –
XXXXXX for XXXXX stolen from us
XXX suchXXXXX bitter, bitter love.

There has been quite a bloodbath! Let's consider the first and final versions side by side:

The carillon

The people in the street looked stricken,
Grey-faced and pinched with misery, –
then features briefly seemed to quicken
when ears picked up a melody.

For in the clock-tower, loudly sounding,
once deep-bronze hours had struck on high,
the carillonneur began his pounding
and music filled the city sky.

Valerius: – a solemn singing
with heavy bell to amplify
and flickerings of lighter ringing:
'We raise our eyes to Thee on high.'

And pressed against the house front, swaying,
one of so many without name,
I stood and listened to this playing
that sang my ravaged country's shame.

This speechless gathering, beyond us
the city with Dutch light above –
First now for all that's stolen from us
I feel such bitter, bitter love.

The carillon

The people in the streets looked stricken,
their ashen faces drawn and tight, –
then something made their features quicken
and, listening, they seemed brushed with light.

For in the clock-tower when, resounding,
the bronze-chimed hour had died away,
the carillonneur began his pounding
and everywhere was heard to play.

Valerius: – a solemn singing
with bass bell's tolling undertone
and flickerings of lighter ringing:
'We raise our eyes to Thy high throne.'

As one of all those nameless people
who by the house fronts came to stand,
I listened to the pealing steeple
that sang of my afflicted land.

This speechless gathering, beyond us
the city with Dutch light above –
I've never for what's stolen from us
felt such a bitter, bitter love.

What does the 'prose transcript' of the original say? (I write in quotations marks, since the whole point is that you cannot detach content from form):

I saw the people in the streets/Their poverty and their grey face(s)/then there passed over their countenances/a listening, a stroke(tinge, touch) of light.//For up aloft in the clock-tower/after the deep-bronzen striking of the hour/the carillonneur, audible everywhere over the city,/started to play.// Valerius – a stately (dignified, solemn) singing/within which the heavy bell moved/strewn through with lighter scintillating/We raise our eye to Thee on high.//And one among the countless many/crowded against the house fronts/I stood listening to this playing/that sang of my ravaged (afflicted, shamed) country.//This speechless gathering together/and Dutch light above the city/Never have I for what has been taken away (stolen) from us/felt a love so bitter, bitter.//*

* *armoe*: The van Dale NE-EN dictionary makes a semantic distinction between *armoe* (1. misery, wretchedness. 2. see: *armoede*) and *armoede* (poverty). I am assured by a highly qualified native-Dutch speaker that this is erroneous. The basic meaning of both forms is *poverty*. The Van Dale *Groot Woordenboek van de Nederlandse Taal* says for *armoe*: see *armoede*.

If I try to compare the first and final versions, ignoring all versions in between, what strikes me most is that my first version has introduced new material and, even more damning perhaps, new images. Elsewhere, I have omitted significant material. This is obvious in lines 3–4, for example: the first version implies that it was when the ears picked up the melody that the features began to quicken. The original talks about a touch of light transforming the features as they listen. Similarly, line 8 does not talk about music filling the sky, it simply says that it could be heard everywhere by those listening.

'Bewoog', which means 'moved', has a lovely heavy sound to it and you see the bell at the point where its weight is about to bring it down and then up once more. The word 'amplify' is more a word we connect with electronics than heavy bells.

I tried the Internet for technical information. There is a bass bell that strikes, rather like the drone of the bagpipes, underneath the flitting melody – a kind a earth (to continue the electronics metaphor). If you look at the melody of the hymn, it operates within a very restricted chord sequence: G major, D major, C major (A minor – the enharmonic equivalent) and back to G major again. The bass line is virtually a drone, since C is the subdominant and D the dominant of G. In this sense, the bass bell is a tolling undertone. (Compare, for example with the held G in the bass line of Bach's English Suite No.3 in G major, Gavotte II, 'La Musette'.)

Lines 13 and 16 reveal all too clearly the dangers of straining for a rhyme. Where are 'swaying' and 'shame' in the original? There is practically nothing of this stanza left in the final version.

The final stanza poses two main problems: starting with the word 'never' would necessitate an inversion in English, for which there is no room (*Never have I for what's been stolen/Felt such a bitter, bitter love* would be a strong contender if the last line syllable count could be $\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} + 1 \dots$ but I suspect Gerhardt would not approve); the tense systems of Dutch and English differ. The poem is from 1941 at the latest. The German invasion is very much part of the present in the mind of the author. In English, the basic meaning of the past tense is 'then not now'. The basic meaning of the present perfect is 'until now' or 'of present relevance'. In other words, the past tense emphasises a BREAK with and the present perfect a CONTINUITY with the present. I would strongly argue that in 1941, Gerhardt is very much thinking of continuity and present relevance. If she had written the poem twenty years later, we could discuss the possible use of the past tense. But to write 'was' in line 15 is for me a wrong translation of 'werd'. By writing 'what's stolen from us' in line 15, I am saying *what is/has been stolen from us*. The difference between the two forms has to do with state and process. *What is stolen from us* emphasises the state – that is how things now are – while *what has been stolen from us* emphasises a process and an agent, i.e. someone has done this. I have had lively discussions of this tense difference with Dutch (and Danish) people, but remain convinced that it is a real difference between English and certain other Germanic languages.

Finally, the repetition of the word 'bitter' is absolutely crucial – it is the emotional apex of the poem. It cannot be omitted from a translation.

Coda: Do not believe in your own ingenuity. 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' may not apply to poetry translation, but as a guideline it has a lot to offer.