

## Workshop – ‘De Nachtegalen’ by J.C. Bloem

This is the second workshop to use a Bloem poem. The first was called ‘It’s all about flow – Bloem’s *November*’. Re-reading it, I can see that the present workshop confirms what I said there: the flexibility of the line within what seems on the surface to be a fixed framework; the pulse; the naturalness of the lines; the slightly ‘retro’ feeling as regards the language. And the great difficulty involved in trying to translate his poetry into English.

### DE NACHTEGALEN

*Ik heb van 't leven vrijwel niets verwacht,  
't Geluk is nu eenmaal niet te achterhalen.  
Wat geeft het? – In de koude voorjaarsnacht  
Zingen de onsterfelijke nachtegalen.*

Bloem could always reorganise the rhythm of a line, thanks to the traditions of Dutch poetry. Take a word like *onsterfelijke* – xXxxx. In line 4 there is an elision between *de* and *on-*. So we get a stress pattern (x)Xxxx. If he had chosen a bird that began with a vowel, the final syllable would have been elided – xXxx(x). If he didn’t want all those unstressed syllables in the middle, he could write *onsterf'lijke* – xXxx. And you can combine these three possibilities to make many more (just how many, I am unsure as a non-mathematician). These possibilities exist for any poet of that era. The real ‘syllable-cruncher’ was, of course, Der Mouw. But Bloem is a master of manipulating the system to make the lines flow as if completely natural. In line 1, he indicates the elision by means of an apostrophe. He does it again in line 2, but also elides *te achterhalen*. Nothing in line 3. In line 4 we have the *de on-* elision.

I have used an over-simplified system of stresses in the above. There are weakly and strongly stressed syllables. In the last line, for example, the most heavily stressed syllable is -STERF-. My guess, as a non-native speaker is that LEVEN, GeLUK, GEEFT are the other three heavy stresses. A crude translation of the poem is thus: LIFE? HAPPINESS?? So WHAT??? IMMORTAL song of the nightingale. This is an excellent example of how the message is not simply enhanced, or reinforced but positively DRIVEN HOME by the rhythm. This is the sub-text. If a translation misses this, the worth of the translation is seriously diminished.

As a translator of poetry, I don’t consciously think of this. But at a subconscious level, I suspect it is operating all the time in the choices, rejections and new choices that I make. And I don’t know whether ‘stress’ or ‘rhythm’ are the right words, for they imply that I am counting. It seems as if we are operating at a larger, global level – something that we could describe as the way the poem breathes – its ‘pulse’, perhaps. And, in talking to poets whose work I have translated, I have noticed time after time – in those where pulse is something that is important to them, for there are poets who think the concept either unimportant or irrelevant – that the way the poet and the

translator experience the pulse of a poem can differ considerably. The question therefore is whether pulse is culturally distinctive or a universal. I think probably both. That a particular culture influences how the pulse is experienced. Possibly, too, that unless you are bilingual, you will never fully appreciate what the native-poet understands by pulse. Whenever possible, I work with a native-language poet and ask to hear the poem being read aloud. This has on occasions proved to be a real eye-opener, even in a foreign language I really feel familiar with. No two native-speakers will read the same poem with the same stress-pattern or pulse, but there are nearly always marked similarities that point in unexpected directions.

If we translate the words one by one, what do we get?

*I have expected hardly anything/practically nothing of life, // Happiness is just/simply not to be retrieved/recovered/discovered/caught up with\*. // What does it matter? – In the cold spring night // The immortal nightingales are singing.*

\*It has been pointed out to me by a native-speaker and poet that *achterhalen* seems to have an archaic tinge and probably means something else in this poem. The big Van Dale has this entry 4 (*veroudered*) *to (mbt. een voorwerp dat wegrolt, wegwaait of wegdrijft) inhalen en pakken* [(archaic) to catch up with and grasp (with regard to an object that rolls, flutters or drifts away)]. So the line has more the meaning 'Happiness just happens to be always out of reach.'

Is that what I do as a translator? Try and find a template that will fit the sense and the pulse? Maybe. But I rarely try to translate the words one by one. I try to put my mind into neutral and operate at roughly four lines at a time – two if it is heavy going.

I go first for the rhyme words in a poem like this. I say ABAB to myself, and then try to decide whether Bloem's 10-11-10-11 (a very frequent combination in his poetry) is to be retained, or whether the 11s should be reduced to 10s. In Bloem's case, the answer is nearly always that the 11s should be retained, otherwise the whole feel of the stanza is drastically altered. As a translator into English, my problem is that as a percentage, there are a lot less words in English that end on an unstressed syllable than there are in Dutch. So, no matter what solution is chosen, the result will differ in 'feel' from the original. English translators of Petrarch in the 16th century often reduced the 11s to 10s to make the poem sound 'more natural'. Wyatt and Surrey, for example.

This then is a recipe for the four lines. All we need is a master chef.

### DE NACHTEGALEN

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't Geluk is nu eenmaal niet te achterhalen.  
Wat geeft het? – In de koude voorjaarsnacht  
Zingen de onsterfelijke nachtegalen.*

Are there any words that only have one possible translation? At a guess: *life, cold, night, nightingale*. The others can all be changed – at the word-class level, e.g. *expect(ation), sing/song*, or at the level of synonyms: *spring(time), immortal/everlasting*.

What are the 'toughies'? All words that are modal markers – 'vrijwel', 'nu eenmaal', since they mark a subjective attitude and are hard to pin down. Also in dictionaries. Unless you can FEEL them, they are real translation traps. This applies to all Germanic particles which, for some strange reason, are lacking in English, e.g. German *zwar, doch, ja, einmal*; Danish *ja, jo, dog, da, nok, vel*, etc. Translating such words literally frequently makes English sound stilted. Often it is best to leave them out and compensate elsewhere in the sentence.

Let's try out ABAB. A possibility for A is *slight/night*. B is harder, since I cannot end line 4 with *nightingales*, unless I drop the idea of 11 syllables. Elision is also permissible, as in Dutch, so the line could end *th(e) immortal nightingales are singing*. But I lack two syllables. To start with *I hear* will not do. That would naturally lead to dropping *are* in the line. Furthermore, it is a statement of fact, not a subjective observation. The next possibility is to add an adverb before the verb, e.g. *are softly/loudly/sweetly/etc. singing*. But even if I found a convincing adverb, the original does not say this. Another possibility for 'padding' is to say *The many nightingales...* A further option is to reverse the word order of the sentence, to start with the nightingales in line 3 and talk about the night in line 4. But then you lose what in music would be called the 'final resolution'. The whole poem leads up to the nightingales and their singing. You will be able to find plenty of examples of translations where such solutions as the above are resorted to.

Suggestion for first draft:

### THE NIGHTINGALES

*Of life my expectations have been slight,  
And joy it does not seem intent on bringing.  
What does it matter? – In the cold spring night  
Once more the immortal nightingales are singing*

#### Unsolved problems of the first draft

The problems at present seem to lie in the first two and a half lines. The *Once more* might seem like padding, but it does not disturb the flow of the verse or the sense to me. The aim is for nothing to 'stick out' and disturb the reading. I tried *What I've expected of(from) this life is slight* but run into the problem of lines 1 and 3 both starting with *What*, which is unsatisfactory. If I change line 3 to start with *No matter*, I have, as in Dutch, the same rhythm and number of syllables, but the question has gone and I have to change the end of the line, either by adding padding, or by changing to something like *In the chill of this spring night*, which means I have *this* in lines 1 and 3 and which makes the line too 'poetic' (the original does not single out one night as such, it talks of a 'now' being experienced). And *in the chilly springtime night* is rhythmically

wrong and sounds like what it is – an attempt to deal with extra unstressed syllables.

Line 2 is still suffering from my inability to find any good rhyme for *singing*. And I really feel this is the best way to end the poem. So line 2 reverses the original, which talks about and elusive happiness that is always slipping from one's grasp, rather than something that is brought to one. A further objection is my reference back to 'life' in line 1, which is not there in the original. My line 2 has a touch of English self-irony about it to try and convey the *nu eenmaal* feel of the Dutch, but I would feel happier if I could get closer to what I sense is the actual meaning of the line.

## Second draft

I have decided to keep 'slight', even though it is not as strong as 'virtually nothing'. It is a good word in English, known mostly in the expression 'not in the slightest', but I can talk of someone's interest in something only being slight, for example. It is line 2 that has been bothering me. I have checked with a rhyming dictionary, but it makes depressing reading. Apart from a couple of Chinese dynasties, possible candidates are: *bring, cling, ding, fling, ping, pling, ring, sling, spring, sting, swing, wing, wring*. I know from past mistakes that to introduce a new image can be made to fit the technical requirements, but the line will then 'stick out' like a sore thumb if compared with the original. Let me give an example – 'And joy though chased is always onward winging'/'To happiness we vainly would be clinging'/'And from this life no happiness we're wringing'/etc. etc. It is normally better to take a less vivid word, one that does not conjure up a distracting image. So 'bringing' is still a real candidate.

Another possibility is to abandon a complete rhyme and accept an assonance, e.g. *thinking/thinning/hinting*. I am quite prepared to do this when the translation reads as if there had been a complete rhyme. This is more often the case than purists would allow. But in a four-line poem, it again sticks out. Possibly less if lines 1 and 3 don't fully rhyme, but to make the last word of a four-line poem only 'almost rhyme' is not going to work. So I have to reject that being used here.

I have chosen a gloomy line 2, but perhaps less gloomy than Bloem. For *nu eenmaal*, Van Dale tells me, implies that things simply cannot be changed. I have tried both 'our' and 'my', but the latter seems too restrictive, since we are stating something that is true for all mankind now, which was not the case in line 1:

## THE NIGHTINGALES

*Of life my expectations have been slight,  
And joy within our reach it's hardly bringing.  
What does it matter? – In the cold spring night  
Once more the immortal nightingales are singing.*

### Third draft

More interesting Dutch reactions concerning lines 2 and 4: that line two would not be read *'t GeLUK is NU eenMAAL niet t'ACHterHALen*, that the natural stress pattern of *nu eenmaal* is *nu EENmaal*, so that the line should perhaps start with a crunched monosyllable: *'t GLUK is nu EENmaal NIET te ACHterHALen*. So the second line has a mumbling, colloquial speech effect that intensifies the laconic resignation of the content. And there is then an echo in the stress on the first syllable of the last line, with its lilting but tailing-off stress pattern.

A second alternative is to read the second line *'t GeLUK's...*, which gives a perhaps slightly less resigned attitude.

These subtleties are probably untranslatable is the conclusion.

Yes, they probably are. Let's look at them.

I have had this problem before with a Bloem poem (*Insomnia*), that the metre pulls one way, but the natural stress patterns of the spoken language pull the other – maybe this tension is one of the distinctive and untranslatable features of his poetry?

It is possibly to start line 2 with *Joy: Joy within reach it's hardly ever bringing*, for example. This also removes the problem of whether *our* is justifiable. But what now happens is that *hardly* = *almost*, whereas in the second draft *hardly* referred to the verb and means *scarcely*. It is the combination of adding *And* and placing *hardly* in the strong stress position at syllable 8 that seems to me to bring out the resignation of the content. But the tension referred to above, the rhythm established in line 1 being counteracted in that of line 2, is admittedly lost. Which is HARDly surprising.

As for the last line, it is also possible to start with a stressed syllable in English, e.g. *Loudly the immortal nightingales are singing* (or whatever adverb is chosen). But there are two strong objections to doing this. The first I have already mentioned – you are introducing an idea that is simply not there in the original. The 'nowness' of the moment is lost if you qualify the verb; it is an intrusion. This line must be kept as stark as possible. Even the *once more* I would prefer to do without, although it is less of an intrusion, rather a joyful acceptance that such moments occur. The other argument has to do with English word order. The neutral position for the adverb is *The immortal nightingales are loudly singing*. To start the line with *loudly* gives it a very heavy stress indeed – one that also removes it completely from the spoken language. This will not do.

So, to my surprise, I end up changing almost nothing in the third draft:

### THE NIGHTINGALES

*Of life my expectations have been slight,  
And joy that's within reach it's hardly bringing.  
What does it matter? – In the cold spring night  
Once more the immortal nightingales are singing.*

#### Fourth draft

The second line, in all versions so far, fails to convince my native-speaker. The present continuous is illogical, because it is describing what it felt to be an eternal truth, and therefore the simple tense should be used. The end of the line is simply there to rhyme with line 4. And the iambic pattern is monotonous – see above remarks, where a stress pattern of XxxXxxXxxXx is suggested. Let's start the line with *Joy* and see what happens. *Joy's an elusive hope to which we're clinging* has the desired stress pattern, but the present continuous tense is still there. *Joy is a hope to which we're vainly clinging* has the same drawback, but the monosyllable *vain* offers more room for other elements in the line. Since I am using a set phrase – the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (OALD), for example, lists *to cling to a hope of being rescued* under **cling** – I get the feeling that the verb does not stick out any more. But how can I get rid of the present continuous?

The problem is that we want something to correspond to *'t Geluk is*, and the most logical thing to do is to copy that in English, i.e. *Joy is* and somehow still manage to end the line with *clinging*. What could be a solution is to use the *go on + -ing* construction. If you 'go on doing' something, this implies repetition, habit, insistence. OALD lists 'to continue, to persevere' as meanings. A possible variant is *keep on + -ing* (OALD 'to continue, to persist'). I find it very difficult to choose between these two alternatives. Since I find saying the line out loud easier with 'go' – I tend to stop up more to say the word 'keep', which means I lose momentum and get less stress on CLINGing, partly a result of repeating /k-/. So I will try the former first. Here, then, is a fourth attempt:

#### THE NIGHTINGALES

*Of life my expectations have been slight,  
Joy's a vain hope to which we go on clinging.  
What does it matter? – In the cold spring night  
Once more the immortal nightingales are singing.*

#### Fifth draft

It might seem at times to be nit-picking, but sooner or later that second line must surely fall into place – and it hasn't yet. The objection – justified as usual – from my native-speaker is that the line is too detached from line one and that the tone is too much one of despair, rather than a resigned shrug of the shoulders. I think it's the 'vain hope' that is the trouble. The original doesn't mention hope. And the 'nu eenmaal' is simply not there in the translation. So I will go for the most neutral statement I can find, risking an internal rhyme with 'thing' and 'cling'. I think, but must check, that 'go on' sounds a bit more dismissive than 'keep on':

#### THE NIGHTINGALES

*Of life my expectations have been slight,  
Joy's just a thing to which we go on clinging.  
What does it matter? – In the cold spring night  
Once more the immortal nightingales are singing.*

PS. It has been pointed out to me that *eenmAAL* and *achterhALen* are in the original line. So maybe the subconscious works after all.

### **Afterthought**

It is sometimes so much easier to translate into Danish than into English, since there is a closer balance between stressed and unstressed syllables as well as more similar word-order.

### *NATTERGALENE*

*Af livet har jeg ventet mig kun småt,  
At fange lykke kom jo ej på tale. (kommer ej på tale)  
Hvad gør det? – In den kolde forårsnat  
Synger de udødelige nattergale.*

Lines 1 and 3 do not rhyme yet, but the template can be found much quicker than in English.