

IT'S ALL ABOUT FLOW – BLOEM'S 'NOVEMBER'

One thing that strikes me about Bloem as a non-Dutch reader is a sense of flow in his poetry. Not monotony, but pulse. You are borne along when reading the poem. In 'November' there is a syllable count of 9898 for each quatrain (if you elide 'dove erinneringen' but do not elide 'te ontkomen'), but the stress pattern is not just repetitive: every 9 does not have xXxXxXxXx, and every eight not xXxXxXxX. And there is plenty of enjambment, even between the second and third lines of quatrains. The basic unit is a four-line stanza, except for the last quatrain, which has a final couplet summing up the preceding lines.

Another thing is the naturalness of the rhymes, something which poses a serious translation problem – it calls for flexibility in the use of syntax and word classes as well as ingenuity in finding suitable rhyme words in the target language. Antiquated, rare words, or words whose meaning is not implied in the original are the pit you can easily fall into.

Bloem is also a writer whose language is backward-looking, rather than forward-looking. It is soaked in tradition, though normally without the over-elision and syllable-crunching of, say, Dèr Mouw or de Tachtigers. Striking a balance in the target language, one that will stimulate similar nerves in the target-language reader as in the source-language reader is a further aspect to be considered.

Bloem is a fearfully difficult poet to translate.

Here, then, is Bloem's poem:

NOVEMBER

Het regent en het is november:
Weer keert het najaar en belaagt
Het hart, dat droef, maar steeds gewender,
Zijn heimelijke pijnen draagt.

En in de kamer, waar gelaten
Het daaglijks leven wordt verricht,
Schijnt uit de troosteloze straten
Een ongekleurd namiddaglicht.

De jaren gaan zoals zij gingen,
Er is allengs geen onderscheid
Meer tussen dove herinneringen
En wat geleefd wordt en verbeid.

Verloren zijn de prille wegen
Om te ontkomen aan den tijd;
Altijd november, altijd regen,
Altijd dit lege hart, altijd.

And here is my first draft – done, like all the others, in summer 2007, which means I am now forced to rationalise after the event, since I am unsure why certain things were changed.

NOVEMBER

It's raining and it is November:
Autumn lays siege now to the heart
That sadly, though more wont than ever,
Endures its secret pains apart.

And in the room, where resignation
Turns ordinary living grey,
From streets that speak of desolation
A wan light falls at close of day.

The years pass by like years departed,
The difference will soon be gone
Between dim memories uncharted
And what is lived and is to come.

Lost are the ways I knew of gaining
Release from time in earlier days;
Always November, always raining,
Always this empty heart, always.

What I normally do is to ask a second opinion on such a draft from a native-speaker with a good command of English – or sometimes vice versa. In this case, I used the former.

The criticisms I received had to do with lines 5–12 – the first and last quatrains have remained unscathed throughout the drafts, so I will leave them aside for the time being.

Here are the second draft alterations:

And in the room, where resignation
To humdrum living holds full sway,
From streets that speak of desolation
A wan light falls at close of day.

The years pass but the years don't alter,
The difference will soon be gone
Between dim memories that falter
And what is lived and is to come.

The first draft 'where resignation/Turns ordinary living grey' is not what the original says, where resignation does not cause anything. But my replacement I find almost worse, even though the meaning is closer. 'holds full sway' is typical padding, a cliché that goes for a rhyme at any cost. This latter crime is precisely why 'uncharted' in line 11 had to go. There is nothing wrong with 'years departed', but 'memories uncharted', with its post-adjectival, is terrible. The 'alter/falter' rhyme is much closer in meaning, less cliché-ridden and simplifies the language – clogged language is one of my weaknesses when translating older poetry.

The third draft has the following changes:

And in the room, where resignation
Sees daily living drain away,
From streets that speak of desolation
A bleak light falls at close of day.

The years pass by but never alter,
The difference will soon be gone
Between dim memories that falter
And what is lived and is to come.

The 'holds full sway' is out, replaced by an active transitive verb for 'resignation' and a feeling of powerlessness and meaninglessness implied by 'drain away'. The construction is much more natural than the earlier version. The replacement of 'wan' by 'bleak' is an attempt to characterise the late-afternoon light better. The word 'wan' is a bit-old fashioned and has 'sickly' connotations, whereas 'bleak' has a touch of 'the prospects are bleak' about it. The changes to line 9 have to do with flow and stress pattern. The previous version 'The years pass but the years don't alter' jerks you to a halt at the word 'but' and the rest of the line is restless.

Here is the final version:

NOVEMBER

It's raining and it is November:
Autumn lays siege now to the heart
That sadly, though more wont than ever,
Endures its secret pains apart.

And in the room, where resignation
Sees daily life pass as it may,
From streets that speak of desolation
A bleak light falls at close of day.

The years pass by but never alter,
The difference will soon be gone

Between dim memories that falter
And what is lived and is to come.

Lost are the ways I knew of gaining
Release from time in earlier days;
Always November, always raining,
Always this empty heart, always.

The only change is 'drain away', which is more than the original said. The idea of indifference due to inability to change the course of events results in 'Sees daily life pass as it may', an improvement I think. 'Life' is better than 'living' and the language is once more simplified and sounds more like natural speech.

EPILOGUE

A few weeks ago, I was sent some translations of Bloem poems by James Brockway. Among them was a translation of 'November':

NOVEMBER

It is raining and it is November:
Autumn's come back again to besiege
The heart that has secret pain to remember,
A sadness time cannot assuage.

And here, where everyday life is lived
With resignation, into the room
Shines from cheerless streets the sieved
And colourless light of afternoon.

The years goes by as years go by,
At the last there is little difference
Between what grows dim in the memory
And what is here, what lies hence.

Lost are the ways we'd escape from time,
Easy to find in early days;
Always November, always rain,
Always this empty heart, always.

Quite honestly, I think this translation has fallen into all the pitfalls I began by listing. If you read it aloud, it reads like prose. It has words like 'assuage', 'hence' in it alongside forms like 'we'd' and 'Autumn's', and the inverted word order of lines 6–8 is typical of second-rate poetry. The whole atmosphere of a Bloem poem is gone. No flow, no go.