

**THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE TRANSLATION
OF THE DUTCH POEM 'ZWEMBAD DEN DOLDER'
BY MENNO WIGMAN**

Zwembad Den Dolder

*Er zijn gevoelens die fascistisch zijn.
De vader die niet weet waarom hij slaat,
de zoon die half verstikt in foto's krast.*

*De mooiste idioot die ik ooit zag
lag op zijn rug een heel heelal te zijn.
Geen vader kreeg ooit greep op deze pees*

*die als een kosmonaut het bad door dreef,
geen moeder stookte in zijn vissenkom.
En wit en scheef en wijs zwom hij. Hij zwom.*

The swimming baths at the Den Dolder clinic

*There are emotions of a fascist kind.
The father who hits out but can't tell why,
the son half-choked who scratches photos through.*

*The loveliest idiot I ever saw
lay on his back, a total universe.
No father got to grasp this basket case*

*that drifted through the pool like one in space,
no mother poked his bowl of fish around.
And skewed and pale and wise he swam. Swam sound.*

Translating a poem by the Dutch poet Menno Wigman is like descending into a vortex. At one level, you have to get into a Wigman mode, i.e. you know in advance that the poetic line is nearly always 10 or 11 syllables long and the stress pattern extremely regular, unless the poet deliberately diverges from it. If he does so, there is always a clear reason for this.

This often gives the poems the feel of a sonnet, no matter how many lines there are. I am talking here of atmosphere, not of content. For the central idea of the poem is not contained in the first part and then expanded and commented on in the second part. It is here one whole – although, it should be added, there is often a Shakesperian 'final couplet' feel to the end of a Wigman poem.

This often has to do with the other feature – a gradual build up of assonance and, often, final rhyme. This phonological acceleration is what I mean by the vortex. Take a look at the Dutch once more:

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*De mooiste idioot die ik ooit zag
lag op zijn rug een heel heelal te zijn.
Geen vader kreeg ooit greep op deze pees*

*die als een kosmonaut het bad door dreef,
geen moeder stookte in zijn vissenkom.
En wit en scheef en wijs zwom hij. Hij zwom.*

These are just a few examples. It is normally the repetition of vowel sounds rather than consonants that achieve this feeling of acceleration – we are influenced by the sounds that have gone before and they all start to recur.

So there is a feeling of recurrence (rhythm) and of acceleration (recurrence of vowel sounds).

Judge for yourself whether the translation is faithful to these two tendencies.

Lastly, I would add that serendipity is always an important element in translation. If you cannot capture a certain feature, look for compensation elsewhere. What you lose on the swings, you gain on the roundabouts. I was in despair when I saw 'pees'/'dreef' and 'kosmonaut'. Until I found a reference to the First World War, where those so badly injured (i.e. loss of limbs) were regarded as 'basket cases', i.e. would need a litter to be transported anywhere. The expression has now acquired other meanings: 'In popular usage basket case refers to someone in a hopeless mental condition'.

See: <http://www.answers.com/topic/basket-case>

Suddenly, there was 'case/space'. And the last line offered 'around/sound'. Well, did not offer, perhaps. The starting point was 'safe and sound'. With the added meanings of 'sound' – which include 'healthy', by the way – still the Scandinavian meaning of the word. The question is whether 'sound' can be an adverb (cf. dug deep, aimed high), or whether this is a borderline case between an adjective and an adverb. He, (safe and) sound, swam. He did not swim 'soundly'. I love this area, which varies from one Germanic language to the other, also morphologically. I have never seen the combination 'swam sound' in English. And you 'sleep soundly'. Even so, the adjectival use as a subject predicate is grammatically justifiable, e.g. 'Safe and sound, he arrived at the far shore'.

My own feeling is that the perfect symmetry of 'Swam sound', which reflects the original symmetry of the Dutch poem, has created a context in which it is poetically correct. And this 'poetic correctness' is not only sound, not only

rhythm, not only symmetry. It is the interweaving of all these, something that builds up during the last four lines:

*No father got to **grasp** this **basket case***

*that drifted **through** the **pool** like one in **space**,
no mother **poked** his **bowl** of fish **around**.
And **skewed** and **pale** and wise he **swam**. **Swam sound**.*

Some of these vowel recurrences have already been established higher up (e.g. **choked**, **photos**). So some bind these four lines together with earlier parts of the poem. But the four lines accelerate towards the end, spurred on by the repetition of 'and' in the last line. So the translation must not alter the slots in that last line. It must read: **And A and B and C d E. e D**. (the capital letters indicate stresses).

This does not mean, however, that I must retain the same ABC order. For there is a repetition of earlier rhymes in B. The Dutch has 'pees/dreef/scheef', which means that 'scheef' gets extra force from the earlier end rhyme(s). So I have chosen to reverse 'wise and pale' to 'pale and wise'. Purists can always argue that this slightly changes the emphasis semantically, but as a translation of a poetic line, it seems an inevitable choice to me.

This leaves the problem of 'zwom hij. Hij zwom'. I could have chosen 'he swam. Swam he', but this is not natural English word order, whereas the Dutch word order is perfectly natural. So the basic problem was to retain the stress pattern, retain the pivot of the same word on either side of the full stop, and yet find a stressed monosyllabic word to end the poem that both sounded natural and had the same 'coming home' feeling, the rounding off of the poem that sums up the very nature of the swimmer.

So 'swam sound', with alliteration to strengthen the effect further, was arrived at. And only then could I work backwards and find the penultimate line.

And, if my memory is not playing me tricks, I think it was only later that I found 'basket case' and my 'astronaut' became 'one in space'. For translation often works like this – you work forwards AND backwards, both inside the lines and between the lines.

All of this does not reflect the 'white heat' of the process of translation – it is reasoning after the event. 'Poetic correctness' is something that happens when your mind is floating free – in neutral, as I like to put it. 'Where did that come from?' is the question I most often ask myself when translating.

PS

A friend has pointed out that I have stressed the repetition of sounds but said nothing about the specific function of the last two lines (the only full rhyme) and the way in which the last two words sum up the three preceding images of the 'basket case' as an autonomous being: total universe, spaceman and fish bowl). What is caught in the word 'sound' is the independence, wholeness, unbrokenness, health of the swimmer. Very well put.