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THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE: THE CASE FOR PRAGMATIC TRANSLATION

David Young

Theoretical discussions of translation often seem to take place at such a remove from actual practice as to generate impressions of irrelevance and inadvertent comedy, especially in the reactions of working translators. But theory, of course, is not something we can toss aside. Even my opening sentence, doubting theory's efficacy for practice, has its own theoretical gist, generalizing as it does about the relationship. What does seem worth asserting is that any approach to practice that is too rule-bound or too ideologically grounded, that is not in itself pragmatic and open, will sooner or later prove problematic. A good translator, among other things, is a flexible performer, adapting to circumstance and opportunistic about possibility.

I can illustrate this, I think, by describing some recent work, with a collaborator, on the twentieth century Dutch poet, M. Vasalis. My translation partner, Fred Lessing, grew up in Holland. He was a hidden child during the Second World War, and he and his family immigrated to the United States when he was about twelve. We knew each other quite well in college. Over the years, he has kept up his Dutch and he mentioned to me, when we went together to a recent college reunion, that he knew of an interesting poet who had not, to his knowledge, been translated into English. Being somewhat addicted to translation—it is how I read non-English poets I am particularly interested in—I suggested we experiment with a collaboration that by now has led to a sizable manuscript. His role is to translate the Dutch, more or less literally, and mine is to try to fashion an effective version in English. We then discuss the results and try to arrive at a final version.

I knew very little about Vasalis at the beginning. Her dates are 1909–1998. She was a psychiatrist and her pen name is said to be a Latin version of her maiden name. She published three collections in her lifetime, and a fourth appeared posthumously. She is widely read and very popular in Holland, but we have so

far not found more than a handful of her poems in English, a shortcoming we have been happy to remedy.

Issues of rhyme and meter surround the practice of translating this poet, and what I have learned, I think, is to avoid too many preconceptions about how to respond to them. By this I mean that in reading the poem in Dutch, and absorbing Fred Lessing's literal and annotated versions, I try to get a feel for how much the formal elements meant to the poet in each particular case. It can be described as a question of priorities. Broadly speaking, I would say that in her early work Vasalis is much preoccupied with the traditional poetic features she has chosen; they have a kind of precedence that a translator cannot ignore. Her later poetry, on the other hand, while still employing rhyme, and loosened meter, shows her much more casual about those elements, a casualness that gives the translator more latitude of response. Poetic effects like off-rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, and consonance, can be used to reflect this more casual formality.

It's also true, I think, that as a translator grows more familiar with a poet's body of work, he or she becomes aware of more options in the way that that work may be negotiated between one language and another. There is simply no substitute for having spent extended time in the presence of another poet's work, learning to trace the habits of thought and expression that the poet characteristically followed. Vasalis' creative process is by now much more familiar to both of us, as we have worked, separately and together, on some seventy of her poems.

I can illustrate her shift in emphasis, and my own considered response to it, I think, by use of an early and a late Vasalis poem. Readers will not need to know Dutch to sense the formality of this text—the first one, actually, that we worked on together:

DE IDIOOT IN HET BAD

*Met opgetrokken schouders, toegeknepen ogen,
haast dravend en vaak hakend in de mat,
lelijk en onbeholpen aan zusters arm gebogen,
gaat elke week de idioot naar 't bad*

*De damp die van het warme water slaat
maakt hem geruster: witte stoom...
en bij elk kledingstuk, dat van hem afgaat,
bevangt hem meer en meer een oud vertrouwde droom.*

*De zuster laat hem in het water glijden,
hij vouwt zijn dunne armen op zijn borst,
hij zucht, als bij het lessen van zijn eerste dorst
en om zijn mond gloort langzaam een groot verblijden.*

*Zijn zorgelijk gezicht is leeg en mooi geworden,
zijn dunne voeten staan rechtop als bleke bloemen,
zijn lange, bleke benen, die reeds licht verdorden
komen als berkenstammen door het groen opdoemen.*

*Hij is in dit groen water nog als ongeboren,
hij weet nog niet, dat sommige vruchten nimmer rijpen,
hij heeft de wijsheid van het lichaam niet verloren
en hoeft de dingen van de geest niet te begrijpen.*

*En elke keer, dat hij uit 't bad gehaald wordt,
en stevig met een handdoek drooggewreven
en in zijn stijve, harde kleren wordt gesjord
stribbelt hij tegen en dan huult hij even.*

*En elke week wordt hij opnieuw geboren
en wreed gescheiden van het veilig water-leven,
en elke week is hem het lot beschoren
opnieuw een bange idioot te zijn gebleven.*

The importance of the regular quatrains is immediately evident, confirmed by the rhyme scheme (a-b-a-b, with the exception of the a-b-b-a third stanza, and the recurrence of rhyme sounds from the two previous stanzas [-oren and -even] in the final stanza) and the fullness of each rhyme. This foregrounding of traditional effects seems intended to create a tonal complexity with regard to the subject (the anarchy of the idiot's world and the order of the poet's recreation of it), and it seemed to me that, as a translator, I had no choice but to try to replicate it, despite the fact that exact rhyme and regular meter now have somewhat different values and meanings in English. At this point it would probably be useful to provide Fred Lessing's literal English version:

THE IDIOT IN THE BATH

With hunched up shoulders, squeezed together [squinting] eyes,
Almost trotting and often hooking in [tripping on/over] the mat,
Ugly and awkwardly bent [stooped] on nurse's arm,
Each week the idiot goes to the bath.

The mist that rises from the warm water
Calms [reassures] him: white steam...
And with each article of dress he sheds [that comes off him]
A trusted old dream seizes him more and more.

The nurse lets him slide into the water,
He folds his thin arms upon his chest,
He sighs, as by the quenching of his first thirst
And round his mouth there slowly glows a great gladdening.

His anxious face has become empty and handsome [lit. beautiful]
His thin feet stand straight up like pallid flowers
His long, pale legs, already lightly withering
Appear [lit. come] to loom like birch trunks through the green.

He is in this green water still as (one) unborn,
He knows not yet that some fruits never ripen,

He has not lost the wisdom of the body
And does not need to understand (the) things of the mind.

And every time that he is taken out of the bath,
And firmly with a towel rubbed dry
And wrestled [shoved ?] (back) into his stiff, hard clothes
He resists [pushes/fights back] and then he cries briefly.

And each week he is born anew
And cruelly [harshly] separated from the safe water-life.
And each week it is the fate allotted him
Anew to have remained a frightened idiot.

The translator looking for ways to reproduce formality will of course be opportunistic, noticing potential rhymes buried in the text, e.g. “steam” and “dream” in the second stanza. Gratuitous rhymes, e.g. “first thirst,” will need to be expunged.

Here is what I eventually came up with. We’ve debated the title, which is a bit more idiomatic in Dutch, but finally settled on the literal version of it:

THE IDIOT IN THE BATH

Trotting and almost tripping on the mat,
Held by his nurse, unable to speak,
Shoulders hunched up and eyes squeezed shut,
The idiot goes to his bath each week.

Mist from the water rises, spreads,
Calms him and reassures: white steam . . .
Each piece of clothing that he sheds
Brings him back closer to a trusted dream.

She eases him in; across his chest
He folds thin arms, his breathing slows,
And he sighs, as if he had quenched a great thirst,
While round his mouth a look of pleasure glows.

His anxious face is handsome now, quite blank,
His thin feet stand like flowers—pale, serene—,
His long blanched legs, withered a bit, and lank,
Are like young birch trunks glimpsed amidst the green.

In this green water he has yet to happen,
He need not know that some fruits never ripen.
His body has the wisdom it requires.
His mind can lose the world and its desires.

And when he’s taken out, and toweled dry,
And dressed again in stiff, hard clothes,
He fights and weeps, resisting with his cries,
That world outside, to which he always goes.

Each week he is reborn to painful matters,
 Each week, for him, the same fate lies in store:
 Harshly removed from his life-giving waters,
 To be a frightened idiot once more.

There are compromises here, to be sure, some in the form (off-rhymes instead of full rhymes, a stanza that rhymes a-a-b-b) and some in the sense, but several Dutch readers have assured us that we've caught the flavor and feel of the poem successfully. Any translation is of course the result of hundreds, even thousands, of miniscule choices, and we do not guarantee that this version is our final one, but for the most part we feel we have created an English version that is a successful sibling to the Dutch original. One reader particularly admired the fourth stanza, both for its fidelity to the original and for its effectiveness in English. For me, the stanza that follows it was perhaps the hardest to accomplish and is, in retrospect, reasonably satisfying.

"*De idioot in het bad*" belongs to Vasalis' first collection, *Parken en Woestijnen* [Parks and Deserts], published in 1940. If we turn now to the posthumous collection, *De Oude Kustlijn* [The Old Coastline], published in 2002, we can compare her early and late styles. She is still something of a formalist, tying her poems together with rhyme, but the rhymes are less strict and occur somewhat sporadically. Meter, too, is considerably loosened, so that the movement of the poem feels more organic to its subject and mood, less governed by a predetermined pattern. This has meant, in practice, that I can explore analogous effects in English without necessarily feeling the kind of obligation to the formal pattern that I felt with respect to "Idiot."

Here is the Dutch for one of my favorites among her late poems:

GELIJKTJIDIGHEID

zes uur's avonds in de keuken

*Het hondje met de opgestoken oren
 de aardappels, die te koken staan,
 de klok die houten tikt—de lucht
 ver en grijs-blauw en de manshoge
 spring-balsemien. Het weiland
 met de ongelijke pollen en hun schaduw
 als grotten-tekeningen. En het felle licht
 dat door de blaadren brandt, een fonkelend mysterie.
 En ik—een ander schepsel, dat het ziet.
 Het blijft tesamen en er verandert niets.
 O heer. Ik voel dat mij iets duidelijk gemaakt
 zou moeten worden. Dat mij nu tijd gegeven wordt
 en ook, hoezeer getroffen ook, iets aan mij schort
 om werkelijk te kunnen zeggen: deze orde
 hoe slordig zij ook is: ik zie het en ik ben ontwaakt.
 Vergeef mijn doofheid en mijn blind-zijn
 en vat mij in uw grootheid—ik ben klein
 maar uitgerust helaas met veel te veel tentakels
 die tasten in her anders-zijnde Zijn.*

Even the look of the poem, in Dutch, signals a different attitude toward poetic composition and presentation. The precise and ‘finished’ feel of the earlier poem has been replaced by an interest in process that is already evident in the densities and hesitations of the text.

Here is the literal version that Fred Lessing sent as we began work on this poem:

SIMULTANEITY (SYNCHRONICITY)

six o'clock [in the] evening in the kitchen

The [little] dog with the pricked-up ears
the potatoes, that are boiling (cooking),
the clock that ticks woodenly—the sky
far and gray[ish]-blue and the person (people)-high
jumping-balsemine.* The meadow (pasture, meadow-land, pasture-land)
with the uneven hassocks (clumps) and their shadow
like cave-drawings. And the bright (intense, sharp, glaring) light
that burns through the leaves, a glittering (sparkling) mystery.
And I—an other creature, that views (sees) it.
It remains (stays) together and nothing is changed (changes).
Oh lord. I feel that something should be made
clear (clarified) to me. That now time is given (granted) me
and also, no matter how badly hit (beat up ?), something that matters
to really be able to say: this order
however messy (sloppy, slovenly, slipshod,) it may be: I see it and I am awakened.
Forgive my deafness and my blindness (lit. being-blind)
and hold me in your greatness – I am small (little)
but equipped alas with much too many tentacles
that grope (touch, reach?) in the different-being Being.

*Common names include ‘impatiens,’ ‘jewelweeds,’ and, somewhat ambiguously, ‘balsams’ and ‘touch-me-nots.’ As a rule-of-thumb, ‘jewelweed’ is used exclusively for Nearctic species, ‘balsam’ is usually applied to tropical species, and ‘touch-me-not’ is typically used in Europe and North America. Some species commonly planted in horticulture have altogether more fanciful names, such as ‘Busy Lizzie’ (the well-known *I. walleriana*).

The versions of my collaborator, I can testify, including his willingness to run down the botanical information, seem to have grown in authority and poise as we have worked together. They make my part of the process relatively easy.

Here is the version that I produced shortly after receiving the above:

SIMULTANEITY

Six in the evening, in the kitchen

The little dog with pricked-up ears,
the potatoes boiling on the stove,
the wooden tick of the clock—the sky
far and gray-blue and the jewelweeds,
tall as people. The pasture
with uneven tussocks and their shadows,

like drawings in a cave. And the knifelike light
 that burns through the leaves, a glittering mystery.
 And I—another creature, watching it.
 It blends together and it doesn't change.
 Oh lord. I feel that something ought
 to be made clear to me. That I've been granted time,
 and yet, however overwhelmed I am,
 something is missing that would help me say: this order,
 however slipshod it may be: I see it, I'm awakened.
 Forgive my deafness and my blindness,
 and hold me in your greatness—I am small,
 but have, as well, too many tentacles
 that grope in the different-being Being.

I opted for 'jewelweeds' because that is the folk name I myself know them by, along with 'touch-me-nots.' In the second line I have introduced a stove, partly because I like the way its 'o' links it to the words preceding and following it. In selecting the phrase "knifelike light" I knew I was taking a slight liberty with the original sense (sharp or intense light isn't necessarily knife-like), but I felt, again, that the sound combination was arresting and that the fact of the kitchen helped prepare a reader for the comparison. Vasalis might have agreed, if she liked all those long 'i' sounds.

I took this version to a session with the Seminar on Translation at the Lilly Library, and our discussion of it revealed something I had only been half-aware of: in the first half of the poem (lines 1–8) Vasalis avoids rhyme, as she sets out the details of the domestic world and the bewildering larger world beyond. In the second half (lines 11–19 after a kind of transition couplet in 9–10), which might be described as a prayer, she resorts to greater formality: not to a strict rhyme scheme or a regular meter, but to occasional rhyming that serves to help shift the tone and present a world that, while precarious in its unity, is ultimately more reassuring than the one in the first eight lines. She rhymes *ziet* and *niets* as a couplet, ditto *wordt* and *schort* (and the off-rhyme, *orde*), framing that latter group with *gemaakt* and *ontwaakt*. In her closing lines, the *zijn-Zijn* rhyme, a word-repetition, feels especially crucial.

I had already reflected some of these effects with the off-rhymes 'it' and 'ought,' and 'time' and 'am,' and with the interior off-rhyme group 'another,' 'creature,' and 'together,' but our seminar discussion made me realize that I also needed to address the closing rhyme (or repetition) as well. The solution was staring me in the face: where Vasalis had varied from her *-heid* pattern (*doofheid*, and *grootheid*) in order to achieve her rhyme by means of *blind-zijn*, I had the same opportunity. Instead of 'blindness,' I could say something like 'blind-being' (the literal sense) and set up the final effect. Here is what I finally decided on:

Forgive my deafness and my lack of seeing,
 and hold me in your greatness – I am small,
 but have, as well, too many tentacles
 that grope in the different-being Being.

It's not perfect, perhaps, being a rhyme rather than a repetition and being a

little weaker in effect than 'being blind' or 'blind-being,' but it reflects her canny use of formal effects without, I hope, too much distortion of her original sense. The distant rhyme-effect of 'small' and 'tentacles' helps solidify the closing lines as well.

My thanks to the members of the seminar who helped me see the necessity of this revision. Meanwhile, the process continues. It takes place, I would venture, with a disposition to explore possibilities and opportunities while avoiding too much theoretical baggage, and with a hope that the process, faithfully followed, will sometimes, even often, yield fortunate results. It has made us, both Fred Lessing and myself, resolute pragmatists.

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