

The trials of literary translation, Dutch to English (part three)



In July 2003 I met Lex Jansen, the head man at The Arbeiderspers. Although he had a very natural interest in seeing a translation of *Het woeden* appear in the US, he warned me not to expect too much. He drew my attention to an article by Stephen Kinzer that had appeared in the New York Times a few days before. Its title: ['America Yawns at Foreign Fiction'](#). Among its many sobering sentences was this one:

'Writers, publishers and cultural critics have long lamented the difficulty of interesting American readers in translated literature, and now some say the market for these books is smaller than it has been in generations.'

And this one:

'Several [publishers] said a decisive factor was the concentration of ownership in the book industry, which is dominated by a few conglomerates. That has produced an increasing fixation on profit. As publishers focus on blockbusters, they steadily lose interest in little-known authors from other countries.'

And these:

'Some publishers said that they had no staff editors who read foreign languages, and that they hesitated to rely on the advice of outsiders about which foreign books might capture the imagination of Americans. Others mentioned the high cost of translation, the local references in many non-American books and the different approach to writing that many foreign authors take.'

Briefly: they are

'less action-oriented more philosophical and reflective ... Americans tend to want more

immediate gratification.'

There is also the disproportionate size and power of the United States, which seems to foster the sense that whatever is written elsewhere isn't really relevant to Americans.

'The hard fact is that, given the reality of the world, we simply don't have to be concerned about Laos, but people there might well want to be or have to be concerned about America.'

In summary, relatively little translated fiction is published in the US.

The search continues

I found the article slightly depressing but not surprising. Forty years ago I spent the larger part of a year in Berkeley, having talked my supervisor at the University of Toronto into letting me write my Ph.D. dissertation there. I loved Berkeley, one of the most gorgeous and agreeable places I have ever lived in. But within weeks I took out a subscription to [The Globe and Mail](#) in order to learn what was happening in Canada and other parts of the world that were evidently of little interest to the readers of the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) or the audience of the electronic media in the Bay area. By no means everybody I met in California was self-absorbed and provincial, very far from it, but the local media were. Outside the United States and Vietnam – the year was 1967-68 – few places seemed to exist.

Well, what about the publication of *God Sought to Kill Moses* in Canada? In fact, Canada seems to be little more welcoming to translated fiction than the US. (A special case is that of French-Canadian works translated into English and English-Canadian works translated into French, for which there is significant government support. Few of these translations enjoy a large sale, however). On the advice of a friend who is a literary agent in Toronto, I sent the manuscript to Random House Canada. The reply I received from one of their editors, Damian Tarnopolsky is illuminating:

'A number of us have read *God Sought to Kill Moses* now and I in particular think it's wonderful. Hart has a beguiling and sensitive prose style and a pretty unique sensibility. I've rarely read a novel that brought together so many genres - murder mystery, Bildungsroman, history - with such success. And I especially enjoyed the descriptions of the narrator's musical life. Congratulations on what looks to me like a very fine translation indeed.

Unfortunately that's all I can say, as we are not able to acquire *And God Sought to Kill Moses* (or *The Sundial*) for separate publication in Canada. I'm enthusiastic, but some of my colleagues were not quite as bowled over, and there is also a problematic sales question here: as I mentioned when you first got in touch, it's very hard for us to introduce

writers to Canada if they are unknown in the English-speaking world. If *The Sundial* is very well received in the UK and the US things might change for us for future titles. I was keen to find out who had purchased the rights to the novel in those countries, because if it had been one of our sister companies that would have altered the situation too.'

Tarnopolsky suggested a couple of small publishing houses in Canada who might be interested. I referred the matter to Laura Susijn. She, still hoping to find a publisher in the UK, did not follow up on this suggestion.

Since then I have anglicized the text by changing the spelling and some of the idiomatic expressions to suit UK usage. No doubt there are things left that will strike readers in the UK as odd, but from experience I know that a copy editor will catch and change them. However, I'm not holding my breath waiting for some UK publisher to move. Susijn is now hoping that Maarten's very fine novel [Het psalmenoproer](#) (2006) will create enough interest to prompt its translation into English, and that this, in turn, will create a market for the earlier book. We shall see.

Not by Maarten alone...

Should I say that I am now, like Coleridge's wedding guest, 'a sadder and a wiser man'? Wiser, yes, sadder, no. I have now translated, for Dutch publishing houses, the NLPVF, and the [Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren](#) (VFL), fragments of novels and novellas by Stefan Brijis (*De engelenmaker*), Mensje van Keulen (*De laatste gasten*), Tomas Lieske (*Mijn soevereine liefde*), Thomas Rosenboom (*De nieuwe man*), and Tommy Wieringa (*Joe Speedboot*), as well as a chapter from *Het psalmenoproer*. To the best of my knowledge, none of these works has so far found a publisher in the UK or US. But as Maria Vlaar of the NLPVF said to me recently:

'translations into English are valuable in countries where publishers' representatives who cannot read Dutch but can read English can use the fragments to determine whether it makes sense to have a book translated into their language.'

My efforts, then, have not been altogether in vain.

I have also translated two short stories by Maarten that have appeared in [Granta](#): Maarten 't Hart, [Midsummer in April](#); [Rats](#); and my translation of *Het zweet der goden*, an account of myth versus reality in bicycle racing by the sociologist Benjo Maso, has appeared in the UK as [The Sweat of the Gods](#).

So long as I [continue working](#) on the [history of York University](#), however, and it will not appear in print before 2009, literary translation continues to be no more than a paid hobby. This is not meant to belittle it or my commitment to it. As a hobby it is stimulating and endlessly fascinating, one that has given me something of a window on current Dutch writing and has brought me a number of

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new friends and acquaintances. I regret that *God Sought to Kill Moses* has not (yet) found a publisher. But I had enormous fun translating it, and I am not at all sorry about the time I spent on it. Not all trials are disagreeable.

Dit is het derde en laatste deel van een serie. Het [eerste deel](#) verscheen maandag 13 augustus, het [tweede](#) woensdag 15 augustus.