

Translating *The Waste Land*: Literal accuracy, poetic fidelity and cross-cultural communication

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Abstract

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*The author of this article published an Afrikaans translation of T.S. Eliot's **The Waste Land** in 1992. This article is a personal contemplation and evaluation of the process of literary translation as experienced in the particular case, referring to aspects of translation theory where relevant. It discusses the unremitting balancing act that literary translation requires, where the translator has to pose the need for as close a literal translation as possible against the need to render, again as faithfully as possible, the comprehensive poetic effect of the work, as regards, for example, stylistic features, emotive force and symbolic significance. Through all of this runs the thread of (a sometimes unconscious) transculturation of the work, partly the result of the desire on the part of the translator to communicate the impact of the poem as successfully as possible to a specific audience with a specific cultural identity and cultural presuppositions. Sometimes the inescapable interpretative nature of literary translation could be attributable to the cultural identity of the translator himself and sometimes it could be the result of the innate cultural dimensions or temper of the recipient language. The problems encountered, solutions arrived at and transcultural evolution effected are illustrated from the (original and translated) texts.*

1. Introduction: the problem of evaluating literary translation

In an introduction to a collection of essays on literary translation, a veteran of Translation Studies, James Holmes of the University of Amsterdam, remarks that a fair share of the “professional literature” on literary translation consists of “chatty” or anecdotal essays (Holmes, 1970:vii) and he quotes the Czech translator, Jirí Lévy, as concluding (1963) that most studies on literary translation “have not advanced beyond the range of empirical comments or essayistic aphorisms”. Susan Bassnett (1991:xv) also remarks that until recently “the discourse of translation was extraordinarily old-fashioned when compared to the level of discourse ... in literary theory”. This phenomenon or criticism, when applied to the translation of literary texts, could be attributed to the fact that it is indeed very difficult to draw universal conclusions on literary translation from the experience of individual literary translators, because every experience, every attempt, appears very individualistic, dependent on the nature of the original text, the language and culture from which it derives and the language and culture into which it is translated, the aims of the translation, the context of the translator and so forth. André Lefevere (1981:54-55) expresses this problem elegantly when he maintains that

... knowledge of the translation process is, in fact, ‘personal knowledge’, the kind of knowledge that can be transmitted only by actually working with somebody who has given proof that he or she possesses it ... It would therefore seem more profitable if we approached the specific nature of literary translations (or translated literature) on the level of the product, and not that of the process, where its specificity is not at all apparent.

In spite of the reservations expressed by Bassnett and Holmes above, there is thus, in fact, quite a strong tradition in Translation Studies – as indeed acknowledged by these two critics and justified by Lefevere – of a contemplation of the act of translation from the actual experience of the translator. John Felstiner of Stanford University has, for example, written notable books on his translations of both Pablo Neruda (1980) and Paul Celan (1995) (cf. Wechsler, 1998:42 *et seq.*). Gentzler (1998b:24, 26-28) mentions that when confronting undergraduate translation students with theoretical essays on translation, the essays that the students found most illuminating and valuable were descriptive (and often comparative) studies of actual translations and what he calls “process studies”, contemplations of the translation process by the translators themselves (articulations of Lefevere’s “personal knowledge”). Dodds (1994:131) states emphatically, “Today, more than ever, the translator has to be able to explain what he is doing when he translates, which is why

translation criticism is becoming so widespread in academic circles all over the world today.”

This article follows in that tradition and is also then, to some extent, personal and anecdotal, relating my own experience of translating T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (see Wessels, 1992:1-12), although at least some cognizance is taken of existing writings on translation and some conclusions are drawn relating to, in particular, the aspect of cross-cultural communication involved in literary translation.

2. Balancing literal accuracy and poetic fidelity

My own preoccupations on translating *The Waste Land* were, firstly, to render as literally faithful a rendition of the poem as possible; secondly, to find some form of equivalence in terms of poetic effect, and thirdly to render the translation in natural and fluent Afrikaans. I was reassured to find that these preoccupations appeared to be shared by the majority of literary translators. In an essay published as early as 1791, the British translator, Alexander Fraser Tytler stated that a translation should constitute a complete transcription of the thoughts of the original, should agree in writing and style with the original, but should have the fluency of an original work (cited in Van der Merwe, 1958:22-23). Three hundred years later, the American translator, Richard Brislin (1976:264), still identifies rendering “the sound, the sense, and the feel of a text in a language other than that in which it is originally written” as the translator’s aim. This faces one immediately with compromise. What one gains as regards literal accuracy (“the sense”), one may lose with regard to an as faithful as possible equivalence of poetic effect (“the sound ... and feel”), and this constant play of compromise is what has made some commentators say that true translation – an accurate reconstitution in another language of the form, the content, the poetic impact – is not possible (Van der Merwe, 1958:22, Van den Broeck, 1972:23). The difficulty is compounded by an awareness that form and content are hardly separable (cf. Wechsler, 1998:82). The German theorist Cauer, recognizing the dimension of unremitting compromise, posits “*So treu wie möglich, so frei wie nötig*” (as faithful as possible, as free as necessary) as a maxim for the translator (quoted in Van der Merwe, 1958:22).

Dante already stated in his *Convivio* (1.17.14.45-46) that nothing that had been harmonized in a poetic pattern could be translated from one language to another without destroying all the beauty and harmony (Van der Merwe, 1958:1; Wechsler, 1998:51-52) and in the eighteenth century Humboldt asserted that any translation was an attempt to achieve the unachievable (in Cary, 1986:25). More recently, Jakobson has also declared that all poetic art is technically untranslatable (Jakobson, 1959:

232-239; Bassnett, 1991:15; Picard, 1988:9), while Robert Frost has stated succinctly: “Poetry is what gets lost in translation” (Wechsler, 1998:51). The American poet Longfellow uncompromisingly preferred literal accuracy (“the sense”) to poetic fidelity (“the sound and feel”). He stated:

In translating Dante, something must be relinquished. Shall it be the beautiful rhyme that blossoms all along the line in honeysuckle on the hedge? It must be, in order to retain something more precious than rhyme, namely, fidelity, truth, – the life of the hedge itself (Bassnett, 1991:70).

Thomas Mann maintained that the work’s “innermost intentions, its spiritual posture and intellectual aims, are distorted beyond recognition, to the point of total misunderstanding, no matter how hard the translator tries for faithful reproduction”, but went on to admit that though he had read the works of the great nineteenth-century Russian writers in “feeble” translations, he considered this reading “among my greatest cultural experiences” (quoted in Wechsler, 1998:52, 55). The great Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, was much more open to the beneficial possibilities of translation and went much further to encourage a liberty in the search for equivalence rather than a strict accuracy, stating that “the sense may be correct; indeed the accuracy of the translation itself, of the meaning, may be what destroys the poem” (Felstiner, 1980:26, Wechsler, 1998:102). Also on a more optimistic note, the Polish poet and translator, Edward Balcerzan (1970:5), has pointed out that it is the very act of compromise, which he calls “creative treason” to the original, that will ensure that machine translation will never replace interpretative, human translation, when it comes to “artistic literature”.

Let us look now at my attempts to reconcile form and effect with content, in the opening lines of *The Waste Land*:

*April is steeds die wreedste maand, as
Lilas uit die droogland dring, as
Begeerte syfer deur herinnering, as
Lentereën die trae wortels dwing.*

The original is of course:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

The notion of continuation that is rendered in the original by the emphatic use of present participles (“breeding”, “mixing”, “stirring”), as well as by

the enjambment in these lines, is rendered in Afrikaans by the use of the “as ...”-construction which also suggests continuous activity/ action (“as” meaning “whilst” or “while” in this usage) and which makes it possible to maintain the enjambment of the original. The use of directly translated present participles in Afrikaans (“voortbringende”, “mengende”, “dringende”), in an attempt at literal accuracy, would have been extremely unidiomatic and clumsy. At the same time the translation manages to achieve an assonance (“dring”, “herinnering”, “dwing”) which is very close to the original (“breeding”, “mixing”, “stirring”), approximating the sound effect or impact of the original. The insertion of the word “steeds” in the first line also contributes to the pattern of continuation (which thematically forms part of Eliot’s theme of rebirth and the cycle of life and death) suggested by the present participles in the original, but furthermore – and that is the real reason for its insertion – makes it possible to maintain the same number of stressed syllables in the translation as in the original so as to imitate as far as possible, “so *treu wie möglich*”, the original meter:

á/pril ís/ the crúel/lest mónth,/ bréeding/

as to

April/ is stéeds/ die wréed/ste máand,/ ás/

In the original the first foot is defective and in the Afrikaans the last, while the last foot is inverted in both versions, so that a stressed syllable follows directly after another stressed syllable. The discrepancies are, to the best of my ability, only a manifestation of the principle “so *frei wie nötig*” (as free as necessary).

3. The aspect of transculturation

While the reconciliation of literal accuracy with poetic fidelity or at least equivalency was a conscious preoccupation, another important force was at play, less consciously, and that was the issue of transculturation, or crosscultural communication. The crosscultural aspect of translation has become more and more prominent in Translation Studies, so that Gentzler (1998a:ix) declares unapologetically “... the study of translation *is* the study of cultural interaction”. Rendering the poem into as natural an Afrikaans as possible was, of course, an aim and this endeavour transpired to have dimensions wider than the purely linguistic, and to move into the broader cultural domain. This was evident, for example, in the choice of a title for the translation. *Dorsland* was chosen, instinctively and unhesitatingly. Eliot derived the term “Waste Land” from Jessie Weston’s book, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), which linked the

legends of the quest for the Holy Grail to ancient fertility myths. Weston believed that the legend of the Holy Grail was a Christian version of the ancient fertility myths recounted by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. The Grail romances describe a “waste land”, governed by a maimed and impotent “Fisher King”. The King’s impotence is symbolically linked to the land’s infertility and both are redeemed by the actions of a knightly deliverer, who uses the symbolically charged lance or spear and Holy Grail (cf. Pinto, 1972:152). The lance and the bowl clearly have sexual connotations, so that the stories link human sexual fertility with agricultural (natural organic) fertility and ultimately spiritual fruitfulness and vigour. The term “Waste Land” thus firstly refers to a physically desiccated, infertile piece of land, with symbolic implications on a psychological/sexual and ultimately a spiritual level. The most direct translation for “waste land” would probably be “woesteny” or “woestynland”. However, the term “Dorsland” already existed in Afrikaans, used with reference to the “Dorslandtrek”, which took place in around 1880 when a group of adventurous or disaffected Afrikaners trekked north through the barren plains of German West Africa (now Namibia) to Southern Angola (Muller, 1968:409). It was a foolhardy enterprise which involved great physical suffering. By adopting this term “Dorsland”, “Thirstland”, I could incorporate the emotionally and historically charged significance the term would have for an Afrikaans-speaking readership to the translation of the poem, involving the idea of a quest, as well as notions of hardship and of culture under stress, all of which concur, in my opinion, with the thrust of the original poem. I did not consider the issue very analytically at the time, but I could argue that the name lifted out the central symbol of the infertile land, devoid of the life-giving force of the water of spiritual and emotional life, in the same way as the original title did. The choice of the title is thus an attempt at achieving what translating theorists call equivalence, this time in the broader cultural domain. (The issue of “equivalence” is a contentious one in translation theory (cf. Dodds, 1994:139-140), and the idea that a perfect and universal equivalent exists in another language has “suffered a long retreat, and final disintegration” (Bassnett, 1998b:1) and has been replaced by the aspiration of achieving an optimal (but relative) degree of equivalence within the confines determined by multiple factors such as source and target languages, source and target cultures, the particular text and so forth. The views of the English theorist, Catford (1965:32-37), who has suggested that in translation there is “substitution” of meaning rather than “transference” of meaning, are apposite here.)

The original poem is redolent with images of drought and a hankering after life-giving water, for example in *What the Thunder Said*:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water

and later

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water.

These passages contribute to justifying for me the interpretative translation of the term “Waste Land” as a “Thirstland”.

It is interesting that it is the translation of the very passages describing the drought, the lack of water, in *The Waste Land* (the passages that substantiate the presentation of the “waste land” as a drought-stricken thirstland, recognizable to South African readers), that Wilhelm Grütter cites in his review of the translation in *Die Burger* (1992-08-25), to illustrate what he called “the surprisingly recognizable African/Afrikaans landscape” (die “*verrassend vertroude Afrika/Afrikaanse landskap*”) that emerges:

Hier is geen water slegs klip
Klip en geen water en die sandpad
Die pad wat slinger tussen hoë berge
Berge van klip sonder water

This is a very faithful translation of the original, but nevertheless incidentally throws up another South African echo “*klip sonder water*”, which evokes not only the archetypal South African *dorp*, Putsonderwater, with its overtones of drought and the relentless struggle for survival, but also on a literary level, Bartho Smit’s play of that title (1961), which quite appropriately deals with the struggle of different worldly forces for the soul of man (cf. Kannemeyer, 1983:433-434). Edward Balcerzan (1970:6-7) remarks that,

All artistic communication ... is always formulated in two languages: in natural language and in the language of the literary tradition of the particular civilization ... To translate a lyrical work [or] a drama or novel, not only does one have to breach the frontier of the natural languages [translated from and into], but also carve out for oneself, at the same time, a pathway through the frontier of the two literary traditions.¹

Apart from the choice of *Dorsland*, another instance where the translation breaches a pathway through two literary and cultural traditions is in the title of the third movement "The Fire Sermon". In his own notes Eliot states that Buddha's Fire Sermon corresponds in importance to the Christian Sermon on the Mount. "The Fire Sermon" was therefore translated as "*Vuurpredikasie*", evoking the Afrikaans for the sermon on the Mount, the "*Bergpredikasie*", which is really the only instance in Afrikaans where this term is used for a sermon. It therefore effectively renders the allusion and culturally points to the Afrikaans Bible translation of 1933, which plays as significant a role as source of reference and allusion in Afrikaans literature as the King James version does in English. The translation is thus warranted and also places the translation within the literary evolution of Afrikaans.

The Italian theorist, Benedetto Croce, says (in his *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (1946)) that all translation must diminish or spoil the original, unless a new expression is created by casting the original into a crucible where it is mixed anew with the personal impressions of the translator (cited in Van der Merwe, 1958:1-2). This endorses my own reasoning and at the same time, is strongly reminiscent of modernist notions such as Eliot's own famous (or infamous) comparison of the mind of the poet "in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations" (Eliot, 1980 [1932]:18) to a chamber in which a chemical reaction takes place, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and the "smithy" of Joyce's soul in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce, 1986 [1916]:257). Croce's view foreshadows Derrida's landmark discussion of translation in *Les Tours de Babel*, in which he suggests that the translation process actually creates a new original text (Bassnett, 1991:xv). Derrida's argument is that translation is "a moment in the growth of the original, which

1 Own translation. The original reads:

Toute communication artistique ... est toujours formulée en deux langues: dans la langue naturelle et dans la langue de la tradition littéraire de la civilisation donnée ... En traduisant l'oeuvre lyrique, le drame ou le roman, il faut non seulement franchir la frontière des langues naturelles ..., mais aussi se frayer, simultanément, un passage par la frontière des deux traditions littéraires ...

will complete itself in enlarging itself” (quoted in Venuti, 1992:7) and this links up with the post-modernist notion that all texts assimilate, borrow, imitate, rewrite existing material and that therefore not only translation, but also original writing are acts of “rewriting” (Holman & Boase-Beier, 1999:2). Also illustrating this point, Barnstone (1993:95) refers to *The Waste Land* itself as “Eliot’s great contemporary salad”, composed of “every element of translation” (cf. Holman & Boase-Beier, 1999:3).

As a final example of transculturation within translation, or rewriting an original within a new cultural context, I would like to refer to the short and lyrical fourth section of *The Waste Land*, “Death by water”/ “Waterdood”, because in this section, without being able to point out precise allusions or exact references, I believe that the translation most successfully breaches a pathway through the frontier of the two literary and cultural traditions by coming closest in style and tone, in “sound, sense and feel”, to the poetic style and mood of the Dertigers, poets like Van Wyk Louw and Opperman, who stand in the Afrikaans literary tradition in the same position that Eliot holds in the modern English literary tradition. The English lines read:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or jew
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

The translation reads:

*Phlebas, die Fenisiër, veertien dae dood,
Vergeet die skreeu van meeue, die deining van die diepsee
En wins en verlies.*

*'n Ondersese stroom
Vreet fluisterend sy bene af. Terwyl hy dein en val
Deurreis hy weer die fases van ouderdom en jeug
Tot die draaikolk met hom maal.*

*Vreemdeling of Jood
O jy wat aan die roer staan en loefwaarts staar,
Onthou vir Phlebas, soos jy, eens skoon en rysig daar.*

Holman and Boase-Beier (1999:12) sum up the translator’s dilemma in terms of cultural transfer by declaring that in the act of transcultural translation the translator is forced to take into consideration not only the

social, contextual, poetic, conventional, linguistic and formal constraints that helped shape the original, but also constraints imposed by the new target language, culture and audience, as well as the need to balance the translator's personal knowledge, background and beliefs with those of the author, but maintain that "by virtue of the ability of constraint to engender creativity, it at least has the potential to be more creative", though they admit that "an excessive burden of constraint can be crippling".

4. Translation as interpretation

In an interesting contemplation of the art of literary translation, Balcerzan (1970:5) identifies three processes which take place during literary translation: a change in the system of signs (the language), a process of transformation, which could involve reduction, supplementation or an exchange of elements (the use of equivalents), and thirdly a process of *interpretation*. He cites Roland Barthes as saying that all translation can be reduced to a process of a deconstruction (*décomposition*) of the original and a reconstruction (*recomposition*), producing a new object. Susan Bassnett likewise suggests that the task of poetry translation is to produce an analogous text rather than a "copy" of the original. Citing Shelley, "The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower", she refers to the translation of poetry as transplanting the seed (Bassnett, 1998a:57-76; Gentzler, 1998a:xix). Inevitably, the translator's interpretation of the original text will play a determining role in the construction of the "analogous text". Along the same lines, Robert Wechsler (1998:9) remarks that a translator "has to be able to read as well as a critic and write as well as a writer" and Marilyn Gaddis Rose (1997:13) declares that "literary translation is also a form of literary criticism".

This process of interpretation inevitably also played a considerable role in the "reconstruction" of *The Waste Land* in Afrikaans. The following lines occur in the second movement of the poem, "A Game of Chess":

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.

This passage describes the mythological rape of Philomela by her brother-in-law, King Tereus, and as far as I am concerned, forms part of the theme of "sexual disorder", as Bernard Bergonzi (1978:95) calls it,

which is symptomatic of the spiritual aridness of the Waste Land landscape. While “jug jug” is apparently the conventional way of rendering a nightingale’s song in Elizabethan poetry (Ferguson *et al*, 1996:1239), it is also a phrase used by oriental prostitutes to advertise their services². In my reading of the poem, the song of the nightingale, who is the raped woman transformed by the gods, thus serves as a warning to the world, the spiritually desiccated waste land world, of the dangers and degradations of “sexual disorder”. Yet, the audience’s “dirty ears” prefer to hear the call of the prostitutes rather than the melody of the nightingale. To translate “Jug Jug”, I thus had to find a term in Afrikaans that would mean sexual intercourse, but only obliquely, not immediately or forcibly. “*Fok fok*”, suggested by a poet friend, would have been strident and banal, and not at all equivalent in poetic impact to the much subtler “Jug Jug” in the original. “*Kafoefel kafoefel*”, while quite sonorous, would have been distinctly comic, and therefore also inappropriate. In the end, I chose “neuk neuk”. The verb “neuk” is very familiar in Afrikaans, but does not immediately suggest sexual intercourse, while it does, however, mean exactly that in its source language, Dutch. By using “neuk” in its Dutch sense, that one step of distance, secured in the original by reference to the fairly obscure usage of the term by oriental prostitutes, was achieved, while the sexual implications of the term were retained at one remove. In Afrikaans the passage reads:

Bo die kaggelrak antiek, pryk –
 Soos ’n vensterblik op woud en plant
 Die treurmare van Philomel, wreed aangerand
 Deur die koning, die barbaar; tog spoel
 Die nagtegaal se lied onaantasbaar deur woestyn,
 Vertolk steeds haar pyn, en steeds verkies die wêreld
 Die vuil ‘neuk neuk’-refrein.

The same “Jug Jug” refrain is again used later in the poem, immediately after the reference to the sensual encounter between Sweeney and Mrs Porter and just before Mr Eugenides’s dirty week-end proposition, in a forging of bird song and the rape to evoke the pervasive theme of sexual disorder:

Twit twit twit
 Jug jug jug jug jug jug

2 To my regret, I was unable to retrace the original source for the identification of “jug jug” as a term used by Oriental prostitutes, in spite of considerable effort. (I came across this reading during my student years at Oxford, twenty years ago.) In spite of this failing, and even merely regarding it as a putative interpretation, I think the discussion valuable in terms of the theoretical issues it illustrates.

So rudely forc'd
Tereu

which becomes:

Twiet twiet twiet
Neuk neuk neuk neuk neuk neuk
Wreed aangerand
Tereu

One of the rewards of the literary translation process is the discovery of unexpected gains, to balance the inadequacies of expression with which one struggles, sometimes recalling for the humble translator Eliot's own expression of the difficulties of the creative process:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

(Eliot, 1974:194)

The Slovak academic, Anton Popovic (1970:78), comments that the "losses incurred in the process [of translation] are sometimes such as to shake our faith in the very possibility of translating a work of art. Yet the act of translating may also produce the opposite result, that is, bring actual gain". These "gains" can be of the nature of the example of "Put-sonderwater" cited above, where there is an unexpected resonance with the culture or history of the target language group, or could be of a more technical kind. The following lines from the fifth movement of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said",

There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain

were translated as

*Tussen die berge is daar nie eens stilte
Maar droë dorre donder sonder reën.*

The second line, "... *droë dorre donder sonder reën*", has an onomatopoeic force which is absent from the original "... dry sterile thunder without rain".

Another such unexpected "gain" in terms of imagery occurs in the second movement, "A Game of Chess" ("Skaakspel" in Afrikaans) where

the following lines introduce the hysterically charged “pseudo-conversation” of the Belladonna and her husband/companion:

Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
Spread out in fiery points
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.

In Afrikaans the lines read:

*In die gloed van die vuur, onder haar borsel
Vertak haar hare in punte wat gloei
Ontbrand in woorde wat spoedig tot woedende stilte verskroei.*

In English a pattern of images is set up by the “fiery” points – a physical description of the woman’s brushed hair in the firelight – and “glowed” which suggests the angry tenor of her emanating speech. In the translation this same pattern is followed in “gloei”, describing the glow of her hair, and “ontbrand”, describing the emanating of her speech, but is taken further and completed in “verskroei” which, forms part of the same pattern of fire images and, I would suggest, effectively renders the highly charged “burning out” of her speech in the lurching dialogue that follows:

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.

or in Afrikaans:

*My senuwees is gedaan. Gedaan! Bly by my.
Praat met my. Hoekom praat jy nooit nie? Praat.
Waarom dink jy? Wat dink jy? Wat?
Ek weet nooit wat jy dink nie. Dink.*

While one of the obvious losses in translating *The Waste Land* is the absence of the immediate signification that some of the literary allusions would have for a well-read English poetry reader, like the references to Marvell’s “To his Coy Mistress”, the allusions to international literature or Biblical allusions fortunately remain equally valid in original and translation. This can be illustrated from an extract in the first section of “The Fire Sermon”:

The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept ...
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

The passage contains allusions to Spenser's *Prothalamion*, Psalm 137 and Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress". As far as the Spenser is concerned, the best I could do, was to try and preserve the lyrical quality and rhyme of the lines (Brislin's "sound"). As regards Eliot's allusion to Marvell, I tried to suggest the imminence of time and death (Brislin's "sense") by preserving the image of the skeleton passing by laughing (equivalence as regards metaphor) and by preserving the jocular, irreverent tone (equivalence as regards "feel"). With regard to the Biblical allusion I could, however, use the exact equivalent phrase from the source of reference and thus achieve optimum equivalence:

*Die nimfe het vertrek,
En hul vriende, die dralende seuns van maatskappydirekteure,
Is weg sonder om 'n adres te verstrek.
By die water van Leman het ek gesit en geweene ...
Soete Theems, vloei saggies tot ek ophou sing,
Soete Theems, vloei saggies want my stem is sag en woorde min.
Maar agter my in 'n rukwind kan ek hoor
Hoe bene ratel, en 'n grynslag strek van oor tot oor.*

Another example where the preoccupations of the recipient (Afrikaans) culture affects the translation occurs later in "The Fire Sermon" where the quick and meaningless sexual encounter of the house agent's clerk and the typist is described:

His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference

becomes:

*Sy eiewaam vereis geen toegeneentheid,
Gebruik die gaping van onverskilligheid,*

in which overtones of the rugby field can be heard.

5. Translating rhyme and rhythm

As rhyme – when used in free verse – has a particularly striking impact, an attempt was made to maintain rhyme where it occurred. Note the following extract, also from “The Fire Sermon”, the conclusion of the above-mentioned encounter:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
 Hardly aware of her departed lover;
 Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
 ‘Well, now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.’
 When lovely woman stoops to folly and
 Paces about her room again, alone,
 She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
 And puts a record on the gramophone.

The rhyme scheme is very conventionally abab/cdcd. This was preserved in the Afrikaans:

*Sy draai na die spieël en betrag haar beeld,
 Skaars bewus van haar minnaar wat ry;
 Half-bewustelik dink sy verveeld:
 ‘Wel, nou’s dit klaar en ek’s bly dis verby.’
 As ’n lieflike vrou haar met stommiteit ophou,
 Stap sy weer alleen deur haar kamer,
 Druk sy haar hare reg met haar mou
 En laat ’n plaat deur die kamer dawer.*

The problem of transforming rhythm in poetry translation has also received a great deal of theoretical attention. The seventeenth-century French bishop and educator, Huetius, commented that in translation “the most important rule is to preserve the meter and the syntax, so that the poet can be shown to his new audience like a tree whose leaves had been removed by the rigors of winter, while the branches the roots, and the trunk can still be seen” (Wechsler, 1998:10). This is easier said than done, however. Viktor Kochol (1970:107) distinguishes between imitating the rhythm of the original exactly, which is seldom possible, substituting an adequate rhythmic substitution, and using an inadequate rhythmic substitution. In the interests of a fluent, natural sounding translation, one mostly has to make do with the second, but it is possible, at times, to achieve the first. Two of my favourite lines in the entire poem, come in the message of the thunder in the last movement, in which a vision of a possible deliverance from the waste land condition is suggested:

The awful daring of a moment’s surrender (12 syllables, 4 stresses)
 Which an age of prudence can never retract. (11 syllables, 4 stresses)

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