

## DESTINATION: MULTILINGUALISM THE PROJECT JAN H. MYSJKIN

Johan SONNENSCHNEIN<sup>1</sup>

1. PhD, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Corresponding author: johansonnenschein@hotmail.com

On the whole, Flemish-Dutch poetic production between 1 January 2009 and 1 September 2010 (the odd relic of a jury member) was an overwhelmingly monolingual undertaking. Apart from *Buurtkinderen* (Kids of the Neighborhood) by Arjen Duinker, an exceptional book in all respects, the motto of poetry in the Netherlands and Flanders seems to be: Bilingualism Only Here and There. Leo Vroman has written some of his poems in the language of the country where he has been living half of his life and has published them in his collection *Soms is alles eeuwig* (Sometimes Everything is Eternal), off and on independently, on and off as English-Dutch duets. *That was it.*

The other examples of bilingualism made use of translators. One Dutch collection included English translations, and three Flemish collections French translations. §1‡ The poets in question are not their own translators, again with one exception: *Enerzijds/L'autre versant* (The Other Side) by Annie Reniers. However, there are poets who integrate their own translations into their own untranslated poems: within the corpus, exactly two. Elly de Waard translated Emily Dickinson twice in *In het halogeen* (In the Halogen), Eva Cox transposes Gwyneth Lewis and the Ghentian symbolist Charles van Lerberghe in *Een twee drie ten dans* (One Two Three Let's Dance) and includes adaptations of Rilke and, once again, Dickinson. In these cases, the translations indicate a kinship: without the source text, they are part of the idiom of the collection of poems. The foreign-language text is recast into Dutch poetry, these are the translations *into* Dutch, the target language is primary.

If these poets are already a minority, the opposite way seems downright barred: translations *out of* Dutch, eccentric. If we ignore

the corpus at stake, the rule is confirmed by the exception of Paul Claes, the only polyglot prowling about the letters of the Low Countries. His debut, *Rebis* (1989), was a multilingual collection in which he transposed the poem "The Son of the Sun" in eight languages; *Glans/Feux* (Lights, 2000) was systematically Dutch-French and *De waaier van het hart* (The Range of the Heart, 2004) contains a Dutch-Latin sequence. Claes's perspective is oriented toward the history of Europe and is scarcely imitated. To my knowledge, in recent years, only Saskia de Jong has done something similar in the eccentric collection *resistent* (resistant, 2006): her thirty-three poems on mint green pages were followed by a ghastly pale appendix, rendering her poetry in the Spanish tongue of Santiago Martin.

The exception *par excellence* is Jan H. Mysjkin. Since his debut, *Vormbeeldige gedichten* (± Exemplary Poems, 1985), his poetry is hard to place, or even to find. His work has been classified by the editors of *Hotel New Flanders* (trilingual!) among the "eccentric oeuvres". The jacket blurb of Mysjkin's sixth book, *Voor mijn ogen ligt het zwijgen* (Before my Eyes, Nothing to Say), eagerly took on this characterization and even added the label "resolutely international". Did his publisher – the Centre of Poetry in Ghent – want to cultivate this internationalism by refusing to send his book to juries? The poems were published early 2010, but Mysjkin escaped the corpus of Dutch-speaking poetry.

Mysjkin's debut opened with a multilingual series, of which the subtitle "mélanges" – a pun of "mélange" (mix) and "langues" (languages) – announced a program, radicalized with *Before my Eyes, Nothing to Say*. To me, the structure of the book seems unprecedented. The pages on the left – in bilingual publications, the location of the source language – welcome fourteen

poems in Dutch; the pages on the right – usually the location of the target language – are each offered in a different language: Spanish, Romanian, Swedish, Hungarian, Italian, Serbian, Arabic, French, Danish, German, Bulgarian, Russian, Estonian and English. Thus, the purpose of Mysjkin's Dutch poetry is his departure *out of* the source language. Destination: multilingualism.

The keyword in Mysjkin's collection proudly occupies the place where the average Dutch poet currently thanks his or her authorities:

This multilingual publication was made possible thanks to the unwavering commitment of the poet and his friends (m/f), without the support of any private or public institution.

Here, multilingualism is opposed to national institutions. This makes Mysjkin's recent work closely related to his many translations of the avant-garde, culminating in *In het teken van de schorpioen. Dada en surrealisme in de Franse poëzie* (In the Sign of Scorpio. Dada and Surrealism in French poetry, 2002) and the Dada collection he inaugurated at Vantilt Press (1998-2003 – both with grants for that matter). There was also political motivation behind his effort for a better relationship between French, Flemish and Walloon poetry in anthologies such as *Hanenveren van diverse pluimage. Levende Franstalige poëzie uit België* (± Cocks of Different Feathers. Living French-speaking Poetry in Belgium, 2004). Recently, he has gone further by producing an issue on Dutch poetry for the French-speaking Moroccan magazine *Électron libre* (Free Electron, 2005) and by strengthening his connection with Romanian poetry, barely known here, in the anthology *Engel in het raam op het oosten* (Angel in the Window on the East, 2010). Again, the flow goes both ways: together with Linda Maria Baros, he works on translations of Dutch poetry into Romanian.

It's not just his own translations that are part of Mysjkin's condition as a poet. His previous book, *Kosovo* (2006-2009), presented thirty-three translations of one poem (including one into Visual Poetry and one into Sign Language) and he has found an innovative, narrative extension

with *Before my Eyes, Nothing to Say*. This collection is again a collective enterprise: the "bibliographic notes" at the end give a brief history of each collaborator. Only one translator shows great similarity to the poet. The pseudonym (2) John Fenoghen signs for the French translation. When one reads that Fenoghen also published as "Jan H. Mysjkin", it is clear that this means not only a farewell to the idea of the source text, but also to the idea of the source author. Moreover, the Dutch text of the diptych Mysjkin/Fenoghen separates the narrator/protagonist of the book from the author/translator. The sentence: "To recite a few sentences in French learned by heart, / without understanding the first thing about it." is reflected in impeccable French: "Dire quelques phrases de français apprises par cœur, / mais n'en comprendre pas un mot." The "zhij" who appears in this poem as a desired character is translated as "ellui". In the poem "Beter kan niet meer" (published in *nY* #1) appears the figure "Harem", in the French version (look here – *Tout est pour le mieux*) named "Ille". Mysjkin's poetry is populated by androgens and gynanders, showing a desire for bisexuality, at the least.

The effect of Mysjkin's project on the reader is first disorientation: the lazily reading eye winds its way through the pages on the left, where we arrive at many exotic locations in short episodes. The journey goes through steppes, deserts, mountain passes covered with snow and tundras soaked by rain, to find rest in hotel rooms or steaming verandas, where the provision of sweat is filled up one "cordial" after another. During the tour, we goggle at macaques, mongooses, crocodiletigers, dogbats, butterflyfish, and we go hunting often. The real trophy, however, is the moment when the moon rises in the sky while the sun is still going down, the quarter which "contains more beauty than all words invented by men can evoke."

This poetry seems to aim at the sensory perceptions of travel without hindrance, unmediated by cameras or tour operators, but time and again it acknowledges its subjection to the medium of the narrating traveler: language. Reading Mysjkin's poetry is comparable to the

way the modern tourist consults the travel guide: promising, but preventing real surprises. Mysjkin does not force the barrier of foreign languages by polyglossy, for this, his world is too big and his journey too unpredictable. His translators guide the reader *into* international languages. We jump from a coach to a camel, from a “bicicleta” in an “uraltes Dampfauto, gebaut wie ein Lokomobil”, and end on “paralitic steamboats”. We smoke a “cigarro” and “pigari” in the “damernas rokrum” (ladies’ smoking room). And inevitably much remains outside our understanding: Arabic, Estonian and three variants of the Cyrillic alphabet make the reader face the strangeness of language.

The poems contain strong criticism of the human drive to talk. Instead of joining in a conversation with a few words of broken English, the narrator emphasizes his linguistic discomfort, sometimes to the point of hatred: “Talking is the most horrible / mastication / of words that I know of.” In the Danish of Gerard Cruys the *Wortsatz* “mastication” is expressed with a gnashing of teeth even more grating:

Samtale er den varste  
gennemtygning  
af ord jeg kender til.

If the word “samtale” first seemed such a charming foreign word (“*Scandinavians have such a lovely language*”), here it shows its most “horrible” side. The word appeared shortly before in the Swedish of Hans Johansson:

Efter fem minuters samtal markte jag att dat finns sa gott som inte en enda forenande lank, inte en enda kontaktpunkt med varlden som ar gemensam for tva personer pa samma gang.

After a five-minute conversation, Mysjkin’s narrator has had enough of the *samtal* and wants to leave. The escape route seems to be “Rest” (as two poems are called), or “Phantasmagoria” or “Dream”: the migration inward. And on this point, the character is again decisively different from the poet. The latter does not choose to be silent, but instead explodes into multilingualism. The final poem, “Triumph”, opens exhausted: “There was a final exchange of visiting cards / with a whole load of people.” The repetition of “There was” at the beginning of phrases

structures the last two poems, concluding a series where much has remained unsaid. The collection ends with the sentence: “There was this that I speak a fair amount of English, as I triumphantly made clear.” Again, with great translating irony, the Dutch is rendered into English. (3) *Before my Eyes, Nothing to Say* is the first of what has to become a series of multilingual collections of picaresque poetry, which Mysjkin calls “chapters”. Soon Meulenhoff will publish *Rekenkunde van de tastzin* (Arithmetic of touch), comprising chapters two and three, published in part in *nY* #1 and some other magazines. They appear without translation from Dutch: the publisher was afraid that this formula would be ill received for its lack of seriousness. This is exactly the kind of reaction that highlights the controversial aspect of Mysjkin’s project: the target group and the target language are not waited on hand and foot, but prompted to leave.

However, the translations come trickling in on *ny-web.be*, and *nY* #6 has already published five poems from the fourth chapter. In this issue (*nY* #9), Mysjkin offers three hunting scenes from the second half of the sixth chapter, in Dutch, in Dutch-French and in Dutch-Romanian. We can expect an extremely exciting and increasingly multilingual final book, of the magnitude of the *Count of Monte-Cristo*, the serial that Mysjkin translated in entirety last year. Could this “count” be “C.M., the unknown who preceded me”, to whose memory *Before my Eyes, Nothing to Say* is dedicated? Or is it the mysterious Charles, who is asked at the end of each chapter to tell *more*?

### Endnotes

1. Andrea Stiltiens & Vrouwkje Tuinman, *Intensive care*, (translated by Astrid van Baalen, D’junge Hond Press, Zwolle, 2010); Joris Iven, *Ninglinspo* and Johan van Cauwenberge, *De vorstelijke gedichten* (both translated by Bernard de Coen, both published by P Press, Leuven, 2009) and Hedwig Speliers *Len de l’el* (translated by Willy Devos, Manteau Press, Antwerp, 2009).
2. In Dutch, Mysjkin doesn’t use the concept of “pseudonym”. He plays on a sound shift impossible to render in English, namely from *schuilnaam* to

- ruilnaam*. The first word (usually rendered as “pseudonym”), an agglutination of “name of hide” becomes “name of change” or “name of exchange”.
3. By John Irons (no “name of change”), author of the bilingual collection *Pa* (2007), with translations into Dutch by Eva Gerlach.