

PROCESS BEFORE EVERYTHING

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Dear colleagues, I'll talk about the translation of a poetic form which looks as free as a verse can possibly be, but which is at least as binding, if not more, as metrical and rhymed verse.

I would like to talk about the 'processual' translation, a term I introduced in Flanders and the Netherlands to describe how I came to translate a number of French poems into Dutch, particularly poems by Michelle Grangaud, Raymond Queneau and Jacques Roubaud. By 'processual' translation, I mean an approach towards the original that stresses the *process* at work in the text more than any other feature. It should be noted from the start that not all texts lend themselves to a processual translation – to allow for such an approach, the meaning of the original should be driven primarily by the process behind the writing and less by everything else. This is the case in the poem 'Pleut!' (Rains!) by Jacques Roubaud, first published in 1995 in the French magazine *Nioques* as part of a cycle entitled *Six petites pièces logiques* (Six small logical pieces).

I translated all *Six petites pièces logiques* for the Poetry International festival in Rotterdam, where Jacques Roubaud was invited in June 1997. The cycle contains twelve texts: the six small logical pieces promised by the title, each doubled by a poem that develops or comments on an aspect of the logical piece that precedes it. Thus, the poem 'Pleut!' follows the first small logical piece entitled 'Il pleut' (It rains). The poem consists of the word 'Pleut!', which comes back several times, and a list of street names. I will read the first stanzas:

Pleut!

Pleut!
rue des Jeûneurs
rue d'Uzès

rue Méhul

Pleut!
rue des Vertus
rue Eugène-Spüller

Pleut!
rue Budé
rue de Turenne
rue de Lutèce

Pleut!

Pleut!
rue de Chevreuse
rue de Fleurus
rue de Furstemberg
rue Suger

Pleut!

Pleut!
rue Euler
rue Greffuhle
rue de Surène

Pleut!
rue Bleue
rue de Bruxelles
rue de Chevèrus
rue Duperré
rue Jules-Lefebvre

and so on...

At the time I translated this poem, I had been following the author for a quarter of a century. I had translated him several times; I had heard him read at the evenings of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (OULIPO – Workshop of Potential Literature) in Paris; I had had the

chance to look through some of my translations with him. I was therefore quite familiar with his work and I immediately felt there was a snake in the grass, i.e. a process supporting the list of streets. As I recognized a few streets as being Parisian, I took a map of Paris and discovered that (1) all were indeed Parisian and (2) they were grouped by district. The first three streets were taken from the second district, the two following from the third district, the three following from the fourth district, and so on. Okay, but why these street names and not others? And why are there no street names of the first, fifth and seventh district?

Just think the *oulipian* way and you will notice that there is an 'e' and a 'u' in the word 'pleut', and that this 'e' and this 'u' come back in all street names of the list. So it's raining in these streets because they all have the 'e + u' of 'pleut' in their name. The poem has twenty-one stanzas, which correspond to the twenty districts of Paris, plus a conclusion that goes as follows:

Pleut?
Pleut!

The first, fifth and seventh stanza are limited to the single word 'pleut', because there are no streets in the districts of these numbers where it's raining, given the constraint in question.

It is not difficult to translate the word 'pleut' into Dutch, everybody can do that. But then... How to continue? It is not enough to translate the word 'pleut' into 'regent' for example - one could also translate by 'plenst' (conserving the 'pl' from 'pleut') or 'zevert' (with a wink to Hugo Claus winking at Guido Gezelle) - and adopt the list as it is:

Regent!

Regent!
rue des Jeûneurs
rue d'Uzès
rue Méhul

and so on...

But the reason for the existence of the list - i.e.: the processual constraint - would be lost. After finding the process supporting the list, it must then be reinstated in the translation. As I translated this poem for the Rotterdam festival, my first idea was to make a list of all the street names of the port town containing all letters of the word 'regen' (= 'rain'). I had to abandon this idea, as the list became very very long - it rains far too much in the streets of Rotterdam. I therefore chose another city, being Ghent, where I lived for the better part of fifteen years. However, I did not only choose Ghent because of this anecdotal reason. This city has the advantage that its Flemish name, *Gent*, is included in the word 'regent', the Dutch translation of 'pleut'. The city of Ghent is in some way suggested by the starting-word. The initial choice of Rotterdam had been dictated by a reason outside the poem, namely the *situation* in which Roubaud would find himself reading the poem; he was invited to the festival of this city and a substantial part of the audience certainly would have recognized the streets. The choice of Ghent/Gent finds its meaning within the linguistic material of the initial word. Furthermore, there was the problem of the composition into stanzas, as Ghent is not divided into districts like Paris. I adopted the alphabetical order of streets, which is not as strong as Roubaud's constraint, since it is no longer imposed by the organization of the city itself. Below are the first stanzas of this Dutch translation:

Regent!

Regent!
Blankenbergestraat
Bruggen der Nieuwe Wandeling
Brughuizeken

Regent!

Regent!
Driegatenbrug
Drongensesteenweg

Regent!
Egelantierstraat

Regent!

Regent!
Gaardeniersweg
Gentse Tankvaart
Goudenregenstraat
Goudensterstraat
Gouvernementstraat
Graaf van Vlaanderenplein
Griendeplein
Groenebriel
Groene Ooie
Groene Valleibrug
Groenevalleilaan
Groenewalstraat
Groentenmarkt

Regent!
Heilig-Sacramentstraat
Herdenkingslaan

Regent!

and so on...

The list of street names is completely different, but the process is exactly the same.

In 2002, Jacques Roubaud was invited once again to the Poetry International festival in Rotterdam to deliver the annual 'Defence of Poetry'. As he was the guest of honour, a collection of translations into Dutch was prepared for the same occasion, more precisely a choice of his most recently published volume, *La forme d'une ville change plus vite, hélas, que le cœur des humains* (The Shape of a City Changes Faster, Alas, Than the Human Heart), published in 1999 by Gallimard. The 'Six petites pièces logiques' had found their final place in this volume and I intended to include my translations of 1997 in the Dutch collection.

But a big problem arose. *La forme d'une ville change plus vite, et cetera* was a collection entirely devoted to the city of Paris, ergo, I could not include the poem 'Pleut!' in its transposition to

Ghent. That would have been an interpretation that flies in the face of the new context, where the poem 'Pleut!' defined an unmovable place on the globe. So I had to redo the list of names on the basis of the street map of Paris. However, the processual constraint didn't change: I searched for all the streets of Paris that have the Dutch word 'regen' in their name, i.e. the letters 'r' + 'g' + 'n' + 2 times 'e'. Of course, this time, the organization into stanzas according to the twenty districts was kept. This new translation of 'Pleut!' surprised many, because they wondered how a list of streets in French replacing a list of other streets in French, can be called a 'translation' into Dutch! The answer is that it's raining in all streets, but that it 'pleut' in the streets of the original and it 'regent' in the streets of the translation.

During the festival, Jacques Roubaud read the list in the original language and I read my Dutch translation. It was the afternoon of Wednesday, June 19, 2002, in the splendidly sun-drenched garden of Schouwburgcafé Floor. During this reading aloud, it was revealed that the Dutch translation is 'stronger' than the French original, insofar as the street names suggest how to say them. As the word 'regen' is found anagrammatically in all the streets of Paris bearing the name of a 'general' or a 'sergeant', a good part of the list can be read by a military tone, alternating with a more suave or neutral tone for other streets. Those who know Paris will not be surprised to learn that most streets in honour of the soldiery are to be found in the sixteenth district and for that reason one runs a greater risk there of getting wet.

In conclusion, dear colleagues, I would now like to read the full poem in my second Dutch translation:

Regent!
rue d'Argenteuil

Regent!
rue Greneta

Regent!
rue Béranger

rue de Bretagne
rue Eugène-Spüller
rue Greneta
rue du Grenier-Saint-Lazare

Regent!
rue Charlemagne
rue Geoffroy-l'Asnier

Regent!
rue Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire

Regent!
rue Garancière
rue de Grenelle
rue Guynemer

Regent!
rue du Général-Bertrand
rue du Général-Camou
rue de Grenelle

Regent!
rue Alfred-de-Vigny
rue du Général-Foy
rue de Saint-Petersbourg

Regent!
rue de la Grange-Batelière
rue de la Tour-d'Auvergne
rue Saint-Georges

Regent!
rue Eugène-Varlin
rue Faubourg-Poissonnière
rue de Grange-aux-Belles
rue René-Boulangier

Regent!
rue de la Folie-Regnault
rue Guillaume-Bertrand

Regent!
rue Fabre-d'Eglantine
rue du Général-Archinard
rue Neuve-de-la-Garonne
rue du Sergent-Bauchat

Regent!
rue George-Eastman
rue des Longues-Raies

Regent!
rue Campagne-Première
rue du Général-Humbert
rue Henri-Regnault
rue de la Légion-Étrangère
rue Vercingétorix

Regent!
rue Frédéric-Magisson
rue du Général-Beuret
rue du Général-Lucotte
rue Gutenberg
rue Mathurin-Régnier
rue Vigée-Lebrun

Regent!
rue d'Argentine
rue Conseiller-Collignon
rue Erlanger
rue Eugène-Delacroix
rue du Général-Anselin
rue du Général-Aubé
rue du Général-Delestraint
rue du Général-Malleterre
rue du Général-Niox
rue George-Sand
rue Pierre-Guérin
rue du Sergent-Maginot

Regent!
rue Alfred-de-Vigny
rue Legendre

Regent!
rue André-Messenger
rue Arthur-Honegger
rue Eugène-Carrière
rue Gustave-Rouanet
rue Pierre-Ginier
rue de Trétaigne
rue Vauvenarges

Regent!
rue Alexandre-Fleming

rue Barbanègre
rue Gaston-Tessier
rue du Général-Brunet
rue du Général-Lasalle
rue Georges-Lardennois
rue de la Grenade
rue Henri-Murger
rue du Pré-Saint-Gervais

Regent!
rue des Envierges

rue Fernand-Léger
rue Pauline-Kergomard

Regent?
Regent!

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