

From the Germanic Soup

David Colmer

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One of the basic principles of literary translation is that you shouldn't translate from a language you don't know well. I say "you" deliberately here, rather than "one" or a construction like "responsible literary translators", because as much as I hold this principle to be fundamental and almost self-evident, I have to admit to applying it more to others than myself.

Let me be specific. I learnt German first, as a young adult, and then Dutch, and for the last twenty years or so my main work has been translating Dutch novels, poetry and children's literature into English. Although I have lived in the Netherlands for almost thirty years and have translated millions of words of Dutch, I am still learning and hardly a day goes without my stumbling upon a word or phrase that is new or difficult to interpret, sometimes because it's regional or historical, but often enough simply because I've somehow managed to avoid noticing it or thinking about it up till that moment. If I'm translating Belgian Dutch, sometimes called Flemish, I might experience the same phenomenon every hour. Of course, these gaps in my knowledge are exposed more readily because of my preference for stylistically challenging literature, but over the years my sense of the importance of a deep understanding of the source language has only grown. If I'd known what I know now thirty years ago, I would never have dared to take my first steps as a literary translator!

Besides translating from Dutch and occasionally German, I have also, over the last decade or so, translated poems from Frisian, perhaps one a month on average, and this is a much more dubious endeavour. Frisian, or more properly West Frisian, is the Netherlands' second official language and spoken by some 400,000 people, mostly in the Dutch province of Friesland. I have never lived in Friesland, I don't speak Frisian, and I can only follow it when people talk simply and slowly. (Although I translate from the page, I believe firmly that being able to understand and appreciate spoken language is a prerequisite for translating poetry and any prose with poetic elements. Unless you understand the "music" of the original, you can't possibly reproduce it.) I can read Frisian when it's fairly straightforward, but anything even slightly complicated has me running for a dictionary. With ample recourse to that dictionary, I can more or less read a poem or short story, but I mustn't forget that my comprehension is naive. At best, it lacks appreciation of subtleties and references; at worst, it's full of misunderstandings. A

prerequisite of my translating “from Frisian” is having a translation of the same work into Dutch to use as a crib. If somebody else were to translate Dutch with such cursory knowledge and relying on a German or French translation, I would be irate, and rightly so. What, apart from deep-rooted hypocrisy, can justify my doing this work?

The simplest explanation is that I have been asked, several times, and each time, neither I nor the poet, editor or publisher doing the asking has been aware of anyone with a track record in English poetry translation and the Frisian skills to do the job directly. The second ameliorating factor is the closeness of Dutch and Frisian and the fact that I have done the translations with the help of a Dutch translation, often produced by the poet in question. Third, I have been able to consult at length with Frisian speakers, including the poets, editors and Frisian-Dutch translators. (Sometimes asking the poet to send a recording of the poem so I can listen to it over and over again to absorb the rhythm and rhyme.) None of this makes me the ideal translator, but until that translator emerges and proves their ability, others will continue to see me as an available stopgap.

The translation I am presenting here is particularly complex because the poem, by the former poet laureate of Friesland, Eeltsje Hettinga, is about the German-language poet Paul Celan, his life and work, his relationship with the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann, and his death in Paris in 1970. All too often there is a tendency to see the literature of minor languages as interesting only inasmuch as it fills the gaps in the canon by concentrating on its own provincial, often rural, backward-looking reality, as if the interconnectedness of the twenty-first century doesn't extend across the whole planet or as if languages that are being pushed back into the private, familial sphere can't be used to reflect on the literary and political world that impinges on that sphere.

I translated the poem for *Swallows and Floating Horses*, a major anthology of Frisian literature, basing my translation on Jetske Bilker's Dutch translation and the Frisian original, and consulting both Bilker and Hettinga about how to resolve the many translation problems. The German epigraph is from Celan's "Psalm" (In Michael Hamburger's translation: "A nothing / we were, are, shall / remain, flowering: / the nothing-, the no one's rose.") There was something head-spinning about trying to use a Dutch translation to produce an English version of a Frisian poem about a German subject, and some elements are illustrative of the problems and possibilities of trying to fish an acceptable translation out of this kind of Germanic soup.

Simple but troublesome problems were presented by two double meanings. Frisian *kaai*, which means both of the English homophones *key* and *quay*, and Frisian *boek*, which means *book* and *beech*.

In the case of *kaai*, the meanings separate completely in Dutch (*sleutel* and *kade*) only to merge again aurally in English, which has a pleasing effect in this poem as *quay* can be retained as the literal meaning while *key* functions as a symbolic echo, especially in combination with the adjective *broken*.

The two meanings of Frisian *boek* are even more crucial and reflect the origin of the word *book* from a common root with *beech* before it diverged across the Germanic languages, i.e. German (*Buch* and *Buche*) and Dutch (*boek* and *beuk*). The West Frisian homonym maintains the connection between the tree and the written word and this association is anchored in the poem with an indirect quote of the first line of Bachmann's poem "Entfremdung" (the literal line is "In den Bäumen kann ich keine Bäume mehr sehen" – in my rough translation "Alienation": "I can no longer see the trees as trees"), linking the difficulty of Celan's poetic project after Auschwitz to Bachmann's alienation from a guilty landscape through the double meaning of the word *boek*.

Faced with the prospect of losing a crucial layer of meaning, I fell back on a kind of etymological explanation that was alliterative enough to fit into the tone of the poem ("the beeches became books"). This is perhaps outside the scope of usual translation tactics, but it seemed like the best alternative, and I discussed it with Hettinga before adopting it.

Another translation issue was whether to give the epigraph an English translation or follow Hettinga by leaving it in the original German, despite German being much better understood by the average Frisian than by the average English-speaking reader. One problem with giving it in English in either of the well-known translations by pre-eminent German-English translators, Hamburger or John Felstiner, would have been the breach this would have opened between Celan's *Niemandrose* and Hettinga's *nimmenslân* (no-man's land), because of both translators' very understandable decision to translate the former as *no one's rose* in the context of Celan's poem.

Other aspects of the poem, although difficult, were no more problematic than general poetry translation from Frisian or Dutch, which requires a certain inventiveness to retain the lyricism while making the essential grammatical adjustments, but is eased by similarities in the poetics of the three languages, particularly in the use of metre. Oddly enough, although Dutch and Frisian share a lot of vocabulary, there are certain similarities between English and Frisian pronunciation that make it possible to approach the sound of the original more closely in English. This can be very gratifying and it does please the poets.

Perhaps I should try to learn some more Frisian.

PONT MIRABEAU

*Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir,
werden wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandrose.*

Ut: 'Psalm'
Paul Celan (23 nov. 1920 – 20 april 1970)

1.

Dit is it plak dat machtiger as
in minske syn frije kar
lang om let dy keazen hat:

de rivier, de brêge en
wyt yn it bloeien de boeken
oer tebrutsen kaaien,

ein april, it seizoen dat nacht oan nacht
himsels lêze liet as de moanne
fan dyn moardner.

Dûnker waard taal in nimmenslân,
sa't tsjuster te sizzen
de dagen de kleur fan jiske oannamen.

In grouwélige, fier oer Europa
rôljende boer wie
gods einleaze ûnferskillichheid.

Do, begroeven yn wa't dy leaven,
te drinken kaamst de stream
fan har útrikke lûding.

2.

By alle wurden dy'tsto hiest mei de taal,
dêr't yn moarde waard,
bisto de paden delgien,
ferreind en smokend ûnder de Ljochstêd
syn dôve lampen.

Fan al dyn deaden bosken gear
de skimen en skaden op Place d'Italie.

Dêr't swellen oer de Seine tipten,
swijden dy de boeken de tongen.

Maitiid wie it, nacht noch,
mar hoe wûnder it ljocht oer de kym
op Blériots kaai.

Net mear binne de beammen de beammen,
skreau B. Dize lei dy del yn dyn fal,
elke brêge in ferlitten.

Alle wurden lykje hjir op fleanen,
hear ik yn de neaken'buorren fan wat libben is,
Dea syn inkeldspraak.

Eeltsje Hettinga

(From: *Ikader. Gedichten*. 2012, Gerben Rypma Stifting, Blauhûs)

PONT MIRABEAU

*Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir,
werden wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts-, die
Niemandrose.*

From: 'Psalm'
Paul Celan (Nov. 23th, 1920 – April 20th, 1970)

1.

This is the place which
mightier than a man's free will
chose you at last:

the river, the bridge and
blossoming white the beeches
on the broken quays,

late April, the season you could only read
night after night as the month
of your murderer.

Darkening language a no-man's land,
as if to darkly say the days
were fading to the colour of ash.

A gruesome belch rolling
high over Europe was god's
infinite indifference.

You, buried in those who loved you,
come to drink of the stream
of her smoked-out voice.

2.

You went down the paths of all the words
you had with the language
in which they murdered,
rain-wet and smoking under the blind lamps
of the City of Light.

The shades and shadows of all your dead
gathered on Place d'Italie.

Where the swallows skimmed the Seine,
the beeches became books that would never speak.

It was spring, still night,
but how extraordinary the light
low in the sky over Blériot's quay.

The trees are no longer the trees,
wrote B. Mist laid you down in your fall,
every bridge a leaving.

All words are misplaced here,
on the barren streets of life
I hear Death's only tongue.

Eeltsje Hettinga
Translation: David Colmer

(From: *Swallows and Floating Horses: An Anthology of Frisian Literature*, London, 2018)

Eeltsje Hettinga is a Frisian poet, essayist and translator. He also spent five years working as a journalist in the United States. Hettinga has translated the work of a number of poets into Frisian, including Ingeborg Bachmann and, more recently, the Surinamese poet Michaël Slory. In 2017 he was made the inaugural poet laureate of Friesland, a post he held for two years. Recent publications of Hettinga's poetry include *De Moanne* (Frisian), *Terras* (Dutch) and *Sinn und Form* (German).

David Colmer is an Australian translator, writer and editor, and a longtime resident of Amsterdam. He has won many prizes for his literary translations including the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (both with novelist Gerbrand Bakker) and the NSW Premier's Translation Prize for his body of work. Recent poetry translations include *Beautiful Things* by Menno Wigman and *Chameleon* [*Nachtroer* by Charlotte Van den Broeck.

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