

The Making of a Translator

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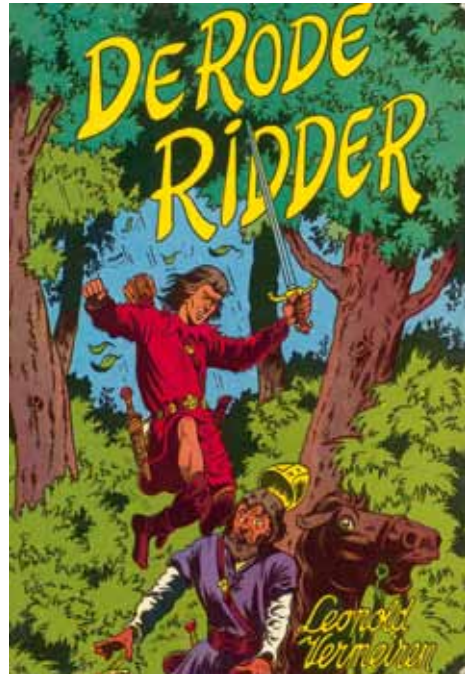
[DANIEL HUGO]

There was a framed Dutch proverb hanging on the wall in my parents' house. Embroidered in gold on black satin, it read: '*Gezelligheid kent geen tijd*' – 'Time flies when you're having fun'. It was a gift from the Netherlands, from when my father's brother had studied classical languages at Utrecht University in the 1950s. This was my very first acquaintance with the Dutch language. Even though I understood the meaning immediately, the spelling, the grammar and the attitude of those words were strange to me.

In Afrikaans that proverb would look slightly different: '*Geselligheid ken nie tyd nie*' – 'Time doesn't not fly when you're having fun'. But that double negative, so typical of – and normal in – Afrikaans, robs the saying of its rhythm and power. That years later, as a translator, this same double negative would frequently cause me major headaches was something that I obviously couldn't have known then. And as for the sentiment it so pithily expressed: in the humdrum existence of the Reformed Protestant parsonage where I grew up there definitely wasn't much time for good times or fun... not. It was years before I discovered that it was very likely that the proverb had originated in the easy-going, Catholic South of the Low Countries rather than in the strict, Calvinist North. I am aware that in saying this I am guilty of unjustified stereotyping here, as will become clear later.

My first conscious acquaintance with Dutch literature came in 1964. I was then nine years old and the book in question was the Afrikaans translation of *The Red Knight* (De Rode Ridder) by the Flemish writer Leopold Vermeiren. The book begins thus: '*The silvery sound of the trumpet sliced through the morning air. The heavy drawbridge was lowered across the wide castle moat and the young Johan, so big and so strong, rode out through the gate on his jet-black steed. He hauled in on the reins for a moment. In the east the sun was still young and red; the fertile, low-lying plain stretched to the south; and in the west, on the other side of the river which cut the entire landscape in two, lay the vast Dagonwoud Forest.*' That adjective-rich mediaeval world held me fascinated for days, there in isolated, hot, arid Namibia where we lived. By return of post I joined the 'Order of the Red Knight'. That Knight was the scourge of the cruel lords who ruled the land, but a friend and protector to the poor. I also devoured the rest of the series, with my lapel badge (an oak twig with three acorns) proudly pinned to my

The Red Knight.



breast. Until one day the series simply ended, abruptly and without explanation, in the middle of the Red Knight's adventures as a Crusader.

In the *'Old South Africa'* of which Namibia (at that time South-West Africa) was a part, high school students had to read a Dutch book as part of their Afrikaans studies. Our prescribed work in the early 1970s was Little Rudolph (De kleine Rudolf) by Aart van der Leeuw. I can hardly remember anything of the story now. And it also didn't teach me much Dutch, either, because our teacher translated the story into Afrikaans while reading it aloud. The literary historian G.P.M. Knuvelde lavishes a good deal of praise on the stylistic qualities of this book: *'... under the pen of this author the language blossoms, the words are imbued with sound and colour, the sentences flow in a captivating rhythm'*. Of course, we noticed precisely nothing of that sound, colour and rhythm. The teacher never once looked at a dictionary and was undoubtedly blissfully unaware of the innumerable *'false friends'* that exist between the Afrikaans and Dutch languages. I am totally convinced that as a result, he created what amounted to an alternative version of the story. Today, this would undoubtedly be described as a post-modernist teaching strategy.

It was when I went to the University of Stellenbosch that I first really became acquainted with Dutch literature, in lectures delivered by professors who had studied in the Netherlands in the days of free cultural exchange between the two countries. The best-known of them was undoubtedly Professor W.E.G.

Daniel Hugo (left) and Tom Lanoye (right), Gerrit Komrij (seen from the back), Franschoek, Weskaap, 2005.



Louw, poet and brother of the poet, playwright and scholar N.P. van Wyk Louw. From 1935 to 1939 he had studied at the Municipal University in Amsterdam, and he spoke perfect Dutch. He could also read arrestingly and movingly from the work of eminent Low Countries writers such as Gorter, Leopold, Achterberg and Nijhoff.

Despite the official suspension of cultural relations between Belgium and South Africa, I was allowed to go to Flanders in 1983 to study at the Catholic University of Leuven. At the time I was an assistant lecturer in Afrikaans and Dutch Literature at the Free State University, and there were informal links between the two universities. I attended classes given by, among others, Hendrik van Gorp and Hugo Brems. And in the University Library I was able to find all those books which were banned in South Africa at the time! It was both a revelation and an education for me. For the first time I realised exactly how oppressive and inhuman the apartheid regime was. I also became aware that a cultural boycott is just as harmful as the censorship of a dictator; both of them keep people in ignorance. I will always be grateful to Leuven University for the fact that I was able to study there during the heyday of apartheid.

One of the high points of my years there was the Antwerp Book Fair, where the theme was 'The other book' ('Het andere boek'). It was there that I saw an interview with the newly-released Breyten Breytenbach (who had spent the previous seven years in a South African prison for alleged 'terrorist activities'). The interviewer was the Flemish poet and journalist Herman de Coninck. At the same Book Fair I saw the young, opinionated and rebellious Tom Lanoye 'performing' his poems.

I could never have imagined then that twelve years later I would find myself translating the work of both Herman de Coninck and Tom Lanoye into Afrikaans. After these two Flemings, I also translated the work of the Dutch

Hendrik Conscience Square,
Antwerp. Photo by Jonas
Lampens.



writers Herman van Veen, Harry Mulisch, Gerrit Komrij and Karel Glastra Van Loon. And then, to restore the North-South balance, I translated the work of another Fleming: David van Reybrouck. With the exception of Mulisch, all these writers came to South Africa for the publication of the translations, and in so doing helped keep the flickering flame of the Dutch language burning in 'darkest Africa'.

'Gezelligheid kent geen tijd', ran that Dutch saying. And after my years studying in Leuven, I was convinced that this motto must have had its origins in laid-back, easy-going Flanders. But something else I discovered in Flanders is just how misleading stereotypes can be. A few years ago I attended a series of translation workshops organised by the Dutch Language Union, which was held in both the Netherlands and Belgium. During a lecture on the cultural differences between the Northern and Southern Low Countries, the speaker claimed that the Dutch expect absolute punctuality from others. But in Flanders, if you are invited to visit someone at their home and you arrive exactly on time, you will find your hosts almost completely unprepared; the man of the house will still be in his slippers and his wife will be standing at the stove in her apron. In Flanders, we were assured by our cultural expert, it is advisable to arrive at least half an hour late. During the Belgian part of the workshop series, in Antwerp, I was invited to dinner at the home of the Flemish radio presenter Jean-Pierre Rondas. The appointed time was seven o'clock. Armed with my newly acquired knowledge, I sat in Hendrik Conscience Square and waited until half past seven before ringing the doorbell. Mrs Rondas opened the door and was patently relieved to see me – Jean-Pierre had spent the last half-hour riding round on his bicycle looking for me. He thought I'd got lost! ■