

“Keefman / Leefman”:

What Jan Arends’ Works in Translation Can Teach Us About the Nature of Translation

In 2011, Google engineers began working on a project called “AI Complete,” a language translating software designed specifically for poetry. Though the project was ultimately abandoned, head researcher Dmitriy Genzel stated in an early-phase interview, “The machines do pretty well. It’s not such a human endeavor as people might think” (NPR).

Can this be true? Can our understanding of poetry – and our process of rendering it in another language, often labelled as one of the most difficult translation exercises – be accomplished without a human touch? Though AI-born poems are rarely the focus of poetry disputes, many scholars debate a parallel divide: translations with and without liberties, or works translated bluntly versus those reworked for emotional (and logical) continuity with the original. But the question of whether poetry can truly be translated is a popular and ultimately overwrought dispute. I am not interested in contemplating the value of a blunt translation over one with liberties, or dissecting which is closer to the original intent. Ultimately, any work written by someone besides the original author is inherently different from the first work, whether through the smaller changes made to preserve rhyme, meter, and rhythm, or through the larger choices to rework untranslatable words and distinctive grammar structures. Vladimir Nabokov, a 20th century Russian novelist, once famously claimed that it is impossible to preserve both the meaning and form of a translated poem (NPR). Despite my amateur background in translation, I agree.

What I am interested in is exploring the unique benefits of translated poetic works. The general benefits are a-plenty: translated poetry can reach an exponentially wider audience and serve as a vessel for the history and stories¹ of another culture. They can also excite new work, as was the case for legendary poet John Keats whose “Ode on a Grecian Urn” was inspired by Chapman’s translation of Homer (Rumens). But when looked at individually, each translation can offer unique benefits to the reader. Of these benefits there are two categories: those that bring greater insight to the original poem, and those that create meaning of their own, separate from both the translation itself and the original. Carol Rumens of the Guardian calls this latter benefit “the child of two parents”: a “third poem [created] when the translator and original are in tune, [that] simply couldn’t exist without them” (Rumens). These two categories of benefits are what I wish to explore in the work of Jan Arends.

Jan Arends is a Dutch poet of the mid-20th century whose work speaks to the experience of the homeless and those institutionalized for mental illness as well as general themes of isolation and loneliness. Though Arends achieved a cult following in Holland, his work never reached international fame and as such no anthology of his has been translated in full to English. I decided to translate a handful of his later works from his last anthology “Roofbloem,” assembled posthumously as the highlights of his career. These translations are available in Appendix A for reference. Because I would like to break down both the meaning of the original poem and how it is stressed in the translation as well as how the translation itself creates new meaning, I will approach my analysis of two poems both from the perspective of the translator and that of the reader.

¹ And values, and customs, and traditions ...

The first of the two poems I'll explore, "De List" or "The Ruse," is a particularly dark and contemplative poem defined by a strict rhyme scheme, repeating lines, and hellish imagery. Arends faithfully rhymes every second and fourth line in each of his four-lined stanzas, with the first and third usually comprising of the repeating lines. The rhyme of "broer" (brother) with "loer" (lurk) stands out thematically, positioning the brother as one who lurks as one of "the dead" (2-4). The rhyme pair also comes back into play in the last stanza, cyclically tying the beginning and end of the poem as another reference to the cycle of life and death but also in drawing attention to the one change Arends makes from "ik ben de geraamte" (I am the skeleton) to "in het geraamte" (in the skeleton) (2-16). The switch calls to question the experience of grief and the duality of feeling as though you must embody those who pass (in effect, live out the life they were unable to) while being overwhelmed by their memory at each turn. Crucially, these sentiments do not lead from one to the other; they can both exist at the same time and moment (while "standing in the rain on the street"), existing not to uphold a narrative of personal growth but rather as a representative of the illogical and omnipresent nature of grief. Interestingly, no documentation exists to confirm Arends' brother, which offers the interpretation that Arends is instead mourning a prior version of himself (supported by the first line of "Today I am no longer myself" and his avoidance of his own house at the end).

Because the rhyme scheme establishes the dominant tone of the poem, reminiscent of the stately pulse of the funeral march, much of my translation process was oriented around recreating a steady 2-4 rhyme. This resulted in two major changes: a shift from "the dead are always lurking" to "the dead lurk after each other," and from "but soon there are nine [sins]" to "but nine remain my bane" (5-12). As a reader, the first change creates a new visual reference to

the overarching cyclical theme of the poem; instead of upholding the omnipresent weight of the dead much as the discussed “skeleton” lines do, the translation introduces a more active role of memory, one that depends on continuity (“after each other”) and community. At its most explicit, this new meaning references Arends' loss of multiple people important to him rather than just one; at its most abstract, it invokes an uneasy sense of predetermination, playing with concepts of free will and agency given the certainty of death.

The second change also shifts the poem to a more active voice, with the “nine sins” (a possible reference to Dante’s nine circles of hell in *Inferno*) “remaining” in Arends life rather than (implicitly) arriving (8). Part of me was sad to make this change – if there had been any line in the original poem that implied some metamorphosis of Arends this one would have been it, in that he moves deeper into a state of guilt and sin. This internal change, even if in a more depressing direction, lends a complexity to the main character of the poem that is lost with my translation. Still the translated line asserts value of its own. In the sins “remaining” Arends “bane,” they contribute to the lasting stagnancy of the tone and the sense of directionlessness that overwhelms the reader. Ultimately, the translation emphasizes the overall theme while losing the more intricate character details, but I see the trade-off as justified to maintain the rhyme scheme.

Not all translators would agree: Bruno Osimo, an Italian translation theorist, explicitly criticizes this method in his 2001 guide to poetry translation. He labels the technique as “single-dominant translation” and calls it “the result of a poor and superficial analysis of the prototext, or of insufficient poetic competence” (Osimo). Though again I do not intend to delve too deeply into the argument between blunt and interpretive translations, I disagree with Osimo. Much of the so-called “singsong” effect that Osimo despises is crucial to the innate *feel* of the

poem, and fundamentally, language is only a tool to reach feeling. Every language has its own cadence and tone, and even to bilingual speakers the innate feeling of two languages can differ in an exactly translated sentence. There is a Czech proverb that encapsulates this shift perfectly: “Learn a new language and get a new soul” (Grosjean). Thus I would prioritize maintaining the overall feel of the poem rather than the more minute plot points – to see language not as a photograph but as a painting, as a tool but not a rulebook. With this guideline in mind I’ll turn to explore the second poem I translated, “Haleine.”

At its core “Haleine” is a love poem. It traces the misery and wretchedness of the human (and specifically, homeless) experience only to reveal the woman who heals the “sick, [...] spoiled, [and] withered” (2-7). Arends employs nature metaphors to describe the homeless and isolated, utilizing urban plants such as “flowers,” “trees,” and “grass” before Haleine comes and switching to rural and rustic plants such as “crops” afterwards to emphasize her ability to bring pastoral peace to those confined to the streets. Arends is characteristically frugal in his language – the last two stanzas are as simple and straightforward as Haleine’s love itself:

Then is the tree

Full

Then are the flowers

Red.

Haleine

Is water and goodness (18-23)

It is important to note, however, that it is here where I made perhaps my most self-serving decision yet – I excised a word completely from the original lines, which read, “Then is the tree / Full shadowed” (18-20). In the initial process I explained the word away as being ‘untranslatable’: in English the phrase “full shadowed” sounds off – it is not a phrase we use as the Dutch do, describing something ‘in full bloom’ or with ‘full foliage’. To me, “full” alone seemed to encapsulate the sentiment just as well. But I must confess my ulterior motive, which was to mimic the simplicity of the following lines. Despite the original having a two-word line, the one-word line better expressed the core of Arends identity as a frugal poet and individual – an identity he took pride in, asking in an interview later in life, “Who uses language so sparingly as I?” (Arends). Still, this is likely a verdict that another translator would find fault with, so I suppose I’ll just have to avoid sending my work to Osimo and others.

I would also like to discuss my translation of “de roofbloem,” the first line of this poem but also the title of the anthology itself. “Roofbloem” can really be translated into many different phrases, as it is one that Arends made up as a portmanteau of two different words, “Roof” and “bloem”. “Bloem” was easy enough – it means flower. “Roof” is harder, because it can mean a variety of things, including, as an adjective, “spoiling,” “robbing,” “raping,” “pillaging,” and “looting.” It essentially sums up all the actions of a chaotic and depraved attack. Of all these options, the definition that felt the most right to me was “spoiling,” because of the visual imagery of the thing that is living also becoming spoiled rather than being the sole aggressor or “spoiler”. Where the other verbs position the flower as only the aggressor, “spoiling” allows the flower to be both victim and attacker, which I think encapsulates Arends view of himself. He was both an

active critic of society and at the mercy of its institutions (or lack thereof), both a “spoiler” of the system and “spoiling” from it. As such, I was able to create Rumens’ “child of two parents” – a new insight into Arends’ vulnerability, dependent on both the original and the translated poem.

Finally, if you’ll allow me an unrelated anecdote, I’ll offer one additional thought. There are unique cases where in one language a word means nothing yet is a cognate in another. I’m particularly enamored by this coincidence in the title of Arends’ debut anthology, *Keefman*. As the story goes, Arends meant the title to be *Leefman* (in English, ‘alive man’) but made an error on his typewriter and refused to correct it (Gardner). In Dutch, *Keefman* means absolutely nothing, but in English, it sounds oddly similar to ‘Caveman,’ an apt title for work by a man isolated from society. In this way, being bilingual brings a new and even comedic insight to the original work.²

Translated poetry can never be an exact replica of the original, nor do I think it should be. Much like when a musician transposes a sonata from piano to guitar, the resultant music will sound inherently different despite it hitting all the same notes. It is instead through these differences that we can find greater meaning, both in the original work and in the general themes that bind the two works. My translations of Arends’ two poems, “De List” and “Haleine,” both bring insight to certain aspects of the original, emphasizing the funerary rhyme scheme and cyclical nature of life in the first and frugality in the second. Yet they also build new meaning on their own, introducing questions of free will and agency in “De List” and establishing a vulnerability to Arends in “Haleine.” Ultimately, it is a strange and wonderful thing to be the one

² Most Dutch people are familiar enough with English that they would also pick up on this cognate play, and there are also many words in English that have integrated into the Dutch vernacular naturally so that today a handful of English words might also be considered part of Dutch vocabulary. I’m not sure if Arends would have known about this double-meaning, though I’m still charmed by the anecdote and the word play.

to carry on the words of another; to create a window through which others can hear a story that they would never have had access to before. I feel grateful to have had the opportunity to do so.

Appendix A

Jan Arends: Roofbloem (en keuze uit de poëzie)
Spoiling Flower (a selection of poetry)

Original Poem (in Dutch)	Blunt Translation	Translation with Liberties
<p>De List</p> <p>Vandaag ben ik mijzelf niet meer, ik ben het geraamte van mijn broer, die gisteren is dood gegaan; de dood staat altijd op de loer</p> <p>De dood staat altijd op de loer en met hem zeven zonden, die mij wel slepen naar de hel als zij mij vinden konden.</p> <p>Maar ik sta illegaal op straat te wachten in de regen, te wachten tot mijn zonden gaan, maar straks zijn het er negen.</p> <p>Ik durf mijn huis niet in te gaan; de dood staat altijd op de loer; ik sta in regen op de straat in het geraamte van mijn broer.</p>	<p>The Ruse</p> <p>Today I am no longer myself, I am the skeleton of my brother, who yesterday died; the dead are always lurking.</p> <p>The dead are always lurking and with them seven sins, who want to drag me to hell, if they could find me.</p> <p>But I am standing illegally on the street waiting in the rain, waiting until my sins leave, but soon there are nine.</p> <p>I don't dare enter my house; the dead are always lurking, I'm standing in the rain on the street in the skeleton of my brother.</p>	<p>The Ruse</p> <p>I am no longer myself today, I am the skeleton of my brother, Who yesterday has passed away; The dead lurk after each other</p> <p>The dead lurk after each other And with them seven sins, Who wish to drag me down to hell If they could grab me in.</p> <p>But I stand banned out on the street Waiting in the rain, Waiting until my sins retreat, But nine remain my bane.</p> <p>I don't dare enter into my house; The dead lurk after each other, I stand in the rain out on the street, In the skeleton of my brother.</p>

Original Poem (in Dutch)	Blunt Translation	Translation with Liberties
<p>Haleine</p> <p>De roofbloemen Zijn zieker in de nacht Dan mensen.</p> <p>De roofbomen Zijn ongelukkiger Dan dwangarbeiders.</p> <p>Het roofgras Verdort Waar het niet regent.</p> <p>Het regent nooit Waar het roofgras Groeien wil.</p> <p>Alleen wanneer Haleine komt Dan leeft het boze gewas, Dan staat het gras Als liefde, Dan is de boom Vol schaduw, Dan zijn de bloemen rood.</p> <p>Haleine Is water en goedheid.</p>	<p>Haleine</p> <p>The spoiling flowers Are sicker in the night Than people.</p> <p>The spoiling trees Are unluckier Than convicts.</p> <p>The spoiling grass Withers Where it doesn't rain.</p> <p>It rains never Where the spoiling grass Wishes to grow.</p> <p>Only when Haleine comes Then live the angry crops, Then stand the grass, Like love, Then is the tree Full shadowed, Then are the flowers Red.</p> <p>Haleine Is water and goodness.</p>	<p>Haleine</p> <p>The spoiling flowers Are sicker in the night Than people.</p> <p>The spoiling trees Are unluckier Than convicts.</p> <p>The spoiling grass Withers Where it doesn't rain.</p> <p>It never rains Where the spoiling grass Wants to grow.</p> <p>Only when Haleine comes Then the angry crops live, Then the grass stands up Like love, Then is the tree Full Then are the flowers Red.</p> <p>Haleine Is water and goodness.</p>

Original Poem (in Dutch)	Blunt Translation	Translation with Liberties
<p>[Zonder titel]</p> <p>Ik weet Dat ik Van alle dingen Ben.</p> <p>Zoals een boom Bezit is Van de grond En aarde Aan de zon Gebonden.</p> <p>Zelfs Van mijn eigen ogen Ben ik het licht En van mijn mond Het spreken.</p> <p>Van takken Ben ik wortels Groeiend in de grond En met het water Ben ik het zoeken Van mijn dorst Naar voedsel.</p> <p>Deel ben ik Van de dingen Deel Van mijn eigen denken. Ik slaap En waak En daarom Ben ik mens.</p>	<p>[Untitled]</p> <p>I know That I From everything Am.</p> <p>Like a tree Possessed by Of the ground And earth To the sun Is bound.</p> <p>Even From my own eyes Am I the light And from my own mouth The talk.</p> <p>From branches I am roots Growing in the ground And with them water Am I the seeking Of my thirst For nourishment.</p> <p>A part am I Of the things A part Of my own thoughts. I sleep And wake And therefore I am man.</p>	<p>[Untitled]</p> <p>I know That I From everything Am.</p> <p>Like a tree Possessed By the ground And earth To the sun Is bound.</p> <p>Even From my own eyes Am I the light And from my own mouth The speech.</p> <p>From branches I am roots Growing in the ground And with them water Am I the seeking From my thirst For food.</p> <p>A part am I Of the things A part Of my own thoughts. I sleep And wake And therefore I am man.</p>

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