

A Poet in Love with Words

Lucebert Translated into English

No other twentieth-century Dutch poet made an entrance quite like Lubertus Swaanswijk, alias Lucebert (1924-1994). He seemed to come out of nowhere. Although the picture turns out in retrospect to be slightly romanticised, Lucebert led a wandering existence in the years after World War II. He began to gain a reputation as an artist and painter among his immediate circle; however his poetic talent remained hidden for a long time, even from his friends. The poets Gerrit Kouwenaar and Jan G. Elburg, who were in close contact with the experimental artists of the CoBrA movement and knew Lucebert as a visual artist, were dumbfounded when he recited some of his poems one evening.

With the 'birth' of Lucebert as a poet, Dutch poetry suddenly gained an incomparable voice. What's more, Lucebert's work had connections to traditions that were unknown or barely known in the Netherlands, such as mysticism, German Romanticism, Dada and other modernist trends. He brought a new élan to the type of experimental poetry that had had scarcely any following in the northern Netherlands since the pioneering work of the Belgian Paul van Ostaïjen. With his poetry and performances, in which there was also an element of wanting to shock the middle class, Lucebert showed the way to a group of young poets named after the decade in which they began to make their mark: The Fiftiers (*De Vijftigers*). One happening, which culminated in a riot, saw Lucebert crowned emperor of the group (wearing fancy dress).

It is now twenty years since his death, and for many people in the Netherlands Lucebert still stands on the pedestal on which he, with his sense of irony, put himself. Poet, novelist and critic Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer writes: "Not everyone realises it yet, but in ten years' time there'll be no doubt left in anyone's mind that, Vondel aside, Lucebert is the greatest Dutch poet of all time. I look on



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him as my teacher." Yet Lucebert often provoked disapproving reactions too. As early as 1953, two years after Lucebert's debut in book form, writer Bertus Aafjes came to the rather hysterical conclusion that Lucebert's work ushered the SS into Dutch poetry. In 2010, the poet Maria Barnas took the measure of the Lucebert anthology selected and introduced by Pfeijffer, and again was ultimately negative in her conclusion.

The key to this disapproval lies in the subtitle that literature professor Thomas Vaessens gave to *De verstoorde Lezer* (The Unsettled Reader), his book about Lucebert, namely *Over de onbegrijpelijke poëzie van Lucebert* (Lucebert's Incomprehensible Poetry). Lucebert's poems are particularly difficult for anyone who approaches them logically and rationally. Sound and rhythm are the basis for a language game that is as virtuosic as it is boundless, and that bursts with associative mental leaps and references to sources often largely hidden from or unknown to the reader. Literature professor Anja de Feijter, for example, has demonstrated the theory that, in his early work in particular, Lucebert was influenced by the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, among other things. Lucebert's method of working has also been convincingly compared with the way in which jazz musicians improvise.

The same De Feijter has written the foreword to the first part of *Lucebert: The Collected Poems*, the ambitious undertaking of translator Diane Butterman, who plans to render Lucebert's entire body of work into English. Lucebert's poetry is so complex

that Butterman's intention seems arrogant to anyone who has not read her translations. Butterman herself gives a detailed account of her choices, but in order to really assess the quality of her achievement, it is a good idea to consider a few examples of what makes Lucebert's poetry difficult, and translating it even more difficult.

One tricky issue is Lucebert's penchant for ambiguous words. Other languages seldom possess words with exactly the same meanings. The following poem illustrates this point:

*haar lichaam heeft haar typograaf
spreek van wat niet spreken doet
van vlees je volmaakt gesloten geest
maar mijn ontwaakte vinger leest
het vers van je tepels venushaar je leest*

*leven is letterzetter zonder letterkast
zijn cursief is te genieten lust
en schoon is alles schuin
de liefde vernietigt de rechte druk
liefde ontheft van iedere druk*

*de poëzie die lippen heeft van bloed
van mijn mond jouw mond leeft
zij spreken van wat niet spreken doet*

her body has her typographer
speak of what cannot be spoken of
of flesh your perfectly closed spirit
but my awakened finger reads the verse
of your nipples venus' hair your waist

life is typesetter without printer's draw
its italics is lust to be enjoyed
and beautiful is all that is oblique
love destroys the standard print
love frees from every imprint

poetry that has lips of blood
that lives on my mouth your mouth
they speak of what cannot be spoken of

Apart from the sound play of rhyme and alliteration, there is the insurmountable problem of the words "leest" and "druk", the double meanings of which cannot be preserved in English. "Je leest" at the end of the fifth line is particularly problematic. It can be read as both "you read" and "your waist". Butterman chooses the second option; translating is a matter of accepting there will necessarily be some loss. In any case, Butterman's translations succeed in safeguarding the vitality of Lucebert's poems, despite the fact that much is lost (something Butterman readily admits to in her notes), for example that quality of Lucebert's work that "builds poems from the swirling quassars of individual words", as Pfeijffer puts it.

Lucebert is a poet in love with words who, time and again, allows himself to be led by the richness of sounds and the ambiguity of language. He is fond, for example, of using words that can be read as both verbs and nouns, such as "saw" and "neck". Because he uses no punctuation, there is often no single authoritative reading. Both meanings are intended, but the translator is forced to choose. What is commendable is that Butterman does so without reservation. However difficult this must have been, it is important that the reader who cannot speak Dutch is served up a good poem and not an integral rendering of all possible sounds, figures of speech and layers of meaning. And Lucebert's poems are good in English too. The resulting clarity would perhaps be undesirable for the poet, but it is not unpleasant for the reader.

In such a comprehensive and ambitious project, some decisions are always going to be debatable, but Lucebert holds his own surprisingly well in English, and consequently the translator does too.

MISCHA ANDRIESEN

Translated by Rebekah Wilson

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