

## Retranslating Couperus

It is a truism that good works of literature outlast their translations. A Dutch evergreen like *Max Havelaar* (1860) has been rendered three times into English, and in each case – as was brilliantly demonstrated by Ria Vanderauwera<sup>1</sup> – not merely updated but radically ‘reframed’. Van Nouhuys (1868) presented the reader with a documentary exposé of colonial abuse, Siebenhaar (1927) with a biting satire that delighted D.H. Lawrence, and Edwards (1967) with a scrupulously annotated classic.

I myself have twice had first-hand experience of retranslation. On each occasion this involved novels by Louis Couperus, *Langs lijnen van geleidelijkheid* and *De stille kracht*, both published in 1900.<sup>2</sup> Both books had been previously translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (1865-1921),<sup>3</sup> a Dutchman resident in England since childhood who became Couperus’s regular translator. The first novel, in which a married woman flees to Italy, where she lives with a young Dutch artist before returning to her husband, might have been republished unchanged, but there were three principal objections to this: a) some scenes had been bowdlerised in response to the rather Puritan English publishing climate at the time; b) the book needed contextualising within Couperus’s oeuvre, as a response to the contemporary debate on feminism, and as an example of the genre of boarding house fiction; c) the tendentious English title (*The Inevitable* in the US and, even worse, *The Law Inevitable* in the UK) begged the central question in the book: was Cornélie’s submission to her husband the only possible outcome? In the retranslation a) presented no problems and b) was addressed in an afterword, but my alternative title suggestions regarding c) (*Little by Little* or *Slowly but Surely*) were overruled by the publisher, who opted for a modified version of the original American title. Dissenting from this choice, I suggested, not wholly tongue in cheek, that modern readers might wish to supply their own mental question mark.



The case of *The Hidden Force*, with its colonial East Indies setting, was more complex. In De Mattos’ version the sex scenes had again been bowdlerised, but in 1985 an edition was published by the University of Massachusetts Press in the prestigious *Library of the Indies* series, in which the editor, E.M. Beekman, while retaining the bulk of De Mattos’ text for reasons of ‘congruence of tone with the original’, restored suppressed passages, corrected a number of minor slips, and abandoned the titles ‘sahib’ and ‘mehsahib’ as too closely associated with the

British Raj. In addition, there was an extensive apparatus of introduction and notes and a glossary of Malay terms.

So why retranslate? Beekman's strategy of inserting omitted passages into De Mattos' translation seemed an uneasy compromise, in which contemporary American slang rubbed shoulders with early-twentieth-century British English. The plethora of Malay words was a cumulative distraction, and two crucial terms were potentially misleading. I therefore retained a minimum number of Malay terms for local colour, explained them in the text on first occurrence, and replaced 'resident' (senior Dutch colonial official) and 'regent' (government-appointed native chief) with '(district) commissioner' and 'prince' respectively. Finally, the academic apparatus, aimed more at students and scholars than at the general reader, was replaced by an afterword in which Ian Buruma expertly positioned the book within the Dutch colonial experience.

The complicating factor in this case was that the University of Massachusetts translation was still in copyright, so that my primary task, besides producing an accurate, readable and atmospheric version, was to avoid any suggestion of plagiarism. This prolonged the translation process and required close scrutiny of both the Dutch source text and the 1985 composite translation.

The value of retranslation for successive generations depends of course in large measure on the quality of the extant versions. There seems, however, to be a tipping point after which the disadvantages (distance in time between source and target texts) are outweighed by the advantages (more accessible contemporary language, etc.). What in my view is *not* an option is a historicising or 'period' version. I was recently horrified to read in a literary journal that a translator preparing a new English version of *Madame Bovary* had acquired an 1850s French-English dictionary! Period flavour is all very well, but can easily slip into parody, which in my view does a disservice to the original.

My own plans after recent experiences? Though I prefer to work on first-time translations, where I have a freer hand, there is at least one Flemish classic I can think of that might benefit from less mid-Atlantic blur in vocabulary and syntax and more precision in rendering regionalisms. Whether a publisher will agree with me remains to be seen.

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#### NOTES

1. 'Texts and Contexts of Translation. A Dutch Classic in English', *Dutch Crossing* 12 (December 1980), 34-54.
2. *Inevitable*, tr. Paul Vincent, London: Pushkin Press, 2005; *The Hidden Force*, tr. Paul Vincent, London: Pushkin Press, 2012.
3. *The Inevitable*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1920; *The Law Inevitable*, London: Butterworth Ltd, 1921. *The Hidden Force. A Story of Modern Java*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1921; London: Jonathan Cape, 1921