

On Translating Ellin Nickelsen's 'Min hidj hee hööl' into English

David Colmer

Gearfetting

Wat no folget, is de werjefte fan in lêzing dy't ik hâlden haw op 'e First Conference on Frisian Humanities (Second Conference on Frisian Literature) fan 'e Fryske Akademy yn april 2018 te Ljouwert. Yn dit artikel haw ik it oer in stikmannich aspekten dy't anneks binne mei it proses fan it oersetten út myn persoanlike fyzje as oersetter wei. It oersetproses dêr't ik it oer haw, wie kompleks as sljochtwei, om't dêr net allinne de auteur en iksels as oersetter, mar ek native speakers fan it oarspronklike Frysk en in 'brêge-oersetting' yn it Nederlânsk by behelle wiene. De blomlêzing dêr't yn dit stik oan referarre wurdt, is Swallows and Floating Horses: An Anthology of Frisian Literature, ûnder redaksje fan Ernst Bruinsma, Alþita de Jong en André Looijenga (London: Francis Boutle, 2018).

My name is David Colmer. I come from Australia and I've been translating Dutch literature into English for more than twenty years. Before moving to the Netherlands in the early nineties, I lived in Germany for a few years and I picked up both German and Dutch informally, in that order, by living in the country.

The working procedure used for this anthology, with Dutch as a bridge language, was imposed by circumstances, and, I think, the best way to go about it in the given situation, but still, from a translation point of view, it's possible to see the whole project as an extended test of the veracity of the expression 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'

As you've heard, I and at least two of the other English translators involved were, to put it mildly, novices when it came to Frisian. It's interesting then to consider whether we've still been able to take something from that language to enhance our translations, or if, instead, our attempts to do so have only introduced additional weaknesses by leading us to jump to misplaced or clichéd conclusions which we then forced into our translations. Of course, it was a collaborative project and we were able to discuss our translations with Jantsje Post, Jetske Bilker [*the main Frisian-Dutch bridge translators*] and the editors, asking questions, getting explanations and sometimes showing them our draft translations. Occasionally we were also able to get feedback from the poets themselves, so hopefully these

things combined saved us from the worst blunders. And at the same time, although we are Frisian novices, we do understand Dutch very well, and we have had some exposure to West Frisian, before and after the crash course provided by the Foundation for Dutch Literature, so this did give us some insight and informed any hunches we might have had about the original texts.

With this in mind, and working on the principle that the extremes are always instructive or at least entertaining, I thought it would be interesting to take a North Frisian poem as my case study today. Not just a poem in a language I had never seen or heard before, but a poem in a language without the Dutch borrowings that make West Frisian so familiar to speakers of Dutch.

The poem is by Ellin Nickelsen, and it's called 'Min hidj hee hööl'. This is the first stanza:

Min hidj hee hööl

Min hidj hee hööl min skan as skäären
ik san en neet faan needler fiin
san min feelern briad ütjenöler steet
an tree kniiwer haa mi
mä skarep kling 'ar
fjauerhuket wön'ger ritset

As was the usual procedure with this anthology, I received a working translation in Dutch, this time from Jantsje Post:

Mijn huid heeft gaten

Mijn huid heeft gaten, mijn vel is gesneden
ik ben een net, door naalden fijn
zijn mijn veren breed uit elkaar gestoken
en drie messen hebben mij
met scherp lemme er
vierkante ramen gesneden

I should say explicitly that this translation was meant to be literal and to function as a bridge translation, and that Jantsje deliberately refrained from taking the liberties that you would normally take to turn a poetry translation into a poem in its own right. What I'm supposed to do is produce an English version from it that retains the meaning, while regaining poetic content, and preferably with poetics that reflect the

original. So if I'm talking about poetic elements, what do I see, if I look at the original with complete naive ignorance? And blindly assuming on the one hand that typographical features reflect sound, which is the heart of poetry, and on the other that there are no crucial sounds that are invisible or disguised in this typographical representation.

The first thing, of course, is the striking alliteration in the first line. If we just look at the consonants, it's really full on: M... HeHeHe M... SK aS SK. And importantly, the first clause is a repeat of the title. This gives it even more emphasis. It actually seemed to me that this first line was so striking that I wouldn't be surprised if this was one of those poems that have grown from the seed of a wonderful line. That the line popped into the poet's head fully formed and demanding that the rest of the poem be written. It seemed to me to be crucial to try and set a similar tone in English, so that the English poem could grow from a similar seed.

Looking at the rest of the first stanza there also seemed to be a good bit of assonance going on, with these long double E's and I's. My inclination then, would be to try to produce a translation that's rich in alliteration and assonance. Some people might think that's a base setting for all poetry translation, but I don't see it that way, and certainly some poets reject this as a stylistic feature and can get quite indignant if you add it into their poems in translation.

At this stage I should admit to deviating slightly from the truth because the meaning of the original poem is not quite as transparent as it seems in the Dutch working translation above with its particular word choice and elucidating commas, and in fact this is the second version of the bridge translation, in which some uncertainties have been resolved.

We were fortunate enough to be able to contact the poet and she explained the autobiographical elements that gave birth to the images. Some people find that explanations like this can break the spell of the poetry, but as a translator I find them useful, not because I want to make these things explicit in the translation, but because I would prefer to avoid inadvertently cutting the translation off from the source. I would like to leave the English reader's options open, so that they too can make the kind of connections that the reader of the original language can make, even if I don't want to lead them by the hand.

Just to give you another peek into the kitchen, I'll read a quote from Ellin Nickelsen's email about the origin and meaning of the start of the poem:

'Es ist ein ziemlich destruktives Bild aus einer schmerzhaften Liebe heraus entstanden. Das Ich ist sozusagen einerseits ein Vogel, dessen Federkleid abgezogen wurde, und das jetzt mit feinen Nadeln fixiert wird, zum Trocknen, und dann wieder ausge-

stopft wird. Andererseits ist das Ich auch ein Netz, das mit Gedanken einfangen m  chte, aber die Haut selbst ist auch ein Netz, das einerseits das Ich zusammenhalten soll, aber verletzt ist und so ein Ausstr  men erlaubt, jedoch auch   berhaupt erst erm  glich.

Just as some Dutch Frisian poets translate their own poems into Dutch, I was also fortunate enough to have Nickelsen's own German translation of the poem. This provided an additional point of reference for the English translation, allowing me to triangulate if you will, but it also gave me a slight insight into the poet's own mind-set regarding translation. How much freedom does she think a translator should or shouldn't take? It's not that I would necessarily change my whole approach just to please an author, but it is reassuring to have a sense that the poet is not going to begrudge me my small liberties.

Nickelsen's translation of her first stanza goes like this:

Meine Haut

Meine Haut hat L  cher sie ist geschnitten
ich bin ein Netz mit Nadeln fein
sind meine Federn breit gespreizt
und drei scharfe Messer haben
in die Haut mir Fenster
mit vier Ecken eingeritzt

Assonance is present here in the middle of the stanza with *fein-breit-gespreizt-meine*, but just as in the Dutch working translation the distinctive alliteration has fallen by the wayside. There's a difficulty in the transference of the sound of the poem, from North Frisian to German, and it seems to me, that there's often a parallel difficulty in the translation of Frisian poetry into Dutch. As Nickelsen herself wrote comparing Jantsje Post's later West Frisian translation to the original 'da kommt in beiden der Klang durch, was ich im Deutschen immer schnell vermissen.' The question for me is then, is it also possible to get 'that sound' in English and if it is, why should that be? Is it perhaps because English is more closely related to Frisian than Dutch or German, and there's something intrinsic about English vowels and consonants that sets up the possibility? I'm sure that is a complete field of study and that many people here know infinitely more about it than I do, but I can imagine there being something to that. Something about the range and messiness of English vowel sounds for instance. The way they can

bleed into each other. Alternatively, maybe it's simply a question of the richness of English vocabulary and the way it gives a translator more opportunity to play around with different words. Mixing it up until you find a combination that gives the desired effect. Because obviously if I want to reproduce the rich consonance of the first line I can't just use a direct translation. Taking Nickelsen's German translation as the point of departure for instance, you'd end up with something like this: 'My skin has holes it has been cut'. Here you have the K of CUT, with the same sound in SKIN, and the cognate gift of HAS and HOLES, but it's all too diffuse and there's no pattern tying sound to meaning. It doesn't sound like a line that can give birth to a poem.

I had to resort to synonyms and that worried me, because the last thing you want is for the translation to sound as if the poet has swallowed a thesaurus. Do the synonyms introduce new meanings that clash with the essence of the poem? Or do they have misleading connotations? I worried about this quite a bit with two of the words I was tempted to use: SCORED as a translation of GESNEDEN; and HIDE as a translation of VEL and synonym for SKIN.

SCORED, of course, is less violent and more considered than CUT, and HIDE seems a much narrower word than Dutch VEL. At its worst it makes me think a bit of Westerns and ornery cowboys, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, for instance. That's worrying. On the other hand, the autobiographical context provided by the poet increases the plausibility of both words. Not just because they are appropriate for the taxidermist tendency in the imagery, but also because their connotations and other meanings slot into the emotional state described. It might seem far-fetched to think of HIDE in this context as a hide in the sense of a place of concealment from which one looks out, but if we think back on Nickelsen's own explanation of the way the different layers fit together, it becomes more plausible, after all: 'Das Ich ist sozusagen einerseits ein Vogel... Andererseits auch ein Netz, das mit Gedanken einfangen möchte, aber die Haut selbst ist auch ein Netz...' With this Chinese box effect of containment and inversion, consideration of the secondary meanings of a word like HIDE starts to seem more like good practice than clutching at straws.

Now that I had an idea of how to solve the alliteration, I was immediately confronted by a different problem, the famous disappearing line problem. Natural English tends to be a little shorter than Frisian. In metrical verse, for instance, you often lose a foot or even two from a line of pentameter after the first direct translation, and in this six-line stanza this tendency combined with the line breaks in such a way that one line just shrank and shrank until it was a pathetic appendage that stood out inversely by virtue of being so very small. In poetry the last

thing you want to do is pad or use deliberately convoluted phrasing to fill out lines, so I ended up deciding to generate an extra line by turning the first line into two.

This is what I came up with:

My Skin Is Scored

My skin is scored
I have holes in my hide
a net is what I am fine needles
spread my feathers wide
three sharp knives have cut
square windows into me

And because a stanza doesn't exist in isolation I'd like to also present the whole poem even though I haven't had time to discuss all of it. And I'd like to do that in three languages, but rather than starting with North Frisian, I'll start with English, so that everyone has an idea of the meaning.

My Skin Is Scored

My skin is scored
I have holes in my hide
a net is what I am fine needles
spread my feathers wide
three sharp knives have cut
square windows into me

now the sun can shine on my bones
and the moon can play ebb and flood with my blood
wind blows through my warm flesh
to carry wishes west
to send the words east
and worries flying south.

But though my skin is scored
and I am empty-handed
though my word is uncertain
thoughts remain as threads
from which to weave my net
for I was here with eyes that lived to see

even if in vain the wind
blew through my hair the tide
licked at my shoes my bones
found solace as I slowly settled
I came here I stayed here
but in the end I had to go.

Ellin Nickelsen
Translation: David Colmer

And from English I'd like to go to Ellin Nickelsen's original.

Min hidj hee hööl

Min hidj hee hööl min skan as skäären
ik san en neet faan needler fiin
san min feelern briad ütjenöler steet
an trii kniiwer haa mi
mä skarep kling 'ar
fjauerhuket wön'ger ritset

So kön a san üüb min knooken skiin
an a muun spelet flud an eeb mä min blud
a winj weit troch min warem fleesk
raft a wansker am waast
stjüürt wurden am uast
an am süüd flä dön surgen.

Dach hee min hidj uk hööl
an stun mä leesig hun ik
as min wurd ei was an man toocht tan triads
huarütj min neet as knootet
so san ik dach 'ar weesen
haa min uugen lewet tu sen

wiar't uk was ferjiiws weid a winj
am min hiar slaket flud am min skur
wiar min knooken dach treest
üüs sanig ik tu rau kaam
ik san kimen san heer weesen
man küd ei loong bliiw.

And to conclude, I'd like to ask Jantsje Post to read the West Frisian translation which she did on her own initiative apart from the anthology, and in which, as Ellin Nickelsen said 'der Klang kommt durch... die Sprachschatz... wunderbar...' and 'friesischen ist friesischen.'

Gatten yn myn fel

Myn h  d is skeind myn fel hat gatten
ik bin in net troch fine nudlen
bin myn fearren fier   tinoar spraats
en trije skerpe knyften
ha fjouwerkante ruten
  tsnien yn myn fel

no kin de sinne op myn bonken skine
en de moanne boartet eb en floed mei myn bloed
de wyn waait troch myn waarme fleis
blaast winsken nei it westen
stjoert wurden nei it easten
en nei it suden fleane de soargen

Mar al haw ik gatten yn myn fel
en stean ik hjir mei lege hannen
al is myn wurd net wis en bin myn tinzen
tinne triedden d  r't myn net fan breide is
dochs ik ha hjir west
myn eagen hawwe libbe om te sjen

ek al wie it dan omdoch waaide de wyn
my troch it hier slikke de floed my oan ,e skuon
dochs f  nen myn bonken treast
doe't ik stadich wer ta r  st kaam
ik bin kommen ha hjir west
mar bliuwe koe ik net

Ellin Nickelsen
Translation: Jantsje Post

