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**Translating the Great War:  
A glimpse behind the scenes (Part 1)**

Last year, Ragini Werner invited me to contribute a piece about a day in the life of an arts translator to the next issue of *eSense*. I liked the idea, but I'd already written an article on translating for museums, which I've recently added to the SENSE Library on the website. Since much of my recent work has been literary translation, I wanted to focus on that topic instead. Ragini kindly gave me permission to write about a subject of my choice.

Around that time, *War and Turpentine* —my translation of the First World War novel by Flemish author Stefan Hertmans—was beginning to attract attention from critics and readers. I thought some SENSE members might enjoy a behind-the-scenes account of how I tackled the descriptions of life in the trenches and other translation challenges in the book. I wrote a short piece about the first sentence last year: <https://www.atheneum.nl/nieuws/2016/david-mckay-on-translating-the-first-sentence-of-stefan-hertmans-oorlog-en-terpentijn-war-and-turpentine/>. But the constraints of the assigned topic kept me from telling the most interesting stories about my experiences.

Although *War and Turpentine* is a novel, the middle section—the part set in wartime—is closely based on unpublished memoirs written by Hertmans's grandfather about his experiences as a soldier. I was nervous about getting the war scenes right, so I called in the cavalry. The Expertisecentrum Literair Vertalen at Utrecht University has a wonderful program that matches translators working on literary books with expert advisers. This program is often used to match novice literary translators with experienced mentors, but it's also possible to apply for expert advice about the subject matter of the book. I asked for an adviser who knew both about the war and, just as importantly, about the English language and literature of the period.

I was ultimately paired with Kate Macdonald, an expert on early 20th-century literature and early literary responses to the First World War. Kate also has editing and writing experience and a strong interest in contemporary novels. On top of that she lives in Belgium and although she doesn't speak Dutch, she's very familiar with the local culture. It was a match made in heaven. Kate saved me from both historical and linguistic gaffes, not only in the war section but throughout the manuscript. On one page, she suggested the concise, idiomatic "Fall in!" instead of the unwieldy "Fall into formation!" and commented that the "courier" should be a "runner." Sometimes she inserted a more contextually appropriate term where my translation was too literal or general: "a falling scrap of iron" became "falling shrapnel." She also offered a first round of general editorial comments, for instance proposing "slowly and relentlessly" instead of "slowly but surely" to avoid the cliché.

Of course, I had to translate the book myself before Kate could do any of that. To brush up on my Edwardian English, I pored over the classic British First World War memoirs about Flanders Fields. My best teachers were Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Edmund Blunden. To make sure I didn't miss a detail, I found the Dutch translations of some of these books and did occasional back-translations of

short passages from Dutch into English. That gave me the chance to compare my own rough English rendering to the original words. I still vividly remember learning from Robert Graves that shells don't fall: they *drop*. The back-translation exercise was a wonderful way of getting under the skin of these authors and learning all sorts of secrets about their prose, and I recommend it to many translators for many purposes.

English-speaking critics often compare translated books to other translated books. Many such comparisons are made for good reasons; for example, many reviewers of *War and Turpentine* have pointed out the influence of the German writer W.G. Sebald, which Hertmans freely acknowledges. It's also tempting to liken *War and Turpentine* to other well-known First World War novels translated into English, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Storm of Steel*. Regardless of how apt these comparisons may be, I'm always a little squeamish as a translator about drawing words and turns of phrase from other translations—it seems slightly cannibalistic, and also strangely like cheating. I did take a good look at those books too, but I relied much more heavily on the British authors.

The Tommies (British soldiers) of the First World War were inventive language users. Their wordplay wrested humor out of deadly serious threats: a shell that gave off black smoke was a "Jack Johnson," after the black champion boxer, and a German trench mortar or *Minenwerfer* was a "Moaning Minnie." Flemish towns acquired tongue-in-cheek English names: Ypres became "Wipers," and the British soldiers fighting in the trenches of the Ypres Salient published a humorous magazine called *The Wipers Times*. Flemish soldiers, too, had their slang: for instance, an infantryman was a *zandstuiver* or *piot*, and a clandestine café was a *tingeltangel* (a word so musical that I left it in the final translation, with an explanation).

I drew on the colorful idiom of the Tommies (with the help of some online resources and, above all, the marvelous book *Trench Talk* by Peter Doyle & Julian Walker) for two reasons: to find translations for Flemish soldiers' slang and, more importantly, to add richness and verisimilitude to the novel in English. The protagonist Martien is sent to England to recover from a "cushy one"—an injury serious enough to require medical leave, but not entailing the loss of life or limb. "Whizz-bangs" blow up around the soldiers in the trenches, and they sneak into occupied territory "in mufti." A soldier is "pipped" in the right eye and dies almost instantly. Of course, I had to add these words with great caution and in an experimental spirit; after lightly dusting the section with soldier's slang, I set it aside. Then I went back and thought carefully about which of these additions really worked (and removed about half of them!).

At least once, the Tommies provided a poetic solution to a thorny problem. Chapter 5 of the war section begins with this sentence: *De tijd wordt eentonige duur, de duur verliest zijn richting, de richting maakt plaats voor stilstand en verveling, verveling maakt onverschillig en loom, de dagen glijden door onze vingers*. I had tremendous difficulty making anything coherent out of this in English until I learned about the Tommy phrase "roll on, duration." British soldiers enlisted for "three years or the duration of the war," and as the conflict wore on, "duration" came to mean an indeterminate, seemingly endless period. "Roll on, duration" or "roll on, time" expressed the desperate longing that the war would soon end. One related phrase was "Roll on, death, and let's have a go at the angels!" These idioms so vividly convey the same desperation as Hertmans's Dutch sentence that I felt I had struck gold. So the sentence became: "Time rolls on into bland duration, duration loses direction, direction gives way to stasis and boredom, boredom makes us sluggish and apathetic, the days creep through our fingers."

The use of "creep" as a somewhat improbable translation of *glijden* (more properly "slip" in this case) is an example of a different translation technique, which I'll talk about in part 2 of this article in the next issue.

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## **Translating the Great War: A glimpse behind the scenes (Part 2)**

*War and Turpentine* is packed with references—overt and covert—to art, music, and literature. This partly reflects the fact that the protagonist Martien, despite his working-class background, is steeped in the European cultural tradition; the word "turpentine" in the title refers to his life as an amateur painter and copyist. The many allusions also reinforce the theme of imitation and originality, one of the main preoccupations of the book. Martien was a talented copyist of famous European paintings from the past; similarly, Stefan Hertmans uses an adapted version of his grandfather's notebooks as the core of his novel. In both cases, we may wonder where imitation ends and creation begins—a fascinating question for a translator. One subplot revolves around a secret tribute in one of Martien's paintings, a nearly exact reproduction of a masterpiece from the past.

Against this painterly backdrop, it seemed appropriate and even important to me to incorporate hidden literary reference into the book that English-language readers might recognize. That brings me back to "creep" (see Part 1), one of a few echoes in this chapter of Macbeth's famous soliloquy which begins:

*To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time*

A couple of pages later, Martien refers to *de dwaze grappen van de idioten in het regiment*. This, of course, became "the stupid jokes told by the regimental idiots," another faint echo of a later line in the same Macbeth soliloquy. Again, feedback from readers was vital; the writer, editor, and translator Michele Hutchison, who read through the manuscript and offered many valuable comments, advised me to axe an allusion to "sound and fury" that had clearly been shoehorned into the text.

Sometimes it was hard to tell whether I was sneaking in my own literary allusion or discovering one that Hertmans had left hidden. *Ergens hoog meen ik een leeuwerik te zien stijgen* very naturally became "high in the sky I think I see a lark ascending," but I have no idea whether Hertmans was thinking of George Meredith's poem *The Lark Ascending*—or, more likely, of the Ralph Vaughan Williams composition based on that poem (originally written in 1914). In any case, the thought of Vaughan Williams's music, along with the image of the lark, makes a perfect transition from the muck of the war to the sublime tranquility of the next paragraph:

Above that, the blue, the spotless blue that reminds me of my late father's frescoes. There is nothing to confirm what we hear again and again: that war has come. Only the peace of this

splendid August, month of harvest, of yellow pears and wasps, of cooler mornings, sluggish flies, and weightless spots of sunlight drifting peacefully over the leaves.

One especially haunting allusion is found in a scene where Martien's mother visits her husband's grave.

*Ze heeft het gevoel dat talloze ogen van talloze doden op haar gericht zijn. 'Hoe talloos velen reeds heeft de dood verdaan' – ze herinnert zich die dichtregel, maar ze weet niet meer waar ze hem gelezen heeft. Ze huivert.*

The line of poetry is from Dante's *Inferno*. Clearly, the repetition of *talloos* ("countless") is crucial to this paragraph. Unfortunately, "countless" isn't in Dante's original Italian: *e dietro la venia si lunga tratta / di gente, ch'io non averei creduto / che morte tanta n'avesse difatta*. Instead, it's a free translation of *tanta*, "so many." Hertmans is loosely quoting the Dutch translation by Ike Cialona and Peter Verstegen (2000): *En zo'n sleep mensen kwam er achteraan dat / Ik toen pas tot het inzicht ben geraakt / Hoe talloos velen reeds de dood verdaan had*. But since there's no word quite like *talloos* in the Italian, the many published English translations of Dante don't include any word like "countless" or even "numerous"—not that I checked all of them!

I eventually decided to solve the problem simply by tampering with an existing English translation of the line so that it would include the word "countless." But which translation to use? Well, if you search for the line from the Cialona and Verstegen translation, one of the top hits is an article on Dante and Eliot. The Dutch line is quoted in a footnote to a discussion of a passage from *The Waste Land*: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many." This fact alone made it tempting to use Eliot's translation as the basis for my own. But what clinched it for me were five lines that closely follow in *The Waste Land*: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? / Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men, / Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!" Here's another part of the same section of *War and Turpentine* (emphasis mine):

How must he look now . . . The thought makes her head reel. **She wants to scratch away the soil with her nails.** Eternal slumber, she thinks, eternal slumber, damn it, damn it, he's so close to me. She grinds her teeth so hard they nearly break. Then she takes a deep breath; **the dark urge to dig up the coffin** has worn her out.

Again, I'm not completely sure that this was an intentional allusion to Eliot by Hertmans, but in any case, it was clear I needed to use the Eliot translation of Dante—doctored, of course, to include the word "countless." So I turned the line into hexameter: "What countless numbers death already has undone."

I should acknowledge that any one particular literary reference is not very important, and most readers won't be consciously aware of any of them. That's why I didn't ask Stefan Hertmans to send me a list of allusions with detailed explanations. On the other hand, I believe that the work of seeing how the novel is embedded in a cultural tradition, and of similarly embedding the translation in a cultural tradition, lends a different character to the final product. I think readers can sense this intuitively, even without knowing exactly what the author and translator have done. And whether or not I'm right about

that, it's wonderful to discover secrets, and to keep those secrets alive in the English translation, and to give them away to you now.

The author did answer many questions for me and even read through the entire translation carefully, pointing out to me that when Martien peeps from behind a tree at a young woman bathing nude in the forest, he is not like "a curious unicorn" (*eenhoorn*), but like "a curious squirrel" (*eekhoorn*). Stefan indulgently told me that he was tempted to leave in the unicorn, for reasons I understand, but I insisted we change Martien back into a rodent. He also explained some bits of old-fashioned Flemish dialect, such as *venijn*—not "venom," but "vermin"—and *beulingen*, which are sometimes "blood sausages" and sometimes simply "offal." A reviewer later singled out the "offal" sentence for praise: "Describing his own grandmother, born in the first quarter of the 19th century, he said that her black apron—he called it a pinafore—smelled like the offal of young rabbits."

That pinafore is another story, but I have to stop somewhere. I hope I've made at least this one point: it takes a village to translate a novel like *War and Turpentine*. If there's one thing I know how to do well, it's getting the help I need. Besides Kate, Michele, Stefan, and Bill Shakespeare, a host of other friends, acquaintances, and professional peers patiently discussed my translation problems with me. Then Ellie Steel and the other wonderful editors at Harvill Secker worked their magic. (I could write a Part 3 about how I managed the US and UK vocabulary for the different editions, but I'm not sure who would want to read it.)

Finally, I invite any perspicacious readers of the book to point out the hidden reference to a classic Belgian comic book series, which was placed there by the author and has survived unscathed in the English edition. This allusion is in the opening pages of the book, which you can read for free on your Kindle or [here](#).