
Not a Spectator Sport

Together, the L1 Dutch students from several year groups (with the guidance of Ms. de Wilde) participated in a poetry translation competition organized by an association of Dutch teachers. Students in secondary schools across the Netherlands were asked to translate the poem Telescope by Louise Glück into Dutch. On the 8th of January the students from the L1 Dutch section at the ESF were declared the winners.

Anyone remember Maslow's hierarchy of need from philosophy class? Me neither, but I'm pretty sure it went something like: Food, shelter, love, books, poetry and boring students by making them analyze poetry. Or at least that is how it goes in the world of most language teachers. Who after several years manage to teach their students just enough poetic metre and devices for the students to be able to mumble a couple of verses from "The Waste Land" by heart and rattling of an analysis. Some of those teachers may be reading this right now, shaking their heads in disagreement. But who are they to argue with the founder of modern psychology?

My point is that most of the people I know seem to dislike poetry. It's hardly a teacher's fault, poetry just seems tedious to a lot of students. Aside from requiring a host of terminology that's easy to mix up, poetry is difficult to interpret. Most of us remember the embarrassing moments during lessons when we are singled out by teachers. Having to answer questions such as: Why did Wilfred Owen choose to use this adjective? What was Wordsworth trying to achieve in this stanza? And having no idea what to say. We know poetry is meant to be a medium for relating emotions to other people's emotions. But the most relatable verse many of us know comes from Marianne Moore's poem about poetry itself: "I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important, beyond all this fiddle".

Needless to say going into this translation competition I was skeptical. Translating poetry is difficult, a whole profession is dedicated to it. Is it better to retain the original meaning? Or should the atmosphere be maintained? Trying to juggle both of these is hard and trying to search for that one perfect word only to come up short is a constant. Collaboration was the answer in the end. A line from an S5 student here, a word from the S2 class there – eventually it came together.

My skepticism was quickly blown away, translating a poem was a surprising and entertaining challenge. When you recognize elision, ellipsis, enjambment, epigraph, epistrophe or epanalepsis in a poem you're trying to translate, all that theoretical knowledge about poems stops being theoretical. It becomes practical and snaps into place. Translating poetry may just be something of a training ground for learning how to appreciate poetry. It makes you read slowly enough, appreciate small details and absorb the atmosphere of a poem. Almost everyone (and I am including myself) abhors the idea of having to write their own poetry, but translating a poem showed me poetry doesn't have to be a spectator sport about interpretation.

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Notes:

1. Marianne Moore's poem *Poetry* can be found in full [here](#)
2. Introduction inspired by Phillip Gaimon his [book](#) on professional sports