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# August Willemsen e a tradução da literatura brasileira para a língua holandesa

## August Willemsen and the Translation of the Brazilian Literature to the Netherlands

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*'Maar meneer Willemsen, die Portugezen van u, die spreken Nederlands...'*  
Sontrop - 1969

*Resumo:* Este estudo de caso apresenta a figura do tradutor holandês August Willemsen como um importante mediador cultural. Seu trabalho de tradução serviu de ponte discursiva entre o Brasil e o mundo falante do neerlandês, entre a literatura brasileira e a holandesa. Como um mediador cultural típico, Willemsen assumiu uma grande variedade de técnicas de transferências discursivas: escrita de ficção, tradução, transcrição, crítica, ensaios, estudos. Ele foi também agente ativo nas trocas interculturais de diferentes instituições editoriais e nas relações interpessoais.

*Palavras-chave:* Tradução; mediadores; literatura brasileira; literatura holandesa; August Willemsen.

*Abstract:* The present case study draws a broad picture of the Dutch translator August Willemsen as an important cultural mediator. His translation work served as the key discursive bridge between Brazil and the Dutch-speaking world, between Brazilian literature and Dutch literature. As a typical cultural mediator, he undertook a variety of *discursive* transfer techniques: fictional writing, translation, transcreation,

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criticism, essays, studies as well as a variety of more or less institutionalised intercultural publishing and personal networking.

*Keywords:* Translation; Mediators; Brazilian Literature; Dutch Literature; August Willemsen.

## 1. Introduction

Translation is done by people. However, translators are never just that: translators. In modern global world, new labels for new profiles testify the vast array of overlapping activities that are covered by new agent roles in new professions. We speak not only about translators or interpreters, but also of mediators, localizers, terminologists, technical writers, product engineers, project managers, crowdsourcers, fansubbers, transeditors, copywriters etc. These new and complex, partly overlapping agent roles are the object of a new and interesting research, by definition, interdisciplinary in nature and leading to new definitions of translation studies' key concepts, to new expert profiles, to new needs for training. At first sight, these evolutions seem to remain confined to the contemporary world as well as to non-literary translators. Of course this is only an illusion. In the past, as well as nowadays, literary translators are often developing a large variety of complex and overlapping mediating activities. They were what we would like to call "cultural mediators".

## 2. How to define a cultural mediator?

Mediators, as we understand, develop a broad range of partly overlapping transfer activities through different cultural fields (literature,

painting, music, film, theatre...), different languages and spatial frontiers. Firstly, cultural mediators undertake a variety of *discursive* transfer techniques. They are multilingual authors, self-translators, or translators who translate, adapt, plagiarise, summarize, censor, manipulate in various ways a variety of products of allophone linguistic communities: poems, novels, songs, theatre plays, opera libretto's, serial novels, so they serve as discursive bridges between these linguistic communities, on an international or intra-national level. Secondly, mediators are often active in a variety of more or less institutionalised intercultural and inter-artistic networking. They may have corresponded with colleagues (informal networking) or may have founded or taken an active part in the editing boards of magazines and periodicals, in salons, in literary and artistic associations, in art and music academies, in artists' workshops, in reading circles, in web communities etc. That is, they often have a variety of institutional mediating roles. Finally, a mediator can be considered a real migrant, a hybrid person, who develops transfer activities in several geo-cultural spaces which considerably sharpens his intercultural and international consciousness. In sum, much more than the prominent figures canonised by literary studies and traditional national history, mediators are often the true architects of common repertoires and frames of reference. They perform strategic transfer roles, create new mediating practices and institutions.

### 3. How to study cultural mediators?

Mediators complex, partially overlapping roles which transgress linguistic, artistic, and spatial boundaries are important cultural practices but rarely acknowledged as such, or even studied broadly because they transcend traditional disciplinary divisions. In other words, research on cultural mediators

also it has a disciplinary surplus value. The study of cultural mediators and their transfer activities should preferably be:

- interdisciplinary and collective, bringing together methods from translation sociology, descriptive translation studies, transfer studies, cultural history...
- process- and actor-oriented, in order to discover the complex intersections of which cultural products are the surface result;
- start from the assumption that translation has to be studied in relation to other transfer techniques (D'HULST 2012) and that "*le débat académique opposant transferts, comparaisons et croisements se résout de lui-même dans la recherche empirique*" (CHARLE 2010: 61).

In short, "we need stories that describe the meshing and shifting of different spatial references, narratives in which historical agency is emphasized, and interpretations acknowledging the changing patterns of spatialization are processes fraught with tension" (MIDDELL & NAUMANN 2010: 161).

In order to meet these needs, the following elements of a mediator's profile and activities deserve our attention<sup>1</sup>:

1) analyze aspects of the mediator socio-biography as a way to reconstruct their social and biographical trajectories and to reconstruct their intercultural habitus. How did they perceive and implement their transfer activities as a way to create new frames of reference and repertoires?

2) analyze their networking, i.e. their informal or institutionalised epistolary, oral or electronic exchanges. What was a mediator's role in these networking? How did these networking facilitate or control the mediator's transfer

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<sup>1</sup> The elements that follow are inspired by a more encompassing methodology designed for the research project "Customs officers or smugglers? - the mediating role of intercultural actors within Belgium and between Belgium and France (1850-1920), (2011-15) financed by the KU Leuven Research Council and coordinated by R. Meylaerts. For an elaborate example, see Meylaerts & Gonne forthcoming.

activities, the importation of cultural products and the construction of new repertoires?

3) conduct a translational analysis from a double angle. First, a comparison between the transferred products and their sources should consider the multiple discursive transfer modes used: translation, transcreation, multilingual writing, self-translation, (film, music, theatre) adaptation, summary, parody, plagiarism, pastiche etc. This analysis should pay special attention to the way in which these discursive products relate to each other (source-target) but also how they mutually modify each other as a result of this relationship (WERNER & ZIMMERMAN 2003: 12). Transfer activities are part of continuous processes and they imply a plurality of directions and a multiplicity of effects (WERNER & ZIMMERMAN 2003: 15) that cannot be conceptualized by Translation Studies' conceptualization in terms of source and target text. A second level of comparison compares the different discursive transfer modes (translation, transcreation, adaptation, self-translation, summary, pastiche, parody,...) among each other (see D'HULST 2012). Translation is just one in many transfer modes making sense and getting shape in relation to all other transfer modes a mediator uses, sometimes within one and the same work.

## 4. So What?

The combination of these approaches within interdisciplinary and collective studies allows us to understand how mediators' transfer activities create new forms of writing and translating and new actor roles, and what was the function and effect of these transfer activities. It leads to a new historiography of cultural practices that tries to answer the following concrete research questions:

- (1) what were the aims, forms and functions of this mediator's transfer activities;
- (2) how did they create new forms of literary writing and translation and new roles of author- and translatorship - roles that we tend to confine to the present, non-literary world;
- (3) which urban, but also national and international, organized networking, supported or controlled these transfer activities;
- (4) which effects did these activities and networking have on the relations between the cultural communities they represented and on the creation of a common cultural history.

Finally, research on cultural mediators aims to make an original contribution to the historiography of cultural practices from an intercultural perspective. From a theoretical methodological viewpoint, it can enhance our understanding of the effects of transfer activities and contribute to the elaboration of new models of cultural historiography.

Obviously, it is impossible to implement this entire framework in one case-study. This paper will therefore illustrate some of the above mentioned aspects by studying August Willemsen, a Dutch translator whose agent role offers a rich representation of what has been presented here as cultural mediator. Translators as the first agents of exchange can decisively influence different cultural fields through their pluriform discursive products and interference. August Willemsen is one of the most important Dutch translators of Brazilian literature and his intellectual influences as well as translating talents respond for the construction of an important space for the Brazilian literature<sup>2</sup> in the Netherlands and Flanders. Two different aspects contributed to maximize his broad influence, both in its macro and micro perspective: 1) in the macro scenario, Willemsen acted as a cultural mediator with enormous

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<sup>2</sup> Willemsen as translator of the Portuguese language also translated important authors from Portugal and some information about this Lusophone translation history might be addressed here however, the main focus of this investigation was his importance to the massive propagation of Brazilian literary works in Dutch.

prestige in a variety of institutionalised intercultural and inter-artistic networks. As we shall see further in this paper, Willemsen's transferring role as translator, author, editor, academic, and intellectual created and shaped the reception of the Brazilian Literature in the Netherlands and Flanders in the period when he was most active; 2) in the micro approach, Willemsen's translations are considered high quality texts due to his ability to temper with the Dutch language according to the creative protocols he perceives in the way Brazilian authors deal with the Portuguese language. The quality of his translation work is due to his singularity and powerful writing; his creative translations or transcreations (see further) blur the boundaries between writing and translating, author and translator, original and translation. Willemsen's work not only changed the cultural community into which he was translating but modified also the culture of the originals he worked with. The specific case of Willemsen's translation of Guimarães Rosa, an ongoing translation event, illustrates this alleged modification of the original texts. The *Hanser Publishers*, prestigious publishing house in Germany, requested Berthold Zilly<sup>3</sup> to produce a new translation of Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão Veredas*, already translated by Curt Meyer-Clason in 1964. In May 2013, Berthold Zilly delivered a long lecture at Universidade de São Paulo (USP)<sup>4</sup> in São Paulo city where he talked about the experience of producing a new translation for such a difficult work. At a certain point, Zilly explains that while working on the translation of the title of the book, he used some translations to the languages he can read: two in Spanish, one in Italian, two in French, one in English and one in Dutch. And he says:

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<sup>3</sup> German translator, Berthold Zilly, will translate the Brazilian masterpiece for Munich publisher, Hansel. Currently a visiting professor at the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Florianópolis, Berthold Zilly is acclaimed for his translations of important Brazilian works such as Euclides Da Cunha's *Os Sertões*.

<sup>4</sup> The complete fragment in Portuguese can be accessed at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wr7im4vl-AU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wr7im4vl-AU)

The one translation that helps me the most, not only in terms of analysis and interpretation but also in its creative aspects, better, recreative or transcreative to mention Haroldo de Campos, is the translation to Dutch (...).

As one listens to his statement one cannot but admit that if Zilly keeps Willemsen's translation as a source of reference for analysis and interpretation while producing his own reading and translation of the "same" original text by Guimarães Rosa, he *will* be influenced by the Dutch translator's work. Willemsen's translation, ultimately his own interpretation of the book, will certainly affect Zilly's interpretation and signification of Rosa's original. After reading Willemsen's translation of *Grande Sertão Veredas*, Zilly will never read it the same way anymore. The meanings he might find in the original in Portuguese will no doubt be forever contaminated by Willemsen's translation, creation or, as he wanted to say himself, transcreation of the Brazilian book.

## 5. The scenario

Willemsen was born in Amsterdam, in June 16th, 1936. When he was still a young boy he spent a few months in German with his parents and sister and reports his first language experience to Ischa Meijer in an interview:

In the beginning of the war, some German soldiers were camping nearby the school close to our house, and I remember how fascinated I was by their pronunciation that sounded strange and exciting. At night in bed, I tried to imitate them, to speak German my own way. As other children my age who played with toy cars, I was busy with languages (NATUMI 2013: 15).

Willemsen's involvement with language would have a strong influence in his career. During his secondary education he started studying French, the first foreign language he could read. Later on he learned Spanish, "from a small



book in only a year-time”, after returning from an accidental trip to Spain in 1956. When he finally decided to major in Classical Languages and Literature, Portuguese became his main language of studies. “My choice for Portuguese had to do with my interest in literature and my talent for languages” (1998: 313). When he was 25 years old he started studying Portuguese at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. During this time he earned a one-year scholarship to study language and literature in São Paulo, Brazil. In 1970 he published his first translation *Meesters der Portugese vertelkunst*, In 1971 he received his PhD diploma, starting to work at the Portuguese Department of the University of Amsterdam, where he taught until 1988. He finally abandoned teaching in 1985 when he decided to dedicate himself fully to translation and writing.

As Willemsen reports, studying Portuguese was perceived as quite uncommon at the time, as a subject without much value or prestige and he would find himself amazed by questions about the reason for choosing Portuguese as his major:

I have always considered this question strange. Why wouldn't I be interested in a language spoken by 160 million<sup>5</sup> people in the world, and which is the third language in the occident, behind English and Spanish, by numbers of speakers. Why wouldn't I be interested in a literature as the Portuguese, with chapters such as the medieval lyric, Fernão Lopes, Gil Vicente, Camões, Antônio Vieira, Eça de Queiróz, Fernando Pessoa, all great literature? Why wouldn't I be interested in a literature like the Brazilian, with authors such as Machado de Assis, Graciliano Ramos, Guimarães Rosa, Dalton Trevisan, poets such as Manuel Bandeira, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, João Cabral de Melo Neto - all great literature? What is astonishing is not, or shouldn't be, my interest in this language, but the fact that someone asks the reasons for this interest (WILLEMSEN 1986: 55)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from a lecture in Amsterdam, in October 1984. According to other sources and estimates, the information is that Portuguese is spoken by 240 million total, outnumbered by Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindu-Urdu, Arabic and Bengali.

<sup>6</sup> My translation from Portuguese.

Willemsen's intercultural habitus was at odds with his environment in the sense that his interest for Portuguese Language and Portuguese/Brazilian literature was perceived as evident by himself but as exceptional and strange by others. Willemsen recalls his first contact with the Brazilian literature, back in the fifties, had a fulminating effect on him: "I read the Dutch translation of *Os Sertões* [*De Binnenlanden*]<sup>7</sup>, by Euclides da Cunha, and for months at the end I annoyed my friends with the story of Canudos" (WILLEMSSEN 1986: 56). This first encounter and the awakened desire to learn the language and visit the many places described in the book *De Binnenlanden* transformed Willemsen in the greatest Dutch translator of Brazilian literature. In 1967, he received a scholarship from the Dutch government to study Portuguese and Literature in Brazil. Willemsen stayed in São Paulo for a year where he, indeed, studied Portuguese, fulfilling his early dream of visiting the province where the story of *Os Sertões* took place, and of course, had the chance to learn about the most important Brazilian authors. Willemsen returned to Brazil on three other occasions, in 1973, 1979 and 1984, and the experiences he had during these four different periods were reported in letters he would send to friends and family. Later these letters became the collection for the book *Braziliaanse Brieven* [Brazilian letters]. The blurb of the second edition presents Willemsen as one of the most colorful writers of Dutch literature. The book became a real bestseller.

## 6. Willemsen's transcultural agencies - discursive products

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<sup>7</sup> This book was then, in 1954, translated by Doctor Marcus de Jong. Willemsen would translate it again in 2001.

Willemsen was a productive intellectual, personally involved in what we consider a variety of discursive transfer techniques. The books he wrote as an author comprehend a variety of subjects<sup>8</sup>, going from academic papers, in which he reflects on his translations, on language and literature to more autobiographical texts such as the book he published in 1991, *De Val*, which accounts for a difficult period of his life when he ends up in a hospital to care for a broken hip. In December 1990, Willemsen was going home from a liquor shop carrying four bottles of vodka and 1,5 liter of Fanta when he fell down on the street pavement:

I had walked just five minutes, but the bag was heavy. Nearby the metro station, fifty meters from my home I started to stagger. I tried to cling to the stone corner but I slipped, and fell, along the wall to the ground. I sat drunk on the ground, hard ground, among shrubs, and surrounded by a little crowd. As I regained consciousness, I noticed that the bag was intact by my side [...] I realized I did not have my pair of glasses on (WILLEMSSEN 1991a: 5).

In 1998 he published *Vrienden, vreemden, vrouwen* (1998), based on his life experiences between 1956 to 1964, and received by critics as ‘Een uniek document humain, en een schitterend tijdsbeeld van de late jaren vijftig en begin jaren zestig’. He also published a series of travelling books collecting the letters he would write home, to friends and family. One of these books was *Braziliaanse brieven* (1985) (see also below), a compilation of letters narrating his four trips to Brazil, filled with jokes and experiences with the people, the land, the culture and the conservative Dutch expatriates. He was awarded the *Lucy B. & C.W. van der Hoogt* prize for this book. Willemsen also published some autobiographic books: the above mentioned *De val* (1991a), and *Sprekend een brief* (1998) en *Van Tibooburra naar Packsaddle* (2001) written during the time he was in Australia, for personal love reasons. In 1994, he wrote *De*

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<sup>8</sup> *Braziliaanse brieven* (1985), *De taal als bril* (1987), *Een liefde in het Zuiden*, en *De dood in Zuid* (1988), *De val* (1991), *De goddelijke kanarie* (1994), *Het hoge woord* (1994), *Sprekend een brief* (1998), *Vrienden, vreemden, vrouwen* (1998) *De tuin van IJben* (1999), *Fernando Pessoa: het ik als vreemde* (2000).

*goddelijke kanarie*, about Brazilian football, one of his passions (see COSTA 2007).

Interestingly, he didn't want to make a difference between writing and translating but considered them as overlapping, similar activities. In an interview with the Dutch critic Rudie Kagie<sup>9</sup> for the newspaper *Vrij Nederland* about *Braziliaanse Brieven* Willemsen declared:

When somebody says that it is so nice that finally a book by myself is published, I react grumpily. I consider these translations also as books of myself. For me there is hardly any difference. In that book of letters [*Braziliaanse Brieven*] I followed the same procedure as for making a translation. From the hundreds of Brazilian letters I sent during the past years to the Netherlands, I made a selection. I adapted, altered, combined rewrote them. I translated them to a larger public.

In thirty seven years of hard work, he forged and shaped the publication of Lusophone literature in the Netherlands and Flanders<sup>10</sup>. Willemsen translated 52 volumes of novels, poems and short stories. According to Schreij (2009), from 1970 to 1986 Willemsen published nineteen translations, followed by a short interruption of six years. From 1992 to 2007 thirty three other titles were issued. Twenty eight titles, or more than 50%, were translations of Brazilian novels and poetry. By translating his favorite authors, Willemsen established a special relationship with his publishers, convincing them that those authors were saleable. Willemsen himself in his publications and lectures accounts for the influence he had on the two most important Dutch publishing houses: Meulenhof and Arbeiderspers. Costa confirms, "... at a certain point, being the translator of a work was a guarantee of the commercial success of a book" (2007: 181). Willemsen translated some of the most representative Brazilian authors: Guimarães Rosa (1977, 1983, 1993), Carlos Drummond de Andrade

<sup>9</sup> Accessible at <http://www.privedomein.info/recensies/recensie/?recensieID=14>

<sup>10</sup> Books published by a Dutch publisher are also distributed and read in Flanders. This is particularly the case for translations.

(1980, 1983, 1992, 1998), Manoel Bandeira (1982), Machado de Assis (1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1992), Graciliano Ramos (1995, 1996, 2002, 2007) just to mention a few.

Willemsen not only translated the most important Brazilian and Portuguese writers but also, the most important translators of Portuguese in the eighties and nineties, he did so according to personal preferences in selecting authors and works. This productive intellectual life transforms Willemsen in one of the most important agents in the introduction of Lusophone literature, and particularly Brazilian literature, in the Netherlands and Flanders. This Dutch translator played indeed a key role in the translation scenario of Brazilian literature when compared to all the other literary production in Portuguese (which, of course, includes literary texts from Portugal but also from other Lusophone countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Timor-Leste). Taco Schreij (2009) produced an extensive and comprehensive study of the translation of Portuguese literature to the Dutch language. Based on statistical evidence he concludes: “What is remarkable is that during the eighties and nineties far more Brazilian Literature was translated when compared to Portuguese Literature” (2009: 42). As Schreij concludes, since the introduction of Lusophone literature in the Netherlands and Flanders in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> there has been a sort of balance between the publications of Brazilian and Portuguese literatures. In the seventies and eighties, however, we see the publication of nine titles from Portugal vs. twenty from Brazil, illustrating a massive preference for Brazilian literary production. The explanation for this difference especially in this period is, according to Schreij, to be accounted for “personal preferences of some stakeholders in the field” (2009: 43). Schreij explains that “some people were directly implied in the translation and publication” (2009: 42). Certainly, “some

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<sup>11</sup> This study did not intend to provide a precise historical picture of the introduction and evolution of Lusophone literature in Dutch translation but just shed light on the decisive contribution of Willemsen to the increase of Brazilian literature in translation during his most productive years.

people” means August Willemsen who officially started translating from Portuguese in 1970. Indeed, further in his text Schreij dedicates one complete section to analyzing Willemsen’s translation work and his influence in shaping the translation scenario of Lusophone literature in the Netherlands and Flanders. In his own words:

In summary, due to his most active participation in the literary field, we cannot blame Willemsen for being subservient. Since the seventies he occupies a permanent position, making it nearly impossible to underestimate his influence in what was to be translated from Portuguese to Dutch, as well as on what was not translated, specially until the nineties. His activities as critic and author made his positions even more powerful. Besides, his dedication and reputation contributed to the success of certain titles (2009: 79)<sup>12</sup>

This quotation confirms Willemsen’s role as a real mediator, combining various agent roles in various languages. Pos (1996), who produced an extensive research on the history of the translation of Lusophone Literature in the Netherlands<sup>13</sup>, was the first to compare the publications of Portuguese and Brazilian literatures. His explanation for the unbalance in the translating scenario of Lusophone Literature is Willemsen’s personal powerful influence in the two major Dutch publishing houses, De Arbeiderspers and Meulenhoff. While analyzing the publishing scenario, Pos is unable to conceal his disappointment for the influence Willemsen had over the publication of far more Brazilian Literature than literary work produced in Portugal. Pos’s explanation for this power is the lack of other literary critics and he considers Willemsen a solitary voice who had no opponents:

Willemsen published many articles, reviews in newspapers and periodicals. In no more than seven Dutch literary magazines from 1975 to 2000 I was able to find thirty seven publications by Willemsen,

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<sup>12</sup> My translation from Portuguese.

<sup>13</sup> Schreij (2009) takes much of his statistical information from Pos 1996.

translations and essays<sup>14</sup>. These papers contributed to make the Lusophone literature available to the Dutch reader. Through these parallel activities so to speak, he could enframe this literature in a framework from which it had been absent. We know that Willemsen had no preference for contemporary Portuguese literature. The *NRC Handelsblad*, on June 14th 1991, published a one page article in which Willemsen criticizes translations of Lídia Jorge (1991) and José Cardoso Pires (1991). In the article named ‘Ben ik te stom voor deze boeken?’ (‘Am I too dumb for these books?’) he writes about ‘literary tricks’, ‘illegibility’, ‘make pretentious literature’, ‘more or less literary tics’ and writers who ‘do not dedicate themselves to tell a story’ (WILLEMSSEN 1991). He attacks the Portuguese writers because of their preference for complicated forms and for the use of artificial words. He had already done that before in the preface for the anthology *Meesters der Portugese Vertelkunst* (Different authors 1970). (1996: 311).

In this extract, Arie Pos regrets the fact that Willemsen did not like the Portuguese books and the Portuguese writers’ style. His evaluation furthermore illustrates how translation and non-translation are two sides of a coin that deserve to be studied conjointly as both inform us about mediators’ activities. Being so critical toward Portuguese literary production of that time, it seems clear that Willemsen would favor his personal preference for Brazilian writers who he considered “typically calvinist” and “whose language can be simple” (1985: 68). In the book *Het Hoge Woord. Beschouwingen en Boutades* (1994), Willemsen explains his preference for what he considered a “Calvinist style”:

I think that it is possible to make a connection between Calvinism and the written word and Catholicism and the spoken word. Naturally, the cult of the spoken word influences the way the written word is used. Indeed, you see that in the Latin Literature, rhetoric is a phenomenon much more common, accepted and admired than in northern countries. The writers I have chosen are then typically

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<sup>14</sup> In these articles Willemsen deals with translation issues, explanation about the literary work’s background and literary profiles of the authors he translates. In any case, Willemsen was considered an expert in Brazilian Portuguese Language and Literature; therefore, he was constantly invited to write about issues involving his expertise.

Calvinists. Machado was in his time criticized for being protestant<sup>15</sup>.  
(1994: 184)

In one of his letters published in *Braziliaanse Brieven*, it is possible to find further information on the reasons why Willemsen enjoyed so many Brazilian writers over the Portuguese ones. While criticizing the Modern Portuguese Literature, Willemsen reports his fascination to the literary works he had discovered in Brazil: “I have just found out that, in this language, you can also write with simplicity” (1985: 68). He goes on listing poets who then fascinated him: Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira, Vinícius de Moraes, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and of course, the novelist Machado de Assis, “a man from last century, but still so close”. Willemsen explains this fascination: “it was as if I was listening instead of reading”, “as something I would write - as if I were a writer” (1985: 68). Again these testimonies illustrate how much Willemsen considered reading, writing, translating as related or sometimes even overlapping activities.

Willemsen never denied this preference and admitted himself that his choices were decisive in shaping the translations of Brazilian Literature. He also acknowledged the importance of his personal networking in reaching his goal. So e.g. in the collective volume *Ik wantrouw iedereen boven de 1.67* to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of Theo Sontrop, the former director of Meulenhof and Arbeiderspers, Willemsen writes an essay in which he confesses his great influence on Theo Sontrop:

Theo [Sontrop, director of Arbeiderspers from 1972-1991] read in English a translation of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*<sup>16</sup> and he asked me if I would like to translate that book. I answered I would do it only if he accepted a complete series by Machado, that is, his five biggest novels, and two short stories anthologies. He allowed himself to be guided by my own opinion and agreed immediately. Most of

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Machado’s religion has never been determined. Many people consider him more an atheist than a religious person although he had been educated in language by a catholic priest.

<sup>16</sup> Assis, Machado de, *Posthume herinneringen van Brás Cubas*, Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1983.



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Machados's volumes reached many issues and Theo thought that everything I touched was immediately turned into gold (2006: 88).

Brazilian literature thus mainly owes its prestige in the Netherlands and Flanders to Willemsen's work. On the one hand, for choosing representative novelists, poets, and short stories' authors and for using his networking for their publication; on the other, for the superb translation work he used to do (COSTA 2007: 287). In 1983, his refined style rendered him the *Martinus Nijhoff Prize*, the most prestigious Dutch translation prize.

## 7. Translating and creating

Any translator, as he or she receives the archive to translate, takes on the double demands of fidelity that comes naturally with the translating task: one toward the original text and its author and one toward the translation text and its target reader. The translator promises to offer the same meanings he gets from the original author. He engages in the double bind of promises to the author of the original and to the reader of the translation. Even if he is honestly engaged in this commitment, the translator suffers as he acknowledges the constraints of his own language. He realizes the impossibility of repeating faithfully.

Divided between the desire to give voice and word to the *other*, to the author of the *original*, and the necessary effort to the building-up of knowledge (linguistic, historical, cultural, psychological) in order to fulfill his task, the translator swings, all the time, between two opposed and complementary attitudes: either is he an "indigent", or a "hero" (Paulo Rónai), he goes from submission to presumption (José Paulo Paes) and from depression to maniac, just like a typical melancholic. (LAGES 2002: 12)

The literary text is commonly considered to be charged with a unique load of senses, and precisely because of that, the translator feels deeply involved in let's say "literary debts". The literary work is exemplary of the wedlock between signifier and signified - language materiality. Nevertheless, the language itself is literally the first victim of the translation. The signifier is precisely what drops through the hands of the translator, and no best option is at hand than forging a creative translation - namely, a *transcreation*, to resume Haroldo de Campos's anthropophagic proposal. This audacity can trigger signification mechanisms in the target language similar to the ones the translator tracks back in the source language.

Analyzing Willemsen's creative translation protocols, it is indispensable to reconsider the binary reductive nature which shapes the relationship between original and translation, authors and translators. Willemsen is a good example of Haroldo de Campos's creative translating strategy - which he names *transcrição* [transcreation] - i.e. the anthropophagic translation aesthetics. For Campos the signified is nothing but a semantic parameter working as a landmark for the creative enterprise. According to Campos, we stand on the reverse of literal translation. As he argues, "this is the test of tests for poetry translation. Translations which do not seem translations. Poetry which is poetry" (1970: 13). Haroldo de Campos has always considered the translation of creative texts as "re-creation", as the reproduction of the creative processes that took place in the original language. In his point of view, "the translation of creative texts will always be recreation, or parallel creation, autonomous, although reciprocal, translating not only the signification but also attempting to transfer the materiality of the literary event" (1970: 13).

In a considerable number of his translations, Willemsen wrote afterwords in which he accounts for his translation choices, the problems and solutions. Strikingly, *Het woord als gedicht - het boek als de wereld* [The word as a poem - the book as the world] is the title of his afterword to Guimarães Rosa's "*Diepe Wildernis: de wegen*", revealing the dimension Rosa's language universe represented to the translator. Guimarães Rosa is considered the greatest

Brazilian novelist, whose innovative prose style derived from the oral tradition of the *sertão* (hinterland of Brazil). In the very first paragraph of this text Willemsen asks: “What does *sertão* mean?”, and assures: “don’t think that the *sertão* is less strange to an inhabitant of Rio de Janeiro than it is to the Dutch reader” (1993-2000: 529). In short, the above mentioned afterwords in general, and the one for Guimarães Rosa more in particular, is a clue to Willemsen’s inquietude and uneasiness to translate and to translate Rosa’s language. They testify about the moments when the translation halted, when something prevented Willemsen from fulfilling his promise of fidelity. In these moments of impasse, Willemsen was compelled to forge solutions, as ingenious as his linguistic skills enabled him to do. His inventive solutions are, in fact, a sort of countersignature on the archives he has chosen and which had imposed him a task.

Willemsen was brave enough to translate *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956), a novel that is considered as the start of the “novo romance brasileiro” (WILLEMSSEN 1977: 173) and which was largely considered untranslatable<sup>17</sup>. Guimarães Rosa is frequently compared to James Joyce while *Grande Sertão - Veredas* is reputable as the Brazilian equivalent of *Ulysses*. Rosa is the kind of writer who operates “consciously in this pragmatic post-babelic linguistic confusion” (VEJMEKKA 2002) just as James Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov or Franz Kafka, writers whose relation to language exceeds the national boundaries, allocating itself in frontier territories, in an *entre-lugar*. Guimarães Rosa dared to weave his text with such unrestrained coined word combinations and syntax as to constitute almost a new language, starting what many consider to be a semantic revolution<sup>18</sup>. Considering the definition given by Grutman according

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<sup>17</sup> About the untranslatable character of Rosa’s work, Vejmekka remarks: “What is now commonly known as Guimarães Rosa’s idiom (Rosa talking about himself in ROSA 1995: 44) has become one of the strongest characteristics of the author being studied for its innovation and transcendental elaboration of regional inland language. His distinguished artistic complexity makes its translation to another language revealing of the interpretation perspective since it seems impossible to completely recreate the unity of form and content.” (VEJMEKKA 2002: 413)

<sup>18</sup> “*Na de verschijning van Guimarães Rosa’s meesterwerk, de monumentale roman Grande Sertão: Veredas, in 1956, was de kritiek, in Brazilië, het over een ding eens: hierna kon*

to which “multilingualism evokes the co-presence of two or more languages in a given society, text or individual” (GRUTMAN 2009: 182), Guimarães Rosa’s work is a good example of multilingual writing. As summarized by Willemsen (1987: 192-3), Rosa uses “regionalisms from Portugal and Brazil, Latinisms, medievalism, Indianism”; and more than that, as Willemsen describes and appreciates:

he juggles with all Portuguese prefixes and suffixes, snatches phrases from each other, forms new words with old fragments, mocks word order and syntax and achieves so by playing with the paradox of an oral, popular sounding, sonorous language manufactured with the handcraft temperament of a watchmaker. His writing is mostly difficult to read, and yet simultaneously playful and philosophical, even eschatological. He even adds elements borrowed from foreign languages - he seems to have mastered fourteen, including Hungarian, Arabic and Chinese. (1987: 193)

Creative texts as Rosa’s, and many others among those translated by Willemsen, are abundant in semantic information, and more yet, in “aesthetic information” (see BENSE 1972). The fragility of this information reaches the ultimate level in the process of translation because it is inseparable of its own performance. In any other language, the text might offer the same semantic information but will certainly present distinct aesthetic information.

Since a detailed study of Willemsen’s translation strategies is not possible here, let us give some concrete examples that are representative for his translation work. While translating Rosa’s *A Terceira Margem do Rio - De derde oever van de rivier*, 1977, Willemsen encountered the sentence on the left which he translated as followed:

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*niemand meer schrijven als tevoren. Nu is moeilijk te controleren hoe iemand geschreven zou hebben als Grande Sertão Veredas niet verschenen was, maar de uitspraak tekent het belang dat onmiddellijk aan dit werk werd toegekend. Inderdaad dateert men vanaf 1956 de novo romance brasileiro, of ook de nieuwere Braziliaanse Literatuur in het algemeen” (WILLEMSSEN 1977: 173)*

*"Vão com Deus!" mamãe disse, profetisa, com aquela voz voável. Ela falava, e choviam era bâtegas de bênçãos,*

*"Ga met God!" riep moeder, voorzeggend, met die ontstijgende stem. Haar spreken was als regen: een zeiken van zegeningen*

*"Go with God!" Said mom, prophetess, with that flyable voice. She spoke, and it rained buckets of blessings*

*"Go with God!" Shouted mother, prophesying, with that mounting voice. Her speaking was like rain: a pissing down of blessings.*

In a lecture at LAC, Latijns Amerika Centrum, in Amsterdam, in 2006, Willemsen explains his creative solution for the above mentioned sentence:

In the end there was this "bâtegas de bênçãos". The literal translation, 'slagregens van zegeningen', did not sound nice and did not preserve the original alliteration. Then I remembered that when it rains hard we say: "Het regent dat het zeikt": and it came to me "een zeiken van zegeningen". I thought: "This is not possible". Finally I decided to leave it there, "why not? It sounds so well". In order to appease my consciousness, I checked the dictionary and from the four senses I found, two regional equivalents "to fall water" and "to rain heavily", gave me permission to use it. In other words, despite my personal taste, I was authorized to use the word (COSTA 2007: 37).

Willemsen's explanation elucidates his translation choices, neatly seeking to support that his linguistic construction was not random, and that there is a logical justification to unburden his guilt. Willemsen, as he confesses, tries to alleviate his consciousness for not being as faithful as he thinks he should. He knows he says something else, and that the text he offers is not a literal translation. The argument he uses to advocate that "een zeiken van zegeningen" is a good translation for "bâtegas de bênçãos", responds to the formal aspects of the source text: "The literal translation did not sound nice and did not preserve the original alliteration" and supports his solution: "why not? It sounds so well", "After all, [in the dictionary] I found two regional

equivalents“. From the perspective of his language choices, there is no strong support to validate his choice, except that, indeed, it sounds nicer. Form is prevalent to content. In spite of being apparently banished from the contemporary debate on translation, the accusation of being unfaithful and deliberately modifying the sense of the original is still the greatest phantom that haunts a translator like Willemsen. Even if we are generous to Willemsen, accepting his arguments, the truth is that “*een zeiken van zegeningen*” says something other than “*bátegas de bênçãos*”, and Willemsen wouldn’t deny it. On the other hand, considering translating and writing as overlapping activities, Willemsen feels he should take the freedom to transcreate in order to do justice to the author and the original.

In April 2007, Sander de Vaan interviewed Willemsen and reminded him of a remark he had made years before. Willemsen is surprised by ever stating that “(the good) poetry is that which could not have been said with different words” and he explains: “at that level [linguistic], poetry works as a joke: if you explain it, it loses the fun”. Considering such a comment on the nature of poetry it is interesting to remember that what a translation does is precisely use different words belonging to another language. In this sense, as Willemsen translates from Portuguese to Dutch, he does nothing else but use “other words”. As I mentioned previously, the linguistic body is, par excellence, what drops in the translation event. In such translation endeavors, the translator is dealing not only with the signification but also with the signifier, the physicality of the sound and the image, in a nut shell, the aesthetic sign. What is then to be faithful if we take into account another moment when Willemsen has to justify the translation of the title of the poem “*Profundamente*” by Manuel Bandeira. This title in Dutch became “*In diepe slaap*”. In that same interview with Sander de Vaan Willemsen explains:

You know, of course, that this word “*Profundamente*” is an adverb for the adjective “*profound*” We do not have in Dutch a separate word that works as an adverb. In the German translation by Curt Meyer-Clason, the title is simply “*Profound*”. It does not please me.

The length of the word with its 4 syllables, for me, corresponds to the profundity of sleep, of the first sleep and eventually of death. Maybe this is foolishness but I do not think you can discard a syllable. That's why "in diepe slaap", also has 4 syllables. I thought that it was mandatory to be like that (WILLEMSSEN 2007: [n.p.]).

Analysing Willemsen's choices from the linguistic perspective in its semantic stratum, which could support his solutions, one must accept Willemsen's creative approach to his translation "problems". Besides, there are semantic developments in the word *Profundamente* that Willemsen did not take into consideration, paying it the same credits he pays to the 4<sup>th</sup> syllable: in the word *profundamente* we have the suffix "mente", which transforms the adjective *Profundo* in an adverb. But *mente* is also the noun for "mind" and the present simple of the verb *mentir* - to lie. This semantic chain can be unfolded as one reads the poem *Profundamente* in its original language. It is precisely this semantic richness that is irremediably lost.

These are two different situations, two different "problems" that Willemsen treats with two different approaches. In translating Guimarães Rosa, he permits himself to abandon the literal strategy for the sake of a solution that "sounds better" and which in fact, strictly speaking, says something else. On the other hand, when considering the title of Bandeira's poem, one only syllable was considered essential and not neglectful.

One last example of Willemsen's translation strategies illustrates the creative process he is involved with while translating. While translating Carlos Drummond de Andrade "A música da terra" - "De muziek der aarde", Willemsen is aware of what he calls, 'de wet van de compensatie' (the law of compensation). As he perceives, when for example,

a wordplay is totally untranslatable, but if somewhere else it is possible to make a new wordplay which is not in the original, and which does not misrepresent the text, then I think that it is permitted. Slightly more general: it is obviously out of the question to surpass the original (to use more beautiful words than the original). (WILLEMSSEN 1987: 23)

While translating this poem, Willemsen had a brilliant opportunity which could be considered one of those moments when the translation “surpasses the original”. In the original by Drummond de Andrade one reads: “Ó Beethoven, tu nos mostraste o alvorecer” which in English would read as “Oh Beethoven, you have shown us the dawn”. Willemsen’s solution to this verse is “Jij, Beethoven, hebt ons de dageraad getoond”. The reader of the translation will certainly grasp Drummond’s meaning “Oh Beethoven, you have shown us the dawn” but further than that, will also have a precious further meaning not present in the original, that is, “Oh Beethoven, you have put the dawn in tone for us”. This second meaning which connects Beethoven and music by means of the same word “getoond” for “showed” is totally to be accounted to Willemsen’s translation. In Dutch the verb *tonen*/to show and *getoond*/showed is similar to the words *tom* (Portuguese) *tone* (English) *toon* (Dutch). It is even more creative when we learn that the wordplay is also new for the Dutch readers as Willemsen uses it as a verb which does not exist in Dutch. The meaning “to put in tone” that one can read in “getoond” is not originally a word. This is Willemsen’s creation considering the perspective of the poem but also considering his mother tongue.

## 8. Translation and other transfer techniques: Outcomes of Willemsen’s translation work.

Willemsen’s translations, together with his afterwords and his many articles, were the transfer techniques that made Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Guimarães Rosa and other Brazilian authors known to the Dutch reader. These transfer activities are part of continuous processes and imply a plurality of directions and a multiplicity of effects. As already shown, Willemsen’s



translations inspired other translators of Brazilian literature into other languages, his translations acting as an intermediate version or even an original for further translations. Moreover, Willemsen's translations were also directly responsible for some cultural products that took different shapes after the publication of his translations in the Netherlands. Translating these texts was an open door to many other cultural products, some of which are listed below:

1) The film *O Amor Natural* by the Dutch film director Heddy Honigmann<sup>19</sup>. The documentary, in original Portuguese language with Dutch subtitles, portrays Carlos Drummond de Andrade's life and poems. While talking about the film, she accounts:

When *O Amor Natural* of Carlos Drummond de Andrade appeared in the wonderful Dutch translation by August Willemsen, I started to dream about a film based on the poems in the book. At first I envisaged a film in which old people would simply read the poems. Beautiful old people and beautiful poems: that was enough to make an interesting film. But after the research period in Rio de Janeiro, the film project became richer: thanks to the poems I was able to talk to wonderful old people about Drummond, about a part of their life, about - their memories of - sex and love. The poems sometimes functioned as a kind of corkscrew, sometimes as a glass of brandy. After my stay there, I called the film for myself *Love and Melancholy*.<sup>20</sup>

2) On March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the *Muziektheater* and the *Theatergroep Flint* presented the spectacle *Midden op de weg* which was presented as

a homage to the poetry of the phenomenal Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987). Andrade is one of the most important South American poets of the last century. His work was made known in the Netherlands through the well-known documentary by Heddy Honigmann after the posthumous publication of his poem collection *O Amor Natural*, which sings physical love with

<sup>19</sup> *O Amor Natural*, life and work of Carlos Drummond de Andrade, poems translated by August Willemsen, Dir. Heddy Honigmann, Producer: Pieter van Huystee Film & TV, Film 35 mm, November 1996.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.heddy-honigmann.nl/hhonigmann/films/o\\_amor\\_natural/index.php](http://www.heddy-honigmann.nl/hhonigmann/films/o_amor_natural/index.php)

tenderness and humor. Everything was beautifully translated by August Willemsen<sup>21</sup>.

3) The music group *Rosa Ensemble* began in 1997 an experimental project to combine music and theater, acoustic and electronic, traditional and experimental, classic and pop style. As explained on their website: “the ensemble was founded in 1997 with the first performance of *Diepe Wildernis*, based on the famous book by Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa, who gave the ensemble its name”. While presenting the project *Diepe Wildernis* they explained:

Het Rosa Ensemble, created in 1997, was founded and named after the Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa. His controversial but stunningly flowery prose put the knife in the South American literary history. He developed a language based on the dialect of illiterate farmers in Guimarães Rosa's native region of Minas Gerais and is full of neologisms, crooked sayings and non-grammatical constructions. Was this a tribute to or an abuse of the Portuguese language and Brazilian culture of the early 19th century? After this same concept *Rosa Ensemble* aims to give a new accent to the old music. The language of João Guimarães Rosa, pregnant with meaning, sultry and musically by the emphasis the author puts on the sound of the words, is a model for the world of sound that the *Rosa Ensemble* evokes in the intersection of traditions where the group is now. *Rosa Ensemble* makes concert programs, music and deliver music to other film and theater projects. Rosa sees theater, visual arts and literature as semiconductors of abstract music. This recently published 'musical narrative' on CD (MGN 97007). (<http://www.rosaensemble.nl/info/bio.php>).

## Conclusion

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<sup>21</sup> [http://wiki.theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Midden\\_op\\_de\\_weg\\_-\\_Theatergroep\\_Flint\\_-\\_2009-01-10](http://wiki.theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Midden_op_de_weg_-_Theatergroep_Flint_-_2009-01-10)

August Willemsen developed a broad range of partly overlapping transfer activities through different cultural fields (literature, media, academia), different languages and spatial frontiers (the Netherlands and Flanders, Brazil, Portugal, Australia the English-speaking academic community. The richness of his production is not completely presented here. As a typical cultural mediator, he undertook a variety of *discursive* transfer techniques: fictional writing, translation, transcreation, criticism, essays, studies.... In this way he served as the key discursive bridge between Brazil and the Dutch-speaking world, between Brazilian literature and Dutch literature, between Europe and Latin-America, between Brazilian literature and the international academic world. He was also active in a variety of more or less institutionalised intercultural publishing and personal *networks*. That is, his institutional mediating role was very prestigious. Finally, he also was a real migrant, developing his transfer activities both in the Netherlands and in Brazil, which considerably sharpened his intercultural and international consciousness. As such he was the architect of common repertoires and new frames of reference on Brazilian literature in the Netherlands and Flanders, and beyond. He furthermore performed strategic transfer roles, created new mediating practices, witness the multiple derived products that were initiated by his translations and which explicitly acknowledged his mediating role and activities. As a consequence, Willemsen's translation and other transfer activities take sense in relation to each other and in relation to the transfer activities they created.

The present case study is obviously just a beginning to understand the forms, aims and effects of Willemsen's transfer activities and their multiform afterlives. More interdisciplinary and collective research is needed to do justice to this intriguing figure and to contribute to a new type of cultural history. It should also allow us to further question the binary opposition between writing and translating, and to explore the relations between translation and other transfer practices.

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