



ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЕНИЕ

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IN MEMORIAM KEES VERHEUL

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On March 16, 2024, the Dutch writer, Slavic literature scholar, essayist and translator Kees Verheul, who made a huge contribution to Russian-Dutch literary contacts, passed away. As a researcher and translator of works by Russian poets and prose writers (Brodsky, Annensky, Akhmatova, Platonov, Mandelstam, etc.) and as a teacher of Russian literature at the Department of Slavic Studies at the University of Groningen, he sought to bring Russian literature closer to Dutch readers. As a participant in the Nijhoff Readings and other Dutch literature events in Russia, as well as the editor and co-author of the three-volume history of Dutch literature *From “Reynard the Fox” to “Dream of the Gods”* (2013–2015), he has helped our compatriots to understand the world of his native culture. As a member of the jury of the prestigious Martinus Nijhoff Vertaalprijs Translation Award and head of a number of large translation projects, he has done much to raise the standard of translations from Russian into Dutch and from Dutch into Russian. The article dedicated to his memory focuses on the origins of his work: based on new data, it describes Verheul’s first steps as a grammar school student in the literary field, his first acquaintance with Russian letters, and traces the connection between the underlying ideas of his books and his life philosophy, which also manifested itself in his everyday relationships with people. In addition, the author of the article — translator of K. Verheul’s works into Russian — shares the lessons of literary translation that Verheul taught her. The article concludes with a fragment of a poem written by Verheul in his grammar school years.

Keywords: Kees Verheul, Dutch literature, Brodsky, Slavic studies, literary translation.

INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2024, the Dutch writer, Slavic literature scholar, essayist and translator Kees Verheul passed away. He is known to Russian readers primarily as the author of the book *A Dance Around the World*, which has been published in our country more than once [Verheul, 2002, 2015] — one of the most vivid and subtle books about Joseph Brodsky, with whom the Dutch writer had a thirty-year-long friendship. In addition, his novels *Villa Bermond* and *Sonata “Tempest”* from the cycle about Tyutchev caused a great resonance in their time: for the Russian translation of *Villa Bermond* he received the Vyazemsky Prize; inspired by the novel Elena Ushakova wrote a poem *Their conversation seemed to follow a pattern* [Ushakova, 1999]. He is well-known to Dutch studies scholars in Russia as a central figure in the project *Poets of Dutch Modernism* [2010] and as a co-editor, one of the authors and protagonists of the three-volume history of Dutch literature *From “Reynard the Fox” to “Dream of the Gods”* [2013; 2014; 2015].

I have previously written about Kees Verheul’s invaluable contribution to introducing Russian literature to the Dutch reading public [Mikhailova, 2013, 2024]: his own translations and publications of Russian poetry and prose in Dutch, which he helped to publish, often became important events in the cultural life of the country. This can definitely be said of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs, which he translated at her own request [Mandelstam, 1971; Naaikens, 2024], and of the monumental book *Straws for the Reader (Strohalmen voor de lezer)*, a volume of over a thousand pages of Brodsky’s poems in Dutch [Brodsky, 2015]. In addition, thanks to Kees Verheul, the Dutch became familiar with the poems written by Osip Mandelstam, Innokenty Annensky, Akhmatova, Boris Ryzhy, and could read Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit* and many other Russian books for the first time. But while in previous essays on Kees Verheul I have spoken at length about these and his other achievements, in this article, dedicated to his memory, I would like to pay more attention not to the fruits of his literary activity, but to its origins. First, to trace how the young Kees Verheul felt a literary calling during his grammar school years and how he became fascinated by Russian culture. Second, to draw attention to some of the underlying ideas of his books and essays, which are intimately connected with his life philosophy, which also manifested

itself in everyday life — in his relationships with people, in his desire and ability to make friends. I came closer to understanding the origins of Verheul's work by reading several dozen speeches and articles, some published, some not yet published, delivered at his funeral or written in the three months following his death. Third, I would like to share the lessons in literary translation that Kees Verheul taught me as a translator of his works into Russian.

1. YEARS OF STUDY: FASCINATION WITH DUTCH LITERATURE AND THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

At the age of 13–14, Kees read S. Vestdijk's historical novel *Rum Island*, which his older brother Wim had been given to read by his literature teacher [Wynia, 2024]. The book fascinated the young Verheul so much that he read many more of Vestdijk's novels, which he borrowed from the town library, where he was exceptionally allowed access to the adult section. The literature teacher Dinand van de Riet, who had learnt of Kees's enthusiasm, invited him, through his wife, to come and visit him to talk about Vestdijk's work. Conversations about literature between Van de Riet and Kees became regular. Even after the young man had finished grammar school, he would visit his teacher to discuss with him the books he had read. At about the same time, aged 13 or 14, Kees became editor-in-chief of the grammar school literary newspaper *Nostra Scribamus*, where his own poems were sometimes published. On one occasion he wrote a letter to Vestdijk on behalf of the editorial board asking him to be interviewed for the paper. Vestdijk willingly answered all of the grammar school student's questions. Such attention on the part of his idol could not but inspire the young man with faith in his own abilities.

In one of the autobiographical chapters of his novel *Villa Bermond* Kees Verheul describes his first acquaintance with Russian letters, which took place at about the same period of his life. The father of the future writer, a polymath who “knew everything”, that is, stored in his memory information from a variety of fields, one day on the train, to occupy his son during a boring journey, showed him how to write Russian letters. The boy kept the sheet of paper with his father's writing and then later practiced writing Russian letters himself for many days in a row:

Since I didn't know any Russian words, I — like my dad that first time — wrote surnames in the new letters. The hardest thing was to write ЧАЙКОВСКИЙ (CHAIKOVSKY). But the first surname I wrote myself, which so occupied my thoughts that I wrote it over and over again, was the surname of the writer who wrote the story about a clerk. At first glance, it was a very simple word — only two syllables, and both beginning with the same letters: ГОГОЛЬ (GOGOL). But the word ends, as it happens, with that single letter, that single sign, the meaning of which my father was unable to explain to me, even though he knew everything. Next to this letter he wrote the Dutch letter *j*, but he said that it was not really a *j* at all, but only the additional sound of a *j*, and that in fact it was almost not even a letter. I had just begun to think that I was about to understand what it was all about, when I read in our pre-war encyclopaedia the name of this letter: “soft sign”. This completely confused me, and I lost hope of ever — even if not now — mastering this letter, this language, this country [Verheul, 2000, pp. 66–67].

The desire to “master this letter, this language, this country” remained with Verheul for the rest of his life. After graduating from grammar school and after studying for another six months in America, Kees Verheul decided to enroll in the department of Slavic Studies at Utrecht University. After graduating, he enrolled as a graduate student working on a dissertation on Akhmatova's later work and travelled to the Soviet Union for an internship, where his goal was to meet people who had been in personal contact with Akhmatova, who had died a few years before his arrival, so that he could question them about her. As in the case of his literature teacher and famous writer Simon Vestdijk, he developed very warm relationships with most of them, from Nadezhda Mandelstam and Lydia Chukovskaya to Vladimir Ufland and Alexander Kushner.

2. “THE CONCORDANCE OF A PERSON'S FEELINGS WITH THE FEELINGS OF ANOTHER PERSON THAT IS UNEXPLAINABLE BY ANY GEOGRAPHY OR HISTORY”

This ability to make people of any age, of any type of character, in any part of the world feel at ease with him is actually related to Verheul's philosophical insight, which he formulated in his comments to his novel *Villa Bermond*. To make it clear what we are talking about, let us talk briefly about the way the novel is structured. There are three story lines: chapters about the Russian poet Tyutchev alternate with chapters about Verheul's own childhood and with chapters about the last months

of the life of Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich, the Russian heir to the throne, who died in his 23rd year of life in Nice in 1865 at the Villa Bermond, where the Church of St Nicholas was built in his memory in 1902. Tyutchev dedicated to him the poem *The Tsar's Son Dies in Nice* (1865). It is to Nice that the Verheul family makes a trip, and the boy Kees sees a Russian church for the first time in his life, which fascinates him no less than Russian letters. Through the alternation of chapters on Tyutchev, on the heir to the throne, and on the Verheul family, the reader's mind draws clear parallels between the feelings of people from these three different worlds.

“Maybe the main idea of this novel is that there is a concordance of a person's feelings with the feelings of another person that is unexplainable by any geography or history”, Verheul explained [Mikhailova, 2013].

In his interactions with people, Kees clearly sought to find in those he spoke with this very similarity of feeling, inviting them to share with him their vision of things. His interest in his fellow human beings was always deep and genuine, for he looked for something of his own reflection in them. This was very vividly outlined by the novelist Willem Jan Otten, describing one of his conversations with Kees Verheul [Otten, 2024]. In the course of that conversation, it emerged retrospectively that both had been present at Frans Kellendonk's funeral service at the Nicolaaskerk in Amsterdam in 1990, but had stood in different places there:

Kees was an enthusiastic and engaging conversationalist. <...> Kees took the similarity of our feelings (at the funeral of Frans Kellendonk. — *I. M.*), despite the complete dissimilarity of our characters, as further proof of the correctness of his intuitive belief that human beings are fundamentally non-individual souls: this is what enables them to get to know each other and to be involved in each other's lives. If I may put it this way, people are bound together by non-individual spiritual experience [Otten, 2024].

And although Willem Jan Otten immediately points out that his account of that conversation greatly simplifies what was said by Kees, a man of extraordinary subtlety and avoiding any straightforwardness, yet this “intuitive belief” of Kees's is easy to grasp in Verheul's own writings and in the memoirs of his friends written after his death, and it is also fully consistent with my own impressions of my interactions with him.

3. “FRIENDSHIP DANCES AROUND THE WORLD BIDDING US ALL TO AWAKEN TO THE RECOGNITION OF HAPPINESS”

The quotation from Epicurus given as the title to this section serves as an epigraph to Verheul’s book on Brodsky. His account of the very beginning of his friendship with the Russian poet in 1967, which was first published in his book *Contact with the Enemy* (1975), echoes the same reflection on the role of geography and history in the emergence of mutual understanding and attraction between people:

The fact that we were both born in the same year, just before the war, gave us a special sense of inner connection, as if we happened to be relatives. <...> In public, we never missed an opportunity to emphasize this: “It’s amazing, really, we’re both born the same year, like twins”. Because of the otherwise completely different environment in which we lived, we tried, one from the other’s stories, to imagine what it would have been like if things had been the other way round. I was Joseph, who had grown up in Holland instead of Leningrad, and he imagined the person I would be on his side of the Iron Curtain. <...> But I could never shake off the thought that there were profound differences between us — in character and in talent — which, had we both been born in Russia or both in the Netherlands, would have alienated us to a greater extent than now, when we were so clearly people from different worlds [Verheul, 2015, pp. 29–30].

Gijs van der Ham and Corinna van Schendel describe Kees Verheul as a friend who never spared time and attention to maintain warm relations with old and new friends, including his kindergarten friend Evelien and his school classmate Michiel. Merijn de Boer talks about the same thing, and also recounts an occasion when he had an argument with Kees: angry with Merijn, then an employee of the Van Oorschot publishing house where Kees was published, the elderly writer called the young writer a “frustrated bureaucrat” [Boer de, 2024]. It is an important piece of back-story: real, emotional friendship, as opposed to indifferent and calm good relations, is bound to be accompanied by quarrels. Verheul writes about a stormy quarrel with a friend as dear to him as Joseph Brodsky in his essay *Around One Dedication*: because of the quarrel, Brodsky removed the dedication to Kees in the first edition of his poem *Holland is a Flat Country* and restored it later, after a reconciliation [Verheul, 2015, p. 105]. And I myself experienced Kees Verheul’s anger when, due to time constraints, we were unable to

include a chapter on his work in the 2nd volume of the *History of Dutch Literature*. But then later the chapter appeared in the 3rd volume, and a joyful reconciliation followed.

4. “WHILE READING, I SOMETIMES FEEL AS IF A BOOK IS SPEAKING DIRECTLY TO ME, AND THEN I WANT TO RESPOND TO IT, SO THAT I CAN GET A SENSE OF RELIEF”

Willem Jan Otten writes: “Kees taught that reading is the most important way to connect with those who are no longer alive. And it works out great because essentially we are all souls. Kees wrote essay after essay, thereby bringing deceased authors back to life” [Otten, 2024].

Kees Verheul indeed had a fantastic talent for approaching authors to whom bronze monuments had been erected long ago — such as Dante, Ariosto, Virgil, Erasmus of Rotterdam, etc. — with the same curiosity and open-mindedness as his young contemporaries such as Boris Ryzhy (1974–2001), Merijn de Boer (born 1982), Sally Rooney (born 1991) and others. The fame and authority of the author he was reading did not matter to him. “Kees Verheul immersed himself completely, wholeheartedly, in what he was reading, delving into the essence, identifying himself with the author. Yet at the same time he did not lose his critical element: beauty must be something sharp”, says Carel Peeters [Peeters, 2024]. Reading Verheul’s essays has helped many of us to become interested in such authors, who before seemed to be lifeless, bronzed classics.

With his characteristic subtle humour, Kees describes his fascination with the essay genre in the following way:

I don’t write essays about books in order to research something or to prove something to someone. As a matter of fact, while reading, I sometimes feel as if a book is speaking directly to me, and then I want to respond to it so that I can get some sense of relief. Sometimes you feel better when you translate this book into Dutch, and sometimes you feel better when you talk about it. I’ve noticed that these two options have a lot in common. When, already as an adult, I first read a collection of short stories by Arthur van Schendel, I was very saddened by the thought that it was written in Dutch, so there was no need to translate it. But fortunately I had had an opportunity to write a few columns about it in a newspaper [Verheul, 1976, p. 7]¹.

¹ Thanks to Prof. dr. Ton Naaijkens (Utrecht) who brought this important quote to my attention.

Kees was always keen to share with his Russian friends the joy of reading his favourite Dutch poets. He used to give Brodsky English translations to read, and as a result the Russian poet became a great admirer of Martinus Nijhoff. When A. A. Purin suggested that Kees consult us in translating Dutch poetry into Russian, he responded enthusiastically. From 1999 to 2006, every autumn our well-played trio (Kees Verheul, A. A. Purin, and I) organised evenings of Dutch poetry in St Petersburg, the so-called Nijhoff Readings, where Kees would give an opening speech that inspired the audience to read our joint translations². When the idea of publishing a history of Dutch literature in Russian took shape, he became not only the Dutch co-editor but also the author of one of the chapters. Kees, with his erudition and sincere passion, proved to be an excellent co-editor. He was happy to read all the chapters written by Dutch Studies scholars in Russia, and his editorial guidance brought these chapters to a qualitatively higher level.

Kees was keen that literary contacts between Russia and the Netherlands should be of a high quality standard and that only worthy translations from the Dutch language should reach Russian readers. In 2005, at a presentation of translations made by A. A. Purin and me of poems by Jan Hendrik Leopold (1865–1925), a symbolist poet and teacher of Latin and Greek, Kees gave me a silver ring with an amethyst. The ring has the word *lilac* (“сиреневых”) written on it in Russian. The Dutch jeweller who had made the ring at Kees’s request upon the publication of his translations from Innokenty Annensky (1855–1909) had chosen this word of suitable length from Annensky’s poem *After the Concert*, which mentions a string of amethysts. Kees gave me the ring with the words that it had belonged to him for a long time as a translator of Annensky, and now it would belong to me as a translator of Leopold, Annensky of Dutch literature. “But”, said Kees, “I wish you would not wear it too long, ten or fifteen years is enough. And then pass it on to a younger translator from Dutch to Russian or from Russian to Dutch”. And so it happened. In 2019, Kees came to St Petersburg and during a conference on Dutch literature at the Dutch Institute we solemnly presented the “translation ring” to a wonderful

² The Nijhoff Readings later evolved into the project “Poets of Dutch Modernism” (2010).

translator Ekaterina Toritsyna, who now wears it as a talisman. We can expect the amethyst ring to roll on further to another translator sometime in the early 2030s.

5. TRANSLATION LESSONS

In the 1990s, when freedom of speech came to Russia, Kees became interested in having his works, especially his novel “Villa Bermond”, published in Russian in a translation authorised by himself. On the basis of sample translations by various Russian translators, then held by the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature in Amsterdam, he chose me as a promising translator, but immediately informed me that before he could authorise my Russian text, we would have a lot of work to do on it. This is because Kees knew Russian very well, he had translated a lot from Russian into Dutch himself, and he had been a member of the jury of the famous Nijhoff Translation Prize for many years, so he had quite definite ideas about what a good translation was. Especially at the beginning of our co-operation, he and I would sit next to each other for hours and discuss literally every sentence. He was very strict and demanding. Later, when he was in Amsterdam, he would read the printouts of my translations and revise them. I keep many pages of text with the marks of his magic pencil, which transformed a pale translated text into a living author’s text. In 2000, I analysed and systematised his revisions, and now I take this opportunity to describe what and how Kees Verheul edited my translations.

The most numerous were the cases when he crossed out in my text all the words that only reduce the vigour of the text and give nothing instead, like *very*, *quite*, *suddenly*, *extremely*, *almost*. Second place goes to the substitution of a blurred or colourless translator’s word for the author’s precise and emotional word. *Шляпа* (‘hat’) became *цилиндр* (‘top hat’), *инструмент* (‘instrument’) became *скрипка* (‘violin’), children listened to Uncle Mikula’s stories not *внимательно* (‘attentively’) but *мирно* (‘sitting still and quiet’), and *госпожа Крюденер* (‘Mrs Krüdenner’) turned into *Крюденерша* (‘Krüdenersha’), etc. Third, Kees fought my desire to write smooth Russian sentences where the original had weird phrases, for example: my translation of *Как они друг к другу прижимались, как терлись щекой о щеку* (‘How they cuddled up together, how they hugged cheek to cheek’) should have turned into

the sentence: *Как они друг в друга вцеплялись, как елозили щекой по щеке* ('How they clung to each other, how they rubbed their cheeks against each other'). "You can see I've got some weird stuff written, can't you?" — Kees would say to me. — "That's how you should translate it. You think if I wanted to, I couldn't write nice phrases?" And fourth, he taught me to use Russian words rather than foreign borrowings wherever possible. For example, in the sentence *Здесь нельзя быть слишком пронизательным или темпераментным* ('You can't be too perceptive or temperamental here') the author's pencil replaced the word *темпераментный* ('temperamental') with *пылкий* ('ardent'). Finally, Kees consistently crossed out one of the qualifiers for a noun if there were three of them, which is often the case if the Dutch noun is a composite, like *oude zware schrijftafel: старый тяжелый письменный стол* ('an old heavy writing desk'). It is better to sacrifice one qualifier — in this case, *тяжелый* ('heavy') — than to use a word combination that is unnatural for Russian.

Such revisions the author would make to a translation which he generally approved. However, on two occasions during the 25 years of our co-operation, he rejected my translation completely, in a most tactful manner, but quite definitely.

The final chapter of *Villa Bermond* is written in the form of a play: it is a dialogue between Tyutchev's daughters, who are picking up flowers on the eve of the Tsesarevich's funeral in an abandoned garden in Nice in 1865. After the remarkably complex analytical text of the whole book, which examines as if under a microscope the subtle movements of the heart and the nuances of the characters' moods, the casual conversation between the two young ladies seemed to me a piece of cake. I translated it three times faster than the previous chapters, with their endless, half-page-long compound sentences and loads of abstract vocabulary. And so the first page of the play came back from the author mottled with questions like "Is it certain that this word already existed in the nineteenth century?" or "Could aristocratic women have used such a word?" or "Isn't this turn of phrase too bookish for an oral conversation between sisters?" The author did not edit the end of the chapter at all, as if to say "it won't help anyway". In a telephone conversation Kees Verheul recommended that I study Turgenev's plays.

Perplexed and in search of justice, I turned to the head of the translation seminar at the Dutch Institute in St Petersburg, S. A. Stepanov,

who also totally criticised my translation. He offered his help. While he was revising the first pages of the play, I was reading “A Month in the Country” and Chekhov’s letters from Nice, marking elegant old words with a pencil. Stepanov’s editing, combined with my immersion in the language of Turgenev and Chekhov, gave my translation a powerful push in the right direction, so in the margins of the second version of the translation the author’s pencil has written the word *bravo*. I consider the story of my translation of the Tyutchev sisters’ conversation a major lesson for three reasons. First, because I felt the satisfaction of a job well done. Second, because it convinced me how valuable it is to have sensitive editors and critics around you, to be in a translation environment that is friendly yet rigorously critical. Third, because the Tyutchev sisters reminded me of the simple truth that form and content are one and the same, and that until I fall in love with the conversing sisters and feel their joys and sorrows as my own, I will find neither old-fashioned nor modern Russian words to translate the Dutch text.

6. “AND SADNESS IS / JUST THE RUSTLE / OF FALLEN LEAVES / AND A SIGH”

In 2018, after Kees Smit, Kees Verheul’s devoted life partner passed away, a sad time came for the writer. Nevertheless, he did not lose his will to live and soon started writing again. In August 2022, he had to move to the Rosa Spier Boarding House in the town of Laren, whose motto is “to give people of art and science a relief from the hassles of everyday life so that they can continue their creative work”. Old friends who had surrounded Kees all his life were now coming to visit him in Laren, and here at the Rose Spier he was making new acquaintances, which gave him pleasure. In the same year 2022, a new collection of his essays *Herleefd vermogen (Reborn Ability)* was published, dedicated to the memory of Kees Smit [Verheul, 2022]. The writer celebrated his birthday on February 9, 2024, with his friends at a restaurant. On February 26, he was admitted to hospital with a diagnosis of ischemic stroke.

At Kees’s funeral in the cemetery in his hometown of Hengelo, his fellow countryman, a literature scholar Gerben Wynia, who had searched the archives for issues of the school newspaper *Nostra Scribamus* from the years when Kees Verheul was its editor-in-chief,

read a poem by Kees that he had found in the paper. In it, a thirteen-year-old boy meditates on death and compares himself to an autumn leaf carried away by the wind into the clouds. The poem consists of three stanzas of 8 lines each and ends with four short lines without rhyme. Here is a translation of the second stanza and the very ending:

So a sad yellow leaf / Torn from a thin branch / By a fierce storm, / To be carried away, playfully / Into heavenly spaces / To snow-white peaks, / Where the leaf will be kissing forever / A crystal brook... <...> And sadness is / Only the rustle / Of fallen leaves / And a sigh...

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16 марта 2024 г. ушел из жизни нидерландский писатель, литературовед-славист, эссеист и переводчик Кейс Верхейл, внесший огромный вклад в русско-нидерландские литературные контакты. Как исследователь и переводчик произведений русских поэтов и прозаиков (Бродского, Анненского, Ахматовой, Платонова, Мандельштама и др.) и как преподаватель русской литературы на кафедре славистики Пронингенского университета, он старался приблизить русскую литературу к нидерландским читателям. Как участник Нейхофских чтений и других вечеров нидерландской литературы в России, а также редактор и соавтор трехтомной истории нидерландской литературы «От “Лиса Рейнарда” до “Сна богов”» (2013–2015), он помогал нашим соотечественникам проникнуть в мир его родной культуры. Как член жюри престижной премии за достижения в области перевода *Martinus Nijhoff Vertaalprijs* и руководитель ряда больших переводческих проектов, он многое сделал для повышения уровня переводов с русского на нидерландский и с нидерландского на русский. В статье, посвященной его памяти, основное внимание уделено истокам его творчества: на основании новых данных рассказано о первых шагах Верхейла-гимназиста на литературном поприще, о его первом знакомстве с русскими буквами, а также прослеживается связь между глубинными идеями его книг и его жизненной позицией, проявлявшейся также в повседневных отношениях с людьми. Кроме того, автор статьи — переводчица К. Верхейла на русский — делится теми уроками художественного перевода, которые ей преподавал писатель. В заключение приводится фрагмент стихотворения, написанного К. Верхейлом в гимназические годы.

Ключевые слова: Кейс Верхейл, нидерландская литература, Иосиф Бродский, славистика, художественный перевод.

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