

A Translated Man

Also by Robert Sheppard

Poetry

Returns

Daylight Robbery

The Flashlight Sonata

Transit Depots/Empty Diaries

(with John Seed [text] and Patricia Farrell [images])

Empty Diaries

The Lores

The Anti-Orpheus: a notebook

Tin Pan Arcadia

Hymns to the God in which My Typewriter Believes

Complete Twentieth Century Blues

Warrant Error

Berlin Bursts

The Given

Fiction

The Only Life

Edited

Floating Capital: New Poets from London (with Adrian Clarke)

News for the Ear: A Homage to Roy Fisher (with Peter Robinson)

The Salt Companion to Lee Harwood

The Door at Taldir: Selected Poems of Paul Evans

Criticism

Far Language: Poetics and Linguistically Innovative Poetry 1978–1997

The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents 1950–2000

Iain Sinclair

When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry

Robert Sheppard

*A
Translated
Man*

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Eric Canderlinck: The Secret Player: René Van Valckenborch and his double oeuvre | 9 |
| Select Bibliography | 12 |
| WALLOON POEMS | |
| <i>translated by Annemie Dupuis</i> | |
| from <i>thingly</i> 2001 | 15 |
| <i>thingly</i> (excerpts) | |
| from <i>masks and other masks</i> 2002 | |
| masks (excerpts) | 20 |
| the stylization of objects: homage to jan švankmajer | 28 |
| from <i>violent detachments</i> 2003 | |
| violent detachments 1 | 30 |
| violent detachments 3 | 31 |
| from <i>the twelfth noise in the twelfth row</i> 2004 | |
| brazilian jubilee | 33 |
| background pleasures | 36 |
| from <i>glance poems</i> 2005 | |
| election day glance poems | 44 |
| from <i>ovid's twistier & new amores</i> 2006 | |
| prelude | 48 |
| tristia bk 1: 7: the exiliad | 49 |
| tristia bk 5: 7: the victimologist manifesto | 50 |
| new amores bk 1: 5 | 52 |
| new amores bk 1: 16 | 54 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| from <i>emoticon</i> 2008 | |
| residues | 55 |
| english dust: homage to jeff keen | 58 |

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| from <i>cow</i> 2010 | |
| cow 1 | 63 |
| cow 4 | 64 |

FLEMISH POEMS

translated by Martin Krol

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| <i>Uncollected</i> 1996 | |
| Untitled | 67 |

| | |
|--|----|
| from <i>The Light and Other Poems</i> 2001 | |
| Four Sides | 68 |
| The Light | 70 |
| Here and Where | 72 |
| He feels the bell ... | 74 |
| The Word | 75 |
| Ballerina | 76 |

| | |
|--|----|
| from <i>Rooms and Revolutions</i> 2008 | |
| Lyric | 77 |
| Manifest (Constellation) | 78 |
| In this room | 79 |
| Roomstanzas: Quennets for Floor, 4 Walls and Ceiling | 80 |
| Call this room | 86 |
| In the Complex | 88 |
| Revolutionary Song | 95 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| from <i>A Hundred and Eight Odes</i> 2010 | |
| Ode to Orbit | 100 |
| Ode to Forme | 104 |
| Ode to Zip | 105 |
| Twitterodes | 110 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| from <i>EUOIA: 27 Imaginary Translations</i> 2008-10 | |
| Jurgita Zujūtė: Kybartai Noctune | 116 |
| Lucia Ciancaglini: <i>from</i> & | 117 |
| Jitka Průchová: Herat 1978 | 118 |
| Trine Kragelund: nonofesto | 119 |
| Sophie Poppmeier: Book 1 Poem 1 | 121 |
| | |
| Rue des Chartreux | 123 |
| | |
| Acknowledgements | 129 |

THE SECRET PLAYER: RENÉ VAN VALCKENBORCH AND HIS DOUBLE OEUVRE

This book is the result of an incredible story.

In the spring of 2004 two youthful translators met at a conference I organised, *Translational Conflicts*, at Leuven, not in itself an auspicious thing to happen. When it is revealed that one of the translator's specialisms was to translate from the Dutch language group and that the other was an expert in Francophone literatures, it might have been expected that, other than the theory of translation, there would be nothing to hold them together. They were both participating on a panel on contemporary literary translation and a remarkable thing happened, as I knew it would, having read their abstracts in advance and paired them. Martin Krol, who is from South Africa, and is an authority on Flemish poetry, and Annemie Dupuis from Quebec, who is a specialist in Walloon literature, discovered not only that they were speaking about translating the poetic work of my homeland, that most linguistically and bitterly divided of modern European nations, Belgium, but that they were speaking about the work of the same poet, René Van Valckenborch. What they discovered—and what had apparently been kept hidden from the literary schools of my country, separated as they are not just by language but by culture and regional autonomy—was that Van Valckenborch was writing in both languages and was publishing two distinct bodies of work, one initially in Canada and the other partly in South Africa, as well as in Europe: in Rouen, Amsterdam, and in Belgium itself.

Both translators imagined that they were the first to apply themselves to Van Valckenborch. There was surprise and laughter for, after Krol had delivered his paper 'Aprosody as Cognitive Mapping', Dupuis declared herself unwilling to read her contribution, 'The Return of the Mind to Things', and extemporised a series of fascinating challenges to herself and Krol (and me) about this extraordinary circumstance. After initial mutual suspicion, and diplomatic manoeuvres on my part during a coffee break, they agreed to work together to solve the mystery: how could, and why would, one writer produce two discrete oeuvres? Their initial answers required them to engage in further translations, email exchanges across continents, and occasional meetings over the next few months. This is not the place to enquire further into their liaison, but after Martin took up a post in Brussels, interpreting for the EU, Annemie moved there too, to work as freelance translator. They lived together, and married in 2006 (but separated in 2010, it seems, about the same time this story unravels).

One of the delights—but occasionally one of the disappointments—of translating contemporary works is meeting their authors. As soon as the couple settled in Brussels, they insist, they set about searching for Van Valckenborch. It had not been unusual for his publishers to only deal with him by email and post – but cybernetic and street addresses failed to yield a reply, and ringing on suggested doors did not materialise the man. Stalking the noisy dope-hazed bars of Vlaamsesteenweg—a ‘clue’ from one of the poems, Krol explained—asking crag-faced bikers after a man of whom they had not even the vaguest description proved fruitless, as did hushed enquiries at the Poëziecentrum, located at ‘a forlorn corner’ of a square in Ghent (another clue). The man had vanished, or as in one of Magritte’s paintings that seems to encapsulate Belgian surreality, his figure offers his back to us, as does his double in the mirror beyond him. For not only did the man disappear, his work stopped appearing. The bookshop at Ghent was to furnish the last substantial chunk of his work in Flemish, *A Hundred and Eight Odes*, and a final Walloon fascicle, *cow*—a direct reference to Magritte’s ‘période vache’—was reportedly picked up by Dupuis in a sale in a sunny bilingual shop in Antoine Dansaertstraat in Brussels, not far from their apartment. A website, containing a selection of work by European poets (clearly all made up) no sooner clicked onto by me than deleted, left a single link to an enigmatic Twitter feed that claimed to be Van Valckenborch’s daily mini-proclamations to the world.

The idea that this extraordinary body of work was a hoax naturally arose. Perhaps it was a counter-hoax, some commentators suggested, to the one perpetrated by RTBF when it broadcast spoof reports of Flanders’ declaration of independence from Belgium in December 2006. (Incidentally, this occurred four days before our translators were married and the processions of monarchists through Brussels interrupted their festivities, to which I had been invited!) The existence of a genuinely bilingual contemporary poet in Belgium seems too good, or bad, depending on one’s perspective, to be true. However, someone had to compose these verses and although suspicion has fallen upon the two translators—critics speculate that the confrontation in Leuven was staged, the ‘original’ poems written backwards from their double ‘translations’, charges I refute as Byzantine absurdity—the fact remains that the poems exist, and demand to be read. (Of course, suspicion has fallen upon myself also, particularly since Dupuis and Krol seem not to answer calls or reply to letters or emails, indeed seem to have left Brussels, if not Belgium, if not Europe ...). I am not denying that the poetry’s ontological status is unchanged by questions of what would once have been called ‘authenticity’, but it remains a truth that

these poems face us uncertainly with this lack of facts—again, not unlike Magritte’s canvasses, which often offer us monumental but obscured central enigmas. The unease which this situation evokes, cannot be willed away by transferring these texts into Gerald Bruns’ convenient category of ‘fictional poems.’¹ They demand to be read as poems, as interventions in the world of form, whatever their provenance, which, in my opinion, should have little influence upon the reading process or their reputational reception. In that spirit, I welcome you to a selection of translations into English, edited by myself, arranged here in their double manifestations, each in chronological order. Some of the translations betrayed signs of hasty execution and I have been forced to amend them silently, occasionally without the benefit of an original. I have appended a brief bibliography of these works for the specialist, and the original volumes are cited in the contents page.

Erik Canderlinck
formerly of the Institute of Literary Translation,
Leuven
2013

¹ Bruns says, in a suggestive passage: ‘To be sure, the difference between a poem in a novel and a poem in an anthology is apt to be empirically indiscernible. To speak strictly, a fictional poem would be a poem held in place less by literary history than by one of the categories that the logical world keeps in supply: conceptual models, possible worlds, speculative systems, hypothetical constructions in all their infinite variation—or maybe just whatever finds itself caught between quotation marks, as (what we call) “reality” often is.’ Bruns, Gerald L. *The Material of Poetry*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005: 105-6.

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Uncollected Prose

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The Light and Other Poems 2001
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A Hundred and Eight Odes 2010 (includes *Twitterodes*
(tweets 2008-9 @www.twitter/VanValckenborch.com))
European Union Of Imaginary Authors: 27 Translations
(website and electronic media) 2008-10

Uncollected Poem

'Untitled', *een klap* 7 (1996): 56.

Uncollected Prose

'Aprosody: a poetics manifesto', *een klap* 16 (2004)

Walloon Poems

translated by Annemie Dupuis

from *thingly*

At last the fidelity of things opens our eyes

—Zbigniew Herbert

2 *scissors*

closed they've a single
point & purpose perfected
cool blades left sleeping

open a dancer—
limbs of flexing steel leap in
frozen cuts of light

5 *orthoceus paperweight*

bloated with
blood or water the
simple life-form

points the wrong way its
supposed head noses
ahead of ghostly segments

it mimes the point
of its containment
a uniform chain that trails

away to its point a trial
impression for a
chinese paper dragon

an imperfection inserted
into limitless grey
a worm reduced

to texture of slate like
a varnished pumice that
can never dissolve it stops

all flights of fancy
holding paper to its
promise to persist

fingers smooth the
split-slate surface
of its base pick it

up a man-made pebble it fits
into the curve the hollow
human palm

6 spectacles from the era of léopold I

arms unfold but
are spikes now
having lost their ear

pieces they could cost
you an eye putting
them on its

joints still open
a genius for survival
the oblate lenses

fringed with rust
in simple metal
frames

between them a nose rest
curved like the moustaches of
the era

a flicked curl at
the extremity of each
holding the lenses

of 1860 focussed
to the narrow
vision of things

a royal canal
trenched through the marsh
the rising of the bourse

& french words around
things among a
clutter of things

unfrench

17 *machine*

the machine
chomps
unoiled hinges

not taking itself
too seriously the waste
basket recycling bin

never catches its bits
not quite evading
metaphor

machine for manufacturing
pairs of
nothing

drops
pure meaningless
atoms

20 *thing*

there's no such
thing space age
arrowhead stone

age laser it
occupies its vacancy
a blade of sky

advertising its handle
of earth promising
spangly girls on spinning

disks a white wheel
hole in a coin
a smile cut from air

no
thing present but
a pure absence within

which we construct
something for a hero
to cut teeth on paper

look again
yearn to skin a liar
it's buried to the hilt

in the flesh of
shadow it marks

a shallow grave

that fills itself
with song
 thingly

from *masks*

1

modern mask ghana

(reverse view)

hollow of smoothed hackings

born violently from wood
for pure spirit or nothing
(like) a consciousness to quiver

construct the inside
of your new face
a concave mirror

for your voice that coughs
apologies to neophyte
& tourist alike

pick it up place it
before your face &
become

showman shaman
sham & shameless hero
shapeshifter shoplifter

look through it at the woman
pawing her face radiance
of sun disk framed by

slots of air steal her
fumes through the mouth as she
ravishes her mask for beauty

3

modern mask ghana

front view

mounted on a wall

spout moon mouth of
spirit language gushes
you! look! listen!

(sketches of
face-shapes are hardwired into
our recognition drives)

eyes convex ovals hold
a-human twin slits a hint
of surveillance

from the other side (you've
been there you know there's nothing
no one there but your slightest movement

doubts you) metal cheeks of peppered
hammer blows eyebrows of
bevel pits bolted to skin

in symmetry above/below eyes
all bound by a circular band
earth-red in which wave-forms play

pure energy scored seashore frown
on a sanded forehead (bristles
of sea-beard rhyme beneath)

three tears filed free of
varnish wash pearl
pips from the fruited eyes

but above the top & tailed fish
scaled nose a forehead
of wooden hair strains

a frontal lobe
nudging into the world
an invasive fist of mind

that echoes the mouth
which rather than speaks
sucks

into its black hole
a whirlpool withdrawing
its eternal guttering moan

4

congo-brazzaville

enface river with half-
horizon loop-cropped grimace
scarred flesh proud

crested hairdo blunt
eyes concentric rings
around holes filled with hole

isolated in the hollow tree
rustling towards the sacrificial
experiment

nothing missing but chiselled
teeth for only the sorceress in her trance
may bite

9

navajo

fingers

 ruffle the
scalp its matted horsehair
soul birth

wrap a hide too
small for saddle into
bare life face

gouge eyeholes
mouth hole but nose
—nostrils—not drilled

paint white zig
zags down one cheek
that breathes under them

as they mould a man
plant a single feather
for affect ready

for the plains alert
to sky's tremulous
messages where

birds peck this wig
for nests beaks poke
eye peeped worm holes

stab eye as mask becomes
body itself in(-)
animate art life god