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**Subjectivity as Skopos: On Translating a Dutch Novel**

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**Subjectivity as Skopos: On Translating a Dutch Novel**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

To my two mothers: Jean Ropp and Irene Bleijenberg

## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to Dr. Pascale Bos for her enthusiasm, meticulous attention to detail, and encouragement as she read and talked me through this project. I am also grateful to Dr. Elizabeth Richmond-Garza for providing a wealth of suggestions for foundational research and for her thoughtful reading of my work. I am endlessly grateful to Joseph Guilin for his support and care.

## **Abstract**

### **Subjectivity as Skopos: On Translating a Dutch Novel**

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This master's thesis presents an excerpt of my translation of the Dutch novel *Maar buiten is het feest* (Arthur Japin, 2012), along with critical commentary. I begin with a review of the most relevant and useful theory I researched for my project, with Hans J. Vermeer's skopos theory providing a crucial basis for my ultimate application of various theoretical approaches, including Venuti's foreignization and feminist translation theory. I then define my own skopos (from Greek: aim or purpose) for this particular translation project, and follow with a detailed discussion of my motivations, methods, and choices for the excerpt presented in light of the skopos I define. I argue that a translation should be judged according to the skopos or skopoi established by the translator and that, as such, the selection of a variety of theoretical approaches is appropriate in application.

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## Critical Commentary

### Introduction

This master's thesis presents an excerpt of my translation of the Dutch novel *Maar buiten is het feest* (Arthur Japin, 2012), along with critical commentary. I begin with a review of the most relevant and useful theory I researched for my project, with Hans J. Vermeer's skopos theory providing a crucial basis for my ultimate application of various theoretical approaches, including Venuti's foreignization and feminist translation theory. I then define my own skopos (from Greek: aim or purpose) for this particular translation project, and follow with a detailed discussion of my motivations, methods, and choices for the excerpt presented in light of the skopos I define. I argue that a translation should be judged according to the skopos or skopoi established by the translator and that, as such, the selection of a variety of theoretical approaches is appropriate in application.

### **Binaries, Strategies, Foreignizing and Feminizing: Reconciling Theoretical Fidelity**

There is a persistent tendency in translation theory to break possible approaches to the act and ethics of translating into oppositional binaries and then suggest that the literary translator must "choose a side" and stick to it in his practice. In Friedrich Schleiermacher's seminal 1813 essay "On the Different Methods of Translating,"<sup>1</sup> he first conceptually divides "interpreting" and "translating," describing the former as not merely the practice of real-time, oral translation of spoken words but also as an approach to translation that borrows the methodology of oral interpretation and applies it to written texts like business documents, newspapers, advertising,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Munday describes Schleiermacher's essay, delivered first as a lecture, as the most famous and influential intervention in the German Romantic conversation around how translation might be used to improve German literature and culture. In Schleiermacher's implicit valorization of foreignization ("moving the reader towards the author," in his terms), he anticipates scholars like Berman and Venuti. Moreover, according to Kittel and Polterman, "practically every modern translation theory [...] responds, in one way or another, to Schleiermacher's hypotheses. There appear to have been no fundamentally new approaches" (qtd. in Munday 47).

travel literature, and science. The latter, which Schleiermacher associates with the fine arts, does not seek to “paraphrase” by means of a formulaic, mathematical search for semantic equivalence, as interpreting does, but rather “imitates” in order to better preserve impressionistic meaning (48). The basic notion of “paraphrase” versus “imitation” first appears in Cicero; it has been called “word-for-word” versus “sense-for-sense,” or “literal” versus “free,” but the same idea—that one either prioritizes semantics or rhetoric—dominates the literature as the pre-eminent debate in translation studies (Munday 30). What is not always made explicit by theorists, but what I suggest is always lurking somewhere behind these terms, is the goal for translation driving the selection of the method, which I would characterize thus: Where equivalence in meaning is sought, paraphrase (or word-for-word) is advocated; where equivalence in effect is sought, imitation (or sense-for-sense) is advocated. It is an important distinction, because where meaning is implicitly prioritized, the author’s presumed intention is prioritized, whereas where effect is implicitly prioritized, the reader’s presumed experience is prioritized.

Theorization and conversation around translation are always implicitly concerned with fidelity, as many have pointed out (see Munday, Simon, and Chamberlain); but where “original author” and “original text” are often conflated, and “fidelity to the text” is often assumed to be the same thing as “fidelity to the author,” it becomes really a debate over fidelity to the author versus fidelity to the reader, with the text ping-ponging between the two of them: to whom does the text ultimately belong, and whom is the translator trying to honor? Regardless, where equivalence remains the main goal, I posit that the baseline assumption underlying the selection of method is that the meaning or the effect is more or less discernible and more or less reproducible, and a translation *can* be assessed, more or less, for “accuracy” or “adequacy”—whether it is a direct or free translation.

In 1958, Vinay and Darbelnet<sup>2</sup>, in their hugely influential “A Methodology for Translation,” use the terms “direct” versus “oblique” translation for “literal versus free,” and detail seven translation procedures which progress from the most direct/simple (borrowing terms straight from the source language, e.g. “rendezvous”) to the most oblique/complex (adaptation of an unfamiliar concept or situation from the source language to a familiar one in the target language, e.g. “cricket” becomes “baseball”). While the structure in which the methods are presented may seem to suggest a preference for direct translation, the seven methods represent more of a continuum than a procedure of progressive elimination, with adaptation presented as “the extreme limit of translation” and borrowing as a method that “would not even merit discussion” if it were not at times inevitable (134, 129). While Vinay and Darbelnet implicitly value oblique translation in their suggestion that a translator should only refer to direct methods in order to fill “lacunae in the target language [...] so that the overall impression is the same for

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<sup>2</sup> The French Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet analyzed translations of French to English and English to French in order to deduce which strategies and procedures had been employed in the translations and then used this analysis to propose a methodology for translation. Munday explains, “In the technical sense a **strategy** is an overall orientation of the translator (e.g. towards ‘free’ or ‘literal’ translation, towards the TT or ST, towards domestication or foreignization) whereas a **procedure** is a specific technique or method used by the translator at a certain point in the text” (86). Though their “A Methodology for Translation” proposes just that—a way to approach the act of translation—it is important to note their own deductive method of arriving at these procedures, as it makes clear that despite the prescriptive approach to translation promoted by many theorists (among whom I would include Berman and Venuti, with their foreignizing projects), which advocates a kind of purity of strategy and corresponding procedures, translation *in practice* seems never to conform to a single, “pure” approach. I would argue that it is important to approach a source text from an *orientation* (analogous to strategy as Munday defines it, but, as the word connotes, less strictly attached to a single ideology) of, for example, a desire to foreignize; having a sense of one’s general orientation clarifies and informs even as it is clarified and informed by one’s motivations and values in approaching the source text and its translation. However, given that translation in practice always seems to have been produced from the use of multiple procedures (which correspond to at times contradictory strategies), I see no reason to “force” procedural purity. Indeed, in my translation of Japin’s novel I found that the relationships Vinay and Darbelnet propose between their seven procedures and the direct/oblique spectrum sometimes broke down anyway. For example, the *literal* translation of “hoofdstad” (“capital city”) performed a foreignizing function in that we do not generally refer to our capital cities as such, but it did not foreignize the text in the way I wanted it to: it did not immediately connote *Amsterdam* as the specific capital city of reference as it did in the original text. By translating “hoofdstad” simply as Amsterdam, as I chose to do, I produced a foreign *concept* and *image* in my reader’s imagination, but not a foreign *linguistic structure*. This is an important distinction: foreignizing can and does work on multiple levels. Berman addresses this very point when he distinguishes between “literal” translation as he uses it (which preserves signification) and “word-for-word” translation (which simply reproduces the sign in the target language). Thus, I employed a procedure categorized by Vinay and Darbelnet as “oblique” (that is, “modulation,” their fifth procedure), which is roughly analogous to “free” or “domesticating” translation strategies, in order to achieve a foreignizing (or literal, or what Vinay and Darbelnet call “direct”) goal.

the two messages” (128), and are thus still very much entrenched in a search for equivalence in effect as the main goal for translation, their recognition that a translator may use all of these procedures in a single text (and that both direct and oblique methods may be arguably present in the translation of a single concept) promotes, importantly, a more moderate approach that recognizes a middle ground in methodology, if not in motivation. Moreover, their methods—borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation—are hugely useful for performing systematic analysis of an already-complete translation in order to look for what Theo Hermans calls “the translator’s voice.” Indeed, though Vinay and Darbelnet seem to value an “invisible translator,” to borrow Lawrence Venuti’s term (and I will discuss Venuti more in a bit), examining a translation alongside the original and identifying choices made according to Vinay and Darbelnet’s categories reveals the truth that “the translator’s voice is always present as co-producer of the discourse”—even in a translation that strives to be as “fluent,” that is, as easy on the reader, as possible (Hermans 42). Of course, a comparative analysis of any translation alongside its original reveals choices made by the translator; what Vinay and Darbelnet’s methods contribute is a simple way to analyze whether a translator “leans” direct or oblique, and therefore to whom the translator implicitly pledges his loyalty: the author and his imagined intentions, or the imagined reader and his imagined experience of the text.

Antoine Berman’s 1985 “The Trials of the Foreign,” Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere’s 1990 *Translation, History and Culture*, and Venuti’s 1995 *The Translator’s Invisibility* signal the “cultural turn”<sup>3</sup> in translation studies, in which the direct/oblique debate

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<sup>3</sup> Loffredo and Perteghella explain that the so-called “cultural turn” in translation theory “placed the practice of translation [...] within a multifaceted, contextualized cultural framework, which has enabled scholars to embrace interdisciplinarity within translation studies” and has “inevitably raised concerns of ideology, manipulation and power, with particular reference to postcolonial issues and to translational relations between dominant and minority

becomes a discussion not merely of text but also, crucially, of context (Perteghella and Loffredo 2). Here, the obsession with achieving “equivalence” of either meaning or effect begins to break apart into a more interesting conversation about power, as these scholars question the structures of dominance and hegemony that can be either reinforced or destabilized by one’s implicit motivations and explicit methodologies. Berman details twelve “deformations” similar to Vinay and Darbelnet’s seven methods, but where Vinay and Darbelnet are both describing and prescribing translation procedures, Berman critiques these “deformations” as part of a negative “analytic of translation” which represents a “system of textual deformation that operates in every translation and prevents it from being a ‘trial of the foreign’” (278). For Berman, the desire for equivalence misses the point of translation, which is a “collision” and thereby a “coupl[ing]” of languages and worldviews, and he laments the traditional “Platonic” approach to translation, which promotes “restitution of meaning” based on “the Platonic separation between spirit and letter, sense and word, content and form, the sensible and the non-sensible” (277, 288). The Platonic approach, then, is roughly analogous to the “sense-for-sense” or oblique translation method, and represents the “destruction of the letter in favor of meaning”: the erasure of the Other<sup>4</sup> for not only for the sake of the reader’s comfort and ease, but also for the sake of the target language’s and target culture’s dominance (288). Instead of practicing these Platonic deformations, Berman suggests literal translation, which is not quite the same as word-for-word, but which means (literally!) “attached to the letter of works,” that is, devoted to “restor[ing] the

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languages and cultures” (1). Berman’s concerns about translation as a potentially ethnocentric practice and Venuti’s challenge to the global hegemony of English as a world language, as part of the cultural turn, are thus grounded in postcolonial questions of political relationships as reinforced by literary production and transnational literary interaction via translation. Feminist translation is also situated within the cultural turn for its challenge to patriarchal hegemony.

<sup>4</sup> I use “the Other” thus capitalized very deliberately to refer to the Hegelian notion of the Self as defined in essential opposition to the Other. Though Berman does not use this term in his essay, I read his critique of the ethnocentrism of domesticating translation practice as implicitly concerned with the destruction of that which is Other in the source text in order to reconstruct it in such a way as not to challenge the identity of the (collective, cultural) Self.

particular signifying process of works (which is more than their meaning” —presumably by being more loyal to the signs themselves as signifiers, rather than assuming the sign to something quite different from signification. For example, instead of offering a proverb equivalent in meaning but different in form, which is for Berman a mark of deep ethnocentrism, a translator should offer to the target language a new proverb. I offer the following example: the common Latin American proverb “Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente” translates directly (most would say literally) as “The shrimp that falls asleep gets carried away by the current” rather than as “You snooze, you lose.” But Berman does not precisely advocate strict word-for-word translation of this nature; he is interested in the communication of signification, of the entire consciousness attached to such a proverb and its utterance, which the flat literal translation above does not offer. To communicate the rhythm and the playfulness with which the shrimp proverb is typically expressed in Latin American cultural contexts, a better “literal” translation by Berman’s definition might be, “When the shrimp falls asleep, he becomes the current’s to keep!” In this way, the original meaning is maintained, along with the rhyme and the personification of the river implicit in the Spanish. It sounds odd in English, but that is precisely the point: to provide for the reader a “trial of the foreign,” the opportunity to try on another consciousness at the level of language itself—rather than treating signification as something like a balloon floating in the air which can be untied from one sign and tied to another without changing its appearance.

Though this “positive analytic” of translation has always been practiced, according to Berman it has been done in “an intuitive and unsystematic way” (278). Nevertheless, it has allowed for the “fashioning and refashioning of the great Western languages” by modifying and augmenting the target language (289). Berman’s literal translation is thus motivated by three main goals: 1) to avoid practicing ethnocentrism, 2) to communicate the rhetoricity of the source

language in a way that mathematical equivalence-based translation cannot; and 3) to enrich and augment the target language. Venuti takes Berman's theory and expands it to offer another binary of translation methodology: foreignization versus domestication. Here, "foreignization" is analogous to Berman's "literal" translation, while "domestication" involves the practice of Berman's Platonic deformations. These terms, meanwhile, refer back to and more fully theorize another binary presented by Schleiermacher: his famous edict that "Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him [foreignization]; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him [domestication]" (Schleiermacher 49). Like Berman, Venuti is concerned with translation as an ethnocentric process; but in his focus specifically on translations into English, he is able to discuss more concrete ramifications of the Platonic or domesticating approach: the emphasis on producing "fluent" translations that provide the illusion that the translator is not only invisible but nonexistent has produced, according to Venuti, cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign, accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other. (15)

Foreignizing the text (and thereby visibilizing the translator) for Venuti is thus not merely a matter of enriching the target language, but of beginning to effect change in the target culture, and very specifically to challenge the dominance of English as a world language. Where Berman rejects equivalence in meaning as the goal (but implicitly endorses equivalence in effect, of a sort), Venuti outright rejects the possibility of equivalence at all: "Meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging unified essence," both in source and target contexts (18). In his insistence that translations should be considered "texts in their own right, [...] one

discursive effect among others,” he echoes Bassnett and Lefevere, who introduce the concept of translations as “rewritings” (Venuti 17, Bassnett and Lefevere 10). In Venuti and Berman, “fidelity” gets complicated: no longer is the proposition fidelity to author versus reader, but rather fidelity to the source language itself (Berman) and fidelity to the source culture in a distinct sociopolitical Western context (Venuti).

Feminist translation scholars propose another kind of fidelity altogether: fidelity to female subjectivity. In their insistence on the fluidity of meaning and their rejection, therefore, of any equivalence-based approach that purports to communicate a work’s essential meaning or effect, they continue the cultural turn’s deconstructivist approach, and likewise advocate for the translator’s visibility. Feminist translation can be seen as a particular kind of foreignizing the text, but with the purpose of foregrounding female experience as the “foreign” or the other rather than a national or ethnic culture. Foreignizing, according to Venuti, involves “disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language”; feminist translation allows for the disruption of cultural codes in the source language, as well (20). Rather than “do[ing] right abroad [by] do[ing] wrong at home,” feminist translation seeks to “do right” by feminism by intervening in the text (Venuti 20). The first form of intervention, as with Venuti’s theory, is considering the translator a creator in his or her own right in general. Theo Hermans reminds us of the hierarchical binaries that have traditionally characterized the work of translation, and how they have been gendered:

creative versus derivative work, primary versus secondary, art versus craft, authority versus obedience, freedom versus constraint, speaking in one’s own name versus speaking for someone else. In each pair it is translation which is circumscribed, hemmed in, controlled, subordinated. And in case we think these are after all natural and necessary

hierarchies, it may be useful to remind ourselves of the fact that in our culture the male/female distinction, too, has been constructed in terms of very similar oppositions of creative versus reproductive, original versus derivative, active versus passive, dominant versus subservient. (44)

Thus, I suggest, the visibilization of the translator is not only a political act, but a specifically feminist political act—regardless of the sex of the translator or author. In choosing to foreignize the target language, regardless of subject matter, a translator is always already performing feminist translation, simply by announcing his or her presence and role as co-creator of the text being read. This can be done in the narrative itself through the deliberate queering<sup>5</sup> of the target language in order to reflect syntactical, lexical, and grammatical patterns of the source language or through paratextual commentaries such as the three practices of feminist translation described by Luise von Flotow: supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and “hijacking” the text (qtd. in Simon 14-15). Barbara Godard coins the term womanhandling for feminist translation, which “would involve the replacement of the modest, self-effacing translator. Taking her place would be an active participant in the creation of meanings who advances a conditional analysis” (94). The feminist translator, then, is loyal not to the author’s imagined intention/the assumed essential meaning of the work, nor to the “universal reader’s” imagined experience of the work; but rather to his or her own reading of the work.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term here in the sense of “foreignizing,” but suggest “queering” as a specifically feminist method of foreignization that attends to how language at the grammatical and syntactical level expresses a gendered worldview. An obvious example of this are those languages in which nouns are gendered, like Spanish; but Simon points out that even in a supposedly neuter language like English there is a sense of “natural” gender, in which “gender is attributed not by form but by meaning” (17). (For example, as a child washing dishes, I was very certain that the knives and forks were male and the spoons were female; I have yet to meet a native English speaker who understands them differently.) The feminist translator, then, might choose to explicitly ascribe gender to English concepts, thereby “queering” the English, in order to reflect the gendered understanding of that concept in the source language. But she might *also* intervene in the source text in order to *disrupt* how that concept is gendered in the source language or culture in her translation; this too would be a way to “queer” the source text, in the sense of subverting its patriarchal (and thus heteronormative) undertones.

Secondly, “the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency” (Spivak 312). There is some dissent among feminist translation theorists about the degree to which “the workings of gendered agency” are universal: Godard references the “collectivity of women,” but Spivak scorns such an idea, saying that “women’s solidarity” and “humanist universality” are both ideas that should be “buried” (Godard 88, Spivak 322). Translators like Godard and Simon, who work from Western European languages like French, seem to presume a female subjectivity that (like earlier translation theory about meaning and effect) is more or less knowable, more or less universal, and more or less translatable, at least between these close cultures; Spivak, who translates from Bengali to English, rejects what we might term “subjectivity equivalence,” and concludes that the only way to really talk about the other (woman)’s experience is literally to learn to speak her language to a highly intimate degree (322). For Spivak, the agency of the translator is “[held] at bay”; there is a limit to what translation can achieve, and a feminist translator should be aware of this (313). However, Spivak coincides with Godard, Simon, and Chamberlain in her declared commitment to intervene in texts for the specific purpose of discovering and (re)presenting female subjectivity.

Finally, in her quest to honor both his or her reading of a text and the female subjectivity(ies) represented in it, the feminist translator has the liberty to radically expand what a translation looks like: it may be “imitation, adaptation, quotation, pastiche, parody—all different modes of rewriting: in short, all forms of interpenetration of works and discourses” (Godard 93). By this definition, intertextuality is aligned with translation, and it becomes “difficult to determine the precise boundaries of a text, and, as a consequence, [engage] the notion of ‘origins’” (Chamberlain 264). In this way, for example, I suggest that we can categorize Carmen

Riera's short story "Mallorca" as a translation of Anaïs Nin's "Mallorca," though they are both written in Spanish. In this, feminist translation theory borrows the notion of all-writing-as-rewriting from Bassnett and Lefevere's cultural turn to effect a creative turn that shifts focus "from ideology to idiolectology, from culturality to cognition and consciousness, from text to textuality" (Perteghella and Loffredo 2). Importantly, this begins to allow not only for an expansion of translation products, but a valorization of other translation processes: where translation is considered a form of creative writing rather than mere functional reproduction, more creative, intuitive approaches are implicitly endorsed or at least acknowledged. In this way, translation as an act or a product is released from the feminized category of "derivative" as opposed to "creative," but at the same time, translation strategies that are less mathematical, less formulaic, more diverse, more intuitive, less symbolic, more semiotic—to use Kristeva's distinction—become a kind of "écriture feminine" that recalls both Berman's emphasis on signification over meaning and Spivak's description of her own process (in which she first performs a "speed translation," then revises).

Feminist translation has been accused of being violent, in what can be seen as a phallic penetration into a text and appropriation<sup>6</sup>. However, Simon says, this can be reconciled ethically with the fact that "feminist translators quite willingly acknowledge their interventions"; "respect for the original," in her and other feminist translators' views, does not preclude "dialogue and even confrontation"—or rewriting of various sorts (36). In the end, "the adequacy of the translation can only be judged against the objectives of the translator" (Simon 138-39). This statement on adequacy is essential for my own approach, which begins with Hans Vermeer's skopos theory and integrates aspects of all of the above scholarly approaches.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rosemary Arrojo's critique.

Vermeer<sup>7</sup>, in his 1989 “Skopos and Commission in Translational Action,” defines skopos as “a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation” (227). In Vermeer’s theory, which is based on a fundamental rejection of the idea that translation has no specific goal or purpose beyond translating “what is in the source text” and that translators have no specific audience in mind, virtually any skopos is legitimate, and the translator is granted a high degree of agency and recognized not as co-author of the original text, but rather as first author of the *translatum*: “[The translator’s] voice must [...] be respected, he must be ‘given a say’” in the formulation of the skopos, even when the translation is commissioned by someone else with other goals in mind (228). “It is thus up to him to decide, for instance, what role a source text plays in his translational action. [...] Source and target texts may diverge from each other quite considerably, not only in the formulation and distribution of the content but also as regards the goals which are set for each” (228). What matters for Vermeer is that the skopos is explicitly stated or assigned via the commission (“the instruction, given by oneself or by someone else, to carry out a given action—here: to translate”) (235). Adequacy of translation, then, can only be measured or assessed according to the skopos; but “a text need not be considered an indivisible whole”: we

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<sup>7</sup> The German Vermeer worked from Spanish and Portuguese and is located among the German theorists of the 1970s and 1980s who emphasized the function and purpose of the text as an entity as the main concern in translation over linguistic equivalencies and shifts at the level of the word or sentence (Munday 111). Vermeer has been roundly criticized (see Nord pages 109-122); one of the most relevant criticisms for my project is that “Skopos theory does not pay sufficient attention to the linguistic nature of the ST nor to the reproduction of micro-level features in the TT. Even if the skopos is adequately fulfilled, it may be inadequate at the stylistic or semantic levels of individual segments” (Munday 125). However, in my experience translating the novel, given my two particular skopoi, I found myself necessarily and constantly attentive to individual words and meaning at the sentence level, not in tension with my larger skopoi but indeed in service of them. I am led to conclude therefore that this concern is not for skopos theory in and of itself but rather for how a translator applies skopos theory: if a translator *only* attends to the larger purpose of the text as a whole entity—for example, as a medical manual—and thus considers a fairly direct and literal translation approach throughout as sufficient to communicate an assumedly straightforward body of content, there is indeed the chance that subtleties and nuances of meaning that *do* make a concrete difference in the diagnosis or treatment of an illness will be mistranslated or difficult to understand. However, that would, as I see it, also necessarily be an inadequate fulfillment of the skopos of comprehensibly and straightforwardly translating a medical manual. Vermeer does not promote *only* reproducing the general format of a given text; indeed, he does not promote any particular kind of skopos at all—only advocates for the specific and conscious definition *of* a skopos. And a skopos, we might then infer, can be lazy or rigorous, useful or useless.

may therefore infer that a translator may have different goals for different aspects of a work, and that all of these goals must needs be kept in mind when assessing the success of the translatum.

### **My Skopos and General Methodology**

My first task in approaching the translation of the Dutch novel *Maar buiten is het feest* is thus to define very clearly my skopos (since I am the commissioner of this translation, I do not need to consult with anyone or negotiate regarding the skopos) and invite my readers to judge the success of my translation against this skopos. However, this is not the first thing I did when performing the actual action of translating. Skopos theory, for as much as it is based in concrete purpose and function of texts, is theory; and I did not start with theory of a formal sort when I began to translate. I learned to speak Dutch at the age of 16, when I spent a year in the Netherlands as an exchange student. I learned it deductively and intuitively, with virtually no formal study: after the first month, in which everyone simply spoke English to me, I realized I would never learn unless I removed as much mediation as possible. I instructed my host family to speak to me only in Dutch and stubbornly refused to speak English; I let Dutch wash over me like orchestra music, grabbing at whatever I was able to understand, attempting to reproduce what I thought I had understood, and judging by the reactions of my listeners whether I had gotten it right or not. Sometimes I was told, “No, no, that’s not what that means,” sometimes I was simply laughed at, and much of the time the cues were much subtler: a quick narrowing of the eyes, for example, to indicate that the way I had used a word or ordered a sentence was not quite right. I never checked myself with a dictionary, and in this way I managed to bypass the “translation stage” that most students of a new foreign language later in life go through. The result is that, some fourteen years later, there are many quite simple Dutch concepts I feel I understand intimately but for which I struggle to find the English word. I know precisely what

phrasal verb expressions like “ervan uitgaan” or “ergens moeilijk over doen” mean, but must meditate on how to express the same idea in English (“assume” and “make a fuss” don’t feel totally right). You might say that I bypassed meaning (one-to-one equivalence) and went straight for signification.

Because I learned Dutch in this way, not having learned any other foreign language before, and since I had never studied translation theory or performed translation from Dutch, it made sense to me to begin my translation in the same deductive, intuitive way. If the translating action may have more than one skopos, and if one way in which the skopos can be applied is in the definition of goals for the translation process, then I suggest that different phases of the translation process may also have different skopos. For my first attempt at translating, though I did not yet know the term skopos, I nevertheless had a clear sense of purpose. My skopos may retroactively be defined thus: to determine via the act of translation itself which problems and questions arose regarding the communication of this particular text as well as what my instinctive approach to/philosophy regarding translation seemed to be. This is what I attended to as I translated the first 186 pages of the novel, or about two-thirds. I translated very quickly and one might say intuitively, but I also deliberated and meditated when problems presented themselves; I kept hundreds of notes throughout, embedded in the manuscript itself in red text, sometimes multiple sentences of dialogue with myself at a time.

At two-thirds of the way through the novel, I stopped. I felt I needed to make it through the most significant and difficult part of the narrative in order to make sure that all of the questions that were to arise would have arisen, but I felt very strongly after getting through those pivotal middle sections of the novel that it was time to stop and make recourse to the theory available. Simply put, I found I needed help to go on. I sought out theory that not only seemed to

align with some of the patterns in my approach I noticed and promised to provide potential answers to the major questions and problems that occurred, but also challenged what I had done. For example, I found myself consistently attempting to adapt for maximum equivalence and fluency; rather than attempt to explain culturally specific concepts like the “Gaper” that hangs above Dutch pharmacies, I sought to produce what Vinay and Darbelnet call “situational equivalence.” Based on the questions and problems I identified during this first phase of translation, I redefined my skopos and revisited my translation to self-reflect and analyze, again, reformulating my questions and examining my choices in light of what I had read and the preliminary, tentative approach I had begun to knit together from the theory. In light of this re-reading, I then further refined my skopos and then adapted my methodology as I edited and revised my translation in order to better fulfill my skopos.

The essential points of my skopos and approach for *Maar buiten is het feest* are as follows:

1. While I agree that translation is a creative act that is co-productive rather than reproductive, and that the translated text is, like the original text, only “one of many possible versions” of a text, fidelity of a certain kind is important to me in the translation of this novel (Levine xiii). Rather than attempting to be faithful either to the author’s intended meaning or the reader’s imagined experience, I will attempt to be faithful in the representation of the subjectivity of the main character, Berna (originally Weijntje). I use the name I have given her in my translation here to signal that I am not purporting to present this subjectivity as it “objectively” exists within the pages of this book, but rather as I read it. In my prioritization of the female, child subjectivity at the center of the narrative above the author or an imagined reader; my advancement of my own reading of this character as primary; and my open declaration of this

intention, I align myself first and foremost with a feminist approach to translation. My approach is moreover more aligned with Simon and Godard than with Spivak in that I do assume, if not a truly universal female or child subjectivity, a translatable female, child subjectivity between two closely related Western cultures and languages. In my translation of this novel, I commit not to attempting to reproduce Weijntje's world as I judge Arthur Japin imagined it, nor Weijntje's world as I imagine the average Dutch reader imagined it, nor Weijntje's world as I think the average American native speaker of English without significant experience in the Netherlands would see it (though to claim I did not attempt to imagine these things at some points would be false). My primary skopos is thus as follows: **I commit to attempting to produce Berna's world as I imagine she experiences it, and as I experience it via Japin's text.**

2. This skopos locates me within the "creative turn" in translation theory and practice, which "embraces subjectivity, textuality and discursivity, selfhood and cognition, experience and experiment" (Perteghella and Loffredo 11). As such, my ethical obligation is to not only acknowledge but describe and make very explicit the particulars of my position, my motivations, and my process. I must make transparent the deeply personal reasons for my choices, because, as Suzanne Jill Levine points out, "Knowing the other and how we receive or hear the other is a fundamental step towards knowing ourselves" (xv). Perteghella and Loffredo offer, "The target text turns into the inscription of the translating subjectivity, an act of self-reflection and ultimately self-translation" (7). This essay serves the function of explicitly visibilizing myself in order to perform this self-reflection, establish my reading of the novel as one of many possible readings, and describe my reading and translation of this novel as inevitably and intrinsically bound together with my own experience, cultural background, lexicon, and history.

3. In my attempt to communicate my reading of the child female subjectivity at the heart of the novel as my primary skopos, a mix of translation strategies is not only acceptable, but (I found) inevitable. I am sensitive to the hegemony of English as a world language and very much in support of Berman's and Venuti's foreignizing agendas as regards English translations of other languages, especially a minor language like Dutch, so rarely read in translation<sup>8</sup>. Simon identifies "translation as an essential component in the construction of strong, national literatures"; the choice to translate a Dutch novel into English is a deliberately political act with the potential to help achieve the introduction of a marginalized literature into a dominant tradition and the strengthening of Dutch national literature at once (65). Indeed, I identify this as my secondary skopos: **to translate a piece of Dutch literature for an English-speaking reader in a way that maintains its "Dutchness."** Of course, this is a vague proposition: What I mean by this is to consciously and deliberately foreignize the target language in the translated text where possible and where it does not interfere with the fulfillment of my primary skopos, in order to preserve some of the sound, style, structures, cultural referents and so on of the original. With this in mind, in my revision of my first translation, I foreignized many of the words, structures and concepts I had initially domesticated. However, since this is my secondary skopos, I found that it was useful, in producing my reading of Berna's subjectivity, to draw from the full spectrum of Vinay and Darbelnet's methods (and make use of nearly all of Berman's "deforming

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<sup>8</sup> In a 1990 table provided by Venuti showing US book exports to other countries (to be translated into local language), the Netherlands receives the 6<sup>th</sup>-highest number of American books, behind Canada, the UK, Australia, Japan, and West Germany (16). Meanwhile, Dutch doesn't even appear on a table showing world translation publications from a three-year span in the 80s showing the number of publications exported to other countries (and the number of English-language publications exported for translation is about 4 times higher than the next most frequently translated languages, French, German and Russian) (14). Of course, as a smaller nation, the Netherlands is producing far fewer books, but this evidence taken comparatively demonstrates empirically what any Dutch reader can tell you: the Netherlands is a nation of readers of foreign literature, not a nation of prominent authors of world literature.

tendencies”) rather than locate myself firmly on one side of the many proffered theoretical binaries (direct versus oblique, Platonic versus literal, foreignizing versus domesticating).

As Levine points out (and Vinay and Darbelnet acknowledge), a theoretical affiliation rarely manifests neatly or cleanly in a totally consistent methodology in practice: both mimetic and semantic translation (analogous to Schleiermacher’s “imitation versus paraphrase”) “can be felicitously fused or alternated” (16). The examples I provide of my choices will demonstrate this.

4. I value an intuitive approach to the practice of translation and do not find it necessarily unethical or anti-theoretical. Though I made numerous changes both large and small to my original translation, I would not change my approach on the remainder of the book. Of course, in a sense, there is no going back: I’ve read the theory now, and it has become a part of what Venuti calls my “positions of intelligibility, [my] canons and taboos, [my] codes and ideologies,” operating more or less unconsciously as I translate (18). An intuitive approach means, to me, acting first and questioning, analyzing, revising afterwards; it means that sometimes, there is no other justification for a certain choice besides it sounds better that way. As previously stated, validating an intuitive approach to the process of translation is an implicit validation of the translator as “reader-creator” and “self-writer”—even when the translation ends up a fairly word-for-word reproduction of the original (Perteghella and Loffredo 2).

I do not suggest, however, that an intuitive approach is always the right approach. According to my initial *skopos* (to deductively determine what were going to be the major questions, problems, and methods I discovered), it was the only possible approach for my particular project. It is worth noting, however, that other translators describe something similar to both my experience with Dutch and my approach to translation. Schleiermacher writes of

“surrender[ing] to the irrationality of languages”; Spivak echoes him when she speaks of “surrendering to the text” in a way that is “more erotic than ethical” (Schleiermacher 48; Spivak 315). “If I stop to think about what is happening to the English,” says Spivak, “if I assume an audience, if I take the intending subject as more than a springboard, I cannot jump in, I cannot surrender” (321). Spivak describes, in fact, a process uncannily similar to the one I employed: an initial speed-translation without much thought or theory, then a very careful revision. This approach seems predicated on an intimate relationship with the language one is translating: Spivak suggests that it be “such that sometimes one preferred to speak in it about intimate things” (315-16). Levine talks about something similar when she describes how she began to “[express] myself more emphatically in Spanish than in English. But wasn’t this mask also a means of bringing to life parts of myself suppressed in English?” (vi). Despite the often very childish and unsophisticated nature of my grammatically imperfect Dutch, I have often remarked that I find it easier to be vulnerable in Dutch, to tell the truth about my feelings and to discuss more emotionally difficult subjects. This is in marked contrast to Spanish, which I formally studied and in which I can have very fluent intellectual discussions, but which I do not, for example, feel moved to speak to my ten-month-old son. I speak quite naturally to him in Dutch.

### **Translation in Practice: Motivations and Choices**

I was introduced to Arthur Japin’s *Maar buiten is het feest* the year it came out (2012) by the woman I still refer to as my “Dutch mother,” although it was only for two months (and fourteen years ago) that I lived with her and her family in the Netherlands. She is the executive manager of a *meldpunt* in Arnhem that screens, assesses and redirects for follow-up action reports of child abuse in the region. She found the book, which deals with sexual abuse suffered by a young girl at the hands of her stepfather over the course of more than a decade, well-written

and authentic in its portrayal of the complicated family and power dynamics that make such long-sustained abuse possible. My “Dutch mother” was not aware when she gave me the book that my own mother had recovered repressed memories of long-term, frequent sexual abuse at the hands of her own father and his colleagues the year after I lived in the Netherlands, nor, then, that I had initially rejected and denied these claims of my mother’s and only recently, in 2012, begun to acknowledge them as truth. I found myself thus attracted to the book for what it might illuminate or reveal to me; I found it both very difficult to read (for the guilt that I felt as well as the pain of confronting a situation similar to what I imagined my mother’s might have been) and powerfully compelling, even perhaps a bit cathartic. I say all of this to make very transparent what we all know as readers, critics, and writers: a person’s reading of and relationship to a literary work is never separable from her own experience. Since it is part of my *skopos* to produce a text that reflects my reading of this work, it is important to me that the *translatum* feel as compelling as I experienced the novel to be—even if my readers do not find the Japin text particularly powerful or impactful themselves.

As previously mentioned, though I initially translated about two-thirds of the novel, or around 180 pages, I present only an excerpt of 35 pages from the novel. The novel is structured in four sections, titled “Vaders,” “Weijntjes opkomst,” “Zonnes opkomst,” and “Moeders.” The Fathers and Mothers sections alternate point of view between Zonne (the main character as an adult) and Weijntje, the main character as a child; and each subsection titled “Zonne” or “Weijntje” is further divided into numbered chapters. The “rise of” sections focus, as their respective titles indicate, on one point of view, and are therefore only divided into numbered chapters. The excerpt of which I’ve chosen to present a translation begins with chapter eight

from “Weijntjes opkomst,” continues through the end of that section, and then includes the first three short chapters from the section “Zonnes opkomst.”

I have chosen this section, lifted from the precise middle of the book, because it represents a climactic turning point in the novel’s narrative arc, in which the protagonist finds her voice and claims agency by renaming herself. This sharply marked, clear-cut moment of ascension is predicated on her definitive fall: the night before this moment, Weijntje is forced to perform sex acts with her stepfather for the first time (after months of excruciating innuendo, surveillance and suggestive touching). The scenes contained in this excerpt represent thus a couple of general challenges: 1) they are fairly graphic scenes of sexual interaction and abuse, in which I felt it was especially important to communicate the right tone and where I felt it was especially easy to do a poor job; 2) they are pivotal scenes for the book as a whole in which the novel’s major themes and conflicts—victimization versus agency; the manipulation of children by adults and of women and girls by men; willed and unwilled self-exposure; the empowering potential of art and performance—crystallize and become explicit. These are scenes of high drama in which the reader must be moved to sensations of horror, triumph, hope—without, I strongly felt, the description of Weijntje’s experience feeling sensationalist, gratuitous, titillating or tacky. They are also essential scenes for the successful fulfillment of my skopos: moments in which the female and the child subjectivity embodied by the character of Weijntje must feel credibly real and authentic.

In the end, because I felt that Japin’s original text did feel “credibly real and authentic,” I did not perform an adaptive translation; in the end, being faithful to Berna’s subjectivity meant being reasonably faithful to Japin’s work. Below, I discuss some of the choices I did make to foreignize or domesticate.

## **Names and Titles**

The proper names in the novel are meaningful and evocative, and presented an immediate challenge to my urge to foreignize the text. As Levine says, “Names—particularly names that ‘signify’—dramatize the impossibility yet necessity of translation. Names in fiction [...] serve symbolic functions: A common noun is often hidden in a proper name. To translate the name destroys its unicity, yet if we don’t translate it we don’t understand it” (18). On my first, “speed” translation, I left the names as they were; upon revisiting the text with my newly defined skopos, I became convinced of the need to change them if I were going to communicate the protagonist’s subjectivity as wholly as possible. For one thing, pronounceability is an issue with a name like “Weijntje,” which is not merely “foreign-sounding” but nearly impenetrable: I did not want the communication of her experience tripped up by a name from which English-speaking readers might feel utterly alienated. I debated on whether to simply provide early footnotes with a pronunciation guide, or change the spelling to something more Anglo-phonetic (but that would have created the hideous and not at all evocative “Vinechya” or similar). Ultimately, I left names as they were or tweaked spelling slightly where it was simple and possible: the stepfather, Sijmen, simply became Simen: a rough homophone of “Sijmen” with a similar-enough meaning (“Sijmen” means “man of the people,” while “Simon” means “listener”; both are thus ironic names for the manipulative stepfather) and a slightly irregular “foreignized” spelling that has the bonus effect of being vaguely, repulsively evocative of semen. The sisters, Laura and Isa, remain as they are; the mother’s friends Berthe and Tessa likewise (with the slight spelling tweak of “Bertha”). The stepfather’s last name, Kabouw, which also becomes Weijntje’s last name, I liked for its close phonic connection to the word kabouter, which means gnome; I liked the idea of giving him a surname like Gnome. In the end, though, I chose to keep Kabouw, as it is

phonetically simple and retains the sense of a comic-book sound-effect punch that reflects the wrecking ball Sijmen acts as in their family. For Weijntje's tough spinster music teacher, Mevrouw Verbeet, I chose Ms. Bitten: "verbeet" is a real Dutch last name, but it is also the past-tense form of the verb "verbijten," and I wanted the same connotation of having withstood ("swallowed") much, plus the allusion to bitterness.

Weijnanda, which means "dapper in de strijd" or "brave in battle," became Bernadette ("brave as a bear"). Though neither of these names is immediately recognizable for their meaning, I liked that Japin tucked this extra bit of significance into his protagonist's name for the critical close reader to discover, and wanted to do the same. In addition to its similar meaning, "Bernadette" retains the old-fashioned, odd, slightly ugly feel of Weijnanda and lends itself easily to shortening to "Berna" as a replacement for "Weijntje." Berna is also the name of a former student of mine, one who had a troubled home life and whom I think about daily as a student I failed, though we maintain a close relationship; I was thus also drawn to "Berna" for deeply personal reasons. Indeed, as previously mentioned, once I began to think of Weijntje as Berna, the text truly became my own, and I found myself feeling instantly more free to deviate from more direct translation.

Weijntje renames herself "Zonne," which becomes her lifelong name both personally and as the wildly famous stage performer she later becomes; this name was more difficult to replace, as it is clearly meaningful ("zon"), but neither a real proper name nor a real word in Dutch. It is rather the adjectival form that "zon" takes on when becoming part of a compound noun like "zonnestraal" (sunbeam). Zonne in the novel is a theatrical, grand diva of a singer: the name I chose had to be analogous in meaning and in connotation. "Sunny" is too simple and too childish—not the name of a powerful diva. The novel is loosely inspired by the life story of

Karin Bloemen, a well-known Dutch performer whose last name means “flowers”; I therefore also considered other words connotative of spring and rebirth: Rainbow, Light, Flower, Petal, Aurora, Dawn, Soleil, etc. All of these were too flower-child—laughable in English. “Zonne” is meant to have come from the character’s father’s nicknames for her as a young child, as shown in this fairly literally translated excerpt:

He avoided using my name whenever he could. For as long as I could remember, he had used sparkling fantasy names with me. “Light of my Life!” he would shout when I entered his room. “Ray of Joy! Reason for my Existence!” If I had been naughty and he had to be strict, it was: “Ray!”; teasing, it was “Hey, Little Shine,” but mostly he strode exuberantly through the house: “Sunshine! Flower of the Nation! Glow of my Days!”  
(56-57)

I thus ultimately settled on “Raya”: like “Zonne,” a sort of nonsense but recognizable mash-up taken from “ray of joy”—provided that the English variety is read as American (“ray a’ joy!”)—with the powerful, single-name diva feel of someone like Lady Gaga, which is the image that came to my mind while reading. This is a clear example of how I am presenting, consciously and deliberately, my reading over the reading I might imagine a Dutch reader to have: Karin Bloemen is older, a Bette Midler type rather than a Beyoncé or a Lady Gaga, as I visualize Raya.

The title of the book proved most difficult of all. “Maar buiten is het feest” is a reference to both the core general theme of the book—the difference between what is happening inside and what appears to be happening on the outside of an individual, a family, a room of the family home—as well as to the particular, pivotal scene which appears in my translated excerpt, when Berna is molested inside of a van by her stepfather in the midst of raucous Queen’s Day celebrations outside. It is also a quite obvious allusion to Gerbrand Bakker’s widely acclaimed

2006 novel *Boven is het stil*, which also deals with hidden familial dysfunction in the rural Dutch home. Taken together, Japin's novel seems to finish Bakker's sentence: upstairs it is quiet, but outside there's a party going on. "Feest" is a difficult concept to translate: "party," "celebrations," "holiday," "festival," and "festivities" are all not quite right; "feest" can embody any or all of these. I looked to the translations of *Boven is het stil* for help: the novel was translated in English as *The Twin* (should I rename the book "The Stepfather"?), while the 2013 film version was *It's All So Quiet* ("And the Party Rages On"?). I ultimately compromised with a title that loses the intertextual reference and the "feest" element but performs a small act of foreignization (in its unusual structure) while maintaining the evocativeness of "maar buiten is het feest" and adding a bit more mystery: *Meanwhile, Outside*.

My intervention in these names demonstrates a partly foreignizing, partly domesticating approach that foregrounds the communicability of the character and her experience over the language itself. I will talk very briefly about a couple of other categories of difference in which I made similarly blended choices. First of all, in my return to my initial translation, I revisited many of the expressions I had domesticated and made the choice instead to foreignize them; that is, translate them more directly or literally. This was done in light of my newly defined secondary skopos. For example, I employed the direct "borrowing" strategy to maintain the word *polder* as it was, translating "unheimisch als schemering boven de polder" as "uncanny as dusk above the polder" (initial translation: "uncanny as dusk over the flat green fields"). In another section, when Sijmen says making a choice is "alsof iemand een mes op je keel zet!", I employed Vinay and Darbelnet's literal translation strategy (a direct translation method) and translated the expression as "Like having a knife held against my throat!" rather than the equivalence method I had initially used to domesticate the expression to a United States context: "Might as well hold a

gun to my head!” Instead of “flash-in-the-pan,” as I’d initially translated “eendagsvliegen,” I used “one-day mayflies.” Another choice was to change “de hoofdstad” wherever it appears explicitly to “Amsterdam” rather than leave it literally as “the capital,” as I initially did; though Japin himself never names “de hoofdstad” as Amsterdam, he makes it implicitly clear elsewhere in the book (for example, in referencing the RAI stadium at which Zonne performs). This is an example of where a not-quite-direct translation might be seen as performing Berman’s “literal translation”: “the capital” signifies The Hunger Games and not the very particular set of images and connotations that arise when one mentions the Dutch capital.

At the same time, I domesticated many other Dutch expressions whose meaning would not be so easily inferred or which I simply felt would be too clunky and interrupt the fluent communication of Berna’s experience (my primary skopos) for the sake of complying with the ideological imperative of foreignizing the text (my secondary skopos). Instead of attempting to directly translate the sailing metaphor of “In plaats van houvast bij elkaar te zoeken probeerden wij elkaar de loef af te steken,” I used the familiar English metaphor of “tripping each other up.” Instead of directly translating “ze vlogen elkaar om de haren,” I used “they fought each other tooth and nail.” I very consciously used particularly American colloquial expressions like “make a killing” and “beat the boys off left and right” as opposed to attempting to find expressions that felt more particularly British, because I endeavor to present my experience of Berna’s experience. And a few expressions reflect a partially domesticated, partially foreignized translation: for example, when Sijmen says to Weijntje, suggestively, “We moeten eens kijken hoe dat vogeltje van jou nou gebekt is!”, I translated it not directly (“Let’s see what kind of mouth that little bird of yours has on it!”), because when we speak in English about the “mouth” someone has on her, we are talking about a sassy, defiant attitude. In order to maintain the

suggestiveness of the innuendo, I used instead, “We’ll have to see what kind of throat you have, little birdy!”—not a familiar English expression, but recognizable as infantilized innuendo.

One more way in which I deliberately “foreignized” the translatum was to maintain or approximate Dutch-style syntax and word order where feasible, hence the appearance of such mildly awkward phrasings as, “Of folders like the one he was showing to me right then, he appeared to possess more than one.” This was done in order to attempt to preserve the narrative structure at the sentence level, so that the information learned (in this case, that there were likely more than one such incriminating folder) comes in the same order as in the Dutch. Japin’s long sentences, cluttered with modifying prepositional phrases, are reproduced where possible, as are his many fragments beginning with “that,” in an attempt to transfer something of the sound of the Dutch in his style. However, where I felt that foreignizing the English to reflect Japin’s syntax or punctuation got in the way of the most effective communication of Berna’s experience, I changed it: for example, I added commas to the original “zei hij hijgend toen ik begon te huilen” so that the translation reads, “he said, panting, when I began to cry.” I felt that the commas, by slowing the action and focusing on the panting, better communicated the nightmare of Berna’s molestation.

As these examples thus demonstrate, I revised my initial translation according to my specific primary and secondary skopoi. A purely intuitive approach, without a defined skopos and additional relevant theoretical framework, would not have produced a translatum that was as justifiable as I feel this rough attempt now is, and, more importantly, it would not have yielded a translatum that is as consistent. Though the methods I used perhaps do not seem very consistent with a single theoretical viewpoint such as foreignization or oblique translation—though I may appear, to reference Schleiermacher again, at times to move the author closer to the reader, and

at other times move the reader closer to the author, willy-nilly—drawing from a mix or a blend of the methods described by Schleiermacher, Vinay and Darbelnet, Berman, and Venuti is consistent with my skopoi. This is because, rather than declare my loyalty to either author or reader, source text or target culture, I pledge my faithfulness to Berna, and the female child subjectivity she represents for me personally.

*Meanwhile, Outside: Translated Excerpt*  
(from *Maar buiten is het feest*, pp. 124-159)

“The Rise of Berna”

VIII.

Queen’s Day, which took place every year in Amsterdam, was the biggest event of the year. Not only was the carnival in town, the biggest one in the country, but for two days everyone lived in the streets. Residents built little stalls in front of their houses where they sold old books and magazines and household goods, self-brewed cocktails and homemade food. There were stages set up on which people danced and sang during the day and orchestras played and singers performed at night.

We were only acquainted with all of this via television, where they reported on the most important performances, live broadcasts we were allowed to watch at home with our plates on our laps. We were always talking about how we’d join those heaving crowds one day, no doubt, how as soon as we were old enough we’d promenade around the night carnival with a bag of candied peanuts, arm in arm, and we’d have to beat the boys off right and left.

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Simen dropped the news with seeming carelessness. He tossed it, brightly packaged, in among us. All four of us shot upright, my mother, Laura, Isa and I, and asked how and what and could he please repeat it again and more clearly.

From a friend of a friend and with some necessary palm-greasing he had managed to rent a standing stall in the fish market not far from the avenue leading up to the city hall bridge, a bottleneck through which everyone headed to the main square would have to worm, a location

where my stepfather thought he could make a killing. It would be a great puzzle, this undertaking, for the van would have to serve not only as a place to sleep (since a guesthouse at that time would be both impossible to find and impossible to pay for), but also as an improvised darkroom, because he was not about to hit up one of his acquaintances in Amsterdam for help with developing and hand over his hard-earned cash.

Besides himself, then, there'd only be place for one other person left over. Simen shared this news with us with a heavy tone and concerned expression, and when we asked which one of us would get to go, he pretended to sink deep in thought and left the table.

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Once at school, an old veteran came to talk to us about the old days. He said that when the war broke out, people danced in the streets with joy. That young boys set off amidst the celebrations that same night so that the next morning, cheered on by people who had gathered along the way, they could run singing to the recruiting office, where they fought each other tooth and nail to be the first in line to sign up. If people didn't let themselves be whipped into a frenzy by wild stories and expectations of glory, history wouldn't *exist*.

Not even a couple months later, once the infantry soldiers from the first deployment were delivered back in batches and their coffins lay piled up in the snow in the field behind the pawn shop because the gravediggers couldn't dig into the frozen ground, the elderly men who had cursed their stiff joints for keeping them from the battlefield were overcome with shame. Those who had been left behind searched for an explanation for the good cheer with which they had pressured their sons and grandsons to enlist and seen them off. Mothers and fiancées found each other in the awareness that they'd have to live with the memory of the pride and joy that they had

felt when they'd delivered their loved ones to their regiment and hung homemade garlands of flowers around their necks in the same colors as the flag in which they were now wrapped.

I am only trying to say that a person doesn't always know in hindsight why he wanted something so badly.

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Every leaflet festooned with decorative treble clefs or dancing eighth notes had been pinned up to the bulletin board at the music school by Ms. Bitten. Usually they hung there until they turned yellow, like the announcement for the amateur production of *Pelléas et Melisande* that had been done three years earlier, or an enticing Terpsichore designed to attract young baritones to auditions for *The Mikado*. Old sheet music was available to be picked up for free by the genuine music lover, as well as a concertina for anyone handy enough to restore a leaky bellows. Competitions were posted, along with scholarships with eligibility requirements that none of Bitten's students would ever be able to meet even if they spent twenty years under her tutelage. She had let that hope go a long time ago; no, she hung such announcements up only because they let her feel as if she was participating in a faraway artistic world, where she was understood.

One day, over the newsletter from the fund for the widows and orphans of orchestra members, Bitten solemnly tacked a notice for a singing competition: anyone under eighteen who fancied himself talented could appear on one of the big stages during the festival in Amsterdam on the last afternoon of the carnival.

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“Like having a knife held to my throat,” answered Simen, shaking his head, when we asked him if he knew yet which one of us it was going to be. “You may as well ask which limb I’d most like to have amputated!”

Meanwhile each one of us knocked ourselves out preparing Simen’s travel supplies, rolling up the backdrops, touching up the front of the booth, checking his lenses and his lights and loading the trailer. Instead of helping each other find sure footing, we tried to trip each other up, just as he had hoped.

If there was anything that bonded us to each other in those years, that we had in common, it was disappointment in ourselves. We would have dearly liked to be stronger. Actually, we had always thought we were strong, until he came into our lives.

## IX.

At school we were told that God sees all and forgets nothing. That you can never escape that watchful eye from above and that at the gates to heaven there is a vast archive containing a record for every person, detailing every step and misstep, each improper word.

I raised my hand once to say that I couldn’t imagine God doing something like that. That it seemed more like the devil to want to keep track of everyone’s business all the time. I was promptly sent out to the principal’s office. I hoped that he would ask why I would say such a thing, and that, when I cast my eyes downward and lifted my shoulders in response, he would pressure me and ask questions until I had to confess my story.

But this is my problem with schools: they do not *ask* follow-up questions. They are not interested. All teachers want is to get every irregularity resolved, by the book and as quickly as possible, so that they can hurry home to a waiting family that surely has enough worries of its own. They find their difficult pupils precisely that, difficult, and don’t waste a second wondering

what is hiding behind their defiance and acts of rebellion. If they did, they would notice how much a child must overcome in order to raise a hand, and they would think that she might have a damn good reason to let her voice be heard.

\*\*

I had forgotten my gym clothes.

Usually my mother set everything out for me in the mornings, but she had been out of town for two days and I, in my sleepy state, hadn't thought of it. Since this was not the first time and there was certain punishment hanging over my head, I thought I'd be clever and just quickly bike home during a free period.

To save time I went around the back, blew through the little hallway and flew past Simen's office in a flash. He was not sitting behind his desk but stood bent forward, leaning against the wall with his back towards me. I heard him curse, I hurried on without looking up or around, I scrambled my things together and then I realized—a few beats too late, like a *Looney Tunes* cartoon—that my stepfather had been standing there in a very strange position, actually. And, it dawned on me now, he might not have been standing there alone.

At that same moment, he stepped into the hall.

He blocked my path and asked what I thought I was doing there. No matter how wide he made himself, he could not prevent my seeing that there was a woman in his office. Her head was obscured underneath a sweater in which she remained hopelessly stuck. She had pulled it on too hastily and tugged at it anxiously in order to cover her bare breasts, which were dancing every which way in response to her violent movements, as quickly as possible. When her face finally slid through the neckhole, her red curls completely wild, I saw that it was Tessa.

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The first thing I felt was relief.

If he's with *her* now, I thought immediately, then it's over with my mother. That means he'll leave soon and everything will go back to the way it was.

I was seldom so happy to see one of my mother's girlfriends. I had the urge to fling my arms around her neck, so grateful that she was taking Simen off our hands, and hardly understood why Tessa began to cry.

"Don't say anything, hey," she sniffled. "Bern, please, I didn't want this, will you promise not to tell?"

Apparently their new love was still a secret. I imagined what a shock it would be for my mother when she came home and these two had to confess.

"It would ruin everything, everything!" Tessa continued her bawling. "And I don't *want* this, I never wanted this, Berna, do you believe me, not from the very start, but I *had* to, I had no choice!"

The third thing I realized was that they were not at all planning to say anything about this. Naturally, and even better: this had been going on for a while and it had been a burden on them, keeping this secret from my mother. Too bad, because as soon as she stepped off the bus that night I would be waiting to greet her at the bus stop with the latest news.

Suddenly Tessa gripped my hands tight.

"He forced me to do it!" She pulled me to her, sobbing through a breaking voice as if she had become a wild animal. "Will you promise to say nothing to your mother, to anyone. Not a word, Bern, in God's name, please, or you will destroy so many lives!"

Maybe it was all more dangerous than I could understand. I tried to loosen myself from her grip.

“I didn’t want to, do you understand? I never wanted this, please understand!”

Simen seized her wrist and twisted it so cruelly that Tessa had to release me, but she was nowhere close to calming down.

“I didn’t have a choice, okay?” she cried, completely hysterical. “What else should I have done, tell me that, what was I supposed to do, what could I do!”

In response to this Simen reared back sharply, slapped her in the face with a flat hand, so that she fell backwards, slammed into the wall, wobbled through her knees and let herself sink to the floor, where she remained, sobbing.

“Shut your mouth and get the fuck out of here,” he growled, “unless you want me to beat your brains in!” He gestured to me to sit.

“I have to go back to school,” I said, “I have class.” But his gaze continued to burn me until I took a place at his desk.

While Tessa got herself together and gathered her things in the corner, my stepfather came over and sat across from me as if I was a business partner with whom he had something to discuss, not acknowledging the woman he had just made love to with so much as a look. She crept out, closed the door carefully behind her and left us alone.

Simen took a key from the ring he wore on his belt, wiggled it around one of the drawers he always kept locked, and pulled a folder of papers into sight.

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“He would have fit in better with the Stasi,” Laura said once, years later. Administration! Simen kept his eye on everything more meticulously than God did. Of folders like the one he was showing to me right then, he appeared to possess more than one.

He kept records of everyone we knew, but also of all sorts of people we'd never heard of whom he had run into on his travels. For most of the residents of our village there was at least a report with observations of their habits and behaviors, often with one or more photos that had been taken without their knowledge or consent, drunk or in a half-clothed state, alone, with their spouses or worse. These were supplemented throughout with handwritten statements, agreements or confessions of guilt which he, threatening to go public with their secrets, had pressured out of them. It wasn't long before his drawers overflowed and he bought a cabinet, and, for his prize items and the money he earned for them under the table, a safe, which had required three men to be carried in and put in its place.

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When I saw my name on the folder that he lay on his desk, I thought my report cards must be in it.

The first thing I recognized was the bar coaster on which he had made me scribble a promise some time ago, and saw other "agreements" he had made us write on the back of an envelope or the backside of a torn-off calendar page.

He would suddenly think of these things, usually if he was in a tense mood. Suddenly you'd have to put down a statement about something, in complete sentences that he dictated himself, grown-up language full of strange turns of phrases that couldn't have come from the mind of anyone but Simen. Apparently he was afraid, in those moments, of the school authorities or the labor inspectors, or a customer had said something, and he wanted to cover himself with statements such as these. That we were delighted to help him out in the shop, for example. That there was nothing we'd rather do than "such activity as" helping our stepfather in the shop after

school, “notwithstanding” his strong recommendation that we didn’t “in as much as” we were too young to do so.

In the beginning I found it exciting, these undersigned documents, like something from a spy movie, and I put forth my best effort on them. That we wished for absolutely no financial or other compensation for our work, and preferred helping in the darkroom to playing outside, but that our homework never suffered as a result “owing to the fact that” our stepfather encouraged us “recurrently to do such.”

Along the way the pressure to complete these documents became greater, the premises stranger and more absurd—that we thenceforth rejected any contact with our biological father, that we wanted no new clothing this year and vowed to completely wear out the old, that we had decided “of our own volition” no longer to wear pajamas to bed. Eventually we signed the hand-scrawled little contracts mainly to avoid a fight, to soothe his nerves during one of his moods or to prevent a slap here and there. Strangely enough I had never wondered where those bits of paper had actually ended up and I was surprised to see them turn up.

Simen fanned them out in one strong stroke, so that the photos underneath became visible. He selected one and laid it in front of me.

I recognized her at once: Bertha, lying on her back, underneath The Electric Woman’s stage. Her breasts were oddly splayed, each pointing in a different direction, it seemed. Between her legs you could see the black curls of the carnival-goer’s head, his shoulders and his hands, which rested on her inner thighs, even the dimples in her soft flesh, paler under the pressure of his fingers as they spread her legs apart.

And you could see me.

That figure in the foreground, that was me.

You could see me at an angle from behind, profile gone, chin and nose turned just away from the viewer, gaze trained on the scene playing out in front of my eyes. A strange sight, a child's head with those writhing bodies, but there was no mistaking it.

“You wouldn't want you mother to find out about this, would you?”

Triumphantly he laid another photo next to the first, in which you could see more of my back. In this one I was huddled in shock and shame, but if you didn't know that, you'd only see a child bent somewhat forward, crawling perhaps, for all you knew right towards that couple. The sweater I was wearing had been knit by my mother.

“But she never needs to know about it, does she?” Simen whispered amiably.

He turned the photo over. On the backside was my signature. It was the statement he had made me write before I was allowed into the darkroom: that I had helped develop these pictures myself.

“This kind of business is our secret now. Sometimes we see things, you and I, that are nobody else's business. Deal?”

I nodded.

“And as far as Tessa goes...” He pulled out another folder, opened it out in front of me, let the photos in it go through his fingers and held one after the other up to my face. “She's just a whore. Look at her lying here, and here, and this one, just take a look, man, everywhere! She's one of those sluts who won't be satisfied until she's been with every guy. She's just trying it, that's all. That's what you saw just now, that's how she is with everyone and it doesn't mean anything beyond that. That's how it works with grown-ups, you already know that, or are you too young to understand something like this?”

I shook my head.

“Good, then this will remain your and my secret and no need to bother anyone else with it. By the way, I’m going to give you something totally different to think about right now.” He swept the photos back in their folders and buried them back in the drawer. “That’s right, young lady, I would start thinking about what you’d like to pack. I’ve just made my mind up and decided who gets to come along to Amsterdam. You are the lucky one.”

My head just kept shaking back and forth. As much as I had wanted to go, that’s how much I suddenly didn’t want to go.

“And if you’re very good in the meantime…” He locked his desk up and hung the key back on his belt. “…don’t talk back and do all that’s expected of you nicely and without complaining, then you may, if you like, still participate in that singing event as well.”

Before Simen turned off the light and walked away, he looked back at me for a moment.

“We’ll have to see,” he said, “what kind of throat you have, little birdy!”

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“Look at them looking, Bern.” Simen smiled as he started the car and waved at my mother and sister through the windshield. “How they would love to be in your place.” He leaned over me, tugged my safety belt loose, pulled it over my body and clicked it into the latch.

“Got to make sure you’re sitting tight, eh!” He hooked two fingers under my seatbelt, lifted it up a bit, slid his fingers along the strap from bottom to top as if to check that it wasn’t pinching anywhere and then—just for his own amusement—slowly back down from top to bottom. In both directions the back of his hand slid meaningfully along my body. “We’ve got a long way to go, so we want everything to feel good, don’t you think?”

He smiled a bit roguishly, the way he did sometimes, as he let his tongue roll back and forth between his teeth, and he *kept* staring at me, provocatively, to see if I would react, while he started to fuss with the seatbelt again, loosened it a bit—“There, that’s better, isn’t it?”—and fell back into his seat.

Laura and my mother, who had Isa on her hip, raised their hands in the air, but I sat paralyzed. I should have freed myself from that seatbelt, should have thrown open the door and leapt out. I would have liked to roll down the window and scream out loud that I had changed my mind. That I didn’t want to go anymore and would gladly give up my place, but it was impossible to explain why I had changed my mind, so I didn’t dare do anything, not even wave back. My mother put her free arm around Laura and pulled her in against her. They remained standing there like that, the three of them, and watched us until we had left the street.

“I’m just so pleased with my choice already,” purred Simen. He turned the radio on and searched for an upbeat station. When he had found one, he let his free hand come down on my upper leg. After a little while he pushed the fabric of my skirt up a bit, as if it were in his way, so that his skin touched mine. There that fist remained for a good deal of the trip, at times a bit higher up on my leg, at times a bit lower. I tried everything, from sitting in different positions to asking him bluntly to stop, but after a while his fingers would always float from the steering wheel to tap out one top 40 rhythm or another on my thigh.

“They’re nice girls too, all three of them, just the best!” Simen concluded once more during the trip. “And it’s a shame you have to disappoint people at some point in life, but you and I on the road together, my little Berna-bird, what could be better than that? I tell you, it’s a golden opportunity, just a golden opportunity!”

X.

The pipes of the scaffolding under the open air stage vibrated and hummed along with every gust of wind. I stood behind it on a staircase waiting my turn and could see through the open grid of the stairs the heads of the children on the square underneath. I gripped the steel handrail, wet from the rain blowing in, so tightly that it left an impression in my palm. Blue plastic tarp stretched across the wings and curtain. It billowed in the storm. One corner where the rope had come loose flapped up now and again, whipped through the air and slammed against the side of the stage. The wind played in the contestant number tag hung around my neck.

Of the seventeen participants I was number twelve. We stood in a line and each time a song ended, we shuffled forward a few steps amidst the applause, closer to the music, the warm stage lamps and the light.

“Just a little longer,” I said to myself. “Five numbers, four, now only three to go, almost there.”

Around us various hawkers were already packing up and breaking down their setups. These were the last hours of the carnival and the weather was bleak.

The pianist, an old man with wavy white hair who had seen better days, had secured his sheet music with clothespins. To keep his joints warm he wore wool gloves with the fingers cut off. Before the competition had commenced, as we were each singing our numbers one time through with him, he’d dropped the names of big stars whom he’d accompanied. Not one of them rang a bell.

Let’s go, I kept thinking the entire time, in god’s name, let’s get started now. If I could just get going, as long as I’ve started singing. Because Ms. Bitten had once told me that a person can’t cry and sing at the same time.

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Our arrival in the capital city, two days earlier, had been a debacle. The spot that the market director indicated was not in front of the big bridge, as promised, but off to the side in a dead alleyway. Moreover the weather was bad and it was quiet in the streets because the city-wide flea market wouldn't open until midnight.

I helped set up the awning with orange and gold stripes and stretched out the backdrop with the painting of the palace, bound the PHOTO SOUVENIRS STARTING AT \$1.50 sign to a tree and the A NIGHT LIKE THIS DESERVES TO BE IMMORTALIZED! to a lamppost, then got sent out with flyers.

That failed to produce much of a turn-out, and according to Simen—who had fallen into the most sullen and snarly of moods—that was my fault. I had probably handed out the flyers to the wrong people, maybe not even handed them out at all. For all he knew I had heaved, hup, the entire stack in the river and gone to the great square to gape at the television stars rehearsing for their performance there at midnight.

“Thanks a lot!”

He yanked on the awning, which clapped shut like a trapdoor on its aluminum tension rod behind me. He zipped out the tailgate tent, secured the floor of it viciously with ties. He opened the back hatch of the van and gestured that I should get in.

“The best thing we can do now is lay down for a bit and try to get some sleep. Hup, in you go.” The bang with which he slammed the door shut behind us thundered through the sheet metal. “We'll rest a bit, get started after midnight, when everyone starts coming out, and then we'll keep going til early morning. Maybe we'll be able to win back some of the clientele that I missed, thanks to you.”

There were two mattresses lying there.

Simen let himself fall back onto one, unbuttoned his shirt, kicked his shoes and his pants off, bent one arm behind his head and remained like that, lying on his back looking at me in his socks and his underpants.

The space was lit by the dome light in the middle of the ceiling.

“Are you trying to ruin your best clothes?” Simen snapped at me when I tried to lay down, clothes and all. “Do you think your mother slaved away over a burning hot iron for her own pleasure?”

Leaning on one elbow he looked at me, the fingers of his free hand swirling through the little black hairs around his belly button.

I toed my shoes off and bent forward, fiddling with my belt as if I needed to examine the clasp. I turned around, slipped the dress off my shoulders, stepped out of it and fell as quickly as I could on the free mattress, where I remained lying in my underwear with my back turned to Simen, knees drawn up, arms tight against my body, hands clamped between my thighs.

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Applause. Two contestants to go.

Waiting in the wings, I could already see the people standing in the square.

“Why the hell did you ever want to do this?” I said to myself. “If you can’t stand being looked at, what got into your damn head?”

I wondered what kind of people these were, huddled in their collars, who braved a bleak day like this. Proud uncles and aunts perhaps, or parents. Many faces were hidden behind a camera or camcorder. One singleton was hidden beneath an umbrella. Couples had wrapped their arms around each other to keep warm, someone had picked up their dog and was holding it in the crook of an arm, another leaned against a flagpole, but all of them were pointing their noses in

the same direction. Obliging they watched, heads tucked into their chins, gaze lifted, like one person, as if they had planned this, peering towards the stage.

“But of course that’s how it is!” I rebuked myself. “There *is* a clear plan. Nothing happens unexpectedly here, not here. We planned this together, she and I.”

This is the difference between being watched and showing yourself.

Applause! The boy before me was announced by the emcee and went on. After this it would be my turn. I went forward a few steps in anticipation, as far as I could.

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“I know you’re awake,” the voice said in the back of the van.

I’d been lying on my little mattress for less than an hour.

“Don’t you know a lullaby you could sing for me? Bern? Hey, why don’t you sing a nice sweet soft little tune for me?”

I continued to pretend to be sleeping, but he shoved his sheets off, lifted mine up and scooted under.

“If you love singing so much, let’s hear a little something.” He rolled against me and wrapped his arm around me. “If it doesn’t lull me to sleep, you can at least cheer me up a little bit.” He started to rock me back and forth as though to gently wake me. “But you’re not cheerful at all, are you? What is it, little baby, what are you afraid of? No wonder you’re having trouble singing if you aren’t happy.”

He pulled the sheets away, came and settled down on his knees next to me and studied me, concerned, it seemed, as if he wanted to understand what was the matter.

“We’re here because there’s a big festival going on, you know. The party will break out at any moment. Why don’t you try to enjoy it a little bit, little girl, we didn’t drive all that way for nothing, after all. Should I see if I can’t get you in a more festive mood?”

Simen slung one leg over me and came to sit astride me. When I tried to wriggle out from beneath him, he laid one hand on my stomach and pushed me back against the mattress, and pulled my underpants down with the other.

“I can do that, you know, I happen to be very good at that.” He planted a knee between mine and pried my legs open. “It’s just a matter of taking that leap...” He grinned widely. “...and feeling it out. Like everything in life.”

To demonstrate, he stuck a couple of fingers in his mouth, pushed them in and out a few times, pulled them out covered in spit, brought them between my legs and started to fumble and scratch at me there.

“Calm down now,” he said, panting, when I began to cry. “You’re not the first I’ve managed to get to sing.”

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“Nothing to be scared of,” whispered the emcee as soon as the contestant before me had begun. “I can already see that you’re going to be very good. A couple of questions...”

He wrote down some keywords from my answers so that he could use them in a moment during his introduction.

“But you’re really not dreading it at all, are you?” he asked finally, rather surprised.

“No...” I thought about it for a moment. “No, I don’t think I am, actually.”

“Well, that’s good...” He looked at my tag for the number and scrolled with the tip of his ballpoint pen down the list of participants until he found it. “Behind that microphone in just a minute there’s only *one* boss, and that’s you...Berna Kabouw.”

I hesitated.

He checked his list of names once again.

“I’m standing here with Bernadette Kabouw, isn’t that right?”

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After he had “opened me up” down there, as Simen called it, a ritual that he assured me all fathers performed with their daughters, he stripped his own underpants off. Had I enjoyed it, he wanted to know, and he’d let me see something nice I could do for him in exchange.

All I could do was cry, but this didn’t change his mind. Tit for tat, and if *I* didn’t want to grab on, he snarled, he’d do it himself this one time, as long as I paid close attention to how this worked, because sooner or later *I would* have to learn it. As he began pulling at himself with great strokes, my stepfather bent over me again, pushed his face between my legs. Where it still stung from the stabbing of his fingers, I now felt his tongue going back and forth, and his lips, and the scraping of his unshaven chin.

“Goddamnit,” he kept exclaiming, “yes, goddamnit, yes!”

The clock struck twelve. The fireworks went off. The people in the street ran towards the square, where the music was starting.

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“No,” I heard myself say to the emcee. “That’s not right.”

“Why not?” he asked, impatiently, for the previous contestant had finished and was already being applauded. The pianist ran a hand through his white hair and clipped my sheet music to his rack with a clothespin.

“That’s not my name. Kabouw, that’s my stepfather’s name. You can’t call me that. My name is actually Van Son. That was my father’s name, Solomon van Son. The fashion designer?”

“That’s what it says here. Bernadette Kabouw, nickname Berna.”

“I know, but that’s not my name.”

“Okay, what is your name then?”

The applause faded away.

All the names my father had ever called me flashed through my head. The little games he had played with that name.

My predecessor headed our way.

“Come on, quickly, it’s your entrance already. How do you want me to present you?”

“Just say Raya.”

“Raya?”

I nodded.

“My father gave that name to me. He was always coming up with names like that.”

The emcee shrugged. He couldn’t wait any longer and stepped into the light.

“What else?” he asked quickly, with a sideways glance at me.

“Nothing,” I called. “Just Raya.”

“The Rise of Raya”

*Like a car, a camera is sold as a predatory weapon—one that’s as automated as possible, ready to spring.*

*Photographs were enrolled in the service of important institutions of power, notably the family and the police.*

*There is aggression implicit in every use of the camera.*

Susan Sontag

*Her name has become such a household concept by now that as soon as someone mentions it, or when it appears in advertising, everyone, whether they wish to or not, immediately and irrevocably sees her appear in their mind’s eye, the star, the public’s darling, that phenomenon, that diva she has grown to become. Memories of her voice surge up instantly for people, that incredible voice of hers, with which she can sing everything from pop to opera, and memories of certain days from their lives that are permanently woven together with her music because she comforted them at a critical moment with her sounds or moved them to tears or made them smile just when they thought there might never be anything for them to smile about ever again. And if someone didn’t already have one of her songs in his head at the moment he caught the name Raya in passing, then he’d continue on his way whistling one anyway, or grinning suddenly when he thought of one of her hilarious one-liners, some of which have become such a standard part of the national repertoire that children repeat them at school and adults greet each other with them in the morning at the office or when entering a shop.*

*Whatever it is that occurs to them first, a melody or an emotion, a lyric or simply wistfulness, eventually an image arrives with it. Not necessarily a specific portrait of her from a poster or an album cover, not one of the close-ups from the magazine covers she graces*

*regularly, not an image from a recent interview or television or film role she's done, no, something more abstract than that, more commonplace and therefore all the more penetrating and lingering: a contour, a shape, an icon that is so branded in collective memory that the mere shadow of it is enough to drive people wild, like her previous run in the stadium, where each show began with nothing but a powerful spotlight behind an enormous white curtain on which her silhouette—one arm stretched high, seemingly effortlessly powerful fingers spread and reaching for the stars—rose slowly up out of the stage on a hydraulic platform, to a standing ovation and the yearning clamor of ten thousand voices.*

*Her appearance is phenomenal. A monument of color and light. Before she has sung one note, before she has even moved, one thing is clear: here stands a woman who, her entire posture screams, will never let herself be defined by another person ever again! Today, thanks to everything I have been through privately and, in equal measure, all I've felt and experienced here on stage before all your eyes—she seems to be declaring—not even the devil himself can scare me anymore!*

*At the same time, and this is what makes her persona so convincing, Raya is the first one to expose the strings. Her broad, dramatic gesticulations, seldom seen since Gloria Swanson stood ready for her close-up at the top of the stairs in her Bel Air villa, the flourish with which she enters every room, all the glitz and glamour of her diva posturing, communicate precisely that: “Darlings, of course this is all just an act!”*

*It's a convincing game, one her public plays along with only too eagerly, an illusion that gives her such obvious pleasure that everyone who dreams of someday daring to be as big and beautiful as she is supports her whole-heartedly.*

*She performs for them the life they don't dare to live and the space they don't have the courage to occupy, she fills up for them. Practically literally: Raya can fill a room with one breath, and with one look she manages to make the people sitting in the cheapest seats high in the biggest stadium in Amsterdam feel as if she is sitting among them in the bleachers and putting her arms around them now and then. Her fans sometimes affectionately call her La Raya, as if she were one of the old-time vedettes, a term of honor in the opera and the classical Russian ballet that she uses herself ironically, in order to both mock her status and emphasize it at once. With an entire arsenal of innocent, naughty, humorous or yearning expressions; those sucking, sulking or sobbing lips; all those surprised, spoiled, scathing or seductive glances, she is able to at once both parody and perfect her own image. This is the big time, the major leagues of being watched.*

## I.

The very first time she had sung before an audience, years ago during the festival in Amsterdam, a few minutes after she'd chosen her stage name, it was silent at first.

Two beats.

Three, tops.

For Raya it seemed an eternity. Once her last note had sounded and the pianist had let the final chord fade, she remained standing, lost in the lights.

She hadn't dared look at the people who stood staring at her in the square. Her glance slid over the spectators, who were huddled in bunches seeking protection from the rain. In those few seconds she couldn't have consciously registered more than five or ten faces, but even now she remembers the sensation, crystal clear in the charged silence, that she knew every one of them. Or, more precisely, that they all now knew *her*.

In reality she recognized only one: Ms. Bitten!

She popped into view abruptly from underneath her umbrella and gave her a thumbs-up, glowing with pride. At the same instant someone else further up broke the silence first, upon which others took over the same enthusiasm and, as one, clapped and clapped and clapped for her.

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It wasn't enough to win.

According to the “applause-o-meter”—nothing more than a board on which the volume of the applause was indicated by an arrow operated from behind by an intern who, according to his own ear and whimsy, moved a lever back and forth—Raya came in fifth in the end.

“Foul play!” Bitten stabbed the parrot’s abdomen that formed her umbrella’s handle into the emcee’s chest. “Classic case of the fear and repulsion that takes over the souls of the little people when they are for once presented with something extraordinary! They shrink from purity. Reject all that isn’t mediocre!” She wouldn’t be surprised if the winner had cemented her triumph in the dressing room before the show thanks to her performance on the couch. “Because it couldn’t possibly have been because of her voice!”

The choir director, who had considered her presence at her protégée’s first performance her sacred duty—a secret, incognito mission so as not to put Raya off her game—could hardly contain her disappointment and eventually won the endorsement of the pianist, who recognized her as a kindred spirit, a fellow artist, someone truly cut from the same cloth, whose indignation reinforced his conviction—he shook his sparse white hair back as if it were still a mane—that the artistic standards of days gone by had been abandoned by the youth in favor of so many one-day mayflies.

“It’s your loss,” Bitten boomed over her shoulder as she went after Raya, who was too full of everything that had just happened to be much affected by the results. “If this kind of talent presents itself to you and you’d rather cover your ears, it’s your loss; you don’t deserve any better!”

At the start of the city hall bridge Raya turned around in an attempt to take her leave of Ms. Bitten, but she hadn’t traveled all this way to let herself be sent away.

“Really ma’am, it’s okay.”

“But child, the injustice that you’ve been done!”

“But I don’t mind.”

“Now, as for how we’re going to prove those dilettantes wrong, I’m going to discuss *that* with your father.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll explain everything to him in perfect detail.”

“That’s just it, it’s not necessary.”

“Your father and I, we’ll plan our revenge.” In lieu of a sword she stuck her umbrella in the air. “Ha, we’re going to make those idiots swallow their words until they choke on them!”

“He’s not my father.”

She could see the van across the water. What if her teacher, with the best of intentions, should blurt out to Simen the stage name under which his stepdaughter had just performed? She could go by that name in her head, but for everyone else she would be Berna. She thought about the night before and could feel how raw she was, bruised and tender as rotting fruit, swollen from the continuous in and out of his tongue and fingers.

“You see, my girl!” cried Bitten when her pupil began to cry. “Don’t cry, angel, shh. After you’ve done such a beautiful job!” She pressed her, shushing, against her and, determined now to deliver the little girl personally to her family, gently nudged her across the bridge. “Didn’t I just say, an audition like that hits you far deeper than you think.”

## II.

Raya needed her mother at that moment. Whatever little adult games Simen had tried to play with her, whatever words he had panted at her, whatever hand tricks and grip techniques he had tried to teach her, she *wasn't* a woman, she was still a child. She wanted but one thing: to run to mama, crawl in next to *her*, press into her chest and smell her warmth, burrow in underneath an arm without saying anything. To be rocked and soothed without having to explain anything. To have her head lovingly rubbed hard for a moment, like when she had bumped it. To make pancakes together or sit with the pink jewelry box on her lap and try on rings and earrings, the way her mother let her when she was feverish and had to stay home from school, to play with perfume bottles under her mother’s watchful eye (something that was only permitted on rare occasions), to take the porcelain travel alarm clock out of its red leather case together as she listened to the story her mother invented about the rococo figures that were painted on it, and then carefully, her small fingers around the little gold pin, wind the hour hand a few times. This was all she could think about during their journey back from Amsterdam: first just being at home again and then clamping on tight to her mother.

“But of course, you’re not a daughter to her any longer,” warned Simen, as if he could read her thoughts, shortly before he turned his van onto their street, “not after what has happened these past few days. You have to remember that.”

If only he had just directly told her to keep her mouth shut. If only he had flattered her, threatened her, bribed her or, if need be, begged her, she would have been able to dismiss his words. She would have been able to just follow her heart and defy him. But the devil knows that fear is best sowed with a loose hand.

“Nothing hurts a woman as much as being betrayed in love,” he said confidentially, “take that from me. And the very last thing you and I want to do is cause her pain, right?”

He laid his hand on Raya’s knee and clasped it briefly, as if they were facing the same dilemma together.

“Someone trying to steal away her husband—no woman can handle something like that, let alone if it turns out to be her own child who’s trying to do that. Just imagine...” he said as he parked.

The front door opened. Raya’s mother, who had been washing the dishes when she heard the car, wiped her hands dry on her apron. She raised them cheerily in the air and waved.

“...and especially awful if you are, as she is, getting on in years.” Meanwhile Simen waved back enthusiastically. “Having to compete with someone so much younger, as irresistible as you are, loads prettier than her. And you’re only going to get more beautiful in the coming years. Flesh out, bloom. It will be impossible for her to compete with that. Look at her standing there, so happy, she knows nothing! God, if she should ever even suspect the kind of fun we had together, she would hate you! Mother and daughter, no, that’s over, gone, from today forward you are rivals.”

As soon as they stepped out of the car, her mother flew to Simen, throwing her arms around his neck, and then stretched her arms out to her daughter.

“Well?”

As hard as Raya had wanted to run to her, she now fought against it.

She couldn't go to her.

She mustn't go to her.

Above all, she could let nothing show.

"All came to nothing," she answered gruffly as she dragged her overnight bag from the backseat. "Fifth."

"Oh honey, what do they know?"

"According to that singing teacher of hers," said Simen, "she was actually the best one of all!"

Raya shrugged.

"That lady just kept going on about how good it was, she went on and on, they couldn't shut her up."

"There, see," said her mother as if that decided the matter. "And otherwise?" She chalked her daughter's evasive attitude up to disappointment and resorted to the remedy she had for all painful situations: ignore it and act twice as cheerful to get through it. "So tell me, did you two have a nice time?"

Raya nodded and mumbled something, slipped around the car and walked inside.

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"What's the matter, Bern honey?" her mother tried now and then in the days that followed. "Come on, Berna sweetie, just tell me what you're thinking."

But that was just it: Berna didn't exist anymore. She had gotten lost in the capital city and had to stay behind there. The Berna her mother loved had been an innocent, a child who played

with dolls and had never heard of the kinds of things that had happened to Raya. A naïve little person who would never have done such a thing to her mother.

It wasn't long before it was impossible for Raya to know anymore if the distance she was experiencing originated with the others, or if it was her own confusion that kept *her* away from *them*. A helpless repulsion befell her sometimes, uncanny as dusk above the polder, and her mother, but also Laura, seemed to be like those little lights, vibrating in the distance, somewhere on the other side of the channel, where you'd so dearly love to go, but you don't dare go so far so late in the day.

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Only with Isa was she able sometimes to feel as before. Once Raya was cuddled next to her little sister in the evening when she came to tuck her in, or reading aloud to her on the sofa, or playing dolls with her on the floor in front of the painted crate that served as their house, she could just play like normal for a little while again, she and Isa united in their innocence, ignorant of the real world.

But already as she was standing up, the impression from the bamboo mat like little white worms on her knees, it felt like she had deceived the little one. And herself.

If there was one thing Raya no longer was, it was innocent. She might look like a child, but underneath she was no better than Bertha or Tessa or her aunt Jany with their twisted bodies and contorted faces and their insides opened towards the camera. From now on she was one of *them*.

III.

People don't know how to look.

When the holiday was over and school started up again, Raya assumed she would receive comments, that someone would speak to her about the changes that had taken place in her, that one of the teachers would put an arm around her and take her aside, gently urge her through the door of the teachers lounge in order to interrogate her carefully in private over a cup of herbal tea.

She was so utterly not the same as the girl that had skipped out of the schoolyard not even a week before that it would be crazy if her secret somehow didn't come out. Surely something like that could not be hidden from people you dealt with on a daily basis. One person might have to swallow at the first glance of her, she had thought Monday morning, one of her classmates would flinch when they saw her, and have to recover and then pretend nothing was amiss.

But apparently other people were not prepared to truly see you.

No one noticed that one of the children drifted aimlessly over the playground in the middle of all the bustle, that she did her best not to look anyone in the eye, that she skirted around little clusters of people and ducked away as soon as someone approached her. She held her arms out wide, in a defensive gesture, as if she had fallen and scraped herself and was afraid that someone would brush against the wound in all the hubbub.

“Well, this is cheery!” remarked the crafts teacher a short while later as she bent over Raya's needlework, for which she had chosen brightly colored floss. “You can tell that it's still holiday in that head of yours!”

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When the final bell rang, Raya didn't know if she should be relieved that this had been a day like any other, that no one had asked awful questions and she had never once had to name or deny her sadness.

She stood under the awning over the bike racks for a while, wrestling as though she had two left hands with her schoolbag, which refused to stay on the rear wheel rack because one of the hooks on the bungee cord was bent and kept popping off.

If on the outside one could read so little of what was really going on, thought Raya, God only knew what all was hidden inside of people, and she couldn't decide if it disturbed her or comforted her that it took so little effort to hide yourself from other people.

It was a sensation that would stay with her throughout the rest of her life, always accompanied by the clatter of rain on the corrugated plastic roof and the feeling of being left behind alone on the playground as one person after another mounts their bicycle and rides away from you until all the racks are empty: the discovery that a person exists in two separate parts, one on the inside and the other on the outside.

A person's best disguise, it seems, is himself.

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