

On lions, fans and crosses. A Low Countries legacy for translation studies

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Already during his lifetime James Stratton Holmes (1924–1986) had a claim to fame. Not only was he a much-praised translator, he also laid the foundations of a – in his time (between 1968 and 1984) – newly emerging academic field of interest, at least in the West: translation studies. It is a fact that, in the Netherlands, translations studies became a full-time course within literary studies at the University of Amsterdam partly through the agency of Holmes, and within that scope he no doubt supplied quite a few of the translators educated there with a thorough theoretical basis. After his death his fame increased even further. In the introduction to Holmes's collected essays, published posthumously under the title *Translated!* ([1988] 1994), Raymond van den Broeck claims that the overall view of the book “provides the reader with a very faithful reflection of the developments that took place in theoretical thinking about translation and in the methodology of translation studies during the period in question” (1994, 1). Van den Broeck thus identifies Holmes's academic life with the flourishing of the discipline. He is right about this, but only in part, as others contributed as well, among them Czechs and Slovaks. There was a simple reason why the first volume of the series *Approaches to Translation Studies* appeared concurrently not only in The Hague and Paris, but also at the Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. Holmes may have been editor of the series, but one of its associate editors (along with Frans de Haan) was Anton Popovič, a man from Nitra and another famed founding father of modern translation studies. With the publication of that first volume of the series in 1970 – in fact the proceedings of a colloquium held in Bratislava in 1968 under the title “Translation as an Art” – the editors wished to put an end to the “chatty essays” on translation that, according to Jiří Levý, had not “advanced beyond the range of [...] comments or essayistic aphorisms” (Holmes – De Haan – Popovič 1970, 7). Their programme was successful, yet the history of translation studies has shown some remarkable ups-and-downs since then. Looking back may not be *en vogue* these days, but it proved worthwhile to reread Holmes's work and use it as a reference point for the impact Holmes had on theorizing about translating and translation in general and more specifically on translation studies in the Low Countries.

PRACTICE AND THEORY

Translated! comprises the collected essays of Holmes and numbers about 100 pages in all. Not a big *oeuvre*, certainly not in comparison with the plump portfolios with which young people apply for jobs nowadays. Ignoring the considerable overlap, the volume in fact contains 10 essays, divided in two parts: one on the translation of poetry and another on the nature of translation studies. For Van de Broeck these two essays reflect what he calls the “two-sided quality of Holmes’s personality”; he remarks that Holmes was a poet and a translator who liked to map his reflections on translation and states that “when [Holmes] began to look into theoretical problems he found it necessary to divide himself ‘rather schizophrenically’ into the practicing translator on the one hand, the theoretician on the other” (1994, 2). Personally, I wonder whether such a distinction really existed in Holmes – practice and reflection seem to have flowed into each other rather organically. Van den Broeck corrects himself when he says that the fruitful interaction of theory and practice “at once guarded the scholar from sterile theorization and the translator from vain complacency” (2). Holmes himself seems to agree with this when he writes: “It has been my extensive experience as a translator that has made it possible for me to contribute the occasional sensible word to translation studies” (2). Two elaborate essays of about 50 pages, of which the second, in which he tries to map translation studies and its different aspects, had the greater impact. The first essay, on translating poetry, is somewhat underrated internationally as it contains examples of his own translations from Dutch and is subjective in tone and thus seems to be more “applied” thinking, and also perhaps because it concentrates on the situation in the Low Countries. In my opinion, however, it epitomizes the value of Holmes’s contribution to translation studies: keeping the subject open for the contribution of the individual translator and his or her qualities in the discipline. I deduce from it that Holmes wished to stress the necessity of the metaposition, while at the same time rejecting that or diverting from it when he discussed translations, either his own or those of others. While in his own time and circumstances the distinction was undoubtedly important, the organic unity of reflection and translation practice presents a more realistic picture of current ideas on translation and their basically translational nature.

POETRY TRANSLATION

The dividing line between reflection and practice is especially fuzzy in the five essays ranged under the heading “The Poem Translated” (1994, 7–64), in which Holmes’s commitment is apparent in his lament that some translations seem to defy him. I regard this as a positive quality, but wish to stress that Holmes’s view is just that: an opinion. That is even more apparent and manifest in his constantly repeated statement that the translation of poetry – and thus translation in general – entails loss. This is evidently a matter of opinion. From the outset Holmes sees poetry as “the most complex of all linguistic structures” (9) and thus suitable to demonstrate all translation problems: time and again Holmes likes to show what happens in the process. But while doing so he invokes what he calls the “prophets of despair” – Croce, Benn, Frost – who claim exclusive rights for the original poem, which by necessity

leads to a lower status for the translation. In this he shows himself to be a child of his time. And even though Holmes in his first essay (from 1969, which, incidentally, was rapidly translated into Slovak in the magazine *Romboid*, 1970, no. 5, 7–12) foreshadows his famous “fan” in which he considers the relation of the metapoem to the poem to be similar to that of an analysis or explication of a poem, one could say he is quite modest and reserved about the practice of translation. Paradoxically, his classic one-liner – “The metapoem interprets not by analysis but by enactment” (Holmes 1994, 11) – disqualifies the analysis and explication involved in the enactment, and to be perfectly clear, that includes the analysis and explication injected from descriptive translation studies. Here, too, Holmes labels his double activities as a scholar and a translator as schizophrenia, while he could have pointed to their organic unity and coherence just as well. “All translation is an act of critical interpretation,” Holmes says later, when he comes up with a metaphor and diagram for his way of thinking, his famous “fan of Holmes” (24). In it, Holmes identifies the double purpose of the translation as metaliterature and as primary literature. As he demonstrates, the logical consequence of this view is that there is no fundamental difference among possible forms of response to a given text. By insisting on the inner workings of the source text, Holmes assigns translations a different status than he does when he so committedly and energetically examines them as an object of study. Taking enrichment rather than loss as a point of departure, this should apply not only to studies of translation but also to the translations themselves. Historically, Holmes’s effort to conceive “the nature of translation” without arriving “at normative dicta” is understandable, but in the meantime translator scholars have arrived in a sort of post-descriptive era and know full well how to avoid normative pitfalls. We do fall short when Holmes compares translating with dancing (26). The description of a dance seems to be poorer than the dance itself; and the dance is hard to fathom without experiencing it and without foregoing the impulses that made the dance possible. Holmes concludes his essay with the remark that each kind of (verse) translation “can never be more than a single interpretation out of many of the original whose image it darkly mirrors” (30).

The first essay, presented in Antwerp, prepares the second essay, presented in Bratislava; the third essay, the Nitra essay on the cross-temporal factor in verse translation, prepares the fourth essay on the “substantial loss” in translating (45), whereas essay five of this section, “On Matching and Making Maps”, implicitly sums up the ideas of the first four essays, yet is negative about the performance when Holmes compares a translation to “an underbaked cake” (53). I cite the last sentence of this essay, or testament rather, to show that, again, Holmes is too pessimistic about translations: “no matter how hard he may try, not even the optimum translation can ever fully and entirely match its original, ever be more than a map of it. The territory remains, though it must not remain terra incognita” (64). In my view, this remark is at odds with the idea that flows naturally from his own notion of a fan around an original, namely that metafans can unfold around a translation. With this I repeat what Matthijs Bakker and I said about “the metaleap in the second degree” at the Holmes-symposium in Amsterdam December 1990, a plea not to be too anxious about mixing object and meta-language discourse, assuming that it is impossible

to ban translation from discourse about translation and translating. “Translation description is translational ‘in a very real if special sense’ in the same way as the ‘critical essay’ is” (Bakker – Naaijken, 1991, 205).

THE NATURE OF TRANSLATION

The second part of *Translated!* deals essentially with the nature of translation and belongs to the collective memory of any Dutch translation scholar and student. Of course Holmes reflected on the nature of translation studies in relation to its object, the phenomenon of translating and translation. In part 1 he formulates his objections and disappointments, his wishes and his dreams; in part 2 (1994, 65–111) he shows himself to be part of a larger community of thinkers and practitioners decking out a discipline that should in fact have existed long before – it should already have been obvious that translation and translation studies are central to all humanities, and literary and linguistic studies – especially in multilingual and ever more multicultural Europe. In part 1 Holmes proved his scholarly nature via translation, which led, in the Low Countries at least, to the canonization of what we call the “cross of Holmes” and the “fan of Holmes”. It was an effort to objectify methods and techniques. In all his papers, James S. Holmes kept hammering home a systematic approach to translating and translation studies, while at the same time pointing to the insufficiency of the respective operations and analyses. He coined enduring metaphors for both translation process and its description – like fans and crosses – and at the same time converted the accompanying fuzziness into clarifying diagrams and scientific formulas. Holmes duly took into account that both translators and translation scholars may very likely discover blank spaces in their own “maps” (89). And he deliberately did not exclude himself from this assessment. When trying to position Holmes in the contemporary landscape of translation studies, one can’t say that the terrain he mapped out lost all its virgin territory: there are still white spaces with lions roaming about, and that is a good thing. Holmes was constantly aware of the discrepancies between theory and practice when he was developing the theory to escape the lions he met as a translator, with which we arrive at the crucial point: the position of applied translation studies, which is allotted a marginal place in Holmes’s diagram of translation studies. Why is that so?

In this respect, too, Holmes’s observations are a product of their time, as became apparent notably in the important contribution of Gideon Toury at the Holmes Symposium in Amsterdam in 1990. As far as I know, it was the first time Toury, who speaks with great respect about his friend James S. Holmes, had put forward the idea that the aim of translation studies should be to formulate laws with which to predict translation phenomena; for this a purely descriptive study of translation is needed which can then take the next step, to go beyond itself and reach the utmost degree of “scientificness” so to speak. Toury’s great regard for the “pioneering paper” (1991, 80) *The Name and Nature of Translation Studies* is accompanied by criticism – he considers the paper “more a desideratum than a reality” and “a ‘flat’ representation of the discipline” (180). The focal point and pivot for Toury – 18 years after Holmes presented his map of translation studies – are descriptive translation studies and

the array of interdependencies between product-, process- and function-oriented research. Toury's approach has been of immense influence in translation studies in the past 25 years. Interesting in the present context are Toury's remarks on what he calls "translation studies proper" (187); he claims that "applied translation studies [...] stand with at least one foot out [side] of the domain of translation studies proper" (87). His arguments are concentrated in the last two pages of the essay, where he also cites the advantages of theory, which isn't concerned in "chang [ing] the 'world'", but which certainly "can be projected onto the applied extensions of the discipline":

For once a law has been formulated, with all its ramifications, it can be passed on as a piece of knowledge. From that point on one can learn, even be taught how to *behave*; not only *in accord* with it (which is what one tends to do anyway, otherwise it would hardly have emerged as a law), but also *contrary* to its dictates (190).

In 1990, I remember, I took these statements as an appeal to keep well clear of application. Now, I see also the openings they bring. Toury himself points to the fact that the relations between translation studies and the applied extensions of the discipline "are of a slightly different nature from all previous ones" (190). The key is in the last sentence:

For, in order to be brought to bear on an applied extension, studies and/or their theoretical implications must be sifted through a filter, or transmitted through appropriate "bridging rules". These may well be different for each type of application, and, at any rate, they no longer draw solely on translation studies, as indicated by an additional set of arrows coming from without and pointing towards the various extensions (190).

The essay ends with a colon and a map with rather mysterious pointing arrows. From where do they point; in which direction do they point? The arrows pointing from theory and descriptive translation studies towards applied are clear and fully understandable, certainly with regard to translation criticism; the arrows pointing from outside towards "training", "translation aids" and "translation criticism" are not so understandable, unless they come from what Toury puts between brackets: "the world". Today I would like to understand this openness as a step towards Holmes's position, despite the felt theoretical necessity to formulate laws that should secure the discipline. In my view, the wind of change that needs to keep blowing through translation studies should arise from the translations themselves, translations as phenomena that function, more likely, contradictory to laws; the wind of change also arises from the translators, who strive for uniqueness and deviance rather than for regularity – translators, too, who are fully aware of the fact that they are just a tiny cogwheel in a larger system or poly-system, in which they function in a "world" that demolishes their identity or singularity. The rise of translation sociology, with its great attention to context and contextualization, in the past decades of translation studies has invited the world in and stretched the boundaries of "translation studies proper", in a fruitful way, I believe. Moreover, the greater attention to translation history in various countries (France, Low Countries, Great Britain) has put translating, the translation and translatorship into perspective, which indicates that the discipline is maturing – despite all the traditional opposition we still experience. At

the same time, the fact that observations are time-dependent, the relativity of the object, and the awareness of the inherently translational nature of translation studies could lead to a reevaluation of applied translation studies – of translation criticism for example, which in my view deserves a more central place in the discipline, but also of translation didactics, especially when defined in the broader sense: as the branch in which knowledge, expertise and know-how are passed on or transferred. Yes, translation policy – in some versions of Holmes’s diagram part of the applied branch – and “research” are two different things. But research into translation policies has a central place in translation sociology, certainly in the case of researchers like Johan Heilbron and more recently Thomas Franssen in the Low Countries, although they may not regard themselves as applied researchers, however extensive one’s knowledge about translating and translation has to be to get a full grasp of translation policy. Still, it is in translation policy that the cross-fertilization between description and influencing behaviour (interpretation, selection, control etc. of translations and their quality) is optimally visible and examinable.

Below I will describe the current developments in TS in the Low Countries, which is strongly descriptive and functional in Flanders and more applied in character in the Netherlands. However, the Low Countries cooperate closely, so who knows what offspring this will lead to in the coming years. Since Holmes set it up in 1970, the series *Approaches to Translation Studies* has been edited by Belgian and Dutch researchers; so far 44 volumes have appeared, mostly by exponents of descriptive translation studies. But still, descriptive and applied translation studies meet here.

A CASE FOR COMPETENCIES

In 1997, the Institute for Translation Studies of the University of Amsterdam was actually closed down. Continuity in Dutch translation research and training was realized by the University of Utrecht, which developed a “specialized” program in the pre-Bologna programmes in modern languages. In the Bologna-era this specialized programme became a master’s programme in translation studies. In 2013 a two-year master’s program in literary translation was set up transnationally by the universities of Leuven and Utrecht. The two universities developed a Centre of Expertise of Literary Translation set up in 2001, in which academic expertise was combined with the expertise and support of the Dutch Language Foundation and the Flemish and Dutch foundations of literature – the goal of the centre was the training and professionalization of postgraduates and other young professionals in order to guarantee new generations of translators from and into Dutch (it co-operates among others with foreign institutes for the Dutch language, e. g. the one at the Comenius University of Bratislava).

For the operations the Centre initiated, there had to come a measurable idea on the competencies needed and the levels to be reached, which is why a so-called Framework of Reference for Literary Translation was developed (Naaijkens et al. 2016). It is based both on findings from descriptive translation studies and on ideas brought forward by a group of professional translators. In Holmes’s line of thinking, this practice-based research had two pillars: one in translation studies proper and

one in the applied branch (and maybe also a third pillar in what he called “the world” of what Toury sees embodied in the “one foot out”). In *Translated!* Holmes sums up some competencies:

In order to create a verbal object of the metapoetic kind, one must perform some (but not all) of the functions of a critic, some (but not all) of the functions of a poet, and some functions not normally required of either critic or poet. Like the critic, the metapoet will strive to comprehend as thoroughly as possible the many features of the original poem, against the setting of the poet’s other writings, the literary traditions of the source culture, and the expressive means of the source language. Like the poet, he will strive to exploit his own creative powers, the literary tradition of the target culture, and the expressive means of the target language in order to produce a verbal object that to all appearances is nothing more nor less than a poem. He differs, in other words, from the critic in what he does with the results of his critical analysis, and from the poet in where he derives the materials for his verse (1994, 11).

This “acumen as a critic” and “craftsmanship as a poet” is complemented by Holmes with what he calls the “skill in the analyzing and resolving of a confrontation of norms and conventions across linguistic and cultural barriers” (11). Centred as it were around the main competence of transferring and translating, the Framework of Reference on Literary Translation lists eight competencies as a result of discussions between professional translators and scholars held between 2001 and 2015. I believe that thanks to Holmes, at least in the Netherlands, there has always been an acute awareness among translators of what translation studies “proper” has theorized on the subject of translational norms. This has led sometimes to conflicts, for example the closing of the Institute of Translation Studies at the University of Amsterdam in 1967. Holmes took note of it: “The controversy between scholars and translators has raged furious, particularly in the Low Countries” (109). He considered it the major task of translation trainers “to impart norms to students, for they must acquire the skills to function in today’s society” (109). Knowing the norms is a prerequisite for having the option to break them. So when this framework was developed, this was also an invitation to deviate from the norms described in it:

No one becomes a literary translator overnight, it takes years of schooling and maturation. You have to amass different kinds of knowledge, gain insight, acquaint yourself with methods and techniques, and learn how to apply them. Developing an attitude that enables you to persevere and pursue your ideals is part of the maturation process. Obviously, every career takes a different course – so many translators, so many minds (Naaijken et al. 2016).

The road to becoming a literary translator is capricious and highly varied. Equally varied are the situations in which translators learn their profession and the training models for literary translators, especially in Europe, where long traditions of translation prevail, but where each country has its own educational system. Some translators follow the more or less official road and learn a foreign language and translating from or into it at university. Other translators learn the tricks of the trade elsewhere. Ask any number of literary translators what kinds of knowledge and skills are required to translate a book, and each will give you a different answer. There is one thing, however, that all of them agree on: their profession involves many different skills. Which

skills exactly has never been mapped out systematically, let alone ways in which these skills may be developed or passed on. This is what the PETRA Framework of Reference for the Education and Training of Literary Translators sets out to do (in short: the PETRA Framework, which is an off-shoot of the original Utrecht-Leuven framework, developed in a greater European context with more researchers, professionals and translators' associations and subsidized by the European Commission in the past two years).

The PETRA Framework contains a competence model, a learning line, and implicitly qualification criteria for situations in which competences are to be tested. As a competence model it enumerates the competencies – i. e. knowledge, skills and attitudes – a literary translator should possess in order to be called a competent translator. As a learning line the Framework shows the steps and levels leading to the acquirement of these competencies. The PETRA Framework is based on five levels: a beginner's level, an intermediate level, an advanced level, a professional level and an expert level (in short: LT1 to LT5). Although the stages through which students of translation must pass in order to become professional literary translators may vary from country to country – as well as perhaps the precise competence level required in each of these stages – level LT1 is mostly reached at bachelor's or equivalent level. University programmes, more and more used to explicitly describe competencies in their final attainment levels, might mirror themselves in the levels LT1 and LT2. The professionalization of the literary translator starts at the advanced levels; the framework reveals the philosophy that from LT3 on a literary translator needs further training and education, normally interwoven with the experience she or he is gaining in the professional field. The higher the level, the fewer descriptors: the reason for this being that each level in a way includes the previous levels. At the same time, translators can be in very different levels concurrently (in LT5 for one competence, in LT2 for another competence).

The Framework has had a major impact on the literary translation master's programme as developed over the years in Utrecht and Leuven, which can be considered to be a direct continuation of the academic programme developed by Holmes at the University of Amsterdam. Defining learning goals was necessary for the curriculum, the course work and the professionalization in the postgraduate phase; this implies the development of didactic working forms, forms of assessment and models of feedback. For the master's student achieving all competencies at LT2-level is the main goal, with the main focus on the relationship between translating and the critical reflection on it. Core courses in critical reflection relate to methods and techniques of translation, the theory and practice of LT, translation criticism, and research seminars on translation studies. Translation workshops are focused on translating and textual competence; the secondary focus is professional, evaluative, heuristic, literary-cultural and research. Didactic working formats include individual translation, group translation, translation slams, defences of translation, translation and peer editing, and essay assignments on specific translation problems and possible solutions. The working stages of a translator were defined as belonging to a) the preliminary stage, in which the main task is the making of a translation-oriented text analysis; b) an

operational stage, in which strategies and procedures are applied; and c) an evaluative stage, in which editing and revision takes place. In this last stage, self-assessment and feedback are crucial and impossible without a substantial knowledge of the principles developed by translation studies, especially the descriptive and functional approaches.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

“In many countries [translation criticism is] still quite uninfluenced by developments within the field of translation studies,” says Holmes in *Translated!* (1994, 78). He continues:

Doubtless the activities of translation interpretation and evaluation will always elude the grasp of objective analysis to some extent, and so continue to reflect the intuitive, impressionist attitudes and stances of the critic. But closer contact between translation scholars and translation critics could do a great deal to reduce the intuitive element to a more acceptable level (78).

This is too modest, I think, an acceptable level of intuitivity is not taken for granted in the Low Countries – most evidently in the magazine for translation and translation studies *Filter* that was started in the Netherlands in 1994 and is still very alive and kicking. Perhaps the best way to situate *Filter* in the landscape of translation studies is by reading its manifesto in the first edition:

The estate of the French author Raymond Roussel (1877–1933) contained a design for a veritable translation machine, working on the basis of the new synthetic fibre babelite, a material with unmistakable filtering qualities. Translation as filter, the filter of the translation: in his own way Roussel makes some of this visible. And making translation visible is what *Filter* wishes to do. If that is the aim of our journal, to increase the visibility of translation, then there is also an editorial principle: translation can make things visible. Translation is not neutral. Where there is a filter, there is no complete solution. There is resistance, there is coloring, there is a residue. [...] And however individual the filter can be, the choices of the translator are always made at the crossroads of the self and the other, the domestic and the foreign, the source and the target, of present and past, and touch directly on issues of cultural identity. By placing translation in the area of tension between rules/laws and freedom, the editors of this journal are interested foremost in a form of debate that stimulates reflection of such issues (Bakker – Naaijken 1994, 2).

Up until this day *Filter* makes visible the confrontation and interaction between translation studies and translation practice. The work of the translator cannot be brought to light only in the detached and objectifying story of research, in the comparison and qualification. The translator's choice, the weighing of options, the reasons for a decision can also be manifest in actu, in the act itself.

“No matter how hard he may try, not even the optimum translation can ever fully and entirely match its original, ever be more than a map of it. The territory remains, though it must not remain terra incognita” (Holmes 1994, 64) – would Holmes's legacy be reduced to what he has to say about the translator, this would be too dispiriting, too negative, and at odds with the idea that metafans can unfold themselves around a translation too. In his testament “in memory of Anton Popovič” – a sort of

goodbye to translation studies – Holmes speaks of translation studies as a “panorama of many shadows”, and the shadows: they are deep” (103–104). Now, 25 years later, some of the so-called “virgin territory” is being explored in some way. Holmes mentions three things (79): the history of translation theory, the history of translation description, and the history of applied translation studies; the latter however, in my opinion too much not done – in both senses of the word. The key to understanding James S. Holmes is his famous line “the nature of the product cannot be understood without a comprehension of the nature of the process” (81). That is why translating and working with translations should be “part and parcel of the scholar’s terrain” and not be reduced to some sort of “tools in the service of some other, higher scholarly goal” (105). I don’t agree with all Holmes’s final theses on the future of translation studies written down in 1978, but I certainly do subscribe to his view that theories “without recourse to actual translated texts-in-function” are weak and naive, and that cooperation between scholars and translators is necessary; in general, all the involvement of practising translators in our discipline. It remains interesting to look at translators, who in the eyes of James Holmes, too, are “also human beings, despite all their efforts to function as clear-glass windows which the bright sun of the author’s text can shine through undistorted. And that fast gives rise to the question: to what extent are the texts they have translated unwitting records of their own motives, desires, and frustrations?” (27). After all these years, for me that is a highly interesting question.

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Translation. Translation studies. Poetry translation. Translation criticism. Translation didactics.

In all his papers, James S. Holmes kept hammering home a systematic approach to translating and translation studies, while at the same time pointing to the insufficiency of the respective operations and analyses. He coined enduring metaphors for both translation processes and the description thereof – like fans and crosses – but at the same time converted the accompanying vagueness into clarifying diagrams and scientific terms. Holmes duly took into account that both translators and translation scholars “may very likely discover blank spaces” in their own “maps”. And he deliberately did not exclude himself from this assessment. In my contribution, I sketch Holmes’s position in the contemporary landscape of translation studies, both the land he mapped out and in the land that remained virgin territory.

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