

Moving Beyond: The Translator as Poet

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Abstract

This paper explores the movement between “the Self” and “the Other” in translation, that involves discovering and determining implicit meanings. In the process of moving beyond, the (sometimes self-proclaimed) identity of the translator may affect the perception and translation of the Other. The present case study investigates the influence of the self-proclaimed identity of a poet by Dutch Sinologist Henri Borel (1869-1933) who translated Chinese literature into Dutch and wrote prolifically on China. His poethood is primarily rooted in European Romanticism, as he makes mention of reading the works of Romantic writers in his letters and diaries. At the same time, there is also evidence of influence of Chinese poetics, as Borel quotes Chinese poets to explain the status of poets in China. He claims that Chinese culture cannot be understood by mere intellect only, but that intuition and spiritual insight were essential too. He believed that as a poet, he could understand the implicit meanings that many other writers/translators were unable to discover. As the findings show: the self-image of the translator as a poet affects the movement from Self to Other and results in the visibility of the translator. Ultimately, this paper will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the influence of the translator’s identity on the movement beyond, as well as the image of China in the perception of the reader.

Keywords: Cultural translation, identity of translator, Chinese poetics

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Introduction

When translating between two cultures, the translator is moving between “the Self” and “the Other.” With knowledge of both the source and target cultures, he/she will discover and determine implicit meanings of the text. In order to do so, the translator’s activity “transcends the closed circularity of mere imitation towards the opening and expansion of the cultural field,” as Ovidio Carbonell writes (93-94). Translation is not merely a linguistic rendering of the source text: it involves negotiations that take place in the so-called third cultural space. Here, I will investigate how much influence the identity of the translator has on this process of negotiation.

In the words of Michaela Wolf, “the cultural Other is not verbalized directly but only indirectly, and filtered and arranged through the ethnographer’s or the translator’s consciousness” (181). In the present study, this means looking at how the cultural Other, here China, is filtered and arranged through the translator’s consciousness, here, that of the poet Henri Borel (1869-1933). Borel, a Dutch sinologist, translated Chinese literature into Dutch and wrote prolifically on China. In his view, an understanding of China required intuition and spiritual insight, and he criticized Western scholars who wrote about China in a merely intellectual way. He claimed that as a poet, he had a naturally superior understanding of China, because in his view China’s language, philosophy, literature and even culture could not be understood without a sense of rhythm and music (1916: 126).¹ He further thought that: “The true history of China’s high culture is in its paintings, poetry and ceramics” (1916: 127). One example of this is found in his assertion that Beijing’s splendors “were not built by mere scholars but by artists. These artists were at the same time philosophers: and the mysticism symbolized in these splendors escapes most sinologists. But it speaks in intimate terms to the poet, who understands it as the simple language of his father” (1912: 263).

Thus, in the movement between (him-) Self and the (Chinese) Other it

¹ English translations of Dutch quotes are mine, unless otherwise indicated. Borel capitalizes certain words for emphasis; this is not normal usage in Dutch, but I have retained this in English to convey his style of writing.

was Borel's poethood that helped him to go beyond the superficial meaning, or in the words of Edward Said, "he felt himself to be a representative Westerner who had gotten beneath the films of obscurity" (223). To discover what influence this had on his representation of China and its reception, I will first establish a definition of poethood in section I, "Poethood." I will go into Borel's background in European Romanticism, which was later influenced by Chinese and Buddhist poetics. Section II, "Poetic Translation," probes into Borel's poetic approach to interpreting Chinese culture and literature. Examples of this approach, including the selection of works, translation strategy and writing style, demonstrate how this self-proclaimed poethood is reflected in his work. Finally, I will show how in reception his writing (style) cast doubt on the veracity of his image of China, as reflected both in negative and positive reviews. In the conclusion, this study shows that the self-image of the translator as poet affects the movement from Self to Other. The belief of the translator in being a poet causes him to move beyond words and convey this to the reader.

I: Poethood

The image that Borel had of himself was that of a poet, someone searching for a way to "transcend humanity." As he wrote in his autobiographical essay "Karma," from the collection *Karma* published in 1923:

Nearby lived a poet who had travelled a lot in the East and he would sometimes come to our place to play the piano. He would always play Bach because he could not play anything else anymore, so he said. If you get old, he explained, you can no longer play Chopin or Schumann, and Schubert, not even Beethoven, the Great, but you play Bach because it is way above everything else and leaves everything behind, it rises out above all deeply human into the realm of divine harmony. (9)

Borel's self-proclaimed identity as poet is based on Romantic ideas of poetry and poethood. This can be traced back to the period when Borel was studying Hokkien Chinese in Leiden (1888-1892) and Xiamen (1892-1894) in preparation for his post as Chinese interpreter in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia). Hokkien was the most spoken language among the Chinese there. Diary entries show that he was reading a variety of works by Dutch, German, French and English authors, many of which are now regarded as part of the Romantic Movement. For example, in his diary entry for 9 January 1892, Borel gives a description of his room, and lists the writers that he is reading, including English poets Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), John Milton (1608-1674) and John Keats (1795-1821), Dutch writers Frederik Willem van Eeden (1860-1932) and Herman Gorter (1864-1927), French writers Paul-Marie Verlaine (1844-1896) and Gustav Flaubert (1821-1880), and German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Among these, Keats and Shelley are well-known Romantics. Romanticism, rooted in the German *Sturm und Drang* movement, was a reaction against Enlightenment in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century. In general, Romantic writing emphasized imagination and emotion, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature. A tendency in this direction can be detected in Borel's works, and not only in his own literary works but also in his translations and writing on and from China.

The fact that Borel sets the well-known French Romantic Victor Hugo (1802-1885) above his countryman Verlaine, a poet associated with the Symbolist movement, is a strong indication of Borel's own Romantic tendency. He quotes a line from one of Hugo's poems in his diary entry of 6 April 1894, while he was studying in China:

Read something magnificent. Victor Hugo's *The Legend of the Ages* [La légende des siècles] "An immense goodness fell from the sky!" Is it not a sublime line? Such a giant, Victor Hugo. Such a Good one. Verlaine seems smaller in comparison. Verlaine has something that I cannot stand. That damned coquettishness, that posing. It is not a sign of a great poet. (Borel Archives,

Literary Museum in The Hague, The Netherlands)

The poem that Borel is quoting from is “Booz endormi,” or “Boaz Asleep,” which according to *A Victor Hugo Encyclopedia*, “may be considered one of the happiest lyrics of Romanticism” (Frey 35). This poem is included in the mythical and legendary section of *The Legend of the Ages* and is considered a true French epic. The poem “Boaz Asleep” was inspired by the biblical *Book of Ruth*, and highlights the advent of Jesus Christ as one of the most important figures in human myth or history, born into the House of David which issues forth from the union of the elderly Boaz and his relative, the young widow Ruth (Frey 35).

The core of Borel’s views on poetry and his budding poethood is rooted in European Romanticism, and is complemented by poetics he encounters in Buddhist and Chinese works in the early 1890s. Borel is seeking definitions of “poethood” as a letter to Frederik van Eeden shows. Borel writes his friend on 9 April 1893 about how fascinated he is by the idea of the deified status of poet in the Hindu scripture the Rig Veda and he quotes relevant phrases from Samuel Johnson’s *Oriental Religions and their relation to Universal Religion—India*:

So beautiful what is written of poets in the Rig Veda “Their hymns are ‘of kin to the god, and attract this heart; for Agni is himself a poet.’ The ‘thoughtful gods produce these hymns.’ The rishis ‘prepare the hymn with the heart, the mind, and the understanding.’ They ‘fashion it as a skillful workman a car;’ ‘adorn it as a beautiful garment, as a bride for her husband.’ They ‘generate it from the soul as rain is born from a cloud;’ ‘send it forth from the soul, as wind drives the cloud;’ ‘launch it with praises, as a ship on the sea.’” (Borel, *Special Collection*, UVA; Johnson 104)

The fragments that Borel cites pertain to the idea that poems come forth naturally from within the poet. Since Agni is a Hindu deity and rishis are

saints, the poet's image too, is that of one who transcends humanity. Both the idea of poetry from the soul as well as the analogy with nature can be found in Romanticism. Compare for instance what Seamus Perry writes about how the "stress on the 'interior' also grew more important as a specific characteristic of the 'Romantic'" (7). This entailed an emphasis on private thoughts coming from within the writer, which were often given in first-person narration.

Moreover, the return to a certain form of naturalism is also characteristic of Romanticism. In addition to the Rig Veda, Borel also found this in Chinese poetics, as he shows in his "Wu Wei: a Study Based on Laozi's Philosophy" [Wu Wei: een studie naar aanleiding van Lao Tsz's filosofie], first published in the literary journal *The Guide* [De Gids] in 1895. Criticized for its non-scholarly nature, Borel later changed the title of this work into "Wu Wei: a Fantasy based on Lao Tsz's Philosophy" [Wu Wei: een fantazie naar aanleiding van Lao Tsz's filosofie] when reprinted in his *Wisdom and Beauty from China* [Wijsheid en Schoonheid uit China].

The story is a first-person narration which consists of dialogues to explain the concepts of "wu wei" 無為, or non-action, and "Dao" 道 or Way. The translated key phrases from the original works of *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Daodejing* 道德經 weave the story around them and help reinforce the point Borel is making in the dialogues between the narrator and the old sage Laozi. In this work, Borel cites the preface by Wang Yaoqu 王堯衢 (fl. eighteenth century) to *Gutangshi hejie* 古唐詩合解, or *Combined Explanations of Tang Poetry*, published in 1732. Borel quotes Wang's discussion of the way any sound in nature is caused by movement:

試聽山間石上，流泉觸之，其聲高低斷續，不諧音律，自成節奏，此又天地自然之聲由動而作者也。夫人心至虛至靈，由心而動，出而成聲，莫不極奇極變，以成文章。詩也者，心之聲也。

Listen to the water that flows over rocks in the mountains. As

soon as it is set into motion, its sound will respond—high or low, short or long—not (exactly) in accordance with the rules of music, but it forms a rhythm naturally. This is the Natural Sound of Heaven and Earth. It is created from motion. When the human heart is most empty, and most spiritual, and it is set in motion, then there will be Sound. Isn't this [a] wonderful and highly variable [way], to create Literature? Oh, Poetry is the Sound of the Heart! (1895: 415)

The meaning of these ideas of sound, music, and rhythm in poetry is similar to that in European Romanticism. Borel evidently found this very important; earlier he used the same quotation in an article on Chinese poetry that he was preparing for publication in *T'oung Pao*, a leading journal of sinology, which was founded in 1890 by French scholar Henri Cordier (1849-1925) and Gustav Schlegel (1840-1903). The latter, however, disagreed with Borel about (the interpretation of) Chinese poetics. Borel took offense at this, as is shown in his letter of 7 May 1894 to van Eeden:

Therefore “Oh! Poetry is the sound (music) of the heart” is exactly translated from the simplicity of the Chinese. This was ridiculous, said Schlegel. Sound of the heart is nonsense. It should be “*What makes poetry to poetry is that it is the echo (!!!) of our feelings*” which is not there in Chinese, because the character for feelings is different than that of heart and echo is completely different from sound. The Chinese literati were astonished when I mentioned this translation. I wrote to Schlegel about it and he replied: the Chinese know nothing about it.² (*Special Collection*, UVA library)

Here are two opposite views of poetry and translation. In Borel's view the sentence 詩也者，心之聲也 can be translated directly from the Chinese.

² Words italicized were in English in the original.

Schlegel, however, disagrees and his version contains an explanation. As a result the article was never published and in afore-mentioned letter, Borel claims he gave up on scholars such as Schlegel, whom he says he admires for his “genius as an intellectual, but [who is] a zero in higher things, and a rhetorician” (*Special Collection*, UVA library). Borel refrained from writing further scholarly articles.³

Yet, the use of both Western and Chinese ideas to interpret and understand poethood and poetry is in conflict with the fact that Borel is a poet who composed very few poems. The only examples of his verse I have found are from his early career and were published in the literary magazines *Now and Later* [Van nu en straks] in 1893 and *The Guide* in 1894. Borel also translated very few poems from Chinese into Dutch, because in his view Chinese poetry is untranslatable. According to the review “Henri Borel on Chinese Poetry” [Henri Borel over Chineesche poëzie] in the newspaper *The Fatherland* [Het Vaderland] about a talk Borel gave, he explained as follows:

Chinese characters are ideograms (pictures), they are not written but “drawn with a brush” (painting), have different pronunciations (sound), lack links in Chinese (which have to be added in translation), [and] use parallelism (which is lost in translation). The Chinese poet is poet, painter and philosopher. (. . .) A Chinese poem is never of a descriptive or explanatory nature; it is extremely suggestive. Often what is not there is more important than what is. An Englishman characterized this in the words “*Express is non-expression* [sic].”⁴ (*The Fatherland*, 18 Feb. 1930)

Actually, the claim that Chinese poetry is unique and dense is ambiguous, for Borel says the same of poetry in general, but it ties in with his translation

³ To date I have found a single scholarly article by Borel in *T'oung Pao*: “Chinese Oath of Friendship” [Serment d'Amitié Chinois], published in 1893, which he wrote in French.

⁴ Words italicized were in English in the original.

strategy, as I will show below in section II. To explain the core of poetry, Borel quotes the poet and scholar Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), who also published on Asia, including Japanese art and Persian painting. Borel cites in English in his essay “Explaining Poetry” [Uitleggen van poëzie]:

Not till the poet discovers his rhythm is he able to express his meaning. It is not a question of sound only, any more than painting is a question of line and color only. To attempt to make an abstraction of these qualities is a fatal mistake; it cannot in reality be done. The power of rhythm is such that not only sounds and forms and colors, but the meaning associated with them becomes different, takes up a new life, or rather yields up their full potentiality of life fused into radiance and warmth as by an inner fire. (The Fatherland, 9 Dec. 1928)

But the pursuit of similar ideas in Chinese and Western poetics underscores the importance that Borel attaches to poethood. Ultimately, Borel explains in the same essay that:

Most important in poetry (and all art) is not a logical thought, which can be explained, but the rhythmic vitality of the poem itself and it is impossible to demonstrate this intellectually.

All poetry contains a kinetic element and a potential element of language, as Ransom has rightly written; the kinetic can be explained if necessary, the potential cannot. (*The Fatherland*, 9 Dec. 1928)

In quoting John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) on the kinetic element in poetry, Borel appears to be saying that as a poem moves from the poet to the reader it takes up a new life. The poem originally composed by the poet who gave it rhythm and sound may or may not be understood or perceived in the same way by the reader. This movement can be explained and understood, but

linguistic perception depends on the reader.

II: Poetic Translation

In a similar way in translation, the movements from Self to Other have an impact on the representation of the foreign culture. In the current study, it appears that Borel's interpretation and representation of Chinese literature and culture is poetic, hence the term "poetic translation." A poetic approach can be seen in Borel's choice of texts, and in his writing and translation style. In the same way as Wolf puts it: China is verbalized indirectly through Borel's consciousness as a poet.

In terms of selection, the majority of the works Borel translates are philosophical and literary texts. An example is his selection of five stories for Dutch translation from the *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 known as *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. Out of the nearly five hundred short stories in the classical language and brief notes on unusual matters that the work written by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) contains, Borel only chose stories about romantic relationships and supernatural elements. None of the stories that he translated display the violence and horrors that some of the other stories of *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* contain.

An early example of poetic translation is a poem from the *Jingu Qiguan* 今古奇觀, or *Wonders Old and New* which Borel copied into his diary on 23 March 1892. The anthology *Wonders Old and New* contains forty novellas, published in Suzhou in 1624. Schlegel used them as texts for teaching Chinese. In Schlegel's view the students would learn more about Chinese culture from these stories. While the collection was thought to be anonymous back then, the authors have later been identified as Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1645) and Ling Mengchu 凌蒙初 (1580-1644). The poem is from the novella *Du Shiniang nu chen baibaoxiang* 杜十娘怒沉百寶箱 or "Du Shiniang sinks her jewel box in anger." Du Shiniang is a courtesan who falls in love with one of her customers. The pair marry, but for fear of his father Du's new husband succumbs to another man's offer to buy

her. When Du hears about the deal, she jumps into a river, clinging to her jewel box as she drowns. As Borel explains in his diary, the poem is about a good, beautiful girl led by fate on the wrong path:

渾身雅艷，遍體嬌香。兩彎眉畫遠山青，一對眼明秋水潤。
臉如蓮萼，分明卓氏文君；唇似櫻桃，何減白家樊素。可憐
一片無瑕玉，誤落風塵花柳中。

Haar geheel lichaam was bevallig en schoon. [Her entire body was graceful and charming]

Haar geheel lichaam was liefelijk en geurig. [Her entire body was lovely and fragrant]

Haar gebogen wenkbrauwen waren als de verre omtrekken van blauwe bergen. [Her curved eyebrows were like the distant contour of the blue mountains]

Hare oogen waren helder en zacht als het water in den herfst. [Her eyes were bright and soft like the water in autumn]

Hare wangen waren als de kelk van den lotus. [Her cheeks were like the calyx of the lotus]

Hare lippen waren als roode kersen. [Her lips were like red cherries]

Hoe treurig dat zulk een vlekkelooze edelsteen bij toeval was gekomen in wind en stof! [How sad that such an immaculate gem happened to end up in wind and dust!] (Borel Archives, Literary Museum, The Hague)

By opting to stay close to the form of the original poem, the translator retains elements of suggestiveness. The images of “curved brows” and “cheeks like the calyx of the lotus” provide examples of literal renderings. The final sentence is difficult to understand; even if the reader knows that this perfect gem is the girl, what does “wind and dust” mean? But then again, Borel did explain the gist of the poem. Compare Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang’s English rendering of the poem in *Stories to Caution the World* by Feng

Menglong, where the translators add or delete words for added fluency (548):

Her body full of grace and charm,
Her skin soft and fragrant,
Her brows the color and shape of distant hills,
Her eyes as limpid as autumn water,
Her cheeks as lovely as lotus petals,
[She was the very image of Zhuo Wenjun.]
Her lips the shape of a cherry,
[She was a veritable Fan Su.]
How sad that such a piece of flawless jade
Has fallen by misfortune into the world of lust!

For “curved brows,” Yang and Yang have omitted “curved” for *wan* 彎 and just translate *mei* 眉 in “brows.” For “her cheeks were like the calyx of the lotus,” Yang and Yang have added “as lovely as” in “her cheeks as lovely as lotus petals.” In the last line they have replaced “wind and dust” with “the world of lust” to aid the reader’s understanding. (There is a discrepancy in the number of lines: lines 6 and 8 are missing in Borel’s translation, possibly caused by a different edition of the original.)

Above examples of Borel’s translation are evidence of his poetic approach. The way Borel attempts to retain the form of the original is similar to what Bassnett calls “deliberately obscure” in the case of William Morris’ translations:

[n]o concessions are made to the reader, who is expected to deal with the work on its own terms, meeting head-on, through the strangeness of the TL, the foreignness of the society that originally produced the text. (76)

In the current study, this approach is expressed in staying close to the source text and introducing Chinese concepts. Borel believed in the notion of untranslatability. As Bassnette argues, this led on to the exaggerated

emphasis of technical accuracy and resulting pedantry. The assumption that meaning lies below and between language created an impasse for the translator and there were only two ways out of the predicament: (1) use of literal translation concentrating on the immediate language of the message and (2) the use of an artificial language somewhere in between the SL text where the special feeling of the original may be conveyed through strangeness (75).

In the case of Borel, he tries to give a literal rendering in order to retain the original meaning and intention of the source text. At times he does give some explanation in paratexts, but his aim is that readers perceive the text as it is. This differs from the approach of other translators in his time, such as that of the Scottish missionary and sinologist James Legge (1815-1897). For example, in a passage from Book IV: 24-25 of the *Lunyu* 論語, or *Analects*, Legge adds words and meaning in English which are not there in Chinese. Borel's version is a more direct rendering from the ST but expects the reader to fill in the gaps (as in poetry). I demonstrate this in my example below, juxtaposing the Chinese (ST), Borel's Dutch rendering (TT1), and Legge's English (TT2), and for comparison, the English version by D. C. Lau (TT3):

ST: 子曰：君子欲訥於言而敏於行。子曰：德不孤，必有鄰。

TT1: *De Meester zeide: "De junzi wil langzaam-voorzichtig zijn in zijne woorden en vlug-prompt in zijne daden." De Meester zeide: "De deugd is niet alleen, maar heeft stellig burenen."* [The Master said: "The *junzi* wants to be slow-careful in his words and fast-prompt in his actions." The Master said: "Virtue is not alone, but is bound to have neighbors."]⁵ (1896: 114)

TT2: The Master said: "The superior man wishes to be slow in

⁵ Note by Borel: *De bedoeling is: "de deugd trekt de deugd aan, en een deugdzaam mensch zal spoedig andere deugdzamen tot vrienden hebben."* [The meaning here is that "virtue attracts virtue, and a virtuous person will soon have friends who are virtuous too."]

his speech and earnest in his conduct.” The Master said: “Virtue is not left to stand alone. *He who practices it* will have neighbours.” (1861, 1893: 172)

TT3: The Master said: “It is desirable for a gentleman to be slow of speech but quick in action.” The Master said: “Virtue never stands alone. It is bound to have neighbours.” (1979: 35)

The strangeness of the concepts requires input from the reader. This manifests itself in different ways. First, Borel retains *junzi* (literally: Lord’s son) in Romanization, claiming it to be a Chinese concept, for which there is no good equivalent in Western languages, whereas Legge translates *junzi* into superior man (although in other places he also uses “a man of complete virtue”). Secondly, Borel adds a double meaning in the terms “slow-careful” vs “fast-prompt” where Legge has “slow” vs “earnest.” Finally, Borel is faithful to the Chinese in “Virtue is not alone, but must have neighbors,” although he does give an explanation in a note, whereas Legge’s version contains an explanation: “*He who practices it*” (italics in the original indicate that this is an addition by the translator). In comparison, Borel expects more from the reader than Legge who explains more with a tendency to overtranslation, while Lau’s version is accurate and complete, yet still leaves space for the reader.

A poetic approach can also be found in Borel’s travel writing in which he romanticizes and idealizes China. In his *Daybreak in the East* [Het daghet in den Oosten] published in 1910 and the English translation entitled *The New China: A Traveller’s Impressions* in 1911, for example, his romanticized description of Beijing goes beyond the visible. Borel wrote this book following his four month study of Mandarin Chinese in Beijing in 1909. Temples, which had previously been depicted by other (travel) writers as dilapidated and dirty, are in Borel’s words presented as mysterious and beautiful places of worship, and the walls of the Forbidden City exude imperial power. Here temples and walls are as it were “filtered and arranged” through Borel’s consciousness. The discovery of hidden meaning in Chinese

culture is evidence of Borel's poetic perception, for in his view his "poetical vision is the only reality" (1911: 263). This reminds one of the words of William Blake in *Vision*: "Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably." (Qtd. in *The Romantic Order* [De romantische orde] by Maarten Doorman 104) The truth of poetry refers to a transcendental reality. Shelley justifies this in his *Defence of Poetry*: "Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed (. . .) All things exist as they are perceived, at least in relation to the percipient" (81-82).

To reinforce his own poethood, Borel also hints at identification with the great Chinese poet Li Bai 李白 (701-762). Borel translated the story "How Li, the Banished Immortal Spirit, While Intoxicated, Wrote the Letter That Frightened the Barbarians" 李謫仙醉草嚇蠻書 from *Wonders Old and New*. His translation entitled "Jingu qiguan: The Poet Li Taibai" [Kin Koe Kh'y Kwan: De dichter Li Th'ai Peh] was included in *Six Stories* [Zes verhalen], a collection of translated short stories published in 1925. Borel selected this story about Li Bai, as he explains in the introduction, because it gives a striking image of Li Bai's talent, his fame and his character. The way Borel introduces the story reveals how he identifies with Li Bai, especially the line:

In the legend about the undecipherable barbarian letter that no one else could translate, some people see a popularized, hidden meaning: poets understand strange things that no one else can. (180)

Borel's statement here shows that he agrees with this idea that poets can discover implicit meanings. Of course, Li Bai has written many poems, whereas Borel wrote or translated but a few. Yet from his ideas on poethood, it appears that Borel believed one does not have to write poems to be a poet. Instead, being a poet means being someone with unique skills or simply a sixth sense.

III: Translator's Visibility

In the process of translation, it shows that Borel played a prominent role: he is engaged in negotiations that take place in the so-called third cultural space. In moving between (him-) Self and the (Chinese) Other, it was his poethood that helped him to go beyond the superficial meaning both in terms of describing Chinese culture as well as translating Chinese literature. Reviews show that Borel's high visibility as a poet in his work can be both pleasing and irritating to readers. In an obituary published in *Newspaper of the (East) Indies* [De Indische Courant] of 5 September 1933, the anonymous writer notes that he was never able to appreciate the writing style of Borel's works, for he found it "too affected, contrived lovely, not masculine enough." Yet, he does acknowledge: "Meanwhile there is another Borel. He is the expert in Chinese language, religion, philosophy and art, and a writer of good books about that." This implies a separation between creative writing, and translations and works on China. This separation perhaps is valid for the literary value of the works, but in my view does not hold in the sense of the translation and writing style because that remains the same for both.

Borel's *Wisdom and Beauty from China* published in 1896 garnered positive and negative reviews. The book is a collection of five essays based on Borel's experience in South China during the years 1892-1894. At the time, Borel had language lessons with an old Chinese scholar every day and also ventured among the Chinese in the city of Xiamen and on the island of Gulangyu. Borel describes his appreciation of the cultural differences, customs and habits in *Wisdom and Beauty from China*. The way Borel writes about his impressions is the result of a poetic vision. The reviewer in *Mirror of the Age* [Tijdspiegel] in 1896, for example, thinks that the book is subjective and lacks any value whatsoever from an ethnographical point of view and makes difficult reading because of its contrived use of language and repeated use of diminutives. He also thinks that Borel's claim that just about everything in China is beautiful makes his writing superficial. Another problem he finds with the work of Borel is his *jeu-de-mots*, or word-play. The reviewer gives an example from a passage on Buddhism:

Therefore there is something absolutely Realistic, without beginning without end, which we don't understand, and therefore means Nothing to us. (*Mirror of the Age* 1896, vol. I: 248)

The reviewer again accuses Borel of being superficial for dismissing things that he does not understand as “non-existent” (248). Considering the influence of the poetic approach on his writing, however, it seems that Borel is deliberately obscure here.

The effect of his poetic approach is also clear in a review of *Wisdom and Beauty from China* published in the literary magazine *Netherlands* [Nederland] in 1896. The reviewer cast doubt on whether the representation of China in *Wisdom and Beauty from China* were true:

It is a pity for people like the Japanese and Chinese that they cannot read what poets and artists such as Loti and Henri Borel say and write about them. Would their own poets think they are as beautiful and important and dream-like poetic and divine-like wise, like these dreamers give us in their lovely language of *Madame Chrysanthème* and *Wisdom and Beauty from China*? (*Netherlands* 1896, Vol I: 493)

Wisdom and Beauty from China is reduced to fiction by this reviewer, put on a par with a novel by the French writer Pierre Loti (1850-1923). Both Borel and Loti write in a poetic manner with similar dreamy descriptions of China and Japan respectively. Yet in spite of their writing styles, both Borel and Loti are still regarded as China/Japan experts for having lived in Asia and having studied the Cultural Other.

Conclusion

With his Romantic translation style, Borel gave a poetic vision of China. In the movement between the Self and the Other to introduce China to

a Dutch audience, his poethood made visible Borel the translator. His poethood is an identity that is projected and reflected in the translations. When reading about China, one would expect the author to bring China to the reader. Yet, in Borel's case, the reader is taken along in the process of this movement of the Self to the Other culture and back, and eventually learns more about Borel than China. However, Borel emphasized that he could not write about China without emotion, and that he did not have the intention to write about China in a scholarly way. This intention may have been symptomatic of the period, for van Eeden wrote the same in the preface (dated July 1904) to the second edition of his novel *The Deeps of Deliverance* [Van de koele meren des doods] claiming that the novel was "not about scientific research but rather about admiration for the beauty of being" (5). This poetic notion brings us back to Romanticism with its emphasis on imagination and emotion. It would be interesting to investigate whether this poetic approach was also prevalent among other authors of the time writing about China, or whether they take a different direction and if so, how that affected the image of China they presented.

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