

HERMENEVS

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„Prometheus” as total theatre

Director's notes, by Erik Vos

*Erik Vos, regisseur van de opvoering van „Prometheus” van Aeschylus tijdens het a.s. Holland Festival, heeft in Amerika dit stuk met zeer veel succes ten tonele gebracht. Indertijd is een artikel van zijn hand verschenen, waaruit wij thans enkele fragmenten overnemen. Een klein gedeelte van de tekst is reeds gepubliceerd — in het Nederlands — in de *Kroniek van kunst en cultuur* (246 jrg. pg. 4-14)*

Drama Without Action

I have recently directed two tragedies of Aeschylus, which were previously unproduced professionally either in Holland or America. For various reasons, both *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound* have been doubtful works with regard to successful realization on stage, despite a general agreement that both are called great works of the Classical Theatre. Even Aristotle appeared uncertain regarding their dramatic value, and based his dramatic theories largely on the works of Sophocles and Euripides.

Today's verdict is the same: the plays are not dramatic. Instead of a slow development of conflict and a constant addition of elements which heighten tension, we experience only the final phase of a conflict. The blade of the guillotine hangs over the head of the protagonist from the first moment, and we wait until it falls.

Thus, *Prometheus* is branded as a drama without action. Is it static drama? Or is it a form of drama that has been misunderstood and hence neglected? Have we not lost the method of staging these plays effectively? In America I was able to examine poems of North

American Indian tribes, poems of exorcism, poems sung with the rain dances, prayer-healing poems. There was a striking resemblance between these poems and the poetry of the early Greeks. It is exciting to see how the American Indians, through dance, song, and rhythmic speech, are able to maintain the same theme through varying forms. They are able to maintain dramatic tension for hours without adding new dramatic elements to the story they enact, suggesting that the poem itself is merely a point of departure for the expanding dramatic experience.

I believe that the Aeschylus' drama is of the same nature. It is devoid of tangible action, the addition of new, conflicting elements. The action of Aeschylus takes place on a more abstract level, indicating the development of an emotion, its intensification and elevation. What is the real situation of Prometheus, and who, or what, does he represent? He embodies the creativity of Man. He has stolen fire from the heavens, given it to helpless and primitive Mankind, and for this Zeus has chained him to a remote mountain. Because of fire, the spark of creativity, Man can begin to develop. With this quality, Man may rise above the level of animal to achieve a conscious existence.

In the play we witness only Prometheus' last hours on earth. In a few moments Zeus will plunge him into the earth because Prometheus refuses to compromise. He cannot be killed because he is immortal, just as Man's creativity is immortal. But like his Christian counterpart, he is also possessed of a humanity that will force him to suffer, pinned to the mountain, just as Christ suffers, nailed to the cross.

The Chorus

What does the chorus represent in this tragedy? A chorus of Oceanides, daughters of the sea, assemble around the rock and remain there until the end. Other figures enter, but disappear again. They are passers-by who have little to do with the actual drama, effecting no change in the fate of the protagonist. Since they perform no visible function, what is their purpose? Again, I believe that the heart of this drama lies beyond ordinary consciousness, and that the structural laws of common drama do not apply here. The keys which fit the drama of action do not fit the drama of „static event” because the action takes place on another level of human experience and is of a totally different nature. The people are not normal people. They are gods, demi-gods, or mythical beings: a virgin changed by Zeus into the form of a cow,

beings who live at the bottom of the sea. The drama of Aeschylus transcends the borders of reality, and the everyday word takes on a different meaning, a new dimension. If one wishes to express this, one must also step beyond daily vocabulary, out of the realm of conversation, in order to enter the domain of the subconscious and ultra-conscious. The chorus gives no commentary on the action (an age-old misunderstanding), but exists as emotion. Since the sea is the only moving force around the rock, Aeschylus uses the elements of the sea to reflect what is occurring in and around Prometheus and to reflect what emotions his suffering evokes from the world of Man.

This world is not physically represented in the play; and yet, it is mainly this world which interests us, since we inhabit it. The chorus translates for two worlds, which actually remain invisible: the distant worlds of Man and gods, between which he is torn.

To effect this translation, Aeschylus uses cinematic methods — long before the existence of the cinema. Through „flashbacks” we see what has taken place before Prometheus’ imprisonment. (Later Sophocles and Euripides inherited this „flashback” technique from Aeschylus). We see what was his self-assurance, his pride, his youthful rebellion, his recklessness. We see projections of future occurrences and what could ultimately lead to a reconciliation between the brute, physical power of Zeus and the self-willed, self-centered strength of Prometheus. An audience can be held, fascinated, not only because it follows intellectually what is happening on stage but also because it is caught up in the waves of emotion which churn on the stage. At one moment the chorus becomes the blood that courses through Prometheus. Through choreography and rhythmic pulses of speech, we can see this flow of blood, away from the heart and back to the heart, renewing its impulses. Now through the voice of theatrical art Prometheus can speak to the blood which pulses in his brain. At another moment the chorus becomes his brain cells. It echoes what Prometheus thinks and feels, consciously and subconsciously. It dances both his longing and contempt for death; it drones his nostalgia, his doubts. It opens and closes as the gills of a fish. It breathes life and stops breathing when Prometheus ceases to exist.

Realisation of the Chorus

In the staging of Prometheus I have tried to make the emotions visible in movement. The rock to which Prometheus is chained, and the

area covered by the Oceanides' -represents now the earth. All movement, then, is an abstraction of an emotion which overwhelms the entire world. Waves of suffering, terror, ecstasy, bewilderment, cover the surface of the earth, echoing a former life and pro-echoing a life yet to come. These movements frequently intermingle, presenting both lives simultaneously. Instead of illustrative gestures commentating on the emotion, I have cried to let the chorus be emotion. The fifteen chorus members may be now used as pigments of color, or tones of a chord that contribute their individual existences to a larger, more abstract existence. This is a primary reason for the use of masks. This power to give visible and audible form to an ;ihsn-i)ct emotion has been largely limited to ballet and music in the modern era. Since the modern theatre has attempted to maintain an illusion of reality, it has neglected a religious theatre which intermingles the worlds of reality, dream, and nightmare. In religious theatre I include most of the works of Genet, Becket, Brecht, and Shakespeare, who use ritual as a major form of dramatic expression.

It is far from easy to give form to the abstraction on stage. The world of the Greeks as well as that of the primitive tribes of Africa and the Ainericas, revolves around the mystery of life and death. Their fire dances, dances for fertility, rain, are primarily an expression of a religious and sacred diameter. How can we in the „civilized” world, with our matter-of-tact way of life, unearth the roots of these primordial longings? If the chorus does not represent reality, and if it is constantly changing from one existence to another, how can we logically effect these changes? How can we avoid being dishonest to our own nature?

Aspects of Language and Translation

There is one facet of translation which I will discuss at length because it concerns me specifically as a director; the musical rhythm of the text, or should I say the aspect of the dramatic structure of the verse.

Let us take as an example the third stasimon of Prometheus. After Io has left Prometheus to continue her wanderings in madness, goaded by Zeus, there is an outburst from the chorus whicli begins with the two words:

Wise, wise . . .

We find an echo of these two words in the parallel line of the Antistrophe:

Never, never . . .

No one will suppose that Aeschylus repeats these words through lack of imagination, or because he could not think of a synonym. „Wise, wise,” and „Never, never,” are emotional explosions emitted by the chorus, born as a violent reaction to the previous scene. These explosions have a dramatic function. It seems as if most of the translators are afraid to maintain this textual structure, which Aeschylus clearly uses purposely. Even the sensitive Vellacott, in his 1963 translation, renders the Third Stasimon as follows:

He was a wise man indeed
Who first weighed this thought in his mind
And gave it utterance in speech . . .

and the Antistrophe:

Oh Fates, who bring all things to fulfillment,
May you never see me sharing the bed of Zeus,
May I never be joined in marriage with any god!

Later, before we began rehearsals for Prometheus with the Stanford Repertory Theatre company, he changed these lines to read:

Wise, wise was the man
Who first weighed this thought in his heart
And gave it utterance in speech . . .

and

Never, never you Fates,
May you find me sharing the bed of Zeus;
May I never be joined in marriage . . .

What makes so many translators so wary of textual structures such as these? Are they afraid of the reader, who might accuse them of being unimaginative, hide-bound to the text?

In the choreography, in the movement, which is both vocal and mimical, Aeschylus' verbal rhythm works as a language phenomenon, having extreme dramatic power. The dramatist Aeschylus uses elements here that are essentially dramatic. The Book of Job is written in this manner, as is the First Book of the Old Testament. To read the Book of Genesis is to experience the sense of supernatural power which created the world. It is astonishing to see the economy and clarity of words and images. There is a master hand at work which unerringly balances the expressed with the unexpressed, the repeated with the elliptical. Again, we encounter not only a literal meaning which attracts the intellect; words take on a physical and rhythmical meaning in their placement, stress and repetition which compels an emotional response.

It is striking to see how later artists such as Bach and Brecht — strange bedfellows — used similar working methods. They married musical and textual elements, each reinforcing the other, achieving finally a stronger dramatic power. Both are artistic strategists, each knowing instinctively the deployment of words in their correct musical formation, and each achieving a strong dramatic thrust from the exact and economic placement of these words. Normally, both Bach and Brecht worked with an historic or religious theme, and both, like Aeschylus, often used a chorus to link the isolated worlds of Prometheus, Jesus or Grusha with the world of the audience. Witness Bach's fascinating line „*Lass ihn kreuzigen*”. Masterfully, he manipulates these few words. Continuously, the word „crucify” erupts in ascending musical lines and is crossed by a similar, descending voice.

Similarly, Brecht uses repetition to capture his audience. In a song from Mahagonny, the chorus sings:

Sehet, Schmidt ist gestorben!
Sehet, welch ein glückseliger,
Sehet, welch ein unersättlicher
Ausdruck auf seinem Gesicht ist . . .

In this case, librettist and composer were not one man; but Brecht, working closely with Kurt Weill, was still able to achieve a unique bond of music and lyrics.

It is exactly the same principle that guides Aeschylus in writing „Wise, wise . . .” and „Never, never . . .” in the third stasimon of Prometheus. The problem confronting us today is that only the written text remains, the choreography and music no longer exist.

Another example from Aeschylus exists in the first stasimon of *The Persians*. The chorus repeats the name „Xerxes” at the beginning of three consecutive lines:

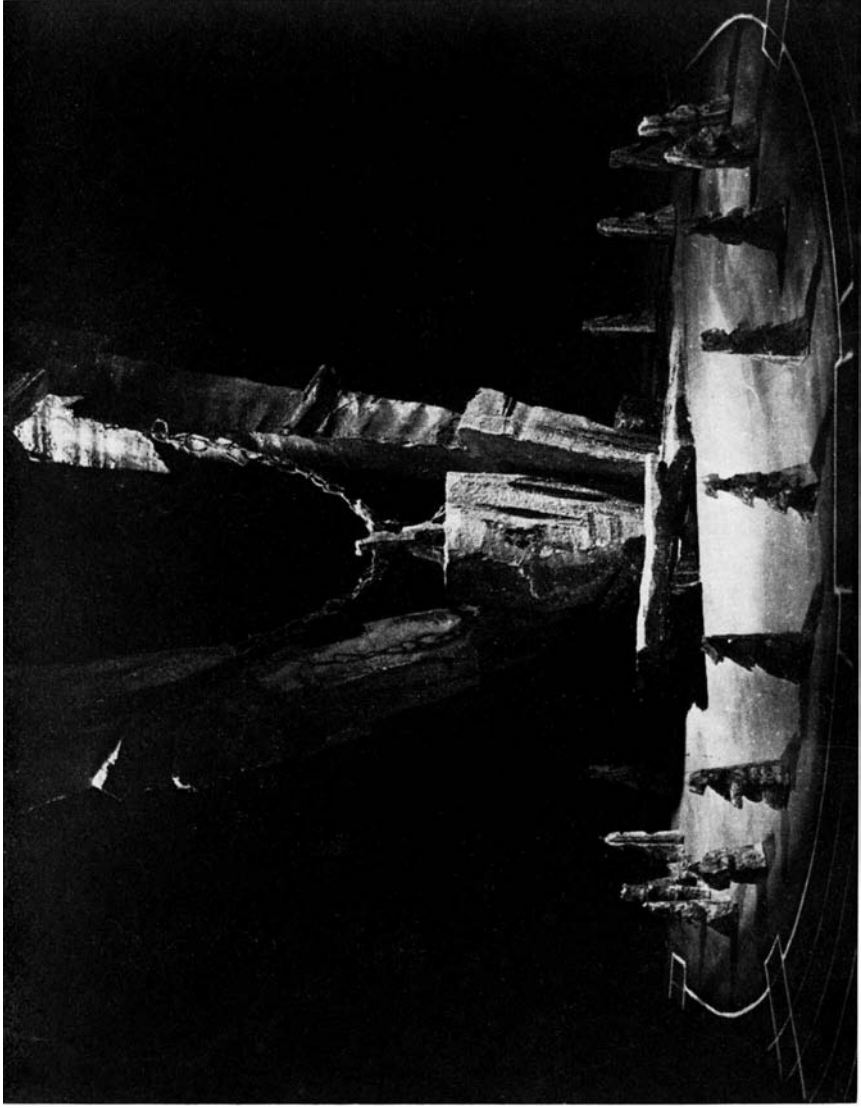
Xerxes ...
Xerxes ...
Xerxes . . .

Naturally he has a specific intention in this: the mere repetition of the name creates in the audience a tension which anticipates a man who has not yet arrived. This tension is even more inescapable because the Antistrophe employs the word „Ships” in the same manner:

Ships ...
Ships ...
Ships . . .

Here is cause and effect. Xerxes, the leader of the army, and the ships that sank in the Greek seas are definitely aligned, not by explanation, but by a similar placement. It is here that Vellacott dilutes the ritual sense of the text by rearranging these key words:

Who led them forth, but Xerxes?
Who sealed their death, but Xerxes?



Maquette van „Prometheus“, in regie van Erik Vos; decor Wim Vesseur

Whose error sent out all to sail in ships,
And lost it all, but Xerxes?

and later:

And ships from home conveyed them,
And ships at last destroyed them - -
Ships, handled by Ionians, beaked with death;

A final example of translators' liberties is found in their abridgement or omission of elements which they feel were important only at the time of original performance, and are no longer of value. It is commonly felt that the Greeks were fond of the lengthy enumeration of locales, gods, and legendary figures. In *The Persians*, the chorus lists the roll of the defeated Persian army. Scholars like to tell us that these were given to delight Greek audiences who would recognize the figures, the war having ended only a few years previous to the writing of the play. It has, they say, the same effect as a similar list of Nazi luminaries subsequent to World War II would have on modern audiences. The result is that not only translators, but also adaptors and, last but not least, directors, often cut large parts of this text. What should a modern audience do with these names which have no meaning for them? This is where the misunderstanding begins. In *The Persians* the intent is not one of historic parade, the gloating of a people over its own victory. What happens here is highly dramatic; Xerxes is flagellated with the names of the people, whom he has thrust into death. Each name is a lash of the scourge with which the wounds of his guilt are reopened. The accumulation of names as a form of flagellation has nothing to do with the recognition of these names by the audience. To the contrary, Aeschylus invented most of the names of the Persian generals, and this proves that the dramatic function could have had the same effect on the Greek audience as it should have on today's.

In *Prometheus* there is a parallel accumulation of names which appear to be there strictly for their own sake. When Prometheus prophesies the journey which Io must take, he describes in extensive detail the countries, rivers, swamps, and tribes that she must pass on her way. I doubt whether these details, *per se*, would have been so much more interesting for a Greek audience than they are for us now. The entire description suggests a static stage picture composed of the immobile Prometheus speaking to the equally still Io and Oceanides as they listen to his prophecy. Here I think Aeschylus, as choreogra-

pher, must have exploited visually the verbal element of his text. It is impossible to believe that an artist of his calibre, living in a time which used sculpture and design to capture the human form in movement, would not try to evoke Io's wanderings in movement.

We must consider the text now as a description of events that are happening on stage and not as a monologue which halts the action. Prometheus is no longer telling the story; he is describing it as it is happening. Cinematically, we would see only Io's journey; Prometheus is present simply as narrator. Io, through Prometheus' prophetic force, no longer listens to the story but begins enacting the story which he describes. The Oceanides also become a part of this journey. They are not limited to act simply in reaction to the story; they become the elements of Io's wanderings, the forces with which she will be confronted. Here, the so-called unities are only seemingly present. The unity of action is momentarily ruptured, and our attention is turned from Prometheus' imprisonment to Io's journey. The unities of time and place exist only at the most realistic level. Actually, time and locale expand to cover the entirety of the journey. Transported through her journey by Prometheus' words, she meets the forces which he describes, and these we see reflected in the chorus. When Prometheus warns her to beware of the nomad Scythians, the Chalybes, or the River Hybristes, the chorus becomes the forces which those elements embody and reject her, or deter her from entering their number. The chorus transforms, taking the form of an enemy body that will repel Io when she attempts to enter. Io will cross rivers and will wade through currents, counterstreams of emotions. She is swept away by the water in the ebb and flow of forces. Finally, she reaches the last edge of land, the city of Canopus, as Prometheus says:

And there at last Zeus shall restore your mind, and come
Upon you, not with terror, with a gentle touch;

The relief which comes at this point comes not only to Io, but also to the chorus, which has been compelled to enact these terrible forces. The audience, through the chorus, has also been actively involved, much more so than if the journey had been merely described by Prometheus.

Number in the Language

Parallel to his pleasure in the usage of words as beats in varying emo-

tional rhythms is Aeschylus' love of employing them in numerical patterns. Prometheus says, in the description of his gifts to Mankind:

Number, the primary science, I
Invented for them . . .

Aeschylus shares Prometheus' point of view, or should we say that he allows Prometheus with his point of view.

The structure of numbers in Aeschylus is sometimes a great help in finding patterns of choreography. It is often possible to make visible on the stage that which is doomed to a dead symbolism on the printed page. It is intriguing, for instance, to see how Aeschylus encloses dramatic units symmetrically, as he does in the scene between Io and Prometheus. Prometheus begins with a four-line speech. Io follows with two lines. Then there is a line-by-line exchange between the two, as in a duel, for seven lines. Io then speaks two lines. This is followed by another seven-line duel. Finally there is a four-line transitional passage by the chorus. The pattern of the construction (hues 609-634) is: 4 – 2 – 7 – 2 – 7 – 4.

This is symmetrical and yet not completely symmetrical. It is in balance in the same manner that the columns of the Parthenon are in balance, never really rigidly symmetrical but always appearing symmetrical. The function of this use of number is to focus the attention of the audience on something exceptional, without its being aware that its attention is being directed. The pattern formed by the Prometheus-Io exchange focuses on Io's monologue, which follows the choral transition and begins:

At night in my own room visions would visit me,
Repeating in seductive words, 'Most blessed maid,
Why live a virgin for so long? Love waits for you —
The greatest: Zeus, inflamed with arrows of desire,
Longs to unite with you in love . . .

The number seven, which Aeschylus often uses structurally, is a dramatic number with „magic” powers. It can never be broken symmetrically ; it is always divided into three, and one. This means that one side will have four lines and the last word in a dialogue battle, as in a tennis game wherein „A” has four volleys, but „B” has only three returns. We find the number seven also in the number of chorus members, which was usually fifteen. This breaks down to half-choruses of seven and one chorus leader. Inside each half-chorus of seven there was again a complete symmetry, three and three, again with the exception

of one. And again, inside the body of three, there is a balance of one and one, with the exception of one.

This asymmetry, or imbalance of grouping is extremely valuable in the choreography, as it is a continual picture of tension, the struggle to attain a balance, a balance which can never be attained either in number, in form, or in spatial relation.

At the end of the tragedy Aeschylus employs a similar geometric structure of lines. Beginning with line 1040, Prometheus speaks fourteen lines. Hermes replies with nine; there is a choral interruption of eight lines; Hermes continues with nine more, and Prometheus concludes the play with another fourteen-line passage. The structure is as follows: 14 – 9 – 8 – 9 – 14.

It may be said that this is valuable only for scholars to ponder, as an audience will certainly not notice the structure. Yet my interest, as a director, is far from academic. This geometric structure of lines creates a rhythm of dialogue which may be supported by similar or counter rhythms of movement in the choreography.

Music

The theatre of Aeschylus cannot be approached from a strictly rational level. The songs are ritual songs that belong more to the domain of religion than to any other. „Ritual music”, says the Greek philosopher Moutsopoulos, „is more than music, it is rite itself.” The word which is sung has an evocative power; it can dispel fears, it can deter danger, it can concentrate disparate forces. Even today, some armies are taught (and these are by no means the worst armies, alas) to sing in time of danger. Navajo Indians have songs that they believe to hold healing powers. They sing prayers to make plants grow, or to bring rain, or to bring animals into their traps. This is not the realm of the natural; here, supernatural powers are involved. The magic power of the word which is sung, or the dialogue which is chanted, is depended upon in each liturgy. I do not believe that these rites have any effects upon the natural elements, or on the raising of the dead. I do feel, however, that the rite transports the singer into another condition, a state of greater concentration, a stronger unity with other individuals, a state of trance. Consequently, it creates a relationship between him and forces which are normally beyond his reach. This relationship gives him power. It is not accidental that, in our rational time, the theatre returns to its sense of ritual, as in the theatre of Beckett, Genet,



Hephaistus, in de voorstelling van „Prometheus” door het Stanford Repertory Theatre, California, 1966. Regie Erik Vos



Īo, uit dezelfde voorstelling

and the experiments of the Living Theatre. Regarding Aeschylus, the rhythm of the text, says Professor Kitto, asks for a particular music and a particular form of dance, and it is most probable that Aeschylus was one of the best choreographers Europe has ever known. „Dramatic excitement,” Kitto says in his brilliant essay on Greek tragedy, „exists on different levels, or, perhaps we had better say, in different forms. As the strictest and most airtight fugue of Bach can be more exciting and more dramatically exciting, than anything Wagner ever encompassed, so an ‘actionless’ plot of Old Tragedy can be more dramatically exciting than the palpitating turns of a Euripidean melodrama.” And Kitto concludes: „The conception and movement of Aeschylus’ plays is nearer the drama of music than the drama of the intellect and of prose.”

The Setting

The rock to which Prometheus is bound represents more than a rock in „the remotest region of the Earth.” Prometheus is born out of the Earth, Aeschylus says. At the end of the tragedy, Prometheus sinks back into the Earth. Aeschylus has changed the legend; the Earth is now Prometheus’ mother. He is now bound to that from which he once sprung, an imprisonment more cruel than bondage to a body to which he had no relation. What is birth in human terms, birth from the ultimate mother. Earth? Is it possible to create such a supernatural mother-form on the stage, in the manner Hieronmus Bosch would paint it in his visions, the legs wide-spread and extending upwards encompassing the tiny, fragile, crucified Prometheus which hangs suspended over the wound of birth, a chasm in the surface of the Earth — a blood-red spot which will open to reclaim to her womb the body she had released. The actors cannot express this emotion completely; the rock must bear part of the emotion, symbolizing the tragic bondage of Man to Earth.

ERIK VOS

“Franciscae Meae Laudes” van Baudelaire

Dit jaar is het honderd jaar geleden dat Charles Baudelaire ¹ na maanden van totale verlamming heenging; tien jaar na het verschijnen van zijn vermaarde „Les Fleurs du Mal”, welk laatste feit in 1957 in Hermeneus werd herdacht ² door Prof. Vooyo in een artikel dat de tekst bevatte van het enige Latijnse gedicht in die bundel.

Dat Baudelaire in zijn jonge jaren al in het Latijn, hetwelk hij ver boven het Grieks verkoos ³, had uitgeblonken, is tezamen met de merkwaardige voetnoot, waarvan de dichter dit gedicht voorzag, al door Prof. Vooyo vermeld. Slechts zij

Novis te cantabo chordis,
O novelletum* quod ludis
In solitudine cordis.

Piscina plena virtutis
Fons aeternae juventutis,
Labris vocem redde mutis!

Esto sertis implicata,
O femina delicata,
Per quam solvuntur peccata!

Quod erat spurcum, cremasti;
Quod ruidius, exaequasti;
Quod debile, confirmasti!

Sicut beneficium Lethe
Hauriam oscula de te.
Quae imbuta es magnete.

In fame mea taberna,
In nocte mea lucerna,
Recte me semper gubernata.

Quum vitiorum tempestas
Turbabat omnes semitas,
Apparuisti, Deitas,

Adde nunc vires viribus,
Dulce balneum suavibus
Unguentatum odoribus!

Velut stella salutaris
In naufragiis amaris
Suspendam cor tuis aris!

Meos circa lumbos mica,
o castitatis lorica,
Aqua tincta seraphica;

Patera gemmis corusca,
Panis salsus, inollis esca,
Divinum vinum, Francisca!

¹ geb. 9-4-1821; overl. 31-8-1867.

² 29^e Jrg. blz. 69.

³ zie B's „L'art romantique”; „Leconte de Lisle”.

* novelletum = jong meisje

hier aangevuld dat het onbekende in een klooster opgegroeide meisje dat door haar intense luisteren naar een zanger de aandacht van Baudelaire en zijn met die zanger bevriende kameraden had getrokken, niet Françoise, gelijk de hierboven aangehaalde titel zou doen denken, doch Lucette werd genoemd. De ontroerende wijze waarop deze Lucette vervolgens daartoe uitgenodigd o.a. het Stabat Mater zong, is kennelijk sterk bepalend geweest voor de keuze van het Latijn in dit haar erende en Baudelaire bijzonder dierbare ² gedicht, waarvan een Nederlandse navolging uit 1957 van Dr. A. Rutgers van der Loef), opgenomen in diens onuitgegeven vertaling ³ van „les Fleurs du Mal”, hier volgt.

M. RUTGERS VAN DER LOEFF

Op nieuwe snaren klinkt mijn lied
voor u die ruist als 't jonge net
in d'eenzaamheid van mijn verdriet,

Vijver overvol van deugd,
levensbron van eeuwge jeugd,
hergeef stommen lippen vreugd!

Wees omkranst met bloemfestoenen
vrouw die straalt als lentenoeien
en de zonden komt verzoenen!
mand.

Wat vuil was, hebt gij uitgebrand,
wat ruw was, hebt gij afgekant,
wat zwak was, heeft uw kracht ver-
mand.

Om herdenkens vuur te blussen
vloeit een Lethe-bron mij tussen
uw magneetkracht en uw kussen,

Gij die hongersnood doet zwichten
en het duister kunt verlichten,
wil mijn weg ten goede richten!

Toen door 't stormen van de zonden
ieder voetpad scheen verzwonden,
blonk uw godlijk licht, ontbonden,

Laat mijn krachten opwaarts groeien,
badfontein wier welig sproeien
geurt alsof er bloemen bloeien!

als een ster redt uit 't gevaar
van een schipbreuk, wonderbaar . . .
'k Wijd een hart op uw altaar,

Schitter staalhard om mijn leden,
kuisheidspantser dat in Eden
engelhandcn mochten smeden!

Schaal van goud en kristallijn,
brood met zout, gebak en wijn
uit den hemel, Fransje mijn!

¹ Banville „Ame de Paris” 1890; „Le divan bleu”: Lucette zong verder; Inviolata en Ave maris stella.

² „Vers latins de Charles Baudelaire”, Jules Mouquet, Paris 1933, pag. 84.

³ Een andere Nederlandse vertaling van Bert Decorte, tot stand gekomen tussen 1936 en 1939, doch eerst in 1946 bij Orion uitgegeven, heeft hier een tenonrechte sterk anachroniserend karakter; „Lofghesank teren Francescae; lek sing een liedt op nieuwer luut” enz.