

Boor Klep Kruimelklauw Baloe:
On Translating Peter Stillman's Speech in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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Introduction

This thesis aims at examining the translation problems in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. More specifically, it focuses on the translation of the passage in which Peter Stillman gives his speech (Auster 15-22). This thesis discusses the many translation problems that this specific passage causes, on the basis of the author's own translation.

There are two reasons why it is relevant to focus on *City of Glass*, and more specifically Peter Stillman's speech, in a thesis on translation. Firstly, language and translation feature prominently in this novel, and in this specific passage as well. In theory, this could complicate a translation, as well as influence translation choices.

Many critics have demonstrated that the novel discusses different views on language. For instance, in "Humpty Dumpty in New York: Language and Regime Change in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*", Sylvia Söderlind argues that central to *City of Glass* is the clash between an ideal language that could express exactly that which one desires it to express and the actuality of language as a conventional system that makes it useful for communication, but also deficient (1-16). Similarly, Pascale-Anne Brault points out that the novel describes a "Utopian vision of land and language" but ultimately deconstructs this idea (229). To elaborate, through the character of the old Peter Stillman, the novel offers the idea of a perfect, universal language that, like the language spoken before the biblical fall of man, has a clear, direct relation to the things it describes. However, the novel ultimately reveals this ideal as an impossibility, showing that language will always be a collection of arbitrary signs.

This shows that language is not just the medium through which the story is told but also plays a great part in the story itself. Arguably, this means that when the language changes by

means of translation, the story changes as well. This is true for each source text, but it could be argued that in this case, it changes more evidently, and to a greater extent. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter ‘i’, standing for ‘investigator’, it was ‘I’ in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him. For five years now, Quinn had been living in the grip of this pun. (Auster 8)

In this passage, the coincidental homophony of the words ‘eye’ ‘I’ and the letter ‘i’ is considered to be very important. On the one hand, this is merely a pun on words, but at the same time this is crucial to Quinn, as he lives “in the grip of this pun”. This way, language becomes an essential part of the novel’s logic, and therefore, changing the language of this story would entail changing this logic as well.

City of Glass also discusses translation. For instance, the protagonist “had worked on a number of long translations” (Auster 4), before he became a writer of mystery fiction.

Additionally, Paul Auster, as a character in the novel, writes a paper in which he argues that the character of Don Quixote translated his own life story from Arabic into Spanish (Auster 99).

Moreover, the young Peter Stillman is convinced that he speaks a language that “cannot be translated” (Auster 18), even though he does think that his words have a certain meaning, which he can understand (Auster 19). Stillman thereby declares translation, at least in the case of this specific language, to be impossible. This goes against the idea, proposed by such scholars as Eugene Nida, that theoreticly a text’s underlying meaning could be expressed in another language through the act of translation and thereby understood by other people (Munday 40).

In “Translating the Impossible Debt: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*” Brault argues that *City of Glass* is about different theories of translation (233). Brault goes even further to argue that the

novel was “meant to be translated” because only in translation can its meaning be fully understood (230). However, according to Brault, the importance of a translation of *City of Glass* lays in its confirmation that the novel can, in fact, not do without the English language:

But in the end the question will be how it was meant to be translated, whether it was all meant to be translated, and whether there are not, intentionally or unintentionally, certain things that resist translation, thereby replacing the one pure, transparent language of God by a single, universal language of man--that language, of course, being American English. (Brault 230)

In her analysis, then, Brault seems to argue that a translation will serve as a means to validate the source text and its source language. According to Brault, the novel withstands translation in essential areas of the novel, such as the translation of “the Tower of Babel”, because the letters of “Tower of Babel” correspond with Stillman Senior’s movements as outlined by Quinn (230). This means that a translator, in order to translate the “the Tower of Babel” into another language, would have to change the description of Stillman’s routes as well (Brault 230). Otherwise, the translator must preserve the English term, and explain this subsequently (Brault 230). This example shows how the discussions on language and translation in *City of Glass* are likely to affect a translation of this novel. This thesis will examine whether this is also true for the translation of Peter Stillman’s speech.

The second reason why it is relevant to focus on Peter Stillman’s speech in *City of Glass*, is because this specific passage causes many practical challenges for a translator. Stillman’s speech is unconventional because it is fragmented, repetitive, and includes uncommon and made up words. Stillman’s creative use of idioms, wordplay and rhyme, as well as his use of expressive names such as “Mr Sad” (Auster 17), further complicate the translation. The discussion will predominantly be based on these problems, as they have the greatest effect on the translation process. However, the thesis will indicate whenever problems are created by the

discussion of language and translation, or when translation choices are motivated by the considerations expressed in this introduction.

Directly following this introduction is a theoretical text, which reflects on aspects of translation relevant to the chosen text. Then follows the actual translation of this passage, which includes footnotes that discuss specific problems or issues and motivate the chosen solutions. The source text and the bibliography are included after the translation.

Translating Peter Stillman's Speech: Problems and Solutions

In the introduction of this paper, it is argued that Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, and more specifically the passage in which Peter Stillman gives his speech (15-22), is relevant for translation and translation analysis. In the light of different translation theories, this chapter discusses the translation problems that the text causes for a Dutch translation, and motivates the chosen solutions. In this passage, the young man Peter Stillman explains to the protagonist Daniel Quinn, whom he mistakes for Paul Auster the private detective, why he has asked for his help. The translation problems that will be discussed can best be understood as what Christiane Nord calls "text-specific translation problems", because they are problems caused by the conversational style of one of the main characters, and solutions to these problems will most likely not be applicable to the translation of other texts (145). However, problems also often arose because something could not be said in the same way in Dutch. These are problems that, as Christiane Nord puts it, "arise out of the differences in structure between the source language and the target language" (147). Stillman's unconventional language use, as well as his use of idioms, wordplay, rhyme, and expressive names will be discussed. A short conclusion will relate this analysis to the introduction.

Unconventional Language

The difficulty of translating Stillman's speech is mainly created by Peter Stillman's unconventional way of speaking. As Stillman explains in this passage, his father locked him up in a dark room for most of his childhood years, did not speak to him at all, and beat him whenever he said one of the few words he had learned before this ordeal (Auster 15-22). When

he was found thirteen years later, he was raised by care providers and taught to speak the English language by a speech therapist (Auster 28). This unnatural and traumatising experience with language acquisition helps to understand the strangeness of Stillman's speech, which is repetitive, fragmented, sometimes ungrammatical or in other ways incorrect, and which includes strings of made up words.

When the source text breaks with the conventions of the source language, the translator theoretically has two options: he or she can either maintain this by breaking with the conventions of the target language as well, or change this, by making the translation adhere to the target language conventions (Langeveld 170). The choice between these two options must be made by determining the purpose of a text: in the case of an informative text, a translator will probably choose to correct unconventional language because it only disrupts the aim of the text, which is to provide information. However, in the case of a literary text, unconventional language can be included intentionally, because it serves a literary purpose.

In Stillman's speech, the unconventional language illustrates his problematic past, it gives him a peculiar personality, and it arouses sympathy in the reader. This means that the logical choice is to make the target text break with target language conventions in ways similar to the source text. Arguably, this way, the target text has a similar effect on the target text reader as the source text has on the source text readers. In that case, the target text will observe to what Nida defines as "dynamic equivalence" and what Werner Koller calls "pragmatic equivalence" (qtd in Kenny 97). In my translation, dynamic equivalence is often given preference over what Dorothy Kenny calls "referential or denotative equivalence" (97): this means that creating the same effect was considered more important than referring to the same thing in reality. This will be illustrated by specific examples below.

Repetition

Stillman's speech, firstly, is highly repetitive. He has several standard phrases that he likes to use, such as "That is not my real name" (e.g. Auster 15), "My mind is not all it should be" (e.g. Auster 15), and "Excuse me" (e.g. Auster 16). My strategy for creating the same effect was to translate consistently, whenever possible. This means, for instance, that "That is not my real name" is repeatedly translated as "Dat is niet mijn echte naam".

However, it was sometimes difficult to create similar repetition in the target text. An example of this is the following passage:

But still, there are words you will need to have. There are many of them. Many millions I think. Perhaps only three or four. Excuse me. But I am doing well today. So much better than usual. If I can give you the words you need to have, it will be a great victory. Thank you. Thank you a million times over. (Auster 16)

In this passage, the sentence "Thank you a million times over" echoes the earlier sentence, "Many millions I think". A Dutch expression similar to "Thank you a million times over" is "Duizendmaal dank", but this means the repetition of million would be lost. This is an example of a problem that is a consequence of the differences between English and Dutch.

Because I considered repetition to be an important stylistic feature in this text, I have decided to translate "Many millions" into "Velen duizenden". This way, the target text has a similar repetitive structure:

Maar goed, u heeft nu eenmaal woorden nodig. Het zijn er heel veel. Velen duizenden, denk ik. Misschien slechts drie of vier. Sorry. Maar het gaat goed vandaag. Zoveel beter dan normaal. Als ik u de woorden kan geven die u nodig heeft, zal dat een grote overwinning zijn. Dank u wel. Duizendmaal dank.

In the source text, "million" is used to indicate a large amount rather than an exact number. Since "duizend", although a smaller number, has the same function, this change does not greatly affect

the text's meaning.

Fragmentation

The use of fragmentation can be illustrated by the following passage:

I say what they say because I know nothing. I am only poor Peter Stillman, the boy who can't remember. Boo hoo. Willy nilly. Nincompoop. Excuse me. They say, they say. But what does poor little Peter say? Nothing, nothing. Anymore. (Auster 16)

In this passage, Stillman alternates between sentences that are clear and understandable, and words that seem to come out of the blue. It is not entirely clear why he suddenly says “willy nilly” and “nincompoop”. Because these words create the fragmentation of this passage, and create confusion, I considered it more important to find similar words in Dutch, than to bring across the exact same meaning, for instance by circumlocution.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “willy-nilly” means “whether it be with or against the will of the person or persons concerned”. In Dutch, this meaning has to be described in multiple words, for instance “graag of niet”. This translation would not serve the same purpose as the English “willy-nilly”, because it does not create the same fragmentation.

However, according to *Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary*, “willy-nilly” also has a second meaning, namely “in a careless and disorganized way”. This meaning can be expressed by one word, such as “plotsklaps”. According to the Genootschap Onze Taal “plotsklaps” is a fairly new word, created by the fusion of “plotseling” and “eensklaps” (“Plotsklaps”). I have chosen this word because it is considered colloquial as well as childish (“Plotsklaps”), which corresponds to the character of Peter Stillman.

“Nincompoop” means, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “a simpleton, a

foolish person”, for which I have chosen the Dutch “uilskuiken”. The translated passage, then, is as follows:

Ik zeg wat zij zeggen omdat ik niets weet. Ik ben enkel arme Peter Stillman, de jongen die zich niets meer herinneren kan. Boehoe. Plotsklaps. Uilskuiken. Sorry. Zeggen zij, zeggen zij. Maar wat zegt arme Petertje? Niets, niets. Meer.

Ungrammatical Sentences

In his use of the English language, Stillman does not always follow the rules of English grammar properly. For instance, he uses the singular verb when referring to both his mother and his father: “Long ago there was mother and father” (Auster 16). In addition, when he speaks of how much he enjoys the light and the air now that he is released from the dark room, he says: “There is the air and the light and this best of all” (Auster 21), which sounds like he stumbles over his own words. Because this passage emphasizes Stillman’s difficulty with language and his strangeness of speech, I considered it important to maintain these mistakes in the translation as well. I have therefore translated these sentences as “Lang geleden was er moeder en vader” and “Er is lucht en licht en dit het allerbeste” respectively. It is not necessarily more difficult to create these kinds of mistakes in Dutch than it is in English, it is just a matter of keeping this feature in mind, or else these mistakes might be corrected accidentally.

Made up Words

There are two instances in which Stillman pronounces a string of words that he has made up. The first time, he says: “Wimble click crumblechaw beloo. Clack clack bedrack. Numb noise, flacklemuch, chewmanna. Ya, ya, ya” (Auster 17). Subsequently, he repeats the first few words: “Wimble click crumblechaw beloo” (Auster 18). As these words are made up anyway, and

Stillman argues himself that these words “cannot be translated” (Auster 18), it could be argued that they can just be copied into the target text.

However, although taken together, these words are nonsensical, they are not entirely meaningless. Some words are English words, such as “wimble”, and other words are combinations of English words, such as the combination of “crumble” and “chaw”. In addition, all words come across as English words. This means that for an English reader, the words will be more familiar, and have a hint of meaning in them. To create dynamic equivalence, the words should therefore be translated into a nonsensical string of Dutch sounding words that also hint at a certain meaning. In addition, in the source text, the words alliterate and rhyme. Maintaining this stylistic feature seemed more important than referential equivalence, because the words do not logically refer to something in the first place. My translation runs as follows: “Boor klep kruimelklauw baloe. Klak Klak Gedrak. Gevoelloos geluid, flikkermag, kauwmana. Ja, ja, ja.”

In addition to this string of words, which do not seem to make sense, Stillman creates a neologism. At one point in his speech he says: “That is why there was so much boom, boom, boom. Every time Peter said a word, his father would boom him” (Auster 20). In this context, the first three booms are verbal expressions of the sensation of being hit, whereas the latter boom is a verb, meaning “to hit”. The latter is created by Stillman; although “to boom” exists as a verb in the English language, e.g. “business is booming”, it does not exist in this meaning. The Dutch “boem” serves a similar purpose as the English “boom”. This can be turned into a verb in a similar way. The translation reads: “Daarom was er zoveel boem, boem, boem. Elke keer dat Peter sprak, boemde zijn vader hem.” In this translation, however, the exact repetition of “boom” is lost, because in Dutch the verb has to be inflected. In this instance, therefore, the target text is

slightly less repetitive than the source text.

Idioms

Another element that complicates the translation of Peter Stillman's speech is his use of English idioms. In some cases, these were used in the correct way and a similar idiom could be found in Dutch. For instance, "Hit the nail on the head" and "You bet your bottom dollar" could be translated into "De spijker op zijn kop slaan" and "Daar kun je je laatste stuiver onder verwedden" respectively. The first translation happens to be the same in terms of referential equivalence as well. In the words of Mona Baker, an idiom was chosen "which conveys (...) the same meaning as that of the source-language idiom and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items" (76). However, as Baker emphasizes, such correspondence between two languages is rare to find (76).

Since a "dollar" and a "stuiver" are not equivalent, the latter expression does not say exactly the same as the English expression in the source text. It does, however, express the same underlying idea. Baker describes this strategy as "using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form" (78). Kenny explains this as "the ST and the TT words triggering the same or similar associations in the mind of the native speakers of the two languages, i.e. (...) *connotative equivalence*" (97).

The phrase "such is my weeping and wailing" (Auster 17), expresses Stillman's sorrow. A Dutch idiom that refers to sorrow is "tranen met tuiten huilen". In addition, like "weeping and wailing", "tranen met tuiten" also alliterates. However, this idiom is more comical than the source text's idiom, and therefore out of place in this context. I have therefore decided not to use this idiom, but instead, translate this phrase into "Zo is jank en jammer ik". The disadvantage of

this translation is that it is not a real idiom in Dutch, but the advantages are that this translation also alliterates, and that this translation manages to maintain Stillman's serious tone of voice.

The most difficult idiom to translate was “Such is my laughter now, my belly burst of mumbo jumbo” (Auster 16). The expression “my belly burst of mumbo jumbo” is an alteration of “my belly burst of laughter”, which is the logical thing to expect, considering that Stillman spoke of laughter right before. This unusual combination of words is likely to strike the source text reader, and it is preferable that such an effect is also accomplished in the target text. A Dutch expression close to “my belly burst of laughter” is “ik barst in lachen uit”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “mumbo-jumbo”, in its collocational use, as “obscure or meaningless language or ritual; jargon intended to impress or mystify; nonsense”. In addition, this word rhymes and is informal. I have chosen to translate this as “kletskoek”, a Dutch word that also refers to nonsense. Although “kletskoek” does not rhyme, it does alliterate and also sounds informal. Combining these two, as is done in the source text, would result in something like “ik barst in kletskoek uit”. However, this translation does not seem to have the desired effect, perhaps because “kletskoek” is a noun, which here takes the place of a verb. In the end, I have decided to go for “mijn buik barst uit elkaar van al die kletskoek”. This is a more literal translation of the source text. In addition, the word “kletskoek”, as it contains the word “koek”, sounds like something that can be eaten. Therefore, this translation does create a new kind of humoristic effect.

Wordplay and Rhyme

Peter Stillman also uses wordplay and rhyme in his speech. This makes his speech funny at times, and it emphasizes both his childlike character and his fascination for language. The following passage for instance, is a pun on the word “God” and its reverse, “dog”:

She says the father talked about God. That is a funny word to me. When you put it backwards, it spells dog. And a dog is not much like a God, is it? Woof woof. Bow wow. Those are dog words. I think they are beautiful. So pretty and true. Like the words I make up. (Auster 20)

In Dutch, the word “God” also spells “God”. The word “dog” however, is “hond”. This joke, therefore, cannot be repeated in Dutch. This leaves the translator with several options. The most obvious one, perhaps, would be to leave out the joke all together, a strategy that Baker defines as “translation by omission” (42). Such a strategy is only justified, however, if the deleted elements are not essential to the text (Baker 42). This is difficult to examine in a literary text. In theory, the target text could do without this specific joke. The target text reader could still understand the story, and would not notice that something is missing. However, that would mean that Stillman’s speech becomes almost a paragraph shorter, as the entire quote above has to be taken out. Moreover, the joke creates humour and illustrates Stillman’s strange character. Therefore, it would be better to find a way to translate this joke.

One option is to use the English “dog” and explain the meaning of this word subsequently. This results in the following translation:

Ze zegt dat de vader over God sprak. Dat is een grappig woord, vind ik. Als je het omkeert, staat er dog. Een hond weet u wel. Maar dat zijn twee heel verschillende dingen, toch? Woef woef. Blaf Blaf. Zegt een hond. Ik vind die woorden prachtig. Zo mooi en waar. Net als de woorden die ik verzin.

This translation, by preserving the English word “dog”, foregrounds the source text language.

This passage is likely to strike the target text reader, and will make it clear that this novel is

translated from an originally English one. In most translations, a translator attempts to create a text that reads fluently, of which the reader will not notice it has been translated (Munday 144). This is defined by Lawrence Venuti as the norm of “invisibility” (qtd in Munday 144). The preservation of the English term, therefore, could be considered a disadvantage of this translation.

Another option is to use “Deense dog”, which is the Dutch name for a breed of dogs, known in English as the Great Dane. This would result in the following translation:

Ze zegt dat de vader over God sprak. Dat is een grappig woord, vind ik. Als je het omkeert, staat er dog. Zoals een Deense dog. Maar dat zijn twee heel verschillende dingen, toch? Woef woef. Blaf Blaf. Zegt een Deense dog. Ik vind die woorden prachtig. Zo mooi en waar. Net als de woorden die ik verzin.

The advantage of this translation is that it is perhaps less visible that the text is translated. A disadvantage, however, is the use of “Deense dog”, a special breed of dogs, instead of the more general “dog”. This means the translation is less equivalent in terms of referential equivalence. Furthermore, the use of one specific type of breed is slightly illogical in this context, because it suggests that only this specific type of breed barks in this way.

In order to decide between these two options, it is important to look at the novel as a whole. As is argued in the introduction, this novel contains several passages which, as Brault argues, defy translation (230), like “The Tower of Babel”, and the pun that is based on the coincidental homophony between “private eye” “I” and the letter “i”. This passage, in which Stillman remarks on the similarity between the words “god” and “dog”, is a third example. Brault argues that such passages cannot do without the English language and are perhaps included intentionally to propose American English as the “universal language of man” (Brault 230). Following this argumentation, it might be logical to accept some English in these passages.

I have therefore chosen to go for the option of copying “dog” into the target text and explaining this word directly after.

In the following passage, Stillman uses rhyme to make a joke:

As for me, I think Peter could not think. Did he blink? Did he drink? Did he stink? Ha ha ha. Excuse me. Sometimes I am so funny. (Auster 17)

In this passage, “I think Peter could not think” indicates that Stillman wonders about his cognitive abilities while he was locked up in the dark room, considering the inhumane conditions and the fact that he was not learning a language. This sentence could be related to discussions about the causality between language and thinking. The introduction has also indicated that this novel reflects on language. It is therefore important to translate “think” into a Dutch equivalent. The other words, “blink” “drink” and “stink”, however, are rhyme words that Stillman comes up with on the spot, whose meaning are of secondary importance. My translation reads:

Wat mij betreft, ik denk dat Peter niet kon denken. Of drinken. Of blinken. Of stinken. Ha ha ha. Sorry. Soms ben ik zo grappig.

This translation shows that coincidentally, the words “drink” and “stink” can be translated into Dutch words that also rhyme: “drinken” and “stinken”. The word “blink” is here translated with “blinken” which means something else in Dutch, but as is said before, the meaning here is only of secondary importance. Unfortunately, the word “think” has to be translated with “denken” which does not rhyme. This means that in this translation, Stillman starts rhyming later, namely after “drinken”, instead of after “denken”.

Translation of Names

The translation of Stillman’s speech is further complicated by the many names that Stillman gives himself and his listener. In the translation of adult literary fiction, names are usually not

changed (Alexiá 199). However, when these names are expressive, and this has a certain function in the source text, a translator sometimes chooses to translate the names into names that can serve a similar purpose in the target text (Alexiá 199). The names that Stillman gives himself and his listener are not really names in the conventional sense. Instead, he uses these names to communicate emotions to his listener. In the following passage, for instance, Stillman uses the name “Mr Sad” to indicate his unhappy feelings:

I forget how to make word come out of my mouth. Then it is hard for me to move. Ya ya. Or even to see. That is when I become Mr Sad. (Auster 21)

In this context, it would therefore be logical to translate these names into Dutch ones, enabling the target text reader to understand the emotive purpose of these names. “Mr Sad”, therefore, is translated into “meneer Verdrietig”. Correspondingly, “Mr White”, “Mr Green” (Auster 18) and “Peter Nobody” (Auster 20) are translated as “meneer Wit”, “meneer Groen” en “Peter Niemand” respectively.

At one point, Stillman calls himself “Peter Rabbit” (Auster 18), thereby referring to a fictional character that features in some of Beatrix Potter’s children’s stories. Perhaps the reference to a children's book is used to emphasize Stillman’s childlike character. In Dutch translations of Potter’s work, this character is called “Pieter Konijn”. Translating “Peter Rabbit” into “Pieter Konijn” has the advantage that many Dutch readers will understand the reference, whereas “Peter Rabbit” will probably be less familiar to a Dutch audience. The disadvantage, however, is that by using “Pieter”, the source text repetition of the name “Peter” is lost.

Theoretically, this could be solved by changing every mentioning of “Peter Stillman” into “Pieter Stillman”. However, I have decided against this, for two reasons. Firstly, Peter also, indirectly, refers to himself as Peter Pan: he calls himself “The little

boy who can never grow up” (Auster 20). Peter Pan happens to be called Peter Pan in Dutch translations as well. Therefore, translating “Peter Stillman” into “Pieter Stillman” would create the same kind of repetition in one passage, but would result in a loss of repetition in another passage. Admittedly, the repetition in “Peter Pan” is less explicit, but it is still there. Secondly, the name “Pieter” is too Dutch for an American character, and giving him this name throughout the novel would therefore sound strange. I have therefore chosen to translate “Peter Rabbit” into “Pieter Konijn”, while maintaining “Peter Stillman”.

This is also why, apart from the names that Stillman gives himself and his listener in this passage, I have decided not to translate the names of characters. Arguably, names like “Stillman” “Henry Dark” and “Virginia” all have an expressive element as well, but translating these would too greatly affect the American atmosphere of the text.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the most prominent translation problems that this specific passage from *City of Glass* creates for a translation into Dutch. To conclude, most of the problems were a consequence of Stillman’s specific conversational style. Translations were often chosen that preserved the effect of the target text rather than its literal meaning. In the practical act of translation, the considerations as expressed in the introduction, in terms of language and translation, do not often play an important role. Sometimes they can help motivate a certain translation option, for instance in the case of the translation of the pun on “god” and “dog” (Auster 20), and the translation of “think” in the string of rhyme words (Auster 17). Usually, however, the translation is motivated by more pragmatic considerations on the source text as

well as on the target language and the target text reader.

The following chapter is my translation, and includes footnotes that discuss other translation problems and choices that have not yet been discussed, such as the alteration of certain grammatical constructions.

Translation

‘Geen vragen, alstublieft,’ zei de jongeman tenslotte. ‘Ja. Nee. Dank u¹ wel.’ Hij was even stil. ‘Ik ben Peter Stillman. Ik zeg dit uit mijzelf. Ja. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Nee. Ik ben niet helemaal goed bij mijn hoofd², natuurlijk. Maar daar kan niets meer aan gedaan worden. Nee, nee. Daaraan. Niet meer.

‘U zit daar en denkt: wie is het die tegen mij praat? Wat zijn dat voor woorden uit zijn mond? Dat zal ik u zeggen. Of ik zal het u niet zeggen. Ja en nee. Ik ben niet helemaal goed bij mijn hoofd. Ik zeg dit uit mijzelf. Maar ik zal het proberen. Ja en nee. Ik zal het proberen uit te leggen, ook al maakt mijn hoofd dat lastig. Dank u wel.

‘Mijn naam is Peter Stillman. Misschien heeft u van me gehoord, maar waarschijnlijk niet. Maakt niet uit. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Mijn echte naam kan ik me niet herinneren. Sorry. Niet dat het er toe doet. Dat wil zeggen, niet meer.

‘Dit noemt men spreken. Dat is geloof ik de term. Als woorden los komen, opfladderen,

¹ The personal pronoun “you” has two forms in Dutch: “jij” or “je”, and “u”. The latter is the polite form, as well as the more distant one. In this translation, “u” is chosen because the characters meet for the first time, because Stillman is younger than Quinn, and because it is a business meeting. However, in the case of certain idiomatic expressions, such as “you bet your bottom dollar”, “you” is translated as the more idiomatic “je”, such as “daar kun je je laatste stuiver onder verwedden”.

² “My mind is not all it should be” is translated into the idiomatic “Ik ben niet helemaal goed bij mijn hoofd”, instead of a more literal translation, such as “Mijn verstand is niet zo als het zijn moet”.

een ogenblik leven, en sterven. Vreemd, toch? Zelf heb ik geen mening. Nee en nogmaals nee. Maar goed, u heeft nu eenmaal woorden nodig. Het zijn er heel veel. Velen duizenden, denk ik. Misschien slechts drie of vier. Sorry. Maar het gaat goed vandaag. Zoveel beter dan normaal. Als ik u de woorden kan geven die u nodig heeft zal dat een grote overwinning zijn. Dank u wel. Duizendmaal dank.

‘Lang geleden was er moeder en vader. Ik kan me daar niets meer van herinneren. Zij³ zeggen: moeder stierf. Wie dat zijn kan ik niet zeggen. Sorry. Maar dat is wat zij zeggen.

‘Geen moeder dus. Ha ha. Zo lach ik nu, mijn buik barst uit elkaar van al die kletsboek. Ha ha ha. Grote vader zei: het doet er niet toe. Wat mij betreft. Dat wil zeggen, wat hem betreft. Grote vader van de grote spierballen en het boem, boem, boem. Geen vragen nu, alstublieft.

‘Ik zeg wat zij zeggen omdat ik niets weet. Ik ben enkel arme Peter Stillman, de jongen die zich niets meer herinneren kan. Boehoe. Plotsklaps. Uilskuiken. Sorry. Zeggen zij, zeggen zij. Maar wat zegt arme Petertje⁴? Niets, niets. Meer.

‘Er was dit. Donker⁵. Heel erg donker. Zo donker als heel erg donker. Ze zeggen: dat was

³ In Dutch, “they” can be translated into both “zij” and “ze”. In most places, “zij” was chosen because this sounds slightly more distant than “ze”.

⁴ “Little Peter” is translated into “Petertje”. The Dutch diminutive, formed by the suffix “-tje” is commonly used to refer to children.

⁵ In the source text, Stillman says that there was “Dark”. This echoes the name Henry Dark, who turns out to be the same person as Stillman’s father. This element is lost in a Dutch translation, unless the name “Henry Dark” is translated into “Henry Donker”. However, as is argued in the theoretical text, I have decided not to translate the names of characters, apart from the expressive names that Stillman uses.

de kamer. Alsof ik erover kan spreken. Het donker, bedoel ik. Dank u wel.

‘Donker, donker. Negen jaar lang, zeggen ze. Niet eens een raam. Arme Peter Stillman. En het boem, boem, boem. De poeptroep. De plasplasjes⁶. De flauwtjes. Sorry. Poedelnaakt. Sorry. Niet meer.

‘Er is dus donker. Dat zeg ik u. Er was voedsel in het donker, ja, rauw voedsel in de au-kamer.⁷ Hij at met zijn handen. Sorry. Ik bedoel: Peter at met zijn handen. En als ik Peter ben, des te beter. Dat wil zeggen, des te slechter. Sorry. Ik ben Peter Stillman. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Dank u wel.

‘Arme Peter Stillman. Hij was een kleine jongen. Amper eigen woorden. En toen geen woorden, en toen niemand⁸, en toen niets, niets, niets. Meer.

⁶ In the source text, Stillman says: “The caca piles. The pipi lakes” (Auster 16). These euphemistic words emphasize Stillman’s childlike character, and are repeated further on: “How to make to make caca and pipi on the toilet” (Auster 17). Dutch equivalences are chosen that also sound childish, and refer to faeces and urine in a euphemistic way.

⁷ In the source text, Stillman speaks of “mush food in the hush dark room”. In order to preserve the rhyme, this is translated more freely. In my translation, the food is not “mush” but “rauw”, meaning “raw”. This is still a negative description of food. In addition, a different element of the room is highlighted; in the source text, Stillman calls the room a “hush dark room”, because of the lack of light and the fact that he was not allowed to talk. In my translation, Stillman calls the room a “au-kamer”, emphasizing the fact that his father hit him in the room.

⁸ The source text reads: “And then no words, and then no one” (Auster 17). The reader here probably expects Stillman to say “not one”. In the Dutch translation, “niemand” is chosen because this word is also out of place, as the reader is likely to expect “niets”.

‘Vergeef me, meneer Auster. Ik zie dat ik u verdrietig maak. Geen vragen, alstublieft. Mijn naam is Peter Stillman. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Mijn echte naam is meneer Verdrietig. Wat is uw naam, meneer Auster? Misschien bent u de echte meneer Verdrietig, en ben ik niemand.

‘Boehoe. Sorry. Zo jammer en jank ik. Boehoe, snik snik. Wat deed Peter in die kamer? Dat kan niemand zeggen. Sommigen zeggen niets. Wat mij betreft, ik denk dat Peter niet kon denken. Of drinken. Of blinken. Of stinken. Ha ha ha. Sorry. Soms ben ik zo grappig.

‘Boor klep kruimelklauw baloe. Klak Klak Gedrak. Gevoelloos geluid, flikkermag, kauwmana. Ja, ja, ja. Sorry. Ik ben de enige die deze woorden begrijpt.

‘Steeds later en later. Dat is wat zij zeggen. Het ging te lang door, nu is Peter niet meer helemaal goed bij zijn hoofd. Nooit meer. Nee, nee, nee. Ze zeggen dat iemand mij vond. Dat kan ik me niet herinneren. Nee, ik kan me niet herinneren wat er gebeurde toen ze de deur opendeden en het licht naar binnen kwam. Nee, nee, nee. Ik kan hier helemaal niets over zeggen. Meer.

‘Ik heb lang een zonnebril gedragen⁹. Ik was twaalf. Dat is wat zij zeggen. Ik woonde in een ziekenhuis. Beetje bij beetje leerden ze mij hoe ik Peter Stillman moet zijn. Ze zeiden: jij

⁹ “For a long time I wore dark glasses” is translated into “Ik heb lang een zonnebril gedragen”, thereby changing the tense. This sounds more natural in Dutch. However, because of the fragmented aspect of the text it would perhaps be logical to choose for a translation that also adds to this. In the end, I have decided against this because this would add more abstraction than the source text originally has. Similar considerations have motivated my translation of “They took him to a dark place. They locked him up and left him there” into “Ze hebben hem naar een donkere plaats gebracht. Ze hebben hem opgesloten en daar achtergelaten”.

bent Peter Stillman. Dank u wel, zei ik. Ja, ja, ja. Dank u wel en dank u wel. Zei ik.

‘Peter was een baby. Ze moesten hem alles leren. Hoe je moet lopen, weet je wel. Hoe je moet eten. Hoe je een poepje en plasje doet op de wc. Dat viel wel mee. Zelfs wanneer ik ze beet, deden ze nog geen boem, boem, boem. Later hield ik zelfs op me de kleren van het lijf te rukken.

‘Peter was een brave jongen. Maar het was lastig om hem woorden te leren. Zijn mond deed het niet zo goed. En natuurlijk was hij niet helemaal goed bij zijn hoofd. Ba ba ba, zei hij. En da da da. En wa wa wa. Sorry. Het kostte steeds meer jaren. Nu zeggen ze tegen Peter: je kunt gaan, meer kunnen we niet voor je doen. Peter Stillman, jij bent een mens geworden, zeiden ze. Het is goed om te geloven wat dokters zeggen. Dank u wel. Dank u zeer.

‘Ik ben Peter Stillman. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Mijn echte naam is Pieter Konijn. In de winter ben ik meneer Wit, in de zomer ben ik meneer Groen. U mag hiervan vinden wat u wilt. Ik zeg dit uit mijzelf. Boor klep kruimelklauw baloe. Prachtig, toch? Ik bedenk steeds dit soort woorden. Daar is niets aan te doen. Ze komen als vanzelf uit mijn mond. Ze zijn onvertaalbaar.

‘Vragen en vragen, dat heeft geen zin. Maar ik zal u wat zeggen. Ik wil niet dat u verdrietig bent, Meneer Auster. U heeft zo’n vriendelijk gezicht. U doet mij denken aan ietwat, of een kreun, één van de twee¹⁰. En uw ogen kijken mij aan. Ja, ja. Ik kan ze zien. Dat is zeer goed. Dank u.

‘Daarom zal ik het u zeggen. Geen vragen, alstublieft. U vraagt zich af hoe het verder zit. Dat wil zeggen, met de vader. Die verschrikkelijke vader die Petertje al die gemene dingen

¹⁰ “I don’t know which” is translated into the more idiomatic “één van de twee”, instead of the more literal “ik weet niet welke”.

aandeed. Wees gerust. Ze hebben hem naar een donkere plaats gebracht. Ze hebben hem opgesloten en daar achtergelaten. Ha ha ha. Sorry. Soms ben ik zo grappig.

‘Dertien jaar, zeiden zij. Dat is een misschien wel een erg lange tijd. Maar ik weet niets van tijd. Ik ben elke dag nieuw. Als ik ‘s morgens opsta ben ik net geboren, gedurende de dag word ik oud, en ik sterf ‘s avonds als ik ga slapen. Het is niet mijn schuld. Het gaat zo goed vandaag. Het gaat zo veel beter dan ooit tevoren.

‘Dertien jaar lang was de vader weg. Zijn naam is ook Peter Stillman. Vreemd, toch? Dat twee mensen dezelfde naam kunnen hebben? Ik weet niet of dat zijn echte naam is. Maar ik denk niet dat hij mij is. We zijn beiden Peter Stillman. Maar Peter Stillman is niet mijn echte naam. Dus misschien ben ik Peter Stillman toch niet.

‘Dertien jaar zeg ik. Of dat zeggen zij. Het doet er niet toe. Ik weet niets van tijd. Maar zij vertellen me dit. Morgen komt er een einde aan. Dat is erg. Ook al zeggen zij dat dat niet zo is, dat is erg. Ik hoor het me niet te herinneren. Maar af en toe doe ik dat toch, ondanks wat ik zeg.

‘Hij zal komen. Dat wil zeggen, de vader zal komen. En hij zal proberen mij te vermoorden. Dank u wel. Maar dat wil ik niet. Nee, nee. Niet meer. Peter leeft nu. Ja. Hij is niet helemaal goed bij zijn hoofd, maar hij leeft wel. En dat betekent iets, toch? Daar kun je je laatste stuiver onder verwedden. Ha ha ha.

‘Ik ben tegenwoordig vooral een dichter. Elke dag zit ik op mijn kamer en schrijf ik een nieuw gedicht. Ik bedenk alle woorden zelf, net als toen ik nog in het donker leefde. Zo begin ik me dingen te herinneren, door te doen alsof ik weer in het donker leef. Ik ben de enige die weet wat deze woorden betekenen. Ze zijn onvertaalbaar. Deze gedichten zullen me beroemd maken. De spijker op zijn kop slaan. Ja, ja, ja. Prachtige gedichten. Zo prachtig dat iedereen zal huilen.

‘Later doe ik misschien iets anders. Als ik klaar ben met dichter zijn. Vroeg of laat zijn mijn woorden op, ziet u. Iedereen bezit maar een bepaald aantal woorden. En wat moet ik dan? Ik denk dat ik daarna brandweerman wil zijn. En daarna, dokter. Het doet er niet toe. Het laatste wat ik zal zijn is koorddanser. Dan zal ik koorddansen, en de mensen zullen verbaasd staan te kijken. Zelfs kleine kinderen. Dat zou ik leuk vinden. Om te koorddansen tot ik sterf.

‘Maakt niet uit. Het doet er niet toe. Wat mij betreft. Zoals u kunt zien, ben ik een rijke man. Ik hoef me geen zorgen te maken. Nee, nee. Daarover niet. Daar kun je je laatste stuiver onder verwedden. De vader was rijk, en Petertje kreeg al zijn geld toen ze z’n vader in het donker opsloten. Ha ha ha. Sorry dat ik lach. Soms ben ik zo grappig.

‘Ik ben de laatste van de familie Stillman. Dat was me een familie, zeggen zij. Van het oude Boston, voor het geval u van ze heeft gehoord. Ik ben de laatste. Er zijn geen anderen. Ik ben het einde van iedereen, de laatste man. Des te beter, denk ik. Het is niet erg dat het nu allemaal eindigt. Het is voor iedereen beter om dood te zijn¹¹.

‘Misschien was de vader zo slecht nog niet. Tenminste, dat zeg ik nu. Hij had een groot hoofd. Zo groot als heel erg groot, wat betekende dat er teveel ruimte in zat. Zoveel gedachten in dat grote hoofd van hem. Maar arme Peter, toch? En die verschrikkelijke omstandigheden, inderdaad. Peter die niets kon zien of zeggen, die niets kon denken of doen.¹² Peter die niets kon.

¹¹ The source text reads “It is good for everyone to be dead”. This is translated into “het is voor iedereen beter om dood te zijn”. “Good” is changed to the comparative “beter” (“better”), because “het is beter” is more idiomatic in Dutch.

¹² This translation, “denken of doen”, is slightly more alliterative than the source text, “think or do”. However, this was not considered to be a problem, as Stillman often uses alliteration in his speech. Therefore, the alliteration is not out of tone with the rest of the text.

Nee. Niet wat dan ook.

‘Ik weet hier helemaal niets van. Begrijp het ook niet. Mijn vrouw is degene die mij deze dingen vertelt. Ze zegt dat het belangrijk is dat ik het weet, zelfs als ik het niet begrijp. Maar zelfs dat begrijp ik niet. Om te weten, moet je begrijpen. Toch? Maar ik weet niets. Misschien ben ik Peter Stillman en misschien ook niet. Mijn echte naam is Peter Niemand. Dank u wel. En hoe vindt u dat?’

‘Dus ik vertel u over mijn vader. Het is een goed verhaal, zelfs al begrijp ik het niet. Ik kan het u vertellen omdat ik de woorden ken. En dat is iets, toch? Om de woorden te kennen, bedoel ik. Soms ben ik zo trots op mijzelf! Sorry. Dit is wat mijn vrouw zegt. Ze zegt dat de vader over God sprak. Dat is een grappig woord, vind ik. Als je het omkeert, staat er dog. Een hond weet je wel. Maar dat zijn twee heel verschillende dingen, toch? Woef woef. Blaf Blaf. Zegt een hond. Ik vind die woorden prachtig. Zo mooi en waar. Net als de woorden die ik verzin.

‘Hoe dan ook. Zoals ik zei. De vader sprak over God. Hij wilde weten of God een taal sprak. Vraag me niet wat dit betekent. Ik vertelt het u ook maar omdat ik de woorden ken. De vader dacht dat een baby het misschien zou spreken als hij geen mensen zag. Maar welke baby? Ah. Nu ziet u het. Hij hoefde niet gekocht te worden. Natuurlijk wist Peter al een paar mensenwoordjes. Daar kon niets aan gedaan worden. Maar de vader dacht dat Peter ze misschien zou vergeten. Na een tijdje. Daarom was er zoveel boem, boem, boem. Elke keer dat Peter sprak, boemde zijn vader hem. Tenslotte leerde Peter om niets meer te zeggen. Ja ja ja. Dank u wel.

‘Peter hield zijn woorden voor zichzelf. Al die dagen en maanden en jaren. Daar in het donker, Petertje in zijn eentje, en de woorden maakten herrie in zijn hoofd en hielden hem gezelschap. Daarom doet zijn mond het niet zo goed. Arme Peter. Boehoe. Zo zijn z’n tranen. De jongen die niet op kan groeien.

‘Peter kan nu als mensen praten. Maar hij heeft ook de andere woorden nog in zijn hoofd. Ze zijn Gods taal, en niemand anders kan ze spreken. Ze zijn onvertaalbaar. Daarom leeft Peter zo dicht bij God. Daarom is hij een beroemde dichter.

‘Het gaat nu zo goed met mij. Ik kan doen en laten wat ik wil. Waar en wanneer ik maar wil. Ik heb zelfs een vrouw. Dat kunt u zien. Ik heb haar al eerder genoemd. Misschien heeft u haar zelfs ontmoet. Ze is prachtig, toch? Haar naam is Virginia. Dat is niet haar echte naam. Maar dat doet er niet toe. Wat mij betreft. Als ik het vraag, haalt mijn vrouw een meisje voor me. Dat zijn hoeren. Ik stop mijn worm in ze en ze kreunen. Het zijn er zoveel geweest. Ha ha. Ze komen hier en ik neuk met hen. Het voelt goed om te neuken. Virginia geeft hen geld en iedereen is blij. Daar kun je je laatste stuiver onder verdedden. Ha ha.

‘Arme Virginia. Ze houdt niet van neuken. Dat wil zeggen, met mij. Misschien neukt ze wel met iemand anders. Wie zal het zeggen? Ik weet daar niets van. Het doet er niet toe. Maar als u aardig tegen Virginia bent, dan laat ze zich misschien wel door u neuken. Dat zou mij blij maken. Voor u. Dank u wel.

‘Dus. Er zijn zoveel dingen. Ik probeer ze u te vertellen. Ik weet dat ik niet helemaal goed bij mijn hoofd ben. En het klopt, ja, en ik zeg dit uit mijzelf, dat ik soms gewoon schreeuw en schreeuw. Zonder goede reden. Alsof er een reden zou moeten zijn. Maar ik zie er geen. En anderen ook niet. Nee. En er zijn de tijden dat ik helemaal niets zeg. Dagen lang. Niets, niets, niets. Ik vergeet dan hoe ik woorden uit mijn mond kan laten komen. Dan is het lastig om te bewegen. Ja ja. Of zelfs maar te zien. Dan word ik Meneer Verdrietig.

‘Ik ben nog steeds graag in het donker. Tenminste, soms. Het doet me goed, denk ik. In het donker spreek ik Gods taal en kan niemand mij horen. Wees alstublieft niet boos. Ik kan er niets aan doen.

‘Het beste is nog wel de lucht. Ja. En stukje bij beetje heb ik geleerd daarin te leven. De lucht en het licht, ja, dat ook, het licht dat overal op schijnt en alles zichtbaar maakt, zodat ik het kan zien. Er is lucht en licht en dit het allerbeste. Sorry. De lucht en het licht. Ja. Als het mooi weer is zit ik graag bij het open raam. Soms kijk ik naar buiten naar de dingen beneden. De straat en de mensen, de honden en de auto’s, de stenen van het gebouw aan de overkant. En er zijn tijden dat ik mijn ogen sluit en gewoon daar zit, terwijl de wind langs mijn gezicht waait, en het licht in de lucht, overal om me heen net voorbij mijn ogen, en de wereld is helemaal rood, een prachtig rood in mijn ogen, omdat de zon op mij en mijn ogen schijnt¹³.

‘Het klopt dat ik bijna niet buiten kom. Het is lastig, ik ben niet altijd te vertrouwen. Soms schreeuw ik. Wees alstublieft niet boos. Ik kan er niets aan doen. Virginia zegt dat ik me moet leren gedragen in het openbaar. Maar soms kan ik er niets aan doen, dan komen de schreeuwen gewoon vanzelf.

‘Maar ik ga wel graag naar het park. Er zijn bomen, en de lucht, en het licht. Dat is een groot goed¹⁴, toch? Ja. Beetje bij beetje wordt ik beter in mijn binnenste. Ik kan het voelen. Zelfs

¹³ In the source text, this is a long sentence with two present participles, namely “with the breeze blowing on my face” and “with the sun shining on me and my eyes”. In order to maintain the rhythm of the text, I wanted to translate this as one long sentence as well, instead of breaking it up. In Dutch, the present participle exists, which would result in “de wind op mijn gezicht blazend” and “de zon in mijn ogen schijnend”, but it is not commonly used and sounds archaic. Therefore, the constructions with “terwijl” and “omdat” are used.

¹⁴ “There is good in all that” is translated into the Dutch idiomatic expression “Dat is een groot goed”.

dokter Wyshnegradsky zegt dat. Ik weet dat ik nog steeds de houten pop¹⁵ ben. Daar kan niets aan gedaan worden. Nee, nee. Meer. Maar soms denk ik dat ik uiteindelijk toch op zal groeien en een echte jongen zal worden.

‘Nu ben ik nog Peter Stillman. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Ik kan niet zeggen wie ik morgen ben. Elke dag is nieuw, en elke dag ben ik herboren. Ik zie overal hoop, zelfs in het donker, en als ik sterf dan wordt ik misschien wel God.

‘Er zijn veel meer woorden om te spreken. Maar ik denk niet dat ik ze zal spreken. Nee. Niet vandaag. Nu is mijn mond moe, en ik denk dat het tijd is om te gaan. Ik weet niets van tijd, natuurlijk. Maar dat doet er niet toe. Wat mij betreft. Dank u zeer. Ik weet dat u mijn leven zal redden, meneer Auster, ik reken op u. Het leven kan maar een bepaalde tijd duren, snapt u. Al het andere is in de kamer, met het donker, met Gods taal, met schreeuwen. Hier ben ik van de lucht, een prachtig ding waar het licht op kan schijnen. Misschien zult u dat onthouden. Ik ben Peter Stillman. Dat is niet mijn echte naam. Dank u zeer.’

¹⁵ In the source text, Stillman calls himself “the puppet boy” and says that he hopes he will “at last grow up and become real”. This is interpreted as a reference to Pinocchio, a character from a children’s story who is a wooden puppet that magically becomes a real boy. The reference to a character from a children’s story corresponds to his earlier reference to Peter Rabbit and Peter Pan, and emphasizes his childlike character. In Dutch, the expression “poppenjongen” would probably not be understood as a reference to Pinocchio, whereas “the houten pop” (“the wooden puppet”) does clearly reference to this character. Therefore, “the houten pop” is chosen to clarify this reference to a culturally specific element for a Dutch reader.

Source Text

‘No questions, please,’ the young man said at last. ‘Yes. No. Thank you.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I am Peter Stillman. I say this of my own free will. Yes. That is not my real name. No. Of course, my mind is not all it should be. But nothing can be done about that. No. About that. No, no. Not anymore.’

‘You sit there and think: who is this person talking to me? What are these words coming from his mouth? I will tell you. Or else I will not tell you. Yes and no. My mind is not all it should be. I say this of my own free will. But I will try. Yes and no. I will try to tell you, even if my mind makes it hard. Thank you.’

‘My name is Peter Stillman. Perhaps you have heard of me, but more than likely not. No matter. That is not my real name. My real name I cannot remember. Excuse me. Not that it makes a difference. That is to say, anymore.’

‘This is what is called speaking. I believe that is the term. When words come out, fly into the air, live for a moment, and die. Strange, is it not? I myself have no opinion. No and no again. But still, there are words you will need to have. There are many of them. Many millions I think. Perhaps only three or four. Excuse me. But I am doing well today. So much better than usual. If I can give you the words you need to have, it will be a great victory. Thank you. Thank you a million times over.’

‘Long ago there was mother and father. I remember none of that. They say: mother died. Who they are I cannot say. Excuse me. But that is what they say.’

‘No mother, then. Ha ha. Such is my laughter now, my belly burst of mumbo jumbo. Ha ha ha. Big father said: it makes no difference. To me. That is to say, to him. Big father of the big muscles and the boom, boom, boom. No questions now, please.’

‘I say what they say because I know nothing. I am only poor Peter Stillman, the boy who can’t remember. Boo hoo. Willy nilly. Nincompoop. Excuse me. They say, they say. But what does poor little Peter say? Nothing, nothing. Anymore.

‘There was this. Dark. Very dark. As dark as very dark. They say: that was the room. As if I could talk about it. The dark, I mean. Thank you.

‘Dark, dark. They say for nine years. Not even a window. Poor Peter Stillman. And the boom, boom, boom. The caca piles. The pipi lakes. The swoons. Excuse me. Numb and naked. Excuse me. Anymore.

‘There is the dark then. I am telling you. There was food in the dark, yes, mush food in the hush dark room. He ate with his hands. Excuse me. I mean Peter did. And if I am Peter, so much the better. That is to say, so much the worse. Excuse me. I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. Thank you.

‘Poor Peter Stillman. A little boy he was. Barely a few words of his own. And then no words, and then no one, and then no, no, no. Anymore.

‘Forgive me, Mr Auster. I see that I am making you sad. No questions, please. My name is Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Mr Sad. What is your name, Mr Auster? Perhaps you are the real Mr Sad, and I am no one.

‘Boo hoo. Excuse me. Such is my weeping and wailing. Boo hoo, sob sob. What did Peter do in that room? No one can say. Some say nothing. As for me, I think that Peter could not think. Did he blink? Did he drink? Did he stink? Ha ha ha. Excuse me. Sometimes I am so funny.

‘Wimble click crumblechaw beloo. Clack clack bedrack. Numb noise, flackemuch, chewmanna. Ya, ya, ya. Excuse me. I am the only one who understands these words.

‘Later and later and later. So they say. It went on too long for Peter to be right in the head. Never again. No, no, no. They say that someone found me. I do not remember. No, I do not remember what happened when they opened the door and the light came in. No, no, no. I can say nothing about any of this. Anymore.

‘For a long time I wore dark glasses. I was twelve. Or so they say. I lived in a hospital. Little by little, they taught me how to be Peter Stillman. They said: you are Peter Stillman. Thank you, I said. Ya, ya, ya. Thank you and thank you. I said.

‘Peter was a baby. They had to teach him everything. How to walk, you know. How to eat. How to make caca and pipi in the toilet. That wasn’t bad. Even when I bit them, they didn’t do the boom, boom, boom. Later, I even stopped tearing off my clothes.

‘Peter was a good boy. But it was hard to teach him words. His mouth did not work right. And of course he was not all there in his head. Ba ba ba, he said. And da da da. And wa wa wa. Excuse me. It took more years and years. Now they say to Peter: you can go now, there’s nothing more we can do for you. Peter Stillman, you are a human being, they said. It is good to believe what doctors say. Thank you. Thank you so very much.

‘I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. My real name is Peter Rabbit. In the winter I am Mr White, in the summer I am Mr Green. Think what you like of this. I say it of my own free will. Wimble click crumblechaw beloo. It is beautiful, is it not? I make up words like this all the time. That can’t be helped. They just come out of my mouth by themselves. They cannot be translated.

‘Ask and ask, it does no good. But I will tell you. I don’t want you to be sad, Mr Auster. You have such a kind face. You remind me of a somesuch or a groan, I don’t know which. And your eyes look at me. Yes, yes. I can see them. That is very good. Thank you.

‘That is why I will tell you. No questions, please. You are wondering about all the rest. That is to say, the father. The terrible father who did all those things to little Peter. Rest assured. They took him to a dark place. They locked him up and left him there. Ha ha ha. Excuse me. Sometimes I am so funny.

‘Thirteen years, they said. That is perhaps a long time. But I know nothing of time. I am new every day. I am born when I wake up in the morning, I grow old during the day, and I die at night when I go to sleep. It is not my fault. I am doing so well today. I am doing so much better than I have ever done before.

‘For thirteen years the father was away. His name is Peter Stillman too. Strange, is it not? That two people can have the same name? I do not know if that is his real name. But I do not think he is me. We are both Peter Stillman. But Peter Stillman is not my real name. So perhaps I am not Peter Stillman, after all.

‘Thirteen years I say. Or they say. It makes no difference. I know nothing of time. But what they tell me is this. Tomorrow is the end of thirteen years. That is bad. Even though they say it is not, it is bad. I am not supposed to remember. But now and then I do, in spite of what I say.

‘He will come. That is to say, the father will come. And he will try to kill me. Thank you. But I do not want that. No, no. Not anymore. Peter lives now. All is not right in his head, but still he lives. And that is something, is it not? You bet your bottom dollar. Ha ha ha.

‘I am mostly now a poet. Every day I sit in my room and write another poem. I make up all the words myself, just like when I lived in the dark. I begin to remember things that way, to pretend that I am back in the dark again. I am the only one who knows what the words mean. They cannot be translated. These poems will make me famous. Hit the nail on the head. Ya, ya ya. Beautiful poems. So beautiful the world will weep.

‘Later perhaps I will do something else. After I am done being a poet. Sooner or later I will run out of words, you see. Everyone has just so many words inside him. And then were will I be? I think I would like to be a fireman after that. And after that a doctor. It makes no difference. The last thing I will be is a high-wire walker. When I am very old and have at last learned how to walk like other people. Then I will dance on the wire, and people will be amazed. Even little children. That is what I would like. To dance on the wire until I die.

‘But no matter. It makes no difference. To me. As you can see, I am a rich man. I do not have to worry. No, no. Not about that. You bet your bottom dollar. The father was rich, and little Peter got all his money after they locked him up in the dark. Ha ha ha. Excuse me for laughing. Sometimes I am so funny.

‘I am the last of the Stillmans. That was quite a family, or so they say. From old Boston, in case you might have heard of it. I am the last one. There are no others. I am the end of everyone, the last man. So much the better, I think. It is not a pity that it should all end now. It is good for everyone to be dead.

‘The father was perhaps not really bad. At least I say so now. He had a big head. As big as very big, which meant there was too much room in there. So many thoughts in that big head of his. But poor Peter, was he not? And in terrible straits indeed. Peter who could not see or say, who could not think or do. Peter who could not. No. Not anything.

‘I know nothing of any of this. Nor do I understand. My wife is the one who tells me these things. She says it is important for me to know, even if I do not understand. But even this I do not understand. In order to know, you must understand. Is that not so? But I know nothing. Perhaps I am Peter Stillman, and perhaps I am not. My real name is Peter Nobody. Thank you. And what do you think of that?

‘So I am telling you about the father. It is a good story, even if I do not understand it. I can tell it to you because I know the words. And that is something, is it not? To know the words I mean. Sometimes I am so proud of myself! Excuse me. This is what my wife says. She says father talked about God. That is a funny word to me. When you put it backwards, it spells dog. And a dog is not much like God, is it? Woof woof. Bow wow. Those are dog words. I think they are beautiful. So pretty and true. Like the words I make up.

‘Anyway, I was saying the father talked about God. He wanted to know if God had a language. Don’t ask me what this means. I am only telling you because I know the words. The father thought a baby might speak it if the baby saw no people. But what baby was there? Ah. Now you begin to see. You did not have to buy him. Of course, Peter knew some people words. That could not be helped. But the father thought maybe Peter would forget them. After a while. That is why there was so much boom, boom, boom. Every time Peter said a word, his father would boom him. At last Peter learned to say nothing. Ya ya ya. Thank you.

‘Peter kept the words inside him. All those days and months and years. There in the dark, little Peter alone, and the words made noise in his head and kept him company. This is why his mouth does not work right. Poor Peter. Boo hoo. Such are his tears. The little boy who can never grow up.

‘Peter can talk like people now. But he still has the other words in his head. They are God’s language, and no one else can speak them. They cannot be translated. That is why Peter lives so close to God. That is why he is a famous poet.

‘Everything is so good for me now. I can do whatever I like. Any time, any place. I even have a wife. You can see that. I mentioned her before. Perhaps you have even met her. She is beautiful, is she not? Her name is Virginia. That is not her real name. But that makes no

difference. To me.

‘Whenever I ask, my wife gets a girl for me. They are whores. I put my worm inside them and they moan. There have been so many. Ha ha. They come up here and I fuck them. It feels good to fuck. Virginia gives them money and everyone is happy. You bet your bottom dollar. Ha ha.

‘Poor Virginia. She does not like to fuck. That is to say, with me. Perhaps she fucks another. Who can say? I know nothing of this. It makes no difference. But maybe if you are nice to Virginia she will let you fuck her. It would make me happy. For your sake. Thank you.

‘So. There are a great many things. I am trying to tell them to you. I know that all is not right in my head. And it is true, yes, and I say this of my own free will, that sometimes I just scream and scream. For no good reason. As if there had to be a reason. But for none that I can see. Or anyone else. No. And then there are the times when I say nothing. For days and days on end. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I forget how to make the words come out of my mouth. Then it is hard for me to move. Ya ya. Or even to see. That is when I become Mr Sad.

‘I still like to be in the dark. At least sometimes. It does me good, I think. In the dark I speak God’s language and no one can hear me. Do not be angry, please. I cannot help it.

‘Best of all, there is the air. Yes. And little by little, I have learned to live inside it. The air and the light, yes, that too, the light that shines on all things and puts them there for my eyes to see. There is the air and the light and this best of all. Excuse me. The air and the light. Yes. When the weather is good, I like to sit by the open window. Sometimes I look out and watch the things below. The streets and all the people, the dogs and cars, the bricks of the building across the way. And then there are the times when I close my eyes and just sit there, with the breeze blowing on my face, and the light inside the air, all around me and just beyond my eyes, and the

world all red, a beautiful red inside my eyes, with the sun shining on me and my eyes.

‘It is true that I rarely go out. It is hard for me, and I am not always to be trusted. Sometimes I scream. Do not be angry with me, please. I cannot help it. Virginia says I must learn how to behave in public. But sometimes I cannot help myself, and the screams just come out of me.

‘But I do love going to the park. There are the trees, and the air, and the light. There is good in all that, is there not? Yes. Little by little, I am getting better inside myself. I can feel it. Even Dr Wyshnegradsky says so. I know that I am still the puppet boy. That cannot be helped. No, no. Anymore. But sometimes I think I will at last grow up and become real.

‘For now, I am still Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. I cannot say who I will be tomorrow. Each day is new, and each day I am born again. I see hope everywhere, even in the dark, and when I die I will perhaps become God.

‘There are many more words to speak. But I do not think I will speak them. No. Not today. My mouth is tired now, and I think the time has come for me to go. Of course, I know nothing of time. But that makes no difference. To me. Thank you very much. I know you will save my life, Mr Auster, I am counting on you. Life can last just so long, you understand. Everything else is in the room, with darkness, with God’s language, with screams. Here I am of the air, a beautiful thing for the light to shine on. Perhaps you will remember that. I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. Thank you very much.’

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