



Dutch Crossing

Journal of Low Countries Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ydtc20>

The Imitation Game. Russian Pseudonyms and Pseudo-Translations in Dutch Literature

Claudia Zeller

To cite this article: Claudia Zeller (2021) The Imitation Game. Russian Pseudonyms and Pseudo-Translations in Dutch Literature, *Dutch Crossing*, 45:2, 133-146, DOI: [10.1080/03096564.2021.1943624](https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2021.1943624)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2021.1943624>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 26 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 438



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



The Imitation Game. Russian Pseudonyms and Pseudo-Translations in Dutch Literature

Claudia Zeller

Dutch Studies, Department of European and Comparative Literature and Language Studies, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Pseudo-translations are a recurring phenomenon within literary history. This article examines three Dutch authors who, towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, opted for a Russian pseudonym. Using Jérôme Meizoz' notion of posture, this article charts the trajectory of these literary scams and explores the rules of this imitation game through contextual, paratextual and textual evidence while also looking on the impact of these mystifications on the career of the respective authors. Finally, the works of the three fake Russians and their reception can also shed light on the place and prestige Russian literature held in the literary field of the Netherlands during a period in which Russian literature was less accessible than today.

KEYWORDS

Pseudo-translations; Dutch literature; Herman Heijermans; Maurits Dekker; Russian Pseudonyms

Introduction

On May 18 1893, the one-act play *Ahasverus* premiered in the *Salon des Variétés*, a small theatre venue situated in the heart of Amsterdam near Rembrandtplein. Announced as a play by Ivan Jelakowitch, a supposedly recently deceased Russian-Jewish playwright, it was favourably received by both the public and the critics. What neither the theatre-goers nor the critics knew however, was that they were witness to a clever *mise-en-scène* of a literary scam. Roughly three weeks later, in a two-part article appearing on two consecutive days in *De Telegraaf*, Herman Heijermans revealed himself as the proper author of the play, stating that he had intended *Ahasverus* as a playful mystification [*grappige mystificatie*] and a small act of vengeance [*kleine wraakoefening*].¹ His debut play *Dora Kremer* having premiered in Rotterdam on April 25 of the same year, Heijermans was dismayed with the scathing reviews it had received and thus decided to trick the critics – by presenting *Ahasverus* as a translation from an unknown Russian writer with a woeful backstory, Heijermans wanted to show that ‘there was something rotten in the state der Hollandsche dagbladkritiek.’² Both the original mystification and the attention its reveal had garnered worked in Heijermans’ favour: what had started as a pseudo-translation would soon turn into a play translated into various European languages and be produced on stage all across Europe.

CONTACT Claudia Zeller  claudia.zeller@univie.ac.at  Department of Dutch Studies, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Heijermans was not the only Dutch author who, towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, opted to present one of his works through a forged Russian connection. After having published a couple of rather tepidly received novels, Maurits Dekker decided to take a page out of Heijermans' playbook: his fourth novel *Waarom ik niet krankzinning ben* [*Why I am Not Insane*] (1929) was presented as being written by the Russian author Boris Robazki and translated by A. Bakels³ – an existing person working as a translator and a friend of Dekker, but also a pseudonym that Dekker had used on more than one occasion.⁴ Finally, although technically not a pseudo-translation, the Russian-sounding nom de plume 'Ilja Destinow' that the poet Joseph Viegen adopted when publishing his three collections of poetry (*Renwagens*, 1933; *Music Hall*, 1935; *Karmijn*, 1938) did nevertheless influence the reception of his work. As Anton van Duinkerken, one of the foremost literary critics of the interwar period noted in *De Tijd*:

The young poet from Limburg who calls himself Ilja Destinow is named neither Ilja nor Destinow, but that he chose an alias that sounds so strikingly Russian must count for something. [...] The passionate whirlwind of words that Dostoyefski's heroes are famous for must have left a deep impression on Destinow.⁵

Although Van Duinkerken suggests that the choice for a Russian-sounding alias was due to the personal taste and obsessions of the author, there is a case to be made that the three fake Russians introduced above point to a broader literary phenomenon. What motivated these authors to present their work as a pseudo-translation, why did they opt for a Russian persona, and how, if at all, did these mystifications influence their respective careers?

Of the three writers discussed in this article, Heijermans is without a doubt the most renowned, not only on an international stage but also within the literary context of the Netherlands. Viegen, on the other hand, never gained any traction beyond his native province of Limburg. Yet it is exactly this discrepancy in status and fame – as well as the fact that each pseudo-translation pertains to a different literary genre – that can help elucidate the conditions of a successful mystification. Using Jérôme Meizoz' concept of posture, this article maps out the use of Russian pseudo-translations as a literary practice during a period in which the Dutch readership was primed to appreciate works of Russian authors – mostly and specifically the great novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy – that up until the early twentieth century were not translated directly from Russian but from either French or German.⁶ Relying on French or German as an intermediary language indicates the relative absence of in-depth knowledge of the Russian language and Russian literature.⁷ The combination of these factors amounted to the perfect circumstances for Dutch writers who wanted to engage in a little game of make-believe. Read through Jérôme Meizoz' concept of posture, the conception, reception and reveal of these pseudo-translations can also shed light on the status of Russian literature within the Dutch literary field towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Posture and Pseudo-translations

Every author is constantly performing and renegotiating their position within the literary field through various modes of self-presentation.⁸ This may entail the use of pseudonyms

that, depending on the cultural context, can be situated somewhere between a playful gesture and, if the author in question might otherwise face persecution or oppression, a bare necessity. In open, democratic societies, writers often employ pseudonyms due to a wish to reinvent themselves or to take literary criticism to task and test whether critics judge a book not by its cover, nor by the author's name, but by its literary quality. According to Meizoz, it is thus possible to regard pseudonyms as 'un indice postural' – in other words: as a sign of the game the writers are engaged in.⁹

Pseudo-translations could be said to function as the extended version of this literary game of make-believe, combining a variety of techniques related to the idea of performance and renegotiation. Echoing Meizoz' classification of the use of pseudonyms, Beatrijs Vanacker and Tom Toremans distinguish several functions of pseudo-translations, describing them as a 'mystifying (and often playful) gesture'¹⁰ that can help introduce new genres or aesthetic features into a given literary field. Moreover, pseudo-translations may serve an emancipatory function that 'contributes [...] to authors' individual careers.'¹¹ Lastly, pseudo-translations reveal the inner workings of a given literary field and the prestige that translations as such or translations from a specific source language may confer within that field.¹²

A successful pseudo-translation creates what Isabelle Collombat refers to as an 'illusion of veracity'.¹³ There are several paratextual features that contribute to creating this illusion. As David Martens suggests, most pseudo-translations imitate 'les protocoles de présentation coutumiers d'un type de texte particulier'¹⁴, meaning that they follow the established conventions of how a translation is generally presented. This may include obvious elements such as a reference to the original title as well as mentioning from which language and by whom the text was translated. Another of those common features of translations that pseudo-translations imitate is the inclusion of a post- or preface, written by the supposed translator, and containing a short biography of the author, hence lending credibility to their existence. Finally, the use of footnotes that clarify the supposed choices of the translator or that explain a strange reference are another common example of paratextual elements in pseudo-translations that take their cue from the existing conventions of regular translations.

Apart from these rather straightforward techniques, there are also more elaborate ways in which pseudo-translations play with the vested norms of the literary field into which they aim to insert themselves. For instance, they might be presented as the first printed edition based on a translation of a hitherto unpublished manuscript. The absence of a printed edition in the source language helps obscure the fact that there never was one to begin with – it 'helps to keep the secret'.¹⁵ Yet as we shall see, neither of the works discussed in this article used a preface or postface in their first edition. In fact, if anything, the paratextual elements indicating that the reader was dealing with a translation were kept to a bare minimum. The second editions of both *Ahasverus* (1911) and *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* (1946) however, published long after the reveal of their true author, did feature a preface in which the authors themselves detailed the origin stories of their works.

A last factor that comes into play when discussing pseudo-translations with regard to posture can be related to the distinction Daniël Rovers makes between the figure of the author [*auteursfiguur*] and the author's figure [*figuurauteur*].¹⁶ Whereas the author's figure pertains to the image of the author that influences the reception of their works and

can thus be situated on a paratextual and contextual level, the figure of the author, emerging through their works and thus situated on a textual level, could also be referred to as their 'literary idiolect'.¹⁷ With regard to pseudo-translations, the illusion of veracity is not only enhanced and sustained by paratextual elements, but also by textual elements. Here again, it is possible to distinguish various strategies. Whereas *Ahasverus* references an existing city and locates the setting in a small village close to Nizhni Novgorod in Central Russia, the locations in *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* are kept extraordinarily vague, being referenced only as 'village S.'¹⁸ and 'city M.'¹⁹ The next paragraph provides a more in-depth analysis of the interplay between these contextual, paratextual and textual elements. Such an approach does not look at pseudo-translations as isolated cases but rather takes them as reflections of the evolution of the place and prestige of Russian literature in the Netherlands.

'As long as it's Russian'

Generally, writers relish the fact that a work of fiction is published under their proper name – after all, what Michel Foucault refers to as the 'author's function'²⁰ is still an organizing principle of libraries, bookstores, and literary history as a whole. Adopting a Russian-sounding name is thus a deliberate choice rather than a random act. Apart from being deliberate, it is also strategic. Both Heijermans and Dekker opted for such a mystification towards the beginning of their career and after having seen their earlier work receive some harsh criticism. Heijermans was seething after the critics had bashed *Dora Kremer*, and Dekker was getting tired of his reputation as a 'third-rate, flaccid and sloppy'²¹ writer and his unforgiving critics. Whether it concerned his dystopian novel *C. R. 133* (1926), which led A.M. de Jong to remark that '[I]t is very regrettable, but from whichever angle one approaches this book, it is a failure on all fronts'²² or his more realistic novel *Zijn wereld* (1928), Dekker's writing was almost unanimously deemed deeply flawed.²³

Both Heijermans and Dekker had ample reason to dissimulate their authorship, yet they did so with diverging intentions – whereas Heijermans was outraged by the bad reception of *Dora Kremer*, Dekker was worried that any new novel he would publish would suffer from his reputation as a mediocre writer at best. Dekker thus opted to give *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* his best shot, assuming that his novel would only stand a fair chance if it was not associated with his name:

Whatever I had published was received badly; I was disappointed and discouraged. It was sad to discover that all my efforts had been in vain, that several years of hard work had yielded nothing and that I was exactly where I had started. [...] Actually, in hindsight I should be thankful to my biased judges since their opposition stimulated me to keep going. With grim determination I strived to give *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* my best shot, possessed by a creative fervour that sometimes seemed physically unbearable. When the novel was finished, I knew it to be a victory, first and foremost from myself, and that from then on, I would be able to cope with anything life would throw me.²⁴

Dekker framed the struggle against his critics as a struggle with and against himself. He was convinced that *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* was the best he had written up to this point in his career, and that it would be 'a strong weapon'²⁵ [*een sterk wapen*] to prove his critics wrong. Opting for a Russian pseudonym was a protective measure to ensure the

weapon's effect: 'putting on the armour of pseudonymity' [*het aantrekken van het pantser der pseudonimiteit*]²⁶ thus protected the novel and its imaginary figure of the author from the real-life author's figure.

Heijermans, on the other hand, set out to write an intentionally mediocre play in order to show that authors with an 'exotic' background were held to norms less strict than home-grown playwrights. He doubled down on this stance in the preface to the first edition of *Dora Kremer*:

In Holland, writing an original play is considered a crime.

They attack it as hawks attack their prey.

Everybody picks a piece, until there is nothing left but a stripped skeleton.

That used to be the case.

That still is the case.

That will be the case:

Since Holland is small,

Since unproductive people are ultra-productive when it comes to being vicious.²⁷

Dated 'May 1983', this preface was written around the same time that *Ahasverus* premiered and foreshadowed how Heijermans would try to avenge his debut. Concerning the conception of *Ahasverus*, Heijermans went to considerable lengths to construct an authentic image of Jelakowitch' author's figure. As we shall see, the strategies employed resemble the established conventions of how a translation is 'normally' presented, yet they also contain some hints pointing to the actual author.²⁸ Heijermans enlisted the help of his friend and fellow playwright Frans Mijnsen, who helped supply a short biographical sketch of Jelakowitch that appeared in the *Algemeen Handelsblad* on the day of *Ahasverus*' premiere. In his letter to the editors, signed by 'abonné X.', Mijnsen emphasized that it is only 'in Holland' that Jelakowitch is 'a fairly obscure author'²⁹ [*deze in Holland tamelijk wel onbekenden auteur*] and points to an unnamed English literary magazine as the source of the following biographical information:

I.J. was born in Nizni-Novgorod on December 3 1864. His father, an Israelite, was an affluent merchant who let his son study at the University of Kasan where Ivan suffered from the intolerance of his fellow students. He first studied Oriental Languages before switching to law. Having to leave university when, after the death of his father the government seized his fortune, Ivan did not finish his studies. From 1887 on, Jelakowitch published several works (e.g. "Bathushka") that drew attention. The novel "Zemstoo of Novgorod", a cunning satire on religious tribulation in Russia, was the reason that he was arrested in 1891. After having spent three months in one of Russia's most wretched prisons, he expelled from the country. Having reached Copenhagen and plagued by a lingering disease contracted during his imprisonment, Jelakowitch escaped to London thanks to the help of some friends. He died there about a year ago in great poverty and misery. His "Zemstoo of Novgorod" reminds one of Tolstoy, it is a forcefully written plea for religious freedom.³⁰

Although this letter appeared in a newspaper instead of as a preface to *Ahasverus*, the strategies apparent in Mijnsen's letter could nonetheless be said to function as a paratext

to *Ahasverus*. Not only does it employ the same strategies, it also takes over the introductory function of a preface or translator's note. There are several elements that are noteworthy in the construction of the fictional author's figure. First of all, Jelakowitch is presented as coming from a rather privileged background who received his education at one of the oldest universities of imperial Russia before falling unto hardship after the death of his father.³¹ Referencing existing places and institutions, this information is presented as being verifiable – theoretically, one could ask the Imperial Kazan University for its student records or check the catalogue of a Russian library for the novel *Zemstoo of Novgorod*. The fact that this information is presented as being taken from a British literary magazine only heightens the illusion of verifiability. Secondly, Jelakowitch' novel is compared to the work of Leo Tolstoy – who was still alive at that point and who, together with Dostoevsky, is credited with unleashing a 'Russian craze' in the Dutch literary field towards the end of the nineteenth century. In 1888 already, commenting on this hype that seemed to value origin over originality, a critic remarked that

[N]owadays, one does not get tired of Russian books. The publishers know how to use this hunger to their advantage and continue to deliver all things Russian to an eager public. After the real, genuine Russian masterpieces of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev etc. they first published the lesser-known works of those great writers, then the products of the lesser gods. It did not matter, as long as it was Russian, every book would be well received, even though one actually found it to be puzzling, boring, strange. If it is considered fashionable, one is quick to condone a lot of things.³²

To this day, with a staggering 227 translations, Tolstoy remains by far the Russian author most translated into Dutch, followed by Dostoevsky with 155 translations.³³ The association between Jelakowitch and Tolstoy thus draws on the popularity the works of Tolstoy enjoyed in the Netherlands towards the end of the nineteenth century. As Pieter Boulogne has shown, interest in Russian literature in the Netherlands began with Turgenev who enjoyed a brief moment of fame from 1870 onwards. Up until 1885, he would remain the only Russian author more or less broadly recognized in the Netherlands.³⁴ After 1885, interest in Russian literature took a flight, mostly due to the announcement of Dostoevsky's death.³⁵ Afterwards, interest in Russian literature waxed and waned, oscillating between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and following comparable hypes in France and Germany.³⁶

Since in Heijermans' time there were barely any professional translators in the Netherlands who were able to translate directly from Russian, both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were translated from either the French or German editions. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* was first published in Dutch in 1887, translated by P. Douys from the French and German versions, whereas the first Dutch translation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* [*Schuld en boete*, 1885], published under a translator-pseudonym, drew mostly on the German translation, although the Dutch title takes its cue from the French edition.³⁷ It is due to this absence of Dutch translators who could translate directly from Russian that Heijermans was able to invent such an elaborate backstory for Jelakowitch without having to face queries from critics or academics specialized in Russian literature – although it surely helped that Heijermans appeared so keen on revealing himself as the actual author of *Ahasverus* that he only managed to keep up the charade for a mere three weeks. Dekker would outlast Heijermans, keeping the

identity of Boris Robazki a secret for about two years after the publication of *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*.

There are other ways in which *Ahasverus* differs from Dekker's novel. Where the publication of *Ahasverus* coincided with a growing popularity of Tolstoy and, in its reception, profited from the carefully constructed image of the author's figure, Dekker rode the wave of a renewed interest in Dostoevsky. Although he did not provide a backstory to Robazki, making Robazki a writer without an author's figure, the novel nonetheless profited from the similarities that were drawn between Dostoevsky's author's figure and what could be referred to as Robazki's figure of the author that emerged from the novel. As De Dobbeleer & Van Poucke have suggested, Dekker's main character Vladimir Stefanowitch Wirginski seems to reference a character from Dostoevsky's novel *Demons*, first published in Dutch under the title *Booze geesten* in 1920, whereas the weapon Wirginski uses to kill his wife is an axe – just like in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.³⁸ Whether these similarities were intentional or a happy coincidence, Dekker's ruse worked. In a review in *Het Vaderland*, *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* was described as a typically Russian novel, and Robazki was deemed a 'typical representative' of a literature that 'excites its Western-European readership with its sharpness and provocativeness.' The review alludes to certain 'exotic' features that are presented as inherent to Russian literature such as a 'complete poeticality and a just as complete barbarity' [*een volstrekte dichterlijkheid en een even volstrekte barbaarschheid*].³⁹

Lacking a well-defined author's figure proved to be no disadvantage for Dekker's novel. Situating his mystification on a paratextual and textual level proved to be sufficient to achieve an illusion of veracity. However, just like it was the case with Heijermans, the paratextual elements used by Dekker also contain hints that point to the actual identity of the author of *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*. For instance, the 'original' Russian title, Исповедание человека [*Confessions of a Man*] was printed on the first page, using Cyrillic letters that predate the simplified Cyrillic alphabet introduced by the Soviets after the October Revolution. By 1920, this older alphabet was only used amongst anti-revolutionary émigrés, suggesting that Robazki was either an already deceased author or somebody who had fled Russia before, during or shortly after the revolution.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the title page notes that the novel was 'adapted into Dutch by A. Bakels' [*in het Nederlandsch bewerkt door A. Bakels*]. The omission of the language from which the novel was supposedly translated could be regarded as another strategic choice since Bakels himself mostly translated from French. Apart from Jules Verne's science fiction novels, Bakels had also translated Peter Kropotkin's *The Great French Revolution* (1909) from its French original. *De Fransche revolutie* was published in 1923, meaning that those familiar with Bakels would assume that he could have translated *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* from a presumed French edition. Yet one must not forget that Dekker also employed A. Bakels as a pseudonym. Like Heijermans did when he had Jelakowitch share a birthday with him, Dekker supplied the key to his own mystification. Still, Dekker proved to be a lot more patient than Heijermans – it was not until 1931 that the mystery of Boris Robazki was resolved.

It is possible to argue that it is exactly due to this short period of time between the reveal of Dekker as the actual author of *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* and the publication of Viegen's poetry debut *Renwagens* [*Race cars*] in 1933 that Viegen did not attempt to present his work as a pseudo-translation. Although almost thirty years had

passed between *Ahasverus* and *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*, when discussing Dekker in a letter to Hendrik Marsman, Eddy du Perron remarks that Dekker must be ‘a parvenu and a scoundrel’⁴¹ since ‘this whole joke with the Russian name is a stupid case of plagiarism, since Herman Heyermans Jr. did *exactly the same* thing with his debut.’⁴² Nevertheless, it stands to reason that Dekker’s *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* was the most ‘authentic’ pseudo-translation. After all, after he had not only heard about it but actually read it, Du Perron changed his tone, describing it as both a great novel and the most shameless imitation of Dostoevsky that he had ever read.⁴³ Du Perron’s change in attitude reflects how most critics reacted to Dekker. Before, his novels mostly gathered negative reviews; afterwards, his novels were evaluated more positively.⁴⁴ *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* thus proved to be a watershed moment in his career.

Even though Viegen made no attempt to follow in the footsteps of Heijermans and Dekker, the mere fact that he chose a Russian-sounding alias was sufficient to earn him a comparison to Dostoevsky. Taking the comparison that was made between Heijermans and Tolstoy into account, this seems to indicate a certain complacency that some Dutch critics appeared to be prone to. After all, Dostoevsky is mostly known as a novelist and not as a poet. The same is true for Tolstoy, who did write a couple of drama’s, but is also known first and foremost as a novelist instead of as a playwright. As the anonymous critic remarked in *De portefeuille*: It didn’t matter, as long as it was Russian – and sometimes, it did not even matter whether it was actually Russian after all. Apparently, sometimes a fake imitation could be better than an authentic original. Comparing literature to porcelain, the critic wrote that ‘Delft Blue has also been imitated and indeed, those who know nothing about it seem to prefer the imitation.’⁴⁵ It was exactly this literary hype – and the hypocrisy it led to – that Heijermans attempted to expose with *Ahasverus*.

Beyond the Netherlands: Ahasverus abroad revisited

Whereas Dekker’s mystification has been discussed by various scholars,⁴⁶ Heijermans’ deception has only been alluded to with regard to the broader circulation of his work.⁴⁷ Since *Ahasverus* was eventually translated into several languages, it can show what happens once a pseudo-translation travels abroad. *Ahasverus*’ first destination was France, where it was produced on stage in the Parisian *Théâtre des Menus-Plaisir* by André Antoine, a French actor and theatre manager who is credited with popularizing naturalist theatre in France. A tiny announcement that *Ahasverus* would be shown on June 12 1893 appeared in the French newspaper *Journal des débats* on the eve of June 11 1893. This announcement however made no mention of either Ivan Jelakowitch or the supposed translator W.v.D. Instead, *Ahasverus* was presented as an original work of Heijermans.⁴⁸ This made perfect sense – after all, Heijermans had no French reputation to make or break and his Dutch name fit in perfectly with Antoine’s interest in contemporary Scandinavian, German and Russian playwrights. Antoine would go on to produce the French version of Heijermans’ most famous play *Op hoop van zegen* [The Good Hope] in 1902.

The timeline mentioned above is important. After all, in his article on June 6 in *De Telegraaf*, Heijermans references a letter that he had supposedly received following the announcement of *Ahasvère* in the *Journal des débats* – on June 12:

Tonight, I received the following letter: Dear Mr. Heijermans! In the Saturday evening edition of the *Journal des Débats* we find announced for Monday June 12 at the “Théâtre libre”: “Ahasverus” by Herm. Heijermans Jr. You certainly must have forgotten to mention the name of the Russian writer Ivan Jelakowitch when announcing your French translation. Please alert mister Antoine of this mistake and kindly ask him to rectify it for the next advertisement. Naturally, whether you want to keep your translator’s pseudonym (W.v.D.) is entirely up to you.⁴⁹

Not only is it questionable whether any Dutchmen would have spotted such a tiny announcement of *Ahasvère* in a fairly obscure Parisian newspaper, Heijermans also intentionally scrambled up the timeline. It is unclear whether this letter, signed by Mari Kreukniet and Henri Poolman, who had produced the Dutch version of *Ahasverus*, was a pre-arranged set-up or whether it even exists at all. Yet it adds to *Ahasverus* being ‘one of the most amusing stratagems in modern Dutch Literature.’⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the French version of *Ahasvère* never appeared in print and the announcements do not mention any translator. The identity of *Ahasverus*’ first translator thus remains a mystery.

The first printed translation of *Ahasverus* would appear in 1894 in the German *Magazin für Litteratur*.⁵¹ This translation by Paul Raché was published again in 1905 as a separate edition and included a foreword in which Raché compares Heijermans to ‘Maeterlinck, Wilde, Gorkij’⁵² and stating that Heijermans’ talent is ‘umso höher einzuschätzen, als es völlig selbstständig aus dem Boden der holländischen Dramatik erwachsen ist und zugleich hinausgewachsen ist über alles, was vor ihm die neuere holländische Literatur auf dem Gebiete des Dramas hervorgebracht hat.’⁵³ Although Raché alludes to Heijermans’ mystification, he obviously does not mention that Heijermans intended *Ahasverus* as a mediocre play at best. Rather, Raché places *Ahasverus* within the ever-growing oeuvre of Heijermans and emphasizes that it should be regarded as a precursor to *Ghetto*.⁵⁴

Raché’s translation of *Ahasverus* would provide the basis for the Czech translation that was first published in 1889 – that year, the Czech-Jewish almanac 1898–1899 published Heijermans’ *Ahasverus* in Jaroslav Leyder’s translation.⁵⁵ Being translated into German provided a bridge into Czech, since ‘[a]ll of the Czech translation of the four plays by Heijermans (*Ahasverus*, *Op hoop van zegen*, *Allerzielen*, *Ghetto*) were preceded by translations into German.’⁵⁶ *Ahasverus* would also be translated into Polish (1905) and English (1934). Needless to say, the name Ivan Jelakowitch had vanished from those books’ covers. The Dutch reprint of 1911, however, still carried the name Ivan Jelakowitch, followed by the name of Heijermans between brackets.

Conclusion

Pretending to be somebody else is a common childhood game, situated in the realm of make-believe. Yet pretending to be someone else is a game that, like any game, must adhere to a certain set of rules. Writers also engage in this game when they choose to publish a work under a pseudonym or as a pseudo-translation. This kind of ‘make-believe’ is not a free for all, it is a game that engages with the general rules of the literary field as a whole.

This article focused on Russian pseudo-translations in Dutch literature and examined why authors chose to publish their work via such a detour. Employing Jérôme Meizoz’

concept of posture, it looked at textual, paratextual and contextual features and traced their function in the construction of either a Russian author's figure, a Russian figure of the authors or both. Whereas the mystification of Heijermans' *Ahasverus* used contextual, paratextual and textual elements to construct both an author's figure and a figure of the author, not all of them are necessary for a mystification to succeed. As the case of Dekker's novel has shown, paratextual and textual elements alone can be sufficient in fashioning a compelling figure of the author whose success can be sustained even without an author's figure. Lastly, Viegen's collections of poetry prove that the simple choice of a Russian pseudonym was a clever move even in the absence of other paratextual, contextual or textual elements that sustain the fiction of the pseudo-translation.

Research into pseudo-translations thus not only exposes the rules of the game, but also shows how different literatures and the traditions they draw on can intersect and influence each other during a given period. As it has been argued, all writers discussed in this article profited from the combination of the popularity of Russian literature and its relative inaccessibility. Analysing pseudo-translations through the lens of them being an indicator of posture thus also provides new insights into the status and prestige of 'foreign' literatures within a given literary field.

Notes

1. Heijermans, 'In en om den Schouwburg. "Ahasverus" en "Dora Kremer". Een vertaald-Russisch en oorspronkelijk-Hollands stuk.' *De Telegraaf*, June 6 1893.
2. Ibid.
3. A. Bakels refers to Antonius C. Bakels (1898–1964) who, like Dekker, held anarchist sympathies and worked as a journalist and translator (see Bart de Cort, 'An Old Friend: Anton Bakels (1898–1964)', 3).
4. De Dobbeleer & Van Poucke, 'Literaire hypes in het interbellum: schone leien en de pseudovertalingen van "Jim Dollar" en "Boris Robazki"', 100.
5. De jonge Limburgsche dichter, die zich Ilja Destinow noemt, heet natuurlijk geen Ilja en geen Destinow, maar het beteekent toch wel iets, dat hij zich een schuilnaam koos, die zoo opvallend Russisch klinkt. [...] Welnu, deze woordenroes waarin enkele van Dostoyefski's helden zich hartstochtelijk uitleven, moet op Destinow groten indruk hebben gemaakt. ('Van Duinkerken, 'Over nieuwe poëzie. Ilja Destinow,' 3.)
6. Boulogne, *Het temmen van de Scyth*.
7. The first chair of Slavonic Languages and Literatures was not established until 1913 (See Van den Baar, 'The History of Slavic Studies in the Netherlands.' and Weststeijn, 'Over Het temmen van de Scyth. De vroege Nederlandse receptie van F.M. Dostojevskij van Pieter Boulogne.').
8. Meizoz, 'Postures' d'auteur et poétique,' 51.
9. Ibid.
10. Vanacker & Toremans, 'Pseudotranslations and Metafictionality,' 25.
11. Ibid., 26.
12. See above 10. 27.
13. Collombat, 'Pseudo-translation: la mise en scène de l'altérité,' 150.
14. Martens, 'Du manuscrit à l'imprimé,' 432.
15. Ibid. 435.
16. Rovers, 'Figurauteur versus auteursfiguur. Tonnu Oosterhoff – een casestudy.'
17. Ibid. 208.
18. Dekker, *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* (1929), 12.
19. Ibid. 32.

20. Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur.'
21. 'minderwaardig, slap en slordig.' (De Jong, 'Letterkundige kroniek CCXXI. Maurits Dekker. CR 133. Een toekomstroman. H.P. Leopold. Den Haag 1926')
22. 'Het is zeer betreurenswaardig, maar van welke zijde men dit boek ook nadert, het is aan alle kanten een mislukking.' (Ibid.)
23. 'Gaaf is dit boek geenszins [...].' (Schmitz, 'Zijn wereld.')
24. 'De ontvangst, welke mijn publicaties gekregen hadden was slecht; ik was teleurgesteld en ontmoedigd. Het was triest tot de ontdekking te moeten komen, dat al mijn inspanning tevergeefs geweest was, dat eenige jaren van hard werken tot niets geleid hadden en dat ik even ver was als aan het begin. [...] Eigenlijk moet ik mijn bevooroordeelde rechters achteraf dankbaar zijn, omdat hun tegenwerking mijn wil om door te zetten stimuleerde en een verbetering bij mij opriep, waaruit ik kracht wist te putten. Ik spande mij in om het beste te geven waartoe ik bij machte was en schreef bezeten door een scheppingsdrang, welke soms fysiek bijna ondraaglijk was "Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben". Toen de roman gereed was, wist ik dat ik het gewonnen had, in de eerste plaats van mijzelf en dat ik tegen den verderen strijd, wat deze ook nog zou mogen brengen, was opgewassen.' (Dekker, *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* (1946), 5–7).
25. Ibid. 6.
26. Ibid.
27. 'In Holland is "t schrijven van "n oorspronkelijk stuk een misdaad. / Men valt erop aan, als havikken (sic!) op 'n kreng. / Ieder sleurt 'n brokje mee, tot 'n kaalgevreten skelet overblijft. / Dat was zoo. / Dat is zoo. / Dat zal zoo zijn: / omdat Holland klein is, / omdat improductieve menschen op 't gebied van venijn ultra-productief zijn.' (Heijermans, *Dora Kremer*, v.)
28. For instance, Jelakowitch seems to share a birthday with Heijermans.
29. Mijnsen, 'Jelakowitch.'
30. 'I.J. werd geboren te Nizni-Novgorod den 3en December 1864. Zijn vader, een Israëliet, was een welgesteld koopman, die zijn zoon aan de Universiteit te Kasan liet studeeren, waar Ivan zeer veel te lijden had van de onverdraagzaamheid zijner mede-studenten. Hij legde zich eerst in hoofdzaak toe op Oostersche talen, daarna op de rechten, doch eindigde den cursus niet, daar hij de Universiteit moest verlaten toen zijn vader stierf en de overheid beslag op diens vermogen legde ... Van af 1887 verschenen verschillende werken van Jelakowitch (o. m. „Batushka"), die de aandacht trokken. De roman „Zemstoo of Novgorod", een vlijmende satyre op de godsdienstverdrukking in Rusland, was oorzaak dat hij in 1891 van zijn bed werd opgelicht en, na drie maanden in een der ellendigste gevangenissen te hebben gezocht, over de grenzen werd gezet. In Kopenhagen aanbeland, holpen eenige vrienden den jongen man, die in den kerker eene sleepende ziekte had opgedaan, naar Londen, waar hij nu ongeveer een jaar geleden in de grootste armoede en ellende stierf. De „Zemstoo of Novgorod" doet soms aan Tolstoï denken, het is een krachtig geschreven vurig pleidooi voor godsdienstvrijheid.' (Ibid.)
31. Although the biography of Jelakowitch was intended purely as a joke, Jelakowitch shares some biographical details with one of the future leaders of the Soviet Union, since Lenin also studied law at the Imperial Kazan University before being expelled – albeit for different reasons.
32. 'Van Russische boeken wordt men tegenwoordig niet moe. De uitgevers weten met dezen trek hun voordeel te doen, en zij gaan voort Russisch te leveren aan het grage publiek. Op de echte, onvervalschte Russische meesterstukken van Dostoievsky, Tolstoï, Turgeniew enz. volgden eerst minder bekende werken van deze groote schrijvers en daarna de voortbrengsels van mindere goden. 't Deed er niet toe, als het maar Russisch was, kon elk boek rekenen op een goed onthaal; al vond men het ook eigenlijk onbegrijpelijk, vervelend, raar; wanneer het een mode-artikel geldt, ziet men immers veel door de vingers.' (Anonymous in *De portefeuille* (1888), 12, cited in Boulogne, *Het temmen van de Scyth*, 216–217.)
33. Waegemans, Willemsen and Severiens, *Bibliography of Russian Literature in Dutch Translation*, 16.
34. Boulogne, *Het temmen van de Scyth*, 173.

35. Ibid. 175
36. Boulogne, ‘The French influence in the early Dutch reception of F.M. Dostoevsky’s Brat’ja Karamazovy.’ and) and Boulogne, *Het temmen van de Scyth*.
37. Supposedly translated by Peter Kuknos, the first Dutch translation of *Crime and Punishment* appeared in 1885. Although efforts have been made to identify the translator, the identity of Peter Kuknos remains a secret to this day. Boulogne, *Het temmen van de Scyth*, 190.
38. De Dobbeleer & Van Poucke, ‘Literaire hypes in het interbellum: schone leien en de pseudovertalingen van “Jim Dollar” en “Boris Robazki”,’ 101–102.
39. W., ‘Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben, door Boris Robazki,’ 3.
40. It could also have been a little joke between friends, since both Bakels, the supposed translator, and Dekker were sympathetic to the socialist cause.
41. ‘In ieder geval lijkt het mij een schoft en een patjepeeër. (Du Perron, *Brieven. Deel 2*, 492.)
42. ‘P.S. Je kunt er overigens bij vertellen dat de heele grap met de Russische naam al een stupide plagiaat is, omdat Herman Heyermans Jr. bij zijn debuut *precies hetzelfde* heeft gedaan.’ (Ibid.) What Du Perron conveniently seems to have forgotten was that he had also made his entry on the literary scene by means of a mystification – his ‘forgotten’ debut, that he later called his hors d’oeuvre, was presented as a found French manuscript, titled simply *Manuscrit trouvé dans une poche, Chronique de la conversion de Bodor Guila, étranger* (1923), supposedly written by the aspiring young poet later turned psychiatric patient Bodor Guila.
43. ‘[. . .] het is op bedriegelijke wijze een gave, sterke, zelfs “grootte” roman. Maar . . . het is één aftapsel van Dostojevsky, en ook dat is griezelig knap gedaan, en zelfs vol met 100 details, die alleen een “volwaardig” schrijver kan vinden; het is werkelijk de beste, maar ik geloof dan ook: de meest schaamteloze, Dostojevsky-imitatie die ik ooit las.’ (Du Perron, *Brieven. Deel 3*, 402.)
44. See for instance Van Duinkerken: ‘Met groote verwachting werd inmiddels uitgezien naar ‘Amsterdam’, een roman door Maurits Dekker. Deze ‘rhapsodie’ [. . .] bevestigde, trots zijn grilligen bouw en zijn weinig evenwichtigen stijl, het reeds gewekte vermoeden, dat Dekker zeer talentrijk moest zijn.’ (‘Het boek van de week’, 3) or Jan Schepens: ‘Na den verbijsterend heerlijken indruk, dien “Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben” op ons liet, zeiden we van te voren: “Amsterdam” kan onmogelijk dit boek overtreffen, moet minder goed zijn. [. . .] Deze geestige satire op Nederland’s hoofdstad kan het inderdaad niet halen bij het werk van Boris Robazki. En toch is het een verduiveld levend en boeiend boek, getuigend van een alzijdig begaafden geest en van een kombatief temperament.’ (‘Maurits Dekker over Amsterdam’, 417.)
45. ‘[O]k Delftsch heeft men nagebootst en inderdaad, die niet al te veel verstand van het artikel hebben vinden het namaaksel eigenlijk mooier dan het andere.’ (Anonymous in *De portefeuille* (1888), 13, cited in Boulogne, *Het temmen van de Scyth*, 217.)
46. See for instance Coudenys (1993), Weststeijn (2009) and De Dobbeleer and Van Poucke (2016).
47. See for instance Sedláčková (2018) and Sedláčková (2019) for the reception of Heijermans in the Czech Republic, Michajlova and Tcherkasski (2019) for the Russian context and Flaxman (1954) for an early overview of Heijermans’ plays in translation, with a special focus on the Anglophone world.
48. See <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12,148/bpt6k466360w/f4.item.r=ahasv%C3%A8re#>
49. ‘Het volgend schrijven ontvang ik heden-avond: Geachte heer Heijermans! In het „Journal des Débats” van Zaterdag-avond vinden wij voor Maandag 12 Juni bij het „Théâtre libre” geannonceerd: „Ahasverus”, van Herm. Heijermans Jr. Gij hebt bepaald bij uwe Fransche vertaling den naam van den Russischen schrijver Ivan Jelakowitch vergeten. Maak s. v. p. onmiddellijk den heer Antoine op deze vergissing attent en verzoek hem die bij de volgende annonce te herstellen. Of gij uw pseudoniem als vertaler (W. v. D.) al of niet volhoudt, is natuurlijk uw zaak.’ (Heijermans, ‘In en om den Schouwburg. “Ahasverus” en “Dora Kremer”. Een vertaald-Russisch en oorspronkelijk-Hollands stuk.’)
50. Flaxman, *Herman Heijermans and His Dramas*, 22.

51. Van Uffelen, *Moderne Niederländische Literatur im Deutschen Sprachraum 1830– 1990*, 168.
52. Raché, 'Vorwort', 1.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid. 7. *Ghetto* was translated into German in 1903. (Van Uffelen, *Moderne Niederländische Literatur im Deutschen Sprachraum 1830– 1990*, 167.)
55. Sedláčková, 'Circulatie van Nederlandstalig toneel in Tsjechië, 1889– 1989', 168.
56. Sedláčková, 'From the Centre to the Periphery: Czech Reception of Herman Heijermans' Dramatic Works in a Cultural-Historical Perspective', 72.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Claudia Zeller studied Cultural Analysis and Dutch Literature at the University of Amsterdam. She worked as a lecturer at the Dutch Department at the Sorbonne-Université and is currently a PhD fellow at the Dutch Department of the University of Vienna where she prepares a thesis about bureaucracy in Dutch literature from the early 21st century.

References

- Boulogne, Pieter. "The French influence in the early Dutch reception of F.M. Dostoevsky's *Brat'ja Karamazovy*." *Babel* 55, no. 3 (2009): 264–284. doi:10.1075/babel.55.3.04bou.
- Boulogne, Pieter. *Het temmen van de Scyth. De vroege Nederlandse receptie van F.M. Dostojevskij*. Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2011.
- Collombat, Isabelle. "Pseudo-traduction: La mise en scène de l'altérité." *Le Langage et l'Homme* 38, no. 1 (2003): 144–156.
- Coudenys, Wim. "De ideale vertaling heeft geen origineel: Russische pseudo-vertalingen in de Nederlandse literatuur." *yang* 160-161 (1993): 75–81.
- De Cort, Bart. "An Old Friend: Anton Bakels (1898-1964)." *On the Waterfront. Newsletter of the Friends of the IISH* 35 (2018): 3–4.
- De Dobbeleer, Michel, and Piet Van Poucke. "Literaire hypes in het interbellum: schone leien en de pseudovertalingen van 'Jim Dollar' en 'Boris Robazki'." *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire inter-ferenties* 19 (2016): 89–106.
- Dekker, Maurits [Boris Robazki]. *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*. Den Haag: H.P. Leoppold, 1929.
- Dekker, Maurits. *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1946.
- Du Perron, Eddy. *Brieven. Deel 2. 1 januari 1930–31 maart 1931*, eds. Piet Delen. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1978a.
- Du Perron, Eddy. *Brieven. Deel 3. 1 april 1931–31 december 1932*, eds. Piet Delen. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1978b.
- Flaxman, Seymour L. *Herman Heijermans and His Dramas*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954.
- Foucault, Michel. "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur." *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 63, no. 3 (1969): 73–104.
- Heijermans, Herman. "In en om den Schouwburg. 'Ahasverus' en 'Dora Kremer'. Een vertaald-Russisch en oorspronkelijk-Hollands stuk." *De Telegraaf* (June 6 1893b): 2.
- Heijermans, Herman. "In en om den Schouwburg. 'Ahasverus' en 'Dora Kremer'. Een vertaald-Russisch en oorspronkelijk-Hollands stuk [Slot.]." *De Telegraaf* (June 7 1893c): 2.
- Heijermans, Herman. *Dora Kremer*. Amsterdam: H.J.W. Becht, 1893a.
- Heijermans, Herman. *Ahasverus*. Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor goede en goedkoope lectuur, 1911.

- Jong, A.M. de. 'Letterkundige kroniek CCXXI. Maurits Dekker. CR 133. Een toekomstroman. H.P. Leopold. Den Haag 1926'. In: *Het Volk* (4 December 1926): vierde blad.
- Martens, David. "Du manuscrit à l'imprimé. La pseudo-translation comme rite d'institution auctorial." *Les Lettres romanes* 67, no. 3–4 (2013): 431–446. doi:10.1484/J.LLR.1.103541.
- Meizoz, Jérôme. "Postures' d'auteur et poétique." In *L'œil sociologue et la littérature*, 51–65. Geneva: Slatkine Erudition, 2004.
- Michajlova, Irina, and Sergei Tcherkasski. "Towards a History of Russian Translations of Dutch Literature: Herman Heijermans and His Play *the Good Hope* in Russia." In *Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature*, edited by d'Haen Theo, 161–182. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
- Mijnssen, Frans. "Jelakowitch." *Algemeen Handelsblad* (May 18 1893), Avondblad, Eerste blad.
- Raché, Paul. "Vorwort." In *Ahasver. Schauspiel in einem Aufzug, 1-7*. Leipzig: Reclam, 1904.
- Rovers, Daniël. "Figuurauteur versus auteursfiguur. Tonnus Oosterhoff – een casestudy." *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 13, no. 3 (2008): 204–218.
- Schepens, Jan. "Maurits Dekker over Amsterdam." *De Tijdstroom* 2, no. 9 (1932): 417–423.
- Schmitz, Marie. "Zijn wereld." *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (January 26 1929): 3.
- Sedláčková, Lucie. "Circulatie van Nederlandstalig toneel in Tsjechië, 1889 – 1989." *Neerlandica Wratislaviensia XXVIII* (2018): 165–181.
- Sedláčková, Lucie. "From the Centre to the Periphery: Czech Reception of Herman Heijermans' Dramatic Works in a Cultural-Historical Perspective." *Germanistica Pragensia* 3 (2019): 71–82.
- van den Baar, A.H. "The History of Slavic Studies in the Netherlands." In *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Slawistik in nichtslawischen Ländern*, edited by Josef Hamm and Günther Wytrzens, 317–360. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985.
- van Duinkerken, Anton. "Het boek van de week." *De Tijd* (June 4 1932): 3.
- van Duinkerken, Anton. "Over nieuwe poëzie. Ilja Destinow." *De Tijd* (April 25 1938): 3.
- Van Uffelen, Herbert. *Moderne Niederländische Literatur im Deutschen Sprachraum 1830-1990*. Münster: Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien, 1993.
- Vanacker, Beatrijs, and Tom Toremans. "Pseudotranslations and Metafictionality." *Interférences littéraires/Littéraire interferences* 19 (2016): 25–38.
- Viegen, Joseph [Ilja Destinow]. *Renwagens*. Maastricht: J.W. Veltman, 1933.
- W.,L. "Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben, door Boris Robazki." *Het Vaderland* (October 29 1929): 3. Avondblad B.
- Waegemans, Emmanuel, Cees Willemsen, and Huub Severiens. *Bibliografie van Russische literatuur in Nederlandse vertaling, 1789 – 2020*. Online: <http://www.benerus.be/cms/wp-content/uploads/BIBLIOGRAFIE-2020.pdf> (last accessed on February 27 2021)
- Weststeijn, Willem G. "Boris Robazki's *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*." *Tijdschrift voor Slavische literatuur* 54 (2009): 66–72.
- Weststeijn, Willem G. "Over *Het temmen van de Scyth*. De vroege Nederlandse receptie van F.M. Dostojevskij van Pieter Boulogne." *Filter* 19, no. 4 (2012): 49–55.