In 2.3 the girl compares her lover to an apple tree, and she says that she enjoys sitting in the shadow. The Hebrew text has *btslw*, the word for "shadow" being provided with a possessive suffix for 3rd person masculine singular. Since the word for "apple tree" is masculine, *btslw* can be rendered either "its shadow" or "his shadow". The Hebrew poet did not have to make the distinction which the gender systems of both Swedish and English force us to make: either "its" or "his". In the original the unity of imagery and reality finds expression also in the double reference of the suffix, whereas our languages do not allow this poetical oscillation. (Incidentally, the Germans are in a better position, *Apfelbaum* being masculine like the Hebrew word: *in seinem Schatten* is exactly as pregnant with meaning as the original). We have to write either "its shadow" (like the Swedish version of 1917), which is perhaps a trifle pedantic, or "his shadow" (that is our choice), which seems a little clumsier than the original. The whole problem could of course be regarded as a minor detail of little significance—but minor details happen to be of great importance in poetry.

I have only been able to discuss a few examples of different kinds of problems in the Song of Songs. If this article has given the impression that translation of the Hebrew Bible is a very difficult task, then I have not failed completely. Few people are endowed with a talent both for singing and for pruning; that is why our translation is made not by a single translator but by a team.

AGNETA PLEIJEL

AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR: the Stylist's Work with the Song of Songs

The author is a writer based in Stockholm.

To be asked over the phone by the Swedish Bible Commission in Uppsala to take part, as a stylist, in the new translation of the Song of Songs was a very special sensation: somewhat frightening, but also thrilling. After all, this is one of the most beloved of the biblical books, if not the most popular one. When we talk about the declining interest in the Bible in modern times, an exception is often made for the Song of Songs. It has formed a national literary tradition of its own in every European language, and Swedish is no exception.

The decision by the Bible Commission to include a contemporary Swedish author in the body of translators of the new Bible translation is, I understand, almost unique. What use is a writer who does not know the source language? My first task was to take part in the work on the Psalms. For the last few years I have been occupied with the Song of Songs. The stylist should, of course, with knowledge and experience of modern Swedish, be of help in questions of style. Is that all? The stylist is in certain respects an amateur among the other translators. It can be a disadvantage.

It can also be helpful from time to time to have an observant "outer eye" in the collective work of a modern Bible translation. Given the suggestions from the stylist, even suggestions that are "wrong" or impossible in relation to the source language, the philologists can be forced to defend their positions in a way that

sometimes opens up new ideas during the slow transformation from source language to target language. That is, at least, one of the reasons that the admirable body of translators in Uppsala gave me when I asked what use we, the stylists, are.

Does the presence of a contemporary writer help the translation to become more "modern", more adapted to contemporary readers? Perhaps. But in my experience, it might just as well work the other way around. Within the body of translators in Uppsala, I have found a notable sensitivity towards the use of contemporary Swedish—in respect of what a non-scholarly audience can understand or will misunderstand. As a consequence, I have found a certain reluctance to use words and expressions that are looked upon as abandoned by modernity. The stylists are sometimes, I have found, more "conservative"—more insistent on keeping elements that are not immediately understood, but which have poetical and/or enigmatic qualities.

I would not call it conservatism—I would rather say that the presence of stylists can sometimes help to broaden the outlook on what can be brought into modern Swedish. Language is a continuous meld of old and new. Translating the Bible is a careful balancing act. The collective aim is to find a contemporary language of strength, beauty, simplicity and clarity, as far as possible avoiding the clichés of religious and literary traditions.

The stylist has of course to depend, more than the philologists, on his or her "feelings" about language. He has to make use of intuition, imagination, musicality and potentiality of association; in other words, to rely on personal linguistic experience that cannot always be formulated verbally. Linguistic "feeling" is of course needed by every member of a translation group, but the faculties mentioned above are qualities that made the stylist choose to become a writer (and in due time be chosen by the Bible Commission to co-operate).

In this respect the stylist is not an amateur but works in immediate connection with his own profession. I was originally trained in the field of history of literature; from there I made my way into literary criticism. This coincided with involvement in the theatre, as a playwright working with directors, actors and theatre audiences. From there I went on to write and publish poetry. This expanded into the experience of becoming a novelist. I feel that all these fields proved useful when it came to co-operating in translating the Song of Songs.

Firstly, the Song of Songs has the qualities of a drama. How it could have been performed, if at all, we do not know. One thing is sure, however. The text does appeal to an audience. There is a certain breath, or breathing, in drama that makes it differ from all texts that are intended to be only read. This has do to with the human body, with voice and gesture, with all that in the theatre is called "address": how the immediate presence of an audience influences the structure, balance and rhythm of the language. Many of my suggestions to the Commission have been influenced by my theatre experience, and have to do with how sentences are "spoken", and how dialogue works.

Secondly, the Song of Songs has a poetical consistency and is a poetical universe—this is at least the hypothesis that I have worked from. The text has to be looked on as a coherent piece of art. We know nothing certain about its author or editors (one or many, male or female?). If we know something about the date when the present text may have been written down, some time around 200 BC, this says nothing about its possible earlier versions, or traditions that permeate it, or

about added parts and formulas. Its images can be taken over from oral tradition or other texts, or sometimes invented at a blessed moment by a poetical innovator or genius.

I have, of course, listened carefully to my colleagues' reflections on the connotation of words or grammatical structures. I have continuously read modern Bible translations in languages accessible to me, and taken notice of quite a few modern commentators. This is part of what a stylist has to do. Still, I think I personally would have been at a loss if I had not very deliberately stuck to the hypothesis that the text *does* have an imminent meaning in exactly the structure given. If the interpretation of the Bible texts once gave birth to what is called a hermeneutic tradition, I have returned to the Bible with a more or less hermeneutic outlook.

Let me give just one example. In 2.16 we find the small passage about the foxes in the vineyards, "an enigmatic verse, whose literal meaning has no relation to the context", as Michael V. Fox puts it (in *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 1985). He suggests at least three interpretations—"the least forced", among many that have been suggested.

The first is that either of the two lovers speaks, meaning that nothing should be allowed to harm the young girl's "blossom of feminine charm"; the foxes stand for "any harmful force" (Budde). The second interpretation understands the verse as a wish that "nothing be allowed to harm blossoming love" (Delitzsch), without deciding on who is speaking. The third suggests that "vineyards" represent nubile girls and "the little foxes" represent lustful youths (Rudolph, Gordis).

Fox favours the third interpretation—which is easy to agree on, as it fits in with all other references to the "vineyard" as the girl and her body, throughout the text. He concludes that the verse should be put in the mouth of the girl, who gently, coquettishly and erotically teases her lover with it. The Swedish translation, like many others, places the verse in the mouth of the Chorus. I find this correct. Its "literal meaning" might have no relation to the context, but it gives an atmosphere and a "tone" to the poem as a whole: generous, mildly teasing and erotic.

The love that is depicted is not taking place in secrecy. The two voices, the male and the female, are set within a community of people who listen sympathetically—and take part. The verse takes up the metaphor used earlier by the girl (first in 1.6, where she is or has a "vineyard") but at the same time varies and anticipates a standpoint that is voiced by the girl's brothers (1.6, 8.8-9), who watch over her virginity. The task of the translators is of course at least twofold when it comes to the target language: 1) to depict images as concretely as possible, and 2) at the same time to allow them to flourish, develop and change—by not hindering them from interrelating with other parts of the text.

Whether it is She or the Chorus who talks about the vineyard and the foxes may be of secondary importance. The vital thing is to look upon the verse as something adding to the poem as a *whole*—not as something that may not belong to it. The verse confirms the "vineyard" as a metaphor for the girl. At the same time it (jokingly) anticipates a view that shows up in a sharper form in the latter part of the poem. What is a joke in 2.16 is something much more earnest, even threatening, in 8.8-9, when the brothers wonder what they will do with their sister when she gets old enough to have wooers.

Now, by observing the twists and turns of images/themes on all levels, the dramatic or even musical structure of the whole poem is eventually built up—and consequently its inherent "meaning". The effort to interrelate even small details in the poem to the whole, is an interpretative work of trial and error. The interpretative work on the Song of Songs does not differ, in this respect, from the endeavour to grasp the "meaning" of any other text—for example T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land".

About T.S. Eliot: we know that he is the individual author of his poem, but also, that he frequently uses quotations from previous poetry and touches on concepts from philosophy and anthropology. Some of his associations can be detected by us. But we would not be able to translate the poem at all without accepting that it *is* a unity—a poetical universe of its own. When an element appears that seems to contradict other elements, it has to be looked on as something that broadens—not diminishes—this universe of the poem.

The same goes without saying for the Song of Songs. In fact, its structure is not unlike modern poetry. Associations and references appear that do not follow ordinary logic or the traditional genres of Western European poetry. (The fact that all of us today have been influenced by literary modernism and the resulting development of interpretative theory might help in translating the Song of Songs.) I have, tentatively, worked from the standpoint of a "unifying principle", or within a hermeneutic tradition. If my colleagues contradict my suggestions for philological or other reasons, such as concordance, I have to give them up—sometimes with a loud "alas"—and start to rethink. This is what I mean by saying that the stylist is a very privileged amateur in the body of translators.

The stylist comes in to strengthen and support everything which has to do with "meaning" and "style". At the same time he (or she) tests questions vital to his own craft, among them intuitive feelings about the inherent "meaning" of the text. If he is wrong, he has to adjust and rethink. But he cannot help thinking further, with the help of deepening knowledge of the text.

Let me return to the verse about the foxes in the vineyard. One could, I believe, add an interpretation, in a sense deeper and more unexpected, than the three variants brought up by Fox. "Foxes" can undoubtedly stand for youthful male lust. But it could also have something to say about the sexuality of the young girl, whose character is bold, sometimes "biting" and "foxy", and in many ways exceeding the limits set to feminine sexuality. Let us say that feminine sexuality = "vineyard". My tentative interpretation leads me to put the verse in relation to what in other places is said about the girl's relation to her mother (3.4, 8.1-2, 6), who seems to stand for a more permissive sexuality than the brothers—but still different from the lust of the young girl.

The sexuality of the young girl contradicts the notions held by the brothers. But it might even go beyond the "vineyard" of feminine or motherly sexuality, and harm it. I have not seen any commentators dwell on this complex, and I cannot not argue for my "feeling" here, or even within the team of translators. I do not know. The only proper thing to do is to insist on keeping open the possibilities of double meanings and ambiguities that you "feel" *can* dwell in an image—which means not "closing" the image more than is necessary.

What I have said here about the girl's sexuality in relation to her mother and her brothers—that she might threaten and exceed them both—brings one back to the girl's first reference to her brothers in 1.6. She calls them "my mother's sons",

making a distinction between the mother, the sons, and herself. The temptation to translate her expression by the simpler "my brothers" is strong, but ought to be rejected. She makes a distinction that might be of importance for understanding a certain layer of the poem—although we, as translators, can know nothing for certain about it.

This example says something about how questions of "style" and "meaning" are intrinsically interwoven. This brings me back to one of the fundamental problems with the text in our (Christian or Jewish) tradition. It has been interpreted allegorically by tradition, which has had an immense influence in European poetry as a whole; I may recall only the work of St. John of the Cross.

The aim of the new translation is to come as close as possible to the textual source. I fully agree with this aim. But most of us have, if only subconsciously, inherited a loyalty to tradition, and each rupture with tradition in a way impoverishes us, as it cuts our links with a literary heritage. Still, as soon as you try to catch the concept of love in the Song of Songs, you are brought back to the heart of the dualism in western or Christian thought: the dualism between body and soul, the corporal and the spiritual.

Now, does the text speak about human love, the concrete love between a man and a woman? It quite obviously does. Does it speak *only* about human love? If anything, the poem defies and transcends the dualism between the spiritual and the corporal. I myself can see no real contradiction between an allegorical interpretation (love as an outflow from God, be it to his chosen people or his church) or a non-allegorical one, bringing love close to all the shades and nuances of love (longing, passion, desire, despair, fulfilment) that human beings experience.

If there *is* a contradiction, allegory can never have the first claim, if it distorts the richness and complexity of the text. It might even be that the inherent meaning of the text revives a concept of love that is very much needed in the world of today. In modern theology, the contradiction between body and soul is often disputed. To our generation, which is used to a secular and one-dimensional definition of love in the mass media, science and literature, a spiritualisation of the concept is healthy. Thoughts like these have given me a joyous feeling of taking part in an adventure of new discovery and exploration by co-operating in the new translation of the Song of Songs.

Erratum

In the **July 1995 Technical Papers** on page 324, third paragraph, line 5: the Hebrew *hă ʾhaṣṣōʾn* should read as *hălô ʾhaṣṣōʾn.*