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Elies Smeyers

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# Hugo Claus in French translation: a Flemish-Belgian author entering the scene of world literature

Elies Smeyers  <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Modern Languages and Translation, Université de Liège, Liège, Belgium; <sup>b</sup>Dutch Literature, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

## ABSTRACT

The Dutch-language author Hugo Claus is one of the most celebrated and most translated Flemish authors of the twentieth century. Especially the French translations of his work fulfil an important position in the (inter)national dissemination of his work. Starting in the 1950s, his oeuvre enters the field of World Literature through the French translations and Parisian publications of his work, because French was still very much a *lingua franca* in the 1950s and Paris the centre of the World Republic of Letters. Even if Paris fulfils a gateway function, Claus's intra-Belgian bilingual francophone-Dutch contacts and networks prove to have been crucial in the coming about of the French translations of his oeuvre and reveal interesting interlingual and intercultural dynamics within the bilingual (multilingual) cultural area of Belgium. In this article, we will explore the position and dissemination of Claus's (early) works within a Belgian and international context, against the background of the mutual interactions between national and international networks and taking into account mechanisms of intercultural exchange, circulation and promotion within the (inter)national literary field.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Hugo claus; Belgian literature; French translation; mediators; networks

## 1. Introduction: what's in a name?

The Flemish author Hugo Claus (1929–2008) is undoubtedly one of Belgium's most celebrated Dutch-language writers of the twentieth century, both within his multilingual country and abroad. Even though the author's international fame should not be overestimated, Hugo Claus is widely reckoned to be a prominent Dutch-language and Belgian writer, especially when it comes to twentieth-century literature.

If we take into account one of this special issue's main topics of interest, i.e., World Literature investigated from a Belgian perspective, the case of Hugo Claus can hardly be excluded. As we will illustrate in this paper, the translation and (inter)national dissemination of Claus's (early) works should be understood in the context of worldwide literary networks and are at the same time deeply embedded in a Belgian framework. What else could one expect from a Dutch-language author, whose most internationally acclaimed novel carries the very 'Belgian' title *Het verdriet van België* (1983, *The Sorrow of Belgium*),<sup>1</sup>

even though the novel's action is largely set in Flanders, the mainly Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, which actually only comprises the northern part of the national territory. This, nevertheless, did not prevent the novel from becoming a success in the French-speaking part of Belgium and abroad, nor does it affect the novel's universal scope and significance. Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee, who translated some of Claus's poems, described *Het verdriet van België* as one of the landmark novels in Post-war European literature (Coetzee, 2007, p. 156). Indeed, the novel's success brought Claus into national and international prominence,<sup>2</sup> and his name became regularly mentioned as a possible Noble Prize laureate, although he would never actually receive this prestigious award.

In other words, despite the explicit reference to Belgium in the title of his most famous novel and the mostly Flemish setting of many of Claus's works, the significance of this novel and of his oeuvre at large goes beyond the author's relatively small European home country or its northern region. This is further reinforced by the many intertextual references in Claus's works to foreign, often internationally canonised authors and their works. Several publications related to Claus's work (Claes, 1984; De Potter et al., 2014; Naaijken et al., 2008) reveal that many of these intertextual references – which, as some would claim, even reek of plagiarism (Janssens, 1997) – seeped into his work as a result of the author's own translation activities and his broad knowledge of other literary traditions. In an interesting article, Bart Eeckhout (2011) explicitly describes Claus's work as a multi-layered example of World Literature by analysing the influences of P.B. Shelly's and Wallace Stevens's poetry on the text-genetic process of one of Claus's 'original' poems. Eeckhout goes further to argue that Coetzee's translation of Claus's poem<sup>3</sup> meets all necessary requirements to be studied in one of David Damrosch's seminars on World Literature.

Indeed, Claus's oeuvre seems to fit largely into Damrosch's definition of World Literature as a set of works that 'circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language' (Damrosch, 2003, p. 4). For any author writing in a peripheral language such as Dutch, translation is however a prerequisite for international circulation and access to a foreign audience. However, translation alone cannot guarantee an oeuvre's effective dissemination and reception outside its culture of origin (Sapiro, 2012, p. 19). The mediating activities carried out by 'gatekeepers', i.e., 'agents that select, translate and disperse foreign literatures' (Marling, 2016, p. 4), are essential in this context. As a matter of fact, authors can gain international visibility and recognition by having their works translated and promoted by stakeholders with great influence in international literary circles. That is exactly how someone like Coetzee, as an important name in the global literary field, contributed to Claus's international fame.

Yet Claus's work began to circulate beyond its culture of origin long before the success of *Het verdriet van België* (1983) and its translations, which indeed turned the international spotlight also more and more on the rest of the author's oeuvre. Moreover, it was not through English but French translations that Claus's works became available for the first time outside Dutch-speaking contexts, in the early 1950s, a time when Paris and the French language enjoyed greater international prestige and still fulfilled a hypercentral position in the international cultural and literary fields. Many of Claus's early, francophone 'gatekeepers' did not have a prominent position in the international literary field and even though their status was in no way comparable to for example Coetzee's, many years later, their mediating and promotional activities contributed immensely to the international dissemination of Claus's oeuvre.

In what follows, we will illustrate the role played by Claus's francophone Belgian translators-mediators and their intra-Belgian networks in the earliest episodes of the international circulation of the author's oeuvre. By alternately zooming in on more local and national networks of translation, and zooming out in order to see the bigger, international picture, we will demonstrate the intricate, entangled dynamics of intra- and international cultural mediation processes. In addition, our analysis will shed light on the contribution of the French translations to the international visibility of Claus's work as well as on the actual translation process. Our case studies will hence provide insights into translation flows between periphery and centre and will enable us to understand some of the mechanisms involved in the international promotion and dissemination of the work of authors from more peripheral literatures.

## 2. The French connection: francophone-Belgian networks and Paris

From his debut novel onward, almost all of Claus's works were first translated into French and published in Paris before being picked up in other language areas.<sup>4</sup> Claus tops the list of twentieth-century Dutch-language authors most translated into French, and several of these French translations, instead of the Dutch originals, have served as source texts for subsequent translations into other languages.

In 1953, the first French edition of Claus's debut novel – *De Metsiers* (1950), translated into French as *La Chasse aux canards* – was published in Paris by *Les Éditions Fasquelle*. In 1959, Fasquelle merged with *Éditions Grasset*, and it was in the latter's prestigious collection *Cahiers Rouges* that *La Chasse aux canards* would eventually be republished in 1987 and 2003. The collection featured Claus's novel along with the works of other outstanding names in World Literature, such as Gabriel García Márquez and Stefan Zweig. Likewise, Claus's first four-act play, *Een bruid in de morgen* (1955),<sup>5</sup> seems to have been quite a success story at first sight. Very soon after the original Dutch-language play was published, it was translated into French and staged in Paris in the 1955–1956 theatre season as *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin*. The staging, which took place in the prestigious Théâtre de l'Œuvre, preceded the premiere of the original play in Flanders. The French performance was supervised by Sacha Pitoëff, a famous Parisian theatre director at the time, and even aired on French radio.<sup>6</sup> It is however worth noting that these two early works by Claus would not have gained such acclaim in Paris without an intense mediation process in which Claus's intra-Belgian network and francophone Belgian translators-mediators played a vital gatekeeping role.

In the beginning of 1950, the French-speaking Belgian Henri Vandeputte (1877–1952) was the first person to recommend the translation of Claus's debut novel into French in one of his many letters to the author and in an article he wrote in the Belgian French-language newspaper *Le Phare Dimanche* on the 26th of March 1950.<sup>7</sup> Vandeputte lived in the coastal city of Ostend, where young Claus took up residence in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The two first met in the late 1940s in Vandeputte's small French bookshop. Years later, Claus stated in an interview that he saw the elderly and impoverished Vandeputte as a kind of mentor and 'professor of [French] poetry' (Bakker, 1998). Vandeputte not only introduced his young Flemish protégé to many aspects of (mainly French) culture and literature, but also made him well aware of the

importance of having his work translated into a more widely accessible language than Dutch. In his 1950 *Phare Dimanche* article, Vandeputte stated:

J'ai oublié jusqu'ici de dire [...] que Claus n'avait qu'un défaut, c'est d'écrire en flamand. Langue aussi honorable qu'une autre, quand le chef-d'œuvre y affleure, mais de moindre audience que notre français. Ne pleurez pas, la traduction de son *Metsiers* (ou *La Chasse aux canards*) paraîtra prochainement, je gage, dans la collection des éditions les plus françaises N.R.F. (Vandeputte, 1950)

I have yet to say [...] that Claus's only impediment is that he writes in Dutch. When it comes to literary expression, Dutch is as honourable as any other language but it has a smaller audience than our French tongue. But rest assured, the translation of Claus's *Metsiers* (or *La Chasse aux canards*) will soon feature in the collection of the very French publishing company, N.R.F. [my translation, ES]

Vandeputte was reassuring his readers that the translation would soon appear in the collection of what is still one of Paris's most prestigious publishers: *La Nouvelle Revue Française* – *Gallimard*. In many of his letters to Claus, Vandeputte repeated that if Claus wanted his work to gain international exposure – which he did –, it had to pass through Paris, the world capital of culture, thus making it essential to find a Parisian publisher for the French translations of his work.

The fact that Claus, whose mother tongue was Dutch, found a friend and mentor in his French-speaking compatriot Vandeputte confirms Claus's fluency in French, one of Belgium's three national languages, along with Dutch and German.<sup>8</sup> Claus's French language proficiency certainly enabled him to make friends, build connections, interact with the press and gain access to French-speaking circles in Belgium and abroad. Moreover, Claus took up residence in France on several occasions, first in the early 1950s with his girlfriend Elly Overzier, who eventually became his first wife.

Vandeputte on the other hand, did not speak Dutch and only started learning to read it at a later age. Remarkably, it was nevertheless Vandeputte who completed the first translation of Claus's work, namely *De Metsiers*. Vandeputte's command of the Dutch language was however insufficient to produce a decent literary translation, and even though Elly Overzier managed to sell his translation to the Paris-based *Éditions Fasquelle* in 1951, several reading reports in the publisher's archives confirm that, although the young Flemish author was praised as a promising new literary voice, Vandeputte's translation itself was considered poor and unfit for publication (Smeyers, 2022). As a result, in addition to promoting her boyfriend's work, Elly Overzier became Claus's translator, together with Jean Raine, a French-speaking Belgian who frequented the same circles of artists and writers as Claus and at the time would readily do all kinds of odd jobs to make ends meet.<sup>9</sup> Being a native speaker of Dutch, Overzier produced a new semantic translation of Claus's debut novel that Raine, who did not master Dutch, subsequently proofread with a view to making it more idiomatic. However, as in the case of Vandeputte – who only started to learn Dutch at a later age and never fully mastered it –, the circumstances in which the translation was produced were far from optimal, and Claus was not fond of this second translation either.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, they had managed to overcome the first major obstacles in the translation and circulation process of this work written in a peripheral language and authored by a young and

not yet very well-known author. Claus's book was translated into a (hyper)central language and published in the hypercentre of the *World Republic of Letters* (Casanova, 1999) of the time: Paris.

When it comes to *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin*, it was Claus himself who reached out to Sacha Pitoëff in February 1955, sending him a French translation of his play, which immediately sparked the interest of the Parisian director (Smeyers, 2019, p. 269). The play had been translated into French by the French-speaking Belgian Maddy Buysse. As several letters and diary entries in Claus's archives indicate, Buysse did much more than just translate Claus's play, and it was at her suggestion that Claus first contacted Pitoëff (Smeyers, 2019, p. 268). A few months later, when the staging of Claus's play was jeopardised by a protectionist rule imposed by the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques* (SACD)<sup>11</sup> that aimed at reducing the number of foreign plays staged in Parisian theatres, it was again Buysse who came to the author's rescue by urging Belgium's cultural attaché in Paris to negotiate with the SACD (Smeyers, 2019, p. 275). In other words, without Buysse's intervention, the play would probably never have been staged so early in Paris, and definitely not by the then famous Pitoëff in the prestigious Théâtre de l'Œuvre.

The above stories demonstrate that from the start of his career onward, Claus's own entourage and his contacts with other francophone compatriots contributed immensely to the translation and dissemination of his work. Eventually, nearly all his French translators and important promoters in the francophone world would be French-speaking Belgians, including the aforementioned Maddy Buysse (1908–2000), and later on also Jacques De Decker (1945–2020) and Alain van Crugten (°1936) as the most eminent ones. In addition to taking full advantage of their networks in the larger francophone world and particularly in Paris, these French-speaking Belgians could also systematically rely on subsidies granted by the Belgian state or the Flemish Community. This considerably reduced the financial risks involved in the translation projects they embarked on, which in turn attracted Francophone publishers (Smeyers, 2018, p. 17). Buysse, De Decker and Van Crugten occupied, each in their own way, an interesting intra-Belgian position, in which the distinction between source- and target culture/language seems to fade. This provided them with an inherent 'double sensibility [...] to understand multiple cultures', which Marling considers to be crucial to the literary gatekeeper (Marling, 2016, pp. 4–5). Maddy Buysse's father-in-law, for example, was the Flemish author Cyriel Buysse. After his death, she moved into his house in the small Flemish village of Deurle, where she would work on her French translations of Dutch-language authors on the same desk and with the same view of the Flemish countryside landscape that her father-in-law had enjoyed while writing his 'rustic' Flemish novels (Vincent, 1994). Alain Van Crugten was born and raised in Brussels, Belgium's only officially bilingual region, so he literally lived at the crossroads of Latin and Germanic influences. This cultural and linguistic background facilitated his translation of *Het verdriet van België*, in which he used many regional Belgian-French terms to compensate for the Flemish literary dialect that Claus had so skillfully developed. Jacques De Decker helped Alain van Crugten to contact prominent Parisian publishers for the publication of *Le Chagrin des Belges*. At the time, De Decker had, for several years, been fostering and facilitating intra-Belgian cultural exchanges. He summarised his motivations and approach in an interview whose excerpts are found below:<sup>12</sup>

[J]'ai toujours regretté amèrement qu'on soit si peu informé de part et d'autre de la frontière linguistique de la vie littéraire 'd'en face'. Ce n'est pas par hasard si je me suis tant occupé d'Hugo Claus. [...] Il est vrai que je me suis toujours senti, en tant que néerlandiste, un médiateur au plein sens du terme. J'ai assumé ce rôle de différentes manières : par des conférences, des présentations publiques, des interviews d'auteurs flamands. J'ai été l'un de ceux qui ont littéralement propulsé *Le Chagrin des Belges* de Claus. (De Decker et al., 2014)

I have always deeply regretted that people on both sides of the language border are so ill-informed about literary activities on the other side. It was not by chance that I developed so much interest in Hugo Claus. [...] It is true that, as a scholar of Dutch, I have always considered myself a mediator in every sense of the word. I have assumed this role in different ways, by organising conferences, public presentations, interviews with Flemish authors. I am one of the people who contributed to propelling Claus's *Chagrin des Belges* to international success. [my translation, ES]

Even though the coming about of the French translation of *Het Verdriet van België* as *Le Chagrin des Belges* (1985) definitely benefited from De Decker's intra-Belgian and international mediation activities, Claus did not have to wait for De Decker or the French translation of his Belgian novel *par excellence*, to gain a footing on the other side of the language border, in French-speaking Belgium and become embedded in a national Belgian context. The play *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin* was for example already staged in Brussels, in French, in the 1959–1960 theatre season. Claus was introduced in the theatre programme not only as a Flemish but also as a talented Belgian playwright – 'un nouvel auteur de talent [du] théâtre belge' – and he was explicitly embedded in the field of Belgian literature:

Hugo Claus apporte, dans les Lettres de Flandre, et aussi de Belgique, une véritable secousse [...]

Hugo Claus has shaken up Flemish and also Belgian Literature. [my translation, ES]

Roger Reding, the director of the *Théâtre Royal des Galeries*, where the play was staged, advocated the consolidation of intra-Belgian cultural ties in order to create a stronger and more internationally competitive *théâtre belge*. According to an article in the Belgian French-language newspaper *La Dernière heure*, Reding even wanted the staging of Claus's play to mark the beginning of his term of office as theatre director and thus become an important date for the *Belgian* theatre (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 319–321):

[Roger Reding] a voulu que cet anniversaire marque une date dans la vie théâtrale belge : il a donc porté son choix sur la pièce d'un de nos compatriotes, le jeune auteur Hugo Claus.

[Roger Reding] wanted this anniversary to be a landmark in Belgian theatre. That's why he chose a play authored by a fellow compatriot, the young Hugo Claus. [my translation, ES]

Even though the *Théâtre Royal des Galeries* traditionally featured the works of prominent French (Parisian) playwrights at the beginning of the theatre season (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 319–320), Reding chose to start the theatre season with a play that indeed had already been staged in Paris, but was originally written in Dutch by a fellow Belgian citizen.

In the case of *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin*, the Brussels premiere took place several years *after* the Parisian premiere in 1955. In other words, it was only after the play had earned its stripes in Paris that it caught the eye of (Francophone) Belgian theatres. This delayed interest in Claus's work in the French-speaking part of Belgium was however not



restricted to his earliest play and would sometimes give rise to angry remarks in the Flemish press, as we read in a Flemish magazine in July 1965, in the context of the staging of another of Claus's plays in Brussels:

Wanneer Parijs bij uitzondering over het werk van een Vlaming zijn zegen schenkt, dan draait Brussel vliegensvlug bij. (E.M., 1965)

When Paris exceptionally gives its blessing to the work of a Flemish author, then Brussels rapidly follows suit. [my translation, ES]

The journalist blames Francophone Brussels theatres for developing an interest in the literary work of Flemish compatriots, only after the latter have gained recognition in Paris. Indeed, this kind of translation flows from periphery to centre and, only after having passed through the centre, back to other peripheral areas, is typical of cultural goods originating in the periphery (Van Es & Heilbron, 2016, p. 297). It is only from the 1960s onward that Claus's plays in French translation would more and more often be premiered in Brussels instead of Paris (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 327–334, pp. 399–451).

### 3. Claus in the spotlights

However, even back then publishing in Paris did not automatically guarantee international exposure and success. The records of *Éditions Fasquelle* reveal that the sales figures of Claus's earliest translations were not exactly promising (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 238–240). Although choosing a Parisian publishing company increased the odds of achieving international success, it was still possible for a work to go unnoticed given the large number of books in the publishers' collections. That was the challenge many Dutch-language authors faced in Paris (Deloof, 1974, p. 140).

Nevertheless, *Éditions Fasquelle* did develop strategies aimed at promoting Claus's earliest works. Just like other Paris-based publishing companies, Fasquelle would for instance use promotional inserts, the so-called *prière d'insérer* [literally 'please insert'], aimed at advertising newly published titles (Genette, 1987/2002, p. 107). Often, these inserts were used by literary critics as a basis for their articles or reviews. The promotional insert about *La Chasse aux canards* contained information about Claus's novel and French translations of laudatory Dutch-language press reviews (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 107–108). The immediate paratext of the translation, most especially its back cover, was also used to highlight the success of the novel and its author in the Dutch-language source culture: it also listed translated excerpts from positive Dutch-language press reviews and referred to the Leon Kryn literary prize that Claus had received in Flanders for his debut novel. In a bid to further promote the novel amongst its new readership and to embed the Leon Kryn prize into a frame of reference that was recognisable for the target audience, the Parisian publisher compared the Flemish (and not 'Belgian') prize, whose reputation had yet to be established, to a much more well-known and far more prestigious French prize, thus describing the 'Prix Léon Kryn' as Belgium's *Prix Goncourt*. The back cover of the French version published by Fasquelle reads,

C'est en 1950 qu'il [=Claus] publia son roman *La Chasse aux canards*, écrit à 19 ans, qui lui a valut le prix Léon Kryn, véritable Prix Goncourt belge, décerné seulement tous les quatre ans, et d'un montant de 300.000 francs.



It was in 1950 that he [=Claus] published *La Chasse aux canards*, a novel he wrote at the age of 19 and thanks to which he received the Léon Kryn prize, Belgium's *Prix Goncourt*. The prize is awarded only every four years and is worth 300.000 francs. [my translation, ES]

Despite these promotional efforts, Claus's debut novel failed to get extensive press coverage in Paris. A few French-language Belgian newspapers featured articles about the novel, several of which showed a rather critical attitude towards the comparison between the Prix Goncourt and the Leon Kryn prize. As Francophone Belgians, these journalists knew all too well that this comparison was somewhat 'tirée par les cheveux' [far-fetched and exaggerated] as literally mentioned in an article by Mogin (Mogin, 1953; Smeyers, 2019, p. 107). Within Dutch-speaking literary circles, the translations of Claus's works rarely went unnoticed, with many seeing it as a confirmation of the author's talent (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 152–153; Wildemeersch, 2007b, p. 180).

In order to compensate for the disappointing Parisian reception of Claus's debut novel, Fasquelle would set up a rather exceptional marketing event aimed at promoting the French publication of Claus's second novel – *Jours de canicule* (1954)<sup>13</sup> – and the upcoming staging and publication of his first four-act play – *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin* (1955–1956) – both of which were translated by Maddy Buysse. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1955, Fasquelle organised, in close collaboration with Sacha Pitoëff, a candlelight lunch at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre and made sure to invite members of the Parisian press. Hugo Claus was the guest of honour and among the other guests were famous celebrities such as the French authors Françoise Sagan and Auguste Le Breton, the French singer and actress Renée Labas and the Francophone Belgian actress Dominique Wilms.<sup>14</sup> In the following days, several articles about this event and the young, promising Belgian author appeared in Parisian and other French newspapers and magazines (Smeyers, 2019, p. 232). Of course, this event and the attention it generated was also picked up with a certain chauvinist pride by the press in Claus's own language area (Wildemeersch & Debergh, 1999, pp. 95–96).

#### 4. Paris as a gateway to the rest of the world

Even though it was only after Fasquelle's exceptional marketing efforts and after they published a second and a third translation of Claus's work that the Parisian press started paying more attention to the Belgian author, the French translation of his first novel – *La Chasse aux canards* (1953) – did have a broader direct international impact. Within four years after the French publication, an American (*The Duck Hunt*, 1955) and a Japanese (*Kamoryō*, 1957) translation would appear. Textual comparison and paratextual analysis reveal that the French translation was used as the (only) source text for both translations (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 164–165, 174). Hence, it had a direct formal and (para)textual impact on them. Several of the French translations of Claus's work that were published in Paris would function as intermediary source texts or as more widely accessible versions that could be sent to international publishers, thus fulfilling a role as 'tiers impliqué' between the Dutch original and another target language and culture. The term 'tiers impliqué' is used by Michel Espagne to describe phenomena of cultural exchange in which more than two parties are (implicitly) involved in the transfer process (Espagne, 2013). Although cultural exchange is often viewed as a

binary process, it is rarely restricted to only two cultural areas. When it comes to Claus's international career, the intermediary role of the French translations, especially when they were published in Paris, can hardly be underestimated. They contributed to increasing Claus's international visibility and literary credibility, which subsequently led to new (indirect) translations in other language areas (Smeyers, 2019).

In the case of *The Duck Hunt* and *Kamoryō*, the French language version of the novel did not play a merely *implicit* role. As mentioned above, it was used as the source-text, and the title *La Chasse aux canards* is *explicitly* mentioned on the title page of both translations, as if it were the original. Furthermore, both translations literally copy the paratextual information found in the French version, comparing the aforementioned Leon Kryn prize to the Prix Goncourt. This comparison with the famous French prize in combination with the explicit reference to the French version and title only, implies that Claus was presented to the American and Japanese readers of his debut novel as a French-language author, embedded in a French cultural frame of reference.

The reasons that motivated the choice of the French translation as a basis for the American and Japanese translations were practical as well as institutionally motivated. To begin with, there were very few translators of Dutch at the time, thus making it practical to translate from French. In 1951, Vandeputte stated in a letter to Claus that in the whole city of Paris, it would be impossible to find five professionals fully capable of translating a novel from 'Flemish' into French.<sup>15</sup> In Japan it would even be harder, if not impossible, to find a single suitable translator. Even English translators of Dutch literature were rather rare at the time. They did however exist, and Claus tried hard to convince the American publisher Random House to hire James S Holmes<sup>16</sup> as a translator for *De Metsiers*, because Holmes could translate directly from the Dutch original (Smeyers, 2022). Nevertheless, Claus's request was never granted, and the novel was eventually translated 'from the French by George Libaire' as we can read on the title page of the American version (Smeyers, 2019, p. 163). Claus was not happy about this, but he had ceded the international translation rights of his first four novels and plays to his Parisian publisher Fasquelle and, as a result, did not have the final say in the negotiations. This also caused dissatisfaction amongst Flemish journalists. For instance, in the 26th of March 1955 edition of the Flemish newspaper *Vooruit*, Karel Leroux lamented:

[Claus'] eerste roman onder de titel *The Duck Hunt* werd vertaald in Amerika ... uit het Frans. Dat zijn zo van die dingen die gebeuren in een overgecommercialiseerde wereld.

[Claus's] first novel has been translated in America under the title *The Duck Hunt* ... from the French. Such things happen only in an over-commercialised world. [my translation, ES]

It is however not very surprising that foreign publishers or translators would sometimes use the French translation as a source text, because they often first came into contact with Claus's work through the French version. It seems that literary stakeholders at the time just took it for granted that the French versions of Claus's work could serve as indirect source texts. In a letter from the twelfth of October 1957 for example, Claus's Dutch publisher, De Bezige Bij, asked for six French copies of the author's then most recent novel, *L'homme aux mains vides* (1957),<sup>17</sup> so they could be sent to other foreign publishers for promotional purposes. It was Maddy Buysse who made sure that the French publisher was contacted, and that the copies were delivered at the Amsterdam offices of De

Bezige Bij (Smeyers, 2019, p. 154).<sup>18</sup> The archives of the German publisher Suhrkamp Verlag indicate that it was one of the foreign publishing companies that received a French copy of the novel (Zajas, 2014, p. 6). Likewise, in the case of the play *Een Bruid in de morgen* (1955), Maddy Buysse explicitly stated in a letter to Claus that a French translation of the play was essential because it would make the text accessible to most foreign publishers and would very likely serve as a source text for translations into other languages – especially in the case of English or American translations:

[...] le texte néerlandais ne peut guère servir de base que pour les traductions en Allemand; ni les Anglais, ni les Américains ne traduisent directement de l'original. Il n'est même pas question qu'une œuvre hollandaise soit soumise aux éditeurs américains si elle n'est pas, d'abord, traduite en français [...]<sup>19</sup>

[...] the Dutch-language text could hardly serve as a basis for German translations, and neither the English nor the Americans translate directly from the original. Therefore, there's no point in submitting to American publishers a Dutch-language work, which has not first been translated into French [...] [my translation, ES]

Our analyses of the German translation of Claus's first four-act play (*Die Reise nach England*, 1960) and the American reviews of its New York premiere (*A Bride in the Morning*, 1960) reveal that the French translation, *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin*, was in both cases used as the main source text (Smeyers, 2019, pp. 246–250). As far as the German translation is concerned, the translator, Elmar Tophoven, seems to have consulted the original Dutch version occasionally in order to adjust some stage directions or revise some rather obscure passages in the French text (Smeyers, 2019, p. 247). Buysse was therefore right about the attitude of the German and Anglophone literary and publishing stakeholders towards the 'directness of translation', which is 'the tolerance for translating from a translation in another language rather than from the ultimate source text' (Brownlie, 1999, p. 8). Next to translation policies regarding the choice of works, authors, genres etc., the directness of translation is what Toury defines as one of the 'preliminary norms' of translation within a specific culture (1995, p. 58). Literary stakeholders in Britain, America and the Anglophone world at large tend to care more about a translation's acceptability than its accuracy (Venuti, 1995). Indeed,

target texts produced in this manner [i.e. through indirect translation] have a greater tendency towards acceptability, as the [...] parameters of a source text which is a translation in its own right are less likely to be held to be inviolable. (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, p. 76)

On the other hand, as evidenced by the Japanese translation of Claus's debut novel and, to a lesser extent, the German translation of his play, indirect translation can also be favoured in weaker 'polysystems which depend on other, stronger systems for literary models and precedents' (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, p. 76). As Landers states:

[C]ertain classic works of world literature would not have found their way into languages of limited diffusion had it not been for indirect translation; at the very least their appearance would have been delayed. With close to 350 million native speakers of the language of Shakespeare, discovery of a long-lost Tibetan text may in relatively short order lead to an English translation, but what are the chances of finding an Afrikaans or Basque speaker schooled in Tibetan? Recourse to a French or English translation may be the only solution. (Landers, 2001, pp. 130–131)

The use of the French version as a source for subsequent translations was also motivated by the fact that, as mentioned earlier in this paper and stipulated in the contracts between Claus and Fasquelle, the Parisian publishing company owned the foreign translation rights of Claus's first four works. This meant that every foreign publisher interested in the translation rights of *La Chasse aux canards* (1953), *Jours de canicule* (1954), *Andréa, ou La Fiancée du matin* (1955) and *L'homme aux mains vides* (1957) had to negotiate with Fasquelle instead of a Dutch-language publishing company, thus almost automatically prioritising the French versions of the texts over the Dutch originals. As a Dutch-language author, Claus's decision to cede all his translation rights to his Parisian publisher, instead of the Dutch-language, source culture publisher<sup>20</sup> of his original works, once more demonstrates that he was well aware of the importance of Paris as a gateway to the rest of the literary world.

Finally, one of the reasons why Claus's debut novel was picked up so soon in America and Japan can also be partially ascribed to isomorphism within the publishing field. Next to constraints and shared norms, imitation is one of the mechanisms generating isomorphism within the global book market (Sapiro, 2016, p. 82). As a rather prominent Parisian publishing company, Fasquelle held an important position within the international book publishing industry and imitating such a publisher could be beneficial for other foreign publishers. As Gisèle Sapiro indicates,

Imitation is typical of competitive free markets. Publishers will give preference to works already selected by their peers in other countries in order to reduce uncertainty (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013). [...] Imitation occurs neither mechanically nor randomly. Publishers tend to follow the choices of some of their foreign peers rather than others. Elective affinities express identities, and thus distinction (Bourdieu, 1979). (Sapiro, 2016, p. 93)

The prestige of foreign publishers could also be used to emphasise the quality of the source text, as an advertisement of the Dutch publisher – De Bezige Bij – in the Dutch newspaper *Haagse Post* illustrates.<sup>21</sup> This advertisement was created to promote the then latest 1959 Dutch-language publication of Claus's debut novel (*De Metsiers*). It shows a picture of the French, American and Japanese 'editions' next to the new Dutch-language edition, thus trying to underline the quality and international appeal of the original novel, in the hope of reviving the interest in Claus's debut novel in the original, Dutch-language source culture.

It can thus be assumed that isomorphism in the publishing industry convinced American and Japanese publishers to invest in the translation and publication of Claus's debut novel. In the case of the Japanese translation however, this institutional isomorphism was preceded by a more personal, small-scale mediation process involving another Belgian intermediary and early advocate of Hugo Claus's work: more specifically, the Dutch-language author Jan Walravens (1920–1965).<sup>22</sup> The latter met Ōmi Komaki (1894–1978), a Japanese translator of French literature, in 1956 at the PEN International Congress held in the United Kingdom. Walravens and Komaki soon discovered each other's fascination for the poetry of the French writer Charles-Louis Philippe (1874–1909), who had maintained a close friendship with none other than Henri Van deputte.<sup>23</sup> Since the latter had died in 1952, Walravens invited Komaki to meet Hugo Claus in Ghent, because, having been a close friend of Van deputte's, Claus could perhaps recall some stories about Philippe his old mentor had told him. As a result of this inspiring encounter<sup>24</sup> with the young Flemish author and after having

read *La Chasse aux canards*, Komaki decided to have Claus's debut novel translated into Japanese<sup>25</sup> (Smeyers, 2019, p. 173). However anecdotal this story might seem, it once again illustrates the importance of Claus's personal (intra-)Belgian contacts as well as the link between these small-scale networks or personal encounters and large-scale institutional factors in the making of World Literature.

## 5. Concluding remarks

This case study has attempted to illustrate the importance of intra-Belgian networks, French translations, and Parisian publishers in the international circulation of Hugo Claus's work. Throughout his career, Claus's good personal connections with the Francophone world and his (bilingual) intra-Belgian networks of motivated mediators were important assets in his attempts to gain access to Paris, which at the time was not only the centre of *la francophonie*, but also one of the capitals of the *World Republic of Letters*. As any writer from a peripheral language area, Claus needed to get his works translated in order to be able to enter the realm of World Literature, but as we saw in this paper, translation alone is not always enough. The role of Parisian publishers was another important factor which contributed immensely to the spread of Claus's work to other language areas. Furthermore, it might at times be necessary to carry out a well thought-through media campaign in order to get international exposure.

Finally, it is worth noting that these French translations did not only have 'outward' effects. Thanks to the translation of his works into French, Claus gained more credibility, not only abroad, but also in his native, Dutch-language culture of origin. What is more, many French translations found their way (back) to Brussels and the Francophone region of Belgium, where Claus would almost systematically be framed and cherished as a *Belgian* author. In other words, Claus's 'internal' or national status as an important Dutch-language and/or Belgian author seems to have been reinforced by his international success. In Claus's oeuvre, the local, national and international interact in a complex symbiosis – on a thematic level (with its often local, Flemish embeddedness on the one hand and its wide intertextual scope on the other) as well as when it comes to the work's (inter)national circulation.

## Notes

1. The first English translation of this novel dates from 1990 and was published by Viking (London) and by Pantheon Books (New York). The work appeared some years later in the Penguin Twentieth Century Classics collection.
2. He was for example invited in Bernard Pivot's famous French talk show *Apostrophes* in 1985 and the story of his novel became the object of a European film project in which Belgium, The Netherlands, France and Switzerland participated. The result was a 1995 mini-series, entitled *Het verdriet van België*, directed by Claude Goretta.
3. Coetzee's translation of Claus's poem 'Ten ways of Looking at PB Shelley' can be consulted online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/feb/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview33>.
4. This holds also true for the translation of *Het verdriet van België* (1983), which was first translated into French as *Le Chagrin des Belges* (1985), before any other translation of this work appeared.
5. The earliest Dutch-language publication of *Een bruid in de morgen* dates from 1953 to 1954 and was published in the Flemish literary journal *Nieuw Vlaams Tijdschrift*. The first book edition of the play appeared in May 1955.

6. Broadcasted on the 8th of January 1956 at 1.20pm at the national French radio station. Inathèque, PHD89002393.
7. These letters have been extensively studied and analysed by Wildemeersch (2007a) and Smeyers (2019, 2022).
8. In Flanders, a Belgian variety of Dutch is spoken. In Wallonia (the south of Belgium), French is the official language and in Brussels, Belgium's capital, both French and Dutch are the official languages. In a small eastern part of Belgium, the official language is German.
9. Raine's son confirmed this. (P. Geenen (personal communication, November 3, 2017)).
10. In a letter dating from the 2nd of April 1953 to his Dutch friend and fellow-author, Simon Vinkenoo, Claus described the French translation of *De Metsiers* in extremely negative terms (Wildemeersch, 2008, p. 127).
11. *La Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques* (SACD) is the first organisation ever to manage and defend the copyrights of authors, playwrights and other people active in the field of audiovisual arts. It was created in 1777 by the French playwright Beaumarchais.
12. After Jacques De Decker's death, a cultural grant was named after him. This grant wants to stimulate young authors and artists with creative projects that cross linguistic borders between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgian communities. (<https://www.passaporta.be/nl/magazine/oproep-de-jacques-de-decker-beurs-een-duwtje-in-de-rug-voor-je-nieuwsgierigheid>).
13. The original title is *De Hondsdagen* (1952).
14. Some pictures of this event survived. A.o. in (the online database of) the Flemish archival institution 'Het Letterenhuis' in Antwerp.
15. 'il n'y a pas à Paris cinq personnes pour traduire du flamand votre livre'. Letter from Van-deputte to Claus, dating from the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1951 (Wildemeersch, 2007a, pp. 60–61). This highlights once more the importance of Belgian Francophone translators, a rare category of translators of which many were able to translate between Dutch and French. Note that Van-deputte refers to 'Flemish' to indicate the language in which Claus wrote his work. Nowadays we rather speak of the Belgian variety of Dutch, when we refer to the official (and literary) language spoken/written in Flanders.
16. James S Holmes was an American who lived in Amsterdam. He was active as a translator and was one of the founding fathers of the scholarly discipline of Translation Studies.
17. The original title is *De koele minnaar* (1956).
18. This information could be generated from the archives of Hugo Claus – which are available at the Letterenhuis (Belgium, Antwerp) – and of Fasquelle – which are available at the Institut Mémoire de l'édition contemporaine (France, Caen). All the contracts between Claus and Fasquelle are also available in these archives.
19. This letter dates from the 22nd of January 1955. Letter available in the collection of the antiquarian bookshop De Slegte, Antwerp. See Smeyers, 2019, p. 246.
20. Around 1957, De Bezig Bij would become responsible for the international translation rights of Claus's work.
21. This advertisement appeared a.o. in the *Haagse Post* of 23 May 1959 (Smeyers, 2019, p. 153). A copy of this advertisement is also available in the archives of the Letterenhuis, Antwerp.
22. In 1949, Jan Walravens founded the Belgian, Dutch-language magazine *Tijd en Mens* with Hugo Claus as one of the co-founders. He also co-founded the experimental Dutch-language theatre company het Kamertoneel, which staged Claus's first one-act drama, *De Getuigen*, in 1953. Walravens was the 1958 laureate of the Leon Kryn prize.
23. This encounter is described in Jan Walravens's autobiographical book *Jan Biorix* (1965) and in Ōmi Komaki's postface to the Japanese translation of *La Chasse aux canards*.
24. Komaki also describes his encounter with Claus in the postface to the translation and seems to have been positively fascinated by Claus's presence. With thanks to Akane Luiken for translating the Japanese postface.
25. In the end, Komaki would only write a postface to the Japanese translation, and a student of his, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa (1928–1987), made the actual text translation.



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

## Notes on contributor

*Elies Smeyers* obtained a PhD in Literature and Translation Studies at the Université catholique de Louvain and Ghent University (Belgium), with a thesis on the French translations of Hugo Claus's early works. She is a lecturer of Dutch and of Literary Translation at the Université de Liège, and at the Université catholique de Louvain. She is a member of the editorial board of the Dutch translation journal *Filter: tijdschrift over vertalen*.

## ORCID

*Elies Smeyers*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0302-0686>

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