Poems of Guido Gezelle

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I think that of all the activities open to those who like to think of themselves as literary scholars, translation is the most scientific. I know this goes against all received opinion, and yet if one accepts, with current philosophy of science, that the demarcation line between the scientific and the non-scientific is inter-subjective testability, it is easy to see that what a translator does to a literary text is much more easily testable than what a critic, for example, does to it. I try to translate accordingly. I believe that what I should do is to give readers the most complete set of materials for their concretization of the text. How they use them (i. e. what the text eventually comes to signify for them) is none of my business. I have no poetics of my own to justify distortions of the source text; what is more, I am not allowed to have one. Again contrary to received opinion, I do not create: I transmit. What I do is as ‘artistic’ or ‘non-artistic’ as what any translator of any text does. Of course I have to know about literature in order to translate it, but does that give me the right to call myself a ‘literary’ translator and cordon myself off from the common herd? Others have to know about chemistry, say, or biology in order to be able to translate a text. Does that make them ‘chemical’ or ‘biological’ translators? The main thing to me is what is now more and more called the ‘pragmatics’ of the text, which roughly amounts to what used to be called something like its ‘total impact’. This means that I try to find out what effect a text makes on its readers in the original language. But that is not the end of it. I also try to imagine, in some cases, what effect it could have, and I try to find ways to remedy the fact that it does not have that effect. This also means that I translate texts, not words or sentences. It means, moreover, that I translate texts written by very specific writers at a very specific time, not ‘anonymous’ texts.

If I am lucky, I may be able to influence, to a certain extent, what is grandiloquently called ‘the constitution of the canon of world literature’, which, in practice, means literature available in English (and/or in Russian).
There may be very specific writers who I may consider to have been – not unjustly, for the term ‘justice’ carries no weight in these matters – omitted from the canon of world literature. If they are my contemporaries I can probably achieve something because that part of the system is still evolving, still constituting itself. If they happen to be writers belonging to a bygone era, the task is much more difficult: others have occupied the niches where they might (not ‘should’) have been and they cannot easily be dislodged from those toughest of all pedestals: handbooks of what is often called world literature and is, in practice, just as often limited to the literature of, say, Western Europe mainly (and by that I mean the ‘main’ literatures of Western Europe), the Americas and Russia. Not only is it difficult to dislodge the canonised figures of literature; it is just as difficult to add a new name to the hallowed list. There are all kinds of reasons for this, of course, and this is not the place to enumerate them, but I might just as well be aware of them, always.

Nearly every Flemish schoolchild has heard of Guido Gezelle; the trouble is that almost no other schoolchild anywhere else has. He is one of the ‘also-rans’ in terms of world literature, which means that his niche has been filled, by Hopkins, among others, and Mallarmé. Even within the boundaries of his own literature, Gezelle has two things going against him. The first is his language, the second is his reputation. Gezelle was a Roman Catholic priest and a philologist. In his first capacity he could muster but scant enthusiasm for what he regarded as the language of Calvinism – that is, the standard Dutch of his time, spoken mainly by the lettered burghers of Amsterdam and taught in schools in the Kingdom of the Netherland and in what is now Indonesia. In the second capacity he was eminently well suited to develop a language more or less his own, based on his native West Flemish dialect which, through some quirk of history, still has almost the same phonological system as Middle Dutch. It would be only a mild exaggeration to say that today about half of Gezelle’s language is unintelligible to the man in the street in Amsterdam, and about a quarter to that man’s Antwerp counterpart. No wonder his work does not quite achieve the effect I would tend to think it deserves.

Gezelle’s reputation has been grossly distorted by anthologists in search of suitable material for use in literature classes in Catholic schools. As a result several of his none-too-brilliant pieces (his bishop even coaxed him to stoop to the level of propaganda once in a while) have been drilled
into generations of schoolchildren, which has usually been enough to make them reject thyme, verse and stanza as soon as they managed to make their escape from the educational system. The truly revolutionary poet Gezelle (always in the linguistic-stylistic, never in the ideological sense) who singlehandedly scraped off a four-hundred-year rust from his native sub-language and experimented with poésie pure before the term was coined, is relatively unknown even in his own literary milieu.

The pragmatics of the Nightingale poem are, quite obviously, primarily phonetic. Gezelle experiments with sound (de la musique avant Verlaine) and tries to imitate the song of the nightingale in words. It is obvious that the semantic aspect of the poem is less important than its phonetic counterpart. The translation will have to strike a balance between the two aspects, but the phonetic will, where necessary, take precedence over the semantic. The most obvious examples are, in this respect, to be found in the stanzas beginning with ‘Now piping fine’ and ‘And now his rhythm’. ‘Piping’ sounds like its Dutch/West Flemish counterpart, but does not really have the same semantic value, and the roof of the original has no thatched coat, which has been constructed in the translation for reason of assonance and metre. Similarly the rhythm does not bounce off notes in the original – Gezelle’s imagery never got that surreal, and the pearls do not dance on marble ground. In fact, semantically speaking these two stanzas are pretty close to the worst possible translation. And yet I say this without batting an eyelid, first because it is the effect of the whole text that matters, and I can give back to semantics in other stanzas what I have to take from it in these; and second because I cannot let semantic considerations interrupt the rhythmic flow of the poem, nor counteract its sound-pattern. Speaking of sound-pattern, I have had to imagine what might be acceptable to the reader of the translation in 1980. Swinburne’s stock is not generally high with the general public, and I have therefore thought it wiser to omit the rhyme (which, in previous attempts, tended to degenerate into doggerel) and to opt for some kind of assonance, each stanza being constructed roughly around a dominant sound, which is given by the semantic aspect and modifies it as the stanza unfolds. Do I therefore drag Gezelle kicking and screaming into the twentieth century? I do not think so. For one thing, it would be the worst kind of treason to translate a stylistic innovator into a kind of mock-Edwardian English verse (a translation of this type has actually been produced and is sold to unsuspecting tourists who, no wonder, are not exactly enthusiastic
about Gezelle’s literary potential); for another, it is the twentieth-century reader of English, and he alone, who decides whether Gezelle is ever going to ‘make it’ in English or not, and not the Dutch philologist who is able to give you the etymology and the exact pattern of derivation of all non-standard words in the poem. Here, too, I have opted for sound instead of sense, and for contemporary sound and sense over attempts at archaization – I do not believe Gezelle’s cause would at all be served by translations with glossaries appended, or translations that would send the reader as often to the OED as the original would send him to a bilingual dictionary.

We should make it easy on ourselves – we translators – and calmly tell the world that total equivalence (the kind of thing that used to be clamoured for in handbooks) simply does not exist, and that the best we – and our readers – can hope for is some kind of optimal approximation. That is always possible, even if it has certainly not been achieved in the translation offered here. But that is my fault, not the fault of any language or any fateful concept of necessary untranslatability. I may not be good enough, but at least I am honest. I do not project my neuroses or my ideology into the text written by a country priest many years ago, and what I write about him will not much serve my personal advancement. I hope that what I translate may serve his. And after all this doctoring of the text, to make some final remarks, am I still brazen enough to maintain that translation can aspire to the status of a scientific activity? Certainly. Anybody who is qualified can compare my text with the text of the original, can see what I have done, and can accept it or reject it. We can argue about what I have done. I may be able to convince him or he me. I do not try to preach at him, or sweep him off his feet, or hit him over the head with truth and beauty. That is not my task. In the final analysis, I try to dispense knowledge – about Gezelle and about (his) poetry. The kind of knowledge that can aspire to the scientific – that can be checked, tested – but also the kind of knowledge that goes beyond the scientific may, in the end, be more important for the reader; but that is for him to decide. My job is done if I have succeeded in giving him the means to do so.

Waar zit die heldere zanger, dien
ik hooren kan en zelden zien,
in ‘t loof geborgen
dees blijden Meidagmorgen?

Where sits that limpid singer
I can hear and seldom see
behind his screen of leaves
this glad morning in May
Hij klinkt alom de vogels dood,
bij zijnder kelen wondergroot'
en felle slagen,
in bosschen en in hagen.

He stuns the other birds
to silence with bold notes
that drop in wonder from his throat
in hedge and undergrowth.

Waar zit hij? Neen, 'k en vind hem niet,
maar 'k hoore, 'k hoore, 'k hoore een lied
hem lustig weven:
het klettert in de dreven.

Where is he? I can't find him but
I hear, I hear, I hear
the song of joy he weaves
it clatters down the streets.

Zoo zit en zingt er menig man,
vroegmorgens op 't getouwe, om, van
goën drom te maken
langlijdend lijwaadlaken.

Men sit like him and sing
before their looms when morning
comes and from good thread spin
long-lasting linseed-cloth.

De wever zingt, zijn' webbe dreunt;
de la klabakt, 't getouwe dreunt;
en lijzig varen
de spoelen heen, in 't garen.

The weaver sings, his frame shudders,
the shuttle keeps the beat,
the loom drones and the spools
move drawling through the woof.

Zoo zit er, in den zomer zoel,
een, werpende, op den weverstoel
van groene blaren,
zijne duizendverwig garen.

So he sits in sultry Summer
and stretches his proud thread
of many colours on
the weaver's frame of leaves.

Wat is hij? mensche of dier of wat?
Vol zoetheid, is 't een wierookvat,
daar Engelenhanden,
onzichtbaar, reuke in branden.

What is he? man or beast, joy
or sweet delight, a vessel
of incense where angels' hands
invisible burn many scents.

Wat is hij? 't Is een wekkerspel,
vol tanden fijn, vol snaren fel,
vol wakkere monden,
van sprekend goud, gebonden.

What is he? A clockwork toy
of fine teeth, fierce strings and
a dapper mouth all wrapped
in speech that sounds like gold.

Hij is ... daar ik niet aan en kan,
een sparke viers, een boodschap van

He is ... what I can't reach,
a spark of fire, a message
veel hooger' daken
als waarder menschen waken.

Horkt! Langzaam, luide en lief getaald,
hoe diep hij lust en leven haalt,
als uit de gronden
van duizend orgelmonden!

Nu piept hij fijn, nu roept hij luid';
en 't zijzpapt hem ter kelen uit,
lijk waterbellen
die van de daken rellen.

Geteld, nu tokt zijn taalgetik,
as ware 't op een marbelstik,
dat perelkransen
van 't snoer gevallen, dansen.

Geen vogel of hij weet zijn lied,
ijn' leise en al zijn stemgebied,
bij zijnder talen,
nauwkeurig af te malen.

't En deert mij niet, hoe oud gedaagd,
dat hij den zangprijs henendraagt,
en, vogel schoone,
mij rooft de dichterkroone!

Wat mensche en heeft u nooit verstaan,
noch al uw' rijkdom recht gedaan,
o wondere tale
van koning Nachtegale!

from roof’s much higher than
the boldest roof’s of men.

Listen! Slow and loud
and lovely, a life, a zest
that sound as from the depths
of a thousand organ-months.

Now piping fine, now screaming
loud it dribbles from his throat
like waterbubbles rattling
down the roof’s thatched coat.

And now his rhythm bounces
off each note — long necklaces
of pearls gone dancing off
their strings on marble sound.

A master of his voice
he knows to counterfeit
the lilt, the manner and
the sweep of each bird’s speech.

An old man knows no envy:
let him take the prize of song,
bird or beauty, and steal
the poet’s crown from me.

For who will understand
and treasure all the riches
it holds, the marvel-tale
of the sovereign nightingale.