Poems of Guido Gezelle

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TEN VERSIONS OF ‘O LIED’
A number of translators were asked either to produce a version of the above poem and comment briefly on their difficulties/strategies as translators, or to comment on an existing version. In one case, Christine D’haen’s translation, published in her Guido Gezelle. Poems (1971), p. 35, the translator was dissatisfied with the English rendering and let it be known that she did not wish it to be included here, despite the argument that discussion of why a particular version had ‘failed’ might in itself be illuminating. (PV)
o Song! o Song!
You ease the smart
that’s wrought by some disaster.
You take, o Song, the wounded heart,
and make the wound heal faster!
o Song, o Song!
You slake the thirst,
you quench the scorching fire,
you break, o Song, the arid worst
and make its pain retire,
o Song! o Song,
my silent tears
that fall now ever quicker,
you make – and now your Art appears—
You make them honey liquor ...
o Song! o Song!
Asked to contribute an English version of Gezelle’s ‘O Lied’ at relatively short notice and at a time when I was preoccupied with other projects, my first inclination was to refuse outright. Looking at the poem, however, the first thing that sprang to mind was an alliterative, metrical, rhyming translation of the first stanza. This encouraged me to go on, and within minutes I had a fair working version of the second stanza as well. Suddenly there was no turning back. Bad luck for me, because the third stanza proved much less cooperative.

The coincidence of these first two stanzas falling into place also defined the translation tactics and stylistic features of the whole translation. I was locked into my instinctive approach. I maintained the original structure and regular metre and also its pattern of single and double rhymes. I felt forced to abandon the six-fold rhyme on ‘-aken’, but another happy coincidence provided an English echo of the original in the many ‘ache’ sounds. I also opted for a mildly archaic vocabulary and usage. This seemed to suit the structure and content of the poem: more pronounced use of archaisms or dialect would run the risk of sounding absurd; overly modern language could clash with the old-fashioned style.

This was the context in which I began my struggle with the third and final stanza. What to rhyme with honey? Which part of the face lends itself to a double rhyme that ties in with tears and tasting? Temple or nostril? I do not think so. This is what I mean by the coincidental character of my translation tactics. If the third stanza had been first, I would have most likely resorted to a quite different approach. As it was, I tried hard to bend the poem to my structure. Ultimately I found solutions I can live with. Perhaps with more time I might have found better ones, but translations are like that, and poetry translations doubly so.

David Colmer
SONG!

O song! O song!
You soothe the smart
When grief comes back again
You can, O song, assuage the heart
And take away its pain.
O song! O song!
You slake my thirst,
You soothe my fevered brow,
You vivify my arid breast,
You banish all my woe
O song! O song!
When silent grief
Makes wet these cheeks of mine,
Then only you can bring relief,
Make honey from their brine.
O Song! O song!
I was drawn to this poem because of its double sentiment of sorrow (or dejection) and yet solace, no doubt a frequent experience for us all. Indeed I can feel the tears on the cheek and even see them on the page.

I did not, if I remember correctly, encounter great difficulty in my attempt at translation, partly because I am prepared to allow myself some freedom when I consider that the essence of a poem comes first and the pursuit of literal precision second. Inevitably, of course, line content will often not be parallel, and sentence structure must also often be different; see how in typical Flemish the infinitive *staken* is widely separated from its auxiliary and comes thus after its direct object. I have, I hope successfully, avoided inversions such as might not please in modern English poems.

I have not extinguished the flame of the eighth line, but perhaps the fevered brow will get by instead, even though the rhyme which it provides is only approximate. As for *brine*, I know it is not in the poem except by implication, but it does provide a rhyme. Even so, this is not a two-syllable rhyme as in the Flemish, but it indicates a frequent difficulty with translation, from either Flemish or German; in English so many sounded final e’s and so many verb and noun inflections have been dropped from the pronunciation that I have decided not to despair if I do not often manage double rhymes.

*Albert van Eyken*
Oh song! Oh song!
You ease the pain
when disaster aims its dart
you, oh song, can mend again,
can mend the wounded heart.
Oh song! Oh song!
You assuage our thirst,
you quench the burning glow,
you, oh song, can surely nurse
the breast that used to flow.
Oh song! oh song!
The silent tears
That now drip down my cheek,
you – and this your art that cheers
can make them honey sweet ...
Oh song! oh song!
This note gives an account of the factors which played a part in determining the shape and wording of this English version of the Gezelle poem.

The translation does not capture the style and flavour of the Gezelle poem. By this I mean that because of my personal tastes, I decided not to use a regional or archaic kind of English. So ‘gij’, for example, was not rendered as ‘thee’ or ‘thou’, partly a reflection of this translator’s lack of an active command of this style of English, but partly also because of the judgement that the translation could come close to pastiche, which I wanted to avoid. I also rejected the poetic or archaic word order that is found, for example, in some English translations of hymns from the mid nineteenth century, and which would have resembled Dutch structures more closely.

The starting-points for this translation were rhyme and metre on the one hand, and emotive force on the other. Although the rhyme scheme was preserved, full rhymes were not always possible, and in these cases assonance was used instead. In a similar way, the metre of the Flemish poem was reproduced in part, though the fourth line interrupts the iambic pattern with a trochaic one. This formal framework guided the translation of individual words and phrases, including the insertion of words such as ‘cheers’ and ‘sweet’ not present in the poem in Flemish. Besides addition, it also involved subtraction, with the loss of ‘wee’ in line 10, and consequently of an emotive element.

Jane Fenoulhet
OH SONG!
Oh Song! Oh Song!
You ease the pain
and each misfortune’s aching,
you can, oh Song, the heart’s cruel chain,
the heart’s cruel chain be breaking!

Oh Song! Oh Song!
You slake the thirst,
the raging blaze’s raking,
you can, oh Song, the parched breast’s curse
and sore distress be breaking.

Oh Song! Oh Song!
the silent bead
that down my cheek is quaking,
you can, oh Song, by art succeed
in sweetest honey making ...

Oh Song! Oh Song!
My initial reaction to ‘O Lied! O Lied!’ was ‘Oh God!’ I think that is still my reaction. Three times arms are flung out in the grand gesture – and I am left with the feeling of a superabundance of form (some of it a teenie bit contrived?) and a dearth of content. (And in this case it seems valid to me to separate the two.)

Having established three stanzas of 4, 4, 7, 8, 7 + coda and a rhyme scheme ABCBC/ADCDC/AECEC/A, the main problem seems to me to be: If I retain all this as well as the set positions where phrases are repeated, I end up with six feminine C rhymes that are going to have to end in -ing. And that means putting verbs at the end of a sentence in a ‘versifying’ style I hate. It reminds me of homemade songs sung to known melodies at Danish parties and weddings – the ‘Now we with joy this day are celebrating’ sort of line.

And translation is reduced to a jigsaw puzzle, where only a few pieces are missing, but none of them fit. As a child I used to push them in a bit harder and hope. This is what I intend to do here, too. It is an admission of failure.

There have been few changes. Not because I rushed off a version, but because words like ‘bane’ are a pain in themselves. Here is the scaffolding:

Oh Song! Oh Song!
You x x x
x x x x x consonant +/ɪkɪŋ/,
you can, oh Song, x x x x
x x x x x consonant +/ɪkɪŋ]/.
The missing pieces were then rammed more or less into place.

John Irons
O SONG!

O Song! O Song!
You soothe the smart
When fortune strikes us low,
You can, o Song, bind up the heart
Which bleeds at a grievous blow.
O Song! O Song!
You slake the thirst,
you quell the fiery glow,
the breast, o Song, with dryness cursed
you calm, you calm its woe.
O Song! O Song!
Each silent bead
which down my cheeks doth flow
you can, o Song, transform to mead –
this art you also know!
The first job I do with poems is to read them through for general tone, structure, etc. It struck me as a fairly typical mid-nineteenth-century piece, not over-incisive in content (can a good sing-song really do all this?). Possibly meant to be set to music, in fact, rather than to be read.

The arrangement on the page hides the fact that the rhythm is that of the ballad: 4 beats – 3 beats – 4 beats – 3 beats, with a rhyme on the 3-beat lines. What makes it a bit more complex than your stock nineteenth-century ode is the rhyme scheme: the 4-beat lines also rhyme, and the same rhyme runs through all the 3-beat lines in the poem. Also the 3-beat rhymes are feminine and the other rhymes are masculine. But that’s probably not something to worry about overmuch (it’s probably due to the fact that a lot of Dutch sentences end in an infinitive, which almost always means a final unstressed -en).

Translating it was fun: I got stuck in with gusto. The general tone – coat-and-tails and evening gown round the mahogany piano and the aspidistra – sets the vocabulary: ‘the smart / when fortune strikes us low’, ‘with dryness cursed’, ‘each silent bead / which down my cheeks doth flow’. With the first version, I went slightly over the top, translating ‘gij’ as ‘thou’ (‘Thou sooth’st the smart’). This was vetoed, however, by my better half – who, besides being my native speaker informant, also acts as my quality controller.

The rhyme-scheme was mean: it took the best part of an afternoon just to get the set of six 3-beat rhymes. Somewhere along the way, this meant losing the parallelism of ‘gij kunt’ (‘you can’) in the fourth line of each stanza: I compensated for this by repeating ‘o Song’ in each fourth line instead. Similarly, I had to lose the blatant padding of ‘de wonde in ‘t hert, / de wonde vermaken’, but managed to get some compensatory padding in the second stanza (‘you calm, you calm its woe’). Of course, the rhyme scheme forces you into slight deviations from the original: ‘wetness’ becomes ‘bead’, ‘honey’ becomes ‘mead’, and so on. But I refuse to feel guilty about this. After all, it’s often painfully obvious that original poets choose certain words only because they rhyme (‘nat’ and ‘dat’, for example), so why should not the translator be allowed the same privilege?

Francis R. Jones
o Song! o song!
The pain I feel
Whenever trials o’erwin me,
You can, o song, soothe hurt and heal
The wounded heart within me.
  o Song! o song!
You quench the thirst
You quell the blazing reeling
You can, o song, restore the worst
Of pain in my parched feeling.
  O Song! o song!
The tacit tears
That make my cheeks so runny
You have the power, as now appears
To turn them into honey,
  o Song! o song
Questions of interpretation arise right from the start: in the title. This, with its lack of punctuation and its use of upper case throughout, gives no indication of the intention behind the refrain. Here there is punctuation, but there is also a consistent use of upper- and lower-case initials in ‘Lied, lied’. The suggestion is surely that there is a transcendental Song and an immanent song: the Gift and what is given. This presents no problem to the translator, who can simply reproduce the typography of the original.

The translator is, however, immediately aware of the poem’s unusual structure. Its two asymmetrical halves pivot symmetrically about the median. The form of the stanza is tied into the refrain held firmly at the centre. This means that the form contributes essentially to the meaning, and the translation must reflect this form as faithfully as possible.

This raises the basic question: if a choice has to be made between exact rendering, rhyme or rhythm, which should be sacrificed? In trying to retain the alternation between male and female rhymes as well as the syllabic rhythm of the original, I have taken some liberties with the literal meaning.

Peter King
SONG!
Song! Song!
You lessen the pain
whenever disaster tries us,
you tell us, O Song, the heart is wounded in vain,
wounded in vain, you advise us!
Song! Song!
You slake our thirst,
you douse the blaze that fries us,
you irrigate, O Song, the driest breast,
undo the knot that ties us.
Song! Song!
The silent tear
creeping down our cheek supplies us
with honey: so be here, be near
and by your art surprise us –
Song! Song!
The main problem is the rhyme scheme. It would be easy to give a close rendering without taking it into account, but I felt that the chiming effects were very much a part of the attraction of the poem, and so some attempt should be made to reproduce them.

*Edwin Morgan*
a) O LYRIC SONG

O lyric song!
You ease the smart
when trouble has its seasons,
your power upon the wounded heart
brings solace to its lesions!
O lyric song!
Song that will salve,
quencher where thirst is regent,
you can that burning drought dissolve
and drive out torment’s legions.
O lyric song,
I feel a damp
witness of stealthy weeping
that, such your canniness, you can
transform to honey’s sweetness ...
O song! O song!
b) **SONG**

    O song, song, song!
    You tend the smart
    inflamed by trouble's flailing
    and so enwind the wounded heart
    you turn away its ailing!
    O song, O song!
    When parched with thirst
    you douse its fiery dealing,
    you can, O song, undo the worst
    drought has to harrow feeling.
    O song, O song,
    this damp that leaks
    over my cheeks distilling
    can, as the candid silence speaks,
    turn honey by your willing ...  
    O lyric song!
The initial decision as to which aspects of a text’s dynamic to highlight has a profound effect on how a translation will turn out. In fact, I had to make two radically different versions of this poem, with differing aims in mind.

Gezelle’s poem itself, regarded simply as a poem, is neither profound nor original. It is chiefly a vehicle for lyricism of a rather simple kind, its metre undeviatingly iambic; such metaphors as it has are traditional, apart from the final conceit. The word-music is more sophisticated, especially the repeating feminine rhyme and the wordplay on ‘kunt’ and ‘kunst’. The way the sense progresses is most interesting of all. Mental pain is alleviated by song; the pain is caused by longing or deprivation, a drought song quenches; this quenching is accomplished by the release of tears, made sweet by the lyrical act. The poem is in fact describing its own effect.

I only got to know the poem well by working on the first version and, at the end, wondering where I had gone wrong. My first impression had been that meaning hardly mattered; it was merely the vehicle through which Gezelle demonstrated his lyrical mastery. I made the conscious decision to produce a paraphrase round which to weave a music of my own, a formal equivalent employing internal, near, off and pararhyme. In fact, the version owes more to Basil Bunting than to Guido Gezelle. Because I had in mind such Elizabethan set pieces as those on night and sleep (‘that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care’), the metaphors verge on the Baroque. It is a travesty of the original.

The next move was to look at the poem in its historical perspective. In 1860 Gezelle was still suffering from the emotional crisis of the year before, following the loss of a favourite student and, besides, had been dismissed from the professorship of poetry at the seminary where he was working. An adequate reason to be down in the mouth! Nevertheless, his approach is impersonal and generalised. Of more importance is the reason for the poem’s simplicity, its lack of original sentiment. Poems like it may be two a penny in English and many another major European language – but they were not in Flemish, owing to the chequered history of the Belgian territories. Gezelle is having to pioneer a style and a language to fit it. In the light of this, the sophisticated procedures of ‘O Lyric Song’ are out of place.

‘Song’ attempts a version that is simpler and closer to the original. Two approaches I rejected at the outset. Flemish forms are at a minimum in this and would not justify a dialect rendering. Scots would be too radical; Yorkshire dialect offers the attractive possibility of a familiar second-person
singular (‘tha’) but is not really supple enough. On the other hand, I had once suggested in a review that the Victorian boudoir syntax of the Claes and D’haen versions (The Evening and the Rose, revised edition, Antwerp, 1989) produced a useful distancing. They underline the fact that what we are reading belongs to the nineteenth century. It would have been valid in this case, too, but I could not bear the thought of using it myself (apart from one inverted verse form in my first version).

How to handle the repeated ‘O lied’ presented a problem in both versions. There is a modulation from back vowel to front in the Dutch not present in the English grunt of ‘O song’. Dutch liquid and dental consonants give way to English sibilant and nasal which, to my ear, have a dying fall. For that reason I only used this particular repetition at the end of ‘O Lyric Song’. I chose the phrase of the title because at least the vowel modulation is represented and gives the better initiatory lift to the poem; also because it underlines the poem’s main interest, lyrical effect rather than the act of singing or listening. It was not an alternative open to the more literal second version, but the objection to repeating ‘O song’ remained. What came to the rescue was the memory of the triple repetition in the first line of ‘Careless Love’. Its intensity grips the attention. Hopefully it might do the same for Gezelle’s sister song!

Beyond that, the rhymes in ‘Song’ are regular. Although it was not possible to preserve the repeated feminine rhyme, each stanzaic section has a pure rhyme and overall they are near rhymes of each other. There are also a few metrical deviations in the form of inverted first feet. Unvarying iambic is a Germanic practice (listen to any high school student reciting), the deadly boredom of which I suspect Dutch use of feminine rhyme is meant to alleviate. English practice requires variation.

I am not satisfied even with the second version. It still falls short of Gezelle’s simplicity and some of his patterns of repetition. On the page, they strike me as rather fiddly. Sung, they might be more effective, and producing a translated text for singing would bring other priorities to the fore.

Yann Lovelock
O SONG!

O Song,
thou makest less the grief
of calamity sore afflicting,
canst, Song, to the sore heart bring relief,
to the wounded heart's distressing!
O Song, O Song!

thou quenchest parching thirst,
dampenest fire's fierce scorching,
replenishest, Song, the empty breast
in milkless sorrow paining.
O Song! O Song,
those wordless tears that start
now down my cheeks a-flowing,
thou canst – for such is thy sure art –
canst honey soon be making ...
O Song! O Song!
To translate is to refract, even to fracture. What follows is post f(r)actum. The poem effectively contains three similar ‘quatrains’, referred to below without qualifying quotation marks.

TECHNICAL
Three constraints made competitive play.
1. gij (= thou/you) occurs on no fewer than seven occasions, all line-initial. In each quatrain Gezelle uses once or twice one or both of the structures gij + finite verb and gij + modal verb kunnen + (end-positioned) infinitive. In ll. 15 gij + kunnen (+ – here – pronominal direct object of l. 14 is repeated), syntactic tension resulting from both this and from the separation by parenthetical ‘en uw kunst is dat’ of the two occurrences of ‘gij kunt het’. In striving to preserve the second person, I used (second person) morphs in -est and -st in each quatrain to ‘carry’ the person, them having been pronominally established in a previous line. Thou was, however, revived in l. 15 in order to stabilise the sense and to prelude the climactic tension of ll. 15–16.
2. End rhyme. Using -ing to render unstressed -en seems reasonable enough, but -en figures here in more parts of speech than -ing (can) in English: some compensatory lexical duplication ensued (‘sore afflicting’, ‘wounded … distressing’, ‘sorrow paining’). Even using a different consonant phoneme to maintain equivalence or the rime riche in -ken would have led to a surfeit of verbal contortion. The persistent stressed end rhyme in -(t), present also in final ‘Lied’ and mirrored frequently elsewhere, is emulated in the second – with ‘thirst’ approximating to ‘breast’ – and third quatrains, but ‘grief/relief’ in the first one proved too enticing!
3. Gezelle’s broadly iambic metre was maintained, in eluding the four stresses in ll. 4, 9 and 14. However, the addition of one iamb in the first line of each quatrain meant that ll. 2, 7 and 12 no longer had the same number of iambs (two) as the four ‘O Lied / O Lied’ lines – a loss.

REGISTER
We know that this poem, like at least two, possibly three, others in Gedichten ... was written for Gezelle’s Roeselare pupil Polydor Demonie, in c. 1860 aged 15 or 16 (see Verzameld dichtwerk, vol. 2, 56 and 52, 64, 69). Is the ‘Lied’ being addressed in our poem a pars pro toto metaphor for a musical pupil? After all, in Bizet’s opera Carmen(cita) both song and person. Such proximity of priest and pupil might justify you for gij. On the other hand,
Gezelle's time-hallowed lexis and prosody in most of the poem inclined me to archaic thou, fitting for matters serious, intimate – and poetic. Moreover, I sometimes even expanded the hymn-echoing tone of much of the original, partly also, despite Gezelle's concision, to avoid too abrupt a rendering (e.g. in the first quatrains 'calamity sore afflicting', 'sweet relief', 'wounded heart's distressing').

**EQUIVALENCE?**
The original's parenthesis 'en uw kunst is dat' is alas rather clumsy, with its filler 'en' in the feeble sequence 'het, en uw, and its inelegant end rhyme in 'dat': but should one have sought to improve? Even clumsier is the collocation of 'de drooge borst' (= the dry breast) with 'doen staken' (= make [to] cease), even allowing for 'de drooge borst' plus 't wee' being a hendiadys. Furthermore, the meaning of 'de drooge borst' is elusive: is emotional or pulmonary incapacity (tubercular perhaps) meant? Or the reading chosen? To the latter I was persuaded by the 'fluid' context of the final quatrains. So I opted for the verb 'replenishes!' – biblically soothing – with both literal and figurative meaning in order to make more startling the adjective 'milkless' in 1.10, which itself adumbrates the even greater but amazingly positive and sensual verbal impact of the miraculous 'honey'.

A cautionary tale: if each quatrains enacts a transformation from hurting to healing – more intense in the second, at its climax in the third quatrains – then 'tears' are licensed to come before 'honey' et sic translatum est. Yet suppose 'het zwijgend nat' (l. 12)', (nat = fluid, liquid, moisture, water, wet) indicates incipient drops of mother's milk, the product of l. 9's restorative action. In that case the second and final quatrains – and we have observed oddness in the latter – refer to a single process of transformation rather than to parallel transformations, and a different rendering of the phrase is required.

Self-evidently, any interpretation should embrace the poem's also being a paean to the ultimate finding of poetic utterance. In the 'mother's milk' reading, 'incipient drops' would then suggest the ébauche of such verbalisation, 'honey' – in all readings – creative achievement. The poem becomes poetological, referring to its own genesis. 'Maak je de borst maar nat', one might conclude, before again venturing into a land of such milk and honey.

*Michael Rigelsford*