CREATIVE TRANSLATION IN GUIDO GEZELLE'S VERSION OF LONGFELLOW'S *THE SONG OF HIAWATHA*[1]

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The translation of written texts is generally considered a literary undertaking that serves a purely utilitarian purpose, and for that reason is usually not ranked as a high-level literary art form. Certainly, the large bulk of translation does not go beyond this expectation. Nevertheless, one will readily admit that the translation of some texts, especially, of course, poetry, calls for a high degree of literary skill and inventiveness in the target language, and not merely linguistic expertise in relation to the source language.

It is also useful toremind ourselves of the important role translation has played in the genesis and development of various literatures. If I may refer very briefly to my own special field of Latin literature, then I note that the first real literary work in that language is a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, produced by Livius Andronicus, himself of Greek extraction, in the middle of the third century B.C.; it is a rather humble, but still crucial starting point for the distinguished, indeed superb literary tradition of epic poetry that the Romans were to develop in subsequent centuries. Latin love poetry, too, starts off humbly towards the end of the second century B.C. with translations of Greek texts, namely a few erotic epigrams of the Hellenistic period; however, within a century the Romans produced some of the finest love poetry in the ancient world.

The history of Dutch literature begins, again very humbly, in the tenth century with a translation into Old Low Franconian, as the proto-Dutch of the earlier Middle Ages is usually called, of the nineteenth psalm: "Himiln tellunt guodlickheidt Godes: Ind werk hando sinro furkundit festi—The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."[2] Then there is a major lacuna in the literary record. But in the twelfth century Dutch begins to emerge as a significant literary language. At first, translations, especially of the French *chansons de geste*, occupy a prominent place in the literary record, but soon Dutch authors begin to find their own voice, and towards the end of the Middle Ages Dutch has become one of the major literary vernaculars of Western Europe.[3]

It is interesting to observe that translations made for a literature that is still in its incipient phase are usually very close, even literal translations. They aim at conveying the original text as faithfully as possible; at a time when the target-language is still relatively unpolished and hesitant, as it were, in the area of literary expression, the translations shy away from highly free and creative renderings. Even so, the exercise of translation provides the target language with an ideal testing ground to try out its own linguistic resources for the written word and thus to develop a genuine literary idiom and style. In fact, a close translation may be a very distinguished piece of literature in its own right and as such exercise a major formative influence on the target-language. In the English language, the classical and unsurpassed example of such a translation is the King James version of the Bible, and almost the same type of importance can be probably ascribed to the Statenbijbel translation for the development of post-Renaissance literary Dutch.

Sometimes a very close, quasiliteral translation can be a very daring creative experiment with the linguistic resources of the target language and thus represent more in its intention than a perhaps somewhat naive striving for fidelity to the original text, which, as I have pointed out, tends to be the hallmark of the earlier translations in the literary history of the target language. Friedrich Hölderlin's German translations of classical Greek literature, especially Sophocles' tragedies and Pindar's *Odes*, come to mind here. As George Steiner has shown in his major study of the art of translation, *After Babel*, Hölderlin was not composing cribs, but was trying, through his use of audacious idioms, neologisms, and syntactic combinations, to infuse, as it were, the hermeneutic essence of the original text into his German, and in doing so, was willing to stretch the latter's resources to the limit.[4] In the hands of a skilled literary artist, then, a close, even quasi-literal translation can turn out as a genuinely creative experiment with the target-language.

More commonly, however, what might be called creative translation will be one in which the translator no longer feels himself or herself constrained by the full spectrum of the linguistic and literary characteristics of the source text, but instead sets out to refashion the text on a large scale so as to acclimatize it as much as possible to the perhaps very different linguistic and

literary environment represented by the target language. Of course, the large majority of literary translations move somewhere between these extreme polarities of close and creative translation, and this is hardly regrettable. A creative translation, while it may very well be a very fine piece of literature in its own right, may have sacrificed much meaningful contact with the original text for the sake of literary brilliance. The most notorious (or if you prefer, brilliant) example of such creative translation in English literature is Alexander Pope's version of Homer's *Iliad*, on which the contemporary English classical philologist Richard Bentley is said to have commented, "A pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer."[5] Certainly, there is, in many respects, little contact between Pope's translation, which is, with its Augustan wit and polish, a masterpiece of neoclassical narrative verse, and the Homeric original, which, although in an uniquely artistic way, still exhibits all the characteristics of oral narrative poetry produced in a preliterate society; Pope was not altogether insensitive to these features, but he did not allow them to constrain his version.[6]

Among the outstanding English translations of this century that are of this creative type, I would single out Ezra Pound's renderings of the Roman elegiac poet Propertius, published under the title of *Homage to Propertius*.[7] This is a mostly very free translation, much freer in fact than Pope's *Iliad*. Pound's renderings are remarkable above all for the startling but also often distorting prominence they give to the elements of wit and irony, which are certainly often present in the Propertian original but do not predominate in the Roman poet as they do in Pound's version.

However, Guido Gezelle's version of Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* represents a very special and almost unique kind of creative translation.[8] It is a splendid work of poetry in its own right, but it has not strayed extremely far away from the original text, and generally reproduces with admirable fidelity the narrative tone and momentum of Longfellow's poem. Indeed, as sheer poetry, Gezelle version is superior to the original. It has, as it were, seized the poetic possibilities that are for the most part only latent in Longfellow's text and actualized them with a remarkable sureness and forcefulness.

Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* is a medium-length, episodic narrative poem loosely based on Ojibway myths concerning their benefactor and culture-hero Hiawatha, who in Longfellow's text becomes an almost Messiah-like figure, endeavouring to bring both material and spiritual well-being to his people. Longfellow's composition of this work reflects the keen interest in cultured circles of the nineteenth century in literature, especially heroic narrative poetry, stemming from preliterate folk cultures. Longfellow, indeed, started his work on *Hiawatha* (in 1854) almost immediately after his reading of the *Kalevala,* the Finnish epic which had recently received its literary reaction, and he adopted from the latter the octosyllabic line that he used in his *Hiawatha*.[9] *The Song of Hiawatha* is a workmanlike piece of literature, but no literary critic today will bestow on it the accolades it received in the last century, and indeed Longfellow's literary reputation as a whole has been in eclipse for most of this century.

For more than half a century after its publication in 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha* was a phenomenally popular work, with translations into numerous European languages appearing during this period. Already in 1862 the first Dutch translation by L.S.P. Meijeboom appeared, which J. Persyn describes as a "lang niet onverdienstelijke vernederlandsing."[10] It is not surprising that Gezelle, too, should have been attracted to Longfellow's work and turned his hand to translating it. Like that of many of his European contemporaries, Gezelle's interest in the culture of the North American Indians can probably be explained in part by the general vogue of the idealized picture of the 'noble savage' as popularized by Rousseau and other thinkers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism;[11] this picture could also find a sympathetic response in the Catholic tradition, which had always maintained that it is possible for man, even in precivilized societies, to have a real and valid knowledge of God through the use of his natural mental faculties, without the intervention of supernatural grace and revelation.[12]

Persyn quite rightly places special emphasis on the misseological motives behind Gezelle's translation of *Hiawatha*.[13] For decades, Gezelle maintained very close contacts with English Catholics. The final and complete version of the translation, published in 1886, was dedicated to the memory of Joseph C. Algar from Frome, England, who, coming via the Oxford movement like John Henry Newman, had converted to Catholicism and had become one of Gezelle's closest colleagues at the Kleinseminarie at Roeselaere. Gezelle hoped ardently for the eventual reconversion of the English-speaking world to Catholicism, and this hope is mirrored in the final *zang* (canto) of *Hiawatha*, where the "black-robed" Jesuit missionaries receive a very cordial welcome from Hiawatha and his Ojibway people.

Persyn observes that a strong religious motive can

be discerned already behind Gezelle's selection of the fifth *zang* three decades earlier for a first experiment in the translation of Longfellow's work (this was published in January 1857 in a Ghent daily).[14] The fifth *zang* narrates how the cultivation of corn (maize) was introduced, under the leadership of Hiawatha, among the Amerindians. A handsome young man, dressed in shining garments of green and yellow, appears to Hiawatha one day towards sunset. Hiawatha then is already into his fourth day of fasting and prayer, pleading with the Master of Life, the Supreme God, that his people do not have adequate sources of food. The young man identifies himself as an emissary from the Master of Life and tells Hiawatha that, through struggle and labour, he will obtain what he has prayed for. He then invites Hiawatha to wrestle with him. The two men wrestle for three successive days. Finally, on the seventh day, in the midst of combat, the young man suddenly drops dead. Acting on instructions that he has already received from the young man in a vision the night before, Hiawatha gives him proper burial and keeps watch over his grave, clearing away the weeds; then corn begins to sprout "And before the Summer ended/ Stood the maize in all its beauty,/ With its shining robes about it, / And its long, soft, yellow tresses..." This aetiological myth, as retold by Longfellow, with its Eucharistic implications pointing to the death and resurrection of Christ, must have drawn Gezelle's attention almost immediately.

Finally, Gezelle was also very much attracted to the poetic form of *The Song of Hiawatha*.[15] With its simple metre and verse form and its ample use of parallelism and repetition, Longfellow's work preserved the essential structural and rhythmical characteristics of narrative poetry of oral folk tradition, and in this fact Gezelle saw a major stimulus and challenge for his own tireless labours to make Flemish Dutch, in all its rich folkish expressiveness, once more a viable and generally accepted and respected literary language.

Even a brief comparison of Gezelle with Longfellow shows how superior Gezelle's version is to Longfellow's in vividness and freshness of expression.[16] Thanks to Gezelle's exquisite verbal skills and inventiveness, many details become alive in a way that they do not in the English original. Very little sounds clichetic and conventionally poetic. The use of assonance, onomatopoeia, and alliteration is masterful, far superior to the original. What Gezelle has done, essentially, is to infuse his own superb lyric genius into what is in Longfellow's original only a workmanlike literary piece, very typical of its age,[17] that tries to preserve something of the flavour of oral narrative poetry. While the sentimental motives that drew Gezelle to *The Song of Hiawatha* were very much dictated by his era and religious background, his lyric gift made possible a veritable 'herdichten' of Longfellow's work, making this version one of the masterpieces of narrative Dutch poetry.

I would remark in closing that many Amerindian languages have been characterized by anthropological linguists such as Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir, and Franz Boas as being extremely rich and versatile in their resources on concrete description and expression.[18] Perhaps it is not too fanciful to imagine Gezelle as having captured more than Longfellow did of the story-telling artistry with which the original myths and legends lying at the basis of *The Song of Hiawatha* had been told and retold in their native societies.

I invite the reader to compare the closing lines of *The Song of Hiawatha* in both Longfellow's original and Gezelle's version. Gezelle's superior verbal artistry and inventiveness will be immediately apparent. Let me cite three instances. Gezelle has entirely eliminated the not particularly effective repetition of "Sailed...Sailed...Sailed." The use of both the weak and strong past tense forms "glom" and "glimde" of the same verb in the same line is not only linguistically audacious but creates fine alliteration and assonance. Finlly, compare the greater auditory and visual vividness of the line "gronsende in de kiezelplaten," suggesting the sight and sound of thick stretches of pebbles along the shoreline being constantly stirred up by the ever-moving water; and notice that Gezelle's waters do not "Sob."

Canto / Zang XXII

Hiawatha's Departure

On the shore stood Hiawatha,
Turned and waved his hand at parting;
On the clear and luminous water
Launched his birch canoe for sailing,
From the pebbles of the amrgin
Shoved it forth into the water;
Whispered to it, "Westward! westward!"
And with speed it darted forward.
And the evening sun descending
Set the clouds on fire with redness,
Burned the broad sky, like a prairie,
Left upon the level water
One long track and trail of splendor,
Down whose stream, as down a river,
Westward, westward Hiawatha
Sailed into the fiery sunset,
Sailed into the purple vapors,
Sailed into the dusk of evening.
And the people from the margin
Watched him floating, rising, sinking,
Till the birch canoe seemed lifted
High into that sea of splendor,
Till it sank into the vapors
Like the new moon slowly, slowly
Sinking in the purple distance.
And they said, "Farewell forever!"
Said, "Farewell, O Hiawatha!"
And the forests, dark and lonely
Moved through all their depths of darkness,
Sighed, "Farewell, O Hiawatha!"
And the waves upon the margin
Rising, rippling on the pebbles,
Sobbed, "Farewell, O Hiawatha!"
And the heron, the Shuh-shuh-gah,
From her haunts amont the fen-lands,
Screamed, "Farewell, O Hiawatha!"
Thus departed Hiawatha,
Hiawatha the Beloved,
In the glory of the sunset,
In the purple mists of evening,
To the regions of the home-wind,
Of the Northwest-Wind, Keewaydin,
To the Islands of the Blessed
To the Kingdom of Ponemah,
To the Land of the Hereafter!

Hiawadha's Heemvaard

Op de kust stond Hiawadha,
groetende elk, met herte en hand, en,
langs het klaar doorschijnend water,
schoof hij zijnen boot te zeewaard;
door het grindselen van den keidam
stak hij zijn tsjiemaan te water,
aaide't met nen 'Westwaard! Westwaard!'
en zoo spoedig toog hij henen.
De avondzonne glom en glimde
luide en prachtig door de wolken,
gloeide in 't zwerk gelijk nen veenbrand,
dreef een strate viers derdeure, en,
in die strate, westwaard, westwaard,
voer,als in nen stroom van schoonheid,
Hiawadha's blinkend vaartuig,
naar't te Gode gaan des zonlichts,
door de peersche heerlijkheden
van de deemstre Westerdiepte.
Al het volk stond op de vloedmark,
na to schouwen hoe hij heentoog,
op en neer en voorwaards dopte,
deur dien vloed van blankend purper,
hoe hij neerzank in de dampen,
zoo de nieuwe mane neêrzinkt,
in de peersche verten, traagzaam.
En dan zei:.Vaarwel, voor altijd.'
elk, 'Vaarwel, o Hiawadha!'
En de diepe, donkere pijnboom,
roerende al zijn rouwgewaden,
zei, 'Vaarwel, o Hiawadha!'
En de baren, langs den zeekant,
gronsende in de kiezelplaten
van de kust, 'Vaarwel Hiawadha!'
En de reiger, de Sjoe-sjoe-gah,
uit zijn wijkstede in de moeren,
riep, 'Vaarwel, o Hiawadha!'
Dus vertrak mijn Hiawadha,
Hiawadha, de beminde,
in't te Gode gaan des zonlichts,
in den peerschen doom des avonds,
naar de huiswaardwindsche landen,
naar't Noordwesten, naar Kieweidin,
naar het land der Uitverkorenen,
naar het eiland van Ponemah,
naar de streken van't Hiernamaals!

Notes

[1]This article is based on a paper presented at the annual meeting of CAANS at the Universite Laval, Quebec, in May 1989.

[2]R.L. Kyes, *The Old Low Franconian Psalms and Glosses*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, 24.

[3]On the *chansons de geste* and early Dutch literature, see Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries*, Assen: Van Gorcum & Company N.V., 1971, 3ff.

[4]George Steiner, *After Babel*, New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975, 322ff.

[5]Mark Maynard, *Alexander Pope: A Life*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, 348 and 877n.

[6]On Pope's literary appreciation of Homer, see Mark Maynard (ed.), *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, volume VII, *The Iliad of Homer*, Books I-IX, London:Methuen & Company Ltd; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, XXXV-LXXI and more expecially LXXI-CVII and CLXIV-CXCIII.

[7]There is a perceptive discussion of Pound's *Homage to Propertius* by a recent translator of Propertius, W.G. Shepherd, *The Poems of Propertius*, Penguin Books, 1985, 28-30.

[8]The most recent scholarly edition of Gezelle's version is J. Boets, K. de Busschere, and J. de Mûelenaere (ed.), *Guido Gezelle: Verzameld Dichtwerk*, volume III, Antwerp and Amsterdam: Uitgeverij de Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1981, with an invaluable introduction, "The Song of Hiawatha: In het Spoor van Longfellow," by J. Persyn; for the text of Longfellow, I have used *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, Boston and New York: Mifflin & Company, 1893.

[9]Persyn, 12.

[10]*Ibid.* 15.

[11]*Ibid.* 12; there is a penetrating discussion of the 'noble savage' in the thought of Rousseau and later thinkers in Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil*, New York: The Free Press-Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968, 29ff.

[12]Kans Kung, *Does God Exist?*, New York: Random House, 1980, 510-514, has shown how the claims of natural theology (God can be known by the mind prior to and independently of faith) were powerfully reasserted in nineteenth century Catholic teaching and doctrine.

[13]Persyn, 17-20.

[14]*Ibid.*, 15-16.

[15]*Ibid.*, 16-17; in response to the regret voiced by an earlier critic and commentator, F. Baur, that Gezelle did not choose to translate a work by one of the truly great English poets, Persyn is quite right in suggesting that the neo-pagan poetry of a Keats, Shelley or Byron would have had little appeal to the devout Gezelle.

[16]Excellent observations by Persyn, 31-34.

[17]I might point to Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* as another highly popular nineteenth century work in the English-speaking world which has something of the same literary objective.

[18]The best introduction to the work of Whorf is *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1956; of particular interest are the chapters on the Hopi language. There is much interesting material on the Amerindian languages in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968; see, for instance, the striking use of diminutive forms in the Nootka language, 181ff. The works of Franz Boas are the most dated (above all, in their concept of race) of the three; nevertheless, there are valuable observations in his brief *Introduction to Handbook of American Indian Languages*, ed. Preston Holder, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966; see, for instance, the section on demonstratives, 36-37. Even a cursory inspection of *An Ojibwa Lexicon*, ed. G.L. Piggott and A. Grafstein, Canadian Ethnology Service Paper no. 90, Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series, 1983, will demonstrate the lexical richness of the Ojibway language (which belongs to the Algonquian family of Amerindian languages) in the identification of concrete phenomena.