



2017

Poor Rutebeuf by Rutebeuf/ Leo Ferré

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Recommended Citation

Greenwald, Roger (2017) "*Poor Rutebeuf* by Rutebeuf/ Leo Ferré," *Transference*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 10. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol5/iss1/10>

Roger Greenwald
Poor Rutebeuf

Rutebeuf / Léo Ferré
Pauvre Rutebeuf

Friends, oh what's become of you,
The ones that I was so close to,
Our love supreme.
They've been too few and far between,
I think they're scattered by the wind:
All love is dead now.
These friends were ones the wind had brought me
And then a gust blew in and taught me
How light they were.

Amid the storm stripping the leaves
Till branches show not even one
That hasn't fallen,
As poverty grinds and assaults me
From every side and tries to maul me
When winter roars,
It's not the time for me to tell you
Exactly how my shame befell me,
That sorry story.

Friends, oh what's become of you,
The ones that I was so close to,
Our love supreme.
They've been too few and far between,
I think they're scattered by the wind:
All love is dead now.
Misfortunes never come alone,
The many stones that fate has thrown
Have all hit home.

Scanty sense and faulty mem'ry
I got from God, the high and mighty,
And paltry wages.
And at my ass the north wind rages,
It rips my rags, it snags my pages.
All love is dead now.
These friends were ones the wind had brought me
And then a gust blew in and taught me
How light they were.

Now I'm hoping for brighter days
And that's my pleasure.

Commentary

In 1955 the French singer-songwriter Léo Ferré released an LP that contained what would become one of the best-known songs in the Francophone world over the following decades. The lyrics consisted of excerpts from two poems by the 13th-century troubadour Rutebeuf that Ferré had combined and adapted into modern French,¹ and the music was of course Ferré's. Ferré called his song "Pauvre Rutebeuf" (Poor Rutebeuf). I met the song for the first time in Ferré's own voice—in a version recorded live in 1957 at a Paris club called Bobino.

Most of the singers who covered this song were French, but two with wide audiences outside France also did so: Joan Baez and Nana Mouskouri. They sang it in French, but their LPs did not supply the French text or an English translation. Some sixty years after the song's first release, I wondered whether it might be possible to translate the lyrics into English in a way that would convey in writing to people who had no French some of the appealing qualities of the lyrics—their tone, their rhythms, their patterns of rhyme and repetition. And it struck me that one way to take aim at that goal would be to try to write a translation that *might* be singable in English to Ferré's music.

Translating song lyrics so they can be sung in the target language to the music written for the source-language text poses all the challenges that translating poetry always entails, plus these special ones: how to match the pattern of syllables in the source text (both their number and their stress pattern); how to match the lengths of vowels; and how at least to avoid mismatches between the characteristic frequencies (i.e., the pitches) of the vowels in the translation and the pitches of the notes in the music. The issue of rhythm and stress is familiar, so I will give examples only of the second and third challenges. (But it is important to remember that in French, a word's final *e* that is silent in speech is most often sounded as an unstressed syllable in singing.)

A singer can of course choose to draw out almost any sound, but a good songwriter knows that some sounds lend

¹ "La Complainte Rutebeuf" and "De la griesche d'yver"

themselves better to such treatment than others. Ferré holds notes longest at the endings of *devenus* and *tendus* in his first two lines. In English, “quit” or “skipped” would be unhappy choices for the first line, since a short vowel cut off by a consonant would be difficult for a singer to extend.

One can hear that spoken vowels have characteristic pitches if one attends to the difference between the sounds of the vowels in, say, “oar” (a “dark” back-vowel) and “peep” (a “bright” front-vowel). (The nearby consonants have an effect on the vowels, but I don’t need to go into that here.) There is a risk of a serious mismatch or an outright clash if, for example, the original song sets a relatively low note to a word with an *aw*-sound and the translator uses a word with an *ee*-sound in that place. Ferré lowers the pitch when he gets to the stressed syllables of *emporte* and *emporta*. An English version translated and sung by Peter Hawkins has “indeed” and “away” in the corresponding positions, thus imposing higher-pitched English vowels on lower-pitched notes written for a dark French vowel.²

Readers with access to the French can judge for themselves the extent to which my version supplies equivalent effects without unduly compromising the tone or the literal sense. I was concerned to reproduce the rhyme pattern (including internal rhyme) as closely as I could without betraying the tone or the naturalness of the diction. I found myself forced to depart from the pattern of the French in the third stanza: the last line in English ends on a near-rhyme (“home”) with the preceding two lines (“alone,” “thrown”) rather than on a rhyme with the first two lines of the stanza (“you,” “to”).

After I’d completed my version, a Web search turned up a couple of literal translations of Ferré’s lyrics that made no attempt to convey the formal qualities of the French. Then I discovered Peter Hawkins’s translation and recording. Hawkins has

² *Love and Anarchy: The Songs of Leo Ferré*, 28 April 2016. Lyrics and audio of Hawkins’s version of “Poor Rutebeuf” are at <https://peterhawkins.bandcamp.com/track/poor-rutebeuf> (accessed 15 May 2017). Ferré recorded the song several times. Of the versions available on line, the one most relevant to this discussion can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=942qPwPdILl>.

moved some lines around, even shifting which stanzas some of them are in. He hasn't followed the rhyme scheme of the French text closely, but he has devised a rhyme scheme that on paper produces an effect similar to that of the French, and I think his wording has some fine touches (though "Now they are strangers" is rather mild for "L'amour est morte"). However, I find the rhythms problematical. Of the thirty-eight lines in the French, nineteen have feminine endings as sung (that is, they end with ordinarily silent syllables that are pronounced in the singing). I have reproduced that pattern exactly, though in some cases a scansion might mark a final syllable as half-stressed rather than as unstressed (but in singing, the stress would be slight on the last syllable in phrases such as "brought me," "taught me"). Hawkins has only two lines with feminine endings and one that ends with a half-stress ("feast-days").

Since English tends to be iambic, one could claim that stressed final syllables sound more natural to our ears, and I might agree with that in the case of a poem to be *read* (on the page or aloud). But Hawkins's purpose was to make the text singable to the music written for the French, and he misses out on the falling/trailing rhythms at the ends of lines. He also finds himself forced in places to semi-speak a few words quickly to fit them all in as the music goes by. So I find his version less than fully effective for singing, but it's not for me to say that mine would be any better if actually sung. Vocally talented readers are invited to try it out and report on the results!