Book Reviews

Paul Vincent, ed. *That limpid singer, a bilingual anthology of the poems of Guido Gezelle (1830-1899)*. Hull: Association for Low Countries Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, 1999. 238p.

This volume, published to mark the centennial of the death of the man who founded modern literature in Flemish, is no. 4 in the Association's series Crossways. I take the opportunity to recall the titles of the previous volumes, since the present one does not give this information:

1. Jane Fenoulhet and Theo Hermans, eds. *Standing clear, a Festschrift for Reinder P. Meijer*, 1991. 237p.

2. Theo Hermans and Reinier Salverda, eds. *From revolt to riches, culture and history of the Low countries 1500-1700*. 1993. 344p.

3. Jane Fenoulhet and Lesley Gilbert, eds. *Presenting the past. History, art, language, literature*, 1990, 335p., essays on "the changing meanings and functions of the past in the academic and cultural life of the Low Countries."

The poems are preceded by three prefatory items. In a foreword, Paul Vincent explains Gezelle's importance and the principles used to compile this anthology, which is intended to present a wide range of translations (slightly more than half were done for this edition) by a variety of translators, the size of their contributions ranging from about a quarter of the total down to one poem. There is a reprinted article by Piet Couttenier on the English connections of Gezelle, who taught many English seminarians and thus played an important part in Catholic attempts to reconvert England. And we have a reprinted article by André Lefevere, feisty here as ever, presenting his version of the poem "Waar zit de heldere zanger," an evocation of the nightingale's song, and defending his choice of the sound pattern of the poem rather than its literal meaning as his guide.

The chronology of the poet's life comes just before the poems; it would have been useful to have this next to the table of contents, for those who like to see under what circumstances a given poem was written. For indeed one can see the connection between his modest career and his output. When young he taught seminarians and future missionaries and established emotional attachments to them, and his poems are joyful (except when these good friends have to leave), cascading with sound play, eagerly exploring his dialect as a literary medium, taking pleasure in observing nature for its own sake. He is indeed the "heldere zanger," the limpid singer of his nightingale poem and of this anthology's title. When he is sent to be a parish priest, from 1862 to 1880, he publishes

no poems, and of those published in the 1880s few have made the cut for this volume. It may be that his superiors frowned on poetry, for he allowed himself only gloomy meditations on old age and death, and his use of nature for parables seems mechanical. Not until the 1890s do the old love of soundplay and observation of nature return, in the poems published posthumously. Each English version is tagged with the translator's initials; a key to these can be found at the end of the book, with a list of poems previously translated into English and a bibliography of secondary literature on Gezelle in English (mostly brief entries in encyclopedias and literary histories, alas, with a few articles and only one recent book).

This anthology is no doubt one of the scholarly works made possible today by desktop publication. Putting the translators' initials at the right margin of the last line of the poem, and not underneath it, would have made the pages look more even. The reprinted articles were presumably scanned into the document; it would have been useful to eliminate the occasional resulting non-words with an English spellcheck. A Dutch programme of that kind would presumably, alas, have rejected too many dialect words in the course of spotting such typing slips as "ziin," "gj" and"nbg." Neither class of slip, however, will confuse the reader. One or two English words may do: "the world purges" for "pursues" (p.113), "Scaled with the Father's sign" for "Sealed" (p.117); on p.175 l.8 the last word seems to be missing ("food," for a guess), and on the same page we have "venal" for "venous."

Enough grumbling. Given such a variety of poems and translators, the reader can have fun comparing various elements. How do older versions compare with new ones? Do recent translators adopt different solutions from older ones? Do most translators stick to the meaning or, like Lefevere, do they aim to reproduce the rhythm, sound play and rhyme scheme of the original? It seems to me that more often they agree with Lefevere. English has fewer audible word endings than Flemish, and this fact allows for the importation of rhyme words. Some of those chosen are a little too learned, to my mind: "recondite" for hidden, "parturiency" to rhyme with "eagerly." Gezelle's syntax is complex to our ears, especially in his early poems, but the resources of his vocabulary are not learned but rural - a long list of names of bird sounds is typical. (For this reason it was a happy idea to render three especially dialect-rich poems, one into Yorkshire speech, and two into the language of Burns).

Altogether semantic freedom seems to be the majority choice, and the choice seems good. Many of the poems are devotional, or like songs, or both - in which case they are hymns, and the translators' memories of these seems sometimes to have guided them to the creation of virtually a new poem on the original topic. Which, of course, will be as good as the translator's poetic talent. No translator should be afraid to capture all the originality of Gezelle's best flights of fancy. If he says "Toch spreeuwt het en vinkt," it seems a pity not to put "it starlings and finches" rather than "there's starlings and finches." On the other hand, breasts and bosoms get into the English version two or three times, a little more than Gezelle would have allowed. One, to be sure, is a misprint for "besom," i.e. broom.

The discussions that readers can have with themselves, they can also have with the translators. In an interesting experiment for an

anthology, the poems open with eleven versions of "O Lied!" (1860) by ten translators, each version accompanied by comments. The poem is typical of Gezelle: twelve short lines not counting the refrain, in three stanzas, rich rhymes (in fact the even-numbered lines are all on one feminine rhyme), and repetition. These features all combine to give a songlike or hymnlike quality - indeed, if we print the opening refrain of each stanza with the line following, we have what the hymnal of my childhood called the Common Metre (8, 6, 8, 6 syllables). This rhythm, and some sort of rhyme scheme, seem to all the translators the essential features to keep. Some wanted to sound modern, some Victorian. Only one translator, Michael Rigelsford, chose to use "thou" rather than "you," thus adding an English religious flavour though not a Catholic one. I single him out because he alone offers a critical study as the basis of his version, examining the different possible interpretations, notably of the obscure image of the dry breast. Otherwise I will mention only David Colmer, because I like his solution of breaking the tyranny of the repeated feminine rhyme and compensating for it with a repeated internal one. Most translators expressed themselves dissatisfied with their version, but their efforts are honourable given a poem whose simplicity is so deceptive. Altogether the exercise is well worth while and a microcosm of the translational challenge posed by the whole anthology.

It is good to have this volume, not only for its interest to translators, but to make this poet and founding father known to the widest possible audience. I hope that not only students and others with a knowledge of Dutch, but all poetry-lovers, will discover this modest publication.