

MODERN POETRY IN TRANSLATION

By Joost Daalder

CAVE, as I see it, is essentially a magazine which happens to use English as its chief linguistic vehicle but is dedicated to the international cause of letters and ideas. It is this which, especially for an insular community like New Zealand, makes its publication so remarkable an event, and which made me feel honoured when the editor asked me to join the international board. Although I am a Dutchman firmly converted to Anglo-Saxon culture, and even more firmly to the English language, I am by the same token acutely aware that culture is an international good. My attitude about this, however, has been wholly selfish. I have been contented for many years to try and absorb what the Anglo-Saxons could give me. No doubt, because their cultural gifts are limitless, the debt will continue to be chiefly mine, and the most effective way to repay it will be for me to continue to be a student and teacher of their culture; but every once in a while I perhaps ought to wonder whether I should not try to preserve and strengthen this culture by drawing specifically on my background, as a native European continental.

The present essay is written with this concern in mind. For a number of years, I have felt a trifle uneasy about largely suppressing it, and not only because I owe an enormous debt to the Anglo-Saxons, but also because I have so shamelessly ignored continental letters except when, like every student of English, I had to take them into account for the purpose of English studies. Time was when I read various kinds of continental literature regularly, and enjoyed it, too. But for at least ten years, trying to adjust to Anglo-Saxon life even more than I already was before I came to New Zealand, I have almost exclusively and obsessively concentrated on that purpose. It is only now that I am beginning to get some sense of balance, and I have therefore of late spent some time, on and off, reading continental literature again.

This, I now find, almost inevitably leads to the drawing of comparisons with literature written in English. In this respect I think that if I read, say, an English translation of a Russian novel, my appreciation of it is almost sure to be the same, or

nearly so, as an Englishman's or New Zealander's. There are probably some differences, but, while I imagine a New Zealander would feel somewhat further removed from what he is reading than an Englishman, the divergence in response and appreciation is presumably from the author's point of view comparatively slight in such a case as, say, *Anna Karenina*. Perhaps *War and Peace* would be more strikingly 'foreign' to the New Zealander. But I doubt whether my being Dutch counts for much in such an instance when I compare my reaction with an Englishman's. I just cannot convince myself that, being totally ignorant of Russian, it makes any difference whether I read Tolstoi in English or Dutch. Those who know all three languages may well feel differently, but that does not alter my own individual position. I get some very faint sense of Dutch being the more appropriate language because it is more obviously continental, but this, in view of the fact that Russian belongs to a totally different linguistic group, is almost certainly no more than an unwarranted and diletantish impression; and even in my own case the impression is counteracted by the feeling that despite the stateliness of which Dutch is capable, it is not, like English, a language that can easily sound aristocratic, or at least not to me. I stress that this is a subjective remark, but, however unscholarly this may sound, it is in such matters exactly the subjective response which counts: the emotional quality which one attaches to the words is fated to be coloured by the way one has seen and heard them used. The whole matter of social context is crucial in this respect, and I personally cannot escape the impression that aristocratic English is on the whole more aristocratic than aristocratic Dutch. This may well be, and probably is, a feeling shared by most Dutch people well acquainted with both languages, and it may be objective in that in England the aristocracy has for long counted for more than in the Netherlands, where the 'burghers' have tended to lead the nation, but if (as is just as possible) the impression is due to my having a different feeling about English aristocrats from Dutch ones, perhaps because one can never judge two nations with complete objectivity unless both are totally foreign to one, it is none the less real for that.

Objectively, it can hardly be denied that English must be

at least as plausible a language for *War and Peace* as is Dutch in that England even now has a class structure, a spaciousness, and an international role such as are not found in the Netherlands. I think that inevitably the reader of the novel therefore situates the novel to some extent in the country with which he associates the language. In my own case, this means that when I read the novel in Dutch its world to a slight extent becomes Dutch, but not greatly so, because I know that so much has been translated into Dutch and the country is so small a part of a vast continent, while in English the book to a larger extent moves into England. I cannot, myself, envisage the 'world' of *War and Peace* in New Zealand. But, as this is my central point, when I read the novel in English, I read it (I feel sure) like an Englishman, and the more so because my whole sense of history and culture is by now almost totally English.

A novel coming from a continental country I do not know at all, the original language of which is totally unknown to me, and which seems to me to have a remarkably unpoetic kind of language in both English and Dutch: this is about the most extreme pole of continental literature which I have not, as a continental, any special affinity with such as an Englishman could not have. However, even when it comes to poetry I tend to judge from an English framework of reference; but at the same time I realize, when I turn to continental poets, that this attitude will not do. It so happens that I can personally read Dutch poets fluently, French and German ones with relative ease, and poets in some other languages with somewhat more difficulty, but, with the use of dictionaries and grammars, well enough. What I have only slowly come to see is that reading from an English viewpoint is not so much improper in that each country is entitled to its own poetic development and idiom, but in that in this day and age, when most students get less and less education in foreign languages, one is quite irresponsibly selfish, as a lover of poetry, if one does not address oneself to the problem of translation. Poets writing in English know that a difficult situation is confronting them: while a small group of dedicated readers who are sensitive to craftsmanship and the imagination does exist, most so-called educated people are becoming increasingly ill-equipped to respond to the most

intensely verbal art. If those of us in English-speaking countries who care about the cause of poetry generally do not ask themselves questions, at least, about translating non-English poets, such poets may seriously suffer, as may the English-speaking world. Such questions are: 'which non-English poets are worth reading?' 'How are they to be translated?' 'Is it true that poetry can only be enjoyed in its original language?'

I have recently tested myself out with regard to these questions by reading both poetry translated from Swedish, which I do not know at all, and poetry translated from Dutch, where I am in a position to make detailed comparisons. In particular, I wish to discover for myself whether the common claim that poetry cannot be translated without serious loss is true, and whether, as a reader of poetry in English, I could enjoy translated poetry well enough where I did not look at (or did not know) the original at the same time as at the translated version. In the case of Swedish poetry, I could only judge as well as ignorant outsiders ever can; with Dutch poems I carried out two tests: I read translated poems I had never seen before without first reading their originals, so that I could not 'cheat' in connection with the Swedish poems, and I also closely compared such poems with their original counterparts. Of course, in many instances where I had seen the originals of translated Dutch poems before reading the English versions, I could not suppose myself to judge objectively. But, since I am by no means very familiar with Dutch poetry after about 1950, I came across several Dutch poems which, oddly, reached me *via* English. I say 'oddly' because it would of course be common for a native speaker of Dutch to turn to the original versions first, but on this occasion I deliberately refrained from doing this.

The result of this survey, I should like to say at once, was such as to make me firmly convinced that there is a good deal of poetry in Swedish and Dutch which is not only worth reading, but which can also be translated with very little significant harm. This second point has struck me as particularly important. That there is good Swedish poetry I was quite ready to believe, and that there is good Dutch poetry I knew, but, having so often heard from philological puritans that poetry cannot be translated, I had almost come to believe that they must be right.

Of course 'philological puritans' does not sound very nice, and I must hasten to add that as someone with a passionate interest in language I admire all those who are devoted to studying it. But let us, please, when we study literature texts keep a sense of perspective. I suppose I ought to be deeply grateful for the fact that I was forced to learn Latin and Greek very thoroughly at a Dutch 'Gymnasium', and I cannot possibly assess what it must be like to be without a knowledge of these languages. However, I frankly think back with resentment of the time when I had to plod through Plato's *Dialogues* with so much attention to philological detail that I, like everyone else in my class, simply could not see the wood for the trees, so that the teacher continually had to give brief summaries (in Dutch) of the contents of what we were reading. The arguments in favour of all this philological labour invariably was that the authors could not be read properly in translation. I shall, in all honesty, admit that no English or Dutch translation of Homer truly satisfies me, but it is possible, indeed likely, that there is a translation, either in the one language or the other, that I have no knowledge of. But, having paid a good deal of attention to this particular matter, I feel that Homer poses very special problems, which should not make us despair about the translation of verse in general. And some translations of Homer do seem very adequate, though perhaps more often in prose than in verse. At any rate, Chaucer has been brilliantly translated into Dutch poetry (*poetry*, not just *verse*) by A.J. Barnouw, a feat which theoretically one might consider almost impossible. And, when all is said and done, we must face the practical fact that it is better that poets get read in translation than not at all. That, however, is a pessimistic view, and my personal contention is that modern Dutch poetry, at any rate, can on the whole be rendered into English with next to no important loss. I presume the same is true of Swedish poetry; even if it is not, the fact remains, for me, that I have recently read Swedish poetry in English and enjoyed it. I suspect this would not be so if poetry were as untranslatable as it is often held to be.

To show that fears on this score seem to me much exaggerated, I should now like to offer examples. Admittedly, to make the point boldly, I shall be highly selective. I have

already mentioned the name of A.J. Barnouw. Barnouw is to me as good a translator of poetry as one is likely to find. The statement implies nothing derogatory; on the contrary, an excellent translator of poetry has unusual gifts. What is required, clearly, is not only an ability to translate accurately, but also to turn one's translation into a real poem that could have been written in the language into which one is rendering, and that in its own way carries a stamp of authority. The task, is, in fact, an uncommonly difficult one, for ideally the translator must not only be linguistically gifted, but also gifted as a poet, while yet creating a work of art in the service of the original poet rather than 'do his own thing'. Translators often are either of the academically punctilious but unartistic kind, or, on the other hand, artists that are not sufficiently precise, either through ignorance or through too great an independence. Of course this independence may become a virtue if the original is in fact only used as a point of departure, as so often in the case of Sir Thomas Wyatt. But I am now thinking of translators rather than creators. As a translator, Barnouw seems to me truly excellent in a stanza like the following:

*Oh, the biteless rage to face the flashes
Of grey purgatory in impotence!
Will this Babel ever burn to ashes
From the shafts up to the black expanse?*

That, I think, immediately sounds like eminent poetry in its own right. One of the astounding things about Barnouw is that he seems just as good when writing in English as in Dutch. Such lines as these do not in any way sound as though they were not immediately written in English in the first place. There are no awkward inversions, no useless 'fillers', no unexpected shifts in register. The lines can be 'scanned' quite easily, but rhythmically they are by no means lifeless; on the contrary, in speech rhythm there is considerable variety, with the strong accents falling properly and naturally on the most important syllables. The strength of such syllables receives further emphasis from the alliteration of the plosive *b* throughout the lines; the alliteration of *f*, and the economical, expressive manipulation of other consonants and

vowels. The passage, in short, has absolute sureness of touch, real force which yet sounds wholly natural.

This is a stanza from a poem called *DIES IRAE*, by H. Marsman. It occurs in *Lyrical Holland*, a small booklet published by the P.E.N. Centre for the Netherlands in 1954. It was donated to the University of Otago by the Royal Netherlands legation in 1955, but to little avail so far, for before I borrowed it in 1976 only one other person had done so. Yet, whatever the faults of the anthology, it gives representative examples of the poetry of most of the important Dutch poets writing in this century. Having had the good fortune of being published about two decades ago, it does, in typically Dutch fashion, justice to what happened to be established fashionable literary taste at the time. The poets represented are therefore on the whole from a poetic epoch which, because it was still rational (though far from unemotional), I can respect. I shall admit at once that re-reading Marsman in Dutch for the first time since about 1960, when my admiration for him was already considered pathetically conservative by many of my contemporaries, I do now find him at times somewhat 'dated', and, more importantly, not always sufficiently in control of his craft. Still, what he has to say is almost invariably interesting, not least because of his enormous vitality, intellectually and emotionally, and at his best he says it extremely well. A poem like *DIES IRAE*, whether in Dutch or in Barnouw's masterful translation, can surely hold its own anywhere, and in this instance, if the language is not particularly 'modern', I do not mind in the least; one must distinguish between a poem that seems timeless in its idiom (like this one), and one that is 'dated' — not necessarily because it uses the idiom of a particular time, but because it does so in a way that makes us feel that the poet is a slave of his period rather than a forceful representative of it or capable of looking beyond it, or heralding it.

It may be interesting to quote Marsman's stanza in Dutch (which is not offered in *Lyrical Holland*):

*o, de woede, machtloos tot de tanden bloot
te staan aan ditgrauw vagevuur!
wanneer zal dit Babel dan verbranden van
de schachten tot het zwart azuur?*

In fact, though the original is also very good, Barnouw seems to me to be better than his source. This is a possibility which those who reject 'poetry-in-translation' do not often reckon with. One may, of course, argue that the point goes to prove the contention that a translation gives a misleading impression. But surely this is a pedantic view, only valid if one pays more attention to the letter than to the spirit, or indeed the form (itself the product of letters!). The important point, I believe, is not that Barnouw is better because he pleases my individual taste more, but because, while writing a Marsman poem in English, he seems to realize Marsman's intentions with even greater success than Marsman himself. If this is true, then surely Marsman himself could hardly complain were he still alive, and though that perhaps should not be our chief concern, we can hardly grumble if we are given something very close to the poet's work but perhaps even more satisfying. If one nevertheless does not feel wholly at ease one has some right to, but should probably put culture and good taste before one's academic conscience. The difference, in any case, is only slight, and I think I would probably be upset only if it were very marked, even if the translator's taste worked on the same principles as the author's.

The real test in assessing the success of someone like Barnouw is whether the fine effect achieved in a translation like this is a matter of Barnouw's taste as an individual or, rather, his skill as a translating poet. This can only be ascertained by seeing how he handles another poet, and, for sure, when he translates A. Roland Holst, a latter-day melodious Romantic who, unusually for a Dutchman, sounds almost more natural in English than in Dutch, Barnouw has quite a different poetic voice:

*I have no barns, I ask no harvest, Lord.
Thy willing laborer is penniless.
But I am rich in this:
That I may steer the ploughshare of Thy word, And
that to me Thou has assigned
This far-off land and lets me mind
These rising fields, whence — as I lean*

*At knocking-off time by the horses of my will,
Weary of limb and still --
The immensity of distant sea is seen.*

The oratory and resonance of Holst show through to a nicety here; one might perhaps in theory argue that Barnouw is even closer, in his overall achievement, to Holst than he was to Marsman and therefore does Marsman more than justice, but this would then seem to be accidentally due to the fact that Holst is a more impeccable poet than Marsman, and not to any undue personal touch in Barnouw, who, in short, in both instances does the best he can for his poets without unduly improving on them, but creating two distinct poetic personalities. Or, rather, it is a matter of re-creating, for Barnouw quite rightly in each case tries to speak, in English, in the way one might conceive the Dutch poet would speak if English were his vehicle.

It would be exaggerated to claim that Marsman does not sound good in the English translation, but if Holst seems a more English poet, then this is no doubt not merely due to his affinity with the English poetic tradition (by which he was influenced), but also to Marsman's being as easily transposed into, say, German, as English. An interesting example of this occurs in *Lyrical Holland* on p. 66, the poem called HEINWEH (Dutch 'Heimweh'), which does not need as talented a translator as Barnouw to get rendered into a German version in all respects very close to the Dutch one. The translation is a very good one nonetheless, but the task confronting Rudolf Lonnes would seem to be somewhat easier than Barnouw's in translating either Marsman or Holst into English, granted even that Holst is a more 'English' poet than Marsman: the fact remains that English, as a language, is further apart from Dutch, in most of the important poetic aspects, than is German.

Before moving on to a consideration of other volumes of translated poetry, I should like to make one or two observations about *Lyrical Holland* in general. An interesting aspect of the anthology is that it contains three sections: English, French, and German. This makes poetry available, in one volume, to the three chief linguistic communities in close proximity to Holland. A disadvantage, however, is that each

community only gets a portion of the cake, and not the whole. One may wonder whether the educated German-speaking reader who bothers about Dutch poetry at all really needs translations other than English ones; I would think he does not, in most cases, while unfortunately many English-speaking readers know so little German that the German section is not likely to mean much more to them than would an untranslated Dutch one. There is further the fact that different poems get translated in the different sections, giving the various communities oddly different perspectives. For example, the English section contains only one poem by Gerrit Achterberg, undoubtedly one of the best poets writing in Dutch in the twentieth century, while there are seven poems by this poet in the French section. Indeed, the English section contains many more poets, and offers a somewhat more 'old-fashioned' choice at that. The Preface is admittedly rather apologetic and humble about the fact, but possible more translations should have been commissioned, or only one language have been chosen.

However, a somewhat fragmentary approach is something one may complain about in more than one volume translated from Dutch. Clearly, this is not only a matter of *Lyrical Holland* being in three languages. No. 52 of *Poetry Australia*, dedicated to 'Post-war Dutch and Flemish Poetry', certainly has the merit of showing a very considerable galaxy of poetic talents, but none of them, even those we might perhaps better be without, can be considered adequately represented. Just possibly, something could be said for having one or two poems by each poet if there were no important differences in quality, though even then one would not find out much about anyone; but the strange impression is conveyed, through the process of selection, that H.C. ten Berge is about as significant a poet as Achterberg. While *Lyrical Holland* may seem somewhat outdated now, the *Poetry Australia* anthology will no doubt seem equally outmoded twenty years after 1974. And this is not just a matter of time: what happens, in fact, is that the Dutch make time move faster than it need by what I believe to be an undesirable preference for trends. To mention only one example other than the under-represented Achterberg, one does not find a single poem by Roland Holst at all. 'Post-war' poetry thus becomes

a matter of limited taste. The introduction by R.P. Meijer is, as one would expect of this scholar, pointed and informative, but while in any case one may find the claim that the 'second great upheaval after the Movement in the Eighties came in the late 40s and early 50s' somewhat extreme, one may even more legitimately, I think, question whether such a view should have influenced the selection as much as has clearly been the case.

However, even if the aim is to produce 'modern' poetry rather than what is 'post-war', we could well have done with some 'pre-war' poetry which still remains essential if one is to get a rounded picture: e.g. examples by van Ostaïjen or the early Marsman, both of whom, as is mentioned, were influenced by the German expressionist poets. And, above all, the reader has a right to more than three examples of this quality:

*From the trumpet's blast
your body grows
steelclear and white,
pregnant with life.
I hold my eyes shut tight it
is true;
the spotless ivory
for which I die,
sounds in my ear;
you are triumphant
over decay
and I relive you
vein by vein,
hand, skin, hair.*

—Gerrit Achterberg, 'Trumpet'.

This is an authoritative, powerful and original voice, starkly economical and taut, at the same time modern and timeless. Achterberg's particular obsession, too, is his own and always gripping; as Meijer says, his experiment is 'to create a world in which the death of the beloved could be negated.' In the sense that the poems are very much alive, he clearly succeeds in his aim; however, this is because of the magic of the artifact.

The poem (translated by Meijer) loses something in the translation. I am not sure that this could not have been avoided to some extent. The first line in Dutch is 'Tit de trompet', which is a good deal more powerful than the more verbose 'From the trumpet's blast'. And Meijer's translations tend to be somewhat wordy generally; stiffer, also, than Barnouw's, or for that matter Peter Nijmeijer's, who is the chief translator in the *Poetry Australia* anthology, and an important translator of Dutch poetry. Thus, although Achterberg, in his extreme economy and with his tight rhymes, may not be the easiest poet translatable, this still is not to say much against the idea of translating poetry. For that matter, Nijmeijer, whether on his own or working with Meijer, is rather uneven himself. Both are adequate translators, for sure, but although because of Barnouw's exceptional skills a comparison is somewhat unfair, such a comparison does reveal that a *truly* satisfying translation needs a master. Even so, most of the translations in the anthology have been well worth doing, and do reveal with a fair amount of accuracy what the poets are like.

There are, however, some bewildering oddities at times. I take the one poem by Hans Andreus selected, 'Beloved and Death'. This is by no means a bad poem in Dutch, though like most poets of his generation (i.e. those born c. 1925), Andreus is no giant. An attractive feature of the poem is its somewhat circular, meandering motion, none of the 4-line stanzas containing a punctuation mark other than a full stop at the end. However, in his first stanza, Andreus broadly says that things keep entering into his mind, and that he cannot help but write them down. This is different from the English line 'it is not my fault things just keep occurring': Andreus' line, even though there is no punctuation mark, suggests a syntactical break after 'fault' (not quite a proper choice anyway, as a translation), while the English may mean: 'It is not my fault that things keep happening' — a sense decidedly not present in the Dutch. On the other hand, Andreus starts his second stanza with (I translate literally and stiffly): 'What do I know a bird with eyes of dying', which keeps open the possibility that the bird is Andreus himself. The translators, however, firmly settle for 'What do I know of a bird with eyes of dying'. Again, this says nothing against translating

poetry in principle, but the English reader does not get quite the correct impression. Admittedly, such defects must be weighed against some quite good lines — at least as good as their originals — which possibly rectify the situation sufficiently.

Strangely, the platitude that translators do not do justice to the authors of originals is invalid also in that when an author translates his own work he may do himself insufficient justice. An attractive aspect of the anthology is that the Dutch and the English are printed on facing sides, readily enabling comparison. A witty, nicely flat (if somewhat unreasonable) poem by L. Th. Lehmann thus occurs in the original Dutch and the author's own English version. For readers in this part of the world it is especially worth quoting:

Duck-billed Platypus

*Once I asked Peg from Geelong
to marry me, and was refused,
for a year I got real tears in my eyes
hearing `Waltzing Matilda',
because it was the only Australian song I knew.
Almost twenty years after I met a Dutch couple
re-emigrated as usual.
Their little son owned a platypus
made of nylon wool, called the flat
puss.
In its belly was a music box
playing `Waltzing Matilda'.*

I call the poem perhaps 'somewhat unreasonable' because it simply is not a fact that Dutch couples can be talked of as 're-emigrated as usual'; however, even if not literal truth, the speaker's feeling, selective observation fits the subjective truth of the poem (and he is, after all, not writing within Australia, so bound to have a distorted impression, even though statistically invalid). Aversion is well-expressed in the reference to nylon wool, and the belly with its music box. However, the 'flat puss' is pretty well incomprehensible and

quite arbitrary in the English version. The equivalent in the Dutch version is 'platte poes', from an entirely Dutch point of view very close in sound to 'platypus'. The effect is wholly lost in the English translation, yet much of the success of the Dutch version hinges on it. Surely it would have been wiser to use something like 'flatty-puss', which, however odd, would no doubt be accepted by the English-speaking reader as justified in a translated poem, and would have got the point across.

A very good poem of the anecdotal kind, to me more truly modern than many of the supposedly modern poems in the anthology in that it moves towards simplicity and intelligibility rather than forced difficulties, word-games etc. fashionable earlier on, is the following one by Judith Herzberg:

Bedside Visit

*My father had sat silently
for a long hour by my bed
When he put on his hat I said
why, this conversation could
easily be summed up
No, he said, no not really,
You just try.*

This one, too, is translated by the author, and though less gets lost than in Lehmann's translation, the English version could, again, have been better still, I feel. The 'you just try' is somewhat awkward, and while 'just you try' might be thought of as aggressive (though not necessarily), it is more idiomatic. Another possibility would be for instance 'Just try it', or something like 'Have a go'. Even so, the English poem remains a very good one, with little lost.

Clearly, the reader of translated poetry must consider himself exceptionally lucky if he finds translations of the level of Barnouw's. The plain fact is that the talent of translation is a very special one. There is no reason for believing that the author himself, even if sufficiently acquainted with two languages, translates better than someone else. On the other hand, someone specializing in translation, like Nijmeijer,

though highly competent, does not necessarily possess the uncommon flair for this unique art that one finds in a few individuals. But I cannot say that I have come across a single translation, in the two anthologies of Dutch poetry under special discussion, that does not give the English-speaking reader a very adequate picture of the original. The task is one well worth doing, and we can use many more translations.

At an earlier point, I mentioned the question of who is worth translating. This, of course, is to a considerable extent a matter of individual taste. It would seem, however, that we could well do with more translations of Dutch classics, as opposed to poets who happen to be fashionable, and with at the least extended stretches rather than the odd poem here and there. The work done by the Foundation for the Promotion of the Translation of Dutch Literary Works (Singel 450, Amsterdam) is laudable, however, and the Foundation's Quarterly *Writing in Holland and Flanders* ought to be in every respectable library. Even so, when considering e.g. No. 32 (Summer 1973), I am struck by the excellent introduction 'Directions and Figures in the Poetry of Holland and Flanders' rather than the fragmentary approach to the poets chosen: four short poems by Lucebert hardly give much of an indication of this vigorous if controversial poet. A much shorter general introduction would have made the inclusion of another four poems possible, and although even eight is not a large number, it makes a reader feel just a little more confident that he gets a glimpse of a poet's range. Nor, in using the word 'classic', do I necessarily imply that a modern poet cannot be a classic, at least for the time being.

In the case of poetry translated from Dutch, I cannot deny that my knowledge of the language invariably makes me wonder (if I do not know) just what the poet has written originally. This urge is likely to stay with me, because of my background and interest in linguistic matters. I am satisfied, however, that the level of the translations I have seen is a high one, and that the English-speaking reader is well-served by such splendid ventures as *Poetry Australia* No. 52 and *Writing in Holland and Flanders* No. 32. My reservations concern the problem of selection rather than that of translation, and the matter of choice is ultimately perhaps so personal as to make me feel that what would satisfy me need

not satisfy others. Presumably, so long as making a choice remains a necessity, no-one will be entirely happy.

However, this reader in this respect feels more contented with *Eight Swedish Poets*, translated and edited by Frederic Fleisher, and published (new edition) by Bo Cavefors Bökforlag in 1969. I should immediately add, though, that I have read this volume without any prior knowledge of modern Swedish poetry, and that it is theoretically possible that if I knew more I would feel that important poets had unjustly been omitted. Be this as it may, it seems to me, as someone totally ignorant of the subject, that if there are other poets that should have gone into the volume a bigger book would have been needed rather than that any of the eight poets offered should have been excluded as manifestly much inferior to others in the company. As it stands, the volume offers an interesting variety of poetry of a high standard, without making one feel, as e.g. the *Poetry Australia* anthology rather tends to do, that one does not get quite an adequate introduction to each of the poets chosen. The difference between getting some ten poems by a single poet rather than two or three cannot be expressed in mathematical terms at all. I do not feel that I now really 'know' any of the Swedish poets well enough, but at least I think I have been introduced to them.

On the whole, the volume seems to be planned and produced with care and good sense. The anthology does not aim to give a 'panorama of 20th century Swedish poetry'. Nevertheless, by including poets of different generations, it gives some sense of development, and one does not get the feeling that the translator's taste is not catholic. The most satisfying aspect of the volume is nevertheless that he appears to have succeeded in his chief purpose, which is 'to convey some impressions of eight major poets of this period' (Preface, p.9). One gets some acquaintance with the poets, not only by the selections, but also by short though reasonably full biographical notes at the end of the volume, and, appealingly, by a photograph at the beginning of each section. The quality of the paper, too, is most pleasing. Unfortunately, some misprints appear to have crept in (e.g. on p.9). At times the reader may well find himself puzzled by these. On p. 112 one readily converts *gaint* into *giant*, but

since one cannot fully trust the text on this score, one finds oneself questioning some readings. For example, on p. 87 we find: 'I bled on the horns of life'. Even without the title, 'By Shelley's Sea', the educated reader of English literature immediately thinks of the 'Ode to the West Wind', that masterful poem which despite the ludicrous contempt expressed today is still generally known even to those who, to their loss, choose to disregard most of Shelley. But, although 'horns of life' can make sense, in more than one way, and might even be a deliberate choice, a poem so permeated by Shelley almost certainly should have the Shelleyan 'thorns of life'. It is a real advantage, incidentally, that the translator is clearly acquainted with the English classics; in several places he uses, in English, the very phrases which one must presume the Swedish poets had before them (or in mind) when using Swedish equivalents. This makes 'By Shelley's Sea' a poem that, in its English version, could have been written by an English rather than a Swedish poet, except that one cannot readily think of a modern English poet who understands his Shelley as well as the Swedish poet, Lindegren, quite obviously does. As an example, I can think of the New Zealand poet Charles Brasch, but it is probably significant that such a voice as Brasch's, often Wordsworth-Shelley overlaid, increasingly, with Yeats and Auden, should occur in New Zealand rather than Britain. Brasch moreover writes commonly, as a poet, as though he were handling a foreign tongue; one does not get quite the same sense of someone naturally and effortlessly expressing himself in the Shelleyan idiom adopted by Lindegren.

Not that Lindegren quite speaks like Shelley, of course. He happens to have some affinity with Shelley, and is not afraid of using a poetic language which many English poets might find old-fashioned, but he uses such a language only as an intrinsic part of what ultimately amounts to a quite personal, original voice ('original', at any rate, to someone not familiar with Swedish poetry). Still, to someone brought up on e.g. T.S. Eliot it is difficult to see, from either a poetic or a political view, why Lindegren should have found it so difficult to find a publisher for his sequence 'the man without a way', written during 1939-40. The 'exploded' sonnets to which the translator refers are perhaps in all respects rather

more 'modern' than 'By Shelley's Sea', but the modernity does not, from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, appear to be far-reaching. I find the handling of e.g. prosodic and figurative features artistically appealing for this very reason in a passage like the following (p. 82):

*anonymous thorns dream their way to reality
rocking themselves to thorns on reality's slope*

*but a cry of pain rolls up a mountain
and throws itself from a cliff to crush*

*the flight of pain rests grandly on the cloth of the eagles
while the wind shuffles the pack of polite faces*

There is, deliberately, no metre and rhyme here, and equally deliberately the images are strained, but we still have essentially a conventional rhythm, 'couplets', quite conventional syntax, and a handling of imagery which though attractively daring remains comprehensible and lucid in addition to its suggestiveness. The 'thorns' seem again Shelleyan, and the use of the word here makes it highly probable that 'horns' in 'By Shelley's Sea' is a misprint, but, although the author is clearly building on a tradition of nineteenth century poetry, the way he violates this tradition makes us acutely aware of a reality very different from what romantically we, with the author, consider desirable. This friction between what the poet, like Shelley, properly longs for, and the actuality of things as he finds them, makes for a potent combination indeed, and personally I admire him for not getting tempted into such despair about the war as to become totally anti-romantic in sentiment, and to mirror such sentiment in hopelessly complex and fragmentary language. Those who (wrongly) believe that Shelley was not aware of evil and the very 'real' difficulty of overcoming evil will find plenty such awareness in Lindegren, but those who still believe that the Shelleyan values were and are essentially the right ones find such a belief endorsed in, notably, 'By Shelley's Sea', from which I quote the end:

*in the green core of my heart everything rests
like the coffin of eternity awaiting its salvation*

that awaits veiled weaves of all the blind's night

*to wait: to be drowned in a soundless sea of dreams
that journey to their home among the dead*

your home where you become air for us to breathe

It is, of course, Shelley with a difference; for one thing the more hesitant, meandering movement of the verse is in tune with a less confident expectation than we find in *Adonais*; Nevertheless, the desire to travel to Shelley's home, where he becomes air for us to breathe, is in essence Shelley's desire to merge with the One, the realm of eternity which has absorbed Keats into it. I cannot tell just how accurate the translator's authorized translations are, but at all events the English versions as they stand are highly successful poetry, universally meaningful no doubt, but in a case like this peculiarly meaningful to the reader of English poetry.

And in general, even when the poems in this volume concern themselves more obviously with Sweden, one in no way gets a feeling of reading poems unimportant to the outsider. The translator has done us a real service in not withholding such 'Swedish' poems from us. In them, the poets' allusions are not of such a kind that they need elaborate footnotes; the poems tell their own stories plainly enough. Insofar as such poems concern themselves, possibly, with elements that make Sweden unique, the reader senses that he learns something about the country through the poems rather than needing external information to comprehend them. And surely lines like the following ones by Lars Forssell could apply to several nations:

*Do you know the country where the cannon blooms
And spreads its pollen all over the world?*

*Impregnates wars so that they burst open as scabs,
Bleeding calyxes all over the world,
Poppies like grenades?*

*Do you know the country? Do you know that country?
Do you know the country where the cannon blooms?*

Possibly lines like the following ones are not as universally applicable, but one can readily understand them:

*I have the feeling that
the oxygen content here has changed considerably.
Try to light a fire. Impossible.
No one reacts.
Here normal people would be
dead, but Swedes get along fine.*

The poet obviously feels that the situation he is describing does not exist elsewhere, but someone who has spent a considerable part of his life in a country like New Zealand may easily have exactly the same feeling. These ironic, journalistic, somewhat Audenesque lines occur at the end of a poem by Bjorn Hakanson, called 'Mayakovsky at Haymarket'. Hakanson's presentation is quite different from the previous extract quoted (from Forssell's 'The Swedish summer'), but the kind of social indignation felt nevertheless emerges clearly in both poems, and I do not think that such poems can be written off, however 'Swedish', as parochial.

What is more, apart from the odd misprint I never get the feeling that the fact that I am offered translations of poems, and not originals, in any way deprives me of something highly significant. The least one can say for the translator, if one does not know Swedish, is that he has succeeded in presenting us with poems which read like impressive originals. I cannot, as in the case of Dutch poetry, decide firmly that there has been no serious loss involved in translating the poems, but the experience of reading translated Dutch poetry persuades me that poetry in translation is an eminently worthwhile proposition, and on this basis I feel fairly confident that the English translations of the Swedish poems, too, are likely to do reasonable justice to their originals. On this score, one feels reassured by the fact that the translations are authorized (and many of the poets in Sweden clearly have an excellent knowledge of English), that the translator's wife is Swedish, and that he is, for example, in charge of the instructions of Scandinavian literature at the Institute, for English-Speaking Students at the University of Stockholm. Such facts tend to put at ease one's academic conscience. At

the same time, it cannot be denied that only someone with an intimate knowledge of both languages can really judge. There are limits, therefore, to the satisfaction that someone who only knows of the two languages can get out of translated poetry. One of the very things that someone who knows both languages will always enjoy is comparing the two versions. The pleasure is not purely academic. While in comparing one does look for accuracy, there is more delight, ultimately, in seeing how the translator has succeeded in creating an artifact matching the original. However, if that is where one puts the emphasis, one finds that the primary thing one looks for, in a translated poem, is artistic quality anyway. Provided that the translator has sound credentials, as in the case of Fleisher or Nijmeijer, what one studies is an artistic work existing in its own right in the language into which it has been rendered, but which at the same time one imputes to the original author. One forgets, in fact, that one is not reading something not directly composed into the language one is confronted with. The first and foremost question one finds oneself asking is: is this good poetry? A translation fails most if it draws attention to itself as a translation. Even a slight linguistic inaccuracy — provided that it is no more than slight — is something that does not materially affect ultimate overall impression. From what I can see, however, the question of accuracy is more theoretical than practical. In the case of Swedish poetry I cannot tell; when reading Dutch poetry in translation I am impressed by the high level of scholastic skill that translators seem to display. Although the odd error does, of course, occur, the distinction is generally one between a good translator and an excellent translator. A good translator I would define as someone who offers something accurate and poetically adequate; an excellent translator is someone who is both accurate and poetically brilliant without substituting himself for the sensibility of the poet he is translating, or, in fact, re-creating. If one is pedantic enough to be satisfied only with what a Barnouw can offer, one has some right to complain that poetry cannot be translated, though even then one's comment remains a crude generalization and does not allow for the exception which confirms the rule. However, there appear to be enough good translators about to make one feel that they should be

encouraged to get on with their highly important work, in the cause of culture, which, even if one takes a very cynical view, is better preserved in reasonably accurate though not artistically splendid translations than not at all, or only for a very small group. In practice, however, I find I am not at all unhappy to read translated poems, and the general prejudice against poetry in translation not only seems to be based on the assumption that the letter is more important than the spirit, but does not seem to me to be borne out by the facts.

There is a good deal of modern poetry in Dutch and Swedish which it is a real pleasure for the English scholar to read as a refreshing change, no matter the extremely high level of poetry written in English. By all means let us have a great many more translated poems from these languages and others. There is no doubt that the Anglo-Saxons ought to spend more time learning foreign languages. It is extremely unlikely that they will, however; the survival of other poets may well to some extent depend on their getting translated into English; Anglo-Saxon culture is at the very least likely to gain some sense of perspective, through translations, of its own value relative to the rest of the world; and even translations which are no more than moderately good are very much more successful than is so often believed. At their best, translators of poetry practise a unique art at an extremely high level, and in my view offer a service to the community which is not inferior to that of a literary scholar. One could even argue that the original poet should reap the biggest reward, followed by the translator, and then by the scholar, who is, after all, furthest removed from the creative process. Without wishing to safeguard my own academic interests unduly I would say, when all is said and done, that we need all these people. Ultimately culture depends on the recipient as much as the creator. As things stand, we cannot assume that the relationship between the creator and the recipient, even when it can be established, can always be a direct one. Scholars and translators are, largely, necessary interpreters. Neither poets nor scholars serve culture by not fully respecting the noble art of translation.