

Book Review

Theo Hermans, ed. *The White Shaman. Poems* by H.C. ten Berge, London: Forest Press, 1991. 85p. 6.95.

Theo Hermans edits *Dutch Crossing*, and publishes a great deal besides that. We have recently had the pleasure of reviewing *The Flemish Movement, a Documentary History 1780-1950*, which he edited, and the proceedings of the eleventh *Colloquium Neerlandicum*, which he co-edited. He is also a translator and has written about translation theory; the excellent anthology of essays on this topic, *The Manipulation of Literature* (1985), which he also edited, comes readily to mind. Now he offers us translations of nineteen poems by H.C. ten Berge (born 1938).

The importance of this poet will need scant explaining to our readers. He was a prominent contributor to the sixties review *Merlyn*, which argued for an objective approach to criticism concentrating on a work's form. In 1967 he founded his own review, *Raster*, and likewise proposed an objective intellectual basis for poetry, though not a social realist one. His own work derives images from his extensive reading of other literatures and from his no less extensive travels. If his literary borrowings serve, as Reinder P. Meijer says (*Literature in the Low Countries* p. 375), "to translate personal emotion to a more general level," the travel experiences are objective also: they capture the alien essence of other places and lives. Imagination (expressed in imagery) replaces our daily diet of realism.

The title of this anthology is well chosen. In the snowbound lands that the poet especially loves to lose himself in, the "white man" can relive for a moment the experience of the shaman who journeys by magic to the spirit world - the spirits we need being the pristine nature that our materialism threatens, and also the visionary beyond, where poetry lives. Jeremy Reed quotes in his insightful introduction to this volume part of the poem that gives it its title:

to leave the tent on all fours
for a distant rustling of wings

eye to eye with the white wolves
of a brief dawn

The nineteen poems are taken from nine volumes, which appeared between 1964 and 1992 (the last seen by Hermans in manuscript), so that we have a representative selection of ten Berge's work. However, the book is at least as much the record of Hermans' personal engagement with that work. All the poems but one are translated by him, the other version being by Greta Kilburn. Eight bear also the names of other translators who worked on the poems with him, that of Paul Vincent in three cases and Yann Lovelock in five; indeed, Lovelock had a hand in all the poems. And Hermans himself says that "a number" of these versions are reworkings of those he published earlier. Since they appeared in thirteen different places, the "number" must include all or most of the poems we have here. All this collaboration and revision will have done a great deal of good: by looking at previous and present versions we could learn valuable lessons in the translation of poetry. Compare, for example, Hermans' version of "Greenland fossil/an icy poet" (from *Poolsneeuw*, 1964) as it appears in *Dutch Interior* (1984):

foundations of poetry
lie naked and open:
the petrified eye staring up into the sky

a bleak view of what is still alive
of what invalidates itself

and as it appears here:

foundations of poetry
lie bared and open:
the eye stares petrified in air

a gaunt view of what still lives
of what dispowers itself

The vocabulary is more concrete now, the verbs more active. We feel closer to the experience itself. I am not judging the English poem as a translation (I have not looked at the original), but as a poem.

Like *A Vanishing Emptiness*, selected poems of Willem M. Roggeman in English, this volume comes from Forest Books. The press is named for Forest View, a street in an outer suburb of London, and it would not surprise me if Theo Hermans lived there. I imagine him, in spare moments, taking up one of his versions and working on it some more. This book is a labour of love.