

## Book Reviews

Decker, Thérèse, and Martin W. Walsh. *Mariken van Nieumeghen. A Bilingual Edition*. Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994. ISBN: 1-879751-20-8.

For English speakers, this is a very important edition of one of the most fascinating plays in sixteenth-century Netherlandic literature. The introduction provides a succinct, lucid summary of issues surrounding the text and scholarly debate on these issues. The need for a new translation (there have been two from 1924 to now) is amply justified both on scholarly and on performance grounds (p.21). Because the original from Vorstermann's 1516/18 edition and the English translation face one another on opposite pages, a comparison of the two becomes a very simple matter. And, finally, the edition provides a highly useful bibliography, divided into editions and translations, secondary literature in English, and secondary literature in Dutch.

One of the intriguing aspects of this translation lies in the fact that it is governed by the principle of "stageability," the effectiveness of the play as a performed dramatic piece. Those who attended one of the two performances of the play in 1992, as I was fortunate to do, will have experienced first hand that the translators succeeded in realizing their goal, for this is, indeed, a play that "works" in performance in considering some of the enduring puzzles presented by the play, and their considerations are an excellent example of the indispensable contribution dramatic practice can make to philological scholarship. So, for example, they conclude their précis of the various arguments that have been made in favour of either a mixed prose and verse or a purely narrative original for the play by remarking that, from the point of view of staging, many of the narrative portions serve the function of elaborate "stage directions," that such narratives may well be records or residues of "dumb show" components typical of the drama of the period (p.5), and hence are an integral part of the dramatic script. Equally convincing is their point that the two kinds of journeying in the dramatic

text, both physical and spiritual, "are beautifully counterbalanced in a full dramatic presentation" (p.14), and that the staged simultaneity of scenes adds to their impact. For example, the dark premonitions of Mary's uncle, just after he has sent her to Nijmegen (p.29) are considerably more dramatic when one sees, at the same, the receding figure of Mary with her basket about to begin a very perilous journey indeed.

Interesting is the discussion of the significance of the "play within a play" which ultimately is the key element in Mary's salvation; the translators argue that this is "an especially effective demonstration of the power of poetry." (p.8) One might not, however, want to go so far as to agree that "this seemingly simple, straight-forward little drama about *Mariken van Nieumeghen* carries within itself a sophisticated theory of the role of language and in particular poetry." (p.8) On the other hand, why not? Sixteenth-century literature is far more sophisticated than it has, in the past, often been given credit for, and indeed "a complete investigation of this question," urged by the authors (p.8), may yield surprising results.

Altogether, the edition is a fine one, and will be the definitive one for English-language teaching and scholarship for the next foreseeable future.

HERMINA JOLDERSMA  
University of Calgary

Kristiaan Aercke, ed.: *Women Writing in Dutch*. New York & London, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992. "Women Writers of the World, ed. Katharina Wilson, 1". pp. XIII, 713.

*Women Writing in Dutch* can be considered a welcome addition to *Women Writers from the Netherlands and Flanders* which appeared in the same year. The selected authors include writers from a very distant and distant past, i.e. Hadewijch, Beatrijs of Nazareth, Anna Bijns, Anna Roemer Visscher, Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher (unfortunately, the name is consistently misspelled

as Roemers Visscher), Anna Maria van Schurman, and Maria Petijt; from the eighteenth century, Elisabeth Wolff and Agatha Deken; from the nineteenth century, mevrouw Bosboom-Toussaint and Henriëtte Roland Holst-van der Schalk; and from the twentieth century Hella Haasse, Marga Minco, Anne Frank, Monika van Paemel, Eva Gerlach, and Maria Stahlie. It is inevitable that in an anthology of this nature the reader will regret the absence of some names, but it is really sad that Anna Blaman has not been included, and since Jacoba van Velde's *De grote zaal* (The Big Ward, 1953) is considered one of the great Dutch novels of the century, she is equally sadly missed.

However, with regard to the authors who have been included, the contributors should be lauded for their well-informed, well-researched introductions, and the carefully selected excerpts from the various oeuvres. In addition, without exception the translations are of a high calibre. For that reason, strange as it may sound, the only text the reader may have difficulty with is Kristiaan Aercke's introduction to the volume, which can be called an *oratio contra domum* rather than *pro domo*. Although the sixteenth century poetess Anna Bijns was in all probability right when stating that she lived in a society wanting in appreciation of women's literature, by the nineteenth and twentieth century that attitude had completely changed. In *Onze letterkunde* (Our Literature, 1925) under the heading "De psychologisch-realistische roman" (The Psychological-realistic Novel), A. Gratama lists, for instance, eleven women and five male writers. It is therefore incomprehensible and even somewhat offensive when Aercke states, without limiting himself to the distant past: "The implication is not simply that women writers are presented as a separate genus, but rather that this genus is made out to be absolutely irrecondilable with an hypothetically diametrically opposite genus of 'male writers'" (p. 4). Equally incomprehensible is the fact that Aercke deemed it necessary to come to the rescue of literary translations because of an alleged lack of appreciation for them. Is it unknown to him that Holland has had a Martinus Nijhoff prize for translations since 1955 (thus for almost forty years)? Here I want to add that, in spite of the consistently high quality of the translations in the volume, I regret that no examples of any of the original texts were included.

For lack of space, I have preferred to review a selection of the authors presented in this volume and to be able to comment in some detail on their writings, rather than to allot only a few lines to all of them. I will leave out Anne Frank simply because she is the best known author (male or female) outside the boundaries of the Netherlands.

It is most rewarding to be introduced (by Hermina Joldersma, Calgary) to the remarkably modern-sounding poetry of the sixteenth-century "dolle begijn" (mad beguine) Anna Bijns (Antwerp 1493-1575). She is right in her assessment that Bijns, the relentless fighter against the Reformation and in particular against the teachings of Luther, was "the first most articulate, and most convincing Catholic voice in Dutch of the century, and her linguistic virtuosity lent her formally correct poetry a liveliness unmatched by her contemporaries" (p. 110). That liveliness comes, for instance, clearly to the fore in the following lines of a poem in which Bijns compares two Maartens: Maarten van Rossum, commander in the service of the Duke of Gelre and notorious for his plunderings in Holland, the other Maarten Luther: "Rossom kwellet lichaam, Luther heeft de zielen/Deerlijk vermoord... (Rossom torments the body/Luther badly murdered the souls...)" (Quoted in *Het spel en de knickers. Kernboek I. Literatuurgeschiedenis van ca. 800-1800*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1981, p. 126). But the following lines from the third collection of her poems (1567) show that the tone is altogether different when the poetess testifies to her faith in God:

I come before Thee as a poor slave  
Before my God, whom I have served  
Most badly, and in my neglectfulness  
Oft' angered... (p. 137).

The chapter on Anna Roemer Visscher (1583-1651) and her sister Maria Tesselschade Roemer Visscher (1594-1649) leaves no doubt that its author James A. Parente, Jr. (Minnesota-Twin Cities) is not only intimately familiar with the writings of the two sisters but also with the historical and cultural background of their time. From his account one gets the impression that they are more noteworthy as literary figures for the first half of the seventeenth century than as writers in their own right. The translator chose well when he did not try "to

reproduce the rhymed couplets of the original texts" and instead "attempted to convey, as accurately as possible, the meaning and rhythm of the original in idiomatic English" (p. 157). The English rendition testifies to the sisters' learnedness but lacks any trace of poetic inventiveness. That quality may not strike the reader by its abundance in the original but the translation gives the impression of its total absence.

I am afraid that if a Dutchman, living *extra muros* were asked who Bosboom-Toussaint was, he would shrug his shoulders, remembering only the somber tree-lined street in Amsterdam named after her. In his introduction to two excerpts from her novels, A.P. Dierick (Toronto) points to the interesting fact that the author, although no longer very popular in the Netherlands, succeeded in putting her own stamp on English Romanticism, spearheaded by Walter Scott, and in being uncritically emulated by her literary colleagues of the time. At the end of her literary career, though, she produced her best novel, *Majoor Frans* (Major Frans, 1874), after she had left the historical novel in favour of one focussing on character development. Despite Dierick's accurate translation and a certain amount of curiosity aroused by the heroine's outlandish behaviour, the slow pace in the rendition of the major's and Squire Leopold van Zonshoven's love affair causes the modern reader to lose interest.

Gary Lee Baker (Denison University, Ohio) provides a comprehensive survey of Henriëtte Roland Holst-van der Schalk's life as a member of the Dutch upper-middle class of the latter part of the nineteenth century, her political interests and career, that started around the turn of the century, and the essential motives behind her poetry. With precision he delineates her embrace of the SDAP (Social Democratic Workers Party), her enthusiasm for Russian Communism, her deep disappointment with the system once she had visited the country in 1921 and witnessed the appalling conditions under which its inhabitants were living, and finally, as a result of her unsettling experience in Russia, her turn to religious socialism. In this connection Baker mentions the biography which Roland-Holst wrote of Gandhi. It is surprising that no mention is made of her deep interest in the religious writings of Leo Tolstoy, of whom she wrote a biography in 1930. The book cannot be recommended as an introduction

to Tolstoy's spiritual writings, but it is very revealing in terms of the poetess' understanding of brotherhood and love.

With reference to the large selection of Roland Holst's poetry translated here (almost fifty pages by Baker in collaboration with Judy Cochran) it seems that accuracy has been sacrificed to an even flow of the verse. In "Sonnets and Verses" (1895), Roland Holst's first collection, the majority of the poems are entitled "Over..." (About...) thus, "Over het ontwaken mijner ziel," (and not My Soul's Awakening), "Over den aard van mijn nukomend spreken" (About the Nature of my Present Speech), a far cry from the flat "Writing a Poem," and "Over rustigende vastheid die ik vond" (About Acquiescent Firmness I Found) which is not the same as the simplistic "Confidence." It can naturally be argued that such titles are not poetical, but a translator should refrain from trying to beautify them. The last sonnet's first tercet reads in Dutch: "Ik werd geboren met een aard die sterk/vanzelf gaat naar de kern van alle zaken/ maar veel stond tusschen mij in en mijn werk." In the Baker/Cochran translation: "I was born with the confidence/ To penetrate to the core of all things,/ But something kept me from my work" (p. 375). No "zelfvertrouwen" is mentioned in the original and it is dangerous to use the word because Roland Holst was lacking in "zelfvertrouwen" throughout her life in spite of the enthusiasm with which she embraced her various beliefs. Lack of space prevents me, unfortunately, from reviewing other passages. The discussion of the chapter on Roland Holst should not, however, end on a negative note. Some shortcomings notwithstanding, it is a valuable introduction to one of Holland's major poetesses.

Hella Haasse, who follows Roland Holst, was born almost half a century after the latter, in 1918. This gap would have been filled by the inclusion of Anna Blaman, born in 1905. As a matter of fact, Johanna Vanderwal Taylor's (Wisconsin-Madison) characterization of Haasse as "one of the Netherlands' premier female contemporary writers, perhaps one of the Netherlands' premier writers..." (p. 423) is equally applicable to Anna Blaman. Taylor aptly comments on Haasse's curious blend of historical account and fiction which comes already impressively to the fore in the author's first major novel, *Het woud der verwachting* (1949). An excerpt

from the prologue to this novel, called *In a Dark Wood Wandering* in an exemplary translation into English by Lewis C. Kaplan and Anita Miller, testifies to the successful simultaneous rendition of historical fact and fictitious character development.

For the chapter on Marga Minco, Johan P. Snapper (Berkeley) has chosen the soberly written but deeply moving story "The Return" which, like the entire literary output of this eminent writer, deals with the incomprehensibly cruel fate endured by the Jewish population of Holland during World War II. Minco uses a disarmingly simple style, but Snapper helps the reader a great deal in understanding the subtleties of this prose by pointing at the symbolic meaning of such ordinary words as street and bridge. His translation succeeds in capturing both the story's simplicity and its sense of deep tragedy.

In the second sentence of his introduction to the Belgian author Monika van Paemel, Basil Kingstone (Windsor) uses the simple words: "Her childhood was dreadful; her father wanted a son and her mother didn't want any children at all" (p. 574). Thus, raised under dreadful circumstances but endowed with a powerful creative talent, van Paemel fascinates the reader from the first line he/she reads in Kingstone's translation, which can be called a worthy equivalent of the writer's not easily accessible prose. The inextricable conglomeration of narrative voices, characteristic of van Paemel's style, seems to create the perfect operational platform for an author who is in constant search of her identity in a hostile world.

I suppose that I am not the only lover of Dutch poetry who, upon being introduced to Eva Gerlach's literary output, could not suppress a feeling of irritation and frustration resulting from both my inability to comprehend her verses and my awareness of being confronted with a major poetical voice. For that reason, I feel indebted to Myra Scholz-Heerspink (a freelance translator, living in Holland) for her well-informed interpretation of this at first sight enigmatic poetry. Scholz-Heerspink's discussion of Gerlach's predilection for intricate constructions intertwined with endeavours to tackle the existential problems of life and death, is especially helpful. That the poetess acknowledged in an interview that there exists an affinity between her

poetry and that of Gerrit Achterberg does not come as a surprise to a reader acquainted with the latter's work. Like Achterberg, Gerlach shows a tendency to discuss profound problems in a language interspersed with everyday and even frivolous speech. Although Scholz-Heerspink is fully aware of this at moments amazing dichotomy, it seems that she did not try hard to find English equivalents for Gerlach's common expressions. The very first line of the first poem in the collection *Domicilie* (Domicile, 1987) for instance, reads: "Wat lig je stil hart, een mens schrikt ervan," rendered in English as "How still you lie, heart, gives a person a fright" (p. 649). The ordinariness of the line is obviously lost in this translation. The inadequacy is the more surprising since the translator herself quotes the poetess as explaining that her aim in the first series of this collection was: "... to call back to life a person who has just died, by remembering her hour by hour" (p. 633). As in Achterberg, the contrast between language and theme is at moments so glaring in Gerlach's poetry that it is an absolute necessity to find proper English equivalents for the various linguistic levels.

In conclusion, however, this collection of informative introductions and more than adequate translations can only be warmly recommended to both readers with no Dutch or only a very basic knowledge of it.

A.F. ZWEERS  
University of Waterloo

Jacqueline Wesselius (ed.), *Het Mijneveld, over journalistiek en moraal*, Amsterdam: Nigh & Van Ditmar, 1994, 311p., ill.

Writing is a matter of choosing: choosing a topic, a viewpoint, a technique, the right words. There are always many possibilities, but only one is chosen, the rest is rejected. Even naturalist authors, who tend to describe things in great detail, cannot be comprehensive. Objectivity is impossible, the truth is elusive. Writers have known this all the time. Journalists are beginning to discover this truth as well, certainly after events like the closely managed reporting from the Gulf War and the staged-for-television military landings in Somalia, where television cameras preceded the invading American soldiers. *All the news that's fit to print. Photos don't*