

century poet and shared the sensibility of that century. Modern speech has not only moved on since then but has built into itself a virtual denial of that past sensibility.

Another paradox arises, therefore. To make Gezelle's emotionalism acceptable to English readers, one is tempted to employ as a distancing device the nineteenth-century literary idiom with all its anachronistic inversions and archaisms. This is noticeable to some degree in many of the versions in *That Limpid Singer*. It certainly reflects one side of Gezelle's use of language, but not its most important aspect. He turned to his own dialect precisely because he was in revolt against the Dutch literary usage of his day. His translators risk losing what is most experimental and vital in Gezelle, the appeal of the popular spoken language as against the authoritarian and alienating written idiom. The dilemma is virtually unresolvable.

A different problem arises when it comes to which poems of Gezelle's to translate. He was a Catholic priest much given to devotion. The sensibility of most English-speakers has been formed by Protestantism and England enters the twenty-first century to all intents and purposes an irreligious society. In this case, Gezelle's religious poetry is hardly likely to find a receptive readership, nor even sympathetic mediation, yet to ignore it altogether is to misrepresent the core of his work and his mission. At this point in the discussion, hard words like 'cowardly' and 'unprofessional' were uttered and the conference beat a hasty retreat in the direction of the tea tray.

No final solutions were reached that day, nor is it possible to do so. If it were, translators of the future would be out of a job! The best that can be done is to keep returning to the task and, like the translator who did two versions of the same poem for *That Limpid Singer* and professed himself satisfied with neither, clarify one's understanding through such failures. Discussion of the problems he poses not only keeps Gezelle's name alive, it points up what is still to be done and is an enticement to go on trying.

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That Limpid Singer: a bilingual anthology of the poems of Guido Gezelle (ed. Paul Vincent). Hull: Association for Low Countries Studies. Crossways Vol. 4; 238 pp. ISBN 0-9517293-4-9.

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Survivals and Escapes on a Grandeur Scale

Anna Enquist's *The Masterpiece*

Anna Enquist (Christa Widlund, 1945-), an Amsterdam psychoanalyst, classically trained pianist and award-winning and best-selling Dutch poet and novelist, is the author of four volumes of poetry and two novels. She was first published as a poet, writing poems for the review *Maatstaf* in the late 1980s, and

soon after won the C. Buddingh' Prize for her first volume of poetry, *Soldiers' Songs* (Soldatenliederen, 1991). The late Flemish poet Herman de Coninck commented admiringly that her poems create a roar not heard in Dutch literature since Willem Bilderdijk, a late eighteenth / early-nineteenth-century poet. Manfred Wolf, who has published articles on and translations of her poetry, describes her first two volumes as yielding a rhetorical poetry of 'arresting phrases, shiny aphorisms, flamboyant metaphors' and being evocative of 'a force and an agitation that will not be denied'. Her subsequent volumes – *A New Goodbye* (Een nieuw afscheid, 1994) and *Broad Daylight* (Klaarlichte dag, 1996) – have, more quietly, explored poetry and language itself.

Enquist's novels have been equally successful in the Netherlands, and even internationally. *The Masterpiece* (Het meesterstuk, 1994), now available in English, has already appeared in German (1995), Swedish (1997), French (1998) and other languages. This English translation is rendered into a very readable and effectively balanced British and American English by translator Jeannette K. Ringold, who has also translated *Nightfather* (Tralievader, 1991) and other works by Dutch writer Carl Friedman. Ringold recently completed a translation of Enquist's second novel, *The Secret* (Het geheim, 1997), which like *The Masterpiece* is filled with musical allusions, themes, and characters.

The *Masterpiece* follows closely the rich and tempestuous 'opera buffa' range of tragic-comic tones and themes of Mozart's and Lorenzo Da Ponte's libretto for *Don Giovanni*. The novel's epigrams come from Mozart's opera and the central characters have associations with characters in the opera. The novel's protagonist Johan, the painter of the masterpiece, is a womaniser like Mozart's Don Giovanni. The interactions of other characters and even their names resonate to the opera as well. Johan's rival and brother Oscar, a museum administrator and art critic (a match to Don Ottavio) is envious of Johan's success with women and his favoured status with Alma, their mother. Alma seeks revenge (as did Donna Anna of the opera) upon her unfaithful husband, who ran away with an opera singer. Johan's wife Ellen, his mistress Zina and friend Lisa (counterparts to the opera's Donna Elvira, Zerlina, and Leporello) are interesting revisionist portrayals of Mozart's characters. Their lives recapture the vibrancy of the characters in *Don Giovanni*, and yet are distinctive and original creations within Enquist's fictional recounting of Johan Steenkamer's iconic role and fate as a contemporary Amsterdam painter and middle-aged womaniser.

Lisa (the 'Leporello' of the novel), is best friend to Ellen, Johan's ex-wife, and a family friend of all the Steenkamers. Her perceptions as a friend and a professional psychiatrist provide the observing eye in this novel and its reliable narrative centre, and some of its most psychologically astute drama. Lisa also serves as antagonist to Johan. She wants to be Johan, as the following excerpt shows: 'Lisa blushes. She is ashamed

when she realises that she is jealous of Johan because of his paintings. He creates. . . . And what do I make? Children, jam, improved patients. Years of work, no public, no applause, nothing new. . . . She lacks something which Johan does have. The missing part is not a penis, not virility but something vague like creative power. Let's say: power. She has remained a slave to helplessness, she would rather please than fight. Not because she's a woman but because she's cowardly.'

Johan not only has power, he can make life brutal for others as well. A narcissist, he does not 'feel' angst like his mother Alma, or sorrow like Oscar and Ellen. He is detached as he observes and makes things out of experience. Johan is not compassionate as a son, brother, husband, lover, friend, or parent. He turns to one of his students, a younger woman, Zina, after the death of his and Ellen's ten-year-old daughter. Johan's response to the loss of his child and wife is desertion, although he later reveals great feeling in his painting called *The Pietà* that is a brilliantly disturbing portrait of Ellen screaming and crying, while being comforted in her grief by Lisa. Parents devouring their children and children trying to escape are themes carried throughout the novel. The opening line of the novel is 'The goldfish have eaten their young.' Fish are symbolic in the painting that Johan refers to as his masterpiece: it is called *The Woman with the Fish* and has a shocking origin that Oscar reveals to Johan at the close of the novel. Secrets and shocks occur and reverberate dramatically through the lives of Johan, Oscar, Alma, Ellen, and Lisa, as their stories of love, marriages, families and failed relationships progress. The fish eat their own kind, but as the novel is nearing the

Anna Enquist (1945-). Photo by Bert Nienhuis.



end, we discover, along with Lisa, that the new-born fish were not all eaten and had survived being devoured by their parents. 'They were able to hide . . . until they were no longer considered as prey. Survivors. Conquerors!'

The Masterpiece is about survivals and escapes on a grander scale. Few do survive as they would wish to, but they are vibrant even in their failures because of their phenomenal spirit. Alma's treatment of her sons rebounds upon her ultimately; both mother and sons are alternately sustained and destroyed by their interactions and contests of wills. Balanced against the tragic and disturbing elements in the lives of Enquist's fictionalised Steenkamers and friends, there remains a powerful excitement about being human, loving, creating, and enjoying art, music, and food. Lisa makes jam for Ellen as a gift of solace and warm feelings. Alma provides an elaborate buffet for Johan's exhibit opening at the museum. Oscar presents a CD of Stravinsky's *Sympathy of Psalms* to Ellen to show his sympathy. Enquist's iconic characters struggle within the full range of human toil, pain, and glory. Some seek to detach and create; others to grieve and love again; to respond and help others; to seek revenge and destroy themselves and others. The question always remains whether they can learn to skate 'over black ice with here and there a silver / fish caught in it, pushed quickly on / to never again, to nowhere' (Enquist's poem, 'River' ('Rivier') in *The Low Countries* 1996-97: 20). Enquist challenges readers to look down at the dark ice rapidly speeding by them as they race on their mental skates across the beautiful, haunting world she creates. It is a world in which the choices are most often about combat or defence. In her work, even music which can bring calm repose is diffused with violent images of force and violence, where Mozart is a surgeon who opens up the patient.

RITA INGRAM GIVENS

Anna Enquist, *The Masterpiece* (Tr. Jeannette K. Ringold). London: The Toby Press, 1999: 230 pp. ISBN 1-902881-05-2.

At the time of writing a translation of *Het Geheim* is due to appear in 2000 (<http://www.tobypress.com>).

FURTHER READING

WOLF, MANFRED, 'Anna Enquist and the contemporary style in poetry'. In: *The Berkeley Conference on Dutch literature 1995* (eds. Johan P. Snapper and Thomas F. Shannon), Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997, pp. 63-73.

See also *The Low Countries*, 1993-94: 35 and 1996-97: 20

The English Reynard

In the Middle Ages, in the borderland where Romance and Germanic languages meet – Picardy, Flanders and Alsace – a new literary genre emerged: beast epic. From the Romance tradition it took elements of the fable and its non-moralising counterpart, monastic satire;