



Book Reviews

Denis Devlin, *Translations into English: From French, German and Italian Poetry*. Edited by Roger Little. Dublin: The Dedalus Press, 1992. 360 pages. IR£21.00 (IR£9.00 paper).

It is appropriate that this volume should be noticed in an issue devoted to Derek Mahon's work, for both Devlin and Mahon have found translation from French to be a valuable poetic resource. By far the greater proportion of Devlin's translations gathered in this volume — some 90% reckoning by a simple page count — are from French. This book is the second stage in a project to make all of Devlin's poetry available in print. The *Collected Poems* appeared in 1989. As General Editor J.C.C. Mays explains in a preface, Devlin's translations from and into Irish will follow, and then the unpublished early and later poems in English. The volume of *Translations into English* has been edited by Roger Little, and it is a model of scrupulous presentation. The translations are given with the original source poems on the facing page; this feeds and facilitates a primary interest of reading and reacting to poetry in translation, which lies in observing the negotiation that a poet makes with a **pre-existing** text. There are concise notes at the back detailing the manuscript sources and glossing points as necessary. René Char, Paul Eluard, Andre Spire, and Saint-John Perse are the source poets for most of the material. The writing careers of these poets were roughly contemporary with that of Devlin. He came into contact with them during his time as a diplomat in the US and Italy and, as Professor Little's helpful introduction suggests, he may have been attracted to their work through circumstance. Nevertheless, translation figured as part of Devlin's poetic project from the earliest stages, and he never lost his enthusiasm for it.

Many of these translations from Char appeared in the earlier *Collected Poems*, as did the prose-poem translations from Saint-John Perse. These last were a significant constituent of Devlin's work, and are of more general significance in that Saint-John Perse was probably the most notable exponent of the prose-poem. Furthermore, this edition takes the opportunity to point out and correct the flawed printing of "Exile" in *Collected Poems*, where a substantial passage was omitted.

In the nature of this enterprise, alongside the more finished pieces such as the Saint-John Perse translations, there are drafts and versions resurrected — or untimely snatched — from manuscripts, with lines **such** as the following awkward rendering of the opening to Claudel's "La Ville":

Oh thou who like a tongue residest in a dark place
Thou knowest little and I shall not call thee
Wise; and yet when thou speak'st I listen
When thou speak'st like to a man who recalleth
I listen; and it is like a branch when a bird stands on it.

One can see, in part, what has happened. Searching for an equivalent to the French second person singular, Devlin resorts to the fustian archaic English form; this spreads infectiously to the third person in "recalleth", and it is only by luck we are spared "standeth" in the next line. And after the few pieces from German and Italian, there is a forlorn appendix of orphaned pieces headed "Translations (?) from Untraced Sources", such as "South Wall" (I quote it entire):

The north cone has been flying this couple of days and more
The local watermen
stare at pilings in the mud.

This is the kind of thing which gives poetry in translation — or even in "translation (?)" — a bad name. While admiring the editor's thoroughness, I question whether Devlin's reputation is best served by this sort of dredging, and whether his reputation is as yet sufficiently assured to take it.

But we must also be grateful for the successes which *Translations into English* brings to light. Of the previously unpublished work, Devlin's translations of Andre Spire work well, and introduce a poet of whom I was not previously aware. And while there is nothing here to equal "Ank'hor Vat" or "The Heavenly Foreigner", a number of the translations show Devlin approaching a lyrical mode which is rarely apparent in his own more sombre poems, so that our view of him is broadened. In particular I would mention his version of Apollinaire's "Le Pont Mirabeau" which, while it looks slightly unfinished, nonetheless follows the turns and regrets of the singing original.

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Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Material & Methods of Research*. The 1880-1920 British Authors Series: No. 8. Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 1993. 275 pages. No price given.

If one had some assurance about the true value of Oscar Wilde, it would not be difficult to revalue him. But (as the compiler of the *Critical Heritage* complains) despite the fact that probably more has been written on Wilde than most other nineteenth-century writers, his reputation is still uncertain. Up to the last ten or so years, Wilde was