

## Peter Denman

*The Word at Hand, with a selection of poems, translated from the French by Roger Little. Lorand Gaspar. (The Dedalus Press, 1995. £7.95 pb.)*

*Poems of a Wanderer: Selected Poems, translated from the Korean by Kevin O'Rourke. Midang So Chong-ju. (The Dedalus Press, 1995. £7.95 pb.)*

Lorand Gaspar, in his mid-seventies, was born in Transylvania, fought and was imprisoned during the second world war, and then made his way to Paris where he trained in medicine. He has spent much of the past fifty years living and working as a doctor in North Africa and the middle east, and has a distinguished record of publication in French, as poet, translator and literary editor. Roger Little and Dedalus are to be congratulated in making available some of his writings in this substantial volume. In the cold light of practicality, I imagine there is certain quixotic quality attached to publishing a book such as this; it is unlikely to "take" with a reading public in any great way, if I can generalise from my own case,—it is not a book that I would readily fasten on. And therefore I'm doubly grateful to have had this remarkable book sent my way for review, and can only urge its claims by bringing it to the attention of PIR readership.

The major part of the book, and what makes it special, is a translation of *Approche de la Parole*, published in 1978. Not a prose poem, certainly not an essay, it is an extended meditation on language and its possibilities and limitations for poetry. I read it soon after seeing John Montague's review of, or riposte to, Thomas Kinsella's *The Dual Tradition* carried in PIR 47. The differences were remarkable: Montague and Kinsella, as do so many Irish poets, talk of language primarily as a carrier of cultural identity and only secondarily as a poetic medium. Gaspar, who has changed languages in his own lifetime and lived in different cultures, is concerned with language as a carrier of poetry first and foremost. His view is informed by his medical and scientific experience.

Much of *The Word at Hand* cries out for quotation, or jotting down in a commonplace book, if you keep such a rarity:

Now, if you wish to read or write, actions alike in their basic movement, forget everything that may have appeared to you like a precept, a technique or a directive, as an object or subject to grasp, to build or destroy, to strengthen or deflate.

Be a listener as well as a gesture, unfinishable and indissociable. But let

your gesture be welded to its dialogue of leap and obstacle, to its energetic texture of gravity and transfusion, erosion and metamorphosis of that erosion. Now forget that again. Be silence and silence of word, action and immobility, rain and sun, the gesture which invents you according to the rhythm and the seasons of all your substances which make you and unmake you.

Be nothing.

What we pompously call creative activity is basically only a gift for combination, for constituting new clusters out of existing elements.

The second part of the book is a selection of translations of poems by Gaspar, the most recent of which were published in 1980. These (unlike *The Word at Hand*) are published with the original French on the facing page. They offer a sample of the work of Gaspar, but without ever abolishing the sense of distance. This is not, I think, the fault of the translator, who is meticulous in his task; it is rather a result of the fact that contemporary French poetry moves more easily into abstractions and largenesses than does most poetry in English. It has an idiom of images different to that which is generally current in poetry in English.

Another piece of exotica from Dedalus is *Poems of a Wanderer*. Paradoxically, many of us will find it relatively easy to read our way into poems translated or imitated from the languages of the Far East, having cut our teeth on Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, or the Penguin anthology *Poems of the Late Tang*. These and similar works have given an acceptable and conventional idiom for the Englishing of "oriental" material, and have even installed the haiku as a possible form in English. Thus it is that Kevin O'Rourke's versions of Midang So Chong-ju's poems are probably an easier read than Little's of Lorand Gaspar. So Chong-ju is a contemporary Korean poet; like Gaspar on the other side of the world, the course of his life was radically disrupted by the Second World War. He published his first collection in 1938, and eight others since the war. This book gives a generous selection from the full span of his career. There are a couple of poems on Irish themes, called 'Two Irish Loves', and also one on megalithic remains on the northern frontier called rather daringly 'Dolmens'. How adequately that archaeological term, or the English versions, represent the Korean originals I am in no position to judge, but these end-products are such as to inspire confidence.