

specifically located coastal anxiety, while the translation weaves together cultural and environmental losses in a more generalised yet still haunting lyric:

It starts at the pole in a kind of unlocking  
and soon we're a legend beneath a blue level.

Elfyfyn reconfigures the local and personal within a range of international relationships, suggesting that "If we travel far enough / we find what is close at hand." ('In Praise of the Moon'). 'Libanus and Lebanon, 2006' plays on the imaginary geographies of Biblical Welsh place-names, tracing their linguistic threads to the tensions of the Middle East, while 'Baggage Carousel' incorporates dizzying geographical and political coincidences into a celebration of the handbag. Her poems are alert, restless movements though unexpected connections; these movements are continued in the process of translation and in the engagement with otherness that this book both encourages and deserves.

Zoë Skoulding's forthcoming collection is *Remains of a Future City* (Seren). She is the new editor of *Poetry Wales*.



## French Letters

HILARY BARKER

Pierre Jean Jouve, *Despair has Wings, Selected Poems*, trans. David Gascoyne, ed. Roger Scott, Enitharmon, £10.95, ISBN 9781904634409;  
Alan Jenkins, *Drunken Boats*, The Cahier Series,  
No. 4, Sylph Editions, £10.00, ISBN 9780955296345

In 1937, the twenty-year-old David Gascoyne met Pierre Jean Jouve in Paris. Jouve, twenty-nine years his elder and the author of several critically acclaimed novels and collections of poetry, was at the height of his powers: senior enough to have repudiated all his work before 1925 as being inauthentic, modern enough to recognise the importance of the unconscious in the creative artist; he was one of the first French writers to

engage with the relatively new science of psychology. His second wife was Blanche Reverchon, whose insights as Freudian analyst had already changed his preoccupations and the way he wrote; she was, famously, to become Gascoyne's own analyst. In later years, Gascoyne would constantly underline how important his friendship with these two minds had been; and on and off throughout his poetic career, he translated selected poems of the man he regarded as one of his mentors. Although many have been in the public domain for years, Enitharmon has brought them together for the first time with a critical apparatus, biographical context, some key essays by Jouve, and facsimile autographs and letters from both writers.

Jouve is represented here by works which span the crucial years of his career, from *Les Nocces* (1931) to *Langue* (1952). The poems he wrote at this time are an agonised examination of the poet's relationship with (as he understood it) the contrasting impulses of sexual desire and mystic exaltation, the exquisite nature of love and his 'nostalgie de la boue', the world's horror and the redemptive mechanism of faith. Readers of Gascoyne will be very familiar with these themes from the same period; indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that his encounter with the couple Jouve helped release the imagination which produced such masterpieces as 'Tenebrae', and 'Ecce Homo'. In this regard, it is instructive to see how Gascoyne has coped with rendering the French into verse which works in English, as opposed to absorbing influences from Jouve and metamorphosing them into the muscular prosody of his great spiritual poems.

French poetry of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has proved notoriously difficult to convey adequately to Anglophone readers. One very real cause of this has been what may be described as a dissociation of poetic language operating in much of 'mainstream' French poetry. Another, obverse, one is the tendency in English-speaking verse to be rooted more and more in the quotidian: this means that the two traditions often find it frustrating to talk to each other. Gascoyne's translations do not altogether escape this trap. Jouve's poetry is characterised by subtle interplays of assonance and alliteration, which means the lines remain mellifluous even when treating of prostitution, close-ups of the female sex, or gobs of spit on the tarmac. More problematic still for an English translator is the fact that his imagery is drawn almost entirely from a universe of dreams, desires, myths and archetypes, and this makes for an uneasy feeling of 'unrootedness' when rendered into English:

The most beautiful the most naked and most tragic splendours

The oppositions between suns and darkneses  
 In night's black protective space  
 The deepest ecstasy in unknown arms  
 ('Nada/Les gloires les plus belles')

Elsewhere there are archaisms which certainly do not occur in Gascoyne's own poetry: "Morn", "nigh", "neath", "nether abode"; even, astonishingly, "Alack-a-day! and well-a-day!". God is addressed as "Thou" and "Thee", which, although technically retaining the intimate "Tu" and "Te" of the French, will alienate numbers of contemporary users of English; inversions seem precious, as in, "Are sleeping now that other granite, roses overblown", where the syntax of the original is quite straightforward: "*Et vous qui dormez! autre granit et vieilles roses*". A document which is of considerable historical interest, however, is the preface to *Sueurs de Sang* (1933), in which Jouve with great prescience identifies a coming catastrophe, "all the more menacing in that its first and last cause lies within man's own inner depths [...] it is a question [...] of sheer destruction, cultivation of a culpable object for our hatred, and regression".

Alan Jenkins's translation of '*Le Bateau Ivre*' was, as he tells us in the preface, fifteen years in the making. At the launch of this pamphlet in December, he described how he had "tinkered away" at it, his editors gradually teasing more and more from him. That this translation was not driven by contractual time, but rather born of admiration for Rimbaud and a profound engagement with the text, over many years, shows in the poem we have here. Jenkins is doubly qualified to attempt this task, one which only the most audacious of English poets would choose, since he read Comparative Literature at Sussex University, and is a not-untried mariner himself, as the two poems of his own which act as triptych panels to *Drunken Boats* amply demonstrate. Moreover, he has a strong grasp of form and, by meditating upon the original for so long, has produced a poem in English which is both a bravura rendition of Rimbaud's fecund imagery and a tightly-threaded and coherently-rhymed – yes, *rhymed* – piece of verse.

Everywhere the reader is delighted by felicitous poetic equivalencies: "Surf like a herd of / Frightened cattle, bellowing and snorting round the rocks" for "[...] *pareille aux vacheries / Hystériques, la houle à l'assaut des récifs*"; "Enormous swamps fermenting, and a great sperm whale / Rotting in the reeds" for "*J'ai vu fermenter les marais énormes, nasses / Où pourrit dans les joncs tout un Léviathan*". Only once does the rhyme become wilful, when he renders "*Mais, vrai, j'ai trop pleuré*" as "True, fuck it: I've wept buckets".

His decision to use twelve-syllable lines as a direct echo of Rimbaud's alexandrines is again a risk pulled-off handsomely, retaining the sinuosity of the original without any sense of *longueur*: "*Je sais les cieux crevant en éclairs, et les trombes*", "I've seen tide-rips and whirlpools, waterspouts, the dawn". And Rimbaud's haunting evocation at the end of the poem of the little boy with his toy boat loses none of its fragility: "On his haunches / Beside that cold black puddle, a sad little boy, / As the scented twilight comes on, squats and launches / A boat as frail as a butterfly – his paper toy". This is a translation to treasure.

Hilary Barker has published three collections of poetry with Enitharmon, and is Head of Modern Languages at St. Paul's Girls' School, London.



## Green Shoots

ALISON BRACKENBURY

Diana Syder, *String*, Smith/Doorstop Books, £7.95, ISBN 9781902382876;

Anne-Marie Fyfe, *The Ghost Twin*, Peterloo Poets,  
£7.95, ISBN 1904324258;

Jean Sprackland, *Tilt*, Cape, £9.00, ISBN 9780224080866;

Sophie Hannah, *Pessimism for Beginners*, Carcanet,  
£8.95, ISBN 9781857548785

How refreshing to find a collection of poetry warmly recommended by *The New Scientist*! Diana Syder's residency amongst the electronic and electrical engineers at Sheffield University was time well spent. *String's* first poem flows, with characteristic exuberance, through idiom and science into music:

the unkinking  
of some protein in your eye  
liberates a dizzy spate of sky.

Syder's poems show an engaging ability to change gear, to let loose a rhyme or lengthen a line "and so fly that much faster into morning". Her flights through science reveal fascinating contrasts, including the gulf between the