

A remarkable anthology of world poetry

12 March 1999

Dear editor,

Let me congratulate the *World Socialist Web Site* on the attention it is paying to literature and poetry. As a contributor, I would like to draw your attention to the recently published *World Poetry Book*, edited by Katharine Washburn, John S. Major and Clifton Fadiman and published by W.W. Norton. This 1,200-page collection is a remarkable work.

Everyone, especially those who are cursed or blessed by a love of poetry should take all efforts to acquire it as soon as possible. It is both a bath for the soul and spirit and a sharp and necessary reminder of the universality and commonality of mankind. It is the first of its kind, in scope and with fresh translations, since the *Anthology of World Poetry* edited by Mark Van Doren in 1928.

The senior editor Clifton Fadiman, in his introduction, draws attention to the need for such a book to counterbalance what he calls the lack of feeling for universal citizenship. He notes the rise of nationalism and implies--rather than states--the benefits of such reminders of our common cultural heritage. It shows how the unconscious needs of humanity, expressed in artistic form, can transcend current social consciousness.

It covers poetry from the Bronze and Iron Ages through to the modern day and takes full advantage of the renewed interest in translation, comparable, as the editors say, to the Elizabethan-Jacobean period. The translators have found, in many cases, there is little to celebrate in their mother tongue. Fresh to most readers, and to this reviewer, are works from the Unuit, South Pacific and Aztec regions. Extra emphasis is also shed on both established poets such as Hsueh Tao, Nguyen Trai and more modern poets such as Rendra, Soyinka and Veli.

One of its most important features is how it redresses the place of English language in the great scheme of things poetic. Only 15 percent of the book is from English-speaking sources. There has been a lamentable tendency over the last few decades in what passes for poetic circles for English poetry to be seen as somehow more important--a sort of a peak at which the "barbaroi" can

only goggle in awe; a mighty summit of expression and understanding which cannot be grasped by those outside the club. One has only to dip into this anthology anywhere to see the paucity and self-deception of this position. Indeed the editors have not included any poet born in the English speaking world since WWII.

Most importantly however is the way in which the anthology is structured--by historical period, rather than by race, ethnicity or creed. The reader cannot but be struck by the interpenetration of human thought and emotion thus revealed. In anthologies that emphasize national boundaries one only has the feeling of separateness and solidity of "national identity". With this book a common breeze blows through all. One is struck, forcibly, by the most startling allusions springing up at the same time in countries far away--as Hebrew poetry, such as from the "Song of Songs", shares with the Greek archaic period.

It is even more startling when one reaches the Post Classical world AD 250-1200, the alive and direct ideographic quality of Tang period poetry has the same quality of image as the Tamil, Arabian and Celtic. And it requires no special understanding of the period to share with the poets their feelings, insights and thoughts. It enables one to share the history of the hearts and minds of mankind.

Through it all, the anthology reaffirms the place of poetry and the poet in understanding of the world and its people. One is reminded of the Wen Fu of Lu Chi (C.300 AD) on how poetry is written.

Taking his position at the hub of things (the poet) contemplates the mystery of the universe;

He feeds his emotions and his mind on the great works of the past. Moving along with the four seasons, he sighs at the passing of time;

Gazing at the myriad objects, he thinks of the complexity of the world.

He sorrows over the falling leaves in virile autumn.

He takes joy in the delicate bud of fragrant spring. With awe at heart he experiences chill;

His spirit solemn, he turns his gaze to the clouds. He declaims the superb works of his predecessors;

He croons the clean fragrance of past worthies. He roams in the forest of literature, and praises the symmetry of great art. Moved, he pushes his books away and takes the writing brush, that he may express himself in letters.

And again, in later lines on the role of the poet:

We poets struggle with non-being to force it to give yield being;

We knock upon silence for an answering music.

We enclose boundless space in a square foot of paper;

We pour out deluge from the inch space of the heart.

This is an antidote to the slump in which modern poetry finds itself. Here instead of the labouring, introspective and tortured artist, à la Sylvia Plath, concerned only with the world of their inner demons, one encounters poetry giving meaning to the world through robust struggle. As said by Archibald MacLeish:

"The poet's labour is not to wait until the cry gathers of itself in his own throat. The poet's labour is to struggle with the meaningless and silence of the world until he can force it to mean; until he can make the silence answer and the non-being BE (sic). It is a labour which undertakes to 'know' the world not by exegesis or demonstration or proofs but directly, as a man knows apple in the mouth."

The anthology as a whole gives ample room to discover the "apple in the mouth" of us all. One can only reiterate: buy this book, read it and take a daily dip into the clear and beautiful waters of our joint understandings. It can only help all of us to learn more of what a wide and wonderful thing a human being is.

Regards,

TC



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