World Poetry and the English language

19 March 1999

Dear Editor,

The letter reviewing *World Poetry* hits the mark in its enthusiasm for this great anthology. Awesome labours have been undertaken to compile these translations of poems from antiquity to the 20th century and around the entire globe. The editors of the book are disarmingly humble about their responsibilities for selection, and admit that for them, the cuts they had to make due to limitations of space were distressing, painful and traumatic.

The letter is absolutely right to recommend such a source of poetic riches to the readers of *WSWS* and to insist that it transcends the bounds of nationality.

In praising this volume, the writer, however, strikes an unfortunate note when claiming the translators have found "there is little to celebrate in their mother tongue", that is, English. With the related claim that the anthology "redresses the place of English language in the great scheme of things poetic", I cannot agree. That is not what the anthology is doing. In fact, in her introduction, one of the editors, Katharine Washburn apologises because "the room allotted to English language poetry in this volume will strike many readers as inappropriately narrow," and goes on to explain: " it was not the chief burden of this book to establish or reinforce the canon of English-language poetry, but simply to allude to its existence: the room allowable for Wordsworth, Milton, Browning and Donne is not meant to be dismissive of their greatness; the number of pages made available for them does no more than hold down the place for these giants."

Furthermore, it is wrong to state, as the letter does, that the editors have not included any poet born in the English speaking world since World War II. The anthology's stated ground rule was not to include the poetry of *anyone* born after then, and the introduction ruefully admits this meant "that China's influential young 'misty' poets had to be dropped."

There is the danger that this iconoclastic outlook towards English poetry makes a concession to those "left" literary critics who advance an "anti-imperialist" critique against writers whom they blame for the "practices of imperialism." According to this caricature, English literature is, after all, that of oppressor nations, and English-language poets should be execrated for that.

An important issue that the letter does emphasise is that the anthology takes full advantage of the 20th century enthusiasm for translation, an enthusiasm shared with Elizabethan-Jacobean writers. The editors recognise that translation is an art form in itself, and regarding the 20th century in particular, Washburn notes that Ezra Pound "remains the patron of those who ferry poetry from one language to another."

Pound elevated translation into English poetic form into an art in itself, not only through his erudition and sensitivity to the original language, but because of his poetic open mindedness. As one admirer wrote of him: "He seems to work directly through the foreign language. His language has no literary encrustations... [Translation] has left him a language that is curiously his own, curiously undisturbed by the English tradition that preceded it." [Alvarez, *The Shaping Spirit*]

The many poets who contributed to this vast project of translation add another dimension to the enjoyment of the whole volume. This is a wonderful anthology and TC is to be thanked for his letter endorsing it.

Regards,

Margaret Rees

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site