

POETRY REVIEW

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Whereas many of the selections in the anthology now to be considered are choice specimens and a joy to read and to have collected in a single volume (what there is of Bunting, Hilda Doolittle's Euripides, Roy Cambell's staggering translation of Baudelaire's 'The Albatross', a particularly fine section of Perse's 'Anabasis' by Eliot), the fact is that this anthology offends as well as pleases, for Steiner has selected and omitted in a strange manner. It is, indeed, almost possible to despair on several points. For instance, Steiner's selection of Ezra Pound translations betrays his really profound lack of proper appreciation of just where Pound's most important work has been done.

In the second part of his introduction, Steiner makes much of Pound and Pound's work. For instance, he says: 'Within [his] general plunder [of the world's poetic resources], Pound's actual translations play a vital part. They have altered the definition and ideals of verse translation in the twentieth century as surely as Pound's poetry has renewed or subverted modern English and American poetics.' Good! But Pound's most important work are largely not included! From the point of view of the anthology as a whole, it is good that the brief and excellent excerpt from an ode of Horace, which Pound put into his *Confucius to Cummings* history of poetry anthology, is included, for it tallies back with the same excerpt translated by Gladstone which opened the Steiner anthology with a bang. But the sensitivity to Pound's real achievements is minimal, if not absent. For instance, entirely missing is Arnaut Daniel (translations of whom Pound considered his most important of all from the point of view of musicality). Entirely missing is Provençal poetry, such as Bertrans de Born, which was epochal in its impact and represents that very rerouting of influences past Shakespeare that Steiner remarks on in his introduction.

Missing is the most important single Chinese poetry translation Pound ever did, Li Po's *Exile's Letter*. Instead we find lesser Chinese translations stuffed in. At least *The River Merchant's Wife* from *Cathay* and four of the *Odes* are included, lessening the disaster. The first of the four odes here selected is, admittedly, a masterpiece one is always glad to see. Left out also is the ancient Egyptian *Conservations in Courtship* which Pound translated from the Italian of his son-in-law Boris de Rachewiltz's translation from the hieroglyphic text. This particular poem is of unique importance in Pound's repertoire for a number of reasons, but particularly as it represents a body of literature both otherwise untouched by major Western poets and also the tradition which Pound's Hellenistic hero the Greek poet Theocritus drew on directly. (And through Theocritus certain fresh elements passed, embalmed, through the corpse of Virgil into the plastic pleasure gardens of later mannered pastoral verse—but, then, that is another story.) For sheer penetration of unknown realms of poesy, the Egyptian translation is unrivalled.

But the strangest of all the omissions of Pound's work are the translations of Guido Cavalcanti, the Italian contemporary of Dante. For there is included only an awesome but nevertheless inferior solitary example of Pound's translation of Cavalcanti's *total work*. This inclusion is Sonnet XXX. But anyone with even the most superficial knowledge of Pound's work and Pound's opinions of his own work must realise that Sonnet VII is one of the most stupefyingly brilliant and powerful translations ever done into the English language and is uniquely important in representing Pound's work on Cavalcanti. Surely if only one sonnet of Cavalcanti is to be included, it must be Sonnet VII. Steiner includes Rossett's weak translation of this very sonnet but not Pound's, which is more curious. In the interests of the anthology alone, it would have been important to give Pound's version so that it could tally back with Rossetti's in the same way that Pound's Horace refers to Gladstone's. Especially as Steiner makes much of Rossetti's pioneering work that he would almost have us believe Pound merely followed and filled in. Perhaps including Pound's outstanding translation of Sonnet VII would show Steiner's contention to be too groundless, on that point. For clearly Pound and Rossetti are not in the same class, and it is doubtful whether Steiner should have asserted so rashly that 'Pound broadened and gave critical orthodoxy to a body of values and emotional responses established by his pre-Raphaelite and Edwardian predecessors'. Followed as this claim was by the statement: 'What

[Pound] revolutionised was the idiom of translation . . .' (with the emphasis falling inevitably on '*idiom*'). Steiner's implication could be taken to be that Pound was a pre-Raphaelite masquerading as Twentieth-Century Man (rather unsuccessfully), that he was more or less another Rossetti emotionally and that his serves to poetry and the art of poetry translation were almost entirely limited to the technical work of recasting an *idiom*.

It is doubtful whether George Steiner has an understanding of Pound or Pound's significance—an ignorance compounded by his obvious neglect of Pound's own critical writings. For Pound bases much of his long essay on Cavalcanti round the extraordinary Sonnet VII. He also includes the sonnet in his *Confucius to Cummings* anthology. Here Steiner has ignored Pound's own words from his essays in judging the relative importances of Pound's work and leaving this crucial sonnet out of the anthology. Similarly, the importance of the Arnaut Daniel translations is emphasised most strongly by Pound in his essay on Daniel and in *The Spirit of Romance*, and yet Daniel is left out of the anthology entirely. Surely, Pound's own essays cannot be ignored by anyone hoping to do his extensive work justice. And the conclusion is clear: Steiner has *not* done Pound justice.

Another outstanding Cavalcanti poem that would have gone well in the Penguin anthology is the Ballata IX, but Steiner's inclusion of the Sonnet XXX has deprived us of a real taste of Cavalcanti's delights.

As for Arthur Waley, here again Steiner has fallen into an amazingly puzzling lapse. There can be no questioning the fact that Waley's translations of the Chinese *Odes* (or, as Waley calls them, the *Songs*—both the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Songs* being interchangeably accurate renditions of the Chinese title, the *Shih Ching*) are of outstanding importance. It would also be valuable to see them in comparison with Pound's versions. But none at all are included in Steiner's anthology! Instead, a really wild and undisciplined selection of Waley's translations has been stuffed in with no appreciation at all of where Waley's true importance was at work. Only one poem of Po Chü-i is included and two of Li Po. And none of the *Shih Ching*! No less than eight miscellaneous poems of uncertain merit and no structural sequence are included, taking away any excuse of lack of space and merely compounding the disorder and confusion. Waley is thus given even more unfair treatment than Pound. For with both,

Steiner has stuffed in much roughage but precious little of the main protein of their work.

Excellent translations of the *Shih Ching* poems by Bernard Karlgren are ignored by Steiner also.

For Richmond Lattimore, many Greek lyrics are included but not a single excerpt from Lattimore's extraordinary translation of the *Iliad*.

For Stephen Spender, a striking poem of Lorca's is included in Steiner's anthology but no mention, much less inclusion, of Spender's work on Rainer Maria Rilke. This is a lapse which one would not expect in a man with Steiner's European sensitivities.

Rex Warner is not included in Steiner's anthology, despite his extensive efforts at translation of George Seferis. In fact, not one poem of Seferis is to be found in the anthology. And where the fine team of Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard have laboured over modern Greek poetry, no mention of their major accomplishment in translating the collected poems of George Seferis appears. Instead we find five poems by three somewhat lesser modern Greek poets. This is a most regrettable lacuna, as Seferis is the only modern Greek to have received the Nobel Prize for Literature and stands like a colossus;—leaving him out of the anthology is like going to Athens and failing to see the Acropolis.

No mention or inclusion of Kimon Friar's monumental labour over Nikos Kazantzakis's epic *Odyssey* poem is found in Steiner's anthology either.

Ford Madox Ford and Richard Aldington are absent from the anthology, though in *Confucius to Cummings* Pound has included their translations of, respectively, Vogelweide and Medici.

Michael Hamburger is included in the anthology, but is represented by a singularly insensitive selection. Not a single poem by Hoelderlin is included, despite the fact that it is Hoelderlin's poetry and not the seven other poems included which represent Hamburger's major work in translation. To include just one Hoelderlin poem out of the total work of Hoelderlin rendered by Hamburger seems not too much to expect from a compiler of such an

anthology as Steiner's. Once again the excuse of lack of space will not stand up to scrutiny and it seems that Steiner's unpredictable and erratic taste is at work. Sometimes, from Steiner's choices and almost guilty defences of some of them in his introduction, it almost seems as if Steiner is indulging himself in a self-affirming bloody-mindedness for its own sake. I feel more encouraged in saying this here because I am not alone in this opinion. And as far as Michael Hamburger is concerned, I did take the trouble of actually asking him what he thought about Steiner's selection of his work and the exclusion of Hoelderlin. Hamburger confessed to being puzzled by the choices—which he considers totally unrepresentative of his translating work.

The Steiner anthology is thus strangely unrepresentative of the true accomplishments of many of the major figures included (or left out) and it could almost, therefore, be said to be a misleading volume.

Not a single poem of Hofmannsthal is included, despite the fine work by Peter Viereck, Stephen Spender, Vernon Watkins, John Bednall, Arthur Davidson, Michael Hamburger, John Mander and others in translating this great poet whose enchantment spreads from out Austria like the cry of a southern Lorelei.

Only a single poem by Paul Valery is included (from both Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur). And of the work of St-John Perse, only a single rendering by T. S. Eliot is presented, an excerpt from *Anabasis*. Though Robert Fitzgerald is represented by translations from Sophocles and Homer, his translation of Perse's *Chronique*—a staggering achievement—is ignored. And completely unmentioned and unregarded are the other translations of Perse—by Wallace Fowle (*Seamarks* and *Birds*), Louise Varese (*Eloges*), Denis Devlin (*Exile*), and Hugh Chisholm (*Winds*).

These translations of Perse's poetry are uniquely important, just as they are curiously ignored. There seems to be a widespread paralysis of appreciation of Perse at present. Only Kathleen Raine in Britain at this time seems sensitised to Perse. Though Perse was awarded the Nobel Prize, very little notoriety or appreciation followed it. His poems have no ordinary rhyme and a rare flow of rhythms, some of which can be rendered in English. Some of these rhythms, in fact, are like the inexorable waves of the sea or the gustings of air, of the descent of birds or the slow but sure descent of snow. It is true that

there has never been poetry like this written by anyone else, that Perse is unique and can be compared with no one, and therefore those who must have a yardstick in order to appreciate genius can best ignore Perse lest they fluster themselves. But for the purpose at hand it must be pointed out that translations of his poetry are particularly strong, for their overwhelming phanopoeia and emphasis on the visual can be successfully transmitted. Few are those who seem aware of this at the moment, however. Steiner obviously included Perse because Eliot translated him; Eliot is too important to ignore, and this is the only translation by Eliot in the book, for Eliot was by no means a prolific translator. It is a common attitude today to consider that Perse was an aberration of Eliot's—one to be tolerated but not examined. Just as one who is fashionable and true to the dicta of the moment, who responds only to the ephemera of this transitory spot on the brow of time, will naturally overlook Eliot's unequivocal statement that Pound was 'the better smith' in poetry, thinking that Eliot was merely being aberrant again, as with his strange Anglican conservatism.

Perhaps the real curse of being elevated to the status of Eliot's sainthood is that such a 'saint' is like one of Humpty Dumpty's words: 'I pay them extra and they mean what I like'. Those who declare and canonise literary saints such as Eliot seem to think themselves the possessors of the right to make the saints 'mean what they like'. If Perse and Pound and Anglicanism don't fit the fashionable mould, then they were 'aberrations'. It is almost unfortunate for Perse that Eliot *did* translate him, for the reaction to Perse has been close to poisonous—as if the serpent-tongued saint-makers were breathing heavily the curse: 'Damn you, how did you get so close to our intercessor?'

In the Steiner anthology Basil Bunting is represented, very aptly, by outstanding renditions of Francois Villon—two 'imitations'. But Bunting has done translations from other languages: he has rendered Lucretius, Horace, Catullus, Firdausi, Rudaki, Manuchehri, Sadi, Machiavelli. Why was all this left untouched in the anthology when so much of so little importance was included from other, often less important, poets? With Bunting's work in translating Persian poetry in mind particularly, it is really curious that Steiner should have remarked in his introduction: 'I have also left out translations from the Persian and Arabic; perhaps wrongly, I feel those I have seen move in a saccharine limbo between the original and the natural

shapes of English'. This may be true of the Edwardian translations—indeed, it is!—but Steiner's statement is an unjustifiably harsh dismissal of the excellent translations of Basil Bunting. To say that Bunting's translations 'move in a saccharine limbo' is to be not only mistaken but offensively so.

In his introduction Steiner mentions his exclusion of both African and American Indian poetry. This is justified if no decent poetic translations exist, but one wonders. And failing all else, it would have been some recompense if part of one of the fine translations of Octavio Paz's *Piedra de Sol* could have been included, as this poem in places reeks of the pre-Columbian odours of Aztec and Toltec imagery, and is the distilled essence of much that belongs to the Mexican Indians.

And as for Steiner's contention in his introduction that Hoelderlin is untranslatable, that is plainly and simply mistaken. For are Michael Hamburger, David Gascoyne, Jonathan Griffin, Geoffrey Grigson, *et al*, such negligible translators of Hoelderlin to be dismissed so utterly by George Steiner?

There remains to discuss the curious circumstances surrounding the reissue of this entirely unchanged volume (except for the helpful addition of an index) bound with a new cover and given a new title. The facts are, frankly, commercial. Originally the volume sold badly, and so it is now titled *Poem into Poem* in the hopes that a more dynamic title and simpler, brighter binding will sell. But it is important to note that this 'new' book is not updated. If some miracle should result in the sale of all the old 'new' books, then we might witness the commissioning of a *genuinely* new edition. And let us hope that if that should ever occur the book would really be drastically revised. Not only should notice be taken at least of some of the more obvious criticisms here given, but also recognition should be made of some translations published since the book came out. These might include recent translations of Odysseus Elytis by Stuart Montgomery, of Nahuatl ('Aztec') poetry by Michael Schmidt, the major translation of *Beowulf* being undertaken by Michael Alexander (not to mention his earlier Penguin of Anglo-Saxon poetry), Michael Reck's new translation of Homer, and the brilliant versions of Persian and Arabic poetry by Omar S Pound. There is also a complete volume of Mexican poems translated into English by Samuel Becket and edited by Octavio Paz of which the Tablada versions are out-

standing. And it is perhaps too much to hope for in believing Mr Steiner might possibly cease to ignore Peter Russell's poetry translations from no less than ten different languages. After all, Mr Steiner *has* met Mr Russell and cannot plead ignorance. But let us be grateful for small mercies and be glad we have our imperfect but (alas!) unique anthology from Penguin.

Poem Into Poem: World Poetry in Modern Verse Translation (formerly titled: *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*) introduced and edited by George Steiner (Penguin 50p)