

Chinese Poetry Shows the Way

By Conger Beasley Jr.

Book Review:

The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry, edited by Eliot Weinberger. New Directions, 2003.

Modern American Poetry was invented by Ezra Pound in the early 1900s. He didn't do it alone. He had help, especially from a Tokyo-based Harvard University professor named Ernest Fenollosa, who knew little Japanese and virtually no Chinese but who laboriously translated some 150 Chinese and Japanese poems, character by character, and put them down in eight large notebooks that were published by his wife after his death in 1908. By a quirk of fate, the widow Fenollosa then selected the expatriate American poet Ezra Pound, the *bête noire* of the London literary scene, whom she barely knew, to do something with the notebooks.

Pound responded with enthusiasm. At first, he wasn't quite sure of the exact nature of the material that had fallen into his hands. He was attracted to the ideogrammatic character of Chinese writing and believed (erroneously) that it was based not on sound but on its pictorial values. Whatever, the idea of a sequence of spare yet luminous word pictures delivered in ordinary speech took hold, and Pound, already versed in the technique of the poem composed mostly, if not exclusively, of images, began to devise a new way to render reality.

Pound had been living in England since 1908, writing lyrical poems in the manner of the French troubadours, trying to forge his own voice out of the welter of gaudy, *fin-de-siècle* rhetoric that encrusted Anglo-American poetry. Five years later, armed with the Fenollosa notebooks, he left for Sussex to begin the first of three winter retreats with William Butler Yeats. While helping Yeats prune and concretize his own poetic output, Pound reworked a few of Fenollosa's crude translations.

In 1915, he selected 18 of them and published them as a pamphlet entitled *Cathay*, which he gave away to friends and colleagues. The effect was galvanic. Ford Madox Ford remarked, "What poetry should be, that they are." T.S. Eliot declared that Pound had become "the inventor of Chinese poetry of our time." In one slim volume, as if by the stroke of a blade, Pound liberated English-language poetry from the preachy effusions of the late-Victorian period and ushered in a new era of easy, natural, everyday speech. *Cathay*, says Eliot Weinberger, editor of *The New Directions Anthology of Chinese Poetry*, "was the first great book in English of the new, plain-speaking, laconic, image-driven free verse. And more: that which was most modern was derived from poems more than a thousand years old."

Pound had long been interested in imagism, the direct depiction of the "thing," shorn of superfluous commentary, a poetry where every word was essential and lines were spun out according to the length of a musical breath. He searched the world's poetries for examples, finding them among the troubadours and in Dante and finally in classical Chinese. In the March 1913 issue of *Poetry* magazine, he inveighed against the flowery excesses of the poetry of the early 1900s, declaring, "The image [is] that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." The lesson that he had learned and that he now dedicated himself to teaching others was quite simple: poetry is *Dichtung*, condensation.

The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry contains translations by William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and David Hinton. Well-known poets such as Li Po (701-762) and Tu Fu (712-770) are featured, along with lesser-known figures from the prolific eras of the T'ang (618-907) and Sung (960-1279) Dynasties. Back then, China was a place of chronic regional conflict, with emperors and warlords constantly seeking to conquer one another. Despite the barbarity of the times, literacy was held in high esteem, and the majority of poets earned their living as bureaucrats in the various warring governments. Their skills were in demand, and not just their

secretarial gifts, but their genius at bringing a moment or mood or object alive in the form of a slim, unobtrusive poem.

The New Directions Anthology collects some 200 poems by nearly 40 poets, from the anonymous early poetry, through the great masters of the T'ang and Sung dynasties. The anthology also includes previously uncollected translations by Pound, a selection of essays on Chinese poetry by all five translators, some never before published in book form, and extensive biographical and bibliographical notes. Moreover, the anthology presents different versions of the same poem by various translators, as well as examples of the translators reinterpreting themselves. Here are two quick versions of a poem by the great T'ang poet, Wang Wei (701-761):

Sitting in mystic bamboo grove, back unseen
 Press stops of long whistle
 Deep forest unpierced by man
 Moon and I face each other. (Ezra Pound)

Sitting alone, hid in bamboo
 Plucking the lute and gravely whistling.
 People wouldn't know that deep woods
 Can be this bright in the moon. (Gary Snyder)

While *Cathay* earned Ezra Pound great accolades from his fellow writers, it's been Kenneth Rexroth in our own time who has brought Chinese poetry in translation to a much larger audience. Both *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (New Directions, 1956) and *Love and the Turning Year: One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese* (New Directions, 1970) have enjoyed multiple printings, which says something about a medium notorious for its inability to attract buyers. Obviously, Rexroth's limpid re-workings of ancient themes struck a chord with American poetry readers, and continue to do so. This is an example of cultural cross-fertilization at its best—the most hierarchical of countries giving to the most democratic a manner of delivery intimately keyed to the plainsong of its everyday

speech.

As Eliot Weinberger avers in his introduction, of all the poet/translators, Rexroth's own work has been more deeply informed by Chinese poetry than anyone else. While still in his teens, he was introduced to Chinese poetry by Witter Bynner, who encouraged him to read Tu Fu. Rexroth eventually abandoned the dense, cubist style of his early verse for a more conversational delivery, which was to influence everything he wrote, prose and poetry, throughout his long career. Consider, for example, the opening lines of "The Heart Unbroken and the Courage Free," (1940):

It is late autumn, the end of Indian summer.
It was dry and warm all day, tonight it is cold.
In the light of the quarter moon the hoarfrost
Glows dimly on the dry long grass

The tone is unmistakable, the encapsulated lines, the keen eye for nature, the melancholy voice.

By contrast, Ezra Pound, in his post-*Cathay* phase, seems to have forgotten everything he preached about the simplicity of Chinese poetry. By the 1920s, he had subverted his own stringent rules on poem-making in favor of the collage-effect, with line and stanza functioning as separate, self-contained images (or characters), humming along simultaneously with every other line and stanza. Another Pound fixation was the overriding idea of the work as a gigantic, formless ideogram composed of countless shards and pieces (fractals), suggestive of the whole, such as he attempted to achieve (with mixed results) in his masterwork, *The Cantos*.

Included in the section entitled "On Chinese Poetry," in *The New Directions Anthology*, is a translation by the brilliant and eccentric Sinologist, Achilles Fang (1910-1995), of a little known work by Lu Chi, a deposition on Chinese poetics entitled "Rhyme-prose on Literature." This entry alone is worth the price of the book. Lu Chi (261-303) was China's first major literary critic, and still, to this day,

one of its greatest. His family enjoyed the confidence of the Royal House in the kingdom of Wu until that kingdom was overthrown by Chin, whereupon Lu Chi, along with his two brothers and two sons, was put to death on false charges of high treason.

The "Rhymeprose" is composed of single-sentence aphorisms about the art of writing bunched together in pithy little chapters with titles like "The Music of Poetry" and "The Art of Rewriting." The entire text should be passed around to student and teacher alike at writers' conferences. A few examples will suffice:

- "We lock a whole infinity in a square foot of silk; we pour a deluge from the inch-space of the heart."
- "Essentially, language must communicate, and reason must dominate; prolixity and verbosity are not commended."
- "Put down terse phrases at key positions; they will invigorate the whole piece."

How many of us, slogging through a course on English Romantic poetry, yearned to write with ripe, mellifluous meaningfulness about brooks and nightingales and decrepit abbeys? And how many of us, cowed by the presence of such worthy exemplars of the poetic canon as Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth, threw down our pens in disgust and decided to become journalists or genre writers?

Well, *The New Directions Anthology of Chinese Poetry* can help change all that and make an important difference, especially for those seeking to understand what it takes to write poetry. Poetry remains relevant today primarily because of the proliferation of good poets, who pay close attention to the spate of simple, quiet things floating just under their noses. The emotions engendered by this type of regard must be carefully modulated in the manner suggested by Sung Dynasty critic, Wei T'ai: "Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling."

It's easy to celebrate classical Chinese poetry. Who can't feel good about the friendship between Tu Fu and Li Po, who were known to have gotten together on several occasions and imbibed

beakers of wine and written poems in a friendly, competitive fashion? The image of the itinerant poet, traipsing from place to place, looking and listening, living off whatever he or she can scratch up, resounds at the heart of the sensibility. Then there's the death of Li Po, perhaps the most poignant of all the great poets; out drunk in a boat at the age of 61, he fell into a river and drowned trying to embrace the reflection of the moon shimmering on the surface of the water.

Good poets of any time or era know it's best to treat experience with simple clarity and steady focus. Life is a fount of inexhaustible energy, and it's virtually impossible to harness that energy for one's own personal display. We don't have to bluster and swagger in order to be heard. The Chinese poets showed the way a couple of millennia ago—"We wrestle with non-being to force it into being; we beat silence for an answering music" (Lu Chi)—and they continue to show the way today.

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