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A Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry

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A GOLDEN TREASURY OF CHINESE POETRY. Translated by John Turner, S.J. (Renditions Book no. 1). Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1976. Cloth HK \$35. Distributed by the University of Washington Press.

When John Turner, S.J., died in Wah Yan College, Hong Kong, in December 1971, he left unpublished more than 10 years' work on his Chinese-English dictionary, and more than 20 years of work on translations of Chinese poems into English. Now thanks to the devoted labor of John J. Deeney, S.J., in Taipei, we have *A Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry* published as the first in a series of Renditions Books by the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Fr. Turner, a highly cultured man of versatile literary talents, came to Hong Kong from Ireland in 1935, already a mature scholar in Greek, Latin, and Gaelic. The use (and abuse) of language was a subject of fascination and discussion for him. To his interest and love for Chinese culture, he added Chinese calligraphy and painting among his artistic attainments.

On one occasion, when he was reproved for being sentimental in his translations, he said: "Sentimentality is a Germanic virtue. And the tincture of guileless Cromwellian blood in my own veins has long been overlaid with the serum of Celtic cynicism. The most sentimental lines I ever wrote were these:

If, as they say, I have no heart — alack,
How should I suffer from a heart attack!"

The sad irony of that strong wit is that he did die of a heart attack, after years of crippling arthritis and poor health, admired by his small circle of literary friends and respected for his knowledge of spoken Cantonese in its various styles and unwritten expressions, popular speech and drama.

The 121 poems in Chinese and English represent the "old China" with its "beauty and order," for Fr. Turner was not in sympathy with the "modern China" that followed the 1919 May 4th Movement. This, he felt, represented the vulgarity, insincerity, and imitativeness of all that was shoddy in the West. For him Chinese literature was the artistic peak of the longest established civilization. It is a sister art of Chinese painting and ceramics. In it is found fluency and delicacy of expression, vivacity and force of idea and emotion, a mastery of craft and exquisite construction. Fr. Turner's English translation endeavors to transmit all this.

In Chinese the unit of rhythm is not the foot of stressed and unstressed syllable, but the syllable. Like the Gaelic poets, the Chinese have a predilection for seven-syllabled and five-syllabled quatrain forms. Then there are the tones, a special feature of Chinese articulation. The smoothness and unsmoothness of utterance give a sort of poetical "fourth dimension" bringing the poetry close to music.

The metaphors, too, and stock patterns of expression, offer special diffi-

culties. The Chinese talk of being "as brave as a tiger," not "as a lion." A beautiful woman is described as "fair as jade," which is rendered as "sweet as a lily or a rose." When we come to "moth-brow," the Chinese refer to the eyebrows of a maiden resembling the dainty sweep of the silkmoth's antennae. The two lines go "The dainty-browed beloved one / Before the horse-men die."

Proper names raise a special difficulty. Thus Tu Fu's (712-770) "Gazing at the Great Mount" goes like this in the first stanza:

To what shall I compare
 The Sacred Mount that stands,
 A balk of green that hath no end,
 Betwixt the two lands!
 Nature did fuse and blend
 All mystic beauty there,
 Where Dark and Light
 Do dusk and dawn unite.

The proper name Tai-tsung, one of the names for T'ai-shan, in Shantung (the Sacred Mount as a god), Ch'i and Lu (names of two ancient principalities) are left out.

A poem known to most primary school boys in Hong Kong is the South China poet Li Po's (701-762) "Night Thoughts":

As by my bed
 The moon did beam,
 It seemed as if with frost the ground were spread.
 But soft I raise
 My head, to gaze
 At the fair moon, And now,
 With head bent low,
 Of home I dream.

In the lean lines there is a reflection of the exquisiteness of China and the poetic flair of Fr. Turner. Here is another reflection of freshness in the lines of traditional folklore, which give what could be described in modern analytic fashion as "psychological primitiveness" in Sung Chih-wen's (660-710) "Down the Mountain":

Down, down the Lofty Mountain
 (Many a time I sigh!)
 Hand in hand with a bonny person.
 Step by step went I.
 The moon that shone between the pines
 Is shining to this day:
 But never, never again, my dear,
 Shall we go down that way.

This collection which covers two thousand years of Chinese poetry may

serve both for the use of the beginners in Chinese and students of Chinese poetry, and for the enjoyment of English verse.

Harold Naylor

SINAGLAHI. Edited by M.L. Santaromana. Quezon City: Writers Union of the Philippines, 1975. 284 pages, P70.

In 1975 the Writers Union of the Philippines played host to the Afro-Asian Writers Symposium held in Manila. In celebration of this event, they published an anthology which they entitled "Sinaglahi." *Sinaglahi* is a coined Pilipino word that may be loosely translated as "reflections of heritage." It is a felicitous title for an anthology of Philippine literature, especially for one that aspires "to define the Filipino writer as artist, as man and, louder now than ever, as spokesman to the world . . . on what has been and should be Philippine."

The table of contents reveals that the anthology's scope is not as comprehensive as it tacitly claims to be. In fact, all of the selections are drawn from modern Philippine writing in English. The singular exception is a group of five poems by Amado Hernandez, originally written in Pilipino and later translated into English by Epifanio San Juan, Jr. This exception raises several disturbing questions: did the editors think vernacular literature so insignificant that they admitted into the anthology only five of these? Or is it that they deemed Ka Amado the only vernacular writer worthy of participating in this "gathering of eagles . . . of committed writers"?

How can an anthology that claims comprehensiveness ignore, or worse, discriminate against vernacular writings, which constitute the greater as well as the more significant part of our national literature? What is there to keep the foreign reader — to whom this anthology is primarily addressed — from concluding that Philippine literature in English is adequately representative of our national heritage? The question of representativeness, i.e., of whether an authentic national literature can be written in a foreign language, is a critical issue today. I do not intend to raise that controversy here, but I feel compelled to raise an objection to the lightness with which the editor, M.L. Santaromana, dismisses this vital issue of language. "Feel free though to decry the English of this book. Filipino [sic], you see, has a limited audience; to reach a larger audience, say, the universe, one . . . must write in a universal language. Could you conceive of Villa or Virginia in Filipino?" The tone of condescension ("you see") is irritating. To the flippant question "Could you conceive of Villa or Virginia in Filipino" one is tempted to reply in kind, "*At sa palagay ba ninyo'y naging tapat kayo sa pagsasalin kay Ka*