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THE NEW REPUBLIC

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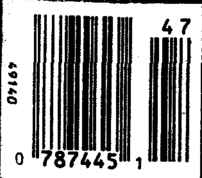

bureaucrat whose sole artistic policy consists of placating the Helmsites on the Hill. The report of the independent commission evaluating the NEA not only proposed that peer panels include more laypeople and multiculturists—and fewer artists—but also suggested that the chairman take more responsibility for the grants. There was no wisdom in either of these proposals. They have helped to create a serious crisis in the arts. •

The anxiety of global influence.

What Is World Poetry?

By Stephen Owen

Let me begin with a gentle heresy, that no poet has ever made a poem for himself or herself alone. Poems are made only for audiences. And unlike the audiences for the more lucrative arts, the audiences for whom poems are made are always imaginary ones. I confess that this heresy is itself imaginary: it forces us to see an Emily Dickinson who dreamed into being a century that could so richly appreciate her work. Still, it is a useful heresy, because it helps us to understand the forces at work in the formation of a creature that never existed before: "world poetry."

The imaginary audiences of poets are ruthless in their capacity for scorn and extravagant in their capacity for approval. The real audiences tend to be far milder in both. It follows that the imaginary audience, by the sheer intimidating force of its suspected likes and dislikes, has the greater power to shape the direction that a poet's work will take. The imaginary audiences also have the tendency to grow swiftly and immodestly. The poet may begin by imagining the responses of a small group of friends who profess interest in poetry, and who will, for friendship's sake, probably read and like what a poet has written. Pretty soon local poetry prizes are being awarded while crowds cheer, and they are followed in quick succession by national fame, a place in the canon, and immortality.

American poets have the provincial's sweet gift of needing to dream no further than an eternity of English-speaking audiences. To write in the dominant language of the age is to have the luxury of writing with unshaken faith in the permanence of a culture's hegemony. But poets in many other countries and languages must, as their imaginary audiences swell, dream of being translated. And thus they must write envisaging audiences who will read their work in translation. For a poet, such speculation runs the fine margin of nightmare. Not to imagine being read and admired beyond one's linguistic borders, however, is to accept a painful limitation, a sense of provinciality. A few of the hardiest poets can do this; but those are the ones we never read in translation, and thus we know very little about them.

STEPHEN OWEN, professor of Chinese and comparative literature at Harvard University, is the author most recently of *Mi-lou: Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire* (Harvard University Press).

The August Sleepwalker
by Bei Dao
translated by Bonnie S. McDougall
(New Directions, 144 pp.,
$16.95, $8.95 paper)

The Nobel Prize plays an interesting role in shaping "world poetry," particularly the poetry of the Third World. Its lure can sometimes be immense: it is "international" (that is, Western) recognition that casts glory on one's nation and promises a moment when the provincial can stand in the global center of attention. There is a waiting line for the prize, and a general opinion that every country ought to have its turn, on the assumption that literary talent should be as fairly distributed as seats in the United Nations. The most interesting aspect of the Nobel Prize for literature, however, is that it is commonly given for literature in translation. When the Nobel Prize is awarded to a poet, the success of that poet's work in translation is inevitably an important, perhaps even a deciding, factor.

This need to have one's work approved in translation creates, in turn, a pressure for an increasing fungibility of words. Yet poetry has traditionally been built of words with a particular history of usage in a single language—of words that cannot be exchanged for other words. Poets who write in the "wrong language" (even exceedingly populous wrong languages, like Chinese) not only must imagine themselves being translated in order to reach an audience of a satisfying magnitude, they must also engage in the peculiar act of imagining a world poetry and placing themselves within it. And, although it is supposedly free of all local literary history, this "world poetry" turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism, depending on which wave of colonial culture first washed over the intellectuals of the country in question. This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal.

I have a friend who writes poetry in classical Chinese and "new poetry" in vernacular Chinese. He thinks of his classical poetry as "Chinese," as deeply embedded in its history, as immensely pleasing to him in the crafting, but not as an entirely serious endeavor. It is the poetry he writes for his friends. His "new poetry," by contrast, is what permits him to think of himself as a Poet, what offers him the hope of eventual recognition. He sees the "new poetry" as simply poetry, as if it had no nationality or history. He does not recognize the weight of local European literary history that lies behind some of the conventional moves that he makes or the habitual images that he uses.

The formation of a world poetry that anyone can write and that can be translated into something still recognizable as poetry requires a corresponding redefinition of the "local." Within "world poetry," in other words, the poet must still find an acceptable means to declare his or her nationality. Instead of a true national poetry, all poetries become merely ethnic. Poets often appeal to names, images, and traditions that serve to bolster local pride, and to satisfy the international reader's desire for "local color." At the same time, the intricate learning presumed in traditional poetries is forbidden. Elements of local color in a poem are the verbal flags of nationality; and like a well-packaged cruise, they will give the international reader an altogether safe and quick experience of another culture.

Apart from this carefully circumscribed "local color," there is a strong preference for universal images. This poetry tends to be studded with concrete things—preferably things that are frequently exported or imported, and thus readily translatable. Phrases of local

weight or objects rich in local lore are avoided, or they are framed, that is, they are held up for poetic consideration and provided with little commentaries that explain them within the poem. There is an illuminating contrast to this practice in the profligate use of American slang and the fashions of popular culture by many contemporary American poets, who write heedless of the fact that in fifty years not even American audiences will be able to understand the allusions and the wordplay.

We should finally introduce ourselves into the strange cultural drama of lyric poetry that is unfolding in the last part of the century. *We* are the real international audience, as opposed to the imaginary one. We have come to occupy some of the seats left vacant for the imaginary international audience. There are only a few of us scattered widely through a huge auditorium. We shout to one another across the empty chairs. We have been assured—we read it clearly in the advertising on the back of the books' dust jackets—that if only this performance were taking place where the poet was "at home," the auditorium would be packed to overflowing with cheering crowds. Meanwhile, back home, it often happens that the local audiences have been assured that the international performances always play to cheering crowds, and that only at home is the poet inadequately appreciated.

What are we seeking when we come into this auditorium? International audiences, real and imaginary, are usually daunted by the strenuous demands that are made by the traditional poetries of other cultures. At the same time, audiences do not want poetry from which all traces of nationality or ethnicity have been erased. They want the poetry to represent the other country or culture. They seek some show of local color and local issues within a kind of poetry that is essentially familiar, easily accessible; they seek a cozy ethnicity. And, if that is the case, then we, as international readers, must recognize that this poet from another land and from a different culture is writing at least in part for us, writing at least in part what he imagines will satisfy us. He is writing in an idiom that has been formed from reading our own poetry. Moreover, these "new poetries"—new Chinese poetry, new Hindi poetry, new Japanese poetry—have often been formed by reading Western poetry in translations, sometimes in very poor translations. Which is to say that we, the Anglo-American or European part of the international audience, are reading translations of a poetry that originally grew out of reading translations of our own poetic heritage. If poetry is, as the cliché goes, what gets lost in translation, this is a most troubling situation.

Or it may be that the international readers of translated poetry do not come in search of poetry at all, but rather in search of windows upon other cultural phenomena. They may be looking for some exotic religious tradition or political struggle. These Western fashions in exotica and causes are ephemeral things. Who now reads Tagore? He is a bargain that fills the shelves of poetry sections in used book stores. In contemporary Chinese poetry, the international reader is likely to come looking for a reference to the recent struggle for democracy. The struggle for democracy in China is in fashion, while other ongoing struggles for democracy have won their moments of attention and faded from notice.

Quite apart from our political opinions, and quite apart from effective political action, there is a thrill at the representation of suffering—the traditional experience of pity and fear, coupled with virtuous indignation. The suffering of oppression, however, does not guarantee good poetry, anymore than it endows the victims of oppression with virtue. And there is always a particular danger of using one's victimization for self-interest: in this case, to sell oneself abroad by what an international audience, hungry for political virtue, which is always in short supply, finds touching. Writing on the struggle for democracy has very little to do with the struggle for democracy, and if anything worth reading comes out of the writing about it, we won't know for a while—not until we can separate it from its function as a selling point.

From the broader case of "world poetry," we may turn to the particular case of modern Chinese poetry. The tradition of classical poetry in China was a long and very complicated one. By the end of the imperial period, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this was a sharp, often witty, highly nuanced and allusive poetry, and a poetry much overburdened by its own history. It was a weary poetry at a dead end. Perhaps it was for the Chinese tradition as a whole that Bei Dao, who was born in Beijing in 1949, offered the following beautifully elegiac image in "Random Thoughts":

steles wrapped in moss soft as silk
are like extinguished lanterns

Although China had perhaps the deepest sense of the encumbrance and the attenuation of its tradition during the encounter with the West, that encounter was no less an upheaval in the poetries of many other great Asian cultures. Western cultural self-confidence arrived to-

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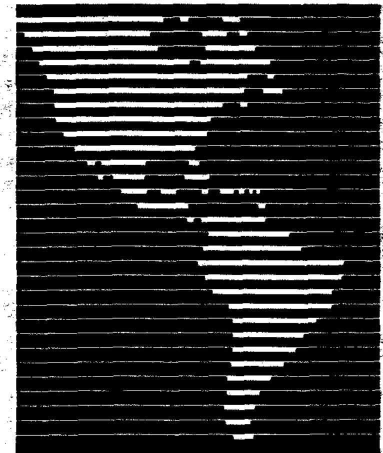

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gether with the reality of Western military and technical power. Western poetry, in most cases Romantic poetry, entered these traditions like a breath of fresh air. The excitement at the strange, exotic poetry of Europe was not unlike the West's excitement on encountering Asian literary traditions—but in this case the excitement was coupled with cultural shock, and often with national humiliation.

Romantic poetry opened up a whole new range of topics and modes of treatment, a whole new sense of what poetry is. Yet Romantic poetry usually arrived in translation, or through an imperfect knowledge of the original languages. Thus it came to China, as to other countries, with little sense of the weight of the cultural and literary history that lay behind it. It appeared as a poetry free of history, which was the very lie that Romantic poetry told about itself, that it was a miraculously new thing. Nobody who knows English poetry well can believe that particular myth about English Romantic poetry (China's particular colonial poetic import), but to the outsider the claim of novelty was credible, and it gave a hope of escape from a history that seemed to have failed.

From that first hope for a poetry free of history, for words that could be transparent vehicles of the liberated imagination and pure human feeling, many early twentieth-century poets in Asian traditions created new poetries that sought to break with their past. It was a grand hope, but it was rarely realized successfully. After the initial encounter with Romantic poetry, Chinese poetry of this century has continued to grow by means of the engagement with modernist Western poetry; and as in any cross-cultural exchange that goes in only one direction, the culture that receives influence will always find itself in the secondary position. It will always appear slightly "behind the times." The Western novel was successfully assimilated and transformed, but the new poetries of Asia often seemed thin and wanting, particularly in comparison to the glories of traditional poetry.

The fate of contemporary poetry in China could easily serve as the figure for a more profound sense of cultural loss and decline, a fall from the center of the universe to an uncertainty about where and who one is in a world that no longer has either a center or clear boundaries by which to orient oneself. Bei Dao writes well of this in "An End or a Beginning":

Ah, my beloved land
Why don't you sing any more
Can it be true that even the ropes of the
 Yellow River towmen
Like sundered lute-strings
Reverberate no more
True that time, this dark mirror
Has also turned its back on you forever
Leaving only stars and drifting clouds
 behind

Sentimentality was one of the consequences of the deceptive promise of immediacy and purity in the new poetry. Poetry will always try to speak the difficult truths of the heart, and to break free of the tribe's clichés that involuntarily rise to the lips to take the place of everything that is hard to say. But a successful poetry recognizes that this process is a struggle, that such words do not come easily. As a culture acquires more history, credibly simple words seem more and more difficult to achieve; those beautifully simple phrases can only break through the cracks in poems, like the vegetation that grows only in the cracks of the mountains. When a poet achieves such a phrase or line, it seems like a miracle.

Such eruptions of simplicity are one thing. They occur in modern poetry, and when they occur, we honor them. But when a poet tries to write such words without having won them, without having earned the right to say them, we are in the presence of a pose. We have sentimentality. We wince. I wince when Bei Dao begins a poem:

A perpetual stranger
am I to the world

I thought I destroyed the only copy of that poem when I was 14, a year after I wrote it. I thought we all did. We destroyed it the moment we discovered the immense difference between writing and reading what we have written. Such sentimentality (or, perhaps, self-conscious posing) is, however, the disease of modern Chinese poetry, and a deception far deeper than all the stifling weight of the past in classical poetry. In modern China, it appears in political poetry and apolitical poetry alike. It appears a few times in the poems translated in Bei Dao's *The August Sleepwalker*. It may be a poet's single most important task to learn to avoid passages like the following from "Rainy Night":

Even if tomorrow morning
the muzzle and the bleeding sun
make me surrender freedom youth and
 pen
I will never surrender this evening
I will never surrender you
let walls stop up my mouth
let iron bars divide my sky
as long as my heart keeps pounding the
 blood will ebb and flow
and your smile be imprinted on the
 crimson moon
rising each night outside my small window
recalling memories

or in "The Orange is Ripe":

Let me into your heart
to find my shattered dream

Despite these painful quotations, it is to Bei Dao's credit (and to Bonnie McDougall's) that *The August Sleepwalker* is freer of large doses of Nutrasweet than virtually any other modern Chinese poetry I have read. Bei Dao's talents, and McDougall's considerable skill as a translator, make these among the only translations of modern Chinese poetry that are not, by and large, embarrassing.

Bei Dao is one of a group of talented younger poets to rise out of the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution into the shaken and much changed China that followed. These new poets were considerably more daring in their images, and in their collocations of images, than were their predecessors. They also grew more daring in the topics that they took up and in the sentiments that they declared. Although Western readers of twentieth-century poetry may find little that is daring in their clusters of images and their sentiments, daring is a notoriously relative quality. In the context of the intense conservatism of Chinese literature, such poetry gave the kind of thrill that Western readers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century must have experienced in the birth of poetic modernism. (This comparison would be merely condescending if these poets were not seeking to produce precisely such a thrill, and to do so precisely on the model of modernist Western poetry.) The thrill of daring does not last long, to be sure; but after the smoke blows away, real poetry is often present. Although it is difficult to see Bei Dao and his contemporaries as "major" poets, there is real poetry here.

From another point of view as well, the work of Bei Dao and some of his contemporaries represents a welcome move in contemporary Chinese poetry, a move away from a narrowly defined and obvious version of political engagement. It is a great misfortune that the state's capacity for real brutality forces us to be interested in what is so inherently uninteresting. The scars of the state's brutality appear here and there as topics in the poems of *The August Sleepwalker*, and Bei Dao writes such poetry well (as in "An End or a Beginning"). Still, if there is heroism in Bei Dao's poetry, it is not in his overt opposition to a regime that is as ludicrous in its transparent lies as it is vicious in enforcing them. Such opposition is a political position that is, at the strongest, unsurprising. His heroism lies, rather, in his determination to find other aspects of human life and art that are worthy of a poet's attention.

To write something valuable that is not

overtly and topically political is a small literary triumph in the People's Republic of China, though it is hardly remarkable in the context of our hypothetical world poetry. In her introduction, McDougall makes the wise and essential point that a truly apolitical poetry is impossible in such a highly politicized world, that an ostensibly apolitical poetry is itself a strong political statement. Bei Dao pays his political dues in the more conventional coinage, in poems that demonstrate his "political correctness" in opposing the regime. But he is also capable of more.

Western readers will generally welcome the apolitical dimension of Bei Dao's poetry as more perfectly representing the range a "world poet" should have. Yet an interesting problem arises here. Chinese readers of "new poetry" with whom I have spoken tend to admire Bei Dao's earlier, more engaged political poetry, and they tend to deplore his turn away from politics to more private concerns. Who decides what is valuable, what is a good tendency, in a poet's work—the Western reader or the Chinese reader? Whose stamp of approval carries more weight? Scholars of modern Chinese literature often object to the imposition of Western criteria of literary judgment on Chinese literature. It is a wise caution. But is this Chinese literature, or literature that began in the Chinese language? For what imaginary audience has this poetry been written?

Success in creating a "world poetry" is not without its costs. Bei Dao has, by and large, written international poetry. Local color is used, but sparsely. Nor is such truly international poetry merely the achievement of the translator, as skillful as she is: most of these poems translate themselves. These could just as easily be translations from a Slovak or an Estonian or a Philippine poet. It could even be a kind of American poetry, though in this final hypothesis a question arises that must trouble us. If this had been an American poet writing in English, would this book have been published, and by a prestigious press? We must wonder if such collections of poetry in translation become publishable only because the publisher and the readership have been assured that the poetry was lost in translation. But what if the poetry wasn't lost in translation? What if this is it?

This *is* it. The poetry of *The August Sleepwalker* is a poetry written to travel well, and it declares the fact proudly, as in "True":

> Spring has no nationality,
> Clouds are citizens of the world.
>
> Become friends again with mankind,
> My song.

This may aspire to be an international poetry that sails over boundaries, but it does have local origins, origins that are not Chinese: the apostrophe to one's own personified poem, "my song," is as alien to traditional Chinese poetry as it is familiar in the Western poetic tradition. And yet this figure of the international poem as a cloud is a well-chosen one. Bei Dao's poems are often just such shapes in aerial motion: passing for a moment into some impossibly beautiful intricacy, then becoming mere puff. It is a new poetry; its way is uncharted. It blunders and sometimes finds real beauty. It is a blind man's motion, and the song-cloud moving across spaces without frontiers can easily undergo a visual metamorphosis of shape into the writing hand that moves across the blank paper, making figures but leaving no trace, as in "Expectation":

> a blind man gropes his way
> my hand moves over
> the blank paper, leaving nothing behind
> I am moving
> I am the blind man

In another metamorphosis of the image, the song-cloud, international traveler, and page of white paper can become the flight of a white crane, which is the traditional Chinese figure of immortality:

> what do you want to exchange with me
> the white crane unfolds a sheet of drifting
> paper
> on it is written your answer
> but I know nothing at all

When Bei Dao's poetry succeeds—and sometimes it succeeds wonderfully—it does so not by words, which are always trapped within the nationality of language and its borders, but by the envisagements of images possible only with words. McDougall also suggests this in her introduction. This is a possible solution to what a world poetry might be, a way of writing poetry that is essentially translatable. (Hegel believed that all poetry could be translated without loss, because its true medium was not words but "poetic ideas.") Keeping in mind the image of the poem as a cloud blown by the wind, we might consider an example of one of Bei Dao's successes, the final stanza of the opening poem "Hello, Baihua Mountain":

> It was a wind within a wind, drawing
> A restless response from the land,
> I whispered, and the snowflake
> Drifted from my hand down the abyss.

His whisper is a small wind within the larger wind blowing in the surrounding world. The song-cloud that issued from the poet's lips undergoes yet another metamorphosis and becomes a snow-

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flake in the hand, caught and carried by the wind of a poet's whisper and blown into an abyss, where there are no margins and no frontiers. This may be a darker and more frightening vision of the truly international poem. National poetry had a history and a landscape; the shape of the poem was more or less fixed and defined by its place in such a topography. The international poem, by contrast, is an intricate shape on a blank background without frontiers, a shape that undergoes metamorphoses. It achieves moments of beauty, but it does not have a history, nor is it capable of leaving a trace that might constitute a history:

the book lying open on the table
makes a rustling noise, like
the sound of a fire
or fan-like wings
gorgeously opening, flame and bird
together
in the space above the abyss

The poem is always in passage, the book that is flame and bird.

McDougall observes of Bei Dao's poetry that "the language on the whole does not rely heavily on word patterns, a particular vocabulary, or special musical effects." In the passage above, the book that hovers like a bird above the abyss is a brilliant image in the translatable sense. The image in itself would probably have beauty in almost any language. McDougall, however, has translated this world poetry of fungible images into true English poetry, which does indeed rely heavily on word patterns, on a particular vocabulary, and on musical effects (not to mention several loud echoes of Anglo-American poetry). Any English reader who reads the passage above out loud should recognize a real mastery of this language, which is a mastery of particular words and their placement. We smile reading it, and our smiles are no more for the image itself than for the way in which the image is embedded in the rhythms, in the placement of caesuras, and in the particular choice and arrangement of words.

It is only fair to offer this instance, when the poet's brilliant image meets the translator's magical touch for her own language, to counterbalance a further and troubling aspect of this new world poetry, which is the power and the consequences of the approval of the international audience, that is, the Western audience. I have in mind the way in which the attention of a Western audience is a function of successful advertising. Bei Dao is a well-known contemporary poet in China, but he is by no means pre-eminent. By writing a supremely translatable poetry, by the good fortune of a gifted translator and publicist, he may well attain in the West the absolute pre-eminence among contemporary Chinese poets that he cannot quite attain in China itself. And the very fact of wide foreign (Western) recognition could, in turn, grant him pre-eminence in China. Thus we would have the strange phenomenon of a poet who became the leading poet in his own country because he translated well.

The international audience admires the poetry, imagining what it might be if the poetry had not been lost in translation. And the audience at home admires the poetry, knowing how much it is appreciated internationally, in translation. Welcome to the late twentieth century. •

The Saving Remnant

By Christopher Lasch

The Feeling Intellect: Selected Writings
by Philip Rieff
edited with an introduction by Jonathan B. Imber

(University of Chicago Press, 416 pp., $55, $19.95 paper)

"Why publish?" Philip Rieff asked himself not long ago. "With so many authors, who remains behind to read?" Almost twenty years have passed since Rieff brought out his last book, *Fellow Teachers*; evidently he meant what he said when he urged authors to file away their best ideas instead of adding to the "babel of criticism" that threatens to deafen us all. If others exercised the same self-restraint, we might have less reason to regret it in Rieff. Since there is little hope that his example will become contagious, however, it is a good thing that Jonathan Imber, a former student and now a teacher of sociological theory at Wellesley College, has given us this anthology of Rieff's uncollected essays to set against the rising flood of books that continue to clamor for ill-deserved attention. We need this book at a time when we are besieged by lesser books—books announcing breathtaking methodological and conceptual breakthroughs, recycling old ideas in new jargon, rediscovering the obvious, refusing to acknowledge any predecessors or worse, betraying no awareness of their existences.

Readers who have not yet made Rieff's acquaintance will find in this collection something of what makes him indispensable, and will be led to read not only *Fellow Teachers* (1973), but also his earlier books, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (1959) and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966). Those who already admired him will find that their admiration was not misplaced. These essays reveal an intelligence at once biting and unfailingly courteous; generous to adversaries and demanding of allies; solemn and playful; pessimistic and hopeful.

According to Rieff, the collapse of religion, its replacement by the remorselessly analytic and critical sensibility exemplified by Freud, and the degeneration of the "analytic attitude" into an all-out assault on ideals of every kind—an impulse to drag everything lofty into the dust—have left our culture in a sorry state. He does not expect immediate improvement, nor does he advance a program of cultural renovation, but he seldom speaks in the voice of doom and despair. Bad as things are, he thinks it is still possible to make a modest contribution to the cause of truth and justice. It is possible, for instance, to find honorable employment as a teacher, provided that teachers do not give in to the temptation to become "armchair prophets." The university, notwithstanding its present disarray, is a "sacred institution," and teachers can set an example for others if they approach their calling in a spirit of reverence.

A certain ambiguity lurks in this exalted conception of the intellectual life. Is it the teacher's calling itself that is sacred, or the culture historically preserved in the university? Rieff is at his best when he leans to the first of these positions, when he argues that the office of the devoted teacher is not to deify or even defend a "dying culture" but to resist the "downward identification" that threatens any form of culture at all. His advice to teachers, which consists largely of negative commandments, reflects his belief that intellectuals betray their vocation when they give in to the