

## METAMORPHOSES

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REVIEW: *ANTOLOGIA POETICA: TRA IL CIELO E LA TERRA/BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH. Poesie in cinese classico, inglese e italiano/Poems in the Classical Chinese, English and Italian*. Translated and edited by Barbara Carle and Curtis Dean Smith. Trilingual, facing translations. Milan: La Vita Felice, 2017. ISBN 978-88-9346-099-6

This ambitious trilingual anthology is the product of close collaboration between poet, translator and critic Barbara Carle, who has published critical articles, poetry books and translations of poetry in English and Italian, and Curtis Dean Smith, a scholar of Classical Chinese poetry. A substantial introduction to the collection is presented in a refreshingly welcoming form: a conversation between the collaborators, in which Carle mainly poses questions (what a non-specialist reader might want or need to know) and Smith provides answers. (The conversation is published bilingually, with English and Italian on facing pages.) On the challenge of translating Classical Chinese poetry into languages so different from the original both linguistically and culturally, the following exchange, which is followed by specific examples of how understanding the interplay of form and shifting genres, and the context in which poets wrote, also sheds light on the collaboration between the two scholar-translators:

BC: We both agree that there are many serious pitfalls in the art of literary translation, but in our case, since we are working between such vastly different cultures, what did we consider to be the most harmful?

CDS: A major consideration is an insidious flaw of Western language translations from classical Chinese: cultural appropriation. As is true with any translation, the vocabulary of Classical Chinese is so very foreign that one must often make certain compromises when choosing words. What makes these choices more complex in our case is that the Chinese written language has a history of over three thousand years. Many characters and phrases in Classical Chinese are still used in the current vernacular, but their meanings have evolved over the millennia. These differences are not always obvious to the non-specialist. (43)

This review is also the product of collaboration. Sujane Wu is a specialist in Classical Chinese poetry; she does not know Italian. Thalia Pandiri does not know Chinese, but has read the English and Italian carefully, and adds her comments to Sujane Wu's evaluations of selected poems.

This anthology presents a good mix of works—some poems are very well-known and often translated while others are not. The overall quality of the translations into English is good.

The title of this poetic anthology is probably derived from one of the lines of Du Fu's poem, "Writing of My Heart on a Night Journey" 旅夜書懷 (p. 152). So, I will use this poem as a starting point for the discussion of the translation in the anthology.

Here is the original:

細草微風岸，危檣獨夜舟  
 星垂平野濶，月湧大江流  
 名豈文章著，官應老病休  
 飄飄何所似，天地一沙鷗

The English translation:

*Writing of my Heart on a Night Journey*

On the bank, fine grass in the light breeze  
 On the boat, towering mast in the lonely night.

Stars hanging, the flat wilds expansive  
 Moonlight gushing, the great river flowing.

My name, certainly, depends not on works of literature  
 My official career, I ought in old age and sickness to resign.

Drifting and drifting, to what can one compare?  
 Between heaven and earth, one solitary gull.

In my view, the translation of this poem manages to convey the syntax and meaning of the original. For example, the first two couplets in the original have a parallel structure, and the translator has successfully maintained the parallel structure and created a lonely night with tranquility and moonlight. The two very subtle movements suggested in the first two couplets are the feel of the "light breeze" (line 1) and the seeing and hearing of the "river flowing" (line 4). All these natural elements are directly displayed in front of "our" eyes—both the poet's and the readers'. I think readers who do not know Chinese can also easily sense the lonely feeling and subtle movements in the translation.

Moreover, I particularly like the way the first line of the third couplet is translated: adding commas before and after the word "certainly" requires the reader to pause—thus to emphasize—while reading aloud or silently. This pause creates a rhythm for this line. The last line also allows the reader to slow down, in particular the last three words, "one solitary gull." [SW]

The Italian translation is very close in content to the English, but is, not unexpectedly, more mellifluous; it also creates a sense of flow rather than offering images that stand beside one another and only suggest a connection. And

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the Italian rather consistently sounds more colloquial and less foreignizing.

*Scrivo del mio cuore in viaggio la notte*

Sulla riva erba fina nella leggera brezza  
nella barca sovrasta l'albero della deserta notte.

Le stelle appese, la selvaggia landa si espande  
il plenilunio brilla sul fluire del fiume.

Il mio nome, certo, non dipende dalle opere letterarie  
dall'alto incarico, vecchio e malato, dovrei dimettermi.

Sono sempre alla deriva, a cosa assomiglio?  
Tra il cielo e la terra un solitario gabbiano.

In the first line of the third couplet, the English has “expansive,” while the Italian uses a verb, “siespande.” In the next line, “the moonlight gushing” is once again rendered with a verb, “ilpleniluniobrilla” (the full moon shines bright). In the next couplet, “I ought in old age and sickness to resign” suggests the regretful hesitation of the speaker, while “vecchio e malato, dovreidimettermi” (old and sick I ought to resign) is in a blunt, everyday register—a phrase you might overhear on the street—that creates a different impression. Finally, in the last couplet, “Sono sempre alla deriva, a cosa assomiglio?” (I’m always adrift, what do I resemble?) is far more conversational; “Drifting and drifting, to what can one compare?” suggests the foreignness of the original. [TP]

On page 124, Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 (673-740), “Gazing at the Moon,  
Longing for the Distance” 望月懷遠

海上生明月，天涯共此時  
情人怨遙夜，竟夕起相思  
滅燭憐光滿，披衣覺露滋  
不堪盈手贈，還寢夢佳期

On the sea, the brilliant moon emerges,  
From the edges of the heavens, we share this moment.

Lovers resent the long night  
As dusk ends, longing arises.

Extinguishing the candle, I appreciate the light full  
Draping a cloak, I feel the lushness of the dew.

Unable to scoop it in my hands to give  
Return to bed, and dream of good times.

One of the most notable characteristics of this English translation is that the Topic-Comment structure in the Chinese text is closely followed in the translation. The third couplet is a good example. To some extent, the translation of the third couplet has also maintained the intriguing play of syntactic ambiguities in the original. [SW]

The Italian version of this poem differs noticeably in meaning from the English, beginning with the title:

*Guardo la luna desidero al di là della distanza* (I gaze at the moon, desire beyond distance)

Sul mare si alza la luna luminosa  
tra i confini celesti viviamo questo momento.  
Gli amanti soffrono l'attesa della notte  
mentre il crepuscolo cala, il desiderio sale.  
Quando spengo la candela scopro la piena luce  
indosso il mantello, mi godo le goccioline di rugiada.  
Incapace di coglierne con le mani per donare  
ritorno a letto e delle gioie del futuro sogno.

(A prosaic translation of the Italian reads something like this:  
Above the sea, the bright moon rises  
between the boundaries of the heavens we live this moment  
Lovers suffer while they wait for night  
when dusk falls, desire arises.  
When I snuff out the candle I discover the full light  
I put on my cloak, delight in the drops of dew.  
Unable to gather some in my hands, to make a gift of them,  
I return to bed and dream of joys to come.) [TP]

Not everything gets conveyed sufficiently well into English; here are a few examples from the third and fourth couplets of the first poem in the anthology (on page 54):

Third couplet:

客行雖云樂，不如早旋歸

Traveling, although is said to be fun  
Is not as good as turning back early and going home.

I think the translation of this couplet is too wordy and loses the beauty of ambiguity. The speaker of this poem could be the traveler or the person left behind at home. If the speaker is the traveler, we could understand it as an inner conversation the poet is having, urging himself to return home as early as pos-

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sible. It could also be interpreted as the person who stayed home and is expressing her wish that the traveler return early.

Fourth couplet of the first poem in the anthology:

出戶獨彷徨，愁思當告誰

Leaving home, alone hence and forth  
Melancholy thoughts, with whom should I share?

Based on the context, my understanding of 出戶 (translated here as “leaving home”) in this couplet should be rendered differently. Here, it shows a sleepless person who “stepped outside” the bed chamber and paced alone hence and forth. Thus, “leaving home” seems misleading. [SW]

For this line, the Italian has “Uscendodalla porta da una parte all'altra,” (Going out the door, from one place to another = going outside), which suggests simply stepping out of the house and makes sense, given that the speaker goes back indoors in the next couplet. The Italian also does not have any reference to “alone.” I might also add that “hence and forth” seems unnecessarily foreignizing and awkward in English, and puzzles the reader without suggesting some deeper meaning. [TP]

Page 130, “Passing an Old Friend’s Farm” by Meng Haoran (ca. 689-740)

An old friend has chicken and grain  
Invites me to his home in the fields.

Green trees join at the edge of the village  
Verdant mountains lean beyond the wall.

Open a window, face the yard and garden  
Hold some wine, talk about mulberry and hemp.

Wait until the autumn festival  
Return for the chrysanthemum flowers.

In the first line, the verb “ju” is translated as “has” which, in my view, does not sufficiently convey the nuances in the original. Even though one of the meanings the character “ju” contains is “to have,” to use this meaning here seems to lose the celebratory atmosphere.

The final couplet contains a cultural specificity which is lost in this translation of the term “Chongyangri” (The Ninth Day of the Ninth Month—Double Ninth Festival) as “autumn festival.” The translation also misses the connection between the festival and the chrysanthemum flowers. A footnote might be needed for this particular festival and the representative chrysanthemum flower to make clear to readers the importance of stories embedded in the entire

poem. [SW]

Again, the Italian version is subtly different in feeling: while the English verbs “open,” “face,” “hold,” “talk,” “wait,” “return” allow for ambiguity (indicative? imperative? speaking to the singular self or implying a plural?), the Italian unambiguously uses the first-person plural: *apriamo, miriamo, teniamo, parliamo, aspettiamo, ritorniamo*. I think any attempt to reproduce the ambiguity of the original would strike a reader of Italian as unnatural, jarring. A translator both takes advantage of and is limited by the grammar, syntax, sounds of the target language. [TP]

All translation is interpretation; translating poetry is notoriously challenging, even when a translator is working with two languages that are not as distant in every way from one another as Classical Chinese and English or Italian. Small wonder, then, that translations differ from one another, sometimes radically. Coincidentally, a few poems in the anthology also appear in this issue of *Metamorphoses*. In addition to Du Fu’s poem (see pages 74-75 in this issue) discussed above, two other examples are poems by Zhang Jiuling (pages 72-73 in this issue) and Su Shi (pages 60-61 in this issue). It is beyond the scope of this review to compare the versions in the anthology with those that appear in *Metamorphoses*, but we would urge readers to compare translations and consider how different approaches and interpretations create versions that are perhaps siblings or cousins of the original poem, but certainly never identical twins.

In conclusion, this handsomely presented trilingual anthology is an important and very enjoyable introduction to the work of thirty-three Classical Chinese poets. For those readers who have access to both the English and the Italian, being able to compare how each language and each translator transforms the same poem is particularly enjoyable. The decision to print the Chinese and English on the left-hand page and the Italian on the facing, right-hand page makes savoring this volume easy. The fonts are pleasing and comfortably large, and the physical size of the book is just right: substantial but not unwieldy (about 220 pages, not quite  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch thick), small enough (about  $6\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{4}$  inches) to fit comfortably in a purse, or even a capacious pocket. We hope you find it and enjoy it!