

THE TRANSLATIONS OF EZRA POUND. With an Introduction by Hugh Kenner. (Faber; 30s.)

One would need to be no mean linguist if one were going to review this book properly. Originals in Tuscan, Provençal, Anglo-Saxon, Chinese and Japanese mean that for most readers the work will have to be appreciated almost entirely on the English text; as good a way as any, I daresay, of assaying the work of a translator.

A good deal is heard nowadays (especially in prefaces to verse translations of various kinds) about the extreme difficulty of translating poetry from one tongue into another. Far less is heard about the astonishing joy such a work gives the translator if he has any measure of success, a joy so absorbing that three or four hours or days or months spent on one sinewy and elegant sonnet grow all foreshortened, a process comparable with the foreshortening of time, perhaps of space as well, achieved by the translator's version if successful, so that for the reader there remains only the shadow of a gulf of centuries and cultures behind a sense of actual and present union.

It is the open absence of any apologetic attitude, coupled with this power to dispel time and space, which mark the quality of these translations. The pieces vary widely and for each of them Mr Pound achieves a personal treatment, ranging from the vigorous alliterative texture of the *Seafarer* to the intricate dances of Arnaut Daniel, from the suavity and grace of the poems of Li Po to the bony anatomy of passion behind Cavalcanti's thought, and the formal ghostly patterns, smoke and silver brocade, of the Japanese *Noh* plays. These last deserve special note; Mr Kenner in his introduction to the book avers that in them it is possible to sense a remoteness on the translator's part, as of 'something exotic, thin, appreciated rather than lived'; yet such a hypothetical remoteness feels like contiguity compared with the utter alienation of ignorance about Japanese culture in which one was reared, and it is very valuable to have an access to these intensely poetic plays in addition to that provided by Yeats.

Taken separately, the translations are most satisfying as poetry, and interspersed with them are short introductions and notes of various kinds, the most pregnant being Mr Pound's own. Taken as a whole, the collection is much less satisfactory; in fact it seems rather a muddle, with the best pieces at the beginning, while the end tails away into a version of certain paragraphs from Rémy de Gourmont which could, one supposes, dispense with translation altogether, and an appendage of short poems very truly labelled 'Miscellaneous'. Perhaps, however, it is stupid to complain of this, for it may be merely a reflection of the particular quality of Mr Pound's genius (deeply poetic, wide-ranging and abstruse like that of James Joyce, and, like his, essentially disunited); and, as in all this great poet's work, there are gleams of a splendour which is rare nowadays, a fitting if fitful complement to the glories and demands of the originals.

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