

BARRY O'DONOHUE

Seven Russian Poets, Imitations by Rosemary Dobson and David Campbell. University of Queensland Press, 1979. 96 pp. \$7.95.

Poems from The Age, selected by R.A. Simpson. Hyland House Publishing, 1979. 128 pp. \$5.95.

Those who see Afghanistan as the epitome of national suffering at the hands of a superior power may be disappointed by the absence of the rhetoric of aggression in this book of Russian poetry. Yet I imagine few people would expect to find savagery in the words of any poet, regardless of his country of origin. No, the voices in this collection are voices of response, both to environments and to an awareness of individuality and truth, and at times the voices are tender, thought-provoking, and at times sharp and deliberate.

Seven poets are presented in this collection, their writing apparently reproduced in a fairly close translation from their mother tongue. While spanning a wide time-period, 1908 to the late 1960s, the poems themselves are not specifically of any time, and have a quality of agelessness. There is little evidence in the words of these people, for instance, that some of them have endured two world wars and a major social revolution, and heralded the new technology of modern man to the disastrous plateau of the seventies. The poets themselves seem, even in brief moments of despair and cynicism, essentially to be at peace with themselves and their environments. Perhaps the best poems in the collection are those by Osip Mandelstam, who died in 1938. His most emotionally appealing poem was written in 1908:

And sometimes, as one looks at another, the faces mist over
And the world dies on the lips of silence,
As though a startled bird flew from the bushes
And at that instant daylight turned to darkness.

One can sense the author's emotional sensitivity towards

humanity, yet at the same time feel he denies himself the close bond with his fellows which he obviously desires. He seems to realise that time, or his own denial of closeness and warmth, is quietly turning his life to darkness. This is explained subtly in the alarm of the bird rising from its sanctuary.

His sense of adventure and restless regard for things external is clear:

Here girls outgrowing fringe and plaits
Shop for rare gowns with shy regard
And admirals in three-cornered hats
Evoke in dreams Scheherezade
Blue distances are lucid, frame
A vineyard; winds blow from Baghdad
And Smyrna. Sailing there is hard
But stars are everywhere the same.

while his sharp and refreshing treatment of the simple things around him is exciting and rich in appeal:

I cannot breathe; the sky's alive with worms
And not a single star speaks prophecies, . . .

Once you move past Mandelstam's poems, typically of a high standard, the intrinsic characteristics of the other poems unfortunately do not have the same attraction. The general tenor of the remaining poems is even in technique, but they lack appeal. It is acknowledged in the introduction that choice of material was circumscribed by the availability of text. This implies that as a study of Russian poetry the collection cannot represent a great depth or breadth of material. This partially accounts for the strained nature of the latter part of the book which draws on the occasional 'ordinary' poem—technically competent but weak in emotion or insight.

As the poets do not represent a wide or typical sampling of Russian authors, it is fair to warn the reader that the collection cannot give an overview of contemporary Russian poetry. It may not be unreasonable to ask why, at a time when local authors are having considerable difficulty finding publishers who will look at manuscripts, an Australian publisher brings out a book such as this at the neglect of one of our own poets. Yet I

guess that the Moscow Olympics may be responsible for its appearance. One would imagine a Russian publisher, or the Russian Government, as a more suitable sponsor for their countrymen's work. Perhaps the answer is a matter for the Australian publisher or editor, and his assessment of the needs of domestic achievement.

Overall, I must come to the conclusion that the book offers little towards an appreciation of Russian poetry. It is not representative, and confesses its failure to give an overview of the extent of Russian poetry of its period. At best, the book gives a quick historical scan of some of Russia's better known and more readily available poets, and perhaps offers readers some chance of seeing how people from a different cultural, educational, and socio-economic background deal with feelings towards themselves and the things around them. If in fact the imitators have achieved this, and I think they have, then the book partially succeeds.

Poems from The Age is a collection of poems selected by the present editor of that newspaper, R.A. Simpson, and is drawn from poems published in *The Age* since 1967. The poems represent a diverse and interesting cross-section of Australian poetry. Names such as Robert Adamson, Les A. Murray, Rodney Hall, Bruce Beaver, John Blight, Vincent Buckley, Bruce Dawe, Gwen Harwood, Judith Rodriguez, Thomas Shapcott, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Andrew Taylor, and Judith Wright are among the seventy-two authors represented. The collection is probably the best example of eclecticism I have seen in recent times, for it does not implicitly try to push one strand of poetry or one class of poet, but is reasonably representative in philosophy and intent. The overall standard of work is quite high, with some very strong pieces that deserve preservation in an anthology. Anyone wanting to have his work published in *The Age* may benefit from this book, as it does indicate the type and length of poem that the newspaper is interested in. *The Age* is probably the most difficult paper to be published in at present. Its editorial standard is consistently high and the standard of poems published continues to rise. This is partly due to the professional

approach Simpson brings to the paper, and partly due to the increased proficiency of Australian authors. The only criticism I have of the book is that not enough of the identity of any one poet is felt, as no author is represented by more than three poems. This is a minor and probably unavoidable weakness and is perhaps outweighed by the number of authors and the diversity of material collected under the one title.

