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Literary Collections

Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthology
John L. Foster, translator
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This anthology is the life work of a single translator inspired by a harper's song carved in hieroglyphics in a tomb more than three thousand years ago: "I have heard the words of Imhotep, and Hordjedef, too, / retold time and again in their narrations. / Where are their dwellings now?" Balancing a general anthology with a scholarly edition, Foster surveys love and narrative poems, prayers, and lyrics from 3000 b.c.e. to the time of Antony and Cleopatra (300 c.e.).

Foster finds poetry in ancient Egypt's surviving material culture: photographs of carvings, papyri facsimiles, and resources at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, where he remains a researcher after his career as an English professor. He has worked directly with fragmentary originals to transform hieroglyphs of a dead language into poetry. In comparison, many Greek texts survive only as translations or in quotes from other works.

Foster has entirely retranslated the poems for this book. He explains that since vowels are not recorded and phrasing substitutes for punctuation, then rhetoric serves as prosody.

He defines the "thought couplet" as the rhetorical unit of ancient Egyptian poetry: a line break splits a sentence with parallel structures.

This is not the only anthology of ancient Egyptian literature; however, it is the most accessible. Ezra Pound translated poems from unreliable Italian hieroglyph transliterations, and Miriam Lichtheim published the standard translations. To compare translations to get a feeling for the original, Lichtheim translates in a poem Foster calls "Maxims of Prahhotep": "O king, my lord! / Age is here, old age arrived, / Feebleness came, weakness grows, 'Childlike,' one sleeps all day." Foster's translation includes quotes, as Prahhotep speaks:

My sovereign Lord, Old age has come, the years weigh heavily,
misery my lot, and infant helplessness returns.

The translations are easy to read. Introductions provide time period and subject information without belaboring minor points. The apparatus-a time line of dynasties and periods, a glossary, and a scholarly bibliography-is lengthy, careful, and necessary. Some introductions to individual poems contain comments such as “Imagine in this girl the charm of your own love” or a hyperbolic comparison between the writer of “The Tale of Sinhue” with Shakespeare. The writer of “Sinhue” wrote a single epic poem about alienation and return, but Foster’s translation allows the character’s emotion full play: “The document arrived / while I was standing there among my people. / It was read out to me, / and I threw myself upon the ground / And gathered dust of the earth, strewing it freely on my breast.”

This anthology, which includes the gamut of ancient Egyptian poetry, is the only one appropriate for general readers.

Catherine Daly