

An Artistry of Dissent

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a review of

Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination, edited by Martin Espada. Curbstone Press (Willimantic CT. 1994). 282 pages.

In his forward to this anthology of 37 poets, all of whom have published or are soon to publish collections with Curbstone Press, the poet and editor Martin Espada defines the political imagination as a matter of both vision and language which “goes beyond protest to articulate an artistry of dissent.”

Espada describes the ethical imperative of such a response: “Any oppressive condition, before it can be changed, must be named and condemned in words that persuade by stirring the emotions, awakening the senses.”

Here is a partial history in poetry of the struggles of many peoples: Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Chileans, Puerto Ricans, Hondurans, Haitians. Curbstone has consciously promoted the publication of Latin American writers, and issues- specific to those communities are prominent here, but many others are present as well: poverty and homelessness, the Vietnam war, U.S. prisons, factory work conditions, sexism and racism.

There are also poems dedicated to past poets like Pablo Neruda, Federico Garcia Lorca, Victor Jaia, whose voices inspired the poets of this volume, and who are evidence of a long-standing poetry of protest.

The poets included in this volume acknowledge and openly accept the mission of their craft: to speak not only for those who cannot speak, but also for themselves as part of a process of self-discovery and affirmation. In “Ars Poetica,” Claribel Alegria, born and raised in El Salvador, defines herself and her life’s task:

I,

poet by trade

condemned so many times

to be a crow,

would never change places

with the Venus de Milo,

while she reigns in the Louvre

and dies of boredom

and collects dust

I discover the sun
each morning
and amid valleys
volcanoes
and debris of war
I catch sight of the promised land.
(translated by Darwin J. Flakoll)

The poet and guerrilla Otto Rene Castillo, who was burned alive by the U.S.-backed Guatemalan government in 1967, condemns the intellectuals who refuse to recognize the human tragedy and injustice that pervade their societies:

On that day
the simple men will come.
Those who had no place
in the books and poems
of the apolitical intellectuals.
but daily delivered
their bread and milk.
their tortillas and eggs,
those who mended their clothes...
and they'll ask:
"What did you do when the poor
suffered, when tenderness
and life
burned out in them?
.
Apolitical intellectuals
of my sweet country,
you will not be able to answer.
.

A vulture of silence
will eat your gun.
Your own misery
will pick at your soul.
And you will be mute
in your shame.

(translated by Margaret Randall)

The poem “Como tú / Like you,” by Roque Dalton, the prolific Salvadoran poet and essayist, who was imprisoned and later murdered by a faction of the ERP (the People’s Revolutionary Army), provides the title for this diverse and ambitious anthology:

Like you I
love love, life, the sweet smell
of things, the sky-blue
landscape, of January days.
And my blood boils up
and I laugh through eyes
that have known the buds of tears.
.
I believe the world is beautiful
and that poetry, like bread, is for every one.
.
And that my veins don’t end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who struggle for life.
love.
little things.
landscape and bread,
the poetry of everyone.

(translated by Jack Hirschman)

FE readers will not appreciate or agree with all of the political choices some of these writers made in their lives. The inclusion of Tomás Borge, the former Nicaraguan Minister of the Interior, essentially the Sandinista chief of police, for example, is disturbing.

A truism about poetry and the craft of poetry is also in evidence here: stories of struggle and suffering are moving and instructive but don’t necessarily make for good poetry.

While the poetic merit of some of these poems is questionable, others clearly reach beyond the trauma of their situations through the wisdom of the poet, and speak to us of beauty while they speak to us of truth—a task that is certainly a difficult and illusive one. Overall, this gathering of voices should excite and arouse profound admiration for the tenacious and intelligent poetic spirit they share.

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