

ALL I HAD NEVER EXPECTED

Poetas "novísimos" ingleses. Antología bilingüe.
by José Antonio Álvarez Amorós
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How new is "novísimo"? A first glance at the contents of this anthology will disappoint any reader expecting a dip into the rich diversity of contemporary British poetry. For those familiar with the last thirty years or more of British poetry the title will conjure up the spirit of A. Álvarez's (no relation) controversial 1962 anthology *The New Poetry*, or *the new british poetry* edited by Allnut, D'Aguiar, Edwards and Mottram in 1988, or Bloodaxe's 1993 anthology *The New Poetry*, edited by Hulse, Kennedy and Morley. And once the idea of contemporary poetry is in the reader's mind, then Penguin's tendentious *Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Andrew Motion in 1982, and the excellent *Grandchildren of Albion: Voices and Visions of Younger Poets in Britain*, edited by Michael Horovitz in 1992 clamour for attention too. But *Poetas "novísimos" ingleses* has a different brief. In 1970 Penguin published an anthology edited by the poet, critic and anthologist Edward Lucie-Smith entitled *British Poetry since 1945*; it was a book divided into eleven sections with titles such as *Sources*, *The Movement*, or *The Liverpool Poets*, which sought to give a particular, but broad, vision of contemporary poetry and its development. In 1985 the volume was revised, with an additional section of poets Lucie-Smith dubbed *University Wits*. As Dr. Álvarez explains in his introduction, the *University Wits* have much in common with those Spanish and Catalan poets of the sixties and seventies, who were described as "poetas novísimos", and thus the title is explained, it provides a suitable orientation "para el público hispanohablante", and has nothing to do with "new" poetry at all, in the English sense. Indeed, at a time when the Poetry Society is promoting its "New Generation" of poets, and the old guard are well-settled as editors in major publishing houses, or as holders of venerable university chairs, it should perhaps be entitled "Poetas viejísimos".

It is this last section of Lucie-Smith's anthology that Dr. Álvarez has translated, with some changes in the poems, though the poets he has chosen are identical, even down to the arbitrary order in which they first appeared. Of the thirty poems in *Poetas "novísimos" ingleses*, nine are the same as those in Lucie-Smith's anthology, the rest, not surprisingly, reflect the changes that have occurred in the eight years that separate the two collections. What is rather surprising is that these changes are confined solely to the poems; have none of the poets changed sufficiently to "come down" from their ivory towers? Are there no new poets aspiring to "go up"? Much of Seamus Heaney's poetry in *The Haw Lantern*, for example, has been written by a "university wit" - look at "Alphabets" or "From the Republic of Conscience" - or must he be forever categorized as a Belfast poet, though he lives in Dublin and lectures across the Atlantic? Or what about Jo Shapcott? She has the appropriate qualifications, having been an English lecturer, and her poetry would fit in nicely, next to Craig Raine's and James Fenton's,

as her award-winning poem "Phrase Book" demonstrates. But *Poetas "novísimos" ingleses* plays safe and is, as a result, a rather dated collection of all-white, all-male, all-English (i.e. born in England) poets who were once arbitrarily collected into an appended section of a volume of contemporary poetry and who now seem to have been mysteriously raised to the status of school, of which "The Martians" are but a minor department.

This said, the translations of the poems are generally very good. Dr. Álvarez reminds us in his introduction of "la naturaleza irremediamente subsidiaria de la traducción poética", but great care has been taken in preserving the line breaks, and indeed, where possible, the syntactic order of the lines and phrases in the poems. A good example is "Un marciano manda una postal a casa", which demonstrates not only the care taken with the translation but also the skill of the original poem itself. The wordplay one might expect from Raine's "Martian" conceits reveals itself as visual rather than linguistic, it is a poem that plays with our perceptions and pre-conceptions rather than with verbal wit, and this lends itself to translation quite comfortably. Inevitably this is not always the case, and translation cannot cope with phrases such as "But where on earth/did he manage to find/that cigarette end?" in the poem "In Modern Dress". Much of the poem compares a very small boy's childish discoveries with those of the explorer Sir Walter Raleigh. "But where on earth" also refers to the latter's discoveries in the Americas, a meaning which is inevitably lost in the translation: "Pero ¿dónde diablos...?". But this is hardly the fault of the translator, though I'm not so sure about the translation of "Just as I thought/he was all I had never expected" as "Según había supuesto/su apariencia no era en absoluto la esperada" from Andrew Motion's poem, "The Great Man"; the cleverness of "never", instead of the expected "ever" could surely have been retained.

Many of the poems in the collection, such as Craig Raine's "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home", John Fuller's "The Cook's Lesson", Fenton's "Dead Soldiers", David Constantine's "You are distant, you are already leaving" or Kit Wright's "I Found South African Breweries Most Hospitable" are sufficiently well-known and appreciated to find a place in any general anthology of poetry from the last thirty years. On their own they are representative of nothing but an anachronistic, exclusive and artificial club which has little meaning in the nineteen nineties, if, indeed, it ever did, and which is potentially misleading to readers who have not realised the limited nature of what the anthology has to offer.

B.P.