

Sargasso Sea of SA poetry

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THE HEART IN EXILE: SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY IN ENGLISH, 1990-1995 edited by Leon de Kock and Ian Tromp (Penguin, R65)

It is impossible not to want to applaud the motivation behind this new anthology of South African English-language poetry, as well as the energy and initiative of its two editors. Leon de Kock and Ian Tromp's *The Heart in Exile* has the express intention of gathering together a selection of truly excellent recent poetry in a book which might appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

Yet at the very outset the editors contrive to destroy the goodwill that any reviewer should bring to a new publication. In fact, one's reservations set in early, with the editors' introduction. There, all too soon, one meets with sentences like the following:

"A number of themes suggested themselves, deriving from our observation of poets accommodating themselves to – making certain settlements with – a difficult social environment and tracking their way through a desire-recoil negotiation of 'South Africa' as a paradoxical sense of place/home/land/landscape, from within or outside the country."

It is hard to be confident about De Kock and Tromp's ability to discriminate between good and bad poetry when, as the above sentence indicates, they are incapable of writing basic, clear English prose.

Such initial reservations only deepen when the editors' critical principles become apparent: *The Heart in Exile* is subtitled *South African Poetry in English, 1990–1995* and it includes only those poems which have been published in the last five years of this country's history. On the face of it, this might seem to be a wonderful idea. If there is a new democracy in South Africa, surely there should be a new poetry to accompany it?

But literature and history do not necessarily travel on a bicycle made for two. In the literary context, "new-ness" cannot be tied to a mere five calendar years. Even 20 to 30 years after its first appearance, Eliot's *The Waste Land* was a good deal newer than almost anything being published in the United Kingdom. *The Heart in Exile*, in short, is based on a misleading, if not thoroughly mistaken, notion of how literary history proceeds – what I would call a kind of vulgar historicism.

The consequences are plain to see: the editors are forced to exclude from their anthology much work that was and is genuinely new. Jeremy Cronin's *Inside*, for instance, was published in 1983, not 1993. It is presumably for this reason that not one of his extraordinary poems appears in *The Heart in Exile*. And yet, to put together an anthology of supposedly new South African poetry which doesn't include a large chunk of Cronin, means the book is, in the deepest literary sense, out of date, even obsolete, before it has emerged from the printing press. And it is certainly not prescribe-able.

The same editorial restriction has further damaging consequences.

Invariably, it means that all those poets who have established their reputation over the last few decades are represented by work which either does not show them at their best or in their full variety. In *The Heart in Exile*, the selections from Stephen Gray, Peter Horn, Lionel Abrahams, Patrick Cullinan, Chris Mann, Robert Berold – every single recognized name, in fact – are all of them inadequate or misleading. Unbelievably, Douglas Livingstone is represented by only one poem, while Lynne Bryer, who gets 10, is inevitably made to look 10 times more important.

Equally unbelievable is the fact that this anthology contains work by 63 poets. One can safely say – that is, without personal prejudice or animus – that at least half of these are not poets at all. For it could not be otherwise. Even in a country with 10 times the English-speaking population of South Africa it would be thoroughly improbable to expect there to be more than 20 poets alive at any one time.

To suggest, as the editors do, that close on 200 really excellent English-language poems have been written in South Africa in the last five years – “poems of potentially breathtaking impact, poems with sinuous, sensuous textures of feeling and expression” – is to enter a world of pure wish-fulfilment.

Not surprisingly, 75% of the contents of this anthology are not more than a sort of low-grade verbal compost. There are good poems, of course. I liked the selections from John Eppel, Ingrid de Kok, CJ Driver and Seithlamo Motsapi; and I wished there had been more of Karen Press and Sally-Ann Murray. But only a handful of poets shine forth from a wide Sargasso Sea of mediocrity.

Indeed, *The Heart in Exile* has them all, from the penny dreadfuls of

domesticity to the neo-surrealist rocky horror shows. There are protest poems whose sell-by date has clearly passed; poems in imitation of modernism, all a deliberate mangling of verbal limbs; narrative excursions that begin nowhere and end not much further off. And almost all of them bang along in that stylistic orthodoxy which free verse has long since become, making all the regulation dissonant noises, and not all of them intentionally.

This is absolutely predictable. But it is also ironic. For it means that Tromp and De Kock’s anthology, far from being “new”, is in almost seamless continuity with all those that have preceded it. Containing a little that is good, a lot that is indifferent, and some that is quite dismal, it creates roughly the same impression as do most previous anthologies of South African English-language poetry.

The Heart in Exile does serve, albeit unwittingly, to answer the question its editors pose in their introduction. Why, they wonder, are South Africans so largely indifferent to poetry? The obvious answer, no doubt, is that South Africans are commonly philistines. But in their indifference they may well be doing more than acting true to type. In relation to the local product, they may also have an instinctive sense of something set down by La Bruyère more than three centuries ago: “There are certain things,” the French moralist wrote, “in which mediocrity is intolerable.” And poetry, he added, was one of them.

Stephen Watson’s latest volume, *Presence of the Earth*, is published by David Philip