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The Gift of Tongues: W. S. Merwin's Poems and Translations



I

*Selected Translations 1948-1968** is W. S. Merwin's twelfth book of verse in sixteen years. It excludes his full-length translations of medieval epics, but ranges, in a highly selective miscellany, from an Egyptian prayer for the dead to Iosip Brodsky's poem about a monument to "The Lie." About one-third of Merwin's translations are from widely disparate folk poetries, songs of primitive tribes, and lyrics from sophisti-

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cated but ancient and exotic cultures. Nearly all the remainder are poems by contemporary post-symbolist poets: Lorca, Neruda, Parra; Jean Follain, Pierre Delisle; Esenin, Mandelstam, and Brodsky. Some of these and other poets more meagerly represented are well known, others hardly known at all here. Of the great poets of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Romantic and Symbolist periods there is barely a page.

Such a book of translations, technically fastidious, crossing many linguistic barriers, avoiding the conventional choices while it enlarges our acquaintance with the ancient and modern enthusiasms of the translator, suggests comparison with such similar enterprises as the translations of Pound and Lowell's *Imitations*. These works are not notorious for fidelity to their originals; Merwin's, in the few cases in which I have been able to parse his texts, seems much more so. Yet he has put his own thumbprint on every page. As with Pound's and Lowell's adaptations, one virtue is that Merwin's brings us closer to poems we couldn't or didn't read before, but another virtue is the relation such a book makes clear between its contents and the original work of the translator himself.

Pound and Lowell clearly integrate their translations into their own *oeuvres*. Merwin on the other hand, in his foreword, disclaims any such connection. Many of these poems, he says, were undertaken from

a wish to embrace, even through wrappings, poetry that was written from perspectives revealingly different from our own. . . . And I have not come to use translation as a way of touching off writing that then became deliberately, specifically, or ostentatiously my own. On the contrary, I have felt impelled to keep translation and my own writing more and more sharply separate.

One appreciates the poet's wish to protect his own style from the imputation of influence from the texts he has chosen to translate, as well as to protect his translations from the imputation of being all made in the cadences of his own style. Yet the matter of reciprocal influence is not so easily put by. The very choice of materials translated has, inevitably, some connection with the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of the poet. Even his desire to embrace the unlike is determined by the sort of poet he is. The full register of Merwin's accomplishment as translator is more easily determined if we are familiar with his own poems.

II

It would be hard to imagine the shape of Merwin's Collected Poems after reading his six books of verse. His career seems to break into halves, with *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960) the pause between them. In fact there seem to be two poets named Merwin, each very prolific and wonderfully accomplished, but what do they share? The younger Merwin wrote long dextrous poems based on ballads, myths, and medieval emblems, using with great brio and surety of touch the traditions and conventions available to the student of Romance poetry and English prosody. Typical early poems are "Ballad of John Cable and the Three Gentlemen" and "Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge," from *A Mask for Janus*. The ballad, in slightly awry liting quatrains, retells an archetypal fable of a final journey, like that in *Everyman* but without the consoling theology. "Dictum" is a fable of rebirth, the matter of Noah's voyage. The ten-line blank verse stanzas unspool with felicitous inventiveness. This is a style which, like the later Stevens, builds and balances glossy parapets in stanzas held together by the bolts and braces of syntax and rhetoric. The fullest extension of this style, Early Merwin as it were, is in his extraordinary bravura piece, "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" in *The Dancing Bears* (1954). This poem is only six lines shorter than "The Waste Land," but has no such irregularity of form; here are 39 thirteen-line stanzas in iambic pentameter blank verse. These retell a fairy-tale version of the tale of Cupid and Psyche (from Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*), with its incremental and formulaic repetitions of journey and pursuit. The theme of this accomplished poem is of course the absolute need for trust in love. But there is more: the lover who comes as a white bear by moonlight to the princess or peasant's daughter—these characters prove to be as much creatures of imagination as mortals. "And what am I if the story be not real?" she cries. At the end the lady seems all but indistinguishable from the moon:

"All metaphor," she said, "is magic. Let
Me be diverted in a turning lantern,
Let me in that variety be real.
But let the story be an improvisation
Continually, and through all repetition
Differ a little from itself . . ."

The Dancing Bears is a book of myths and marvels. In it Merwin drew heavily upon the rival traditions of Pound and Graves, fusing elements from *The Spirit of Romance* with others from *The White Goddess* in an individual voice. Yet, as was true for Lowell in "The Mills of the Kavanagh," the poems of Merwin's which most fully extended his mastery of received traditions verged on Gongorism. To escape the decadence of one's own style a radical change must be invoked in one's way of seeing. As Merwin wrote much later (in *The Lice*), "If you find you no longer believe enlarge the temple." One way he was able to do this was through his translations.

During the next half dozen years, while he was also writing the transitional poems in *The Drunk in the Furnace*, Merwin did several ambitious translations from Spanish and French medieval texts: *The Poem of the Cid* (1959), *Spanish Ballads* (1961), and *The Song of Roland* (1963). These are exact and scholarly. The need to find near equivalents in English for the stylistic qualities of these more highly inflected and

Walking Home From The Raleigh Court Branch Public Library

I reach the first real page
Of John H. Watson's reminiscences
Who took his degree in 1878.
The year is 1949, and I have only
A mile to go. I am walking home.

Sometimes today I want to loosen out
Like a large flag, possibly orange,
In an early April wind, and do.
But more often I remember
Walking home where I can really settle in.

—R.H.W. DILLARD

assonantal languages compelled Merwin to develop a style in verse and prose quite unlike the baroque conceits and rhetorical complexity of his own poems.

I do not suggest that the great change in Merwin's own style is the result of his translations; what caused that change is of course something much more deeply felt than this. What I wish to establish here is that when Merwin once decided he must forego the extensive, referential, and complex formality of his own poems, he had already honed a spare, economical diction in his work on the medieval epics.

In theme and content these are all akin to Merwin's early poems, however different in language. All are mythic or historico-legendary poems of heroic journeys and quests. Of *The Cid* he wrote, "The vocabulary of *The Poema* is small; the language is simple, there is little ornament." The *Spanish Ballads* are fragments and remnants of courtly heroic poems, as remembered by wandering minstrels; in short, a folk poetry based on historical and epic materials. Their language, Merwin notes, "is the result of a highly developed poetic convention and of loving artifice, but it is simple, direct, precise; at its best it seems both inevitable and unexpected. The rhythm of the poems is sinewy and spare." For *The Song of Roland* he used prose, saying that "The qualities of the poem which finally claim me are all related to a certain limpidity not only in the language and the story but in the imagination behind them, to a clarity at once simple and formal . . ." Such qualities as these, at which he aimed in his translations, seem to me to describe pretty closely the stylistic features of the poems in *The Moving Target* and *The Lice*: the style of Late—or should we say Middle?—Merwin. These are also the qualities, as will appear, of many poems in *Selected Translations*; indeed I think many poems there were chosen because they either exhibited like qualities in the originals or lent themselves to such a style in English. But first let us see what sort of poems Merwin himself has been writing since about 1960, and make some conjectures about the radical shift in his poetic means.

On an early page in *The Moving Target* is "Noah's Raven," a neat contrast to "Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge":

Why should I have returned?
My knowledge would not fit into theirs.
I found untouched the desert of the unknown. . . .
Hoarse with fulfilment, I never made promises.

What a contradiction of the earlier poem. "Noah's Raven" abandons not only the formality, rhetoric, and extensiveness of "For a Masque of Deluge" but also its theme of the world's regeneration. Merwin's harbinger is now the raven, not the dove, and the shrinking waters reveal no fruitful land but "the desert of the unknown." This is the territory Merwin's poems have since been exploring, as on the last page, "Daybreak": "Again the procession of the speechless / Bringing me their words / The future woke me with its silence / I join the procession / An open doorway / Speaks for me / Again". By this point punctuation has atrophied: the mind is uttering disjoint incompletions, in seeming prose, a language that resists the ordering of grammar as well as cognitive similes.

"The Widow" in *The Lice* makes a similar contrast to the ebullient faith in imagination and metaphor given earlier in "East of the Sun." As at the end of that poem, the speaker broods on the moon:

The Widow rises under our fingernails
In this sky we were born we are born
. . . .
You grieve
Not that heaven does not exist here but
That it exists without us

Unlike Stevens, whose "Sunday Morning" lamented "this dividing and indifferent blue," Merwin has no consoling faith in reality. Its existence does not mitigate man's desolation, since "Everything that does not need you is real."

A longer poem, "The Last One," specifies what has so shaken this poet's sensibility that he can no longer use the inherited resources of language, meter, syntax, allusion, myth, and legend out of which poetry has hitherto been made, but must construct, seemingly out of his own unmediated experience among the broken pieces of the modern world, a new set of strategies for discovering and expressing his feelings. In "The Last One,"

The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
The night and the shadow put on the same head.
And it said Now.

Everybody—called "They"—acts by some mysterious compulsion to "cut everything because why not. / Everything was theirs because they thought so." But everything falls into the shadow on the water, leaving only the shadow, indestructible. When they try to destroy the shadow, it maims or destroys them. The telling of this legend relies heavily on the syntax of simplicity: each line is a declarative sentence, end-stopped. This world is made of discrete particulars which do not respond to the compound or complex machinations of the mind. The artful naiveté is an effort to treat the modern legend of the atom bomb as would a primitive medicine man. Our legend is destruction.

Books by William S. Merwin

POETRY:

A MASK FOR JANUS

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952. \$2.50.

London: Oxford, 1952. 16/

THE DANCING BEARS

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954. \$2.75.

Don Mills, Ontario: Burn and MacEachern, 1954. \$3.50.

GREEN WITH BEASTS

New York: Knopf, 1956. \$3.50.

London: Hart-Davis, 1956. 10/6.

Toronto: British Book Service, 1956. \$2.75.

THE DRUNK IN THE FURNACE

New York: Macmillan, 1960. \$1.25 (pa.).

London: Hart-Davis, 1960. 12/6

Toronto: British Book Service, 1960. \$3.00.

THE MOVING TARGET

New York: Atheneum, 1963. \$3.95; \$1.95 (pa.).

London: Hart-Davis, 1967. 21/

Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Ltd., 1963. \$5.00;

\$2.35 (pa.).

THE LICE

New York: Atheneum, 1967. \$4.50; \$1.95 (pa.).

TRANSLATIONS:

POEMA DEL CID

New York: Las Americas, 1960. \$5.00; \$2.50 (pa.).

Spanish text & Ramon Menendez Pidal with

English verse translation by Merwin.

With Title: POEM OF THE CID

Don Mills, Ontario: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1960,

\$3.25; 16/.

New York: New American Library Mentor Edition, 1962.

IN MEDIEVAL EPICS

New York: Modern Library, 1963. \$3.75.

Toronto: Random House, 1963. \$4.85.

SOME SPANISH BALLADS

New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1961. \$3.50; 12/6.

With Title: SPANISH BALLADS

New York: Doubleday, 1961. \$.95 (pa.).

THE SATIRES OF PERSIUS

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961. \$3.50.

Copp, 1961. \$4.00.

THE LIFE OF LAZARILLO DE TORMES, HIS FORTUNES AND ADVERSITIES

New York: Doubleday (Anchor A 316), 1962. \$.95 (pa.).

With Title: LIFE OF LAZARILLO DE TORMES, HIS FORTUNES AND ADVERSITIES

Magnolia, Mass: Peter Smith, 1964. \$3.00.

"THE SONG OF ROLAND" (IN MEDIEVAL EPICS)

New York: Modern Library, 1963. \$3.95.

Toronto: Random House, 1963. \$4.85.

—T.C.

Sometimes the literal truth requires the greatest imaginative courage. Believe this legend to the letter, and what avails our inherited culture, our classical myths, our poetic forms? It is not only that politics and society seem to have fallen apart and that intellect proves all futility; the nature of reality itself is in doubt. All that seems known is the evidence of the senses, minimally buttressed by vestigial memories of a cultural heritage no longer operative because in ruins. The poet as voyager can no longer be sure of his journey's goal: "I take the road that bears leaves in the mountains / I grow hard to see then I vanish entirely / On the peaks it is summer". The epigraph to *The Lice* quotes a fable by Heraclitus, who elsewhere tells us that all is mutable, nothing stays.

With his usual perspicacity, W. H. Auden, in his preface to Merwin's first book, commented not only on the usefulness of mythological allusions to a young poet who wished to extrapolate general statements from his own life, but also quoted Tocqueville's observations on the effect upon poetry of democratic institutions:

When skepticism has depopulated heaven . . . the poets . . . turned their eyes to inanimate Nature . . . [Yet] I am persuaded that in the end democracy diverts the imagination from all that is external to man, and fixes it on man alone. . . . The destinies of mankind—man himself, taken aloof from his age and his country, and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchedness—will become the chief, if not the sole theme of poetry among these nations.

Auden's prophecy for Merwin's career has indeed been borne out. But the fact that Tocqueville made it over a century ago, as a general statement of the effect upon the poetic imagination of the breakdown of traditional culture, may suggest that Merwin's direction is representative rather than unique, however distinctive his poems may seem among those of his American contemporaries. When we turn to his

Selected Translations we can see that this is the case, for he has naturally chosen to translate poets whose responses to the twentieth century are not unlike his own. For instance, fifteen years ago in Chile, Nicanor Parra published *Poems and Antipoems*, including these lines from "The Tunnel," in Merwin's close translation:

In my youth I lived for a time in the house of some aunts . . .
At the beginning I ignored their telegrams
And their letters composed in the language of another day,
Larded with mythological allusions
And proper names that meant nothing to me
Some referring to sages of antiquity
Or minor medieval philosophers
Or merely to neighbors of theirs.

Parra's three "aunts" may well be the Muses. "I saw everything through a prism / In the depths of which the images of my aunts intertwined like living threads," making his hurting eyes "more and more useless." In the end he kicks all that, finding how much his aunts had imposed on him. Luckily, he has a sense of humor.

III

A book of diverse translations raises several questions for its readers. Thus far—and I'm not yet through with the topic—I have been considering how Merwin's versions relate to his own poems, thematically and stylistically. But how do the translations relate to each other? And why do we want to read poetry in translation anyway? For such a book I have several hopes. One is to meet poets I do not know who write in languages with whose traditions I am familiar. One likes to be introduced to poets in languages he knows who write in a style, or use conventions, which he has never met before. It is good, also, to meet the poetry of languages of which we

William S. Merwin

Born in 1927 in Pennsylvania, Mr. Merwin is a graduate of Princeton where he majored in Romance languages. After his graduation he spent several years as a tutor in France, Spain and Portugal, before going to England where his early reputation as a poet was made.

In 1954 he received a Kenyon Review Fellowship for Poetry and in 1956-57 he had an appointment as playwright-in-residence at the Poet's Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He received an American Academy of Arts and Letters fellowship in 1957. His poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Harper's* and *The Sewanee Review*.

—T.C.

are ignorant, and to encounter the poetry of cultures totally different from our own. (Merwin has relied on French or Spanish versions of most of his primitive dialects, and worked with native speakers of Vietnamese and Russian.)

Of the resulting translations we must require that they make their own way as poems in their own right, finding in English whatever effects or conventions are analogous to those in the original which the differences in language don't allow the translator to reproduce. How close need he keep to his texts? One can't hand down bulls, but an empirical rule I find sensible is this: When the original is from an easily available language (like French) the translator had better be as close to the original as he can, especially when the poet's work is already familiar. When the original is from an exotic source or a language whose conventions have no close analogues in English, the translator's job is to make an effective poem out of his materials, as Pound did with Fenellosa's rambling transliterations from Cathay.

As I've said, the first third of Merwin's book is given to archaic, remote, and primitive materials. Some of these exotic poems seem to be sources or analogues to poems of his own. His *Destruction Myth* in "The Last One" seems an inversion of "The Creation of the Moon," a legend of the Caxinua Indians of Brazil. On the other hand, "The Enchanted Princess," reprinted from *Spanish Ballads*, is a truncated folktale version of the key motif in his earlier poem, "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." But most of the primitive poems are not so directly linked to poems of his own. They are, however, like many of Merwin's, evocations of wonder. I feel grateful to him for letting me know such a poem as this anonymous, untitled Eskimo verse:

Into my head rose
the nothings
my life day after day
.
.
.
But only one thing
is great
only one
This

In the hut by the path
to see the day
coming out of its mother
and the light filling the world

We might not otherwise meet this poem by the contemporary Blas de Otero, called "On This Earth":

What kills me
is my
chest.

(Chest
shaped like
Spain.)

Get lots of air, the doctor
told me, lots of ai—

—OK, where.

Or another poet new to me, Pierre Delisle:

Voice closed like a lamp
The mother of memory
Says:

I give you my daughter
I give you memory

You will both be lost
You will be absent

As long as she lives with you

It will be observed that the primitive poem above is a celebration, but the contemporary poems are laments. In a general way this characterizes most of these translations. But is it likely that an Eskimo would use the broken phrasings and unpunctuation of a contemporary French—or American—poet? I suspect that any such bard in his igloo would, like all other primitive poets, use mnemonic devices, some principle of repetition whether of sound, phrase, or word, in a poem to be chanted. Such verse is a whisper in the ear of the gods, a part of magic. Merwin's version reads rather like a modern image poem, perhaps because based on a French intermediary version. But since we lack the Eskimo's religious certitude, we may not be able believably to recapture his rhythms (whatever they were). The image may be what in his poem is most viable for us.

If de Otero and Delisle also seem to read a bit like Late Merwin, this is not to suggest that that one tone runs everywhere. Merwin has arranged his contents in roughly chronological order, but as he gives also the dates of his translations, another ordering can be tried out on the contents. His earliest version is "Dedication of a Mirror to Venus" by a member of the Pléiade, Baïf. This ten-liner could have sprung from

A *Mask for Janus*, with its mythological allusions in baroque metered phrasing. Well, that's all right too, a man can but use as best he may what instruments he has on what materials most interest him. A decade later Merwin was deep in Spanish balladry, and here the language is spare and direct, as he said it was: "So that I may weep for my sons / One by one, every day / She has her men throw / Seven stones at my window."

At about this time (1958) he worked in nineteenth century French and in Latin, with varied results. His Catullus seems to be an effort to use the spare diction of the Spanish style. With "Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus," the result is not successful for the reader who approaches the poem with memories of the cadenza versions by Ben Jonson and Campion. Although smoothed into iambic pentameters, the verse trots on pony feet. But see how resourcefully Merwin renders this quatrain from Apollinaire: "Les mains dans tes mains restons face à face / Tandis que sous / Le pont de nos bras basse / Des éternels regards l'onde si lasse." Merwin reads,

Hands within hands we stand face to face
While underneath
The bridge of our arms passes
The loose wave of our gazing which is endless
(*"The Mirabeau Bridge"*)

His assonantal endings even suggest the original rhyme.

But Merwin, unlike William Meredith, does not translate all of *Alcools*: only this one poem, and another from *Calligrammes*. Merwin cares little for the already familiar. Instead he gives us seven poems by a little-known imagist, Jean Follain (b. 1903). All are epiphanies of despair, as in these lines from "Solitaires":

they watch for a moment
the ornate lamp
hanging from the black ceiling
a spotted green plant dying
mourns for a lost child
under the vast low sky
then at last it snows

Such poems as this and the other contemporary examples quoted above are the murmurings of bruised sensibilities. The range of possible emotion is circumscribed in them by unexplained wounds. Blas de Otero's poem about the pain in his chest is more explicit: society is the wound. This wound appears in other poems, specifically or allusively referring to politics. But the wound may be a personal one, as in Neruda, whose verses wrap death and lost loves in a tumult of images—

Do not call me: that is my occupation.
Do not ask my name or my condition.
Leave me in the middle of my own moon
in my wounded ground.
(*"The Waltz"*)

Perhaps the final test of a collection of diverse translations is this: However closely or not the themes of the poems comport with those of the translator, however faithfully or freely he has rendered the originals in English, can we tell the translated poets apart in his versions? Although I have found many resemblances in *Selected Translations* to Merwin's own attitudes to experience and to the styles he has used to express them, I find that his translations on the whole do not homogenize the individuality of the original poets. Let me quote again:

And in the fond confusion, uncertain where to begin,
the soul does not recognize the transparent woods.
She breathes on the mirror and she still clutches
the copper wafer, the fee for the misty crossing.

Where are you now and why so far
do we shine brightly for you
the accordionist's on a vodka cure
for his clap caught in the civil war

No the lost Russia will not be silenced
on all sides the rot feeds a wild courage
oh Russia my Russia
rising in Asia

I think no one would take all three quatrains for the work of the same poet. In the first, Merwin has caught the deliquescence of Mandelstam's symbolist manner, the sad ironies and languorous movement in which the mythological reference crystallizes the introspective drama. The language in Esenin's poem, from which the next eight lines are taken, is much more violent, the rhythms abrupt and broken, the attack on a corrupt society direct, the sensibility attuned outward toward society.

Here, in a poem by Brodsky (translated, as were the foregoing, with the help of Olga Carlisle), Merwin conveys this poet's blending of Esenin's social consciousness with Mandelstam's subjectivity:

They go to work every morning,
mix cement, haul stones,
build the city . . . No, they erect
a monument to their own solitude.
They recede as we disappear from the memory
of someone else, they keep in step beside words,
with their three tenses in line,
the verbs climb the hill of Golgotha.

Recently convicted of being a "social parasite," Iosip Brodsky in "The Verbs" broods at once on industrial Communism, on language, and on Heaven. That constitutes a dangerous course in a culture committed to the Heaven of the Now. Solitude inevitably proves seditious. The translation may not be an exact analogue of Brodsky in Russian (I wouldn't know about that), but one certainly wouldn't confuse Merwin's Brodsky with his other poets, Russian or whatever.

Since *A Mask for Janus*, Merwin has journeyed far. These translations, done over twenty years, have helped him both to pay his bills and to find his way. His own work must be the result, among other things, of a profitable colloquy between his sensibility and that of the poets he has studied so closely in order to translate them. Although in his present phase he says, in poem after poem, that the past is vanished, the present threatened, the future inconceivable, the confidence with which he leaves behind him the pages from the diary of his dolorous voyage make me think he really does resemble, more than he may admit, "A Woodcutter on His Way Home":

Here and there little breezes stir the rushes.
At dusk the birds hurry as though they were lost.
Loaded with wood he moves slowly homeward.
He moves slowly, knowing the way.

(Anonymous, Vietnamese)

—DANIEL HOFFMAN

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