An Online Interview With W. S. Merwin Essay, Research Paper

from Artful Dodge

Daniel Bourne: Your poem on Berryman last night was interesting. It seemed

rather un-Merwinlike, a very traditional focus, little elliptical movement. Is this a kind

of departure, something new, or a return to the roots of an earlier literature, with that

kind of poem?

W.S. Merwin: I have no idea. I don’t have any ideological sense of what is

Merwinlike or un-Merwinlike. I’m always happy to find I’m writing a poem which is

different from anything I’ve written before, but I don’t think you can really write out a

paradigm. To be surprised is to find new directions and new regions you haven’t been into

yet, to be surprised by your own writing,that’s what I would always be hoping for.

DB: Does that poem surprise you more than any other poem you’ve written

recently?

Merwin: No. I don’t feel that very much about my own writing. I very much don’t

want to repeat myself or imitate myself or find myself doing something I’ve already done

before. If anything feels as if that’s what’s happening, then I try to move away from it.

DB: Do you see yourself coming from any springboard as a poet or translator? Did

you start with any firs principles or how long was it until they developed?

Merwin: Probably very few first principles. I started out realizing I didn’t

know very much and still don’t know very much. At some distance, translation obviously has

always been of great importance to writing to me. I went to see Ezra Pound when I was

nineteen or so. He told me something that I think I really already knew. He said that it

was important to regard writing as not a chance or romantic or inspired, (in the

occasional sense) thing, but rather a kind of spontaneity which arises out of discipline

and continual devotion to something; and translation is a way of keeping one close to what

one is doing, to the possibilities of one’s own language. I don’t translate very much

anymore but for years I tried to translate all the time, a certain amount, and just how

that’s affected my writing, I don’t know. I didn’t try to imitate while I was translating

or anything like that. The familiarity with one’s medium, a familiarity with language and

with the practical details of dealing with tension and language which come out of

translating- I think are of great importance to me in writing. What I’ve chosen to

translate is as much a matter of affinity that I recognize as I went along as it is an

influence on what I actually wrote. I’m sure it’s worked both ways, but I haven’t tried to

follow it. Just as I don’t really theorize much about my own writing, I don’t even pay too

much analytical attention to it. What I’m really interested in is not what I’ve written

but what I haven’t written, the next poem, if there is one. I don’t know if there is a

next one. It’s the part that doesn’t know that I believe it comes from, if it comes at

all. I don’t do it by forming an idea of what the next poem is supposed to be or what kind

of poem it’s supposed to be or where it’s supposed to go, or anything of the kind.

DB: Are you afraid that there won’t be another poem?

Merwin: I feel that it’s quite possible there won’t be another one. I hope there

will be. But I don’t understand people who can program themselves to the point where they

can predict another one. Of course, you can sit down after years of discipline and years

of writing and you can write a poem. What kind of poem is it going to be if it is as

deliberate as that? I don’t want to sound spooky or romantic about it either. I think that

the sitting down and trying to write is terribly important, the regularity with which one

works. If you do try to write regularly, you will notice that the results are irregular.

There are times when you just can’t stop writing. Everything contributes to it. I suspect

that everything is contributing to it all the time but there are long periods when it

seems very hard to put words together that are at all satisfactory, that are doing what

you want them to do. These things come in waves or cycles.

DB: You said that translation seems to be able to serve as that disciplinary

force.

Merwin: An example, I guess, of what I’m saying is that in the late fifties,

after The Drunk in the Furnace, there was a period when I knew perfectly well I

wasn’t going to write for awhile. There wasn’t anything I could write that didn’t seem to

me to be simply a continuation of what I’d been writing before. I didn’t want to do that.

It seems to me that I had to come to the end of a way of doing something. And ten when I

began to write again, I wrote about half of The Moving Target in a few weeks.

DB: You said that you translated those works towards which you felt a strong

affinity. I noticed that your translations of Jean Follain and Antonio Porchia are

definitely not the broad cultural works you translated earlier. (Merwin: Those were

done in the mid-Sixties, too.) Is there some kind of movement from the broader appeal…?

Merwin: No, in most cases they were people whom I found and they weren’t very

well known. Antonio Porchia wasn’t know at all in this country. I found a not very

satisfactory French translation of him by accident. That led me to write off and get the

Spanish original. I took to carrying it around wherever I went. I was fascinated by

Antonio Porchia. Since I couldn’t remember some of the Spanish aphorisms I found myself

making little notes in English in the margins, which I could remember for reference. These

gradually turned into translations and I found I had translated about half the book. That

was how I did the Porchia. Again, there was no schematic or programmed view of what I

should be doing. This is one of the problems with a lot of literary history. Critics tend

to assume that writers work out some sort of program for themselves, that it (writing) is

much more calculated than it is. If it’s any good, talent or the gift of somebody is an

urgency, a moving force, and all one can do is try to direct it, and hope that it stay

there, and keep it fed and alive, and alert, awake… I don’t know much about fiction

writers, of course. My small experience with writing with the theater is rather different.

But with all of them, I think there is a great, I almost said blindness, a movement that

begins out of what you don’t know rather than what you think you should be doing next.

It’s not some kind of intellectually calculated program that you conform to. Faulkner says

in several places that The Sound and the Fury really began with an image in his

mind of that little girl’s wet panties as she was climbing down out of the apple tree. The

whole novel came out of this image. Where did this image come from? Heaven knows…

Faulkner’s own imagination. But the image was first and the whole thing rose out of that.

I think if it is too calculated there’s something fishy about it (writing). Frost says

that about individual poems. If you know too much about a poem to begin with, you’ll

probably write a phony poem. I think there is a danger in writing a lot of so-called

political poetry. I said yesterday I think all poetry is political. But most political

poetry doesn’t turn out to be poetry in the long run because you have double-guessed about

it too much to begin with, you know too much about it. You know what it’s supposed to be

saying, apart from the poem itself, what it’s message is going to be. If it arises out of

a real feeling for rage or oppression or something that’s close to visceral experience,

then it saves itself, it becomes a real poem, a piece of propaganda.

DB: You speak so much about sound. Is that the basic unit you strive to

transpose in translation? Do you think it’s more important than metaphor?

Merwin: I think that’s one place where I do believe in being calculating and

programmed in translation… deciding what aspect it is of translation that one really

wants to make in the new language. I think that it is very seldom sound. I think usually

the sound itself is pretty obvious although it’s missed again and again by both critics

and translators. I think really the sound is part of the original language just I think

the sound plus the form is part of the original language and all the association that go

with it. What one can try to transpose is the role of the sound. What is the

function of the sound? How important is it? What does it do to the effect, the power of

the poem? I see if I can remake that function in the translation.

DB: How close do you think translation of syntax is tied up with translation of

sound?

Merwin: I don’t know that there is an answer to that because it depends wholly

on whom you’re translating. In the original, sound and syntax are inseparable, if you’re

translating a really accomplished and interesting first-degree magnitude poet. But in

translation, they’re bound to be separate because the sound is part of the original

language and the role of the syntax in the original language is not the same as the

language into which you’re translating. But it’s related to the value of translating as an

exercise, I think. The ability to have some kind of flexibility of syntax, to recognize

the enormous importance of the different syntactical ways of trying to say something, each

of which is slightly different, is something that’s being lost sight of, I think, in the

educational system. Students come to the point where they think they want to write and

they have very little syntactical experience, very little dramatic education. They reach a

certain point where they feel there’s only one way of saying anything. The obvious way,

the way one is used to saying it, may not be the right way of saying it. Unless there’s

been a real education in the grammar of your language, translation helps you to finish

your education. Otherwise, the choices that are opened to you are much more limited and

you feel they are the only choices. That’s to bad. It means you can hear only a few

choices, that your ear is closed off to all kinds of possibilities. I don’t know the

answer to this. It’s right there in the educational system and in the fact that English is

taught so badly now. It goes along with the way vocabulary is getting imprecise, not just

in our speech but in our writing. The example I was using is where "convinced"

is used more and more often when the person really means "persuaded." "I

convinced him to take the afternoon plane rather than the other one." What the person

means is, "I persuaded him to take the afternoon plane."

DB: In a way then, the acquisition of good syntax and varied ways of saying

something is almost as important as the image.

Merwin: Well, it’s a tool. It’s like trying to be a fine carpenter when your

only hammer is a six-pound sledge and you have a cold chisel. You’re going to have a hell

of a time, you’re handicapped. I think this is related to the matter of the life of the

language coming our of colloquial speech. In real vernacular, in real colloquial speech,

there’s always the energy of the language and we know of contemporaries, critics, and

writers, who insist that one must have the colloquial and not the formal or that one must

have the control of the form that the colloquial line is put in. I think these are poles

which make the tension in which the language operates and the literature can be written.

You can’t let go of either one without the tension just all disappearing, one must honor

them both, absolute energy of colloquial speech, as long as it has not been totally

debased by debasing uses of it, such as advertising, communal abstractions, committee

English, and things of that kind, and on the other hand, the honoring of the tradition of

the language itself and its formal possibilities. They’re both assumptions of the life of

the language, into the life of what we can write in the language.

DB: When translating Lazarillo de Tormes, were you seeking an idiom, and

what do you think of rendering local color in translations?

Merwin: I wasn’t trying to imitate or invent any particular locality. I think in

some ways it was one of the most difficult translations I ever did. It led me to realize

the importance of translating comedy. Translation of comedy is one of the great

disciplines I know of. Because if you are translating jokes, for example, if you get

anything wrong, nothing works. You have to get it absolutely right. Then you realize that

all translating is really that way. With Lazarillo de Tormes, I was trying to get

that. These are several things happening. This was a very literate man who wrote Lazarillo,

and that’s very evident in the book but also he’s writing in the voice of a fully-formed

and funny character, a kind of much harder, much more difficult Huckleberry Finn. It’s

sort of the original form from which the other picaresque people descended later. I

imagine Huckleberry Finn, is certainly in this tradition, whether Mark Twain was

aware of any of the others or not. I certainly wasn’t trying to make him sound like

Huckleberry Finn but there’s a real closeness between those two characters.

DB: Did that book come before Boccacio’s Decameron ?

Merwin: No, I don’t think so. The Decameron was earlier.

DB: I thought there was a lot of picaresque in that book.

Merwin: But’s there’s no single character. Lazarillo is the original

picaresque because it’s the original role-hero going from episode to episode. The only

continuity is one character who goes from one episode to another. I think it’s one of the

first books in literature which actually does that and has a character who, by the

standards of the society around him is a rogue, in all senses a rogue. He’s an outsider

and an oddball. Lazarillo is also a very winning and touching character, I think, very

funny. The whole book is full of those ironies which Cervantes uses not so very long

afterwards in Don Quixote, which are also virtually intranslatable. The subtlety of

Cervantes’ irony is one of the things that is lost in translation. I wasn’t trying to make

him sound like Huck Finn or something like that. He had to sound like a child, very

intelligent, very straight, a very courageous and funny child.

DB: Do you feel that maybe the key in translating that book was the voice?

Merwin: Absolutely.

DB: You mentioned last night about the heavy impact of reading Czeslaw Milosz’s The

Captive Mind. Why do you think that during a period like the Sixties (which was very

political), the book did not really get any attention?

Merwin: I simply don’t know. I think that the only theory that I have about it

is that Milosz was so critical of the Communist world and there was a great deal of

leftist sympathy in the Sixties. For example, the SDS-oriented people felt that Milosz was

right-wing just as many Marxists felt about Camus and The Rebel. I’ve always felt

that this was wrong, I mean in the sense of being incorrect. There’s a kind of outlawry

that I have been drawn to all my life which is not doctrinaire, which is neither right nor

left. In fact, it’s opposed to them both. Every time I come back toward a political

stance, I never stay in one very long because every time I move toward one I tend to

partake of that anarchy, a suspicion of all their houses. That’s the only explanation I

can think of as to why Milosz was not accepted more widely and was not read more widely in

the Sixties. I don’t remember when The Captive Mind was published, 1958, 1959,

somewhere along in there. I know some of my friends read it and were excited about it at

the time and it just seemed to disappear. I think it went out of print, too. It’s been out

of print for a long time because I’ve tried to get copies of it for my friends and

couldn’t find it.

DB: The Seventies seemed a time of political relaxation, or at least part of it

did. Was it for you? Do you think your poetry seemed to turn away a bit…?

Merwin: It depends on what you mean by politics. If you mean concern with the

manipulation of human beings by other human beings, if you want to define it that way, you

could say that’s true. I was trying to say last night that what’s happening to the world,

what organized human activity is doing to the world, is that same thing it’s doing to

language and culture around us and to other cultures, to other people and species. The

natural world, as a whole, is all the same thing and to me it’s all political. One picks

it up where one feels most strongly and most immediately about it. Sometimes I feel more

immediately concerned with what’s happening to the elements, the sea, the animals, the

language, than I do with any particular society. I don’t make a distinction. The poisoning

of the soil, the imminence of nuclear disaster, are absolutely the same thing. You shut

your eyes and you open them and you’re staring at the same thing but the form of it looks

different. Here you are at a different movie but it’s all the same thing.

DB: Do you think you are influenced or have any sort of affinity for Robinson

Jeffers?

Merwin: It’s been a long time since I read him and I may be very unfair and I

love some of Robinson Jeffers. But there seemed to me to be a kind of relishing of his

misanthropy, a kind of hugging to himself of a bitterness which really, I thought, in the

long run, was egocentric, feeling very superior to the world around him, to the human

race, a real kind of hatred of it. I don’t feel close to that at all. I certainly feel it

with a sense of elation or relief, but one of great sadness, a feeling that if I stay

there it would be a kind of moral defeat. One really has to find a way to move out of

there. One doesn’t stay in nihilism, I think.

DB: In many ways, both of you seem to be dealing with the same thing or the same

perspective, but that you’re both attacking in completely different ways.

Merwin: The one thing I feel close to is his sense of our self-importance as a

species, which I think is one of the things which is strangling us, our own bloated

species-ego. The assumption that human beings are different in kind and in importance from

other species is something I’ve had great difficulty in accepting for 25 years or so. To

me, it’s a dangerously wrong way of seeing things. I think that our importance is not

separable from the importance of all the rest of life. If we make the distinction in a too

self-flattering way, if we say we are the only kind of life that’s of any importance, we

automatically destroy our own importance. Our importance is based on a feeling of

responsibility and awareness of all life, the fact that we are a part of the entire

universe and our importance is not different from the importance of the rest of the

universe. We’re not in that way the only valuable and interesting thing to have appeared

in the universe.

DB: Would you answer the criticism that’s been leveled about there not being any

people in your poems with the fact that this perspective on your work might arise out of

Anne Sexton-Sylvia Plath analysis-type poetry?

Merwin: I don’t know where it comes from. I can see where it comes from in some

of the poems, I suppose. It seems to me that people who make the criticisms have been

reading other critics rather than reading the poet, generally. Are there any people in

poems like "Western Wind" or "Ode to Melancholy"? Are there

people-less poems? A poem that is made of human language and human perception and refers

to human experience has people in it, I think. Whether it has drama in it, whether there

are people in the third person is another matter. I think the first and second person are

more common in my poems, probably, than the third person. This may be what whoever it was

who first said that had in mind. Do you think there are people in the poems?

DB: One of my favorite poems of yours is "A Letter From Gussie." That

has people in it. I think it’s a very clever and human poem. So I really don’t agree with

the criticism at all. But I’d like to switch over to talking about the genre confusion

that’s going on now in poetry and prose and what you have said about it. Recently I was

re-reading William Burroughs’ Naked Lunch and I sensed that he was consciously

taking the narrative further away from poetry even though he used poetic diction. I was

wondering if you could say some more of things you did last night about how you’re trying

to separate the narrative from the poetry.

Merwin: I wasn’t suggesting that narrative is anti-poetic at all. I don’t even

think of prose as being anti-poetic. What I was suggesting is that I think that the more

imaginative intensity there is in poetry or in prose the more it calls in question the

difference between poetry and prose, so that if you get a great deal of intensity in

prose, rhythms begin to emerge, powerful rhythms, and various things happen in the texture

so that people begin to say it’s poetic, whatever they mean by that. If there’s great

intensity in poetry, sometimes it leads toward a rhetorical thickening of texture, but

sometimes it drives the poetry toward a greater and greater surface simplicity so that it

begins to seems almost like prose. The example that I was giving was Dante–an enormous

freight of meaning and experience and enormous intensity. As Eliot said somewhere, if you

imitate Shakespeare, you’re going to get inflated, but if you imitate Dante the worst

thing that’s going to happen is that it may sound a little flat. I’m trying to say that

from either side great intensity follows this shifting, this undefinable boundary in

question. What is the difference between poetry and prose? You can make a definition but

it’s not going to be applicable forever in all circumstances. This confusion arises out of

the fact that the old categories are getting in the way rather than helping to direct and

to provide energy. I don’t mean that I think there are never going to be categories but

we’re going to have to remake them, or else they’re going to form themselves again.

DB: I guess what I was trying to get at was the decisions you made back twenty

years or so when you evolved the absence of punctuation and you were doing things that

tried to make your work more poem-like.

Merwin: I was trying to do things that I suppose poets always try to do. I was

trying to write more directly, and in that sense more simply. One of the ironies of that

was there were critics who immediately and for a long time called poetry hopelessly

obscure. They thought it was simply willfully obscure and that I was trying to write

incomprehensible poetry. I was really trying to make it more direct but at the same time

more inclusive, to make it contain more experience and to transmit it more directly in

words and do it in a way that carried more of the cadences of pure language, of speech.

DB: Were there any poetics that you can think of behind why you started using

what I call the "gapped-line"?

Merwin: You mean just a few years ago? Yes, we were talking about that

yesterday. I realized that the predecessor, not even the predecessor (I think of it as the

subterranean tradition) of English prosody is the Middle English line that was over laid

at the time of Chaucer, by Chaucer, a great genius who brought this Romance meter into

English and did it so brilliantly and beautifully. It became the classical meter of

English. But is is an importation and I think Middle English line is absolutely native to

English and it’s been there all along. I think that it is even deeper and older than that.

I think it is a manifestation of a parallelism that is the basic structure of verse in

most languages that I know anything about. I was simply trying to pick that up and use it

in a way that would make it available to me and possibly suggest to others that this was

every bit as native to our language and consequently as legitimately useful to us as

iambic pentameter, which is rather a weary form when most people use it nowadays. It

carries a terrible freight of habit, of mere habit, although I think that students should

read an awful lot of it and write an awful lot of it to start, to be able to master it, to

be able to hear it, to be able to talk it if they have to. Otherwise these bits of the

tradition are liable to come as ghosts and use us rather than our using them. Stevenson

used to complain about that, that he couldn’t write prose without its being filled with

iambic pentameter.

(Transcribed by Don Boes)

The Editors at Artful Dodge debated for quite a while on whether to present

the full text of these interviews on our web page, or to give only brief taste of each

interview, hoping that you would send us$5.00 for a back issue in order to finish it.

Luckily, we decided to err on the side of literature. But, if you enjoy these interviews

and would like to have a part in supporting us s that we can continue to publish new

interviews just as fascinating, not to mention intriguing new poetry and fiction, please

subscribe or order a back issue by sending $5.00 to the same address. Thank you for

supporting us and helping us continue ou mission to publish fresh, illuminatingwork.

—The Editors of Artful Dodge

from Artful

Dodge.

350