

Why Poets Translate

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS COLUMN

Ghazals of Ghalib, edited by Aijaz Ahmed. Oxford India Paperbacks, 1994. 174 pages. Rs 150.

Selected Translations, W. S. Merwin. Copper Canyon Press, 2013. 406 pages. \$40.

Collected Translations, David Wevill. Tavern Books, 2014. 168 pages. \$17.

IF THE NUMBER OF TIMES THAT I HAVE lost a book by lending it out and then ended up buying it again is any indication of its true worth, then the most expensive volume on my bookshelf is definitely *Ghazals of Ghalib*, edited by Aijaz Ahmed. I first came across it while backpacking through India after college in 1998, the year of the book's fourth printing. The weight of bound paper is the opposite of what you want on such a journey. But I was so intrigued that I had to buy it, and I ended up carrying it on my back for the good part of a year. Although I couldn't have articulated it at the time, I was captivated by what the book had to say, in its very conception, about the instability of the text.

Originally published in 1971, *Ghazals of Ghalib* presents for each poem multiple translations done by such notable American poets as W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, and Mark Strand. "We started, from the outset, with the premise that there is no one right way of translating a poem," Ahmed writes in his introduction. "One translation may capture what another misses and both be, in different ways, good translations." By good translations he means good poetry written by poets rather than scholars of Urdu. With this approach, the book rejects the idea that there is a definitive translation of a poem in favor of creating "an intense impression of Ghalib's mind and moral universe" through the accumulation of different approximations for any given poem.

And how different they are! Take the opening couplet of Ghazal XXI:

There's meaning in the teardrop that blurs the
red eye of the poppy:
the heart that knows its flaw understands the
need for concealment.

(trans. Adrienne Rich)

Dewdrop on poppy petal
there for a reason

in that place the cruelty of her heart can be
concealed only by one of her own tears

(trans. W. S. Merwin)

Dew on a flower—tears, or something:
hidden spots mark the heart of a cruel woman.

(trans. William Stafford)

Clearly these three poets each hear a very distinct music and also interpret the poem differently, especially in relation to the idea stated in the second line. Stafford's description of "hidden spots" on a cruel heart is not as self-reflexive as Rich's coming to understand "the need for concealment" because of those flaws. Merwin's version, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of tears to make up for or conceal the blemish of cruelty. The variations convince me that, in the best of all worlds, we would have multiple versions of

anything we read in translation in order to draw nearer to the "mind and moral universe" of a poet.

I have ended up lending *Ghazals of Ghalib* out so many times because it is a powerful demonstration of how much the translation of a poem can vary. It speaks more loudly than anything I can say here to put to rest the idea that a definitive translation is even possible. A poem is a mutable thing, and each occasion enriches it—just as variations of the original enrich and alter our understanding of it when we see the poem written out longhand, hear the poem read aloud, read the poem anthologized, encounter the poem with lexical notes. Each occasion adds another layer, another reading, which is what any given translation offers.

As such, there are indeed rich readings and poor readings. The translator not only needs to understand the foreign language, its sonic texture and idioms, the poetics of the period, and the author's pertinent biography but also the literary tradition of the translation language, its sonic possibilities, genres, and so forth. All of this begs the perennial question of whether one needs to be a poet to translate poetry. Simply put, I would say yes, inasmuch as one needs to be a good writer to translate anything—which doesn't have to correlate with whether one is publishing original writing as well. Being a poet oneself helps immensely, though, especially in relation to the later necessities of understanding the realm of the translation language.

But I am even more interested in the question of why poets choose to translate in the first place. Given the difficulty of finding time to write amidst the demands of making a living—which, you will find if you look into it, many of our poets who were able to find success didn't actually have to do—why devote your energies to translation? Even more so, if there is no such thing as a definitive translation, why toil away at the tedious process of weighing each word choice to bring someone else's poetry to light in another language if your version will only be compared to or supplanted by another version?

W. S. Merwin's *Selected Translations* gives us a dynamic answer. Such a collection is a rare and rather strange thing that makes an unusual request of the reader: look to this book not just for the foreign element but for the Merwin element. In other words, any type of selected or collected translations is built on the premise that we want to understand what brought that particular poet-translator to the table and what makes his or her versions distinct. If this is a kind of anthology, it is a highly idiosyncratic one that highlights not just Merwin's personal affections and professional commissions but also those single lines and phrases that called him to keep returning to what he dubs "this unfinishable art."

Merwin is known for his long-standing commitment to translation spanning many decades, represented by two previously published selected translations for 1948–1968 and 1968–1978, which are included here along with a new selection for 1978–2011. Interestingly, the result is that this selection is bookended by one of the oldest texts, an anonymous Egyptian poem from the 20th century BC, and one of the newest, a poem by the contemporary Mexican author Alberto Blanco. In

between, we get such classics as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Catullus, and Dante; important voices of the last few centuries, such as Pablo Neruda and Osip Mandelstam; and everything in between. Well, actually, not everything. Glaringly absent are poems known to be by women (there are plenty of anonymous poems), save for four: one poem by Anne-Marie Kegels, one by an anonymous troubairitz (woman troubadour), and two by Ngo Chi Lan. In almost 400 pages of poetry, this doesn't account for much.

I find this quite problematic, especially given what Merwin has to say about the reasons he turned to translation in the first place. His great exemplar was Pound, whom he visited at St. Elizabeth's when Merwin was a nineteen-year-old college student. In speaking about poetry of the troubadours, Merwin recalls Pound saying, "The translation of it is not simple, but trying to do it will be the best teacher you will ever find. Translating will teach you your own language." Merwin reiterates this idea in the forewords to each of the three sections. "I began translating with the idea that it could teach me something about writing poetry," he says in the first foreword, by which he means embracing other perspectives and voices as a way to sharpen one's awareness of the possibilities of one's own language and tradition. In other words, as he puts it in the second foreword, the translation extends what the poet can hear in his or her own language. It is fundamentally a way of learning to hear.

So, what do we hear through Merwin's *Selected Translations*? Certainly not women's voices as important teachers of what poetry can be or as catalysts for stretching English to include something new. Don't get me wrong: I completely agree with Merwin's and Pound's ideas about what poets gain from translating. I just wish the sample was not biased in this way. That said, Merwin's linguistic range and willingness to embrace different methods of trying to hear poetry from a vast array of time periods across numerous traditions is, without a doubt, impressive. He is proficient in several Romance languages, namely French and Spanish, but his curiosity is certainly not confined to them; with the help of glosses, relay translations (from a language he doesn't know into a language he does know), and others' knowledge, he translates from Chinese, Eskimo, Japanese, Malay, Persian, Quechua, Swedish, and quite a number of other languages. The very breadth of his palate conveys a voracious appetite, and I, for one, enjoy sitting down to such an assorted feast.

Perhaps translation is most appealing for those poets who have this kind of insatiability. Merwin's version of Ghalib's Ghazal XXI, presented here in yet another variation, is a perfect demonstration of just how unfinishable the process can be for those who can't help but keep trying new flavors. In a very different version from the one in *Ghazals of Ghalib*, the opening reads:

Red poppy
a heart
an eye

one dewdrop on it
a tear

there to hide something

she is cruel
it leaves its mark

Merwin himself admits that his translations of Ghalib stray more than many of his other translations precisely because of the context in which they were initially presented, alongside other versions and a literal gloss with notes prepared by Ahmed. Knowing that his would be only one among a series of versions gave him a certain freedom. The slight oddity of any selected translations is that we lose such context that helps us evaluate the translation—after all, knowing how to approach a particular translation is largely contingent on understanding the intent behind it. Nor can we benefit from the biographical background and sustained attention given to the translation of a single author's work. We lose the original's context but gain the translator's voracity.

One of the ways in which Merwin consumes poems in translation is by transforming them into his particular kind of punctuationless prosody. "I have tended, at least part of the time, toward greater freedom from the original's verse conventions," Merwin writes in one of the forewords, "with a view to suggesting some vitality of the original in forms native to English." A perfect example of this is his translation of Michelangelo's poem 55:

Very dear though it was I have bought you
a little whatever-it-is for its sweet smell
since by the scent often I find the way
Wherever you are wherever I am
beyond all doubt I will be clear and certain
If you hid yourself from me I pardon you
Taking it always with you where you go
even if I were quite blind I would find you

Compare this to John Frederick Nims' version:

Though quite expensive, look, I've brought you this:
a little *je ne sais quoi*, sweet-smelling too.
Now I can sniff my way, and never miss
your door, wherever I am, wherever you
happen to be. No longer compassless!
Hide if you want—all right. Play peekaboo,
I'll find you. Just carry this wherever you're at
and I'd nose you out in a whiff, though blind as a bat.

How satisfying that opening line break is in Merwin's version as we first pause to take in the line unit, the declaration that "I have bought you," before continuing on to find a different direct object, "a little whatever-it-is." This kind of double reading is pure Merwin and also a characteristic of contemporary free verse lineation. As Denise Levertov once said, "There is at our disposal no tool of the poetic craft more important, none that yields more subtle and precise effects, as the linebreak if it is properly understood." The same kind of double reading occurs between the fourth and fifth lines, as the apo koinou construction causes us to read both "wherever I am" and also "I am beyond all doubt."

Clearly Nims' version privileges different things: form first and foremost, with strong rhyme, and a certain playfulness that doesn't really exist in Merwin's translation. Only by comparing the two do we begin to sense how much Merwin appropriates the poem to his own particular sound. As he puts it, "A poet-translator cannot write with any authority using someone else's way of hearing," which is precisely why it helps to have multiple translations of a poem to compare. The variations allow us not only to draw nearer to the poet's "mind and moral universe" but also the translator's sense of what words are all about, of poetic form, and of poetry in relation to the time that the translation comes into being.

David Wevill couldn't be more opposite from Merwin as a translator. Compared to the heft of Merwin's volume, Wevill's *Collected Translations* includes all of six poets (again no women) and is largely devoted to his renditions of Hungarian poet Ferenc Juhász's work. Unlike Merwin, he is far from forthcoming about his motivations and provides almost no reflection on the nature of translation as he sees it. We must glean his intent in the few sentences that he provides by way of introduction for each poet (though we do get the full introduction to his translation of Juhász's poetry published in 1970). Of San Juan de la Cruz's "The Dark Night" he explains that he was going for a "quieter, more lyrical version than the typical representations." He characterizes his translation of the one Baudelaire poem included here, "The Owl," as a "stripped down version of his elegantly formal original" and his Pindar translations as "much freer in form than the originals." That's about all we get.

I have to admit that I'd like a little bit more engagement by way of stated excitement for these particular authors and/or insights into the translation process. Reading between the lines, it's clear that Wevill feels a connection to the work of each poet. After all, it takes an extra measure of interest to approach translating from a language that you don't know, as is the case with Juhász and Pindar. And I assume that the translations of Alberto de la Cerda's work came about through their friendship as fellow professors at the University of Texas at Austin. Ultimately, his translations seem to be predicated on the fact that other translations already exist for many of these poems, which gives him the freedom to offer up his renditions in relation.

This works beautifully for his freer Pindar odes. I was particularly struck by a succinct yet amazingly powerful line from his translation of Pythian 3 compared to Anthony Verity's more plodding 2008 translation:

one spark can eat a forest
(trans. Wevill)

a fire that starts from one spark can destroy a forest.
(trans. Verity)

I find Wevill's version much more powerful and startling, with its synecdochic emphasis on one spark rather than a fire started from one spark and the unexpected action of eating rather than destroying. A difference in rhythm and tone also is apparent. Take this passage:

We must not ask
the gods
for more than we are, mortals
knowing our path, our fate
our human condition

Heart, do not ask
for immortal life
be what you are, beat
with the energy you were born with
on earth.

(trans. Wevill)

Men should seek from the gods only what is consistent with mortal minds,
knowing what lies before our feet, and the nature of our destiny.
Do not, my soul, long for an immortal life,
but make the most of what you can realistically achieve.

(trans. Verity)

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I have to admit that only through comparing the two do I come to really admire what Wevill has done here. He is able to bring the ancient text to life as poetry we can hear today.

Would such an approach be ethical if there weren't other versions available to fill in our understanding of the original form and tone? In the case of Wevill's translations of Ferenc Juhász's poetry, which he helped to introduce to the Anglophone world in 1970 when there were as yet no other translations, he seems to have taken fewer liberties with form. These poems are perhaps what brought him to translation. "I believe there can be strong affinities with poems that lie outside one's linguistic range and are therefore read in translation," Wevill comments in an interview in 2010, "more so even than within one's own linguistic culture. Which means that, aside from those affinities and kinships, a barrier of mystery and even ignorance remains." Though he

doesn't state it outright, he is drawn to Juhász's voice because of its mystery and difference in relation to other Eastern European poetry of the time. "Juhász is a poet at odds with his time," he writes in the introduction. "His weapons are not irony, allusion or insinuation, but energy, imagination, and a passionate 'Hungarian-ness' that he gets from his peasant background."

I would have to agree that these poems stand apart, insofar as I find myself less equipped to appreciate them. They make me painfully aware of how much I have come to expect a certain ironic awareness in poetry written after World War II. "Irony has become less part of a whole tonal range than a scrupulous inhibiting armor," Louise Glück writes in her introduction to Jay Hopler's *Green Squall*, "the disguise by which one modern soul recognizes another [. . .] Essential, at every moment, to signal that one knows one is not the first to think or feel what one thinks or feels." In-

terestingly, both Hopler and Juhász exude a kind of "natural wonder" that stands apart from such inauthenticity; Wevill compares it, in the case of the latter, to the paintings of Marc Chagall.

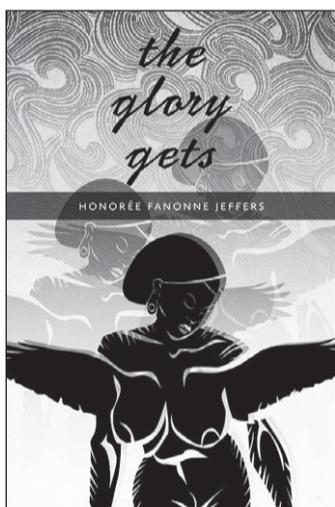
Once I relaxed into the poetry, I found Juhász's lack of armor refreshing. In the poem "The Tower of Rezi," the speaker effortlessly becomes a swallow in flight as he watches it through field glasses:

My eyes are glassy stalks,
they catch a swallow as it dips.
It is held in the glasses' lens,
trapped, in a fairytale glass tower.

The wonder of this magic spell—
modern wizardry!
It flies so near it's as if
its wings would flit through my pupils.

[. . .] My heart has become a bird,
put on feathers, grown wings—

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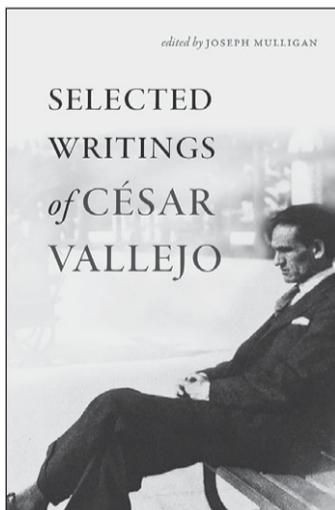
"This book is a miracle. The wisdom and the courage in these poems cuts straight into me. Jeffers is wrestling with what I thought I'd learned to put over there and call History, and she brings it back over here where I stand. It is alive. It watches me. How much of what we are and what we run from is caught—held, trapped, but also illuminated—by that gaze? These poems make clear how much we turn our backs to, trying to forget. This poet sings it beautifully and brutally back into being."

—Tracy K. Smith

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.



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Publication of this book is funded by the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation Fund at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

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I share
the soaring infinity of the bird.

Most wonderful, wonderful flight!
Joy, pain, sweetness, tears.
The circling heart feels no boundaries,
each curve brings it nearer to heaven.

When the bird finally “breaks from the path of the lens,” the speaker is left with his isolation, not in a self-conscious way but in a moment of intensified awareness of his own fragility.

There is wonderful music throughout these translations, especially in one of the most politically engaged poems, “A Church in Bulgaria,” in which a heap of bones is described as being “like a hayrick pitched over stakes out on a lake” and the action proceeds with a strong iambic lilt as “drop by drop he filled the stone communion cup with blood.” The world of these poems—if not the style of the verse—reminds me of Patrick Kavanagh’s unvarnished portrait of peasant life, especially in Juhász’s long poem “The Boy Changed into a Stag Clamors at the Gate of Secrets.” However, as the title alone suggests, there is more fairytale and magic here.

Speaking of which, both of these books ultimately demonstrate how the translation of poetry takes a kind of empirical alchemy that is not wholly explicable. We can’t deny such alchemy when we are able to compare different translations of the same original. Both Merwin’s *Selected Translations* and Wevill’s *Collected Translations* present very rich readings of the poets whose work most engaged them—as poets. They succeed precisely because they allow the originals to be transformed into their own poetry to some degree—into their own way of hearing, as Merwin would put it—and we are right to approach this work a bit out of context and in part as poetry written by them.

It surprises me how often translations and, by extension, translators are not approached in this way. In my own experience of giving readings alongside the poet whose work I translate, I have learned that, sadly, I have to remind organizers that I too should be introduced, that I too have a biography. It’s not that I want the attention. But it’s important to remind readers that translators have personalities and predilections that affect the ways in which they go about translating. Perhaps presenting selected and collected translations helps push back against this tendency. It provides a platform for translators to talk about what they do and why they do it.

In my ongoing quest to find such volumes, I would love to hear about any selected or collected translations that you have found engaging, which you can tell me about at www.mirarosenthal.com/contact. ◀

MIRA ROSENTHAL is the author of the prize-winning collection *The Local World*. She has received numerous awards, including fellowships from the NEA, PEN, and Stanford University, where she was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in poetry. She is a translator of contemporary Polish literature, most recently Tomasz Różycki’s *Colonies*, which won the Northern California Book Award and was shortlisted for the prestigious International Griffin Poetry Prize, among other awards. Her poems, translations, and essays have been published in many literary journals and anthologies, including *Ploughshares*, *Harvard Review*, *Slate*, *PN Review*, *A Public Space*, *Oxford American*, and *Mentor and Muse: Essays from Poets to Poets*. This fall she will be joining the English Department at the University of South Alabama as the Director of Creative Writing.

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