

Agata Hołobut

**CLOSING SHUT AN OPEN FORM:  
W.S. MERWIN'S POETRY IN POLISH TRANSLATION**

**Forma otwarta i jej domknięcia. Polskie przekłady poezji W.S. Merwina**

Choć W.S. Merwin uchodzi za jednego z najwybitniejszych autorów amerykańskiej poezji współczesnej, a jego twórczość towarzyszy czytelnikom od ponad sześćdziesięciu lat, pierwszy wybór jego wierszy, *Imię powietrza*, ukazał się na polskim rynku księgarskim dopiero w 2013 r., gdy autor otrzymał Międzynarodową Nagrodę Literacką im. Zbigniewa Herberta. W artykule przedstawiam wcześniejsze, pionierskie przekłady wierszy Merwina, publikowane w polskich czasopismach i antologiach poezji. Omawiam odmienne strategie, po jakie sięgnęli pierwsi tłumacze Merwina: Piotr Sommer, Zofia Prele, Tadeusz Rybowski, Julia Hartwig, Krzysztof Boczkowski, Grzegorz Musiał, Czesław Miłosz i Paweł Marcinkiewicz, żeby przybliżyć polskim odbiorcom jego pisarstwo. **Słowa kluczowe:** poezja amerykańska, przekład, W.S. Merwin

**1. Introduction**

One of the most eminent contemporary American poets, W.S. Merwin has authored over thirty books of verse and contributed to twenty-five volumes of translations in his career spanning over six decades. And yet despite his prolificacy and international renown, he long remained unknown to the Polish audience, with

only a few dozen texts dispersed among journals and anthologies of American verse in translation.<sup>1</sup>

The Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award conferred on the poet in June 2013 allowed him to make his mark on the Polish literary scene, with his first individual collection published to honour the occasion (*Imię powietrza*, 2013). The editorial works on this volume offered a good opportunity to take stock of the existing renderings of his works, examining the translation policies they evinced and translation strategies they revealed. The following chapter summarises these literary critical findings, discussing the ways Piotr Sommer, Zofia Prele, Tadeusz Rybowski, Krzysztof Boczowski, Julia Hartwig and Czesław Miłosz envisaged Merwin's poetics in their pioneering translations, dispersed among journals, anthologies and magazines long before the publication of the book.

## 2. W.S. Merwin's poetics

William Stanley Merwin was born in New York City in 1927 as a son of a Presbyterian minister. He received a scholarship at Princeton University, where he studied poetry and Romance languages. After graduation, he moved to Europe, where he supported himself as a private tutor and translator. *A Mask for Janus*, his poetic debut published in 1952, reflected his enchantment with traditional forms inspired by classical and medieval models, which preoccupied him as a translator. The book contained odes, ballads, sestinas and carols, critically acclaimed for their technical dexterity.<sup>2</sup>

In 1956 Merwin came back to America and his next two volumes, *Green with Beasts* (1956) and *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960), returned to American themes and poetic idiom. The former book remained formally intricate, but revealed Merwin's growing interest in irregular metric and introspection.<sup>3</sup> The latter showed an evolution of a new style, characteristic of his mature work. The poet began to adopt "loosened blank verse metric", which "moves the lines along irregular, but subtly controlled rhythm" (Gross, 1970, p. 97). Thus Merwin's signature "open form" started to take shape.

He returned to Europe, where he published his fourth book of verse, *The Moving Target* (1963). Tainted with a dark vision of human history, it demonstrates an evolution of Merwin's speech-like idiom, "imitating the awkward

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<sup>1</sup> According to Karolina Kopczyńska's library research, by the year 2013 forty-two poems and two prose passages by W.S. Merwin had been officially published in Polish translation. Among them, twenty derived from Merwin's most famous collection, *The Lice* (1967). A detailed overview of these will be presented in section 2.1 below.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/w-s-merwin> (Accessed 23.08.2016).

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/w-s-merwin> (Accessed 23.08.2016).

phrasing, distorted syntax, irregular rhythms of the inarticulate” (Stepanchev, 1965, pp. 118–119). The metre becomes patchy; it is often broken with line-stops, interspersed with moments of silence (Gross, 1970, p. 100).

In 1967 the apocalyptic tension reached its peak in Merwin’s influential volume, *The Lice*. Written in response to the Vietnam War, the book explored themes of imminent human self-destruction, and the looming extermination of plant and animal species, endangered by man’s blind arrogance and greed. As Edward Hirsch remarked, *The Lice* was characterised by “ruthless authenticity, the stark, stripped down style and prophetic feeling, the utter seriousness and desperate sense of a coming extinction” (Hirsch, 2013, p. 120). The poet finally eschewed punctuation, opening the lines to multiple interpretations. Each verse resembled a heavy bundle of thought, suspended in empty space.

In 1970 *The Carrier of Ladders* followed, awarded with the first Pulitzer Prize in Merwin’s career. The volume resumed the theme of human destructive ambition, exemplified by the history of American Frontier. Merwin allegedly donated the prize money to support the draft resistance movement.<sup>4</sup>

His deep pacifist and environmental involvement led him to move to Hawaii in 1976 to study Zen Buddhism and restore the forest surrounding his self-designed home. On nineteen acres of land he planted eight hundred species of palm trees and other plants endangered with extinction, physically tending to the preserve.<sup>5</sup> His later books of poetry reflect this immersion in the natural world. These include amongst other *The Compass Flower* (1977), *Opening the Hand* (1983), and *The Rain in the Trees* (1988), followed by another European volume, *Vixen* (1996). With time, Merwin’s moral detachment from humanity gave way to contemplative unity with the natural environment. As Edward Hirsch remarked (Hirsch, 2013, p. 121),

his poetry took on the character of a rescue operation. All of his subsequent work is alive with the sound of rain in the trees, with forgotten springs, with animals in the forest, with dark nights and bright days, with the air itself. It is powered by the recognition of our all-important connection to the natural world.

In 2005 *Migration: New and Selected Poems* appeared to commemorate more than half a century of Merwin’s creative career. The collection received the National Book Award. His more recent volume, *The Shadow of Sirius* (2008) won him another Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Other important distinctions include the PEN Translation Prize and the title of the Library of Congress’s seventeenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/w-s-merwin> (Accessed 23.08.2016).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.merwinconservancy.org> (Accessed 23.08.2016).

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/w-s-merwin> (Accessed 23.08.2016).

### 2.1. *Merwin's open form*

Spanning six decades, Merwin's work documents his ideological and artistic evolution. As for the former, starting with early reflections on art and myth, his works have shown growing concern with the external world, visible first in his zoomed-in human portraits and then in panoramic views of men exterminating themselves, destroying the Nature and losing their Culture. A writer at war with humanity, Merwin gradually turned into a writer at peace with the environment. What has remained changeless since the 1970s, however, is his involvement in deep ecology movement. Most of his works reveal an egoless, anti-humanist perspective and express conviction that cruel, overambitious humans are "no better" than grass. The only thing they can do to gain self-understanding is contemplating the nature (Lazer, 1982, p. 277).

Merwin's poetics has reflected these shifting interests. Contrived artistry of his early texts gave way to controlled spontaneity of free verse, which he has perfected since the early 1960s. "Punctuation nails the poem down on the page," he wrote. "When you don't use it, the poem becomes more a thing in itself, at once more transparent and more actual" (quoted after Hix, 1997, p. 16). Merwin called this unpunctuated free verse an open form. He understood it as "the setting down of a way of hearing how poetry happens in words ... a testimony of the way of hearing how life happens in time" (Merwin, 1982a, p. 305). According to Hirsch, the form evolved out of Merwin's belief that poetry is much closer to the spoken word than prose. Hence, in his poetry he aimed at the "movement and lightness" of speech (Hirsch, 2013, p. 121). Jay Parini described the poet's mature style as "his own kind of free verse," in which image is layered upon image, "allowing the lines to hang in space, largely without punctuation, without rhymes, with a kind of graceful urgency" (Parini, 2009).

## 3. Merwin in translation

Speech-like and ambiguous, Merwin's open form evoked diverse responses among his Polish translators. Each understood differently "how poetry happens in words" and each established an individual canon of texts worth presenting to domestic audience. According to Karolina Kopczyńska's library research, by the year 2013 forty-two of Merwin's poems and two prose passages had been officially published in Polish translation. Half of them came from his early volume, *The Lice* (1967), to be rendered more than once by different authors. Apparently, the most dystopian of Merwin's collections was also most attractive for his Polish interpreters.

### 3.1. *Piotr Sommer's true grit*

The first translator to introduce the Polish readers to Merwin's poetry was Piotr Sommer. In 1976 he selected three pieces to appear in the literary journal *Litera-*

*tura na Świecie*, each presenting a different aspect of Merwin's work. "Grandfather in the Old Man's Home" is a bitter family portrait; "The Room" captures a disturbing, metaphysical inscape and "The City" is a snapshot of modern urban life with its inhumanity and franticness.<sup>7</sup> Sommer's textual and translational choices reveal his artistic agenda. His Merwin speaks with a strong, contemporary voice, adept at both observation and introspection.

In his interpretation of "The Room," Sommer brings to the fore the concrete and the colloquial. The poem maps human spiritual experience on a topography of a living space (Merwin, 2012, p. 129, my emphasis):

I think all this is somewhere in myself  
The cold room *unlit* before dawn  
Containing a *stillness* such as attends death

Sommer renders the image equally tangible, but slightly more specific. He presents the room as "unlit" and filled with "quiet" rather than "motionlessness," the original concept of *stillness* being ambiguous (*Pokój*, 1976, p. 200):

Myślę że to wszystko jest gdzieś we mnie  
Zimny pokój nicoświatłony przed zmrokiem (*sic*)  
Mieszczący w sobie *ciszę* jaka towarzyszy śmierci

This stress on concretization and specificity is also visible in the consecutive lines:

And from a corner *the sounds of a small bird* trying  
From time to time to fly *a few beats* in the dark

In Sommer's rendition, the vague "sounds of a small bird" are explicated as "wriggly movements of a young bird" and the ambiguous beats (which may indeed be produced by the bird's wings) are spelled out as "pulse beats:"

Z kąta dobiega *szamotanina młodego ptaka* który co jakiś czas  
Próbuje przefrunąć w ciemności *kilka uderzeń tętna*

Apart from their conceptual import, these choices contribute to the hard-bitten, matter-of-fact tone of the Polish poem. *Szamotanina* defies the ornithological stereotypes known from lyrical poetry. The emphasis on bird's youth helps avoid sentimental diminutive forms, which might have been used to stress its smallness. The metonymic image of "pulse beats" (*uderzenia tętna*) anatomises the conventional image of a "heartbeat" (*uderzenia serca*).

Sommer's intention to present Merwin as tough, engaging and highly unpoetic is especially visible in his translation of "Grandfather in the Old Men's

<sup>7</sup> The texts appeared in *Drunk in the Furnace* (1960), *The Lice* (1967) and *The Compass Flower* (1977), respectively.

Home”, a bitter autobiographical portrayal of the poet’s booze-loving relative and his wife, a fundamentalist Methodist (Hix, 1997, pp. 109–110). Although the text retains punctuation, it already demonstrates Merwin’s preoccupation with spoken idiom. Sommer brings this *spokenness* to the fore; he endows the subject with a powerful voice and capitalizes on the potential of Polish colloquial structures and idioms. Indeed, in the revised version published in 1992, the translator still sharpens the idiomaticity of his rendition, as is his usual practice (Jarniewicz, 2012, p. 50). To provide a few examples of this tendency, let us consider the opening of the poem: an image of the senile man, visited by his relatives (Merwin, 2012, p. 67):

Gentle at last, and as clean as ever,  
He did not even need drink any more,  
And his good sons unbent ...

Sommer repaints the image retaining the speech-like fluency of the original (*Dziadek w domu starców*, 1976, p. 198):

Na koniec pogodny, i jak zawsze czysty,  
Nie potrzebował już nawet więcej pić,  
A jego dobrzy synowie poczuli się luźniej ...

Yet in the revised edition, he still lowers the register, which now seems to surpass the colloquialism of the original. The act of drinking is presented in a more idiomatic fashion as “hitting the bottle,” the sons are ironically diminutivised as “sonnies” (*synkowie*) and the way they feel is colloquially described as “*a tad* more relaxed” (*Dziadek w domu starców*, 1992, p. 327).

Na koniec łagodny, czystszy niż kiedykolwiek,  
Nie potrzebował nawet *ciągnąć więcej z butli*,  
A dobrzy *synkowie* poczuli się *ciut* luźniej...

Similarly, the poem’s final – and equally unsentimental – lines describing the grandfather’s demise become even more cynical in Sommer’s rendition. The original reads as follows:

While the children they both had begotten,  
With old faces now, but themselves shrunken  
To child-size again, stood ranged at her side,  
Beating their little Bibles till he died.

Interestingly, the 1976 version portrays the grandfather’s children as “shrunken:”

Podczas gdy dzieci z nich zrodzone,  
*O twarzach starych już, lecz skurczone na powrót*

*Do rozmiarów dziecka, stanęły przy niej rzędem,  
Thukąc w swe małe Biblie aż mu się umarło.*

The 1992 revision, by contrast, presents the grandparents as “shrunken” and their offspring as endowed with “old faces:”

– oboje już skurczyli się na powrót  
do rozmiarów dziecka – a dzieci z nich poczęte,  
o twarzach starych już, stanęły przy niej rzędem,  
*międląc swe małe Biblie aż mu się umarło.*

Regardless of these conflicting interpretations, which remind us of Merwin's penchant for syntactic ambiguity,<sup>8</sup> both translations cleverly caricature the image of the old man's death and his family's religiousness. In both versions, Sommer uses the non-standard reflexive form of the verb “to die” (*umrzeć*) with the dative object: *aż mu się umarło* (literally “until he died on himself”) rather than the standard non-reflexive form with the nominative subject – *aż umarł* (“until he died”). This connotes incidentalness and nonvolitionality of the event, de-romanticising its portrayal in Polish. Similarly, the translator presents children “beating their little Bibles”, as literally “crumpling” the books (*międląc swe małe biblie*), which further illustrates his colloquialising strategy.

### 3.2. Zofia Prele and Tadeusz Rybowski's prosaism

The next sample of Merwin's poetry, this time much richer, appeared in the same literary journal ten years later, in 1987. It presented a selection of poems, predominantly from the apocalyptic volume *The Lice*, rendered into Polish by two authors: Zofia Prele and Tadeusz Rybowski. Probably influenced by Sommer's early choices, both translators opted for understated, source-oriented solutions, allowing Merwin to retain the transparency and simplicity of the spoken word.

Zofia Prele selected a wider variety of poems for the journal. These included “When I Came to Colchis” from *The Dancing Bears* (1954), a text quite traditional in form, reminiscent of Merwin's early classical fascinations. She also included in her selection Merwin's “Spring” from *The Moving Target* (1963) – a rather perplexing poem with Native-American motifs. The remaining texts, i.e., “The Widow”, “Dusk in Winter” and “Gods” were taken from the dystopian volume *The Lice*, so popular among Polish translators.

Prele attempted to retain the original low register, giving her renditions speech-like quality. She made unsophisticated lexical choices and overused demonstrative pronouns to achieve the effect of plainness. Let us consider a few examples. In “Spring”, the speaker sets out on a metaphorical journey (Merwin, 2012, p. 108):

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<sup>8</sup> Another interpretation, the most likely one, would indeed picture the grandparents as endowed “With old faces now, but themselves shrunken / To child-size again”.

I take down from the door  
 My story with the holes  
 For the arms the face and the vitals  
 I take down the sights from the mantel  
 I'm going to my uncle the honest one  
 Who stole me the horse in the good cause

In Prele's rendition, the speaker expresses his thoughts in a prosaic, informal style (*Wiosna*, 1987, p. 512):

Ja zdejmuję z drzwi  
 Opowieść pełną dziur  
 Co mi osłoni twarz i męskość  
 Zabieram *widoczki* znad kominka  
 Ruszam do wuja *tego pocziwca*  
 Co w zbożnym celu ukradł mi konia

She consistently uses the informal relative pronoun *co* ("that") instead of *który/a/e* ("which/who") to de-poeticise her version (*co mi osłoni twarz i męskość*; *co w zbożnym celu ukradł mi konia*); she also employs colloquial lexical choices, portraying the uncle as "that good chap" (*tego pocziwca*) and "the sights" as "little views" (*widoczki*), diminutivised and hence deliberately clichéd in Polish. Like the previous text, this poem also demonstrates the ambiguity of Merwin's open form. The metaphorical image of the coat-like story, taken down from the door, "with the holes / for the arms the face and the vitals" can indeed be understood as designed to protect or to expose the mentioned parts of the body. Prele chooses the former interpretation, further specifying "the vitals" as "manhood" or "organs," which adds to the informal tone of the poem.

Another illustration of Prele's prosaic strategy is her rendition of the famous "Dusk in Winter," coming from the same volume. The mid-apocalyptic landscape is portrayed with an appalling impassive acceptance and conveyed with speech-like plainness (Merwin, 2012, p. 129):

The sun sets in the cold without friends [...]  
 It goes down believing in nothing

Prele retains this simplicity. Her lexical choices remain either neutral or colloquial and the syntactic choices follow the cadences of spoken Polish (*Zmierzch w zimie*, 1987, p. 515):

Słońce zachodzi w *tym zimnie* bez przyjaciół [...]  
 Schodzi w dół nie wierząc w nic

As we can observe, the demonstrative pronoun *w tym zimnie* ("in this cold") allows her to enhance the prosaicism of her translation. The poem closes with a description of the landscape after sunset:



When it has gone I hear the stream running after it  
It has brought its flute it is a long way

The personification of the stream may evoke obvious lyrical associations. Prele avoids these by describing “the long way” with a colloquial idiom *kawał drogi* (“it’s a world away”):

Po jego odejściu słyszę *goniący je strumień*  
*To kawał drogi zabral ze sobą flet*

Thus, the translator avoids obvious “poeticism” and elevation of style, although the aesthetic effect she achieves seems deliberately makeshift and unpolished.

The former cannot be said of her co-translator, Tadeusz Rybowski, who presented his renditions of W.S. Merwin’s poetry on two occasions: first, alongside Prele in the 1987 issue of *Literatura na Świecie* and then, eleven years later, in the literary magazine *Gościniec sztuki*. The earlier publication seems to be in tune with Zofia Prele’s stylistic choices, which suggests a consistent editorial policy on the part of the journal. The texts rendered by Rybowski: “Asians Dying,” “Looking for Mushrooms at Sunrise,” “For the Anniversary of My Death,” “December Among the Vanished,” “Caesar,” “It’s March,” “Come Back,” “Watchers” are some of the most eminent and representative excerpts of *The Lice* volume, evocative of Merwin’s political and environmental disillusionment, reflected in his “poetics of Nothing.” Like Prele, Rybowski retains the prosaic speech-like flow in his translations and, like his colleague, he believes in the de-poeticising power of demonstrative pronouns. For instance, in “The Asians Dying” Merwin describes the post-military landscape in the following way (Merwin, 2012, p. 134):

The ash the great walker follows the possessors [...]
   
The dead go away like bruises
   
The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands
   
Pain the horizon
   
Remains

What strikes the reader in Rybowski’s rendition is exactly the marked presence of demonstrative pronouns, italicized in the quotation below (*Umierający Azjaci*, 1987, pp. 505–506):

Popiół *ten* wielki wędrowiec podąża za zdobywcami
   
Zmarli giną jak sińce
   
I krew wsiąka w zatrute pola
   
Zostaje ból
   
*Ten horyzont*
  
Nad głową kołyszą się pory roku
   
*To* papierowe dzwony

Interestingly, Rybowski radically changed his approach to Merwin's poetics while preparing the second selection of his texts in 1998. He decided to balance the apocalyptic visions presented in *Literatura na Świecie* with more affirmative poems, such as "Living Together," "Green Island" or "Turning to You" from the volume *Finding the Islands* (1982). What they all have in common is a certain erotic lyricism. Rybowski responds to it on a sentimental note, making ample use of elevated stylistic choices, such as contracted forms of personal pronouns and inversions. This can be perhaps best illustrated with a short fragment of the "Green Island," which reflects Merwin's interest in Japanese poetry (Merwin, 1982b):

The rain gives way to clear  
night and you draw  
me to you in the cool daybreak

—  
I want you to be  
the smell of the bed  
and the fingers of the day

In his rendition (*Zielona wyspa*, 1998, pp. 39–40), Rybowski resorts to lexical choices connoting poeticism, such as *brzask* (literary, "daybreak") or *pragnąć* (literary, "to wish") (Jarniewicz, 2012, p. 40):

Deszcz ustępuje miejsca jasnej  
Nocy a ty przyciągasz mnie  
Do siebie o *chłodnym brzasku*

—  
*Pragnę być* była  
Zapachem łóżka  
I palcami dnia

He also willingly repeats contracted possessive forms: "Ten sam blask słońca ... na *twoj* mokrej skórze" ("The same sunlight ... on your wet skin"); "W twoim głosie deszcz / Odnajduje *swą* drogę ku strumieniowi" ("In your voice the rain / is finding its way to the stream"). This shows a clear drive on the part of Tadeusz Rybowski towards "redesigning" the image of W.S. Merwin to appeal to a more conservative and traditionally-minded readership, quite contrary to his previous efforts demonstrated in *Literatura na Świecie*.

### 3.3. *Julia Hartwig's dark oracle*

The idiomaticity of Piotr Sommer and prosaicism of Zofia Prele become all the more apparent when confronted with Julia Hartwig's renditions. An accomplished poet and translator herself, she selected five of Merwin's poems from the volume *The Lice*: "Avoiding News by the River," "December Among the Vanished," "Herds," "Dusk in Winter" and "Come Back." She included three of them in the

anthology of American poetry ...*opiewam nowoczesnego człowieka*, published in 1992. Her vision was clear: she chose texts that address post-apocalyptic, prehistoric themes, bringing out Merwin's oracular, misanthropic perspective by means of literary diction.

Let us examine the above-mentioned "Dusk in Winter" (see section 3.2). the translator ennobles the style and enhances the metaphoricity of the original (*Zmierzch zimą*, 1992, p. 325):

Słońce zachodzi wśród chłodu bez żadnych przyjaciół [...]
 Zapada w dół nie podtrzymywane żadną wiarą

Hartwig's sun "falls in", or "collapses." It is also "unsupported" by faith, thus creating an image of a huge downbound object rather than a human being, who believes in nothing. What follows, is a vision painted in clearly poetic colours:

Kiedy już zaszło słyszę jak podąża za nim strumień
 Ze swoim fleciem a to długa droga

The image of a stream "following" the sun rather than simply "running after it" is markedly more elegant than its English counterpart, as is the diminutivised *flecik*, which the stream is carrying in Julia Hartwig's translation. Thus, Merwin's voice becomes more refined than in previous translations.

Let us consider another example, the misanthropic "Avoiding News by the River" (Merwin, 2012, p. 139).

I dreamed that the heavens were eating the earth
 Waking it is not so
 Not the heavens
 I am not ashamed of the wren's murders
 Nor the badger's dinners
 On which all worldly good depends
 If I were not human I would not be ashamed of anything

A closer look at this powerful fragment in translation will reveal Hartwig's consistent use of poetic diction, visible for instance in the alliterated noun phrase *biesiady borsuka* ("badger's feasts"), more markedly stylized than Merwin's "badger's dinners" (*Wystrzegając się nowin nad rzeką*, 1992, p. 324).

Śniło mi się że niebo połknęło ziemię
 Po zbudzeniu okazało się inaczej
 To nie było niebo
 Nie zawstydzają mnie morderstwa strzyżyka
 Ani *biesiady borsuka*
 Od których zależy całe dobro świata
 Gdybym nie był człowiekiem nie wstydzilibym się niczego

Hartwig's is even reflected in the title itself: "Avoiding News by the River" becomes "Wystrzegając się nowin nad rzeką." It is notable that both the verb *wystrzegać się* ("eschew") and the noun *nowiny* ("tidings") are stylistic archaisms in Polish. This version contrasts sharply with Tadeusz Rybowski's simple "Z dala od świata nad rzeką" ("Away from the world by the river"). Overall, Julia Hartwig accentuates Merwin's dark prophetic undertones by means of ennoblement and allusions to biblical diction. This antiquation portrays Merwin first and foremost as an oracular poet, perhaps more emotionally involved than in the original works.

### 3.4. Miłosz's cool reason

Merwin's another eminent translator, Czesław Miłosz, did not share Julia Hartwig's fascination with his "poetics of the End." Miłosz rendered three of Merwin's poems into Polish: "Corps de Ballet," "Dusk in Winter" and "On the Anniversary of My Death." The latter two, coming from *The Lice*, appeared in Miłosz's anthology of translations, *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych* (2000). They clearly deprive Merwin of his misanthropy and prophetic gloom, as can be easily observed in "Dusk in Winter" (p. 48):

Słońce zachodzi w zimnie bez przyjaciół [...]
   
Zachodzi nie wierząc w nic.

The opening lines in Miłosz's version are markedly less metaphorical than Hartwig's. The sun "sets" twice, as the translator repeats the verb *zachodzi* typically associated with the Sun and the Moon. It does not "go down", which is more ambiguous in the original and invites apocalyptic associations with disaster. What follows is an almost bucolic description of the landscape:

Kiedy zaszło, słyszę, jak biegnie za nim strumyk,
   
Wziął ze sobą swój flecik, bo droga daleka.

Miłosz avoids Hartwig's elevation; he opts for simple lexico-grammatical choices. However, by diminutivising the "stream" and the "flute" (*strumyk, flecik*), he changes the post-apocalyptic elegy into a pastoral poem. It seems that, regardless of its hopelessness and estrangement, the sun will surely find comfort in the little stream's friendly company.

Miłosz's rendition is also remarkable for another reason. He remains one of the two translators who closed shut Merwin's open form with punctuation. As mentioned, the American poet considered punctuation as "nailing the poem down on the page" (quoted after Hix, 1997, p. 16). This is exactly what Miłosz decided to do in all his renditions, narrowing down the readers' scope of interpretation. Yet, despite this slight retuning of W.S. Merwin's voice by both Julia Hartwig, who turned it into a dark bass, and by Czesław Miłosz, who preferred a lighter

tenor, both translators created powerful renditions which showed the American poet in the most favourable light.

### 3.5. *Krzysztof Boczkowski's romanticism*

This cannot be said of the next translator, Krzysztof Boczkowski, who included two of Merwin's poems in his 1989 anthology *Białe usta* and published their revised versions in his 1993 anthology *Z nowoczesnej poezji amerykańskiej*. The only thing he has in common with Czesław Miłosz is his decision to enrich Merwin's texts with punctuation. This is especially visible in his rendition of "The Room," a poem translated thirteen years earlier by Piotr Sommer (see section 3.1). Let us consider its opening passage (*Pokój*, 1989, p. 134):

Myślę – to wszystko – jest gdzieś we mnie:  
Chłodny pokój – mroczny przed świtem  
Zawiera nieruchomość nadchodzącej śmierci;

The translator rendered Merwin's coherent first line as grammatically anomalous and elliptical, interrupted with Dickinsonian dashes. The third line strikes the reader as particularly odd, because it contains an oxymoron: "the *motionlessness* of the *on-coming* death." If misinterpreted, it can also reveal lexical ambiguity, because the Polish word *nieruchomość*, unlike *znieuchomienie* or *bezruch*, may also denote "real property," which complicates the interpretation of the poem. In the next lines we learn that a small bird trying to fly "somewhere inside" the speaker, thus calling the motionlessness of the image into question. In the last line, Merwin writes (Merwin, 2012, p. 129):

You would say it was dying it is immortal  
Boczkowski renders this passage in the following way:  
*Rzekłbyś – on kona, on jest nieśmiertelny.*

It becomes apparent that Boczkowski's Merwin reminds us of late Romantic poetics, not only because of the Dickinsonian and Norvidian dashes, but also because of elevated lexical choices: *chłodny, mroczny; nieuchronność, zawiera, rzekłbyś, kona*. The imagery becomes much more abstract and figurative. In the revised version of the poem published four years later Krzysztof Boczkowski removed the dashes from the first line and changed some of his word choices (*Pokój*, 1993, p. 134).

Myślę to wszystko jest gdzieś we mnie:  
Chłodny pokój – mroczny przed świtem –  
Zawiera *nieruchomość nieuchronnej* śmierci; [...]  
Rzekłbyś *umiera* – i jest nieśmiertelny.

Notably, he gave up the paradox, portraying death as "inevitable" rather than "on-coming." He also replaced the elevated verb *kona* ("it expires") with

a more popular one *umiera* (“it is dying”), probably realising that some of his earlier choices might have been too literary for the American poet. Still, both his renditions do not reflect Merwin’s speech-like simplicity, so well reflected in Piotr Sommer’s behaviourist imagery and colloquial idiom (see section 3.1).

### 3.6. *Paweł Marcinkiewicz’s thought streams*

Another ambassador of Merwin’s poetry in Poland was Paweł Marcinkiewicz, who published his translations in the *Newsweek* magazine to acknowledge the release of Merwin’s collected poems, *Migration* (2005) and his recent volume *The Shadow of Sirius* (2009). He used the opportunity to show a different side to Merwin, popularising his more contemporary works, characterised by poetics of abundance rather than silence. First, he presented a selection from the 1996 volume *The Vixen*, containing prose-like, verbose texts with images spilling off the verses. Let us see a short fragment of “Forgotten Streams,” which illustrate well the poet’s artistic strategy (Merwin, 2012, p. 372).

The names of unimportant streams have fallen  
 into oblivion the syllables have washed away  
 but the streams that never went by name never raised the question  
 whether what has been told and forgotten is in  
 another part of oblivion from what was never remembered

Marcinkiewicz reflected the spontaneity and loose organisation of the text, bringing to the fore Merwin’s add-on strategy (*Zapomniane strumienie*, 2005):

Nazwy błahych strumieni utonęły  
 w niepamięci rozmyły się ich sylaby  
 lecz strumienie które nigdy nie płynęły pod nazwą nie pytały  
 czy to co było powiedziane i zapomniane zajmuje  
 inną część niepamięci niż to czego nigdy nie pamiętano

As can be seen, the Polish translation makes as frequent use of enjambement as the original and exploits the unpunctuated openness of Merwin’s form to the full, turning the reflection on forgotten streams into a stream of consciousness. It even adds a clever play on words with the Polish streams “drowning” in oblivion. Marcinkiewicz is certainly unafraid of repetition, typical of spontaneous unscripted speech. In a word, his Merwin is a far cry from his earlier apocalyptic incarnations. The same holds for the translator’s selection from *The Shadow of Sirius* (*To może być sen*, 2009) again dominated by spontaneous utterances immersed in nature.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Other authors who presented W.S. Merwin’s poetry to the public before the release of *Imię powietrza* included Grzegorz Musiał, Krzysztof Czyżewski, Ryszard Mierzejewski and Franek Wygoda; the latter two presenting their selections online in the form of self-publications. However, a detailed discussion of their contributions exceeds the scope of this paper.

On the whole, for the last forty years, Merwin spoke to his Polish readers in a choir of voices: that of a gritty ironist, a terse prosaist, a dark oracle, an affirmative philosopher, a sentimental Romanticist and finally – a master of ad-lib. Each translator took a different approach to the poet's open form; each concretised it in a unique fashion.

#### 4. Translating Merwin's mind-in-text

Thus, it goes without saying that Merwin's unpunctuated, free verse has posed quite a challenge to his Polish translators. In the previous section, we discussed in detail the aesthetic choices they made; now it is time to focus on the semantic intricacies they encountered. By definition, the openness of Merwin's form multiplies meanings and invites various interpretations. Those chosen by his Polish translations reveal their personal sensitivities, as well as collective norms and expectations they partake in. Having analysed all the Polish renditions pre-dating the publication of Merwin's first individual collection, I noticed that it was his non-anthropocentrism that often got lost in translation. Following his disillusionment with humanity after the Vietnam War, Merwin came to be known for his anti-humanism and misanthropy. They are especially visible in his apocalyptic works of the 1960s and 70s, which are canonical among Polish translators. In 1975 a literary critic Anthony Libby remarked (Libby, 1975, p. 20): "The poet of many styles is now occupied with refining one style, sometimes monotonously, and that style focuses with obsessive frequency on the subject for which it seems to have been devised: human emptiness and cultural death." He calls Merwin "The Poet of Nothing," who treats nothingness "with an emotional blankness" (Libby, 1975, p. 30). According to the critic, Merwin perceives death "not as a way to union but as the entrance to nothing, which for him is more obsessively present than any of the things which it is not" (Libby, 1975, p. 30). Life, by contrast, is presented as "sickness" or "a strange garment" that humans will finally shed. Merwin's apocalyptic visions of that period testify to his belief in animal values and human disposability.

As Libby further explains, since Merwin is "an affirmative poet for the world and for its creatures", he must logically be "a poet of negation for man the destroyer" (Libby, 1975, p. 40). Hence, he advocates acceptance of non-human values tantamount to human self-obliteration. He believes that the earth will thrive without men, which is the natural course of evolution. As another critic Hank Lazer explains, these are the reasons Merwin touches upon such motifs as "an animal's view of man, distance, coldness, darkness, a belittling of man's sense of accomplishment, the effort to begin again, and the inability to rise to song" (Lazer, 1982, p. 264).

Quite surprisingly, the poet's "positive view of his own disappearance," combined with "empty adequacy, his Buddhist sort of joy" (Lazer, 1982, pp. 274–

275) seems to have escaped the Polish translators' attention. This is best illustrated by the famous poem "For the Anniversary of My Death" and a series of its four subsequent translations. A classic example of Merwin's open form, the text seems to "reach beyond language", surrounded by "empty white space of possibility" (Libby, 1975, p. 26).

In the first stanza the speaker imagines his death and compares it to a star burning out. He turns to nothingness; what remains is the silence that embarks on its journey like "a tireless traveller" (Merwin, 2012, p. 131):

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day  
 When the last fires will wave to me  
 And *the silence will set out*  
*Tireless traveller*  
 Like the beam of a lightless star

Remarkably, out of four Polish translators who interpreted this piece it is only Tadeusz Rybowski who reflected the speaker's acceptance of self-extinction (*Na rocznicę mojej śmierci*, 1987, p. 507):

Co roku nieświadomie mija mi ten dzień  
 Kiedy ostatnie ognie skiną na mnie  
*I ruszy w drogę cisza*  
*Niestrudzony podróżnik*  
*Jak promień zgasłej gwiazdy*

The remaining four translators portray the speaker as a "tireless traveller" entering the afterlife. Grzegorz Musiał conceptualises the silence as "letting" the traveller "out." He also compares silence to the star (*Na rocznicę mojej śmierci*, 1994, p. 327):

I niestrudzonego wędrowca wypuści  
 Milczenie  
 Jak gwiazda bezpromienna promień

Czesław Miłosz also presents the dead self as a tireless traveller, still enjoying a form of individual existence, although presumably not an earthly one (*Na rocznicę mojej śmierci*, 2000, p. 284):

I cisza odprawi  
 Niestrudzonego wędrowca  
 Niby promień nie świecącej gwiazdy.

Finally, Franek Wygoda provides a more ambiguous reading of the passage (*W rocznicę mojej śmierci*, 2014):

I milczenie obejmie  
 Niemordowanego wędrowca  
 Jak promień bezświatlnej gwiazdy



In this version, the silence literally „embraces” the tireless traveller „like a beam of a lightless star.” This image does not rule out the possibility of the traveller finally terminating his journey. It is also ambiguous in that it can be the silence or the traveller who resembles the beam. Regardless of these nuances, however, the translator also anthropocentrically focuses his attention on the diseased, rather than reflecting his disappearance and focusing on the silence.

Thus, the majority of the translators embrace the vision of an afterlife as more appealing than the vision of a person's complete extinction, which is indeed much more likely in the context of the volume. Further in the poem Merwin comments on the “love of one woman / and the *shamelessness of men*.” Again, all but one translators fail to interpret the remark as pertaining to the corruption of *mankind* in general. Instead, they read it in gender terms, contrasting the “love of one woman” (*miłość jednej kobiety*) with “shamelessness of menfolk” (*bezwstyd mężczyzn*). It is only Franek Wygoda who envisages the human race as shameless (*bezwstyd ludzi*) and does not turn misanthropy into misandry.

The last example illustrating the elusiveness of Merwin's anti-humanism and animal perspective will be “The Herds.” As Athony Libby remarks, it is “set in an ice-age landscape of voyaging animals which could as easily be pre-historic as post-apocalyptic” and its eerie quality “is created partly by the mystery of its speaker: what voice is this that uses our words to ‘once more celebrate our distance from men’?” (Libby, 1975, p. 39). Let us consider a fragment (Merwin, 2012, pp. 130–131):

As I lay among stones high in the starless night  
Out of the many *hoof tracks* the sounds of *herds*  
Would begin to reach me again  
Above them their ancient sun skating far off

Sleeping by the glass mountain  
I would watch the flocks of light grazing  
find the water *preparing its descent*  
To the first dead

Quite notably, in Julia Hartwig's translation (Stada, 2000, p. 5) the “distance from men” is consistently reduced and the voice gains certain human qualities. The line quoted by Libby loses its reference to the mysterious collective “us.” The speaker simply “celebrates again the distance from men” and does not perceive him/her/itself as a part of a herd (*I raz jeszcze święcić będą oddalenie od ludzi*). What follows, is an image of secluded landscape which still bears the mark of civilisation. Let us consider the analogous passage in translation:

Leżąc wśród kamieni wysoko w bezgwiezdną noc  
Z dała od śladów zostawianych przez *podkowy*  
Znów posłyszę *pobekiwania trzód* dobiegające  
Spod starożytnego słońca które zapada daleko stąd

Zasypiając w sąsiedztwie szklanej góry  
 Patrzeć będę na wypasające się stada światła  
*I na wodę gotową do obmycia*  
*Pierwszego umarłego*

Hartwig adds human-related touches to her portrayal of the represented world. The “herds” are portrayed as *trzody*, a word which usually refers to livestock (and sheep in this context) and “hoofs” are rendered as “horseshoes” (*podkowy*). Thus, a presumably pre-human or post-apocalyptic vision of a speaker (whoever it is) partaking in animal life turns into a vision of a retreat for a human recluse, surrounded by sheep, cows and horses. Finally, the image of water ready to descend “to the first dead”, whether singular or plural, is again touched with human existence or memory. In the Polish translation, the water prepares itself to “wash the first diseased” (*obmyć pierwszego umarłego*), the word *umarły* being reserved in Polish exclusively for humans. Thus, regardless of the suggestive beauty of Julia Hartwig’s rendition and the alienation it portrays, her landscape does not strike the readers as suggestive of an “ice-age” and the animals do not appear as voyaging.

## 5. Conclusion

As illustrated above, Polish translators have put different garments on W.S. Merwin’s poems, some of them quite “strange,” to quote the poet himself. His love of silence and speech-like simplicity has been respected by some Polish authors and levelled out by others. The former used neutral or colloquial style to render his texts, the latter ennobled them to meet the traditional criteria of poeticism.

What is significant, the Merwinian unpunctuated open form, which was designed to foster ambiguity and freedom of interpretation, is often closed shut in translation. In the analysed material, the Polish interpreters rarely multiplied meanings by means of structural ambiguity. They preferred to bring out one interpretation which they found convincing. Interestingly, the author himself refuses to suggest any preferred line of understanding to his translators, as he admitted at the poetry reading in Krakow after he received the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award. He clearly accepts the fact that once the form has been opened up for his readers, they can make themselves at home in it.

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