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W. S. Merwin: 02-29-1968

W. S. Merwin

Gregory Fitz Gerald

William Heyen

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[Music]

MERWIN: "For the Anniversary of My Death:

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 traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what"

[Music]

FITZGERALD: "Welcome to Writers Forum. I'm Gregory FitzGerald, director of the creative writing program at the State University College Brockport, and at my left is William Heyen of our English department. And our guest today is the noted American poet and translator, W. S. Merwin, author of five famous translations, and three more in the works, and six books of original verse. Welcome to the Writers Forum, Mr. Merwin."

MERWIN: "Thank you, Mr. FitzGerald.

HEYEN: "Would you read again for us, Mr. Merwin, on the Anniversary of My Death?"

MERWIN: "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 traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what"

HEYEN: "That's a very fine poem."

FITZGERALD: "Yes, it is indeed."

HEYEN: "I'm impressed with the conversational, quiet, subdued quality of that poem. It seems to me that your work has changed quite a bit since your earlier volumes. I'd like for you, during this time, to read us at least one of your early poems, and I especially like Leviathan from Green with Beasts, your third volume. Would you read that for us for the sense of contrast?"

MERWIN: "Yes, I will. There's obviously a big contrast, just the noise of it. Shall I say first that the poem is partly a deliberate echo? The first part of it, not the second part of it. The first part of it is a deliberate echo of an Anglo-Saxon farmer by the whale and Leviathan, of course, is the name of the whale.

"This is the black sea-brute bulling through wave-wrack,
Ancient as ocean's shifting hills, who in sea-toils
Travelling, who furrowing the salt acres
Heavily, his wake hoary behind him,
Shoulders spouting, the fist of his forehead
Over wastes gray-green crashing, among horses unbroken
From bellowing fields, past bone-wreck of vessels,
Tide-ruin, wash of lost bodies bobbing
No longer sought for, and islands of ice gleaming,
Who ravening the rank flood, wave-marshalling,
Overmastering the dark sea-marches, finds home
And harvest. Frightening to foolhardiest
Mariners, his size were difficult to describe:
The hulk of him is like hills heaving,
Dark, yet as crags of drift-ice, crowns cracking in thunder,
Like land's self by night black-looming, surf churning and trailing
Along his shores' rushing, shoal-water boding
About the dark of his jaws; and who should moor at his edge
And fare on afoot would find gates of no gardens,
But the hill of dark underfoot diving,
Closing overhead, the cold deep, and drowning.
He is called Leviathan, and named for rolling,
First created he was of all creatures,
He has held Jonah three days and nights,
He is that curling serpent that in ocean is,
Sea-fright he is, and the shadow under the earth.
Days there are, nonetheless, when he lies
Like an angel, although a lost angel
On the waste's unease, no eye of man moving,
Bird hovering, fish flashing, creature whatever
Who after him came to herit earth's emptiness.
Froth at flanks seething sooths to stillness,
Waits; with one eye he watches
Dark of night sinking last, with one eye dayrise
As at first over foaming pastures. He makes no cry
Though that light is a breath. The sea curling,

Star-climbed, wind-combed, cumbered with itself still
As at first it was, is the hand not yet contented
Of the Creator. And he waits for the world to begin."

HEYEN: "Mr. Merwin, Stephen Stepanchev is one of the critics who's lately been attracted to your work and he says this. Allow me to read something. "There is a point in the career of a poet when he is no longer excited by his own manner. He must change for the sake of his survival as a poet. This seems to have happened to Merwin. At any rate, the style of 'The Moving Target'," and this is a 1963 book, "could not have been predicted on the basis of the four earlier books." Would you comment on this change in your style?"

MERWIN: "Well, I feel very split over that. I don't like Mr. Stepanchev's language. I mean, I don't think a poet has a career, for one thing. He may have a career in something else but he doesn't have a career as a poet. I think in so far as he is a poet, you know that passage where Thoreau quotes a Chinese text about an emperor who had in his bathtub, "Make it new. Make it every day new and every day new"? I don't think a poet -- I think a poet really ever gets excited by his own manner for more than, you know, 30 seconds at a time, there's something very dangerous going on. But there certainly was a deliberate change. I mean, in 1958, at the end of 'The Drunk in the Furnace', I thought that if I were ever going to write again, it would have to be in a very different way because this was no longer anything that I wanted to go on doing in the same way."

FITZGERALD: "Well, exactly how do you explain the changes? And what are they? What do you see them as being?"

MERWIN: "I wanted something that was more direct and in which the experience, the thing that was trying to make the poem, which was a private experience, was its relation with the language was completely different. In other words, it wasn't something which made the language as something apart from itself. It was something in which the experience was really trying to get into the words and come right through them if it could. And the result, I kept thinking that I was writing things that were clearer all the time, and I found that some people thought they were clear and some people thought they were just absolutely incomprehensible."

FITZGERALD: "Well, the rhythms are certainly changed as well as the diction, and this kind of rhythm that you read to us in Leviathan is no longer present in 'The Lice'."

MERWIN: "No. Leviathan was not really even typical at the time it was written."

FITZGERALD: "Yes."

MERWIN: "But, as far as these changes are concerned, you feel by going, don't you, rather than set up something consciously for yourself?"

HEYEN: "Oh, yes. Yes."

MERWIN: "And you'll leave it to critics, really, to pick these things out."

HEYEN: "That's right. You know, there are two lines in The Tao about it is called going forth where there is no road and rolling up the sleeve where there is no arm."

MERWIN: "Yes. Yes."

FITZGERALD: "So you have an image like that in one of your poems, the sleeveless arm."

MERWIN: "Yes. I didn't know that line when I wrote it."

FITZGERALD: "Yes. Yes."

HEYEN: "Would you read for us now a poem in a different voice, the titled poem of The Drunk in the Furnace?"

MERWIN: "Yes. It's the last poem that was written in that book, too."

HEYEN: "Yes."

MERWIN: "The Drunk in the Furnace:

"For a good decade, the furnace stood in the naked gully, fireless and vacant as any hat.
Then when it was no more to them than a hulking black fossil to erode unnoticed with the rest
of the junk-hill by the poisonous creek and rapidly to be added to their ignorance.
They were afterwards astonished to confirm one morning a twist of smoke,
like a pale resurrection, staggering out of its chewed hole.
And to remark then other tokens that someone cozily bolted behind the eye-holed iron door
of the drafty burner, had there established his bad castle.
Where he gets his spirits, it's a mystery.
But the stuff keeps him musical.
Hammer and anvilling with poker and bottle to his juggled bellowings
until the last groaning clang as he collapses onto the rioting springs of a litter
of car seats ranged on the grates to sleep like an iron pig.
In their tar-paper church on a text about stoke-holes
that are sated never, their reverend lingers.
They nod then hate trespassers.
When the furnace wakes, though, all afternoon their witless offspring flock like piped rats
to its siren crescendo, and agape on the crumbling ridge, stand in a row and learn."

FITZGERALD: "Yes. I enjoyed that."

HEYEN: "The townspeople in that poem don't quite know what to make of the drunk who has taken up
abode in their town. And their children flock to him."

MERWIN: "Well, there's a bit, a sort of umbilical connection. My father's family come from a very tiny
town on the Allegheny River, and it's a very rough community but part of it is -- part of it misbehaves
and the other part is teetotaler, and it's always been that way."

FITZGERALD: "Yeah. Your father was a minister, was he not, Mr. Merwin?"

MERWIN: "His father was a river pilot on the Allegheny."

FITZGERALD: "How interesting. How interesting. Something in common between them. Would you mind
if I change the subject a bit and ask you another quite distant question from this subject? I wondered
what your comment would be if I asked you what you thought the role of the poet in politics were. And
does the poet have any business being in politics at all?"

MERWIN: “Well, again, I have to do some qualifying. I wouldn't presume to prescribe as to what the poet should do. I mean, I've no idea. I don't know who the poet is and I find it hard enough to try to ponder what I should do. Politics, I think, is the greatest bore, I mean, for me, in the world. But the politics of our time are so arranged that it, I think it's morally damaging to anyone to close his eyes to what's going on. I don't see how one can. That while we're sitting here talking, people are being burned to death who probably never carried arms in their lives. This goes on around the clock. Others are starving to death. This isn't politics; this is simply something that, if one doesn't shut one's mind to it, one feels desperately helpless to do something about it. And that feeling of helplessness, that feeling of everything from anger, to bewilderment, to bitterness is a direct and inescapable part of one's daily experience at the moment. And one writes out of one's experience, that's all, and one acts out of it, too.”

FITZGERALD: “Well, you have written a poem about this and I wonder if you'd read it for us. It's called When the War is Over.”

MERWIN: “I have several poems.”

FITZGERALD: “From ‘The Lice’.”

MERWIN: “There are a couple of them. Maybe I can read them both.”

FITZGERALD: “All right. Certainly.”

MERWIN: “Well, When the War is Over is a short one and it eludes, of course, to a song with a rather rude part to it.

When the war is over
We will be proud of course the air will be
Good for breathing at last
The water will have been improved the salmon
And the silence of heaven will migrate more perfectly
The dead will think the living are worth it we will know
Who we are
And we will all enlist again”

FITZGERALD: “Now, that has a rather ironic ending to it, doesn't it?”

MERWIN: “Yes, I wish it -- I hope it does, yeah. It's only ironic.”

FITZGERALD: “What's the title of the other poem you wanted to read?”

MERWIN: “The other poem is called The Asians Dying. I would like to think that, if such a book were opened years from now, they wouldn't even know what it referred to. Wow, that's a strange thing to say without qualifying it. I mean that the fact that this kind of war was possible would be something unimaginably far in the past is what I mean, not that those people's deaths were simply forgotten.

The Asians Dying.

When the forests have been destroyed their darkness remains
The ash the great walker follows the possessors

Forever
Nothing they will come to is real
Nor for long
Over the watercourses
Like ducks in the time of the ducks
The ghosts of the villages trail in the sky
Making a new twilight

Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead
Again again with its pointless sound
When the moon finds them they are the color of everything

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed
The dead go away like bruises
The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands
Pain the horizon
Remains
Overhead the seasons rock
They are paper bells
Calling to nothing living

The possessors move everywhere under Death their star
Like columns of smoke they advance into the shadows
Like thin flames with no light
They with no past
And fire their only future”

HEYEN: “Mr. Merwin, the artist today can't help feeling intensely the things that are happening. We're bombarded by television and the newspapers, et cetera. But how does one handle a topical issue in a poem so that it becomes art rather than propaganda?”

MERWIN: “Well, I think this is a question that never really is solved for very long and one always tries to get around it; I mean, really, one doesn't. Every issue is topical and, in the sense that you mean it, there's some real mutual revulsion between art and topical things. And on the other hand, poets in every age have tried to do this and sometimes with more than less success. It's always, I think in terms of making something topical larger, that it works as a poem. And if it doesn't, if you keep it simply to the topical, it ceases to be a poem and moves toward propaganda. I was thinking this morning of Catullus' hatred of Caesar and a hatred which really worried Caesar. He respected Catullus, and he didn't like being hated by Catullus, and this was, of course, one of the mysteries of the period. And of a Russian poet whom I very much admire, Mandelstam, who died in Siberia for having written a poem about Stalin, which Stalin didn't like very much.”

FITZGERALD: “And, of course, the satirists, too. Dryden and Pope wrote a great deal about contemporary affairs. And I think your poem, *When the War is Over*, is also very satirical and it fits into this category somewhat.”

HEYEN: "Someone has said of Robert Frost that we can read through his collected poems and not even be aware that the two world wars through which he lived even grazed his consciousness. But I think that this won't be said of you."

MERWIN: "I don't know whether it's true of Frost. I've heard it said that it can be argued that Ulysses is one of the great books about World War I. But there's a poem that I hope -- I mean, there was an attempt to do what you were asking about, not topically but making a myth out of the thing, which is, I think, one proceeds with a thing like that, called Presidents, which I think might be worth reading this distance from the election. I supposed we'll have another one, much good may it do us."

The president of shame has his own flag
the president of lies quotes the voice
of God
at last counted
the president of loyalty recommends
blindness to the blind
oh oh
applause like the heels of the hanged
he walks on eyes
until they break
then he rides
there is no president of grief
it is a kingdom
ancient absolute with no colors
its rule is never seen
prayers look for him
also empty flags like skins
silence the messenger runs through the vast lands
with a black mouth
open
silence the climber falls from the cliffs
with a black mouth like
a call
there is only one subject
but he is repeated
tirelessly"

FITZGERALD: "Mr. Merwin, you have said on occasion, I believe, that you would not enter the academy because you felt that somehow this would change your art or, in an adverse way, affect what you're doing. Would you care to elaborate on that somewhat? And what would happen, for instance, if some large university made you a substantial offer? Would you be willing to accept it or commence it?"

MERWIN: "Not at the moment, I wouldn't."

FITZGERALD: "I see. What are your objections to the academy, if you have any? Or am I loading the question in that way?"

MERWIN: "Little bit, but they're, I mean, they're my own objections."

FITZGERALD: "I see."

MERWIN: "I mean, I have general suspicions about the role of the poet and the university in general. I mean, every man knows whether he's doing the right thing. That's not for me to say, but —"

FITZGERALD: "Well, in your case?"

MERWIN: "For me? Yes, I don't think I'm a teacher in the first place. I think this is something that one really ought to be able to know about one's self. I don't have that kind of patience. What I'm interested in is not, never is regular and formal as far as imparting things goes. And find it difficult, find it depressing, and oppressing to have to talk about poetry regularly and indiscriminately as a matter of principle. I mean, this is a thing which bloweth where it listeth quite a lot."

FITZGERALD: "Do you feel that it diminishes your creative urges and —"

MERWIN: "I've no idea. I mean, I've avoided it because I —"

FITZGERALD: "I see."

MERWIN: "I just thought it —"

FITZGERALD: "Yeah. I think the comment is interesting in view of the large number of academic poets that we have in America today. I mean, it's a real issue and I wanted to get your responses on it."

HEYEN: "Poets in the in the university are mushrooming, and may I jump to one of your poems called Looking for Mushrooms at Sunrise? It's the concluding poem in 'The Lice' and a very impressive poem."

MERWIN: "Yes, I'd rather talk about mushrooms, anyway."

Looking for Mushrooms at Sunrise

When it is not yet day
I am walking on centuries of dead chestnut leaves
In a place without grief
Though the oriole
Out of another life warns me
That I am awake

In the dark while the rain fell
The gold chanterelles pushed through a sleep that was not mine
Waking me
So that I came up the mountain to find them

Where they appear it seems I have been before
I recognize their haunts as though remembering
Another life

Where else am I walking even now
Looking for me

HEYEN: "I suppose that this is one of the tireless quests of the poet, isn't it? Looking for self?"

MERWIN: "I think, yes."

FITZGERALD: "May I ask you a technical question? Anyone who picks up 'The Lice' notices immediately that there is a lack of punctuation in all but one poem."

MERWIN: "There's one with punctuation?"

FITZGERALD: "Yes, I was thinking of 'The Last One'."

MERWIN: "Oh, yes, that's punctuated."

FITZGERALD: "Yes, it's too long for us to read now; otherwise, I'd ask you to read it."

MERWIN: "Well, it's not a conventional punctuation."

FITZGERALD: "Right."

MERWIN: "It's a deliberate marking the ends of the lines which I just sort have done with a line or anything else."

FITZGERALD: "But except for that, 'The Lice' is free of punctuation. I wondered if you would tell us why you've chosen this?"

MERWIN: "Well, I didn't choose to do it that way rationally or deliberately. I came to it gradually thinking it seemed to get better. It seemed better. It seemed right to do with less and less, and finally with none. There are all kinds of reasons for it, I mean having done it not for a reason. For example, it throws much greater weight, if you don't punctuate, on the actual way the poem, on the way the motion of the poem, on the way the motion of the grammar of the sentences and everything is put together. You can't rely on punctuation. You have to rely entirely on other movements in the actual language. And I think it also makes -- it also brings the poem, if the poem exists at all, it pulls it off the page. It makes it simply lift up. But finally, one of the simplest things that it does is to make an absolute line between poetry and prose. Prose has to be punctuated. Poetry has an irreversible thing about it. This is one of, if you were going to make a definition, this would be one of the things about it. The language can't be changed without changing the whole thing that the poem is. This isn't true of prose. And in so far as you use prose, punctuation, and poetry, you're using -- I mean, it doesn't work the same way in poetry and that was sort of the way that I moved toward it, by recognizing that there was a real difference between using a comma in a poem and using it in a paragraph in prose."

FITZGERALD: "Is this largely visual, or is it both visual and aural?"

MERWIN: "Well, of course, it wouldn't work if you didn't have a printing press."

FITZGERALD: "Right. Well, now I think we have time for one or two more poems. I wonder if you would please read us the poem that you called Free, 'The Free'."

MERWIN: “Yes, I'd like to conclude with that poem and I'd like to explain about the title that the free, it's the free who are speaking. The we of the poem is the free.

So far from the murders, the ruts begin to bleed, but no one hears our voices
above the sound of the reddening feet.

They leave us the empty roads.

They leave us for companions, for messengers, for signs,

The autumn leaves before the winter pains.

We move among them, doubly invisible, like air touching the blind.

And when we have gone, they say we are with them forever.”

[Music]