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# Interview with Miller Williams

by Fred Alsberg

**ALSBERG: What are the stages in the translation of a poem?**

**WILLIAMS:** The first stage is the reading and re-reading of the poem until it's known from the inside, almost as if the translator had written it. The second is the creation of a trot, or literal rendition, as word-for-word as possible. The third is to turn this into a poem in the translator's language as if the translator were writing an original poem from the seed of the trot, at the same time being restrained by the tone and prosodic pattern of the original. The fourth is to test it on a good and honest reader of poetry, asking that it be read not as a translation but as an original work. The fifth is to show it to a bilingual poetry reader native to the original language, watching the facial expressions very closely.

**ALSBERG: Are there any poems impossible to translate?**

**WILLIAMS:** It's not possible to re-create any poem in another language without losing part of it. There's no poem that can't be carried over in part. When there's a major problem, it's usually not because of the language but because the original poem alludes heavily to cultural matters with which most readers of the second language are not conversant.

**ALSBERG: To what extent is a nation's poetry determined by its language?**

**WILLIAMS:** To the same extent, I think that a nation's music was originally determined by its instruments. Our languages are as different and different in some of the same ways as the zither, bagpipe, lute, and harp are different.

**ALSBERG: How do you choose a poem's form? Or, at some point, does the poem choose its own?**

**WILLIAMS:** I've never decided, at the outset, that

a poem would be a villanelle, a sestina, in rhymed couplets or quatrains, or in blank or so-called free verse. Somewhere around the fifth or sixth draft the poem starts trying to tell me what it wants to be. It has taken me a while at times to pay attention.

**ALSBERG: You frequently write personae poems? Can you say why?**

**WILLIAMS:** One of the most unattractive things a poet can fall into, I believe, is the publication of what in effect are personal letters, diary entries, transcriptions from therapy sessions. The dramatic monologue obliges the poet to try the air inside another skull.

**ALSBERG: Do you have any tips for removing clutter from a poem?**

**WILLIAMS:** Make every word earn its way. Don't say anything that the reader would have known without being told, excepting repetition for emphasis or pattern.

**ALSBERG: What grants a few poems permanence and is missing from the majority of poems?**

**WILLIAMS:** I can't claim to know the answer to this question. I can suggest that virtually all the poems we have from the past that seem to be permanent fixtures are at the same time direct and indirect or, as David Baker has said, "Clear to children and mysterious to adults"; we know at once what the poem says but what it means comes more slowly and is not the same for every reader.

**ALSBERG: What gives power to a narrative?**

**WILLIAMS:** The reader has to believe it could happen, to care if it could happen, and to be intrigued by the thought of being there when it happens. This is made more likely by a compelling force of forward motion created by carefully con-



structured lines that leave the reader momentarily satisfied but with a sense of expectancy that pushes the eye forward.

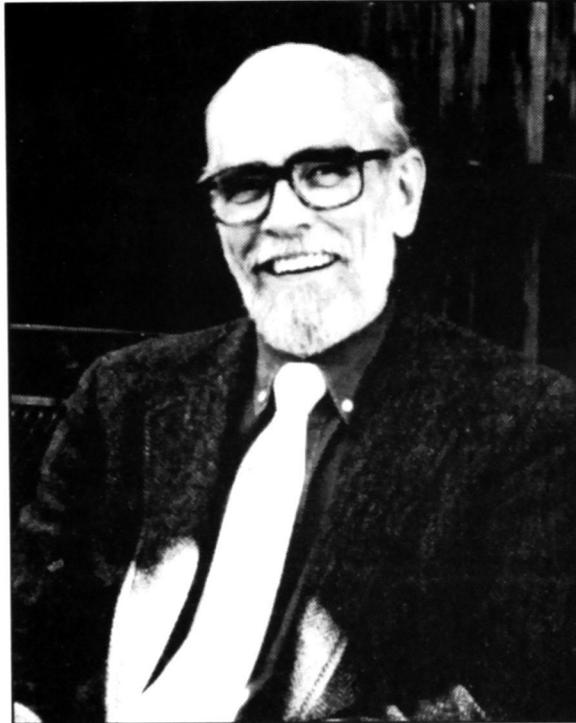
**ALSBERG: To what extent should a poem be accessible to the senses?**

WILLIAMS: To be a meaningful experience for the reader, a poem speaks to the senses in two ways, through its own music—quality of tone and rhythm—and through its images. And its involvement of the senses is a great deal of what brings the reader to take part in it as a personal experience. We would be much poorer without having ridden the sounds when “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day./ The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea./ The plowman weary plods his homeward way./ And leaves the world to darkness and to me,” or without being made to feel “zero at the bone.”

**ALSBERG: How does good figurative language work? Does poetry need figurative language?**

WILLIAMS: To my mind, the primary difference between poetry and prose is the use of figurative language in poetry. It works a magic on us by causing us to hear one thing when another is said, by causing us to see one thing when another is shown us, and by suggesting that all things are at heart one thing. It is in doing all this while involving the senses that poetry involves the reader in its own making. It is in all this that a poem is direct and indirect at the same time.

**ALSBERG: What reading recommendations would you give to young poets?**



*Miller Williams*

WILLIAMS: A person wanting to become an accomplished poet should know not only poetry but the language of which it’s made the way a cabinet maker knows maple from oak, seasoned from green, pliant from brittle. To know English in this way, it helps greatly to know Latin and German. But the question, I know, was aimed at the reading of published work. And my answer to this is: read and re-read the classic poetry through the nineteenth century and from that time on to the present read a lot and often the poetry you enjoy reading, making

sure that this includes both patterned and unpatterned poetry. If it doesn’t, then I’d recommend another line of work.

**ALSBERG: How has your academic work in the sciences affected your poetry?**

WILLIAMS: The critics tell me that it’s kept my poems in close touch with the phenomenological world, which I hope is true.

**ALSBERG: Why did you choose to write poetry instead of fiction?**

WILLIAMS: Well, I’ve published some short stories and I have a small collection about ready, but mostly I’ve written poetry, as the question makes obvious. The reason for that is the reason we do any one thing instead of another, I suppose—we like the result better or we get more joy out of the process, or both. But, then, it may be that as a poem chooses its form, poetry chooses its writers. Not always as well as it could, I guess. Maybe I’m just lucky that way.

