

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

By Michael Ventura

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Now that our literature is rich with translations of the world's major poets, it's easy to forget that in 1970 North Americans who cared deeply for poetry had mostly never heard of the poets whom Robert Bly has since rendered so wonderfully -- poets like Cesar Vallejo, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Tomas Transtomer, Antonio Machado, Kabir, Mirabai, Rumi, and Ghalib. The little that was available before Bly, especially of the 20th-century poets, was spotty and often clunky -- or let's be kinder and say: limited. There was, for instance, only one good translator of Rainer Maria Rilke, C.F. MacIntyre, but he was best at Rilke's descriptive poetry; the spiritual marvels of *Sonnets to Orpheus* were slightly beyond his reach, and MacIntyre never translated Rilke's short metaphysical poems. Except for Ben Belitt's stiff but forceful rendering of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Poet in New York*, Lorca translations were rare and mostly woeful, and even Belitt missed Lorca's fiery zest. Pablo Neruda had fared better, but rarely did his gutsy insistence on happiness, alive in even his most bitter work, make it to the North American page. Whole dimensions of Rilke, Lorca, and Neruda had to wait for Robert Bly to be revealed in our tongue. Certainly by 1970 excellent work had been done: For instance, Rex Warner's versions of George Seferis (sadly long out of print), the Rae Dalven renditions of Constantine Cavafy, and Muriel Rukeyser's presentation of Octavio Paz's *Sun Stone*. But for the most part, a North American reader was unable to experience how especially the 20th-century poets of other cultures were visioning this tumultuous era. And we were desperately in need.

For by 1970 everyone knew that the United States was the dominant innovative force in modern history; the phrase "the American Century" had become, as a description, hard to deny. But that very phrase was symptomatic: It sliced off the definition of "America" at our southern border. As Vietnam was proving so horribly, we were rich in inventiveness but impoverished in our ability to see past ourselves, to see through ourselves, and to see the validity of anything but ourselves.

Our poetry suffered from this inflated, insulated attitude as much as our politics. It wasn't only that there were no North American poets who ranged through the underground caverns of the psyche and linked the intimate with the historical as vividly as Lorca, Neruda, and Vallejo; it wasn't only that a spirituality as provocative and free of boundaries and doctrine as Rilke's, Jimenez's, or Machado's, had been almost utterly absent from our poetry since Whitman and Dickinson; and it wasn't only that the patient introspection of a Tomas Transtomer -- who conceived of contemplation as a journey, and who was too responsible to surrender to self-loathing and irony -- couldn't be found in our "confessional" poets. All of that was bad enough, but it wasn't only that. It was this: that many young poets speaking and reading mainly American English, however they might yearn to go beyond William Carlos Williams' "No ideas but in things" or Robert Lowell's self-hatred or Anne Sexton's waltz with death or Allen Ginsberg's howling or Robert Creeley's pinched shoes (each line a short painful step), could find few 20th-century examples of a more expansive vision of what poetry might be.

Of the 20th-century North American poets who'd transcended the culture's more obvious limits, Hart Crane's language was too enclosed within itself to be a useful model,

and the same could be said of Wallace Stevens -- though both were marvelous poets. But fine poets like James Wright, David Ignatow, and Robert Bly as well, were struggling against the tide -- which is why Wright and Bly often collaborated as translators, finding in translation the strength to leap past their origins and deepen their means as well as their meanings.

Then in 1971 Bly (with Wright and John Knoepfle) gave us *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*. "Compared with Vallejo," Wright wrote, "other poets seem afraid of their own voices." North American strictures weren't simply demolished by these poets; more importantly they seemed not even to recognize our strictures, for theirs was a poetry of raw psyche that transcended the personal and ranged wherever it pleased. That book was followed in 1973 by Bly's *Lorca and Jimenez: Selected Poems*. As with the first book, Bly wisely combined a legendary name (Neruda/Lorca) with one virtually unheard of here (Vallejo/Jimenez). Bly wrote of Jimenez: "His emphasis on how the poet *lived*, rather than on rhythm and technique, is precisely why so much poetry flowed from him into the young [Spanish language] poets." Through these translations Bly was giving the same example to us. Then, using mostly translations as models, in 1975 he published *Leaping Poetry*, with a thought at its heart that, for most U.S. poets, was either exciting or threatening or both: "The farther a poem gets from its initial circumstance without breaking the thread, the more content it has." These forceful books, following so closely one after the other like three wild animals running suddenly past a campfire, altered the very definition of poetry for many -- a coup completed with, that same year 1975, his first translations of Tomas Transtomer, a Swede who proved you didn't necessarily have to be Latin to "leap." *The Kabir Book* followed in 1977, Transtomer's *Truth Barriers* and the anthology *News of the Universe* (including many new translations) in 1980, *The Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke* in 1981, and *Times Alone: Selected Poems of Antonio Machado* in 1983. Taken together, these eight books constitute an extraordinary and unparalleled dozen years of masterwork in translation.

Bly's translations of this period, accompanied in his many readings and essays by a constant advocacy of the importance of translation, were pivotal in igniting the wave of translations that's enriched us since. (Jane Kenyon, for instance, credited Bly with first inspiring her to tackle Anna Akhmatova.) Certainly no one of his generation has done as much to deepen and widen the riverbed of North American poetry. Our poets have before them a universe of poetry unavailable and unimaginable 30 years ago. We're equipped now, with these models, to go into territories of the poem that stretch out limitlessly in every direction. Had he done nothing but these translations, Robert Bly would rank highly in any just evaluation of the 20th-century North American pantheon.

For myself, my first book of Bly's was *Neruda and Vallejo*. I date books as I read them, and the date in my hand on the title page is 9/23/71. I was some six weeks shy of my 26th birthday, living in Brookline, Massachusetts, earning my living as a typist at the end of the trolley line in Boston -- a writer who had yet to publish, working every night and far into the night on poems that I knew were terrible ... but I also knew I had to write them, had to break through their inadequacies to get to whatever writing I may or may not have been born for. Why I selected this volume in the bookstore, I no longer remember. But I do remember that on the trolley back to my apartment I was tremendously excited by several lines of Bly's introduction: "Neruda, like a deep-sea crab, all claws and shell, is able to breathe in the heavy substances that lie beneath the daylight consciousness. He stays on the bottom for hours, and moves around calmly and without hysteria."

Getting off the trolley at my usual stop, I was too stirred up to go back to my apartment. I just walked and walked, sitting down finally on a bench in a small and lovely park where I had never been before. There I read his versions of Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo for the first time. And then I wasn't reading anymore, I was remembering an old woman I'd seen years before -- she was throwing handfuls of seeds all about her as a flock of pigeons flew around her and seemed to cover and clothe her with the excited movement of their wings. On the blank back pages of that book I began writing a poem about her -- with a freedom of movement within the poem that I had never attempted before the examples of Neruda and Vallejo. And then a strange thing happened: A very tall old man, well-dressed and erect, walking with a cane, passed by my bench, and he stopped, looked at me as I looked up at him, and he raised his cane and said, smiling, "Welcome to Emerson Park!"

I said, "Thank you," we grinned at each other, and he walked on. But I felt an emissary had been sent to me by the spirit of poetry to say, "Yes, boy, you're on the right track at last!" And he must be dead by now, long dead, but it's surprising how often I've thought of him since. Suddenly his greeting -- "Welcome to Emerson Park!" -- rings in my head and I know that some energy of that book and of my discovery within those poems had radiated to him and he'd responded with a timeless welcome. Certainly, in terms of poetry, nothing has ever been the same for me.

A version of this piece will appear in the McKnight Foundation's tribute to Robert Bly.

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