

Max Wickert

Miscellaneous Translations



TO THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST

--anonymous Spanish Sonnet (?Sor Juana de la Cruz)

Don't woo my love, my God, with threats of doom.
Fear will not father fearless love for you.
Don't lure my soul with promised ecstasy:
Love born of promises is true love's tomb.

You, Lord, need neither threat nor promise, whom
my crimes thrice tripped, and who to pay their due
compelled yourself to be compelled for me
thieflike to hang, to steal my love. Black gloom

and utmost suffering gladly suffered show
from what unbounded springs your love must well.
How did I love that you should love me so?

If you did all your love on loveless me bestow,
what need you promise Heaven, threaten Hell?
Not Heaven, not Hell, but Love makes my love grow.

--translated 1958, unpublished

MEPHISTO'S LULLABY (after Goethe)

Vanish at once,
you gloomy vaults
piled up high,
let in the sky
that more invites us,
blue and bright,
than your austere,
unfriendly light!
Let clouds dissolve
and make appear
the glinting stars,
each star the sphere
of a milder sun
than the sun we know.
To and fro
from afar
the off spring of heaven
hover and beckon,
bent to wherever
yearnings are,
and yearning leaps
to follow where
the off spring of heaven
hang in air.
The streamers of
their garments flutter
on high and cover
the open fields
and the arbors where lovers,
lost in thought,
give their lives away
for a life unsought.
Leafy close follows
on leafy close.
Green sprout the vines.
Each tendril glows

each ponderous grape
drops to the press
in a wild plunge
to drunkenness.
Wine foams and flows
in trickling waves
through veins of rock
and crystal caves,
rushes away

from heights and spills
in sheets round green,
contented hills.
There drink of joy
all winged things
and soar toward
the sun, the sky,
the shining island
realms that sway
in latitudes
of liquid day,
where crowds intone
enchanted songs
and dancers strew
the meadows in throngs—
some swirling aloft
toward the peaks,
some skimming abroad
across wide lakes,
some pinioned at
a dizzy height,
all seeking life,
seeking the light
of distant, loving
stars, the yes
of single, endless
blessedness.

--translated 1984, unpublished

THE READER

--after Rilke

I've been reading a long while, ever since
the afternoon leaned with a rush of rain
against the windows. I heard no more of the winds.
My book was heavy and hard.
I stare at the sheets as at faces when
they go dark with musing or a start.
Time bulged behind the reading I did.

Suddenly something outshines my pages. Instead
of the timid words that tangle and blend
I am reading *Evening! Evening! Evening!* everywhere.
Yet I do not look up, and still I read
those long stretched rows until
the words roll off their strings whither they will.

Then I know.

 Above the brim-full,
shimmering gardens, the heavens are vast.
Once again the sun had to be gone.

Now summer night rushes in far as the eye can wander.
All scattered things are now recast
in modest groups. Dark on long roadways, people walk.
What little happens still is heard so strangely far,
it seems to signify something more.

If now I look up from my book,
nothing will be alien, all will have size.
The outside is what I am living in,
and, here as there, limitless, everything.
Only I weave myself on more tangled looms
when things find a measure in my eye
for the solemn simplicity of their mass.

Earth grows beyond herself and seems
to embrace the entire sky:
The nearest star is like the farthest house.

--translated 1969, unpublished