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A RAID ON THE INARTICULATE:
THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE IN THE POETRY OF W. S. MERWIN

And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.

T. S. Eliot
Four Quartets

By Anthony G. Stocks

English Honors Essay

Mr. Young

Mr. Friebert

Mr. Hobbs

20 April 1984

For W. S. Merwin, even more than for most of the poets of his generation, a fundamental concern has been the very possibility of writing poetry in a world which seems inevitably heading toward apocalypse. A long-time political activist, Merwin is painfully aware of the war, genocide, and uncontrolled industrialization which have poised civilization on a point between nuclear annihilation and environmental ruin, and he has often reflected on the problem of writing toward a future which may well be nonexistent. In the poem "It is March,"¹ from his 1967 collection The Lice, Merwin states the problem bluntly:

When you look back there is always the past
Even when it has vanished
But when you look forward
With your dirty knuckles and the wingless
Bird on your shoulder
What can you write

This poet, contaminated by the poison of the industrial world and sporting a decidedly grounded symbol of inspiration hardly seems in a position to explain the chaos which confronts him. And yet, the speaker refuses to admit defeat, tersely declaring at the end of the poem, "Whatever I have to do has not yet begun." Doggedly, like one of Beckett's protagonists, he moves on, searching for some song of deliverance, for some affirmation which can illuminate the darkling plain of the twentieth century.

The odds against him are impressive, for not only has the catastrophic upheaval of the century endangered man's physical existence: it has called into question the full range of his spiritual values as well. Such a crisis, acute enough at any rate, has especially crucial implications for Merwin and other poets of his generation, for they stand to lose not only their faith in a transcendent God, or in the efficacy of human reason, but also their trust in the fundamental basis

of their art; human language. The problem is not simply one of selecting the right word or phrase to describe the seemingly indescribable. That is a question which has always bedeviled poets, and will continue to do so. It is rather a deep and pervasive mistrust of the functions which language has been called upon to discharge in Western society: its ability to "name" things, to absolutely define and distinguish one object or concept from another; its use, given this capability, to order the world, to provide human beings with categories of experience with which to construct systems of belief, be they ethical, mythic, religious, or scientific; finally, its ability to communicate these names, categories, and systems, both to one's contemporaries and to future generations. It is these functions which many modern poets, inspired by their century's seeming disregard for other absolute human systems, have called into question, and their critiques have led them to ask whether poetry, constructed as it is of undependable words, can ever give a true picture of reality. They have come to a point, in the words of Alan Williamson, where language is considered "as much the enemy as the facilitator of essential creativity."²

Merwin has proven himself especially sensitive to these problems of language and reality. Throughout his poetic career he has been an indefatigable translator of non-English poetry, and the experience has not only provided a unique stimulus to his own poetic imagination, but has also convinced him that "if we take a single word of any language and try to find an exact equivalent in another, even if the second language is akin to the first, we have to admit that it cannot be done."³ Merwin has confirmed the suggestion that such an impression could be extended to the task of translating reality into poetry in a 1981 interview with Richard Jackson:

There's a sense in which language is always inadequate. We don't have to be metaphysical to see this---the cushion here, for instance, can't be named. You can call it a cushion, but that finally is no name; it does not call itself a cushion. There is that aspect of language which is always a gross approximation to the uniqueness of any perception about any experience. Language is fairly general---the color red has to apply to every red in the world when actually each red is different. The more you use language imaginatively, the more you try to describe what's unique about something, the more you realize the inadequacies of language.

Later in the interview, in fact, Merwin draws a fascinating parallel between the arrogant egocentricity of twentieth century man and the absolute use of language: "Human arrogance extends into language, as though we thought the naming of things were actually a substitute for things themselves."⁵ In Merwin's view, the same self-righteous belief in our own superiority which has caused us to slaughter one another wholesale and despoil the earth of its riches also informs our insistence on nailing down reality with the rigid and inadequate medium of language.

Yet for all his doubts as to the efficacy of language, Merwin, like the intrepid survivor of "It is March," refuses to despair at the prospect of creating poetry. In a career distinguished for the variety and tenacity of its poetic efforts, Merwin has striven to discover a viable aesthetic for his apocalyptic era. For over two decades, he has painstakingly explored the possibilities of language, searching for a means of expression which will bridge the gap between the self and the world without diminishing the essential mysteriousness or "otherness" of reality, the "unnameable aspect" of things which Merwin believes is their "real source."⁶ To capture experience while avoiding the arrogance of rigid definition is Merwin's avowed goal in attempting to rediscover what he has referred to as the "great language." In his polemic "Notes for a Preface," the poet has defined this ideal as:

Not a particular mode of poetry, but the great language itself, the vernacular of the imagination, that at one time was common to men. It is a tongue that is loosed in the service of immediate recognitions, and that in itself would make it foreign in our period. For it conveys something of the unsoundable quality of experience and the hearing of it is a private matter, in an age in which the person and his senses are being lost in the consumer, who does not know what he sees, hears, wants, or is afraid of, until the voice of the institution has told him.

Implicit in such a language is a mythic resonance which will not only illuminate the lives of men and women, but will somehow reintegrate human kind into the natural (and supernatural) world from which its insufferable superiority has separated it. It is an epiphany which is beautifully described at the end of Merwin's short poem "Spring:"

everything in the world has been lost and lost
but soon we will find it again
and understand what it told us when we loved it⁸

In this paper, I hope to examine Merwin's ultimately successful quest for such a language, and such a myth. Beginning with a brief description of his early work, in which the problem of language becomes a seemingly insuperable barrier to an understanding of the world, I wish to demonstrate his gradual evolution of a poetic voice which is both contemporary and universal. Of course, a study of this length will inevitably be marred by a certain amount of over-generalization and simplification. Merwin's struggle with language has been a long and arduous one, and he has explored many byways on the journey which we will simply not be able to investigate. However, I trust that this summary of the major stages of Merwin's poetic development, with a special concentration on the poems which mark its fruition, will provide a cogent introduction to his response to the unique poetic problems of his time, as well as offer some insights as^{to} the achievement of his work.

The problem of language is already strikingly apparent in Merwin's first book of verse, A Mask for Janus, selected by W. H. Auden for publication in the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1952. The theme is immediately broached by the book's epigraph, taken from John Hall Wheelock:

Habit is evil, all habit, even speech,
And promises prefigure their own breach.⁹

The quotation points up both the petrifying rigidity and the inherent instability of language, and its sentiments find a constant echo throughout the book. In "Rime of the Palmers,"¹⁰ a group of spectral medieval pilgrims declare:

Speech is a thorny way
In a hard land
And into absence
Into quiet goes

A page later, the speaker they are addressing responds:

A word is a hard thing
And the letter kills.

This precocious and obsessive preoccupation with the medium of his art is evident in every line of Merwin's first volume. And it must be obvious that for a poet so conscious of both the brittleness and the impotence of language, the task of bridging the gap between the self and the world must appear daunting indeed.

Merwin's solution to this problem in A Mask for Janus, one practiced by scores of poets before him, is to attempt to fashion a vision of the world through the use of mythic imagery and tightly structured verse forms. If chaotic reality cannot be directly translated into poetry, the writer will create a self-consciously artificial and ordered world, hoping to catch in its measured verses a clarifying reflection of the chaos. Such a strategy can often be quite successful, and one need only consider the visionary musings of Yeats or the tightly structured poetry of Louise

Bogan in order to credit its viability. Unfortunately at this point, Merwin simply does not possess the originality of vision and versification to accomplish such a coup. Instead, like so many American poets of the 'forties and early 'fifties, he takes refuge in the mythology, verse forms, and even the language of the distant past. Appropriating what Auden refers to in his preface for the volume as "the wisdom and assumed authority" of the classical and medieval worlds,¹¹ the young poet adopts an impersonal, bardic voice which spins out any number of ballads, songs, sestinas, carols, and even a half roundel. The poems are filled with archaic terms like "halcyon" and "penates" and peopled with medieval damsels, eternally wandering Persian soldiers, and the aforementioned spectral pilgrims.

Two factors seem to me to defeat Merwin's mythmaking strategy in this early book. The first is the obvious failure of his assumed language and mythology to anywhere engage with or reflect the world of reality. Merwin's self-consciously artificial vision seems without a single substantial referent; nowhere in these impersonal, opaque, and rarified poems do we catch even a glimpse of human feeling, or an image immediately identifiable with contemporary human existence. Little wonder that Robert Bly, writing in his magazine The Sixties, condemned Merwin's poetry as a "parade of nothingness."¹² Even in "Dictum: A Masque for the Deluge," perhaps the best poem in the collection, the retelling of the myth of Noah and the flood is so patently artificial and stylized that the poem's promise of "Dictions for rising, words for departure," is impossible to credit.¹³

Yet I feel a closer consideration of these poems will mitigate some of our feelings of censure toward their young author. For in my

view, the book fails for a second and more interesting reason than Merwin's inexperience. It is simply that the poet does not really trust his own solution to the problem of language. While Merwin realizes the importance of divining a mythic explanation of his world, he is even more aware that the language at his disposal is unable to capture the world in all its essential mystery. The classical myths, fine ladies, and intricate verse forms are merely an ornate and transparent facade. The real effect of these poems is to monotonously demonstrate their own failure to penetrate the silent chaos. They are, in the words of Bly, a "writing with empty language,"¹⁴ and their halting lines conjure up a bleak and desolate landscape of non-communication:

Then we poised, in time's fullness brought
 As to a new country, the senses
 In the mutations of a sallow light,
 A season signs and speechless;

* * * *

The covenant we could but seize
 Fractionally by the ear
 And dreamed it substance, that the eyes
 Might follow---and its motions were

Hands that toy about a door
 In dreams and melt where they caress,
 Not displacing the wind they wear---
 Brought us to this final place.¹⁵

The lines are turgid enough, and yet in the surreal image of human hands melting on the verge of some unspecified discovery, we catch an echo of the later Merwin, with his eloquent insistence on the difficulty of knowing.

Merwin's conception of his poetic dilemma is even more clearly dramatized in a short and otherwise undistinguished poem from his second collection of verse, The Dancing Bears. Entitled "On the Subject of Poetry," it is the complaint of a young man mystified by the behaviour of what we must take to be a true poet:

I do not understand the world, father.
 By the millpond at the end of the garden
 There is a man who slouches listening
 To the wheel revolving in the stream, only
 There is no wheel to revolve.

He sits in the end of March, but he sits also
 In the end of the garden; his hands are in
 His pockets, It is not expectation
 On which he is intent, nor yesterday
 To which he listens. It is a wheel turning.¹⁶

The poem continues in the same way for three more stanzas, but its import should be clear. Merwin posits a mysterious essence, silent and invisible in the routine of everyday human life and language, which is nonetheless the true pulse of the cosmos, the dimension which must be accounted for in any genuine poetry or any real understanding of the world. At the same time, the poem seems to me to stand as much as a mark of Merwin's confusion, as of his metaphysical penetration. It is hard not to identify the poet with the young man who "does not understand the world," for as important as Merwin's discovery of the essential silence underlying all existence may be, it is certainly not dramatized with much poetic force in The Dancing Bears. If what the man in the garden listens for is "not expectation/...nor yesterday," he would be unlikely to find it in this particular volume of Merwin's verse.

For in The Dancing Bears, Merwin appears determined to flesh out and enhance the artificial mirror-world which was only tentatively brought forward in A Mask for Janus. Once againⁱⁿ this collection we have a fair number of short-lined songs, but the book also contains several more ambitious pieces: a five hundred line metaphorical fairy tale and three "cansoes," love poems based on a medieval French model. Together with these attempts at working with a longer line, Merwin adds a much richer language and imagery, often to unintentionally comic effect:

What might she be but chorus to a dream,
 But one who strokes a dream of chrysolite,
 Glass pheasants, ducks ridiculous in stone,
 A gold salmon in a beryl pool,
 As reliquary, as meager communicance
 Till daylight, then departs and sits again
 By the tower and plays with a gold carding comb?¹⁷

Such rhetorical forays, unthinkable in the sterile world of A Mask for Janus, would seem to indicate that in some way, Merwin has tempered his distrust of language. And indeed, the "Cansoes," in addition to being embarrassingly effusive love poems, also put forth convoluted arguments that romantic love can somehow bridge the gap between the self and the world and validate the poet's song raised in its behalf:

It is by your faith that I believe, I am.
 Therein is genesis, as though a man,
 In love with existence, should bring to belief
 A divinity, an imagination
 That might move upon the idea of nothing
 And image a man; as though a man could make
 A mirror out of his own divinity,
 Wherein he might believe himself, and be.¹⁸
 So, in your articles, we love, you are.

Yet such a declaration of certainty and faith in the power of love, and its ability to discover "the imagination before the names of things/ The Dicta for the only poem,"¹⁹ has just the opposite effect on the reader. Whatever the theoretical viability of Merwin's pronouncements (and I, for one, find them incomprehensible), their practical value is totally vitiated by the actual poetry which frames them. Once again, Merwin finds himself betrayed by language. It is impossible to lend any serious credence to his dazzling but empty world of classical deities and ladies with herons. These images have absolutely nothing to do with the human experience of the twentieth century. They carry no mythic resonance, only a dead mythology. The poet is as isolated as ever, an increasingly skilled wordsmith spinning out ethereal fantasies without

a trace of relevance. Even Merwin, as caught up as he sometimes appears in his magic castle building, seems aware of his mistake. The terse epigraph of The Dancing Bears is taken from Flaubert:

...la parole humaine est comme un chaudron fele ou nous battons des melodies a faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les etoiles.²⁰

The quotation's reference seems obvious. Merwin, hoping to move the stars with the eloquence of his rarified language, has succeeded only in providing the absurd accompaniment for an unnatural spectacle.

However, if at the end of The Dancing Bears Merwin appears a poet mired in problems of both philosophical justification and practical versification, "Leviathan,"¹¹ the initial poem of his third collection, Green With Beasts, represents a significant, and seemingly effortless step forward. The language of its opening lines, pitching and rolling in an orgy of alliteration and assonance, betrays none of the languor and hesitation of Merwin's earlier verse. Rather, this remarkable first sentence, breathlessly extended over twelve lines, trumpets a conviction that language can evoke the primordial power and chaos of the cosmos through the energy of its rhythms, as well as the denotation of its words:

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.²¹

The whale these verses describe may be mythic in its proportions, and the verses' prosody owe⁵ much to Anglo-Saxon alliterative forms, but there

is no denying their effectiveness as poetry. The reader here discovers a delight in the play and possibilities of language and an unselfconscious confidence of expression welcome after the hesitation of past efforts. At the same time, as stylized and "poetic" as this language is, it possesses an emphatic directness which is patently convincing. We feel privy to a real experience, not a pale copy of one, and this realism is central to winning our belief in the mythic vision of the poet.

Even a cursory reading of Green With Beasts, or the volume which follows it, The Drunk in the Furnace, will convince us that "Leviathan" is no fluke. Banished from these books are the carols, ballads, and other archaic verse forms of which Merwin was so enamoured. In their place are dense, page-long paragraph blocks of verse, eschewing the inversions and end-stops of the past for longer, prose-like lines. The tone of these poems, while remaining self-consciously poetic, becomes progressively more accessible, often almost conversational, and a welcome vein of irony and wit becomes apparent as well. A wonderfully evocative passage like this one from "The Bones" would be unthinkable in the glass world of The Dancing Bears:

For years I had hardly
 Considered shells as being bones, maybe
 Because of the sound they could still make, though
 I knew a man once who could raise a kind
 Of wailing tune out of a flute he had,
 Made from a fibula: it was much the same
 Register as the shells'; the tune did not
 Go on when his breath stopped, though you thought it would.²²

There is also a gradual movement away from the self-consciously mythical subjects of the past. While Green With Beasts does include rather bombastic retellings of "The Prodigal Son" and "The Annunciation," it ends with a large number of poems on the sea and the mariners who get

their living on it. The Drunk in the Furnace also contains a number of sea poems, which approach the mythic from a much more realistic starting point. But the most remarkable feature of this book is its sequence of poems depicting American small-town life with a decidedly Gothic realist cast. Many of these poems echo the experiences of Merwin's western Pennsylvania childhood, and their often bitter, mock elegaic tones bear some resemblance to the poems of Robert Lowell's Life Studies period:

Wriest of uncles, and most remote, Sam Hess,
 Who named your tall daughter for the goddess
 Minerva, whom all agreed she resembled
 Till her car smashed with her and Olympus crumbled.²³

Yet the most important factor which distinguishes all these poems from their predecessors is simply a greater confidence in the medium of language. Merwin simply seems no longer to doubt the ability of language to provide an imaginative, yet realistic vision of the world. While these poems certainly admit a consciousness of the world's mysteriousness, they eschew the pervading and paralyzing awareness of silence and emptiness so evident in the early works.

A good deal of the thinking underlying this important shift can be gleaned, I believe, from an examination of the poem "Learning a Dead Language,"²⁴ which appears in the latter half of Green With Beasts. The ostensible subject of the poem is the methods and rewards of studying a language which is no longer actively spoken, a topic with obvious ramifications for Merwin's work as a translator. Yet I believe the poem has much wider implications, and that, on a deeper level, the task of learning a dead language comes to serve as a powerful metaphor for the process of coming to understand and artistically represent reality. Read in this way, the poem could as appropriately be titled "Learning a Poetic Language," or perhaps even, "Learning the Great Language."

The poem begins with an opening word of instruction to the student which conveniently doubles as a description of Merwin's own poetic predicament: "There is nothing for you to say." The first stanza continues with an emphasis on the patient, passive listening that the language will require of its pupil:

You must
 Learn first to listen. Because it is dead
 It will not come to you of itself, nor would you
 Of yourself master it. You must therefore
 Learn to be still when it is imparted,
 And, though you may not yet understand, to remember.

Immediately, we are reminded of the poet in "On the Subject of Poetry," patiently trying to grasp the meaning of the world by listening silently to the turning of an invisible wheel. I would suggest that a similar regimen for understanding the cosmos is being prescribed here, although it might at first seem strange to describe the world which lies beyond rational, human explanations as "dead." Nevertheless, after a moment's reflection, the epithet becomes clear. The world is "dead" because that is the way that modern man, isolated by his illusory sense of superiority, chooses to treat it: as a collection of inanimate objects to be defined and exploited. As Merwin's previous poetry has demonstrated, this world will neither "come to you of itself," offering explanations which can be reconciled with human ideas of rationality and progress, nor "would you/ Of yourself master it," through some isolated act of the human will. Instead, the silent rhythms of the seemingly inanimate world can only be detected through an open, attentive process of listening.

The poem makes no claims that such a pursuit will be easy. Like the individual words of a highly developed language, the isolated objects and events of everyday existence will only become comprehensible once the student has grasped the underlying basis of the entire system:

To understand
 The least thing fully you would have to percieve
 The whole grammar in all its accidence
 And all its system.

Not surprisingly, the faculty of memory takes on a crucial importance in such a quest. For the "order/Incomplete only where someone has forgotten," which Merwin seeks, and which will become the focus of all his later work, is not a human order of hierarchies and distinctions, but an extra-human pattern based on the eternal cycles of the natural world: the progression of the seasons, the ebb and flow of the tides, the recurring cycle of birth and death. Such a natural rhythm, embraced by primitive man but forsaken by his technocratic descendents, can only be grasped through the exercise of the memory, through observing the seemingly random events of the world, and carefully searching for the subtle patterns of repetition and continuity which underlie them. Just as the student of a dead language may discern the "governing order" of his subject because it is not obfuscated by "the passions it composed," the constant stream of babble it created when still spoken, so the student of reality must penetrate beyond the chaotic surface of the universe and attempt to descry the Heraclitian spirit of flux which animates all reality.

The discovery of this universal spirit has far-reaching implications, both for the understanding of the world that the poet would capture, and the language which he must use to capture it. The supposedly inanimate world is found to have a life of its own, an all-encompassing "passion" that does indeed allow for the discernment of order and pattern in what once appeared formless chaos. And, while that order can never be subject to the tyranny of human ambitions or rational explanations, there is clearly a sentiment in the poem's last stanzas that human beings, as

inhabitants of the universe, can naturally share in its primeval power: "You may find at last the passion that composed it, / Hear it both in its speech and in yourself." A reintegration of human consciousness into the natural cycles of the cosmos, a submission wherein we will discover those cycles in ourselves as well as in the world around us, becomes the chance for escape from the paralyzing isolation which confronted Merwin in his early poetry.

A similar revision is evident in the poem's attitude toward language, which, like the reality it figures, turns out not to be "dead" after all. Rather, it too possesses a life or "passion" of its own, which can render it a flexible tool for the evocation of reality, as well as the inadequate and stultifying phenomenon it appeared as in Merwin's early work.²⁵ This passion, the age-old human desire for explanation, communication, epiphany, which forms the basis of "The Great Language," can, like the spirit of the universe be incorporated into the life of the poet, and provide words where none seemed possible before:

What you remember saves you. To remember
Is not to rehearse, but to hear what never
Has fallen silent. So your learning is,
From the dead, order, and what sense of yourself
Is memorable, what passion may be heard
When there is nothing for you to say.

The real goal of the study of language therefore, is not to inherit and adopt the "passions" which the language composed, the systems, myths, and verse forms which have in Merwin's case proven unable to provide a relevant basis for modern poetry. Rather, it is to become part of the continuum of human desire for order and myth that "never/Has fallen silent." Allying this original motivating spirit of language with his own living spirit ("what sense of yourself is memorable"), the poet may begin the difficult task of communicating the mythic order which his meditations

have revealed to him. The artificial mirror world will be left behind for a language which will at least attempt to convey a realistic sense of the world.

Of course, the solution put forward in the poem does not completely wipe away all the problems of poetic utterance. It does not endorse an absolute basis for language, or claim that humans can persist in the simplistic belief that their words are substitutes for the objects they refer to. Nonetheless, it does allow for the possibility that language can be a useful tool for relating the mysteries of the cosmos, thus aiding us in transcending the barriers of our acquired ignorance and isolation. The key for Merwin now lies not in the arrogance of one-to-one-correspondence, nor in the lifeless artifacts of more confident ages, but in an ordering of language which will somehow suggest the full ambience of an object or experience. To return to the metaphor of translation, it is the spirit of the original, not some attenuated and lifeless correspondence, which the poet must attempt to capture:

If we continue, we reach a point where some sequence of the first language conveys a dynamic unit, a rudiment of form. Some energy of the first language begins to be manifest, not only in single words but in the charge of their relationship. The surprising thing is that at this point the hope of translation does not fade altogether, but begins to emerge. Not that these rudiments of form in the original language can be matched---any more than individual words could be---with exact equivalents in another. But the imaginative force which they embody in context, may suggest convocations of words in another language that will have a comparable thrust and sense. 26

Poetry thus becomes a matter of "presencing" reality, as opposed to rigidly defining it. It requires that the poet communicate not only what can be known of an object of experience, but that he pay special attention to suggesting what cannot be grasped about his quarry: its essential otherness or mysteriousness. If such an approach is taken, Merwin believes, the possibilities of poetry become promising indeed:

A poem is a huge leap---from the kind of basic, primitive use of language to a basic, primitive use of poetry. Poetry is in a way the real use of language because, though we can't name the cushion, there is a way of making a poem in which the cushion and one's experience of it are not apart. Then you reach the point where you can't name the experience, but where the poem is the same as the experience. They become one.²⁷

Such a flexible, living conception of language inevitably suggests a new and more relevant definition of myth as well. In Merwin's new formulation of the term, myth becomes not a static and hoary construct from the past, but merely an intensified vision of the individual's natural and supernatural perceptions:

Myth is pretty hard to isolate. It's a dimension underlying sensual experience; if sensual experience is seen with sufficient intensity and identification, then you are already treading in the preludes of myth. That is, you're realizing your own dreams. You analyze them and begin to come out with symbols, but from beginning to end you know you're walking in the place where myth is happening.²⁸

Armed with this new and liberating conception of his craft, Merwin is able to begin the development of his unique poetic voice. His apprenticeship of language is recorded in Green With Beasts and The Drunk in the Furnace, two books which, while admittedly uneven, still represent a great step forward. It is also in Green With Beasts that we come upon "Low Fields and Light," to my mind Merwin's first truly great poem, and a promising harbinger of things to come.

"Low Fields and Light" is a serene description of an American seascape, which for all its simplicity manages to create powerful feelings of mystical recognition in the reader. Such a response is principally evoked, I think, by a subtle tension in the poem between the realistic description of a landscape which the reader can comfortably visualize and the delicate suggestion of less tangible presences inhabiting the landscape. This tension between the realistic and the otherworldly is immediately introduced in the poem's first stanza, as the speaker's

supposition that the landscape he is imaginatively recalling has an actual physical location in Virginia is juxtaposed with two beautifully expansive similies: "Like a grey blade set to the moon's roundness/Like a plain of glass touching all there is."²⁹

The confluence of realistic and mythic subtly underlies the remainder of the poem as well. Its subsequent five stanzas are, for the most part, a straightforward description of the landscape and the circumstances which led to its present appearance. But the diction of the poem hardly presents such a cut-and-dried depiction of the scene. Instead, the exclusion of humanity from the landscape, the subtle animism suggested by the characterization of light ("the edging light crawled/There and covered them, a little more each year"), and the measured graceful ebb and flow of the poem's enjambed lines, spoken as if a single, breathless utterance, prepare us for a silent, but stunning recognition of the place's unknowable dimension:

But you would think the fields were something
To me, so long I stare out, looking
For their shapes or shadows, through the matted gleam, seeing
Neither what is nor what was, but the flat light rising.

The poem refuses to define the ineffable feeling it has pursued. It remains the "something" which can only be negatively suggested by the poem's movement and imagery. And yet its power is unmistakable. We feel that we have been transported, along with the poet, not only to an actual landscape, but to the verge of some momentous insight, to a scene whose liminality bespeaks the presence of primeval forces, wherein the silent flux of the universe is discernable. This is not the mere romanticization of a landscape. It is rather the tacit awareness of an unnameable but integral spirit of change underlying all things, an awareness which holds out the hope of man's reintegration into the life of the cosmos,

even while pointing up his current alienation from that eternal current.

In its preoccupation with the silence and mystic resonance of a non-human landscape, "Low Fields and Light" points the way toward Merwin's mature poetic aesthetic. But it must be admitted that its level of penetration and success is somewhat atypical of his poetry at this point. In order to gain a more complete understanding of Merwin's development during this period, and offer some insights as to the radical shift in style and tone which would appear in his next volume, The Moving Target, it will be useful to glance briefly at the title poem of Merwin's fourth collection, "The Drunk in the Furnace."³⁰ The poem, one of the best in Merwin's "American Gothic" sequence, also indicates the poet's awareness of the limits of his current poetic aesthetic. Its wonderfully absurd scenario of a drunken tramp turning a dirt poor rural community upside down by taking up a noisy residence in a junkyard furnace is at once imaginative and appealing, and its crisp, yet conversational tone and evocative, colloquial word choice, indicate the formidable skill that Merwin has developed as a versifier. In addition, there is an undeniable mythic resonance to this poem, ironically underscored by phrases like "pale resurrection" and "bad castle." Once again, although with admittedly less intensity than in "Low Fields and Light," one admires Merwin's ability to unobtrusively reveal the archetypal echoes of realistic situations.

However, I would argue that the poem can also be read as Merwin's own self-deprecating recognition of the limits of his current poetic stance and style. The third stanza of the poem stresses that the character "cosily bolted behind the eye-holed iron/Door of the drafty burner" is indeed a poet of sorts:

Where he gets his spirits
 It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical:
 Hammer-and-anvilling with poker and bottle
 To his jugged bellowings, till 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.

The pied-piper-like appeal of his song to the children of the community, who, "agape on the crumbling ridge/Stand in a row and learn," further emphasizes the comparison. And yet, the image conveyed is hardly that of the poetic sage seeing to the heart of reality that we find speaking in most of Merwin's poems of this period. It is instead a tipsy and boisterous old buffoon, isoated within a cast-off fixture of the industrial world. The furnace becomes Merwin's version of Plato's cave, an ironic reminder of the limits of his own powers and percptions, and perhaps a realization that the confident and realistic mode in which he has been working has produced poems which are not so much epiphanies with the cosmos as "jugged bellowings" preceding the "last groaning clang" of extinction. The poem becomes a reminder of Merwin's human limitations, and an admission that in his intoxication with his new-found faith in language, he too perhaps has fallen into the trap of linguistic arrogance and rigidity.

Certainly, Merwin's reflections on the period immediately following the publication of The Drunk in the Furnace would seem to confirm such a suggestion. For eighteen months he found himself unable to write any poetry at all, and his account of the period in a recent interview indicates the difficult questions with which he was wrestling:

What I remember happening in the late fifties was coming to the end, in fact, of The Drunk in the Furnace and thinking that I'd come to the end of something and I didn't know what was going to happen next, but I knew that it wasn't going to be the same thing. Because that seemed to me to be something I knew about, in a way. I think that poetry, and maybe all

writing, certainly everything we do to some degree, does not come out of what you know. And one of the great superficialities of positivistic thinking is the assumption that things really evolve out of what you know. Nothing evolves out of what you know. You don't move from what you know to something else you know. And it's the unknown that keeps rendering possibilities. So I really came to the point where I was dissatisfied with what I knew, and I wanted greater access to what I didn't know.³¹

For Merwin, the aesthetic of The Drunk in the Furnace had come to appear too pat. It was too oriented toward an ideal of human singularity, too retrospective, too dependent on the assumed, but baseless authority of the poet. What was needed was a new poetic voice; a voice that was decidedly human, but which transcended the personal ego; a voice that was contemporary in its political and spiritual consciousness, but nevertheless timeless in its mythic resonance; a voice that did not balk at a visceral encounter with reality, but which always admitted, and indeed emphasized, the inevitable frustration of its efforts. It was such a voice that Merwin set about developing in his fifth collection of verse, The Moving Target.

The opening pages of The Moving Target offer a vivid dramatization of Merwin's ultimate poetic metamorphosis. The first two poems in the book, "Home for Thanksgiving" and "A Letter from Gussie" are long, first-person dramatic monologues, similar in tone and style to the "American Gothic" pieces in The Drunk in the Furnace. However, the poem which immediately follows them, entitled "Lemuel's Blessing,"³² marks a radical departure from their themes and perspectives. With its primitive, ritualistic tone and imagery, and its insistence on transcending the limits of the poet's own ego, the poem represents Merwin's ecstatic declaration of a new poetic aesthetic and a new poetic self.

Merwin takes the epigraph of "Lemuel's Blessing" from the Jubilate Agno of Christopher Smart: "Let Lemuel bless with the wolf, which is a dog without a master, but the lord hears his cries and feeds him in the desert." The poem is that blessing, a long, repetitive incantation to a transcendent creative spirit, here personified in the totem animal of a wolf. Selecting for his avatar a creature traditionally separated from the realms of human civilization, Merwin imaginatively projects himself into a being which both symbolizes and participates in the instinctive, essentially mysterious life of the cosmos. He leaves behind the rational, egocentric persona which has provided the viewpoint for all his previous poetry, and instead attempts to partake of a wisdom at once unconscious, primeval, and extra-human:

You know the way,
 Spirit,
 I bless your ears which are like cyprusses on a mountain
 With their roots in wisdom. Let me approach.
 I bless your paws and their ^atwenty nails which tell their own prayer
 And are like dice in command of their own combinations.
 Let me not be lost.

This initiative is perhaps the most crucial move in the whole of Merwin's poetic development. No longer will he merely gaze out at the seascape, the detached, ironic, inevitably alienated observer. No longer will he accept his humanity and its modes of thought as an insuperable barrier to a transcendent reunion with the natural world. Instead, the poet commits himself to an imaginative quest beyond the accepted boundaries of human consciousness,^a a quest which, though it may inevitably be frustrated by the limitations of both the mind and its language, appears the only way to approach a true, impartial understanding of reality.

There are regrets in this poem that the choice has not been made sooner, that the poet has more often resembled the servile domestic dog

than the fearless and untamed wolf. In his admission that "I have hidden at wrong times for wrong reasons" and his plea for deliverance from the "ruth of approval," which would render him a "faithful custodian of fat sheep," there is perhaps even a recognition that the speaker has too often truckled to his audience, instead of boldly pursuing his true artistic goals. But the most significant points of the poem are not the occasions of Merwin's regrets, but the remarkable goals he now sets for himself. In a crucial passage toward the end of the work, the desire for and implications of abandoning an exclusively human perspective are carefully elaborated:

Let fatigue, weather, habitation, the old bones, finally,
 Be nothing to me,
 Let all lights but yours be nothing to me.
 Let the memory of tongues not unnerve me so that I stumble or quake.
 But lead me at times beside the still waters;
 There when I crouch to drink let me catch a glimpse of your image
 Before it is obscured with my own.

The concerns of human comfort, food, sleep, and shelter, become negligible in the light of the new-found quest. Likewise, the "old bones," the demands of one's immediate past with its ancestors and traditions will no longer act as a burden to be incessantly dwelt on and regretted. Rather, such concerns will be embraced in and swallowed up by the larger questions of contemporary existence. Finally, traditional forms and uses of language, "the memory of tongues," will also be rejected, in favor of new strategies which will attempt to better communicate the otherworldly silence of the "still waters," the essential otherness of reality. Such linguistic forms and functions, traditional sentence structures, conventional verse patterns, and sequential modes of development based on rational logic, may have played a large role in Merwin's poetic apprenticeship, but now they must be left behind in favor of a language which will be stretched to the point of fragmentation and entropy in order to drama-

tize the chaotic flux of the universe. The artificial patterns and hierarchies of linguistic structures, and the logical modes of thinking they represent, will be discarded, just as the faith in the absolute correspondence of words to the objects they denote was previously left behind. All that remains will be the "passion," the "life" of language, the essential desire for communion and epiphany which holds out the hope that the poet can somehow encounter and presence the image of the ineffable spirit, before it is obscured by the opacity of his own ego.

"Lemuel's Blessing" could certainly not be designated as one of Merwin's most perfect poems. When taken out of context, it can appear too long and overly repetitious, as well as untenably optimistic in its estimate of the possibilities of human transcendence. Nevertheless, the poem is crucial to any understanding of Merwin's subsequent poetic development. It stands as the poet's declaration of independence from the patterns of thought and perception which he had to master in order to write poetry at all, but which now must be transcended because they no longer keep pace with his deeper and more comprehensive vision of the world. For all their hints of the ineffable and mysterious, the poems of Green With Beasts and The Drunk in the Furnace remained fixed in an egocentric, human-centered perspective. They were the products of traditional, logical modes of thought and expression, displaying deliberate commencements and climaxes, and relying on accepted verse structures and time-honored rhetorical devices. With "Lemuel's Blessing," Merwin begins his attempts at a poetry which abandons the individual ego in favor of a freer, more mystical evocation of natural and supernatural presences. It is to be a poetry not of beginnings and endings, of logical, sequential developments, but a poetry of process which reflects the eternal Heraclitian

flux of the universe, rather than the arbitrary demarcations which humankind imposes on it. Finally, it will be a poetry which will rely not on language to shape reality, but on reality to shape language, which will try to capture in the rhythms of language the chaotic uncertainty as well as the reassuring continuity of the natural (and supernatural) world.

The poems of The Moving Target will retain a good deal of the timeless, totemic imagery and tone of "Lemuel's Blessing." There is in this book, as in all of Merwin's subsequent volumes, an emphasis on archetypal images and landscapes which consistently conveys a mythic atmosphere of first things and mystic presences. Yet at the same time, these poems carry about them a sense of urgency and contemporaneity which renders them more immediate, and in the sense that they convey the actual "feel" of the world, more realistic, than any thing which precedes them in the Merwin canon. The use of a casual, often colloquial, but always disembodied voice, which spews out clichés, epigrams, proverbs, and an amazing stream of surreal images in broken, fragmented, unpunctuated lines of verse conjures up a vision of twentieth century America at once recognizable and alienating. Here there is truly no line between present and past, between experience and myth, and as the presence of the poet moves through these pages, discarding the obfuscating burden of his own ego, and its inherited notions of perception and poetry, the boundary between art and reality appears to waver as well.

An excellent example of Merwin's new approach, which pays special attention to the problems of language and expression we have been tracing, is "October,"³³ which is found near the beginning of The Moving Target. The poem's title not only produces in the mind of the reader a presentiment of change, decay, and death, but also introduces the idea of the eternal

cyclic progression of the seasons, a movement which, when contrasted with the human efforts of the speaker, will provide the poem's central tension.

That tension is introduced in the work's initial lines, wherein the speaker recounts his attempts to order the world, a desire which, as we have observed, is intimately connected with the functions of language:

I remember how I would say, "I will gather
These pieces together,
Any minute now I will make
A knife out of a cloud."

Like the speaker of Eliot's "The Waste Land" ("These fragments I have shored against my ruins"),³⁴ the poet would impose some classification or systemization on the seemingly unrelated fragments of his experience, and thus move toward a rational understanding of his world. But the suggestion that such a course is problematic, if not impossible, is as strong in this poem as in "The Waste Land." The speaker would make "A knife out of a cloud," he would somehow transform the naturally vaporous and ungraspable flux of reality into a man-made instrument designed to sharply separate one thing from another, an instrument which is by extension a symbol of aggression, division, and death. Certainly there could be no clearer exposition of the potential arrogance which Merwin has always recognized as inherent in the use of human language, and the poem goes on to emphasize that such an approach is inevitably defeated by the very nature of the world. No matter what our efforts at explanation and classification, the days pass obliviously, "leaving their wounds behind them," in an impersonal refutation of the myth of human superiority. Ultimately, it appears that the only sure definition man can assign to anything is the name which will be inscribed on his own tombstone, a distinction which appears dubious to us, but which the speaker embraces with a sort of a sort of desperate bravado: "But, 'Monument,' I kept saying to the grave, / 'I am still your legend'."

Having admitted the impossibility of finding a sure foundation through some logical classification of the world, the poem abruptly shifts to a consideration of the transcendent possibilities of romantic love, a theme which, we recall, was previously canvassed in the "Cansoes" of The Dancing Bears:

There was another time
 When our hands met and the clocks struck
 And we lived on the point of a needle, like angels.

Here, there is an acknowledgement of transcendence. The sheer intensity of the experience seems to have had an effect on time, or at least the perception of time, as represented by the clocks. In fact, there seems a suggestion of the miraculous nature of human love, as human beings under its influence are likened to angels, able, in the old cliché echoed in the last line, to dance on the head of a pin. Yet the irony and hyperbole inherent in that cliché, and the evocation of pain conveyed by Merwin's transformation of the "head of a pin" into "the point of a needle," also affirms the evanescent and potentially destructive nature of human passion. Certainly, this attempt to cheat time and the world seems little more successful than the strategies of language rejected in the first stanza.

Having put forward two strategies for mastering the world, the speaker in the third stanza tacitly rejects both, choosing instead to acknowledge the fact that he cannot arrogate himself above the cycles of nature and time:

I have seen the spider's triumph
 In the palm of my hand. Above
 My grave, that thoroughfare,
 There are words now that can bring
 My eyes to my feet, tamed.
 Beyond the trees wearing names that are not their own
 The paths are growing like smoke.

In his reference to "the spider's triumph," the speaker accepts the evidence of the cobweb-like lifelines on his hand, which link him to the pro-

cesses of birth and death. In the next lines, his conception of language receives a similar amendment. Imaginatively descending into the grave, the speaker looks up to realize that his death will have no effect of the life of the world. Instead of his tomb becoming the a "monument" to his "legend" which will be revered by all, it will become a "thoroughfare," heedlessly passed over by all creatures. The words of an epitaph will fail to immortalize the speaker. They do, however, bring his eyes to his feet in shame, showing him the error of his attitude of superiority and taming his destructive spirit of human arrogance. The beneficial outcome of this new-found humility is demonstrated in the stanza's final lines. No longer will words be used to assign arbitrary names to natural objects, such as the trees in the penultimate line. Instead, they will be employed to convey an awareness of the superior and uncontrollable powers of nature, the sobering discovery that the "paths" to something lying beyond the natural^{world} of the trees are, like the clouds, nothing more than insubstantial smoke.

By the poem's final stanza, the speaker has reached a sobering admission of his and his species' insignificance:

The promises have gone,
 Gone, gone, and they were here just now.
 There is the sky where they laid their fish.
 Soon it will be evening.

The promises of civilization, the baseless dreams of the personal ego, which at one time seemed able to so reverse the natural order as to fill the sky with fishes, must be forgotten. Now such fantastic dreams of imposing one's will on the world must be abandoned. But the enigmatic image of the sky and its fish also recalls the clouds of the first stanza, swimming slowly over the horizon, and the terse final line of the poem, "Soon it will be evening," indicates a stoic, if understandably regretful

acceptance of the eternal cycle of day and night, life and death, which the poem's own cyclic movement has helped the reader to discover.

"October" could certainly not be called a ringingly optimistic poem, but there is a rigorous honesty and humility in this work which I feel we cannot help but admire. Merwin is unflinching in his critique of comfortable human assumptions, and he offers no easy alternatives to the logocentrism and love he has been forced to revalue in the course of his meditation. The face of nature here appears nowhere near as benevolent and accessible as in "Lemuel's Blessing," and the poem's almost obsessive interest in images of death render that phenomenon the ultimate reality in the dissolving world of these verses. And yet, I don't believe the poem can be dismissed as a mere pessimistic murmur in the void. There is a sense of patient groping after truth here, a concentrated effort to put aside the assumptions and presumptions of the personality and its acquired knowledge. Merwin forces his language to mirror the objects he pursues as closely as possible, employing the animism we first noticed in "Low Fields and Light" to "the days," "the trees," "the paths," "the promises." He sets these presences on a level equal to his own being, and captures a world of spirits which move in ways which are not human, but certainly become more comprehensible when observed from this disembodied viewpoint. At the same time, the humanity of the speaker, the rhetorical directness of his voice, the familiarity of the clichés he plays upon, and the poignant note of regret and sadness we sense in the poem's closing lines, is never for a moment in doubt. In this stunningⁿ balance between the human and the inhuman, the familiar and the mysteriousness, it is impossible not to sense a glimmer of indispensable knowledge, a feeling that we now understand our true position in the universe, and will no longer be deluded by our own egotism.

Such a metaphysical realignment is even more fully accomplished in another poem from The Moving Target, "The Way to the River."³⁵ The title of the poem would seem to suggest some path toward spiritual discovery, some way of return to a time-honored symbol of continuity, life, and renewal. However, at first glance a reader might well find this work incomprehensible. "October" may have employed complex patterns of imagery and some surprising shifts in its development, but it appears a model of coherence when placed next to the unpunctuated, kaleidoscopic jumble of surreal images that "The Way to the River" initially appears. But this initially forbidding appearance is, it seems to me, a crucial feature of the poem's overall strategy, and one which makes the work of art emblematic of the reality it attempts to convey. Like the cosmos it seeks to presence, the poem may at first appear a meaningless chaos of fragments, but a careful study of its language and movement should yield not only a number of insights into the motions of the cosmos, but should mimic the actual sensation of those motions as well. Of course, we cannot here expect any sense of linear development or logical resolution to emerge from this reflection. Those are artificial human constructs inapplicable to the forces Merwin wishes to capture. Nonetheless, careful reading of the poem, like a thoughtful contemplation of the world, will both teach us and move us.

As we have mentioned, "The Way to the River" is, like "October," concerned with the possibilities of human transcendence, and, like that poem, it pays special attention to the relation that human language and human love bear to such a quest. The poem begins with a series of disembodied, surreal images emblematic of the evanescence and emptiness of the modern world. Here, we encounter "names/of/Ash," language which conveys nothing, empty sleeves, devoid of the arms which should fill them, the "wreaths of

hinges," devices which should allow for the opening of doors and crossing of thresholds instead fashioned into symbols of mourning and death. These pitiful shards of the civilized world are serenaded by the "song of the bandage vendor," a comically grotesque image suggestive of both the essential violence and deep-seeded greed of the modern world.

Against this weird parade of nothingness, the speaker places the name of his beloved: "I lay your name by my voice/As I go." The realms of language and love merge, and there is a suggestion of incantation, of a mystical power of language like that in "Lemuel's Blessing." However, the word is hardly out before another daunting litany of surrealistic obstacles appears to challenge its utterance. There are "late/Doors," which no longer lead anywhere, and "children born looking backwards" who, in a grisly evocation of a divided, violent world, "play that they are broken glass." The inhabitants of this world become depersonalized "numbers," that "wait in the halls," while the clouds, by human definition inanimate objects, are personified into a life of their own. Paradoxically, it is they who are free, and marking the ineffable passage of time, "putting the horizon/Into baskets they are escaping." Or perhaps it is really the children who are engaging in these activities, forced to "play that they are old" by a world which makes children suffer as much as its other inmates, and lost to the speaker's sight in the process. The syntax of the poem suggests both possibilities, and makes a good example of the general ambiguity which marks both Merwin's poetry and the world it attempts to present. If we follow the first option, we find another case of natural animism. If we choose the second, we find a pattern of repetition in the language of the poem which mirrors the recurring patterns of the natural world.

Picking his way through this sterile landscape, revealed now as the illogical and uninhabitable place it really is, the speaker again invokes the totem of his lover's name: "I step over the sleepers the fires the calendars/My voice turns to you." It is again a brief moment of tranquility. The onslaught of the dead city continues, as a torrent of words pours out in a literal stream of consciousness, pointing up the fragmentation and free association which language must embrace if it is to replicate the actual experience of reality, even a reality as unnatural as the appalling city. It is in passages like this one, where words simultaneously demonstrate their ability to convey the feel of the world and the incredible strain which marks their inability to in any way contain or control its primeval energy, that both the life and limitations of language become fully apparent:

I go past the juggler's condemned building the hollow
 Windows gallery
 Of invisible presidents the same motion in them all
 In a parked cab by the sealed wall the hats are playing
 Sort of poker with somebody's
 Old snapshots game I don't understand they lose
 The rivers one
 After the other I begin to know where I am
 I am home

There can be no doubt that the reader is brought to a visceral encounter with reality by these lines. Not only do the verses present us with a visionary estimate of the modern American city, the decay and deceptive promise of the "condemned building the hollow/Windows gallery," the devastating political irony of the "gallery/Of invisible presidents the same motion in them all," and the comically frightening vision of human beings reduced to hats, playing an incomprehensible game with the remnants of the past and losing their contacts with the rivers, natural symbols of life, in the process. Not only is there an incredible poignance and sense of human emotion in the speaker's recognition, "I am home," but the lines

also demonstrate the structures of language breaking down under the pressure of trying to capture the ambience of the scene. The rational rules of punctuation, sentence structure, and even standard language usage can no longer hold. Instead, the words tumble out in seemingly arbitrary bursts of utterance which echo the chaos of the landscape: "juggler's condemned building the hollow gallery." There is no pretension to precise definition here, no ambition to make a knife out of a cloud. The game is a "sort of poker," the snapshots "somebody's," the speaker's mixture of instinctive perception and alienated confusion captured in the phrase "I begin to know where I am," the simultaneous resonance and failure of language dramatized by assigning the term "home" to all that has gone before.

Yet this visionary tour de force hardly closes the poem's consideration of language and reality. In its next stanza, the speaker's plaintive cry of "Be here" is juxtaposed with sterile images of the human world. Letters full of words provide him with no relief; they are the prey of flies, symbols of decay and death. Nor are other human means of remembrance, "medals" in approbation of fidelity and fortitude, or the almost fetishistic token of a lover's glove, any comfort in the face of the alienation and loneliness experienced by the speaker. Presence has become all. The name which seemed a protection before appears seriously threatened as the reality of time becomes overpowering and offers its own word, "Now," a blunt and meaningless fragment which nonetheless seems in its emphasis to wield a strange power of its own.

This power works its spell on the subsequent words of the speaker:

Be here what can we
 Do for the dead the footsteps full of money
 I offer you what I have my
 Poverty

Here there is a desperate stammering inversion of language, and the ability of words to simultaneously communicate even as they fall short of their mark is again apparent. The line break is ambiguous, and typical of the flexibility and suggestiveness which Merwin's language has now attained. If the first line is taken by itself, it can be inverted into one metaphysical question (ie. "What can we be here?"). If read in conjunction with the second line, the question becomes a rhetorical one, "what can we/ Do for the dead," whose answer of "nothing" must be clear from the entire poem's relentless reaching after presence. Yet in addition to impossible questions, the stanza concludes with an offer of the virtue that is a pre-requisite to any seeking after that all-important presence, whether it is figured as a valid use of language, the embrace of a lover, or a reintegration with the spirit of the natural world: "poverty," humility, an abandonment of human arrogance and superiority.

An elaboration on this concept of humility as a way toward ultimate reunion is contained in the next stanza. Here the "handful/Of water," the fragment of the eternal river which the speaker brings to the inhuman world of the "city of wires," provides a natural mirror which indicates the temporality of the city. The speaker will not be deceived by the technocratic dreams of his countrymen "building the empty/Ages." Instead, he will build on the insights which his disillusioned perspective has allowed him to discover. He will no longer be "ashamed of time," nor will he try to explain it away with language, for "its hands /Have no names/I have passed it I know." And he will acknowledge the determinism, "Necessity...with/All the faces," the inevitable ebb and flow of the cosmos which frustrates human ambition, but is nonetheless always evident in retrospect, for it is "written on the back of every thing."

The poem seems to have wound down to the same patient, autumnal stoicism that characterised "October," But perhaps even more strongly than that work, "The Way to the River" resists an entirely pessimistic conclusion. For its closing lines "we/Will read it together," suggest not only the survival of human affection between lovers and human communication between poets and readers, but also offer the possibility of comprehension, of "reading" reality, even if such a reading only leads to a discovery of our own powerlessness. Certainly, the poem as a whole demonstrates such a possibility of understanding, for though its chaotic syntax and fragmented movement make it difficult to decipher, it nonetheless suggests important truths about the universe. As a microcosm of reality, it defies linear explication and logical categorizing, but not a patient, careful explication. Language here has become the perfect mirror of reality, a flexible, fleeting phenomenon incomprehensible to those who seek pat, clear-cut answers, but opening up possibilities of communication for those willing to encounter it without condescension.

A poem which carries a similar interpretation of human existence, but which offers a different perspective on the use of language is "The Last One,"³⁶ found in Merwin's 1967 collection The Lice. Here, language is conceived as a vehicle for constructing a comparatively formal myth. But there can be no thought to a return to the classical allusions of Merwin's early career. Instead, the poet mixes a wickedly ironic, casually conversational tone with archetypal imagery and ritualistic patterns of repetition to create the singular blending of timelessness and contemporaneity that we have noted before. The first lines of the poem, a devastating portrait of the arrogance and destructiveness of urban man, could be likened to the effect of Brechtian drama, creating simultaneous feelings of alienation and recognition:

Well they'd made up their minds to be everywhere because
 why not.

Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.
 They with two leaves they whom the birds despise.
 In the middle of stones they made up their minds.
 They started to cut.

"The Last One" is a devastatingly effective fable, a warning, both blackly humorous and grimly frightening, against the unconscionable attitude of superiority of mankind over nature which leads to the exploitation and destruction of animals, forests, and rivers. In order to dramatize the redressing of such folly, the poet personifies the forces of nature, in the figure of the last tree to be cut by the marauding population:

They came to the end of the day there was one left standing
 They would cut it tomorrow they went away.
 The night gathered in the last branches.
 The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
 The night and the shadow put on the same head.
 And it said Now.

Such a non-human perspective, while violating the laws of "reason," nonetheless portrays the conflict as it actually exists. Man is exposed as powerless in the face of nature's persistent, downright magical powers of survival. Indeed, the more futile attempts the foresters make to obliterate "the last one," the stronger it grows until it has either swallowed its persecutors up or permanently maimed them.

The story is certainly a powerful allegory in these times of wholesale environmental destruction, but its significance goes beyond this most literal level of interpretation. If we recall Merwin's linking of the arrogance which leads men to destroy their own habitat to the arrogance which animates their absolute belief in the efficacy of language, it should not surprise us that "The Last One" can also be read as a meditation on the vagaries of language and its referents. Significantly, it is not the actual physical manifestation of the last tree which wreaks

its revenge on the cutters. It is the tree's shadow, its indescribable, but here palpable essence, which defies all attempts to eradicate it, and in its night utterance of the word "Now," we hear a clear echo of the simple presence which emerged as the ultimate reality in "The Way to the River." Not only does this presence defy all the efforts to beat it, bury it, or blow it into oblivion, but it especially resists attempts at definition. When the cutters, who live "in the middle of stones" find themselves frustrated, they decide to "make a stone out of" the shadow, giving it a concrete name which they can subsequently control. But the shadow defies this attempt at rationalization as effectively as it overcomes physical onslaughts. In fact, it reverses the attack, infecting those who try to destroy it, swallowing them into the black otherness of death. At the end of the poem, those who escape find themselves permanently impressed with the experience. They are "The lucky ones with their shadows," carrying within themselves a knowledge of the mysterious power and untameable otherness which is an integral part of all things.

"The Last One" is an excellent example of Merwin's ability to employ language to mythically suggest the presence and power of the cosmos, without destroying a sense of its essential mysteriousness. The poem's skillful personification and its careful evocation of a landscape both timeless and contemporary where it seems plausible for such impersonal presences to move and interact with humans, are able to simultaneously approach the mysteries of the world and avoid any appearance of limiting their power.

In this, the poem is typical of the volume from which it is taken, for in The Lice, the process of discarding the false assumptions of humanity, which was so powerfully dramatized in The Moving Target, has been completed, and the poet finds himself wandering through a post-apocalyptic

landscape, seeking the reunion with the natural world he has prepared for. Yet true to the rigor of Merwin's philosophy, such transcendence is still not to be automatically found. More often than not in the poems of this volume, the poet finds himself still isolated from the unconscious world he would embrace, aware and ashamed of his species' continued capacity for destruction. It is a situation whose despair is poignantly expressed in the last lines of "Avoiding News by the River," a poem whose beauty and depth of vision go far to explain why The Lice is often counted as Merwin's single most enduring volume:

In an hour it will be summer
 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 anything³⁶

Yet not all of Merwin's mature poems are long, surrealistic odysseys which have as their terminating point a stoic acceptance of human helplessness and the inevitability of death. Other poems, echoing the optimism of "Lemuel's Blessing," emphasize the beauty and serenity of the natural world and express a guarded hope that human beings may find a transcendent fulfillment in an unconscious reunion with nature. Often these poems are very short, partaking of some of the simplicity and delicate resonance of oriental haiku. Carefully interspersed throughout Merwin's collections, they help create the rhythm of discovery and frustration, transcendence and confinement which becomes the central tension animating Merwin's later work. And, of course, they again display the remarkable spiritual possibilities which language can exhibit if used in the proper way.

A beautiful example of this type of poem is the piece entitled "In the Time of the Blossoms,"³⁸ which concludes Merwin's 1970 collection The Carrier of Ladders. The poem is a humble address, almost a prayer, directed to an ash tree, an object whose paradoxical name suggests both the tactile and the untouchable aspects of any living thing, and which also introduces the interdependent phenomena of life and death which subtly pervade the poem. Life appears in a dimly perceived female presence whom the ash tree is sacred to, "her who sails in/from the one sea," a presence whose love and whose links to the unconscious might be able to bridge the gap between the poet and the mysterious source of nature. Death appears in the "leaf skeletons/fine as sparrow bones" which cover the ash tree, presumably shedding its leaves as a natural consequence of the change of the seasons. Yet there is a beauty in this emblem of the rhythm of the cosmos which figures an "unbreathed music," akin to the inaudible tones the the planets were held to produce in the perfect balance of their orbits. Humble and attentive before the tree, the speaker opens himself up to what its natural music can teach. "Sing to me," he says, and the reader can hardly doubt the response, for in the poem itself, in the directness and simplicity of its diction, and in the incredible feeling of silence and otherworldliness which its short, unobtrusive lines convey, we catch an echo of the timeless voice of the natural landscape.

The same suggestion of a successful reintegration into the natural world is found in a longer, if less tranquil poem entitled "A Door,"³⁹ published in Merwin's 1974 collection, Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment. The resonant connotations of the title should be obvious. A door marks a threshold, a passageway to some other place, the promise of

a new horizon, and in this context, the term comes to stand for any supposedly inanimate object which offers an opportunity for reaching beyond ourselves. Yet the poem's first lines appear to indicate that such opportunities are rapidly disappearing: "What is dying all over the world/ is a door," and the succeeding blocks of language go on to make clear that their demise is intimately connected to an arrogant use of words:

you will say That
is a dead thing

and you will be talking about the entry
to a chamber of your heart

you will say of that door
It is a thing

and you will be speaking of your heart

The passage reaffirms Merwin's by now familiar belief that in treating the inanimate world as "a dead thing" and dismissing its presences with absurdly simplistic and demeaning designations like "That," we forfeit any chance of discovering the world's true essence. Yet it also extends the idea to a consideration of what effect such arrogant language use has upon its practitioner. For such a tendency not only cuts us off from any communion with the world of non-human presences, but also causes us to lose sight of our own "doors," the elements within us that offer a means of transcending our own isolated existence. The most important of these doors is the heart, which offers an escape through the possibility of selfless love. Yet, as Merwin points out, treating a door as a thing to be exploited by language or force, reflects a character too selfish and egocentric to open the heart either to the love of another person or to communion with the world. It turns out that the arrogant use of language becomes its own dehumanizing punishment.

From this preliminary meditation on language, the poem now shifts to a chaotic vision of technological apocalypse, the ultimate outcome of this attitude of human superiority. Yet the same parallelism which insists that as we treat objects so we treat ourselves is maintained. The concrete streets not only "run over the wells," covering the natural sources of life-giving water; they also "run over the ears," depriving human beings of their hearing. Electrical wires will not only "cover the sky," but the patterns of their lines "will cross out the eyes," blinding their creators. In an appalling din of "numbers numbers/numbers/numbers," man's achievement turns on him and its inhuman noise drowns out all traces of the natural functions of the human voice: crying, calling, laughing. Yet as the poem makes clear, by the time such an apocalypse actually occurs, those emotional doors may well be forgotten anyway, their existence dismissed as "a tick coming over us/for no cause we by then/re-cognize." There is nothing to stop the cacophony of an industrial world gone wild, and as the noise mounts higher in "each cell" (an image of both biological universality and human imprisonment), the tension of the poem's fragmented language reaches a feverish pitch.

Yet just as the noise of the man-made world seems about to overwhelm the silent rhythms of the universe forever, those rhythms unexpectedly reassert themselves. Perhaps the technological monster has exploded from the pressures of its own excess. Perhaps the comforting peace of the natural world may be discovered even in the midst of its stupefying clamor. Whatever the case, there can be no doubt that the poem's final lines evoke an island of serenity where affection, freedom and security all seem perfectly blended:

and still someone touching
 a silence
 an opening
 may hear all around us the endless home

Here, the frenetic concrete vocabulary of the poem's second section is replaced by a language which is oblique, suggestive, and tranquil. The phenomenon of human love, here appearing as an essential element in this eternal return, is evoked by nothing more than the vague and fragile "still someone touching." The means of egress called a "door" in the poem's opening lines has been even further derationalized to become "an opening." And the sense of otherness and indefinability which must mark the mystical return to the "endless home" is beautifully created by the paradoxical description of a silence which nonetheless may be heard all around us. The poem has described a line of progress, clear in retrospect, which moves from a critique of the arrogant use of language and a vision of the barrenness and danger of such a mind-set, to an actual demonstration of the spiritual possibilities of language, which hold out the promise of an unexpected solace for those prepared to seek it.

As I hope this essay has demonstrated, a similar line of development might be said to describe the progress of Merwin's entire poetic career. No other modern poet has proven himself so consistently concerned with both the problems and possibilities of language, and no other poet has set himself such a rigorous criteria for using the medium of his art.⁴⁰ Beginning with a paralyzing consciousness of the self-delusive dangers of words, and the isolation and myopia which may result from ignoring them, Merwin has worked carefully to forge not only a new set of standards for using language, but also a poetic aesthetic which must redefine the very concept of language for all who come to accept its viability. Not surprisingly, this aesthetic requires the abandonment of many comfortable human assumptions which, in other contexts, have already been shaken by the apocalyptic winds of the twentieth century. No longer can men believe

their language to have an absolute correspondence to the items it would subjugate, and no more can human rationalism and egocentricity be seen as anything other than an unjustified and self-destructive delusion which can only result in the extinction of the planet. For proof of this renunciation may be more difficult than it sounds, however, the reader need only glance at the pages of The Moving Target or The Lice, wherein the doubt and despair attending this surrender is portrayed with an often agonizing intensity.

And yet, the rewards which may result from such a self-effacement would seem to more than justify the sacrifice. For in Merwin's new poetic language, the very promise which words must have held for the peoples who first spoke them is to some extent recovered. In discarding the rules and assumptions with which our out-of-control civilization has shackled language, Merwin has not only managed to expose the fallacy and arrogance of those assumptions, but has fashioned a supple, evocative language able to presence reality without destroying its essential mystery. The poet has resurrected the possibility of myth for modern man through a diction which abjures the sterility of precision for a poetry which insists on discerning the dimly visible, timeless cycles underlying contemporary existence. He has broken the tyranny of language which would force reality into narrow and lifeless categories, and mastered a flexible language which engages the reader in its vision of reality with the unorthodox rhythms of its movement, as well as the originality of its insights.

Of course, there is no guarantee, even given such a radical change of perspective, that the transcendent reintegration of humankind with the natural cycles of the cosmos, which is the culmination of Merwin's vision, will be effected. One need only recall poems like "October" or "The Last

One" to conclude that often the surrender of the self seems to bring only a knowledge of powerlessness and inevitable death. But even in these pessimistic visions, there is a sense of rigorous honesty, of at least knowing the true facts of one's existence, and stubbornly refusing to fool oneself with the comforting claims of human inviolability. Still, in many of Merwin's late poems, there is much more than this ambivalent knowledge. Works such as "Lemuel's Blessing," "In the Time of the Blossoms," and "A Door," convey a powerful feeling of mystical knowledge and an ecstatic sense of renewal and communion with the natural world which transeends many of the anxieties and fears of contemporary life.

Merwin seems well aware of such a wavering in his philosophy between stoic knowledge and mystic epiphany. In the poem "Air,"⁴¹ from The Moving Target, he seems to consider the topic in light of his own artistic career. Appearing in a dark landscape, under a sky pictured as a silenced musical instrument, the poet reflects on the singularity and disquieting loneliness of his vocation:

Naturally it is night.
 Under the overturned lute with its
 One string I am going my way
 Which has a strange sound.

Yet by the end of the poem, this fear has given way to a liberating sense of freedom, and the speaker, without losing his underlying consciousness of potential desolation, reaches a simple affirmation of the sheer joy of existence. In three short, simple lines, Merwin evokes the quiet felicity which a patient receptiveness can bequeath to us and language can communicate. It is the same resilient, skeptical, but ever hopeful spirit which has animated every phase of Merwin's poetic career, and rendered it one of the most original and exciting in all of contemporary literature. And ultimately, like the possible worlds it reveals to us, the language

seems to take flight, leaving behind the earthbound approximations of my analysis to create a song as resonant, uplifting, and harmonious as the murmur of nature itself:

This must be what I wanted to be doing
Walking at night between the two deserts,
Singing.

FOOTNOTES

¹W. S. Merwin, "It is March," The Lice (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 17.

²Alan Williamson, "Language Against Itself: The Middle Generation of Contemporary Poets," American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives, Robert B. Shaw, ed. (Chester Springs, Pa.: Dufour Editions Inc., 1974), p. 55.

³W. S. Merwin, "Foreward," Selected Translations: 1968-1978 (New York: Atheneum, 1980), p. viii.

⁴quoted in Richard Jackson, Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets (University, Al.: University of Alabama Press, 1983), p. 50.

⁵ibid.

⁶quoted in Jackson, p. 52.

⁷W. S. Merwin, "Notes for a Preface," The Distinctive Voice, William J. Martz, ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1966) pp. 269-70.

⁸W. S. Merwin, "Spring," Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 42.

⁹quoted in W. S. Merwin, A Mask for Janus (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952), p. v.

¹⁰W. S. Merwin, "Rime of the Palmers," A Mask for Janus, pp. 9-14.

¹¹W. H. Auden, "Foreward," A Mask for Janus, p. viii.

¹²Crunk (Robert Bly), "The Work of W. S. Merwin," The Sixties, 4 (Fall, 1960), p. 34.

¹³W. S. Merwin, "Dictum: A Masque for the Deluge," A Mask for Janus, pp. 42-46.

¹⁴Crunk, p. 35.

¹⁵W. S. Merwin, "Anabasis (I)," A Mask for Janus, pp. 1-4.

¹⁶W. S. Merwin, "On the Subject of Poetry," The Dancing Bears (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 61.

¹⁷W. S. Merwin, "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," The Dancing Bears, pp. 41-60.

¹⁸W. S. Merwin, "Canoso, (I)," The Dancing Bears, pp. 69-72.

¹⁹ibid.

²⁰quoted in W. S. Merwin, The Dancing Bears, p. 2. I am indebted to Tracy Chevalier for (among other things) her translation: "...human language is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out melodies to make the bears dance, when we would rather move the stars."

²¹W. S. Merwin, "Leviathan," Green With Beasts (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), pp. 11-12.

²²W. S. Merwin, "The Bones," The Drunk in the Furnace (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), pp. 14-15.

²³W. S. Merwin, "Uncle Hess," The Drunk in the Furnace, p. 40.

²⁴W. S. Merwin, "Learning a Dead Language," Green With Beasts, pp. 62-3.

²⁵In Jackson, p. 50, Merwin has further elaborated this point: "On the other hand, language itself is unique; it has a life of its own which makes it a part of the life of everything. It is, for example, what makes conversation possible. So there is a simultaneous reverence and distrust of language."

²⁶W. S. Merwin, "Foreward," Selected Translations, p. viii.

²⁷quoted in Jackson, p. 50.

²⁸quoted in Jackson, pp. 48-49.

²⁹W. S. Merwin, "Low Fields and Light," Green With Beasts, p. 70.

³⁰W. S. Merwin, "The Drunk in the Furnace," The Drunk in the Furnace, p. 54.

³¹quoted in Jack Myers, Michael Simms, "Possibilities of the Unknown: Conversations with W. S. Merwin," Southwest Review, Spring, 1983, pp. 168-9.

³²W. S. Merwin, "Lemuel's Blessing," The Moving Target (New York: Atheneum, 1963), pp. 6-8.

³³W. S. Merwin, "October," The Moving Target, p. 34.

³⁴T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-50 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1971), p. 50.

³⁵W. S. Merwin, "The Way to the River," The Moving Target, pp. 76-77.

³⁶W. S. Merwin, "The Last One," The Lice, pp. 10-12.

³⁷W. S. Merwin, "Avoiding News by the River," The Lice, p. 71.

³⁸W. S. Merwin, "In the Time of the Blossoms," The Carrier of Ladders (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 138.

³⁹ W. S. Merwin, "A Door (IV)," Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, pp. 34-35.

⁴⁰ In fact, it may well be a standard too rigorous for Merwin himself to consistently maintain. His most recent collections of verse, The Compass Flower (Atheneum, 1977), Finding the Islands (North Point Press, 1982), and Opening the Hand (Atheneum, 1983), demonstrate a disappointing slackening in the intensity of their syntax and diction, and a corresponding decline in the overall quality of their poetry.

⁴¹ W. S. Merwin, "Air," The Moving Target, p. 50.

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Honors Project Reading List:

John Berryman: 77 Dream Songs

Elizabeth Bishop: Selected Poems

Louise Bogan: Selected Poems

Robert Lowell: Life Studies

W. S. Merwin: The Compass Flower

The Miner's Pale Children

Opening the Hand

Selected Translations: 1968-78

Transparence of the World (Poems by Jean Follain)

Unframed Originals

Charles Simic: Dismantling the Silence

Mark Strand: Darker

LEARNING A DEAD LANGUAGE

There is nothing for you to say. You must
Learn first to listen. Because it is dead
It will not come to you of itself, nor would you
Of yourself master it. You must therefore
Learn to be still when it is imparted,
And, though you may not yet understand, to remember.

What you remember is saved. To understand
The least thing fully you would have to perceive
The whole grammar in all its accident
And all its system, in the perfect singleness
Of intention it has because it is dead.
You can learn only a part at a time.

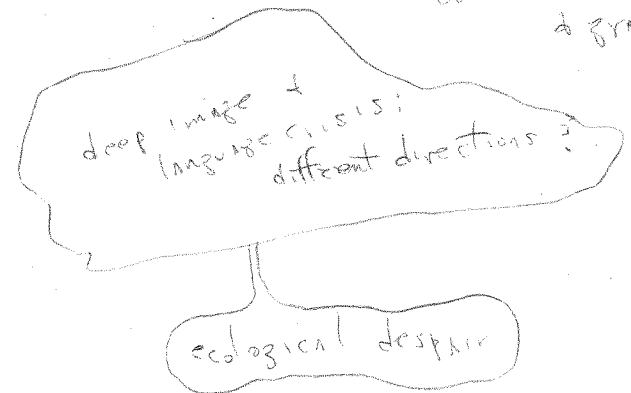
What you are given to remember
Has been saved before you from death's dullness by
Remembering. The unique intention
Of a language whose speech has died is order
Incomplete only where someone has forgotten.
You will find that that order helps you to remember.

What you come to remember becomes yourself.
Learning will be to cultivate the awareness
Of that governing order, now pure of the passions
It composed; till, seeking it in itself,
You may find at last the passion that composed it,
Hear it both in its speech and in yourself.

What you remember saves you. To remember
Is not to rehearse, but to hear what never
Has fallen silent. So your learning is,
From the dead, order, and what sense of yourself
Is memorable, what passion may be heard
When there is nothing for you to say.

- critical dictation -
vs.
- own language -

coherence, flow
& grasp



I remember how I would say, "I will gather
These pieces together,
Any minute now I will make
A knife out of a cloud."
Even then the days
Went leaving their wounds behind them,
But, "Monument," I kept saying to the grave,
"I am still your legend."

There was another time
When our hands met and the clocks struck
And we lived on the point of a needle, like angels.

I have seen the spider's triumph
In the palm of my hand. Above
My grave, that thoroughfare,
There are words now that can bring
My eyes to my feet, tamed.
Beyond the trees wearing names that are not their own
The paths are growing like smoke.

The promises have gone,
Gone, gone, and they were here just now.
There is the sky where they laid their fish.
Soon it will be evening.

LOW FIELDS AND LIGHT

I think it is in Virginia, that place
That lies across the eye of my mind now
Like a grey blade set to the moon's roundness,
Like a plain of glass touching all there is.

The flat fields run out to the sea there.
There is no sand, no line. It is autumn.
The bare fields, dark between fences, run
Out to the idle gleam of the flat water.

And the fences go on out, sinking slowly,
With a cow-bird half-way, on a stunted post, watching
How the light slides through them easy as weeds
Or wind, slides over them away out near the sky.

Because even a bird can remember
The fields that were there before the slow
Spread and wash of the edging light crawled
There and covered them, a little more each year.

My father never plowed there, nor my mother
Waited, and never knowingly I stood there
Hearing the seepage slow as growth, nor knew
When the taste of salt took over the ground.

But you would think the fields were something
To me, so long I stare out, looking
For their shapes or shadows through the matted gleam, seeing
Neither what is nor what was, but the flat light rising.

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,
Cosily 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 jugged bellowings, till 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 and 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.

THE WAY TO THE RIVER

for Dido

The way to the river leads past the names of
Ash the sleeves the wreaths of hinges
Through the song of the bandage vendor

I lay your name by my voice
As I go

The way to the river leads past the late
Doors and the games of the children born looking backwards
They play that they are broken glass
The numbers wait in the halls and the clouds
Call
From windows
They play that they are old they are putting the horizon
Into baskets they are escaping they are
Hiding

I step over the sleepers the fires the calendars
My voice turns to you

I go past the juggler's condemned building the hollow
Windows gallery
Of invisible presidents the same motion in them all
In a parked cab by the sealed wall the hats are playing
Sort of poker with somebody's
Old snapshots game I don't understand they lose
The rivers one
After the other I begin to know where I am

I am home

Be here the flies from the house of the mapmaker
Walk on our letters I can tell
And the days hang medals between us
I have lit our room with a glove of yours be
Here I turn
To your name and the hour remembers
Its one word
Now

Be here what can we
Do for the dead the footsteps full of money
I offer you what I have my
Poverty

To the city of wires I have brought home a handful
Of water I walk slowly
In front of me they are building the empty
Ages I see them reflected not for long
Be here I am no longer ashamed of time it is too brief its hands
Have no names
I have passed it I know

*Oh Necessity you with the face you with
All the faces*

This is written on the back of everything

But we
Will read it together

THE LAST ONE

Well they'd made up their minds to be everywhere because
why not.

Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.
They with two leaves they whom the birds despise.
In the middle of stones they made up their minds.
They started to cut.

Well they cut everything because why not.
Everything was theirs because they thought so.
It fell into its shadows and they took both away.
Some to have some for burning.

Well cutting everything they came to the water.
They came to the end of the day there was one left standing.
They would cut it tomorrow they went away.
The night gathered in the last branches.
The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
The night and the shadow put on the same head.
And it said Now.

Well in the morning they cut the last one.
Like the others the last one fell into its shadow.
It fell into its shadow on the water.
They took it away its shadow stayed on the water.

Well they shrugged they started trying to get the shadow away.
They cut right to the ground the shadow stayed whole.
They laid boards on it the shadow came out on top.
They shone lights on it the shadow got blacker and clearer.
They exploded the water the shadow rocked.
They built a huge fire on the roots.
They sent up black smoke between the shadow and the sun.
The new shadow flowed without changing the old one.

They shrugged they went away to get stones.

They came back the shadow was growing.
They started setting up stones it was growing.
They looked the other way it went on growing.
They decided they would make a stone out of it.
They took stones to the water they poured them into the shadow.
They poured them in they poured them in the stones vanished.
The shadow was not filled it went on growing.
That was one day.

The next day was just the same it went on growing.
They did all the same things it was just the same.
They decided to take its water from under it.
They took away water they took it away the water went down.
The shadow stayed where it was before.
It went on growing it grew onto the land.
They started to scrape the shadow with machines.
When it touched the machines it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with sticks.
Where it touched the sticks it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with hands.
Where it touched the hands it stayed on them.
That was another day.

Well the next day started about the same it went on growing.
They pushed lights into the shadow.
Where the shadow got onto them they went out.
They began to stomp on the edge it got their feet.
And when it got their feet they fell down.
It got into eyes the eyes went blind.

The ones that fell down it grew over and they vanished.
The ones that went blind and walked into it vanished.
The ones that could see and stood still
It swallowed their shadows.
Then it swallowed them too and they vanished.
Well the others ran.

The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them.
They went as far as they could.
The lucky ones with their shadows.

IN THE TIME OF THE BLOSSOMS

Ash tree
sacred to her who sails in
from the one sea
all over you leaf skeletons
fine as sparrow bones
stream out motionless
on white heaven
staves of one
unbreathed music
Sing to me

A DOOR

What is dying all over the world
is a door

you will say That
is a dead thing

and you will be talking about the entry
to a chamber of your heart

you will say of that door
It is a thing

and you will be speaking of your heart

the streets will run over the wells
the wires will cover the sky
the lines will cross out the eyes
singing numbers numbers
numbers
numbers of
shadows of generations of armies with flags
the streets will run over the ears
trucks will run over the streets
no crying will be heard
nor any calling
the function of laughing neither remembered
so a tick coming over us
for no cause we by then
recognize
meanwhile in each cell the noise
turning higher as it
turns higher as it approaches

and still someone touching
a silence
an opening
may hear all around us the endless home