Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

45

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 45

David Galens
Project Editor

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given

at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Sylvia Kasey Marks, "A Brief Glance at George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy,*" *Victorian Poetry* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1983), 184-90; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism,* vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 128-31.

Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature,* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism,* vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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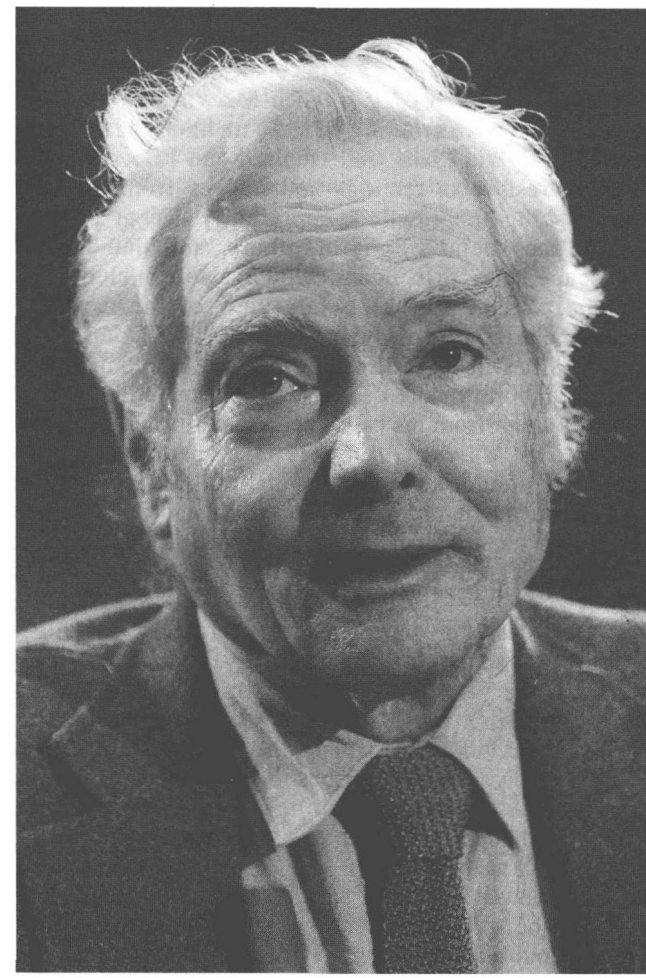
W. S. Merwin
1927-

(Full name William Stanley Merwin) American poet, essayist, playwright, short story writer, and translator.



INTRODUCTION

Although he has written essays; plays; translated poetry from French, Spanish, Latin, and Portuguese; and written television scripts, Merwin's most memorable and controversial work has been as a poet. As one of the most prolific poets of his time, Merwin has, over a five-decade career, published over twenty volumes of poetry and is celebrated as testing the bounds and power of language through imagery driven by a quest for knowledge of the human condition.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Merwin was born on 30 September 1927 in New York City, the son of a Presbyterian minister. He grew up in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. His early life in rural Pennsylvania as the son of a minister, and the poverty he saw there and subsequently wrote about, led to Merwin's focus on social, philosophical, and spiritual concerns as well as his use of biblical imagery in his works.

After receiving his degree in English at Princeton University, Merwin stayed for postgraduate study in modern languages, during which time he encountered poet John Berryman and critic R. P. Blackmur (to whom his fifth book, *The Moving Target,* is dedicated), both of whom have had significant influence on his work. Merwin left Princeton for Europe, where he traveled extensively, finally settling in Majorca in 1950, where he worked as a tutor for poet Robert Graves's son. Graves's interest in mythology greatly influenced Merwin, as can be seen in the mythic themes of his early books. Leaving Majorca, Merwin settled in the South of France and remained there for most of the 1960s. He also lived for several years in Mexico and has lived in Hawaii since 1975.

MAJOR WORKS

Peter Davison, writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*, whose pages have included Merwin's work more often than that of any other poet, comments that the "intentions of Merwin's poetry are as broad as the biosphere yet as intimate as a whisper." His first book, *A Mask for Janus* (1952), displays Graves's influence—mythic themes, a highly formal, neoclassical style, and shades of the medieval poetry Merwin was translating at the time. Chosen by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in the year of its publication, the book's preface (written by Auden) notes that Merwin had caught "the feeling which most of us share of being witnesses to the collapse of a civilization . . . and in addition the feeling that this collapse is not final but that . . . there will be some kind of rebirth, though we cannot imagine its nature." The themes of myth and philosophical questioning regarding the self and survival continue in *The Dancing Bears* (1954), where the poems also reflect a search for identity. Merwin's third book, *Green with Beasts* (1956), departs from the formal traditions of his first two books for more flowing blocks of language. Merwin shifts his perspective from that of one who describes an experience from without to one that participates in the experience. *Green with Beasts* is broken

into three parts: the first, a bestiary, includes "Leviathan," which draws on the biblical themes of Genesis; the second section involves poems that are dramatic monologues, including "The Annunciation" and several others based on Judeo-Christian traditions; the third section centers on images of the sea.

Although *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960) continues the sequence of sea poems started in *Green with Beasts,* the last few poems in the book show Merwin shifting to more uniquely American themes. This book followed two years' residence in Boston during which Merwin met a number of poets who were breaking with the traditions of the 1950s including Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Robert Lowell. Merwin resurrects feelings and images from his past, admonishing those who complacently accept poverty, ignore the social plight of others, and damage the landscape. The title poem, which also concludes the volume, summarizes Merwin's view of the American landscape as both comedy and tragedy. "The Drunk in the Furnace" has made a discarded furnace his home—Merwin's symbolic image of spiritual and material poverty. This departure from his early themes and format is intensified in *The Moving Target* (1963), where Merwin essentially abandons punctuation, making the reader responsible for interpretation of syntax and, to a degree, abdicating control of his work and inviting the reader to construct his or her own images.

The Lice (1967) is one of the most critically acclaimed volumes of poetry in the last fifty years and has often served as the yardstick against which critics measure the rest of Merwin's work. The book's title is taken from an ancient Greek riddle that Homer, the wisest man in Greece, could not solve. Merwin wishes to point out to us that we need to focus on the mystery of the world and our distance from it. Although often interpreted as a reaction to specific events, such as the Vietnam War, *The Lice* is perhaps more properly viewed as another step along Merwin's continuum in which he focuses on nature and spiritualism. In 1970 Merwin published both his Pulitzer prize-winning *The Carrier of Ladders* and his book of short fiction, *The Miner's Pale Children. The Carrier of Ladders* includes a sequence of poems devoted to westward expansion in the United States, echoing works by Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Gary Snyder. The fifteen poems in the collection trace Merwin's thoughts on American history, including autobiographical "journeys," his early images of Pennsylvania, the westward movement of Europeans, and the misuse of land and maltreatment of Native Americans.

In *The Compass Flower* (1977) Merwin moves further along the continuum, shifting to a more personal voice reflecting his feelings about his parents, life, death, love, and the importance of all types of connections—communal, biological and familial. *The Rain in the Trees* (1988) showcases Merwin's concerns with respect to ecology and cultural anthropology. Merwin's *Travels* (1993) presents the experiences of naturalists, artists, the Amazon experiences of Manuel Cordova, and includes a long personal account of his childhood and his minister father. In 1996 Merwin published his book-length narrative epic poem *The Folding Cliffs,* a historical piece concerning the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Merwin's poetry has been greeted with a mixture of praise and criticism, with his early work regarded as his most universally successful and his later work evoking more critical responses. Some critics, including Victor Contoski, argue that the mixed reception is a result of a misunderstanding of Merwin's use of unfamiliar poetic traditions rather than the often-cited opinion that his work is simply enigmatic and obscure. Edward Haworth Hoeppner agrees that Merwin's poetry presents some problems for readers and critics alike; Neal Bowers explains this as a failure to consider Merwin's work in a postmodernist context. Most critics, however, have celebrated his work, and his list of awards—including the Pulitzer prize (for *The Carrier of Ladders*), Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and *Kenyon Review* fellowships, and numerous other grants and prizes—is testament to the critical acclaim he has enjoyed over his fifty-year career. Merwin's themes, including myth, emptiness, and cultural death, are explored by Thomas P. Roche, Jr. and Jarold Ramsey, while Kenneth Andersen, Harvey Gross, and Anthony Libby consider Merwin's evolution as a poet. The development of Merwin's poetry and style is examined by Frank MacShane, who cites the poet's European years and Ezra Pound as significant influences. Analysis of Merwin's poetry is provided by John Vogelsang, and by L. Edwin Folsom, who addresses Merwin's obsession with the meaning of America, and Cheri Colby Davis, who investigates Merwin's use of time in his work. Analysis of specific works is offered by Vincent B. Sherry, Jr., who examines Merwin's shift from traditional to surreal forms using *The Compass Flower* as a basis. Randall Stifler explores "The Annunciation," one of Merwin's more powerful works, while Michael W. Thomas considers "For the Anniversary of My Death." John Burt offers a detailed review of Merwin's narrative epic *The Folding Cliffs.* Michael Clifton comments on Merwin's visionary poetry, contending that it is derived from altered states of consciousness. Jane Frazier discusses the narrators of Merwin's poems, noting that they are often "disembodied," thus permitting a story to be told without the intrusion of ego.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

A Mask for Janus 1952
The Dancing Bears 1954
Green with Beasts 1956

The Drunk in the Furnace 1960
The Moving Target 1963
The Lice 1967
Selected Translations, 1948-1968 [translator] 1968
Voices [translator] 1969
The Carrier of Ladders 1970
Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment 1973
**The First Four Books of Poems* 1975
The Compass Flower 1977
Finding the Islands 1982
Opening the Hand 1983
The Rain in the Trees 1988
Selected Poems 1988
†*The Second Four Books of Poems* 1993
Travels 1993
The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative 1996
The Vixen: Poems 1996
East Window: The Asian Poems 1998
The River Sound: Poems 1999
The Pupil: Poems 2001

Other Major Works

Darkling Child [with Dido Milroy] (play) 1956
The Miner's Pale Children (short stories) 1970
Houses and Travellers (short stories) 1977
Unframed Originals (autobiographical sketches) 1982

*Includes *A Mask for Janus, The Dancing Bears, Green with Beasts,* and *The Drunk in the Furnace.*

†Includes *The Moving Target, The Lice, The Carrier of Ladders,* and *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment.*

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (essay date 1963-64)

SOURCE: Roche, Thomas P., Jr. "Green with Poems." *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 25, no. 1 (1963-64): 89-104.

[*In the following essay, Roche discusses some themes in Merwin's poetry, including the journey and myth, and comments that they reflect his concerns with totalitarianism, disarmament, and scientific threats to mankind.*]

William S. Merwin was born in New York City in 1927 and thereafter lived in Union City, New Jersey, and in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He was graduated from Princeton in 1948 and studied romance languages in the Princeton Graduate School for a time. Between 1949 and 1951 he worked as a tutor in France, Portugal, and Majorca. His first volume of verse, ***A Mask for Janus,*** was selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1952 and was followed in 1954 by ***The Dancing Bears,*** which won him the Kenyon Review Fellowship for poetry. His third volume, ***Green with Beasts*** (1956), was selected by the British Poetry Book Society. Previously he had written translations for the BBC Third Programme, and in January, 1956, his unpublished verse play, *Darkling Child,* was produced in the London Arts Theatre. It was written in collaboration with his second wife, Dido Milroy. In 1956 he received grants for playwriting from both the Rockefeller Foundation and the Arts Council of Great Britain and was playwright-in-residence at the Poets' Theatre, Cambridge, Mass. In 1957 he was awarded a grant by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has published two other volumes of verse, ***The Drunk in the Furnace*** (1960) and ***Moving Target*** (1963). He has published volumes of translation from Latin, Spanish, Portuguese and French. He and his wife live in New York and on their farm near Lot, France.

—ED.

While yet an undergraduate, W. S. Merwin set out to become a poet, and in the fifteen years since his graduation he has amply proven his title. His credentials are the ten volumes of verse and verse translation that bear his name. He has become a professional poet in the tradition of Robert Graves: non-academic, insistent that the muse should bear the responsibility for daily sustenance and be accounted a respectable, upstanding member of society. His first volume, ***A Mask for Janus,*** established him as a poet who could write any kind of poem he wanted. The formal perfection of the ballads, songs, and sestinas make it one of the most finely wrought volumes of verse by a young American. Each succeeding volume has shown a new facet of his craft. ***Moving Target,*** his latest, is no exception. It is a radical departure both in form and content, a new voice saying new things. One would not have predicted this development on the basis of the earlier volumes, but poets have a way of evading predictions. For this reader, ***Moving Target*** brings Merwin closer to that subject he has always been seeking and has not yet found. To imply that the early poems in some way fail would be unfair, but one is conscious during the enchantment of some lack, some reality that has escaped the words in their formal perfection.

Merwin, too, I think, is aware of this absence of being where being might be.

> Coming late, as always,
> I try to remember what I almost heard.
> The light avoids my eye.
>
> How many times have I heard the locks close
> And the lark take the keys
> And hang them in heaven.
>
> **("The Poem")**[1]

After the first volume he is continuously searching for a subject to sustain his verbal talents, to bridge the gap between the personal perception and the verbal fact. This often leads him to an introspective, self-contemplating

revery on the subject of poetry (**"Hermione on Simulacra," "On the Subject of Poetry," "Learning a Dead Language"**). Merwin is very much concerned with the significance and meaning of his craft. I suppose the apotheosis of this side of his poetry is the splendid *tour de force,* **"The Annunciation,"** where the Word become Flesh becomes the subject of meditation by the Virgin.

Most often, however, he turns to the mythic journey, not to tell an heroic narrative (although this leaning without doubt led him to translate the *Cid, Lazarillo de Tormes,* and *Song of Roland*) but to provide a frame for his perceptions. It seems to me significant that the first poem in each volume is some kind of journey poem.

Both these themes are found in his longest poem, **"East of the Sun and West of the Moon."** Here the old fairy-tale variant on the Cupid and Psyche story is used to distance the poet's concern with his craft. The tone is highly sophisticated, but the sophistication never gets in the way of the charm of narrative or the power of the language. It begins,

> Say the year is the year of the phoenix.
> Ordinary sun and common moon,
> Turn as they may, are too mysterious
> Unless such as are neither sun nor moon
> Assume their masks and orbits and evolve
> Neither a solar nor a lunar story
> But a tale that might be human. What is a man
> That a man may recognize, unless the inhuman
> Sun and moon, wearing the masks of a man,
> Weave before him such a tale as he
> —Finding his own face in the strange story—
> Mistakes by metaphor and calls his own,
> Smiling, as on a familiar mystery?
>
> The moon was thin as a poor man's daughter
> At the end of autumn. A white bear came walking
> On a Thursday evening at the end of autumn,
> Knocked at a poor man's door in a deep wood,
> And, "Charity," when the man came he said,
> "And the thin hand of a girl have brought me here.
> Winter will come, and the vixen wind," he said,
> "And what have you but too many mouths to feed,
> Oh what have you but a coat like zither-strings
> To ward that fury from your family?
> But I though wintry shall be bountiful
> Of furs and banquets, coins like summer days,
> Grant me but the hand of your youngest daughter."

The story ends with the poor bride's realization.

> "All metaphor," she said, "is magic. Let
> Me be diverted in a turning lantern,
> Let me in that variety be real.
> But let the story be an improvisation
> Continually, and through all repetition
> Differ a little from myself, as though
> Mistaken; and I a lady with foreign ways
> To sing therein to my own hair."
>
> Say the year is the year of the phoenix.
> Now, even now, over the rock hill
> The tropical, the lucid moon, turning
> Her mortal guises in the eye of a man,
> Creates the image in which the world is.

Had Merwin's poetry stopped at this stage of development, he would have achieved a high degree of poetry, but the story goes on. Instead of continuing to anchor his perceptions on myth already created, on forms already known, he has taken stock of his perceptions, found them not wanting, and is able to use them to make his poems come into being. I believe that his new note starts with the three beautiful love poems that end ***The Dancing Bears.*** It would be difficult to find many modern love poems to equal them. For vitality of language one would have to go to Hart Crane's *Voyages,* and for directness of feeling back all the way to Spenser's *Epithalamion,* whose envoi I think Merwin has in mind when he concludes his first **"Canso."**

> I have pronounced you the single luminary,
> And we are housed in an embrace of whiteness,
> But shadows would threaten and the dark descend
> In all the rooms where we believe. Oh love,
> Believe this candor indivisible,
> That I, perfected in your love, may be,
> Against all dissolution sovereign,
> Endlessly your litany and mirror,
> About your neck the amulet and song.

This new assertion of the personal over the mythic has brought him new subjects, new insights. I am thinking of the Frost-like **"Tobacco," "Burning the Cat," "Dog Dreaming,"** and **"After the Flood"** in ***Green with Beasts*** and those wonderful, sometimes whimsical, sometimes macabre poems about his relatives in ***The Drunk in the Furnace.***

The poems in ***Moving Target*** on the surface look like a return to the mythic, a movement away from the personal wrought into verse. This seems to me erroneous. There is a new note of cynicism and disappointment in these poems, a tone that could arise only from deep involvement.

> In the future there will be
> No more migration, only travel,
> No more exile, only distances.
>
> **("Route with No Number")**

The mythic journey is now an endless sojourn without purpose. Symptomatically the forms so carefully fashioned in the earlier poems have become looser, less traditional.

> This stone that is
> not here and bears no writing commemorates
> the emptiness at the end of
> history listen you without vision you can still
> hear it there is
> nothing it is the voice with the praises
> that never changed that called to the unsatisfied
> as long as there was
> time
> whatever it could have said of you is already forgotten
>
> **("For the Grave of Posterity")**[2]

The clue to this new style lies, I think, in a poem recently published but not included in the volume. It is called **"Tribute"** and was published in *The Nation* for December 23, 1961. It is a poem in the new style and has along the margins of the page as gloss excerpts from a newspaper account of a child born eyeless after its mother had visited a Soviet atomic center. Merwin's latest poems are a reflection of his deep concern over the problems of totalitarianism, disarmament, and scientific threats to humanity. In the last year he has written three articles for *The Nation* on Agostinho Neto, the Portuguese poet imprisoned by Salazar, on the Quaker protest at the White House, and on the voyage of the *Everyman* (February 24, 1962; June 16, 1962; December 29, 1962). These articles explain the tone of these latest poems and prove to me that he is not returning to the mythic but painting the dead landscape of our present despair. He is not writing propaganda, and so the poems do not specify the direct affronts to human dignity. Nevertheless they are powerful protests in poetry. The poem **"My Friends"** at first reading appears flat until the ear has caught the rhythms of ecstatic despair.

> My friends with nothing leave it behind
> In a box
> My friends without keys go out from the jails it is night
> They take the same road they miss
> Each other they invent the same banner in the dark
> They ask their way only of sentries too proud to breathe
> At dawn the stars on their flag will vanish
>
> The water will turn up their footprints and the day will rise
> Like a monument to my
> Friends the forgotten

This poem and many others in ***Moving Target*** are too long to quote here, but they all voice the new tone, the new rhythms, and the new tortured images of Merwin's protest. Many will object to the loosening of form and intensification of tone in these poems. I feel that they are a further step in his search for a subject. In writing of Agostinho Neto Merwin says:

> Where injustice prevails (and where does it not?) a poet endowed with the form of conscience I am speaking about has no choice but to name the wrong as truthfully as he can, and to try to indicate the claims of justice in terms of the victims he lives among. The better he does these things the more he may have to pay for doing them. He may lose his financial security, if he has any. Or his health, his comfort, the presence of those he loves, his liberty. Or his life, of course. Worst, he may lose, in the process, the faith which led him to the decision, and then have to suffer for the decision just the same.

Merwin might almost be writing about himself, but one may hope that the severities of society will not silence him nor keep him from that search which has already added so much of value to the world of poetry.

Notes

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Kenneth Andersen (essay date January-October 1970)

SOURCE: Andersen, Kenneth. "The Poetry of W. S. Merwin." *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 16 (January-October 1970): 278-86.

[*In the following essay, Andersen characterizes Merwin's work as a poetry of evolution based on a philosophy that depends on an ever-changing point of view.*]

W. S. Merwin's poetry (***The Dancing Bears, Green with Beasts, The Drunk in the Furnace, The Moving Target, The Lice***), is a poetry of a distinct evolution. In these five books of poems, he has created not only diverse works of art but also, within this art, a synthetic philosophy which depends on, for its very foundation, a vital, changing point of view. As a poet Merwin begins in disenchantment and isolation. He has felt the malaise of the "Wasteland," and it conditions his early, personal poetry, ***The Dancing Bears.*** In ***Green with Beasts*** the poet travels across the sea in an Odyssean quest of a secure home, and of the human answers to the riddles of existence. The search extends onward in ***The Drunk in the Furnace,*** and he arrives home in his family portrait poetry. The search seems completed in ***The Moving Target,*** for not only is its form relaxed and contemplative, but its spirit is somewhat affirmative and secure. Yet Merwin's last book of poems, ***The Lice,*** continues the quest again, in a poetic style that is both refreshingly new and refined.[1]

Merwin's ***The Dancing Bears*** (1954) is a book of melancholy poems. It betrays the poet's bitter isolation and alienation from the human community. He is the intellectual Eliot of the "Wasteland" with his closed, neat style, his numerous allusions, and his disenchantment with the present myths and beliefs. Curiously, his poetic style is muted, understated, and restlessly gentle; he "does not hug terror so tightly."[2] Instead, he obscures that terror in allegory, fable, and allusion. The personal note in this early poetry is suggestive and at times vehement, yet it is consciously restrained within an ordered, balanced, and "patient" form. His diction is delicately chosen and metaphorically complex, and his near-syllabic verse has a "metaphysical" toughness to it. As a poet, Merwin conceives of his artistic function, as did Wallace Stevens, to create "new fictions," to make order out of chaos; yet the prevailing chaos which he feels has not only destroyed myths and beliefs, but it has also destroyed the basis for his creation of myths as a poet. He cannot write credible fables; he feels that he has lost his creative function in the human community, for he thinks he is

A stranger up from the sunned
Sea of your eyes, lady
What fable should I tell them,
That they should believe me?[3]

As an alien artist whose myths have no validity or meaning in the modern world, the poet feels obligated to stand detached and apologize for his having created myths and poetry. Thus in the poem, **"Fable,"** he excuses himself with the words,

I am a mad precarious man
Making a prayer for folly
At the midnight and heartless hour,
Moon-beset, and my best of prayer
Is incontinently to complain
Upon a foolish story.

(24)

He realizes with a bitter tinge that he is "rendering a story, and complain[ing] / Heartless and foolishly" (27). Where Shelley in his "Ode to the West Wind" could personify that wind, making its inspiration his, Merwin cannot find that spirit. He is cut off from the poetic inspiration which once gave order and meaning to existence:

(But caution: for the west wind
Is secret, the west wind's hunger
All love and ghost
May not satisfy)

(39)

The west wind is forever a "secret" because all revelation is, as the poet implies, dead. All belief in faith and myth ("love"), and in illusions and artistic fantasies ("ghosts"), comes to naught, because the wind does not respond to the artist's creations. It is silent, it only hungers insatiably. It is like the sea of his later poems, a sea of fatal attractiveness, both intoxicating and destructive.

Yet if the poet is disturbed by the futility of his endeavors, by the frailty, and perhaps the fallacy of myth in the modern world, he has, nonetheless, employed fables and myths to elucidate and sustain his poetry in ***The Dancing Bears.***[4] He has created order out of chaos simply by writing these poems whose wealth of allusions substantiates, somewhat, Merwin's belief in the positive function of art and poetry. If, in **"East of the Sun and West of the Moon"** (41), the poet can have the skeptical bird of experience say, "All magic is but metaphor" (50), in the end the girl of innocence triumphs when she affirms poetry in our age with the words, "All metaphor . . . is magic" (59).[5] Revelation then, is in the "west wind," and its "secret" will be unveiled for Merwin through metaphor, myth, and fable in his succeeding poetry.

Green with Beasts (New York, 1956), the next published book of Merwin's poems after ***The Dancing Bears,*** marks a distinct change in the poet's evolution. No longer is his poetry the cry of a forlorn and despairing outcast; no longer does he treat myth and fable with skeptical and detached irony. His scope broadens and becomes more comprehensive and versatile. His art tends to be more sophisticated, more expansive, and more complex. The poet is beginning to feel humanity's problems and not just his own. He begins to "see" more, and his increasing knowledge of the world is evident in the variety of poetic subjects he has chosen to write about (from the **"Blue Cockerel"** to **"A Sparrow Sheltering Under a Column of the British Museum"**). Throughout the book Merwin is creating myths of profound import, all of which sustain his affirmation that "all metaphor . . . is magic."

In his **"Blue Cockerel"** (13), we find a poet who reminds us of the verse of Wallace Stevens or of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

. . . this bird balances,
His blue feet splayed, folding nothing, as though
The too-small green limb were ground; and his shout
Frames all the silence. Not Montezuma nor all
The gold hills of the sun were ever so plumed
As the blue of his neck, his breast orange, his wings'
Blazing, and the black-green sickles of his tail.
It seems to be summer. But save for his blue hackles
And the light haze of his back, there is no sky,
Only the one tree spreading its green flame
Like a new habit for heaven.

Merwin here is a fine connoisseur of a myriad of glittering, luminous colors, of rich, luxuriant surface textures.[6] Through a counterpointing of the soft assonantal sounds of the "o" and "a" with the sharp, brilliant consonantal sounds of "ck" and "z," the poet creates interior rhymes which are at one and the same time mellifluous and startling, fluid and taut.

In his sea poems, the highlight of ***Green with Beasts,*** Merwin is adrift on his sea voyage homeward bound. The sea represents to the poet, first of all, power: the bursting, violent, archetypal, primeval force with which Melville was concerned. It is **"Leviathan":**[7]

. . . 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.

(11)

The calculated complexity and interwoven design of these first few lines is such that one can almost feel the whale bursting the bounds of the poetic form. Expecially significant are the alliterations of "*b*lack . . . *b*rute . . . *b*ulling"; "*w*ave-*w*rack"; "*s*houlders *s*pouting"; "*f*ist . . . *f*orehead"; and "*g*ray-*g*reen": all of which catch the quality of characterization through forceful, consonantal repetition. In addition, the participles create trochaic and dactyllic rhythms of the brute whale bulling and thrashing through ancient sea-swells of motion.

The sea, while representing the turgid and boiling energy of the whale, is certainly intoxicating; but it is also treacherous. If Merwin can say in **"River Sound Remembered"** (57) that "It will be the seethe and drag of the river / That I will hear longer than any mortal song," he nonetheless warns us in **"Fog"** (80) that "whether we float long / Or founder soon, we cannot be saved here." For the sea is fatal; it is "everywhere" (**"Sailor Ashore"**) with its "screaming silence" and its deceitful "whiteness" (**"The Frozen Sea"**). Merwin's hero becomes the "entranced man in a boat, lost at sea yet as 'found' as fatality will permit anyone to be. He 'knows sailing,' but that knowledge can protect him for only just so long."[8] He is protected only so long because of the fear of seeing a **"Sea Monster"** or approaching the treacherous waters of **"Cape Dread,"** or "lifted by the wake" of the ill-starred **"Portland Going Out"** (these past few poems are from ***The Drunk in the Furnace***). The only guidance that he finds in such fatality is in a **"Fog-Horn"** which gives

> . . . warning of something we dare not
> Ignore, lest we should come upon it
> Too suddenly, recognize it too late,
> As our cries were swallowed up and all hands lost.
>
> (3)

Security can come, paradoxically, from a "dead thing"; from a **"Bell-Buoy"** which can

> . . . assure you
> Of where you are, though it knows nothing
> Of where you are going or may have been.
>
> (13)

Yet Merwin's approach to such a stark reality, the treacherous and chaotic sea about us, does not always have either the crashing discords of **"Leviathan"** or the "screaming silence" of **"The Frozen Sea."** In other poems, Merwin "close[s] in on panic so gently and unexpectedly" that it is only quietly that we finally come to "realize the depth of the waters, the / Abyss over which we float among such / Clouds" (**"The Iceberg"**).[9]

This technique of "clos[ing] in on panic so gently and unexpectedly" is amply manifest in Merwin's poem from ***Green with Beasts,*** **"Evening with Lee Shore and Cliffs."** This poem deserves a close analysis, for the mood which exudes from the poem is sustained by the complex variation on the sounds within the poem itself. I quote it in its entirety:

> Sea-shimmer, faint-haze, and far out a bird
> Dipping for flies or fish. Then, when over
> That wide silk suddenly the shadow
> Spread skating, who turned with a shiver
> High in the rocks? And knew, then only, the waves'
> Layering patience: how they would follow after,
> After, dogged as sleep, to his inland
> Dreams, oh beyond the one lamb that cried
> In the olives, past the pines' derision. And heard
> Behind him not the sea's gaiety but its laughter.

In the first line, the use of the dactylic foot ("sea-shimmer") and the repretition of the "s" sound catch perfectly the vibrating surface of the sea. The assonance in the "ai" and "az" sounds, plus the use of two spondees in "faint haze," slows the description down in order that the thick, misty air might come through with full force. In the second line, "A bird / Dipping for flies or fish" picks up the rhythm again in the iambic feet, in the assonance of the "i" sound, and in the double impact of the repeated "f" alliteration. In the second sentence, the action decelerates in the spondaic "Then, when . . . ," and this halting motion is complemented by the long "a" assonance of the words, creating a drawn-out interior rhyme. The movement picks up again in the dactyl "suddenly," in the trochaic "shadow" and "skating," and in the rising and swelling "s" alliteration. The motion is then left precariously at a tenuous height in the "i" sounds of "with a shiver / High in the rock?" Following this, a contrast is built between the sea and the air in the soft, mellifluous assonance of "the w*a*ves' / L*a*yering p*a*tience." This relaxed, fluid rhythm is then contrasted to the sharp, serpenty "i" sounds of the land ("h*i*s *i*nland"). The alliteration of the "p" sound in the ninth line emphasizes the hard, sputtering "derision," as it does the forthcoming "laughter." The emphatic "h" sounds of "*h*eard / Be*h*ind *h*im" following into the tenth line not only focus attention upon the speaker, but also prepare the reader for the variation on the "h" sound in "se*a*'s gaiety." This light, bouncing rhythm is only to be broken abruptly by the hard, rasping "ter" sound of "laughter," a word which is tellingly reminiscent of the first word in the poem, "sea-shimm*er*." The end rhyme scheme is also subtly organized: there are the slant rhymes of "over," "shiver," "after," and "laughter"; and the consonantal rhymes of "bir*d*," "inlan*d*," "cri*ed*," "hear*d*," "*s*hadow," "*s*hiver," "shado*w*," and "*w*aves." This poem is, then, highly structured, and in that its form is organic to its subject, the poem succeeds in "hugging terror"; but it does so very quietly and softly.

Merwin "hugs" the fatal sea in such a way that his art, like a "man's bones" in his poem, **"The Bones,"** gives "shapes to the sprawled sea, weight to its winds, and wrecks to plead for its sands." If the poet has lamented in an earlier poem, "What fable should I tell them, / That they should believe me?," he now has his answer. For he will tell them of "man's endeavors" to "give shapes to the sprawled sea" by creating myths and fables in an attempt to construct order in a world of chaos. He will create poetry which is close to traditional iambic form, but is far enough away to retain some of the "chaos" of organic, or naturally rhythmic, form. It is a straining form which in its visual abruptness (e.g., "beyond the one lamb that cried / In the olives") points out the limits of the poet's ability to contain within his art the chaotic and ever-changing sea; and which, in its soft, assonantal sounds (e.g., "farther th*a*n a m*a*n c*a*n see") reflects the fluid eternality of a sea which can never fully be contained within the mortal art of the poet.

With the advent of his family portraits in the latter half of ***The Drunk in the Furnace*** (New York, 1960), Merwin

finally comes ashore from his early alienation and his later penetrating sea voyage. Yet he does not give up the Odyssean quest of the ultimate answers; rather he puts them in a familiar and tangible context in which he can see before his own eyes the struggle being reenacted. He is at once sympathetic and understanding, compassionate and benign.

Thus we find that his poetry has come another stage in its metamorphosis. His style loosens from the calculated complexity of his sea poems and becomes more direct: "Oh / Kill it at once or let it go" (**"Plea for a Captive,"** 29). It can even be brutal, albeit it is realistic: "Do not look up. God is / On High. He can see you. You will die" (**"Small Woman on Swallow Street,"** 36). The poet looks about himself at humanity, and with both sympathetic pity and envy, he occasionally pays tribute to them: "Except for coughs they are quiet; / Sober; they always knew something would happen, / Something would provide" (**"The Gleaners,"** 37). His poetic gift becomes increasingly more "innocent," and more evocative, as when he invokes "Summer" to "be of this brightness dyed / Whose unrecking fever / Flings gold before it goes / Into voids finally / That have no measure" (25). And at times he can offer friendly and paternal advice, for he has in store the knowledge of his sea voyages: "Helpless improver, / Grown numerous and clever / Rather than wise or loving, / Nothing is newer than ever / Under the sun . . ." (**"Under the Old One,"** 20).

In two of his grandmother poems, **"Grandmother Watching at Her Window"** and **"Grandmother Dying,"** the poet seems terribly troubled and the personal note is agonizing even if it is stoically endured:

> but God loves you so dearly
> Just as you are, that nothing you are can stay,
> But all the time you keep going away, away.
>
> (42)

and again, in soft, modulated tones,

> and her chair went on
> Rocking all by itself with nothing alive
> Inside it to explain it, nothing, nothing.
>
> (44)

If this seems but a bleak and despairing view, it is nonetheless not the disenchanted view of the alienated poet of ***The Dancing Bears.*** Instead, the poet now convinces us of his essential humanity by his personal and heart-felt connection with the tragedies of which he speaks. He is now sharing a common destiny with them, just as he, as poet, is capturing, through image and metaphor, all of those feelings and emotions which were hitherto unexpressed. And if the speaker seems frustrated before the inexorable laws of birth, life, and death, he can nevertheless affirm that same cycle in **"Burning Mountain,"** where he soliloquizes in these lines: Before long it [the "Burning Mountain"] practically seemed normal, / With its farms on it, and wells of good water, / Still cold, that should last us, and our grandchildren (48). And perhaps the highest note of affirmation amid the poet's somewhat resigned melancholy comes in the last poem of ***The Drunk in the Furnace,*** the poem of that name. For it is here that the artist affirms, even if comically, his continuing artistic function as a creator of myths: "Where he gets his spirits / It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical . . ." (54). Significantly, in the poem his "musical spirit" rises in stature above whatever knowledge and wisdom the "Reverend" is able to give. This is indeed a high tribute for a melancholy poet to pay to his art and to his art form.

In Merwin's next published book of poems, ***The Moving Target*** (New York, 1960), the poet becomes increasingly less complex in form as he becomes more various in his selection of poetic subjects.[10] The most noticeable aspect of this poetry, perhaps, is the selection of epigram poems that are distributed throughout. In their simplicity of statement, they catch the essence of a thought or an observation quickly but profoundly. For example, in a short poem like **"Separation,"** the poet twists words metaphysically in order to refresh a prospective: "Your absence has gone through me / Like thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color" (9); or similarly, in the **"Dead Hand,"** "Temptations still nest in it like basilisks. / Hang it up till the rings fall" (14).

Another concern in this poetry, as the title ***The Moving Target*** indicates, is with motion, and with the future in relation to the past. The repeated emphasis upon "shoes" throughout brings this concern to mind. It is first of all a questioning concern, as in **"Sire"**: "Deaf disappearance in the dusk, in which of their shoes / Will I find myself tomorrow?" (21). Yet Merwin at times, seems somewhat arrogant and self-indulgent in his bluntly stated awareness of his sea journey and the knowledge which he received from it. For example, he can say with a confirmed self-assurance in **"Noah's Raven,"**

> Why should I have returned?
> My knowledge would not fit into theirs.
> I found untouched the desert of the unknown,
> Big enough for my feet. It is my home.
> It is always beyond them.
>
> (10)

This particular type of facile reasoning appears also in such poems as **"Home for Thanksgiving," "Economy,"** and **"Inspiration for a Burned Bridge."** Nevertheless, there are a few poems in this volume which provide us with a more affirmative view of Merwin as a poet and as a man. In these poems, the redeeming factor is the sparse but precious conviction of self which he asserts in the modern age. Thus, in **"Departure's Girl-Friend,"** the poet insists upon the integrity and validity of his journey in spite of the personal hazards and the common resistance to his course when he says,

> and I step once more
> Through a hoop of tears and walk on, holding this