W. S. Merwin in Transition
The First Four Books

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When Merwin's first book of poems, *A Mask for Janus*, was published in 1952, W. H. Auden remarked in the preface that "the profundity and eternal relevance to the human condition of the great myths cannot fail to instill the most immature writer who reflects upon them with that reverence and wonder without which no man can become wise."[1] But this is not so much a comment on Merwin's craftsmanship as it is on the appropriateness of classical mythology to serve as subject matter for a young poet. Merwin's early attention to conventional forms and classical themes no doubt provided him the opportunity to develop a strong voice at an age (twenty-four) when no clear philosophical approach to personal creativity had yet been found.

There is much tension and verbal excitement in this first collection, as can be felt in "Anabasis II":

> Thus calmed we lay and hungered east or west
> But drifted on what warm meridian,
> Grazing the reefs of dying; yet we passed
> Through that peripety and afternoon.[2]

The quatrains of iambic pentameter evidence Merwin's ability to revitalize well-worn forms at a time when most contemporary poets had abandoned these confines in favor of the liberating spontaneity of free verse. But, as well-crafted as these poems are, I cannot help sensing an imper-

1. W.S. Merwin, *A Mask for Janus*, New Haven, 1952, p. viii.
2. W.S. Merwin, *The First Four Books of Poems*, New York, 1975, p. 8.

sonal distance being placed between poem and poet. Merwin's strength in *A Mask for Janus* is the expert and original anchoring of chaotic perceptions to a bed of well-regulated verse forms, yet his exploration into the subtler, deeper levels of consciousness typically sought after by contemporary poets oftem seems to be thwarted by a conscious manipulation of language. As James Dickey complains:

> Merwin has never given enough of himself to his subjects: of the self that somehow lies beyond the writing self. He has always seemed so sure, so utterly sure of what he knew and could tell about them that the strokes out of Heaven, or out of the subjects themselves, has [sic.] never quite managed to hit him between the eyes.[3]

Dickey recognizes Merwin's mastery of technique, but believes that such "dictatorship" over one's material "obscures and kills what the poet should want to get at: those areas which only he is capable of discovering."[4]

It is not that Merwin's early works are dated. His frequent thematic preoccupations with time and the desire to create order out of the raw chaos of the perceived universe are largely twentieth century issues. But there is an authoritative quality, a spiritual conviction in *A Mask for Janus* which defies contemporary man's search for identity in an overwhelming and impersonal universe. For example, "Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge" is written in the demanding tone of a playwright ordering appropriate stage directions:

> There must be a vessel.
> There must be rummage and shuffling for salvation
> Till on that stage and violence, among
> Curtains of tempest and shaking sea,
> A covered basket, where a child might lie,
> Timbered with osiers and floated on a shadow,
> Glides adrift, as improbably sailing
> As a lotus flower bearing a bull.

The commanding tone does brilliantly affect an intense and purposeful disturbance, expressed at its best in the penultimate stanza:

3. James Dickey, *Babel to Byzantium*. New York, 1968, p. 142.
4. Ibid, p. 143.

At last the sigh of recession: the land
Wells from the water; the beats depart; the man
Whose shocked speech must conjure a landscape
As of some country where the dead years keep
A circle of silence, a drying vista of ruin,
Musters himself, rises, and stumbling after
the dwindling beasts . . .[5]

It is as though Merwin is acting as surveyor, locating a point in the mind where the greatest chaos exists, a juncture, when reached, that becomes a timeless, spaceless "non-position" where reality and life can be viewed on one side juxtaposed with imaginative non-reality and death on the other. Nevertheless, the voice that emerges has a distant, impersonal quality that I feel somewhat compromises the psychic subject matter of the poem. It is remarkable that Merwin was able, at so early an age and with such expertise, to handle the rigorous demands of conventional forms. But the voice is simply not a personal one.

It is to Merwin's credit that he recognized a need for stylistic growth. In his second book, *The Dancing Bears*, Merwin relaxes his form somewhat and the voice becomes earthier, less God-like:

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 there to revolve.[6]

Richard Howard has these remarks to make on Merwin's new voice:

> The aspiration to commanding utterance is from the start renounced, decried, and the dandy's posture of supreme defiance, cast up to the indifferent stars, justifies the *made* music (as opposed to the miraculous natural harmonies) of these further poems.[7]

Still, there is a tendency in *The Dancing Bears* to "lean" on classical mythology rather than to supplant a more personally mythical realm. The poems are strong, but they seem

5. W.S. Merwin, *The First Four Books of Poems*, pp. 38, 40.
6. Ibid, p. 100.
7. Richard Howard, *Alone With America*, New York, 1980, p. 424.

to lack immediacy; a quality of slightly removed personal experience still prevails.

Although Merwin's third book, *Green with Beasts*, shows a further development into narrative-like, free verse poems, it is in *The Drunk in the Furnace* that Merwin's own style comes alive. Howard notes "an ungainliness and an intimacy one would thought inaccessible not only to the singer of all those carols and cansos, but even to the connoisseur of numinous landscapes and emblematic weathers."[8] He sums up the book's predominant theme with the cogent perception that here Merwin's work reflects the "desperate calcination of a man in a death-struggle with his own *realization*, in all the senses that word will bear, of mortality."[9]

The collection of sea poems within "Furnace," especially, possesses a brooding fascination with the role of death in man's life. In "FogHorn" the awareness of mortality is exposed through the metaphor of the warning beacon:

> Who tethered its tongue
> So that its voice could never come
> To speak out in the light of clear day,
> Buy only when the shifting blindness
> Descends and is acknowledged among us.[10]

until the importance of death-awareness is made clear:

> We only put it there
> To give 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.[11]

"The Iceberg" incorporates the symbol of the iceberg to reveal the function of the birth-death-rebirth cycle: "These must dissolve/Before they can again grow apple trees."[12] And nowhere in Merwin's earlier works is the portrayal of that terrible space between life and death expressed with

8. Ibid, p. 431.
9. Ibid, p. 434.
10. W.S. Merwin, *The First Four Books of Poems*, p. 203.
11. Ibid, p. 203.
12. Ibid, p. 202.

greater clarity than in the climactic stanza of "Deception Island":

> It is like being suspended in the open
> Vast wreck of a stony skull dead for ages.
> You cannot believe the crater was ever
> Fiery, before it filled with silence, and sea.[13]

"The Frozen Sea" demonstrates a new attitude by angrily indicting man's tendency to miss the simplest of nature's symbols. Here, the God-like voice is entirely absent. The tone is not didactic or overly-authoritative, as indicated by the use of the pronoun "we." The inclusion of self-indictment indicates that Merwin has clearly set his feet in the earth, admitting "the mortal flaw" in himself, laying bare his human fallibility so that the poet self unites empathetically with the collective self of the poem.

The Drunk in the Furnace is Merwin's homecoming. He appears to have found a voice that expresses his themes with undeniable immediacy. It is not surprising, then, that the highly personal family poems that close out his collection are included. This series exposes the hypocritical, lifeless, and rigid atmosphere around which Merwin grew up:

> Grandmother, his wife, wearing the true faith
> Like an iron nightgown, yet brought to birth
> Seven times and raising the family
> Through her needle's eye . . .[14]

The Drunk in the Furnace clearly took many critics by surprise. Eric Hartley remarks that "as a whole, man is given rather short shrift. For the most part, he has little more than petty, bigoted, and self-serving motives for his actions. . . . If *Green with Beasts* takes the reader toward a heaven, then *The Drunk in the Furnace* takes him into a hell and offers little hope of getting out."[15] I cannot agree with this assessment. It is precisely the portrayal of this realistic "hell" which provides the reader the necessary

13. Ibid, p. 204.
14. Ibid, p. 247.
15. Eric Hartley, *American Poets Since World War II*, V. 5, Ed. Donald J. Greiner, Detroit, 1980, p. 68.

provocation for "getting out." Karl Markoff seems to have his finger more closely placed on the pulse of this collection:

> It may be simply a coincidence that the family poems immediately precede the emergence of Merwin as a practitioner of open form; but it is tempting to the theorist to imagine that some sort of liberating process took place in *The Drunk in the Furnace*.[16]

The "liberating process" is clearly the replacement of recounted classical myths with a language and voice that strike directly at the source of man's mythmaking desires. The poems are colloquial, approaching narrative, but retain a musical resonance within the lines.

The Drunk in the Furnace draws Merwin nearer to the more subconscious, archetypal world of his later works. He has outgrown his poetic youth to the point at which the need to approach chaotic themes from a distance has been replaced by a more courageous recognition of the poet's own immersion within the razor-thin line between life and death. It is the voice of a poet weary of old convictions, excited and renewed by the impending, less certain confrontations with new, approaching beasts.

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16. Karl Markoff, *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, New York, 1973, p. 213.