

# W. S. Merwin:

## *The Poet as Creative Conservator*

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IN HIS FIRST FOUR VOLUMES W.[illiam] S.[tanley] Merwin (1927- ), the contemporary American poet, harkened to the voices of the literary past. This habit, demonstrated in *A Mask for Janus* (1952), *The Dancing Bears* (1954), *Green with Beasts* (1956), and *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960), earned him critical repute as a traditional poet. Often, however, the term has been applied in a manner that does not do justice to Merwin's early work. Awareness of the past was a cardinal virtue in the poetic milieu into which he was born. Especially in its dominant current, established by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, literary modernism stressed the use of the past as poetic material. Impersonality of statement, literary allusiveness, and the formal qualities of ambiguity and complexity were its aesthetic tenets. But in the 1960's critical reaction began. The new demand was for direct, personal statement and a vivid portrayal of the poetic emotion. From the viewpoint of this existentially oriented criticism, Merwin's early work suffered. It was too loosely associated only with Eliot; and more often, only with the practices of the New Criticism that Eliot popularized. This identification obscured Merwin's actual debt to Eliot. At the same time it minimized the wide variety of influences that have furnished Merwin's talent with richness and depth. At mid-career the poet's work was found lacking in emotional intensity. In critical terms, Merwin needed to "suffer a little at the hands of his subjects." His early volumes belonged to a "museum world." His early poems were "perfect stone statues."<sup>1</sup>

In fact Merwin's relation to the modernist tradition is both conservative and innovative.

Like any representative poet, in any era, he recognized that an individual idiom must be fashioned out of respect for past achievement. He also realized where the ossifications of tradition made improvisation necessary. In the late 1940's, in his formative years at Princeton University, Merwin absorbed the modernist aesthetic apparently through the agency of R. P. Blackmur, an eminent New Critic.<sup>2</sup> But his desire to amalgamate the whole range of literary modernism led him outside its main current. He assimilated its peripheral voices, among them those of William Butler Yeats and Robert Graves. The early Merwin plumbed modernism's tributary streams; he explored their preoccupation with pagan mythology. Ultimately his work discloses that poetic attitude which distinguishes all major poets; that search for permanent value and poetic truth in a world that does not credit either. It is a work that appears stylistically diversified rather than intimidated by the strictures of any one current of tradition. As one critic discerningly noted, Merwin's uniqueness among contemporary poets consists of the fact that his work represents "a microcosm of the history of modern verse."<sup>3</sup> As for the charge that his attention to tradition has obscured emotional feeling in his early poetry, Glauco Cambon asserts the opposite. He notes that in *A Mask for Janus* one cannot miss the "authentic lyricism": "the earnestness of the basic tone."<sup>4</sup> This lyricism is sounded on the subject of tradition in "Sestina," an early poem dedicated to Graves. Here Merwin puts strikingly his determination to unite all literary influences into a creatively new idiom:

Merciless restlessness falls to my share.  
 Whose house shall I fill for more than a  
 season?  
 I woke with new words, and in every place,  
 Under different lights, evening and morn-  
 ing,  
 Under many masters studied one song.<sup>5</sup>

That three of these masters were Eliot, Pound, and Yeats emerges in Merwin's review-article, "Four British Poets," in 1953. Here it is Eliot's voice that predominates in Merwin's critical viewpoint. In his comments on near-contemporary British writers, Merwin demonstrates an awareness of the whole scope of modernism, including the source of its reaction to nineteenth-century verse and its developments in the 1930's and 1940's. He laments lingering Romantic tendencies toward "diffuseness" and emotional vagueness in the work of Kathleen Raine and Edwin Muir. In Raine's poetry, freedom and directness with regard to experience "lead too easily to their own abuses"; in Muir's, the central influence of Wordsworth leads to a "discursive" rendition of the poetic subject, despite the beneficent influence of "the later Yeats."<sup>6</sup> Merwin's notation of the "Cambridge group," which influenced Raine, and of the politically motivated "thirties poetry," from which the work of Louis MacNeice derived, indicated a keen appreciation of poetic developments subsequent to the modernist revolution. Having placed Muir within this "current of English poetry," as a practitioner who contributes little in the way of innovation, Merwin goes on to state this view of literary tradition:

For a tradition proceeds, it would seem, both by the continuities and by the variations which it can contain alive; as long as it is alive itself it manages to make a continuum out of the necessary departures from itself. The work of the imagists, say, of Ezra Pound, of Mr. Eliot himself, enlivened the tradition by departing from it—it had to change in order to include them. (p. 469)

This insight raises uninvestigated issues with respect to Merwin's early career. Exactly how should his own work be placed in this pattern of a tradition's "continuities" and "varia-

tions?" Here Merwin implies that Eliot's influence has been exerted. Yet the precise rôle that Eliot played in the formation of Merwin's poetic self-image has never been fully explicated. Especially in the permanent qualities of mind they shared, their relationship transcends that initial closeness indicated by Merwin's first published poem, "On John Donne" (1946).<sup>7</sup> Donne, of course, was the Metaphysical poet championed by Eliot early in his own career. But the point is that the crucial directions Eliot indicated help to define the whole conservative tendency of Merwin's attitude toward tradition. Rather obviously, Merwin's statement about tradition echoes Eliot's seminal essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot defined tradition as a living organism whose life was altered by the birth of an authentic, individual work: "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it."<sup>8</sup> This process would occur by virtue of the artist's "historical sense," which Eliot maintained as "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." The poet, Eliot noted, would be aware that he "must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past." In Merwin's poem, "The Master," in *Green with Beasts*, this historical sense surfaces explicitly. The poet appears meditating the presence of a deceased literary figure, whose identity cannot be fully ascertained. There is a touch of irony in Merwin's portrait of this figure, who had

. . . a weakness for petty meddling,  
 For black sheep, churlish rancours, and  
 out-of-hand damning. (*GB*, 164)

Yet in the poet's literary relationship with this mentor, there is a serious and vital respect. Unmistakably a consciousness of the presence of the past is heard. Referring to the master's disciples, and counting himself among them, the poet claims:

For over a generation his ghost would come  
 bullying  
 Every hand: all modes seemed exhausted,  
 and he had left nothing  
 Of any importance for them to do

For only with his eyes could they see, with  
 his ears hear  
 The world. He had made it. And hard, now,  
 to believe  
 In the invention . . . (GB, 165)

For Merwin, as for Eliot, literary tradition would serve as creative restraint. It would provide not only a past standard of judgment, but also a hierarchy of aesthetic forms. Furthermore, tradition would comprise the means for transcending one's limitations of cultural perspective. Explicitly and implicitly, Merwin's first published essay, "The Neo-Classic Drama" (1949), embodies these views. In it he professes interest in a "live contemporary poetic drama," an interest born from "our responsibilities to the past."<sup>9</sup> The same concern with drama and with dramatic modes preoccupied Eliot throughout his career. In the first decade of Merwin's career, through *The Drunk in the Furnace*, dramatic presentation is a dominant feature of the poetic idiom. In this essay, however, the exemplars on whom Merwin concentrates are the French neo-classicists, Corneille, Molière, and Racine. In that these figures are foreign or continental ones, the essay presages the fifteen volumes of translation that would accompany Merwin's own original work. The whole storehouse of European literature would be the poet's home; for as Eliot claimed, a tradition would include all of European literature from Homer to the present.<sup>10</sup>

Merwin's early interest in the neo-classic period extended to its Spanish representative, Lope de Vega. As a translator, he apparently moved backward in time, through the minor traditions of Portuguese and Provençal poetry, and toward the Latinic source of the Romance languages. Although his *Satires of Persius* did not appear until 1961, Merwin must have been at work learning Latin at the time of *Green with Beasts*. It is in this volume that his poem, "Learning a Dead Language," fully captures his view that even in its disused branches tradition serves the artist as a source for self-discipline. Of itself, for a poet, translation is an act of self-effacement. But in the subject of rendering a dead language, Merwin espouses a more general attitude toward learning: one dependent upon the human virtue of humility.

This prerequisite humility is expressed in the poem's opening lines, as the poet appears instructing either a pupil or himself:

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 . . . (GB, 176)

As Merwin develops the poem, it becomes apparent that the "Dead Language" represents not just Latin but the language of the past as a whole. The attitude of humility makes possible the discipline of memory. In this process, crucial to the preservation of culture, an individual attains full human stature. Hence, the poet asserts that not only is "What you remember . . . saved," but also "What you come to remember becomes yourself." From humility and the self-discipline that memory requires, an harmonious dialectic of past with living present occurs. The "dead" past comes alive as a vital and instructive force:

What you remember saves you. To re-  
 member  
 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. (GB,  
 177)

With its dichotomy between man's "order" and his "passion," this poem points to yet another quality of mind that Merwin and Eliot share. In "The Neo-Classic Drama," Merwin used as an organizing principle T. E. Hulme's statement: "man is the chaos highly organized, but liable to revert to chaos at any moment." It was Hulme who helped Eliot formulate his awareness of Original Sin; both stressed the centrality of human limitations in their view of man's social destiny. Their classical point-of-view—one resigned and without illusions—was to be set against the unfounded optimism of nineteenth-century liberal doctrine. A classical mind looks skeptically on liberal hopes for social progress and human perfection. In his essay Merwin demonstrates this realistic

awareness, an unflinching attitude toward the moral paradoxes of human experience. In tragedy, he maintains, the crucial conflict is always based upon the struggle between society's laws and an individual's rights. In the dramas of Racine, a disintegration toward social chaos is likely to occur just when the social order is most nearly complete. It is in this sense that tragedy often reveals "evidence of human helplessness to control the human process."<sup>11</sup> This qualified assessment of man's social possibilities is what leads Merwin to stress the need for order and self-discipline. False hopes and great expectations, an emphasis only on humanity's goodness, obscure an awareness of the reality of sin, cited by Eliot as the virtue of a mature artist.<sup>12</sup> In *A Mask for Janus*, Merwin speaks out repeatedly against illusory hope. In the dramatic poem "Rime of the Palmers," for instance, the palmers advise the narrator that hope is a sentiment which leads one on a false road. Near a "broken bridge" and a "last mountain," their advice will be relevant:

If hope brings you there  
 Where night's self darkly burns,  
 Abandon hope to air  
 And to the wind's returns. (*MJ*, 13)

Merwin's classicist temperament indicates that another of his "continuities" with the modernist tradition is ideological. His early work continues that criticism of liberal social trends initiated by Eliot. Unlike Eliot, Merwin has never focused on the pitfalls of liberal doctrine *per se*. But in his socio-political comments, as in his poetry, Merwin opposes the same social maladies which Eliot associated more specifically with liberalism. For Eliot, liberal thought with its premise of cultural change led directly to the pagan or religiously neutral attitudes so apparent in modern societies. As it was promulgated in twentieth-century America by John Dewey, liberalism accepts "what is modern in human civilization: the belief in change, in social organization, in the 'law' of progress, in the planned human will."<sup>13</sup> Because it is founded upon a scientific image of man, liberalism places all of its stock in the collective human intelligence to control and to shape human nature and destiny. In this sense

liberalism is melioristic: It advances the belief that through the human agency the world will become increasingly better. Through the application of technology and the scientific method to nature and to the human social order, liberalism would fashion a world ordered solely by human consciousness. From these perspectives, humanistic and anthropocentric in essence, the world was created for man's disposal.

Merwin indicts this feature of the liberal ethos in a review-article of four books about man as a species. This essay, "On the Bestial Floor," concerns man's relation to the environment and to his own self-image. Though written at mid-career, it sets forth directly those principles which are latent in Merwin's early work. Here Merwin castigates modern man for according to human intelligence "a spontaneous moral splendor." As a result of this tendency man has severed his connection not only with God, the author of creation in the "myth of genesis," but also with the earth he inhabits. Holding out "his intelligence . . . as the great exoneration," modern man has desacralized his world, assuming "superiority to the rest of creation" and the "right to hold over it the powers of life and death."<sup>14</sup> According to Merwin, man has arrogated to himself the absolute rights and privileges of a creator in a world he did not create. Moreover, for Merwin, man's intelligence itself is suspect. Not only has man been irresponsible with regard to the rest of nature, but he is also far from the self-contained and autonomous status that he presumes for himself. The poet goes on to lament that

. . . as man's power over other living things has become if not more perfect at least more persuasive, his dominion over himself, however conceived, seems here and there to be escaping him despite analyses and institutions . . . (p. 313)

In its desacralizing and profane emphases, liberalism challenges Merwin's view of man. Liberalism, like all secular philosophies, refuses to account for the way that man exists on two levels of being.<sup>15</sup> From Merwin's perspective, evinced in an early essay on the poet

Dylan Thomas, man is “a metaphor or analogy of the world.” According to Merwin, the literary artist will perceive “In both man and the world . . . a force of love or creation which is more divine than either man or the world, and a force of death or destruction which is more terrible than man or the world.”<sup>16</sup> The import of this comment is quite obviously metaphysical. For Merwin, as for Eliot, man possesses innately a transcendent awareness, an intuition of such “other-worldly” realities. For Eliot in fact it was just this religious awareness that liberalism ignored. By its affirmation of cultural change liberalism severed man from the historical past, in which spiritual authority ordered human societies. For Eliot this process left man alienated and uprooted. Merwin has never gone so far as Eliot; he has ever declared that the collapse of Western cultural values is the result of Christianity’s decline. Yet Merwin’s opposition to the modern liberal ethos springs from the same type of religious sensibility. (And here it may be instructive to mention that the poet’s father was a Presbyterian minister.) Merwin has stated that the human condition, past and present, faces an “abiding mystery”: “the mystery that stays with us and does not change.”<sup>17</sup> This mystery is born from the interaction of the “force of love” with the “force of death.” It is a universal aspect of human existence, transcending all fluctuations of cultural change. Even though, for Merwin, the experience of mystery cannot be fully defined, true human intelligence will acknowledge it. In his poem “Her Wisdom,” in *Green with Beasts*, Merwin maintains that spiritual understanding—as both the source and the end of poetry—transcends the physical senses and so arrives at mystery. Poetry must capture

Such understanding, uncommunicable  
To other senses, and seeming so simple  
Is more a mystery than things not known at  
all. (GB, 179)

For Merwin this mystery also ascribes the limitations of man’s intelligence. Human hopes for progress and for social perfection must always be referred to it. In his poem “White Goat, White Ram,” also in *Green with Beasts*, Merwin subverts the “spontaneous

moral splendor” of man’s intelligence. Implicitly, this poem also questions the extent to which man may be innocent. In doing so, it debates the critical premise of liberal thought; for from the standpoint of liberal thought, man is innocent by nature. As the poet ruminates on the meaning of two goats that graze on a mountainous hillside, he makes successive discoveries about man’s need for innocence—rather than his actual possession of it. In the first part of the poem, Merwin realizes how this need for innocence has led man to misconstrue his relation to the world; and more specifically, to the animals of the poem. So he asserts that

. . . They are white, these two,  
As we should say those are white who remember nothing,  
And we for our uses call that innocence,  
So that our gracelessness may have the back  
of a goat  
To ride away upon . . . (GB, 136)

Clearly, the human state is fallen, not innocent. From his own gracelessness man “uses” the goats to signify innocence. Yet, as the poet goes on to discern, this state of being has little relation to their actual significance. Thus Merwin posits the limitation of all human purpose, since he has recognized the distortions of human need. Even in its symbolizing processes the human intellect will err,

. . . For our uses  
Also are a dumbness, a mystery,  
Which like a habit stretches ahead of us  
And was here before us . . .

From the humility apparent in this statement, and from his awareness that man cannot ultimately penetrate the world’s mystery, the poet comes to understand its true potentialities. Finally Merwin defines mystery as a realm of possibility. And although in this realm man may be innocent, this state of being remains beyond the actual world of time, beyond “all the uncovenanted terror of becoming.” Innocence, like the mystery, can be grasped only through “whisper of an elusive sense,” through “Infrequent meanings and shadows, analogies.”

The focus on human limitation rather than

on human capacities is constant in Merwin's early work. It is the surest index of his antipathy against liberal expectations for social progress. In *The Drunk in the Furnace* Merwin continues to chronicle man's incapacity to understand his own intentions. Man's inability to chart even physical reality is rendered in Merwin's poem "Fog-Horn." And as in many of Merwin's sea-poems, the confusion registered by the speaker of "Fog-Horn" connotes a more general incapacity. Listening to the sound of the fog-horn as the poem begins, the speaker is alarmed by its lack of resemblance to what should have been a comfort-producing sound.

Surely that moan is not the thing  
That men thought they were making, when  
they  
Put it there, for their own necessities.  
That throat does not call to anything human  
But to something men had forgotten,  
That stirs under fog . . . . (DF, 203)

The image of man characterized by these lines is a far cry from the autonomous hero who through technology regulates the world in liberal visions of human destiny.

For Merwin man's incapacity is what most limits his historical future. In *The Drunk in the Furnace*, in revealingly lifelike and satiric portraits, the poet depicts humanity as recalcitrant to improvement or change. In "Pool Room in the Lion's Club," for example, after his initial assertion—"I'm sure it must be still the same"—Merwin portrays from memory the characterless and indolent poolplayers. In them he captures that lack of moral fiber which Eliot foresaw as the outcome of liberal ideology. Although "Trains from the sea-board rattle past" outside the pool room,

. . . nothing changes their concern,  
Hurries or calls them. They must think  
The whole world is nothing more  
Than their gainless harmless pastime. (DF,  
244)

In liberal ideology the need for personal effort and internal restraint is removed. This occurs because the task of human discipline is placed on the collective social whole. All that is necessary to attain the full flower of man's

natural goodness is the right arrangement of individual desires within the society at large. Hence liberalism nullifies the necessity for personal moral conflict; it neutralizes the individual's potential to realize moral values. What results is the blank and vacuous human condition that Merwin imagines in his poem "No One." In fact this poem can be read as an ironic address to liberal ideologues. For by abdicating the need for personal morality, and by gazing upon the future with optimism, liberals are bound to experience the betrayal that this poem registers. In a manner that echoes Yeats' "The Second Coming," Merwin captures the arrival of the historical future. "Who would it surprise," the poet queries—if

. . . when the wind of prophecy  
Lifts its pitch, and over the drifting ash  
At last the trump splits the sky,  
No One should arise

(No one just as before:  
No limbs, eyes, presence;  
Mindless and incorruptible) to inherit  
Without question the opening heavens.  
(DF, 223)

This figure, "No more than equitable," is "By No One to be succeeded," as Merwin tells us in the poem's last stanza. For as Eliot pointed out, liberalism dissipates human energy; have no authentic idealism and no real standards, it "loses force after a series of rejections, and with nothing to destroy is left with nothing to uphold and nowhere to go."<sup>18</sup>

*A Mask for Janus*, Merwin's earliest work, initiates his commitment against two specific instances of the liberal ethos. His early indictment of liberalism is focused upon its egoism and its materialism. Liberals, of course, advocate materialism as the primary means to accomplish social perfection. But for Merwin, as for Eliot, no genuine social progress, no improvement of man's spiritual state, could result merely from the satisfaction of his physical needs. Much later in his career Merwin was to declare unequivocally: ". . . I put no faith in material utopias . . . they . . . seem to me to be projections of a poverty that is not in itself material."<sup>19</sup> Behind his early poetry there lies

a keen awareness that liberal designs for social progress have resulted in society's enslavement to materialism. This awareness is sounded in the two poems which begin *A Mask for Janus*, "Anabasis I" and "Anabasis II." Taken as one whole poem, Merwin's "Anabasis" again discloses his need to provide literary tradition with its vital "continuities." The original *Anabase* by the Greek poet, Xenophon, described the conquest and the foundation of cities in Asiatic territories of the Ancient East. This work was given a free translation by the French Nobel Prize winner, St.-John Perse; it was then brought to the attention of English readers by Eliot, who translated the French poet's version in 1938.<sup>20</sup> In fact, it is St.-John Perse who strikes the key note for Merwin's opposition to societal materialism. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the French poet declared: "The gulf between poetic creation and the activities of a society subjected to material bondage grows even wider" in our time.<sup>21</sup> The poetic need, one synonymous with man's religious need, according to St.-John Perse, will be the motive for resistance to society's materialistic ethos. In Merwin's "Anabasis," as in the French poet's, the speaker, or persona, is an explorer, a veteran of many voyages. In the images of the poem, in the persona's recollection of encounters in far-away countries, Merwin renders the threat posed by society to man's spiritual needs. The physical and the social landscapes are blended together to make one feel the dangers inherent in modern liberal civilization. In their sea journey, the explorers have passed

Straits whose rocks lean to the sound,  
 Monstrous, of their declivities,  
 As lovers on their private ground  
 See no distance, but face and face;

We have passed in a warm light  
 Islands whose charmed habitants  
 Doze on the shores to dissipate  
 The seasons of their indolence. (*MJ*, 4)

The twin threats of egoism and materialism are caught here in successive stanzas. The lovers "see no distance, but face and face"; in other words, because of their privacy of feeling

and their self-absorption, they miss their connection to the whole human family. The islanders are simply "charmed" into sloth in an image suggestive of pure material surfeit. This social condition, soporific and static, is linked more clearly to liberal ideology in "Anabasis II," in the speaker's claim:

. . . we suffered music that declares  
 The monstrous fixities of innocence. (*MJ*, 9)

These "fixities of innocence" necessitate the perpetual resistance, the cycle of voyage, encounter, and renewed setting forth, upon which the poem depends. And in the phrase itself, Merwin captures the characteristic indulgence and the dissipation of human potential that Eliot saw as the informing spirit of liberalism. There is no necessity for moral resistance in a society fixated on innocence. In such a society the individual's potential for creative achievement will be blunted or stultified. For this reason, as St.-John Perse maintained, the poet will understand that "Inertia is the only mortal danger." In "Anabasis II" Merwin communicates his own awareness of this threat. His speaker asserts that the "sick repose" of his "saeculum," or era, calls for continual exploration.

In his review-article of Hugh MacDiarmid's *In Memoriam James Joyce*, Merwin's antipathy against the easy optimism of liberal thought emerges. According to MacDiarmid, a literature of the future might be comprised of all the world's languages, combined into "a single literary medium." This scheme would raise man's intelligence to the point where what is now considered genius would be the norm. Merwin, however, senses in such a proposal a betrayal of man's "local mortality"; a neglect for man in his "particular locale."<sup>22</sup> Merwin's stress on the value of place grows from his recognition that it contributes to "the abiding mystery of the human condition and what it faces." Calling for literature to express, as always, this mystery, he berates MacDiarmid's utopian scheme. It would leave behind too much of man's traditional past. Based on "pedantry" and "easy assumption," MacDiarmid's proposal ignores the changeless nature of

the human condition. Merwin's respect for traditional social values surfaces clearly in his poem, "In the Heart of Europe," in *Green with Beasts*. Here the poet ruminates over a force that, for generations, has kept the European farmers in "the same spot." These farmers have survived changes in the social order—"Survived masters and serfdom"—by keeping alive their collective habits and customs. These customs confer permanence and order on their society; they extend even to the way that houses are always built in similar fashion. The poem poses the question that it answers: "What keeps and has / Kept them?" It defines social tradition as a form of love,

That is a habit so ancient that a man's  
span  
Is brief in its practice . . . (GB 173)

Construed as inherited wisdom, social tradition is an intangible component of a society's collective awareness.

It is as though, in a thing so established  
They knew themselves tenants, merely, till  
the country  
Turns from them to their children. You feel  
they would never  
Say the place belonged to them . . .

It is just this collective spirit, this interaction of a body of people with their environment, their predecessors, and their progeny that liberalism fragments. Liberalism foments egoism because, as Eliot discerned, it dissolves a people's "natural collective consciousness into individual constituents."<sup>23</sup> What results is an insularity of attitude perhaps most alarmingly expressed by the modern, middle-class emphasis on domestic life. This aspect of the liberal ethos appears as a restrictive narrowing of outlook and capacity; one's own private family becomes a surrogate for the whole human community. The human condition in its universality is no longer confronted. Merwin's opposition to this species of liberalism is rendered succinctly in his early poem, "Ballad of John Cable and Three Gentlemen." His distaste for domestic existence is constant in his career, when it represents a

retreat from one's responsibility to the family of man. It is a note sounded in his "Ballad," which, in its complexity of statement, also puts the case against materialism.

John Cable, the poem's main figure, is a concrete example of one of those lovers who, on his "private ground," sees "no distance, but face and face." The story at one level is straightforward. Walking one morning, "Over seven hills," Cable comes "by the last tree,"

To a gray river  
Wide as the sea. (MJ, 15)

Imaged elsewhere in the poem as " 'the stream of Friday,' " this river appears as a traditional symbol for the stream of time and life. It becomes also a symbol for the recognition of last things—for an awareness of death and eternity. This connotation is not immediately apparent; it is generated by the dramatic tensions of the poem. At the river's beach, Cable encounters a "listing wherry," a boat that holds "Three dark gentlemen." They instruct him to come with them, to embark on a journey to " 'the far side' " of the river:

'Come and be company  
As far as the far side.'  
'Come follow the feet,' they said,  
'Of your family,  
Of your old father  
That came already this way.'

It becomes quickly clear, however, that the "family" and the "father" whom these men have in mind is not Cable's immediate family. Making haste to resist their command, Cable points out that if he goes his sister will have " 'no man on her garden' "; no one to help with the plowing in springtime. As a second excuse, he asserts that his wife will have no one to console her and may " 'die of grieving' "; as a third, that his " 'poorly mother' " will surely pine away. From Cable's perspective, his own private family and his domestic duties and responsibilities prevent him from leaving. Who then comprises the "family" of which the gentlemen speak; and what is their real identity?

The poem's meaning begins to unravel as the "Three dark gentlemen" dispose of Cable's excuses. It becomes obvious in the nature of

Cable's final plea. In the first place, the gentlemen allow him no self-indulgent sentiments. Clearly, a consideration of his real family transcends the emotional ties that bind him in an insular web to mother, sister, and wife. To Cable's excuse that his sister will be without a plowman the three reply:

'Lose no sleep . . . for that fallow:  
She will say before summer,  
I can get me a daylong man,  
Do better than a brother.' (MJ, 16)

For Cable's reason that his wife may die of grief, they merely assert: "Ask no such wild favor." And of his "poorly mother," and of the emotion "of charity" from which he wishes to comfort her, the gentlemen bluntly state:

. . . 'She is old and far,  
Far and rheumy with years,  
And, if you like, we shall take  
No note of her tears.'

In this statement it becomes apparent that the gentlemen do, in one of their guises, represent death. At some point they will also take Cable's mother. They recall Charon in his boat on the river Styx. From their perspective, death is a *donnée* of the human condition, not a cause for exception or self-indulgence. Death undermines all egoistic or self-centered values since it inevitably obliterates the individual consciousness. That Cable has based his life on a cultivation of personality, on a materialistic rather than a metaphysical point-of-view, becomes apparent from his last excuse. As his fourth reason for not going "On the dark river," Cable cites his "'own body,'"

'The frame that was my devotion  
And my blessing was.' (MJ, 17)

Here Merwin makes clear the fact that the domestic life is associated with the physical plane of existence. All of Cable's excuses are subsumed by this last one, which indicates why he has accepted his domestic duties. He wished to preserve a life of bodily gratification:

' . . . have you  
Thought of my own body  
I was always good to?'

That his attachment to his body has been part of his sentimental and self-indulgent domestic life is also apparent from his last comment. He terms it a "'poor thing,'" which

'Might not remember me  
Half tenderly.'

Cable regards his body as a friend to be placated and served.

The gentlemen reject Cable's final excuse in no uncertain terms. They allow him to "nurse no worry," for it has become obvious by this point that Cable avoids the higher significances of human life. They insist that, with regard to his body,

'Poor thing is made of patience;  
Will not say a word.'

It is instructive to notice the values of abstinence and of self-control implicit in this last piece of advice. The body can be trained not to protest; it is "'made of patience.'" In this final refusal by the three gentlemen, Merwin exposes all egoism as materialistic in essence. In fact, the poem can be read as a philosophic rejection of the materialistic view of life: the body has ultimately no authentic reality. This theme—the renunciation of the body, its pleasures and its needs—is an ethical one that reverberates from this poem into *A Mask for Janus*, such as "Over the Bier of the Worldling" it is a theme best expressed by the proverbial wisdom: "vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). With respect to final ends, and to eternal life, all temporal pleasures and pursuits are negligible. In poems of *A Mask for Janus*, such as "Over the Bier of the Worldling" and "Epitaph on Certain Schismatics," the theme of vanity is stated even more coherently. Of the schismatics, Merwin is wholly approving. They have severed relations with a corrupt Church, apparently because of the abuses that became part of its doctrine in the Middle Ages. One such abuse was the doctrine that through penance, or through public prayer, grace could be gained for one's soul in the next life. The materialistic emphasis in such a doctrine is obvious, as is its pride or its anthropocentrism; man presumes to know the will of Providence. The schismatics have renounced "the arrogant

knees" of the sacrament of Penance, in favor of a more total abstinence:

These were they whom the body could not  
please,  
Shaded between the shaded lights who rose  
Quavering and forsook the arrogant knees,  
The bodies death had made incredulous. (*MJ*,  
33)

These schismatics know what Cable must learn. In the light of the eternal, the physical life means nothing. They know that nothing temporal is permanent; that

Even cool flesh . . .  
When they could best remember it, only  
made  
A wry shadow between the quick and the  
dead.

It is also important to demonstrate how the three gentlemen of Merwin's "Ballad" represent more than physical death. Death is the gateway to a more meaningful life; these three figures embody the permanent and the transcendent reward, expressed in man's collective and cultural existence. For Cable is going somewhere, if only in spirit. This somewhere is revealed at the poem's outset as "the far side" of the river. Then, near its conclusion, Cable's destiny is more fully disclosed. He is going

"To a populous place,  
A dense city  
That shall not be changed  
Before much sorrow dry." (*MJ*, 18)

The poem's complexity is deepened by the inclusion of this image. Merwin confers spiritual life on his "hero." Cable is heir to the higher life of cultural tradition; to a changeless life in a "city" beyond time and flux, and beyond the significance of his mere mortality. Merwin intends this city as a Byzantium, or city of art. He intends Cable as a type for the poet, and for the poet's conflict and role in life. This fact is evident in the final identity of the "Three Gentlemen." In their threefold nature, though they always speak as one, and in their paradox-

ical role, both to destroy and to create Cable's destiny, they represent the Muse. This identity is not fully clear, until one has finished Merwin's entire first volume. In "Hérons," there are three birds which similarly offer advice; in "Ode: the Medusa Face," there are "three hags" who must be confronted. These three gentlemen are faces for the Triple Goddess, or White Goddess, of art and of life. This is the dominant mythological system used by Merwin in his early work. Finally the "Three Gentlemen" speak for the aesthetic vocation. Calling for values requisite for the aesthetic life, they demand that the poet sacrifice his egoism, and all its trappings of human company and comfort. They repeat insistently near the end of the poem:

'Come with no company  
To the far side.'

In an indication of what must be achieved by the aesthetic mode, the gentlemen or Muses make Cable forswear every impulse toward emotional responsiveness. Their city of art will not be changed "Before much sorrow dry." Impersonality, to the point of austerity, is part of the final outlook of these figures. In fact all of the values they recommend are religious in essence; these are affirmed in the poem's resolution, as well as by its formal qualities. For-saking all, Cable goes with the gentlemen, in the spirit with which Merwin will dedicate himself to the Muse. Nor can the poem's resolution be termed bleak, or in any sense, less than affirmative. Indeed there is a certain gaiety, an air of celebration in its closing lines. This note arises from the imagery as much as from the more obvious resolution of meter and rhyme scheme:

Now Cable is carried  
On the dark river;  
Nor even a shadow  
Followed him over.

On the wide river  
Gray as the sea  
Flags of white water  
Are his company. (*MJ*, 18)

<sup>1</sup>For these views, see James Dickey, "The Death and Keys of the Censor," *The Sewanee Review*, 69 (Spring 1961), 328; Frank MacShane, "A Portrait of W. S. Merwin," *Shenandoah*, 21 (Winter 1970), 9; Richard E. Messer, "W. S. Merwin's Use of Myth," *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association*, 1 (Summer 1975), 43, respectively. <sup>2</sup>*Contemporary Authors: A Bio-Bibliographic Guide to Current Authors and Their Works*, ed. James M. Ethridge and Barbara Kopola, XV-XVI (Detroit: Gale Research, 1966), 299. <sup>3</sup>Karl Malkoff, *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Crowell, 1973), p. 208. <sup>4</sup>*Recent American Poetry*, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), pp. 16-17. <sup>5</sup>*W. S. Merwin: The First Four Books of Poems* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 43. All subsequent reference to Merwin's poetry, as it occurs in the text, is to this collected edition of his first four volumes. These abbreviations will be used to denote the original titles: *MJ* for *A Mask for Janus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952); *GB* for *Green with Beasts* (New York: Knopf, 1956); and *DF* for *The Drunk in the Furnace* (New York: Macmillan, 1960). <sup>6</sup>*The Kenyon Review*, 15 (Summer 1953), 467-69. Subsequent reference occurs in the text. <sup>7</sup>"A Checklist of the Writings of William Stanley Merwin," comp. Jon Quitslund, *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 25 (Autumn 1963), 96. <sup>8</sup>*Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York:

Harcourt, 1932), p. 5. <sup>9</sup>*The Hudson Review*, 2 (Summer 1949), 300. <sup>10</sup>*Selected Essays*, p. 4. <sup>11</sup>"The Neo-Classic Drama," p. 299. <sup>12</sup>*Selected Essays*, p. 342. <sup>13</sup>George A. Panichas, "T. S. Eliot and the Critique of Liberalism," *Modern Age*, 18 (Spring 1974), 149. This fine analysis of Eliot's stance against liberalism, in its clear elucidation of the opposition, as represented by Dewey, has deepened my understanding of the entire debate. <sup>14</sup>*The Nation*, 200 (March 22, 1965), 313. Subsequent reference occurs in the text. <sup>15</sup>Panichas, p. 161. <sup>16</sup>"The Religious Poet," *Adam International Review* (1953); rpt. in *A Casebook on Dylan Thomas*, ed. John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Crowell, 1960), p. 59. <sup>17</sup>These two usages of the term "mystery" occur in Merwin's review-article, "Without the Reality of Music," *Poetry*, 88 (April 1956), 49; and in his Foreword to *Transparence of the World: Poems by Jean Follain*, trans. W. S. Merwin (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. vi, respectively. <sup>18</sup>*The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber, 1939), p. 16. <sup>19</sup>*Contemporary Authors*, p. 299. <sup>20</sup>For a description of both works, see *Anabasis: A Poem by St.-John Perse*, trans., with a Preface by T. S. Eliot (1938; rev. ed. New York: Harcourt, 1949), pp. 10-12. <sup>21</sup>*St.-John Perse: Two Addresses*, trans. W. H. Auden and Robert Fitzgerald, Bollingen Series, 86 (New York: Pantheon, 1966), p. 9. <sup>22</sup>"Without the Reality of Music," pp. 48-49. <sup>23</sup>*The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 16.