Academic Journal of Modern Philology
e-ISSN 2353-3218
ISSN 2299-7164
Vol. 5 (2016)
181–189

Piotr Zazula
Rezekne Higher Education Institution, Latvia

Intimate but Not Private: Deep Image and the Telluric Sublime in W. S. Merwin's Poems

Abstract

If we define a poet's encounter with the sublime as an inherently religious experience, then many of W. S. Merwin's poems can be considered as deeply religious. At its best, his poetry has an air of uncanny familiarity, a "familiar strangeness," as one critic has put it. In this sense Merwin's lyrics offer a modified approach to the concept of the sublime. Blending archetypal imagery with defamiliarized diction, the American poet tries to reconnect his readers with a long-gone religious paradigm – that of earth-oriented, pagan spirituality of Western Europe, filtered, though, through Merwin's essentially Buddhist sensibility. Offering a close-reading analysis of selected poems (with an emphasis on Merwin's use of what Robert Bly calls the deep image), this paper attempts to decode some of their more complex metaphorical meanings in the light of the poet's spiritual affinities. These, though theologically unspecified, seem grounded in his both "pagan" and poignant awareness of nature's self-contained status vis-á-vis the human condition. Thus, both Nature's ultimate ontological status and Merwin's private creed remain a riddle.

Keywords: Merwin, sublime, spirituality, poetry.

Though "difficult" or "abstract" by common reading standards, many poems by W. S. Merwin have an air of uncanny familiarity, a "familiar strangeness" in Richard Howard's apt phrase (1971: 376). Even if it is sometimes hard to say what they are actually about, one usually has a sense of an intuitive grasp of the poems' otherwise inexpressible themes. This of course could be said of any good poetry, but in the case of Merwin's lyrics, especially those featuring marine motifs and images (one of his favorite subjects was the sea), part of the author's success may result from an ingenious blend of two staple components of poetry: archetypal imagery and defamiliarized diction. Tapping the natural world as a connotative resource of imagination, the poet creates verbal constructs meant to function as alternative realities, thus

problematizing the relation between the natural and the artificial. Yet, paradoxically enough, Merwin is, by the same token, as Howard puts it, acknowledging "the world's alterity, its endless alien force which makes of the poet no more than a channel for its energies" (Howard 1971: 366). Merwin's world is strangely familiar to the reader not because we are, as a species, "naturally unnatural," but, most likely, because the poet's seemingly surreal or ostensibly contrived visions are, in fact, deeply imbedded in our collective unconscious.

In this sense these modern American lyrics offer – however indirectly and regardless of their authors' intentions – a modified approach to the concept of the sublime, "as it has been rediscovered in the works of Edmund Burke and Kant" (Jameson 1993: 326). The difference between the two thinkers' understanding of the term itself is important here. As Fredric Jameson explains,

> The sublime was for Burke an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether: a description then refined by Kant to include the question of representation itself, so that the object of the sublime becomes not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces. (1993: 326)

In the context of modern American poetry, the problem of "the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature" recurs, for example, in Sylvia Plath's nature poems, her understanding of the sublime being thus more akin to Burke's. (Incidentally, her stance is also reminiscent of the medieval Gnostics' and Schopenhauer's ambivalent attitude towards organic matter, but these affinities, however intriguing, are of course way beyond the scope of the present paper.)

In Jean-François Lyotard's account of the Kantian concept one experiences the sublime when faced with the inexpressibility of one's transcendental intuitions, or "the incommensurability of reality to concept" (Lyotard 1991: 79):

> The sublime sentiment, which is also the sentiment of the sublime, is, according to Kant, a strong and equivocal emotion: it carries with it both pleasure and pain. Better still, in it pleasure derives from pain. […] It takes place […] when the imagination fails to represent an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it. We have the Idea of the simple (that which cannot be broken down, decomposed), but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object which would be a "case" of it. We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible. (1991: 77–78)

At this point a quote from William C. Williams' famous poem "To Elsie" comes to mind: "It is only in isolate flecks that / something / is given off." The irremediable fragmentariness of our perception of transcendent truths is a recurrent motif in Modernist verse. Williams' point is that such fleeting moments of insight into the cosmic scheme are not cumulative in their effect, they do not add up, so to speak. In other words, they are not like scattered bits and pieces of a mosaic that can be put back together, however laboriously. Each glimpse into the truth constitutes an autonomous whole whose workings are therefore comparable to what Lyotard, speaking of various avant-gardes in modern painting, refers to as "making an allusion to the unpresentable by means of visible presentations" (1991: 78). It follows that such presentations cannot make up a coherent picture when viewed together *as presentations*.

Kant's understanding of the sublime seems particularly modern because of its emphasis on the limits of articulation or representation. Thus contextualized, the fragmentariness of truth is a modern challenge and ordeal *per se*, a cognitive determinant of a secularized and scientistic culture in which personal longings for transcendence on the part of sensitive intellectuals are, by and large, suspended in an axiological void. (Thus Eliot's conversion to a highly institutionalized religion and Pound's embracing of fascism can be regarded as two desperate acts of modern flight from modernity.) To be modern is to live with an axiological ambivalence on a daily basis. As John Jervis puts it,

> [M]odernity is served by renunciation, of that which is familiar, that which we love, in order to live in the unfolding of an uncertain future. Not surprisingly, this precipitates a deep ambivalence, characteristic of the modern attitude since Baudelaire, Marx, and their contemporaries, if not before. Modernity offers hope of progress, civilization and emancipation; but it has also been inseparable from nostalgia, rootlessness, fragmentation and uncertainty. The consolation of goals achieved can turn readily into dust; and, perhaps even worse, they can be revealed as empty, grandiose, absurd. This duality of response, corresponding to real tensions in modernity itself, makes ambivalence a feature not just *of* modernity but of attitudes *to* it. There is a reflexive dimension here: to be modern is, among other things, to see oneself in these terms, to be aware of oneself *as* modern. And the sources of this ambivalence and reflexivity must be sought deep in the modern experience. (1998: 4–5)

The speakers of most of the poems discussed in this paper are thus modern intellectuals negotiating, more or less successfully, their position vis-à-vis the kind of ambivalence Jervis writes about.

Offering a close-reading analysis of selected poems by Merwin, I therefore attempt to decode some of their more complex metaphorical meanings in the light of the poet's (self-consciously ambiguous) spiritual affinities. These, though theologically unspecified, seem grounded in Merwin's both "pagan" and poignant awareness of nature's self-contained status vis-á-vis the human condition. As Richard Howard notices in his comment on *The Drunk in the Furnace*, published in 1960,

> Landscapes ("In Stony Country," "The Highway") and sea pieces ("Fog-Horn," "The *Portland* Going Out") extend the impulse of *Green with Beasts* [Merwin's third volume, published in 1956] to inflect the consciousness, to subdue the identity so utterly to the given scene that some other passion beyond the merely personal speaks out of observation. There is an enlarged sense of the *menace* of nature, of some obscure opposition to human life in the mere process of the universe […]. (1971: 367)

So, to repeat, abstruse and puzzling as his poems often seem on first reading, Merwin is clearly not a noncommittal aesthete absorbed in formal experiment for its own sake. For one thing he has taken a firm and quite explicit stand on environmental issues. The poem "For a Coming Extinction," from *The Lice* volume, first published in 1967, testifies to Merwin's highly developed ecological sensibility. Here is the text:

> Gray whale
> Now that we are sending you to The End
> That great god
> Tell him
> That we who follow you invented forgiveness
> And forgive nothing

I write as though you could understand
And I could say it
One must always pretend something
Among the dying
When you have left the seas nodding on their stalks
Empty of you
Tell him that we were made
On another day

The bewilderment will diminish like an echo
Winding along your inner mountains
Unheard by us
And find its way out
Leaving behind it the future
Dead
And ours

When you will not see again
The whale calves trying the light
Consider what you will find in the black garden
And its court
The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas
The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless
And fore-ordaining as stars
Our sacrifices

Join your word to theirs
Tell him
That it is we who are important
(Merwin 1993: 122–123)

The beginning sounds almost like a traditional Native American prayer, but Merwin quickly corrects this impression by stressing (in lines 7–10) the inherent artifice of his invocation to the whale: "I write as though you could understand / And I could say it / One must always pretend something / Among the dying." This almost agonizing self-consciousness places Merwin squarely in the modern poetic tradition, itself a modification of the Romantic perspective. Odes to west winds, sky-larks, nightingales and waterfowls, if not to whales, were staple fare in Romantic poetry, but neither Shelley nor Keats (or William Cullen Bryant for that matter) would have bothered to acknowledge within the lyric itself the conventional character of the poet's addressing natural elements or birds as if they could understand his words. Thus, though ostensibly tapping two poetic traditions – tribal Native American and modern Anglo-American – Merwin distances himself from both.

Incidentally, the tone of "For a Coming Extinction" brings to mind some poems on animals written by Merwin's American contemporaries, especially James Dickey and Gary Snyder. In Robert Bly's words, "As a Dickey poem begins, we see a man sleeping in the suburbs dreaming he is a deer; it is possible this sleeper may be a deer dreaming it is a man" (1991: 164). Such implicit shifts of perspective, often accompanied by a shift of agency from the human to the animal, are also a trademark of Merwin's style. In the whale poem the transition is foregrounded in lines 15–17 where the poet traces the fading echo "winding along" the whale's "inner mountains." The entrails-as-mountains metaphor, though simple enough, is poetically powerful because it merges successfully two types of analogy. The first one is descriptive – by human standards the whale's internal organs may indeed seem mountainous. The second one is functional – the echo "unheard by us" and disappearing into the whale's inner landscape, points out to the cosmic, as it were, scale of the whale's being, allowing for a fleeting glimpse into an entirely different and self-contained reality, unfathomable by the human mind. The whale thus construed not only lives in a separate world: it *is* a world of its own. As Thomas B. Byers noted, "The [poem's] message is the more poignant because it refuses the assimilation of the other that characterizes Whitman's empathy" (1989: 169).

Similarly, in Snyder's *Myths and Texts* (published in 1960) one comes across poetic tributes, such as "This Poem Is for Bear" or "This Poem Is for Deer," in which animals are presented as power-emanating creatures equipped with minds of their own. However, despite the shifts in perspective from the human to the feral, the texts' central consciousness, so to speak, both in *The Lice* and in *Myths and Texts*, remains human. In "For a Coming Extinction" – permeated with ironic references to the Bible – the speaker is a representative of (self-)destructive mankind. In Snyder's "This Poem Is for Bear" tribal myth is likewise employed as a paradigmatic frame of reference, the bear becoming an increasingly symbolic creature as the poem progresses.

In this context what makes Merwin's "Ancestral Voices" particularly intriguing – and in this respect more akin to some lyrics by Dickey in which animals "exist as if aware of their own stage of evolution" (Bly 1991: 170) – is the poet's successful attempt to explore not only the ontological but also the epistemological *otherness* of the natural world (or, in Howard's terms, "the world's alterity"). A defamiliarized perspective is, to repeat, certainly one of Merwin's favourite poetic devices. In "Ancestral Voices," however, he complicates things more than usual by reversing the standard spatial and temporal relations between commonplace phenomena. Here is the poem:

> In the old dark the late dark the still deep shadow
>   that had travelled silently along itself all night
> while the small stars of spring were yet to be seen and the few
>   lamps burned by themselves with no expectations
> far down through the valley then suddenly the voice
>   of the blackbird came believing in the habit
> of the light until the torn shadows of the ridges
>   that had gone out one behind the other into the darkness
> began appearing again still asleep surfacing in their
>   dream and the stars all at once were gone and instead the song
> of the blackbird flashed through the unlit boughs and far

out in the oaks a nightingale went on echoing
itself drawing out its own invisible starlight
these voices were lifted here long long before the first
of our kind had come to be able to listen
and with the faint light in the dew of the infant
leaves the goldfinches flew out from their nest in the brambles
they had chosen all their colors for this day and they sang
of themselves which was what they had wakened to remember
(Merwin 1994: 23)

The poem begins and concludes with defamiliarized images of movement in which the standard spatial relations between the action's agent and its environment, or between subject and object of action have been reversed. While in "real" life shadows – or any moving objects for that matter – can only travel along *other* things, in the poem the shadow "had traveled silently along itself all night." This shifting of agency makes perfect sense, given the logic of the situation. If there is no source of light, there can be no shadow (the "small stars of spring" are not out yet and the "few lamps" are apparently insufficient). The "old dark" which Merwin probably meant to connote, among other things, the primordial night prior to the act of creation contains only a potential for facilitating the appearance of shadows. (It is, like in the poem "Any Time," the darkness that is "thinking the light.") Indeed, the very concept of darkness presupposes the contrasting presence of light, just as the concept of space presupposes the existence of physical objects. That is why the poem's shadow could only travel along itself all night.

Much in the same vein the nightingale in line 12 goes on "echoing itself," and the goldfinches in line 17 sing "of themselves," themselves being "what they had wakened to remember." Waking up for the sole purpose of remembering "themselves," the birds do not sing to communicate with the outer world. Their being – like that of the shadow in the dark – is totally turned upon itself. The realm of nature in "Ancestral Voices" is a self-contained riddle. The tenor of nature's self-sufficiency recurs in a number of Merwin's metaphors.

This reversal of standard relations heralds a recurrent motif not only in "Ancestral Voices" but in many other nature poems by Merwin, namely the poet's constant and self-conscious shifting of ontological points of reference. In "Ancestral Voices" the natural world does not need a *super*natural sanction. Far from being a reflection of any transcendental reality, nature remains an inscrutably autonomous realm, existing in and of itself. A human being in a world thus construed must invariably appear to be an intruder, the poem's speaker positing himself as a hyper-sensitive observer awed by this mind-boggling spectacle of nature's self-sufficiency. (The implied question at this point for any human being is: What am I doing here?)

The poem's lack of punctuation constitutes an important part of the message. In standard texts punctuation functions as an organizing principle. Telling us, among other things, where to stop or pause, the dots, dashes and commas always imply some sort of hierarchy among the utterances they accompany. By contrast, in "Ancestral Voices" the reader is left on their own, the poet providing no guidelines whatsoever as to the boundaries between sentences and phrases. The text remains thus to a considerable degree an "open" book, like the natural world it describes. With the standard ordering hierarchies gone, Merwin's nature appears as a hypertext of sorts, the poet acting as a temporary activator/interpreter of

its potential message. The message, however, is – to repeat – only a potential one, its ontological status comparable to that of the shadow in the dark traveling along itself.

Darkness is also a key image in Merwin's short, cryptic poem "The Fishermen." Here is the text:

When you think how big their feet are in black rubber
And it slippery underfoot always, it is clever
How they thread and manage among the sprawled nets, lines,
Hooks, spidery cages with small entrances.
But they are used to it. We do not know their names.
They know our needs, and live by them, lending them wiles
And beguilements we could never have fashioned for them;
They carry the ends of our hungers out to drop them
To wait swaying in a dark place we could never have chosen.
By motions we have never learned they feed us.
We lay wreaths on the sea when it has drowned them.
(Merwin 1956: 32)

As one goes through this puzzling little poem, one is forced to change the interpretive tactic at least twice. What starts as a fairly realistic description, halfway through the text begins to smack of an allegory (*cf.* lines 6 and 7: "They know our needs, and live by them, lending them wiles / And beguilements we could never have fashioned for them"). Should the reader follow on this track, the periphrastic logic of the net-casting metaphor from lines 8 and 9 ("They carry the ends of our hungers out to drop then / To wait swaying in a dark place we could never have chosen") might be formulated as follows: the nets as "the ends of our hungers" stand for tools and technological devices that humankind utilizes so as to satisfy its desire ("hunger") for something that remains undefined in the poem.

It is at this point that the allegorical reading begins to crack. If we cannot define the poem's "hunger," it is hardly possible to determine who or what the fishermen stand for. (What is more, the "hunger" may simply stand for the fishermen's clients' craving for fish, no symbols attached.) And yet, despite its seeming inconclusiveness, the poem, most readers would probably agree, does communicate something, and – what is crucial to the specific character of poetic communication as such – stays with us; it is, in short, what a good poem ought to be – memorable. One explanation of the poem's power is psychological and points out to the already-mentioned image of the "ends of our hungers" calmly swaying in the ocean's dark, waiting for their catch. Replete with archetypal connotations, this metaphorical picture is a perfect example of what poets and critics inspired by Robert Bly's work back in the 1960s defined as a "deep image."

What Howard argues about the *The Moving Target* (the volume published in 1963) seems perfectly applicable to "The Fishermen" as well: "The poems are intimate, of course - but they are not private, for they have worked their way down into the very hinges of the language, and by an interlocking system of 'directorates,' like some chthonic cartel, they have managed to control a tremendous range of experience by a very few figures" (1971: 376). Significantly, through this subterranean trope, the critic implies that the power of Merwin's imagery resides in its connection to the collective unconscious of the readers.

Far from being a mere collection of physical phenomena observable in real life, a deep image is not something one can see out of the window. Rather it is a mental picture resultant from the poet's intuitive

translation of his/her subconscious knowledge into visual forms. The knowledge to be thus accessed is archetypal and therefore vital not only to the poet. Owen Barfield in his book *Poetic Diction* claims that a good metaphor reveals the forgotten relationships between things, such as, for example, the relationship between the woman's body and the tree celebrated by medieval alchemists (*cf*. Bly 1991: 274). Merwin's fishermen, then, are those special individuals who, confronting the primordial, elemental reality of the sea on a daily basis, manage not only to survive the experience, but also profit from it. Living face to face with the ultimate truth, they mediate, as it were, between nature and culture, negotiating a precarious living and catering to the needs of the vast majority who live at many removes from the "dark place." (Should the reader choose to return to the allegorical reading of the poem, the fishermen may stand for the priests of institutionalized religions, alleviating the laymen's hunger for transcendence by their own theological tricks of the trade.)

The point is that whatever reading one decides to pursue, all of them must remain in a way inconclusive. Admittedly, the original impulse behind the writing of the poem could have been Merwin's careful observation of real fishermen at work. By the same token, it may have occurred to him that fishermen's work has a potentially symbolic import. But the power of the poem's central image clearly surpasses all such interpretive closures. As Robert Bly puts it in his discussion of the deep image, "Images of […] [this] sort carry us to conscious or superconscious matter […]. [Such] images work against the notion that human intelligence is alone in the universe, isolated, and unchangeably remote from the natural world" (1991: 280).

Nowhere is the existence of such mysterious bonds between man and nature more consistently implied than in "Looking for Mushrooms at Sunrise." Byers' comment on the poem is apt:

> The mushrooms of the title live off decay and embody nature's regenerative cycle. Hence they recall the grass from graves of "Song of Myself, 6" and the "sweet things out of such corruptions" from "This Compost." For Whitman, however, nature depends for nourishment and realization on a human order, in which the earth "gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leaving from them at last." Merwin, on the other hand, seeks a place for the self - and a self for the place - in an essentially non-human order. Thus the poem begins with the speaker "walking on centuries of dead chestnut leaves / In a place without grief" - a place not subjected to us. (1989: 79)

As Cary Nelson and Ed Folsome have put it,

> The soft, almost shapeless thrust of new mushrooms rising through darkness is a perfect image of the half-awakened consciousness. But the stanza goes further, hinting that our sleep is not exclusively human, that our sleep is the earth's sleep. So the search for mushrooms is also part of a waning hope that mute, essential substances will continue speaking to us in the light. (1987: 27)

Charles Altieri stresses the inconclusive character of Merwin's poem:

> The poem's final question casts us back on other questions raised along its way. What is it that calls him to the mushrooms--is it some common life-process they share which the morning wakes in him, or is it a deep participation in the blankness of death only imaged in "a sleep that was not mine"? What is the other life he remembers--an instinctive childlike sharing in natural growth or a state of nonbeing before life? Do the mushrooms live in or live off the darkness and the decaying chestnut leaves in which they thrive? Finally, does the final question suggest that the speaker envisions those incomplete and fragmented parts of himself participating in a natural process by which the living feed off the dead, or do these fragments seek the complete identity of nonbeing? (1987: 162)

Paradoxically enough, then, by creating the seemingly artificial and extravagant private realities of their own, deep-image poets such as W. S. Merwin reconnect us to the natural world as we perhaps once knew it.

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