

“Fact Has Two Faces”: An Interview with W.S.
Merwin · *Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson*¹

EF: You have rarely done interviews. Why?

WSM: I gave one in Los Angeles about six years ago, with a couple of students who wanted to do one, but they hadn't prepared anything. I think that's one of the reasons for distrusting it. If the interviewers are unprepared or the questions are remote, you have to give a monologue to save the occasion. Then the risk is self-indulgence. The interviews we know well, I suppose, started with those in *Paris Review*, about twenty-five years ago. Then it became a very popular form, and I think it's been a happy hunting ground for all sorts of self-indulgence, both in the making and in the reading. It's often a substitute for really thinking about a problem and trying to say something coherent. It can be spontaneous, but sometimes it's just louder, given more seriousness and attention than it probably deserves.

CN: I think the last detailed interviews I've seen with you are the 1961 interview published in *The Sullen Art* and the interview with Frank MacShane published in *Shenandoah* in 1970.

WSM: Both were a long time ago—ten and twenty years, but I assume we're doing something different.

EF: You were telling us recently that you have been reading *Leaves of Grass* again. I'm curious about what you find there now.

WSM: I've always had mixed feelings about Whitman. They go back to reading him in my teens, having him thrust at me as the Great American Poet. At the time, coming from my own provincial and utterly unliterary background, I was overly impressed with Culture (with a capital C) so the barbaric yawp didn't particularly appeal to me when I was eighteen, which is an age when it is supposed to, nor did I feel that this was *the* great book written by an American. I've tried over the years to come to terms with Whitman, but I don't think I've ever really succeeded. I've had again and again the experience of starting to read him, reading for a page or two, then shutting the book. I find passages of incredible power and beauty. . . . Yet the positivism and the American optimism disturb me. I can respond to the romantic side of Whitman, when he presents himself as the voice of feeling, but even then it's not a poetry that develops in a musical or intellectual sense. It doesn't move on and take a growing form—it repeats and finds more

and more detail. That bothers me, but in particular it's his rhetorical insistence on an optimistic stance, which can be quite wonderful as a statement of momentary emotion, but as a world view and as a program for confronting existence it bothered me when I was eighteen and bothers me now. It makes me extremely uneasy when he talks about the American expansion and the feeling of manifest destiny in a voice of wonder. I keep thinking about the buffalo, about the Indians, and about the species that are being rendered extinct. Whitman's momentary, rather sentimental view just wipes these things out as though they were of no importance. There's a cultural and what you might call a specietal chauvinism involved. The Whitmanite enthusiasm troubles me for the same reasons; it seems to partake of the very things that bother me in Whitman. I don't know how to say it better than this, which is one reason I didn't write to you about it. I'm not sure I'm very clear about it.

EF: I think you're very clear about it. We were talking this morning about the problems inherent in putting together a *Collected Poems*, especially for you, since you have developed individual books so clearly and with such integrity. People who follow your writing closely, I think, conceive of your career in terms of the various books, moreso perhaps than in terms of individual poems. The books are each organic wholes, and each is a separate and clear step in your development, with growth and change in evidence. Each marks an important evolutionary shift. Whitman, on the other hand, is a poet who insisted on writing one book over a lifetime, and that's part of the reason for the uncomfortable positivism that pervades his work, isn't it? He starts out with this incredible positivism which is rampant in the mid-century, in the 1850s, which grows out of his sense of exhilaration about manifest destiny, about America as a ceaselessly growing field of unified contrarities. As his career developed, though, the two major historical events of his adult life—the Civil War and the closing of the frontier—destroyed the persona that he had taken on with such burgeoning enthusiasm. Consequently the book—his one growing book—became a burden to him in a way. He could not contradict the book because he was not writing new ones; he was adding on to and readjusting the old one. I'm wondering if some of that positivism in Whitman is there because he refused ever to set his past aside and begin again?

WSM: Several times Whitman sees something essential about the American situation. F.O. Matthiessen describes it too: in a democracy one of

the danger points is rhetoric, public rhetoric. I think now, looking back, that he is also describing his own weakness. Both Whitman's strength and his weakness is that he is basically a rhetorical poet. And he's rhetorical not only in the obvious sense that all poetry is rhetorical, but in the sense of rhetoric as public speech: you decide on a stance and then you bring in material to flesh out that stance, to give details to your position. This is one of the things that makes me uneasy about Whitman. The stance is basically *there*; and much of the poetry simply adds detail to it. So many of the moments in Whitman that I really love are exceptions to this. Yet to my mind, these exceptions occur far too infrequently. Most of the time he's making a speech. The whole *Leaves of Grass* in a sense is a speech. It's a piece of emotional propaganda about an emotional approach to a historical moment. It's almost set up in a way which makes it impossible for it to develop, to deepen, or to reflect on itself and come out with sudden new perspectives.

EF: What about some of the poems of the "Drum Taps" period like the "Wound Dresser"?

WSM: They're some of my favorite passages, you know, because his theory won't support him there. He's simply paying attention to what he sees in front of him. I find those poems both sharper and more moving than many other things in Whitman.

EF: But they tend to get lost in that vast programmed structure of *Leaves of Grass* . . .

WSM: He allows himself to get lost in it, insisting on inciting the bird of freedom to soar . . .

CN: Even in those poems in which he is depressed by what he sees and admits his difficulty in dealing with it—rather than announcing it yet again as an appropriate occasion for his enthusiasm—some of the same role as the representative speaker for the country, the role of the speaker voicing the collective condition of America, continues to be foregrounded, though perhaps with less mere rhetoric, less oracular theatricality.

WSM: I'm very anxious not to be unfair to him. I'm not altogether convinced, as you must guess, by the deliberate stance, but there's obviously a wonderful and generous human being behind it, and a quite incredible and original gift, equally incredible power. But those misgivings have been quite consistent now for all these years, so I guess I'm going to have to live with them.

EF: Do you conceive of your own writing, your own career, as the creation of one large book?

WSM: Well, your whole work is one large book, because there is a more or less audible voice running through everything. At least I would like to think that one's work becomes a coherent project eventually, that poems are not merely disparate pieces with no place in the whole. But I don't conceive of deliberately trying to construct a single book the way Whitman was trying to do with *Leaves of Grass*. I don't think of that even in terms of the separate books. I never set out to write *The Lice*, or to write *The Carrier of Ladders*, but wrote until at a particular point something seemed to be complete. On what terms, or on the basis of what assumptions, I wouldn't be able to say, any more than I would with a single poem be able to say "Ah, that poem is finished."

EF: You have said that when you go back to nineteenth-century American writers for a sustaining influence, it's not Whitman you turn to, but Thoreau. I think a lot of people throw Whitman and Thoreau together as part of the American Transcendental and Romantic tradition. What draws you to Thoreau that doesn't draw you to Whitman?

WSM: I suppose the way in which he meant "In wildness is the preservation of the world" for one thing. Or the recognition that the human can not exist independently in a natural void; whatever the alienation is that we feel from the natural world, we are *not* in fact alienated, so we cannot base our self-righteousness on that difference. We're part of that whole thing. And the way Thoreau, very differently from Whitman, even in a paragraph takes his own perception and develops it into a deeper and deeper way of seeing something—the actual seeing in Thoreau is one of the things that draws me to him. I think that Thoreau saw in a way that nobody had quite seen before; it was American in that sense. I don't know if Williams talks about Thoreau, but I would have liked to hear what Williams had to say about Thoreau's capacity to see, even though Williams' great sympathy is more toward Whitman. Indeed I've suspected for a long time that an American poet's sympathy would tend to go either toward Whitman or toward Thoreau, not toward both. Gary Snyder at this point is rather snippy about Thoreau, says he's very uptight, WASP, and so forth. That's a way of describing Thoreau's weaknesses all right—such as his lack of any automatic spontaneous sympathy for his fellow human beings. Thoreau is not all-embracing. The kind of hawkish thing in Thoreau puts off the enthusiasts of enthusiasm itself, the great Whitmanite hugs of feeling, the lovers, "I love my fellow man." Perhaps if you really are there you don't have to say it so often and so loudly. Dana recently has been

reading Henry James and Thoreau and getting very impatient with James and reading a passage of Thoreau and saying, "You know, for James the natural world is scenery outside the window." There's never anything alive out there. And for Thoreau, when he sees it, it's alive, completely alive, not a detail in a piece of rhetoric. And he leaves open what its significance is. He realizes that the intensity with which he's able to see it *is* its significance. This is an immense gesture of wisdom in Thoreau that I miss in Whitman. Whitman's wonderful expansive enthusiasm isn't there in Thoreau, though he has things of equal beauty and power. The last page of *Walden* is certainly one of the most beautiful things ever written, and of a kind of elevation that Whitman himself was trying to reach all the time.

EF: Yes, Whitman does tend to dwell a bit too long on "cameraderie," as if it's something he's trying to *invoke* rather than to *describe*. I think in that sense there's a real loneliness at the heart of Whitman.

WSM: There is at the heart of both of those writers, but it's quite obvious in Thoreau, he makes no bones about it. There's that wonderful passage where he says, I don't pay enough attention to my fellow human beings, I don't feel strongly enough about them, I don't take enough interest in them, and I'm going to do something about that: these people down here working on the bridge, I'm going to walk closer to them and see if I can't think of them as though they were groundhogs.

EF: Do you read Thoreau often?

WSM: Well, I keep him in the john. He's been there for years. So I go back and read things over again. I think *Walden* is an incredible book. I feel grateful to Thoreau in a way. He's been a companion. Yet I see Thoreau's limitations, too, including whatever it is that makes him write by tacking one sentence onto another sentence out of notebooks, and putting them together. It's a strange way of writing, though he's not the first person in history to write that way, after all.

EF: Your myriad translations suggest all kinds of affinities for you from outside America, but are there other American writers besides Thoreau that you find yourself returning to, that you would call sustaining influences?

WSM: Thoreau is really the main one that I go back to. There's nobody really before Thoreau. There was a time when I used to read Mark Twain for fun, but apart from *Huckleberry Finn*, which I love, I find that he doesn't last very well. I don't even find him very funny anymore. And then I read an early book, his book about Hawaii. It's amazing how much racism and John Wayne-ism there was in that generation.

CN: Has Thoreau been behind some of the prose that you've written recently? You're writing about your family and your past, which are very different topics from his, but there's a certain humility about phenomenal existence that I see both in Thoreau and in these pieces from your new prose book, *Unframed Originals*.

WSM: I hadn't thought of that, Cary; that's interesting. Maybe so, who knows?

EF: Certainly that position you put yourself in when you buy the old abandoned house in France at the end of that one autobiographical essay, called "Hotel"—the position of moving into that house only so far, not wanting to clear the floor and put panes in the windows and paint the walls, but rather only lie there on a simple cot—is a very Thoreau-like position. It's like his bean-field: half-cultivated and half-wild.

WSM: Yes. I guess that's part of what I was talking about a minute ago. That's a wonderful way of putting it, too—his humility before the phenomenal world. If you don't accept the genuine chairness of the chair, if it's all just background, as it is for a great many people in the contemporary world—first the separation from the natural world, then from the phenomenal world—things tend to be seen only in terms of their uses, or in terms of what abstraction they can serve. If the reality of the unreal objects cannot be accepted as an infinite thing in them, you can't see anything. You only see counters in a game that is of very doubtful value.

CN: I feel in your recent pieces a real wariness about rhetorical overstatement, a wish to write in a very delicate and lucid way and not to fall into what might be a Whitmanesque mode of thinking about your own past, but to speak in simple and direct terms about it if possible.

WSM: Well, of course I don't have to tell you that you're always writing in a rhetoric of one kind or another, but I am working to avoid as much as possible a kind of rhetoric which is an emotional screen that keeps you from seeing what you're trying to look at. That's something I did want to do. And I also realized, part way through, since one of the the main themes of the book is what I was not able to know, what I couldn't ever find out, the people I couldn't meet, that reticence was one of the main things I was writing about. Indeed it was a very reticent family. But I felt if I could take any detail, any moment, anything I could clearly see, and pay enough attention to it, it would act like a kind of hologram. I'd be able to see the whole story in that single detail—just the way, if you could really pay attention to a dream, the dream would

probably tell you everything you needed to know for that time and place. But obviously any exaggerated rhetoric you were using at that point, in the sense of waving an emotional flag in front of the thing itself, would prevent that from happening.

CN: I have been trying to distinguish between the way your poetry of the last twenty years makes me think about language and the rather different view of language that I detect in *Unframed Originals*. At least from *The Moving Target* on, it seems you felt it necessary—if you were to write as the present conditions of the world required you to write—to let language *do* to you what it would, to let language in effect have its way with you. In these recent prose pieces I sense a new wariness about that, a desire *not* to let language have its way. I'm wondering whether that rings true at all, or even whether you have some sense that the recent prose pieces are written in a significantly different mode, that they show a real change in your relationship to words?

WSM: It must be, but I wasn't aware of it when it was happening. And to connect that with what we were just saying, when you're trying to avoid that one kind of rhetoric, of course you're developing a different kind of rhetoric. I had a feeling of trying to write in what years ago I suppose I would have described as a kind of classical way, in which the form of the prose, the form of the writing, was in the service of but not swallowed up by the subject, so you were really deliberately formed through the language. The language ordered what you were seeing, unlike, to choose a very different alternative, a stream of consciousness style. Yet I'm unaware of some of the other differences. I certainly don't want to keep doing what I've done before, and if it feels as though I'm just doing something I've done before then obviously I don't want to be doing it. But I don't very often have some deliberate, conscious notion of what direction I want to move in; when I started off to write those pieces I knew that I wanted to handle that material, to put it down, to give it what would be the clearest and sharpest possible form, but I didn't know how to go about it, and having finished the book, I would still feel I didn't know how to go about it, and don't know now. I don't think I *know* how to write anything, but particularly I don't know how to write prose.

EF: Certainly there is a dramatic shift in the way your prose *feels* from *The Miner's Pale Children* to *Unframed Originals*.

WSM: How do you see the difference?

EF: I see the difference corresponding to the difference between the

poems from that period and your most recent poems. The change of voice in your most recent poems is surprising, and moves further in the direction of the more colloquial language of *The Compass Flower*. Your recent poems are allowing a much more colloquial language into themselves than I've heard before. They're allowing a kind of clear narrative development that they have not had before—one of the ones you read the other night, as I told you, reminded me of Williams' "Plot of Ground." It seems to me a movement that is first evident in many of the poems of *Compass Flower*. The language seemed to grow less gnomic in tone, much more inviting. The voice became more relaxed, and I sense the same thing in the recent prose. As I'm describing this, I realize I'm not saying the same thing Cary is—Cary senses something almost opposite to this in the recent prose, a reticence and a tightening. . . . But we would both agree that *The Miner's Pale Children* is a book which goes much more with the period of *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders* than these recent pieces. Do you feel that?

WSM: But I don't think there's a contradiction. You're saying different things, but I think it's possible for both of these things to be happening at the same time. I certainly wanted the prose to handle material that it never had before, and to do it as plainly and directly as possible. Plainness is the thing you are both saying is involved here.

CN: It seems that it would have been immensely dissatisfying for you to write about this subject matter in the style of *The Miner's Pale Children* or *Houses and Travellers*.

WSM: But I also think there's been an impulse in the direction of plainness for a long time. It's been growing, and it goes back quite far. I've seen some critical commentary confusing plainness and what's been called the *quietness* of the poems. I don't know if they really are quiet or not. They don't seem quiet to *me* obviously. But there are not so many decibels as there are in Whitman, though Whitman has moments of another kind of power. A line like "A woman waits for me" seems to me to have at least as much emotional power as "I hear America singing"—you know, I don't care if he hears America singing; I *do* care when he says "A woman waits for me."

CN: But there are moments, at least in *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders*, when one might say you hear America dying. There is something of that role of speaking in a representative way for the culture, obviously not with Whitman's enthusiasm, but with virtually the same energy in reverse. Were there times in working, say, on the American

sequence in *The Carrier of Ladders* and on some of the poems of real horror in *The Lice*, when you felt yourself in Whitman's position but with a very different message, with a very different tone?

WSM: Very much, yes. One of the things that I found happening, not deliberately, as I tried to write those American poems at different times, again and again—I don't think it's possible for me to see or to approach that subject—it never has been—without the feeling that Ed was describing as we drove across the country yesterday, this feeling of inhabiting a palimpsest. However long the culture may have left, we are *not* just sitting here on a Sunday afternoon. Insofar as there is any historical or temporal continuity at all, that continuity involves these many layers, many of them invisible, and they are not different at all from the repressed, pressed, and forgotten layers of our own experience. And if we really are so dishonest and so mutilated that we can't make any sense of the world, or come to any terms with them, then our lives are maimed and truncated accordingly—our imaginative lives and probably our physical lives too. You know I've felt various things about that over the years and very often the rage that you, Ed, said that your father felt when he saw what was happening to the soil of this country—I can imagine feeling it about the soil, too. For awhile I used to think of it in terms of two myths, two Western myths, one of them the myth of Orpheus obviously—the important thing there is that Orpheus is singing with the animals all around him listening—and one can take that as a myth of arrogation or as a myth of harmony. It's both, you know, it is homocentric but it's also inclusive, and everything is there in the act of singing. And the other is the myth of Phaethon, who says “Daddy, I want to drive those horses,” and ends up with a holocaust . . . and the beginning of racism. It's probably not as simple as that, but at one point I kept seeing it in terms of those two myths. But the American poems. Let me approach them in another way.

F.O. Matthiessen, as I remember, years ago was talking about the attempt of a number of American writers to find an American myth of history; Richard Howard quotes that wonderful passage at the beginning of his book, from which his title comes, *Alone with America*. You know, one can begin to see differently the great phoney myth of the “winning of the West”—it was the *destruction* of the West. It *was* heroic, but it was heroic in an incredibly cramped and vicious way. People did suffer and were magnificent, but they were also broken and cruel, and in the long run incredibly destructive, irreversibly destructive. What

we've done to this continent is something *unbelievable*—to think that one species could have done this in a hundred years. Right where we're sitting. And this is our lives. This is not something to have an opinion about, this is what we live with, this is our bodies and our minds, this is what our words come out of, and we should know.

EF: Cary was suggesting that in *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders* you sometimes take on the voice of the culture in a kind of negative way. I'm wondering if sometimes too the voice in those books is not that of the other animals, if your desire throughout your work is not in part to accomplish what is both impossible and absolutely necessary, that is, to give voice to the voiceless beings, to those creatures that cannot speak their rage. Do you at times feel your voice coming not from the human culture but instead from the silent herds being destroyed by that human culture?

WSM: It would be very presumptuous to agree to that, but insofar as I dare to suggest a formula for myself or anyone else, I think it's very important to remain open to that possibility, to welcome it, and to evoke it if possible. Otherwise, what else is there? Otherwise, one is there in an ego-bound, historical, culturally brainwashed, incredibly limited moment. One can't perceive anything because one has no perspective at all. The opposite—the nearest thing I can imagine to what I would think of as a sound or even healthy approach and attitude toward existence as a whole (as distinct from the endless separation of the human species from the rest of existence that leads to evaluating the one at the expense of the other)—would be Blake's "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way,/Is an immense world of delight, clos'd to your senses five?" It works both ways, one both can be and can never be the bird.

EF: I think of "For a Coming Extinction," where the voice shifts a great deal, trying to speak to the gray whale while being aware of the fiction that the gray whale can hear us anyway, and then at the end of the poem becoming the voice of the culture: "Tell him/that it is we who are important." The most ironic lines in your poems occur when your voice shifts into that mode of speaking for the culture.

WSM: I hadn't thought of that.

EF: And when the voice seems least ironic and the most enraged, it seems to be speaking from somewhere that one cannot name, that is not within our culture. It is not a voice speaking from within, but a voice that has to dismiss itself from the culture for a time in order to speak the rage.

WSM: Like "Avoiding News by the River."

EF: Yes.

CN: It's more difficult, it seems to me, to decide what voice is speaking in the passage right before that in "For a Coming Extinction": "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." At first in that passage there's an extraordinary and, I think, powerfully unresolvable sense of anger . . .

WSM: I was going to say, even when you read it, that all I hear is the anger with which it was written. It overrides these other distinctions.

EF: But there's a clear double-voice there: "Our sacrifices" carries all of the pride of the destructive culture.

WSM: Yes.

EF: And yet it comes out sounding incredibly angry because we know that the voice that is really speaking this poem and mouthing those words is not emerging from the source that would speak those words with pride.

CN: One also hears a certain contempt even, earned.

WSM: Yes, and you know, driving in the West, I've thought and remembered afterwards, and see it in Hawaii watching these things: you drive along and you see some pile of ditched cars, or a little place where they serve trash—deep fried food, or something like that, and you think, in order to bring this about dozens of young men were sent off to die of leprosy in the leper colonies, or hundreds of Indians and thousands of buffalo were killed and the whole place has been poisoned for years in order to bring about this little pile of shit. And it's described in terms of the triumph of civilization. What kind of impossible lie is this that we're all subscribing to?

CN: I have a poster version of "For a Coming Extinction" upstairs that I see each time I walk in that room. It's a more immediate and continuing relationship than one can easily have with a poem in a book. Every time I read the poem I enter into a cluster of remarkably divided emotions. Each stanza seems simultaneously fractured and sustained by contradiction. "The End/That great god" suggests at first our lust for extinction, for a kind of demonically hieratic narrative conclusion. Yet a sense of transcendence also enters into the reference to "The End" as a "great god." To the extent that the poem confers a static immortality on the gray whale, it too participates in that act of "sending." There is a certain beauty in these animal "hosts ranged countless," a beauty

not cancelled either by a sense of loss or by their status as a collective indictment of human history. If we are appalled at the numerical accumulation of slaughtered animals, we are also in awe of the “irreplaceable hosts” now ranged before us. These two impulses are inextricably linked by the poem; it becomes fascinated with that miraculously awful achievement and thus puts forward a far more radically compromised voice than anger alone would permit.

WSM: It would be very difficult and very rare to make a poem out of pure anger, or out of pure anything. Even love poems are seldom made out of pure love. Actually, they’re made out of words, so all of the paradoxes that are built into any phrase come into it. Pure anger would just be a scream.

EF: And there can’t help but be a fascination with those people who at the end of the poem say “It is we who are important.” You can despise those people, but there’s a fascination with them, and you have to come to terms with them because they’ve constructed the layer of the world we’re living on and dying on right now.

WSM: Yes, you *have* to come to terms with them; that doesn’t mean that you have to say it’s okay.

CN: No, but there are texts of more unqualified anger about this kind of subject matter, not necessarily in your work but elsewhere in contemporary poetry. I think yours is a poem that forces you, if you want to read the poem carefully, to think through your own motivations. It doesn’t let you away easily. It doesn’t let you off being convinced that you won’t continue in this pattern. You may already be part of it.

WSM: That aspect of it is even more apparent probably—from what people have told me, whether they’ve responded to it with pleasure or with annoyance—in that pineapple poem that was published last year. People obviously find that they’re being got at in different points in the poem, and don’t like the attack.

EF: That reminds me of another poem from *The Lice*, “A Scale in May,” where this issue of a double-voice is central. The “I” in this poem seems to be able to identify the problem of human arrogance while simultaneously recognizing his own participation in that arrogance.

A Scale in May²

Now all my teachers are dead except silence
I am trying to read what the five poplars are writing
On the void

Of all the beasts to man alone death brings justice
But I desire
To kneel in a doorway empty except for the song

Who made time provided also its fools
Strapped in watches and with ballots for their choices
Crossing the frontiers of invisible kingdoms

To succeed consider what is as though it were past
Deem yourself inevitable and take credit for it
If you find you no longer believe enlarge the temple

Through the day the nameless stars keep passing the door
That have come all that way out of death
Without questions

The walls of light shudder and an owl wakes in the heart
I cannot call upon words
The sun goes away to set elsewhere

Before nightfall colorless petals blow under the door
And the shadows
Recall their ancestors in the house beyond death

At the end of its procession through the stone
Falling
The water remembers to laugh

Looking back on it now, what can you tell us about the voice in this poem?

WSM: I'm trying to remember exactly when the poem was written, and I can't. Obviously it was written sometime in the 60s, in the spring. I'm not a theorist and in any case I don't want to embed it in a theory that implies it was written with the whole thing worked out intellectually

in advance. But in hindsight I think I see that certain things I've been trying to say for years seem to have been converging all the way along. I see quite a number of them in that poem. But I'd better say something first about the progression; the middle part—the second, third, and fourth sections—are set up in ways which can be taken either straight or ironically, and I would like them to be taken both ways. They've been written about, in criticism, from both points of view, as though each excluded the other, and that wasn't the intention. And, as Ed has pointed out, the use of language in a particular way to possess the world is part of what I *felt*, much of my life, to be a very dangerous human arrogance, one which no one is exempt from—we're sitting here as part of that arrogance. We arrogate to ourselves things that do not belong to us, that don't belong to anybody. I don't want to develop that as a kind of ethical matter and say how I think we should solve the ecological problems, pollution, and so on. As I suggested the other night, I think that the first hope of mankind begins in simply caring about those things.

The thing that I *do* want to try to say something about, as a basis for talking about the poems of that time, and probably all of the poems I've written since, is that—to put it personally first—I used to feel that it was a terrible fault of character not to be able to come to clear resolutions and decisions about things, that I would always be seeing two sides of something, and saying “Yes, but.” Of course that is a fault of character, but at the same time the character *does* use a left and right hand, the heart does beat both ways. And I've come to believe that existence—and by that I don't mean just human existence, I mean existence as a whole—has always got, basically, these two aspects to it, one which is relative, and the other which is not relative at all. The second, of course, is the teacher who is not dead, the world of silence. But that's also the world in which you can't call upon words. The arrogance comes from saying that that world doesn't exist or is of no importance, when of course in my view it's that world that gives words their real life. It also allows them to be luminous, transparent, and to illuminate the world, which in itself is transparent and luminous. Arrogance and an attempt to possess that world as something which is absolutely solid and can belong to somebody, completely nullifies that whole dimension of existence, and deprives existence of any kind of sense, and it deprives it of its senses. It deprives us of our own senses. The sense of smell is the first, most obvious one; we've almost lost it; it's going away from us. If you take that as a basic note to the poem, I think it will help make the poem ring

clear. And I don't think that idea is a very difficult one, though it's probably a difficult *feeling* to come to terms with. And very little of our public, social, and historical experience, our experience in the time that we live in, fits us for coming to terms with it; we're being shunted away from it all the time, and it is very uncomfortable, until we accept it. Then I think it is the only comforting thing there is. That's why the water remembers to laugh.

EF: I'm curious about what you might have to say about the form that you used in this particular poem—a three-line stanza which becomes a form you return to quite often: in *Asian Figures*, in *Feathers from the Hill*. In this poem these varying perceptions are all captured in those three-line moments. What attracts you to that form?

WSM: Well, it goes farther back than that. There are poems in *The Moving Target* which are in that form, and I wrote a number of poems in the form at that time, but I didn't publish most of them. A little later I tried to develop and figure out what I was doing. One of the things I wanted to find . . . you know, when people say "I don't understand modern poetry" or "I don't understand any poet," sometimes they mean they have difficulty in apprehending intention and subject and so on, but I think that sometimes it's a temporary inability to grasp an unfamiliar sense of completeness, a new recognition of how things can be complete. And at one point I wanted to see what it was that made a poem complete as a small, if not the smallest, unit; it was a way of discovering what was the single thing that would stand by itself. Why I gravitated to a three-line form I don't know, but that seemed to me the ideal small form. And in *Asian Figures* I really was trying to see just what was the *smallest* form, not that I wanted to stay there, but I wanted to explore this idea of completeness. And then when you start putting these complete things together, do you see them as separate or in relation to each other? It's a question, I think, that art is always suggesting: this is complete, yet at the same time, what is its relation to everything?

EF: Returning for a moment to the irony, the double-voice, in this poem—to what extent does the "I" separate itself from the world of fools?

WSM: Well, you're asking a question that has a double answer: how much do I remember about my intention of the poem, and what do I feel now, which is the only place I can answer it from. I think that was deliberately left up in the air because the "I" is *not* separate from the fools; on the other hand, the "I" is judging a kind of human action, a

human gesture, it wants to be separate from. Of course we're all fools; I have a watch in my pocket (I don't have it strapped on). The foolish thing is to take that world which we have made as the real, total, absolute final world, and say we have it—it's ours. You know, I doubt whether one can come to anything that resembles a moral judgment without seeming to be outside it. On the other hand, you can't altogether make one without identifying yourself with the person you're judging, whether you know it or not. You don't see it if you're totally separate from it. But deploring an action doesn't necessarily mean that one is saying "It's them"—it's us. If you see someone beating a dog, and there's nothing you can do about stopping it, you feel angry, but part of your anger probably is bound up with the fact that somewhere inside you, you're capable of beating a dog. But you may not stop to think, "Is it me? Am I being self-righteous?" You want to stop the beating of the dog. I want "them" to stop destroying the Northwest, killing the salmon, killing them both in the sense of thinking that they're unimportant, and in the physical sense of polluting the rivers; both of them are really the same thing.

But I can't really remember with any close or absolute accuracy what I was trying to do in this poem. And, you know, it would not be an authentic poem if the *intellectual* intention were the real, final guiding force in the poem. This is another way of recognizing that other dimension; I think a real poem comes out of what you don't know. You write it with what you know, but finally its source is what you don't know. There's a passage where Thoreau says, "How can someone find his ignorance if he has to use his knowledge all the time?" The arrogance would be the assumption that what you know has some kind of final value and you can depend upon it, and it will get rid of a whole world which you will never know, which really informs it. . . . Both of these worlds, in my view, are without meaning; there is absolutely no meaning in either, but the *sense* of the world of relation comes from them nonetheless.

EF: When we get to *The Compass Flower*, the ecological rage and ironies and devastations that I feel everywhere in *The Lice* seem to have changed dramatically. The ecological poems in *The Compass Flower* tend to have a tone like that of "The Trees"—a sadness at what's about to be gone and a recollection of what it is that the trees have offered. It's a very different tone from that in *The Lice*. Obviously you could not remain at the point you had arrived at in *The Lice*, where it seems to me that you were on the verge of not writing poems at all . . .

WSM: Absolutely right. In fact most of the time that I was writing *The Lice* I thought I had pretty well given up writing, because there was really no point in it. For different reasons—much the same way that I think some writers of continental Europe felt late in the Second World War and after, that there was really no point in going on writing; what they had experienced was just terrible beyond anything that language could deal with, and there was no point in even trying, and there was probably no one to write it for either, for very long. That can easily be described as despair, but I think it may not be just despair—it may be a kind of searing vision: a dumb vision, and I don't think you can stay there if you're going to go on living.

EF: Your books since *The Lice* form a clear and eloquent record of how you have come to grips with that despair, and moved beyond it. But I'm interested in your own personal version of how you came to terms with going on to write after *The Lice*. What happened to the rage and the anger and the despair?

WSM: Oh, I think they're all still there, but I suppose some lucky recognition that the anger itself could destroy the thing that one was angry in defense of, and that the important thing was to try to keep what Cary described as humility before phenomenal things: the fact that that chair may be destroyed tomorrow is no reason not to pay attention to it this afternoon, you know. The world *is* still around us, and there is that aspect of other human beings which has *not* been solely destructive, and to which one is constantly in debt, and which involves simply the pleasure of existing together, being able to look and see the trees, the cat walking in and out of the room. The answer to even one's anger is in the way one can see those things, the way that one can live with them. Not very often, perhaps for no more than a few seconds at a time. Even so, one lives second by second.

CN: I have been reading *The Compass Flower* the past few days and thinking about its relationship to the four books preceding it. From *The Moving Target* through *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*, your special vocabulary—including words like silence, darkness, emptiness—is taken up by historical circumstances, permeated by a particular feeling about our culture's destiny. During that time it seemed to many of us that our culture's destiny was being played out in very visible and unarguable ways. In *The Compass Flower* you are often trying to write very different poetry, including love poetry, yet this vocabulary in a way returns to haunt you. In writing the poetry of *The Compass Flower* was

it a struggle to deal again with words that were colored by a different sense of history, or at least words that seemed decisively to belong to the public world and its power to enter into and transform our private lives? WSM: I think so. They are words that I used with increasing caution, because they can become habitual, they can become counters. They can have an emptiness which obscures their real emptiness; they can become sentimental indeed in that way. They can simply become one's own signatures that are habitual. That's really self-defeating.

CN: I would say that some of those same words become habitual in Kinnell. Indeed it's a risk for many poets—a vocabulary like that becomes so much a part of the way they write that it's merely instinctive.

WSM: Yes. Well, obviously I'm not going to try to never, never use those words, but I use them with increasing, deliberate self-consciousness. If I use them now it's with a kind of self-consciousness I wouldn't have had using them fifteen or twenty years ago.

CN: In the period of *The Lice* the self-consciousness would have gotten in the way.

WSM: That's right. The funny thing is now, when you're both talking about that, I realize that there is a small group of poems from the beginning of this year—new ones—in which the kind of magma that produced *The Lice* suddenly insisted on writing, bringing out the same vein again, just before the inauguration of Reagan.

CN: Well, we're going to have more occasions like that. The history that wrote *The Lice* or that's there in *The Lice* has hardly left us.

WSM: I think so. I didn't set out to write those poems. Several poems suddenly came out with more of that quality than I knew was going to be there. Just the beginning of this year particularly, I felt a great deal of that: the British presence in Ireland, what Reagan was up to, and Watt, my return to Pennsylvania and seeing what the result of the new policies was there—total devastation.

EF: Those most recent poems surprise me somewhat. I feel in them the same anger that was in *The Lice*, the same rage, but what is different is that the historical allusions are direct and clear. The allusions are not defamiliarized for the reader, as often happens in *The Lice*. In *The Lice*, you may be talking about an assassination, but the name of who was assassinated does not appear, and in fact there would not be a direct or clear allusion to any of the actual events of the assassination.

WSM: Actually both of the assassination poems in *The Lice* were written before the assassinations.

EF: So they really were not historical poems . . .

WSM: The one was written very shortly before the Kennedy assassination; the other one very shortly—about three days—before Martin Luther King was killed. I better not write any more of them.

CN: I think it's difficult to say the poems in *The Lice* are not historical poems. The process at work for a reader is one in which a core of precise historical referentiality becomes uncertain and unstable, even blurred, in the poem. Yet in a way the poem's historicity becomes more representative as a result. The poem presents a history potentially more possessive of us and where we are in time. The specificity begins to erode as the poem proceeds.

WSM: I have a recent poem with a reference to the IRA hunger strike, but I'm uncertain about that passage, and I'm thinking of taking the extremely specific reference out of the poem. Although I very much wanted it to be in there when I wrote the poem, I'm not sure it belongs there. I don't think it strengthens the poem, or even serves the reasons for having that specific passage there in the first place.

EF: This talk of referentiality ties in with your description of how you came to deal with writing poetry after arriving at the wordless position you were in upon completing *The Lice*. There seems to be a gradual realization that the world is still here, that you could still be attentive to the things that were around you—that's certainly the feeling that I sense growing book by book after *The Lice*. A striking example of this new feeling is "St. Vincent's" in *The Compass Flower*. This is a poem that to me marks a new kind of attentiveness, a new kind of use of language, that I find more and more, as I've said, in your autobiographical prose pieces. We have that same concern with wanting to keep the senses open—there seems to be a feeling in this poem that there's been a place there for a long time that has been part of your common experience; you see it every day, and yet you've never seen it. You've never paid attention to it, never really looked at it. "I consider that I have lived daily and with/eyes open and ears to hear/these years across from St. Vincent's Hospital." And what happens in the poem, then, is a kind of opening of the eyes and ears to the sights and sounds one has learned to dull one's senses to, so that "long/ago I learned not to hear them/even when the sirens stop/they turn to back in/few passers-by stay to look/and neither do I." So there's a sense now of *staying* to look, staying to record, staying to imagine what might be going on beyond the things that one can see and hear if one is attentive enough. And then the poem

ends with a question, “who was St. Vincent”: the name given to the thing that one has lived across from all the time—I take it that the question *does* ask for an answer, who *was* St. Vincent, and I think of St. Vincent who defined his life by paying attention to those elements in society that no one else paid attention to. So, too, this is a poem about learning to pay attention, it seems to me, to things that one has learned not to pay attention to, by custom, by habit, and then learning to overcome that.

CN: Before you read “The Last One” the other night, you said that you wished that the poem would become so untopical that no one would know what it was about, a comment that I found appealingly subversive. “St. Vincent’s” is a poem whose referentiality is more or less inescapable: I wonder if you are comfortable with that, or do you sometimes wish that it, too, had a quality of undecidable plurality, making it impossible merely to link it with that building and that structure.

WSM: No, I don’t feel that; I’m very fond of that building. The poem was written in January, I think it was 1975. I’ve had an apartment for many years across the street from St. Vincent’s Hospital, so that’s the time and place of it. And it was, I suppose, a particular attempt to do that thing we were talking about, to honor the very specific historic immediate circumstance, to make the poem directly out of that. The poem was a deliberate attempt to practice something closer to the tradition of Williams and Whitman. One of the things that I envy about that tradition sometimes is the ease of address, the immediacy of the use of historical circumstance, which sometimes I would very much like to have been able to use more familiarly myself. But obviously I can’t believe that I’m ever going to be in the center of that tradition; I don’t share any of the original assumptions. It has seemed to me that *fact* has two faces, too. Fact is in the world of relation—one is always looking at the outside of facts. One sees all the facts from the outside. One is never going to be on the inside until one is caught up *in* the *relation*, then of course you don’t *see* the inside; there is no separation between the inside of you and the inside of what you’re looking at. They’re the same thing. “Who was St. Vincent” remains a question, and it’s a question that one goes on asking; it’s the question that asks what the relation *is* between the world of history and the world that’s shared. And between them and oneself.

There’s a moment in St. Vincent’s biography when he gave up the life that he’d been living and went to live with the poor whom he’d

been serving, because he felt that what he'd been doing was inadequate . . . and after the first night of introduction to this terrible squalor, with people beating each other and misery and hunger and the lives falling apart, he woke up in the middle of the night in tears, saying, "Forgive me, God, I did not *know* that this was going on. I didn't know that suffering went this far. I didn't realize that this was in the world."

EF: In "St. Vincent's" the referentiality is very clear; it's all there—we're given the name of the hospital, we're given the context in the book of poems to let us know we're in New York, we know exactly what the building looks like. Is the original St. Vincent's still extant, by the way?

WSM: It's still there, but, you know, like everything else, it's changing. They're tearing the inside out of part of it now, and keeping the facade, which is quite beautiful, the old part of it. But they're expanding. I had a surprise when the poem was published. I met somebody who said that they'd been over there to St. Vincent's for medical reasons, and they'd found the poem pasted on the walls of the elevators. I got a letter from the nun in charge of public relations who said, "There are a lot of questions in that poem, and if you'd really like them answered, please come by and I'll take you through the hospital," and I did, and had a whole afternoon going around St. Vincent's. . . . The questions are still unanswered.

EF: But the unanswered questions are very different from those in your earlier New York poems. I think, for example, of "Before That" from *The Moving Target*, where you have an image of "Cemeteries sifting on/the city's windows." Do you anticipate that your reader will see the referentiality that you described at your reading the other night, about the crosses being the white X's on the windows of condemned buildings, or is that something that you *remove* from the realm of referentiality in the poem, and only restore at the reading?

WSM: Well, assuming there is going to be a historic future, which is an assumption that we make but we have no real reason to, one can't doubleguess which of our historic circumstances are going to be known or matter to people a hundred, two hundred years, hence. I'm unsettled to realize that as the natural world recedes, and as generations of students grow up without having had any contact with it, an enormous number of really very basically simple images are becoming remote, increasingly inaccessible, in traditional poetry and in our own. There's an image in a poem of mine about flies in the middle of the room going around a

statue of nothing, and a poet came to visit me one day and was talking about my poetry being surrealist and used this image as an example; I said, "Come on," and I took him to a room and opened the door and said, "Look." There's a whole lot of simple sensual experience related to the natural world which is becoming a thing of the past; I don't think this *can* continue indefinitely. I don't see how we can exist in such an attenuated and deprived context.

CN: When you introduce a poem like "Before That," a poem that seems very open and in some ways gnomic and unstably suggestive, and you gloss certain lines by identifying their object or their occasion, seeming thereby to grant the poem a source and the writing process a moment of origin, what do you feel you've done to the text?

WSM: I feel that I've obscured it. Because I think that I probably provided you and anyone who reads the poem with a distraction. The important thing is to arrive at that insight not through referentiality but through response. Now of course there would be no response without some kind of reference. But obviously I didn't feel that the poem should have more reference than it had when I wrote it. And in a sense putting more "chat" around it than it had then betrays it. Not that I want for it to be a kind of mystification, or anything like that. I want it to present a kind of experience in terms which are not those of the habitual and customary referentiality which is dulled and blunted and exterior. It is a cemetery, you know; it's not *like* a cemetery, it's not a lot of white things painted on a window. And its sense is the sense of cemeteries on windows. Just that.

CN: Is it just the pressure of a reading, then, wanting to break the rhythm and make things, at least for a moment, accessible?

WSM: It's a moment of weakness and friendliness.

EF: This whole matter of referentiality, historical allusion, is tricky business. Specific references in your poetry can be quite explicit when they are personal or derive from a personal experience. References like that never become "topical" in the way that references to current events do. Topical things fade in a way that personal references don't.

WSM: It has to do with a consistent feeling about poetry, and probably about all of the arts, but certainly about my own poetry, which is that no deliberate program for writing a poem works. A poem begins to be a poem when a sequence of words starts giving off what you might describe as a kind of electric charge, when it begins to have a life of its own that I sense the way I would if I suddenly picked up a shorted

electric wire. If it doesn't have that, even if it's got what I would very much like it to have, then it's not working as a poem. I suppose all poets work that way in one way or another, but I notice in many of my contemporaries a more deliberate approach to what they want to put in their poems, though they do it differently and in ways that I have never been able to do it. There are many things I would like to write about or to include in poems, but I've never been able to work that way. The life of the language doesn't happen when it's done that way, so I have to wait. . . .

I had a conversation with Allen Ginsberg eleven years ago, in New Orleans, when Allen said, "Okay, how would you write a poem about this room?" And I said, "Well, Allen, the difference is that you assume, I guess, that you could write a poem about this room just because you chose to, and I can't make any such assumption. I'm not sure I could write about this room. Perhaps at some point I might be able to, though I wouldn't start necessarily by just jotting down details." It would start with the room, obviously, but we might not agree about what "the room" was. It's a different way of approaching the whole idea of how you write a poem. I'm not sure that I can write a poem just by deliberately setting out to write a poem about, you know, the sofa, or . . . It's a nice idea, but basically there's a part of me that would think, well, you could always do it as an exercise, but if a certain extra dimension isn't there, the brilliance of the exercise won't disguise the fact for very long. This seems to me so obvious that I almost take it for a doctrine, but I realize that there are many poets who don't see it that way at all. I feel that way when I'm reading poems, too. If I can't eventually find that quality there, the poetry bores me.

I think I'm probably often deluded about what I'm doing in my own writing because I keep thinking that I'm getting nearer and nearer to an immediacy of historical detail, and yet when people talk about the poems I realize that may not be their impression. But then for years I thought that I was writing more and more simply and directly, and people kept saying the poems were getting more and more difficult, opaque, harder to read.

EF: We've discussed your relationship with Whitman and other American writers, but what poets do you feel the most natural affinity with?

WSM: My favorite poets, the two that I live with as talismans, are very remote in time and didn't write in English. I would feel even rather diffident about naming them, both out of superstition and awe:

François Villon and Dante—not very far apart from each other in time, both medieval poets. And when I began I was fascinated with medieval poetry. I think some of that was due to Pound’s influence; I had great admiration for Pound when I was in college. That was partly it; a rebellious stage, because almost no one else admired Pound, and I used to walk around with a beard which I grew just like Pound’s. There’s one thing that we all owe him, the debt to his way of hearing. That incredible ear runs through much of the *Cantos*. I find them hard to read, not because of intellectual references, which are reason enough, but I keep getting irritated with what the man is saying, the stance, and that cornball American lingo that he keeps lapsing into. But my debt to him began very early.

Whether the affinity with the medieval poets is as close as it was I don’t know. I have a debt, as I think everyone does whether they know it or not, to Anonymous; to oral literature as the best one can work toward it. That’s the real matrix of possibilities that’s always there. I keep saying I’m going to stop translating, and then I find someone else I want to translate. There’s still so much possibility that one hasn’t touched, found, heard.

EF: I’m curious about how your translation work teaches and forms voices for your own poetry, or how much your own poetic voice predetermines the voice of your translations. When you read “The Last One” the other night, you mentioned that you had in mind a creation myth—is that the “Creation of the Moon,” which you translated from the Amazon native original? A part of that translation reads, “So the head started to think what it would turn into/If it turned into water they would drink it . . .” and so on. It moves on with that repetitive line structure, and the feel of the poem is very much like “The Last One.” Do your translations modify your own voice, or vice-versa? I guess it can’t help but work both ways . . .

WSM: Yes, I think it works both ways. I’m very anxious not ever to do that—and I don’t mean this as a pejorative comment on Cal Lowell’s work at all—but I never wanted to do what he did; I never wanted to take the work of someone else and use it simply as a springboard for providing poems of my own. And I persuaded myself, for the sake of practice, until the late Sixties, and that first book of selected translations, that I did keep them separate. There were various ways of keeping them separate. On the other hand, something that you become involved with as intimately as translation, if you’re working at it over a period of time,

and something in which you use words as deliberately as you do in translation, is bound to affect your own writing. And besides, what you want to translate is already an indication of an affinity that you had before you found that poem to translate. So I was not ever deliberately looking around in translation for something that I could use as the starting point for poems of mine. Yet that particular kind of movement—the repetitive line structure—that you’re describing is an example of something that provided a suggestion, something I wanted to echo, a deliberate allusion.

A great deal of anonymous oral literature seems to me endlessly suggestive, not as something to be imitated, crudely and directly, but as a reminder that the possibilities open to us at any moment are not as limited as we might suppose. The world is not as simple and as codified and conventional as you thought it was. There is even a convention that recurs in oral literature in which the consideration of possibilities becomes itself a kind of form. In one Spanish ballad a girl has had her dead lover for seven years in the room, and she says, “If I tell my father, this will happen; if I tell my mother, this will happen; if I tell my brother, this will happen,” and so on. And you can think of many fairy tales in which that happens. I think that’s something that you find much less often in written literature than you do in oral literature. Eliot talked about tradition in that way, at least once as I remember it, in a lecture on Dr. Johnson. He was comparing Marlowe and Tennyson, saying as the verse form developed, and as literature developed, in a way it refined itself at the expense of possibility. In the earlier, apparently cruder way of doing it, you have not only a different kind of energy, but you have a different sense of possibility. I think this is one of the things that happens in English—the metrical verse form that was most traditional in English begins at the time of Chaucer with an importation of the romance form of iambic pentameter into a language which is already a mixture. And of course the new meter replaced a basic parallelism in Middle English, which Middle English shared with Hebrew poetry and with a great deal of oral poetry, with a great deal of the poetry of the Americas. I think that parallelism is probably one of the deep basic forms of poetry, perhaps the basic structure of verse, and is never really lost. . . .

CN: “The Last One” is a poem that’s always troubled me a bit, because I’ve heard you read it before and, with its energy and parallelism and repetition, it’s a poem that often generates a murmur of approval and

satisfaction from an audience. I tend to suspect that positive reaction, though, because my guess is that people feel the poem gives them a secure moral or ethical vantage point. It's a poem that may seem to be simply in the mode of the conventional science fiction "revenge of the despoiled earth on those who despoiled it." Yet I don't think that's what the poem does. The poem begins "Well they made up their minds to be everywhere because why not," and in a sense the poem in the end makes up *its* mind to be everywhere because why not; or at least the poem, in the voice and manner of the shadow, proceeds to carry out a rhetorical appropriation of the same totalizing, universalizing, covering motion that the possessors begin with as the poem opens. And in that sense—although I think the sense of pain and despair at the kind of ecological tragedy that the poem communicates is not undercut—what *is* undercut, it seems to me, is any secure moral position that we feel we can take in the midst of that catastrophe. Somewhat the same exaltation in power occurs again in "Now It Is Clear" from *The Carrier of Ladders*, which includes the lines "As though I were a great wind/which is what I pray for." The speaker in the poem, and the poem itself in a way, becomes the great wind, as the second half of the poem moves forward. These formal and rhetorical co-optations should force people to call their own moral certainty into question, though at the same time the poems leave that moral certainty as something that is immensely desirable to us.

WSM: I'm so glad you said that, because my chief doubt about the poem is precisely what you have suggested, that it might be understood as simply saying, from a secure moral vantage point, that *those* people are doing such dreadful things. That's not the poem, as I see it, and I think the index of what I mean is in the last line—with its suggestion that the relation with what the shadow is in the poem has been ignored, despised, thrown away; that's quite as important to me as the science-fiction aspect of the narrative. I'm reminded of the line in the psalm, "Yea they despised the pleasant land." The pleasant land was themselves.

CN: There are a number of irreducible ironies in that last line, "The lucky ones with their shadows." Are their personal shadows uniquely their own, as they (or we) might like to believe; i.e., are their shadows unlike the consuming, generalizing shadow of the rest of the poem? Or do they each already carry within themselves the semblance, the vestige, of that covering shadow they hope they have escaped?

WSM: Both. When two people stand together and their shadows run together, whose shadow is whose? Who owns the shadow?

CN: We've talked about how translations can help initiate your own poems, but more generally how do your poems *start*? What are the first things that happen as you begin to write? Is it that sense of a certain sequence of words coming alive? Does a line or two come to mind as a first step?

WSM: There's that sort of excitement coming from somewhere. Sometimes it's not even in words yet; it's just somewhere around. But I never got very far away from that more or less spooky feeling about poetry, you know, that it does have something to do with the muse's presence, as Berryman used to describe it—some really very ancient presence that is referred to and alluded to and invoked again and again in all talk about poetry up until very recently. It's talked about very foolishly very often, and very embarrassingly, but without that presence what the hell are we paying attention to. Without it we're playing an intellectual game and there are some very brilliant intellectual games going on in the world at the moment, but among games it's a matter of taste, not a matter of importance.

EF: You mentioned the other day something Berryman said to you when you were nineteen . . .

WSM: He said, "At this point I think you should get down in a corner on your knees and pray to the muse, and I mean it literally."

CN: Once the muse has departed, do you revise a lot?

WSM: Well, I don't know quite how to answer that, Cary; in a sense, a lot—if I look over a draft of a poem, I see that things have been scratched out and scratched out and scratched out, but actually what I really do is write very slowly, and change it a lot as I'm going on. Although very often getting quite close to the final thing right at the beginning, then making minute verbal adjustments until it seems to come out right. But once it reaches a certain point I very seldom go back to it, except maybe either to throw it out or cut hunks out of it, see if I can do with less, see if I've overwritten it.

CN: Do you save chunks that didn't fit in and use them other places?

WSM: I keep thinking I'm going to, but as a matter of fact I very seldom look at them again.

EF: Do you have this same "spooky" feeling when you're about to write a piece of prose? Or is writing prose a very different kind of act for you than writing poetry?

WSM: It's not a *very* different kind of act. There's something of the same thing there. I can't write anything without that, because I don't know

what else holds imaginative language together. And writing anything else, I find it rather boring, wearisome, and a rather depressing process. That doesn't mean that there's not a great deal of labor involved in writing. I find writing very hard, and I find writing prose in particular very hard. It takes a long time before this mass of writing begins to generate an energy of its own that sustains it, keeps it going. But I don't mean a kind of baroque energy either—sometimes the plainer it can be the stronger it is.

EF: At what point do you sense when an experience or a feeling will become a poem instead of a piece of prose? I'm curious about what draws certain experiences into prose for you and others into poetry.

WSM: I'm not sure about that at all. Eleven or twelve years ago when I was starting to write *The Miner's Pale Children* I wondered about that quite a lot, and sometimes I would start to write something as the one and I'd realize it was the other. The differences I still don't know, yet I've come to the conclusion, thinking about this, that the more passion or intensity there is in a piece of writing, whether it is prose or poetry, the more it calls into question the writing's generic allegiance. In other words, the more charged a piece of prose is, the more it tends toward the condition of poetry. Then you begin to describe it as poetic, or you begin to ask what it was that separated it from poetry. And oddly, I think that this happens with poetry too. The more charged poetry is, then the more it's driven to the point where it does some of the things that prose does. I suppose I believe that because to me the ideal poet is Dante, and some of the most powerful passages in Dante are, as Eliot said, rather flat. At least they look rather flat, though you realize they are anything but flat, but the *plainness* of Dante leads you to think it's just like prose, except it's utterly unlike prose.

CN: Earlier in your career you were writing poems about your family and about your past, some of them never collected in books. Now you're writing prose pieces about the same things.

WSM: New poems about them, too.

EF: That's what led me to think about that corresponding nature of the prose and poetry, because some of the new poems sound very much as if they are the corollary in poetry of these new prose pieces.

WSM: Those connections I don't know, of course, because they're not deliberate. As you notice them, or I notice them, then I can guess at what the connections are, but I don't really *know*. One doesn't really know what the connections are between so closely related but obviously distinct things. You don't in your own writing or in your own life.

CN: Is there a sense of return, circularity, completion, in coming back to those topics after so many years?

WSM: There's a sense of it happening, but it's not utterly deliberate, except it was deliberate in that I wanted to deal with that family material in that book of prose, *Unframed Originals*. I've been waiting for two or three years to get circumstances together where I could do it. My notes were in a warehouse and I had no desk to work on, and so forth. A lot of it was done in the house that we were trying to build, before the carpenters would show up in the morning. I'd go down when it got light and work until they arrived about ten o'clock, then stop and start hammering pieces of wood the rest of the day. I never know how to answer those questions about the connections of different writings of the past, because so few of the connections are plotted beforehand. It's like saying, what's the connection in your mind between different parts of a poem—well, you can describe them in terms of the poem, and maybe you set it out beforehand, but maybe it developed as you went along and then you saw what the connection was both as you wrote it and as you look back on it. But a great deal of it is bound to be very subjective, and finally it's not something you can articulate or describe yourself.

EF: You've mentioned your fondness for Williams. As you talk about the differences between prose and poetry, Williams is certainly one figure in American literature who has worked with that distinction—or lack of it—quite a bit.

WSM: Who calls it constantly into question. I think that's a measure of imaginative richness, calling it into question. You don't wonder about it when you're reading Sidney Lanier, but you wonder about it when you're reading Melville. You wonder about it when you're reading Thoreau, whose verse isn't very interesting, but the power of the wonderful passages in *Walden* is the power of poetry. The energy of the language is as intense as anything in nineteenth-century poetry. You have to think of Keats or Hopkins for something comparable.

EF: Do you go back to Williams?

WSM: Yes. But not as a cult figure, as some people do. I go back to him with great affection and reverence. I really do love Williams, and I read him over and over when I was about twenty; I still read him. I go back to him, how shall I say it, as an engraver. It's the visual quality of individual moments in Williams: not the magnificence of the long poem in *Paterson*, but passages in *Paterson* which I see as separate poems, or the early collected poems, *Spring and All* and that period. Or some of the very late poems.

EF: *Pictures from Brueghel*?

WSM: Yes. He's come back to that vein with a wonderful serenity by that point. And such purity of language. The element of Williams which some of his admirers like so much, the "experimental" element, sometimes seems to be just fooling around. Nothing the matter with fooling around, but I don't find myself returning to it irresistibly. But I imagine I will continue to reread parts of Williams with fondness and gratitude.

EF: Do you go back to the prose of *Spring and All*, or only the poems?

WSM: Less to the prose. I don't like his prose so much as the poems that I'm fondest of. And I read the autobiography, but the prose there is often limp.

EF: *In the American Grain*?

WSM: *In the American Grain* is a wonder—I love that.

CN: Much of that is beautifully composed prose—sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase.

WSM: Yes. Many of the Williamsites seem to ignore the element of composition in that great book, probably the most impressive and imposing single book that he wrote.

CN: I reread parts of it every year.

WSM: There's nothing in it like the really exquisite lyrics, but it's there on the shelf with the great American single volumes. It's on my shelf.

EF: When I think of Williams and his experimentation, I think of course of the poetic line. Whitman and Williams and Olson and Ginsberg—all have written so much about the poetic line, and all have theories about its origins, which they all associate with breath. The theories probably culminate in Olson's "Projective Verse." Williams talked of dividing the Whitman line into three parts, coming up with the triadic line composed of three variable feet, and so on. What are your thoughts about the origin of the line in your own work? Where does your line emerge from?

WSM: I think the line is a matter of absolutely essential importance. If the line is not that important, why is one writing verse in the first place? One of the meanings of verse after all is "a line." Yet one of the ironies of what you just said about Whitman-Williams-Ginsberg is that, though they talked a lot about the line, their tradition has been involved in the demise of the clarity of the line in a great deal of modern and contemporary American verse. It's one of the danger signs in recent verse. There's a huge amount of talent around now, including some

really gifted young people coming out of colleges, but some of them have a very shaky sense of what a line is. This is obviously bad for individual poems, but it's also very bad for the possibility of their development as poets or for the development of anything resembling a tradition—even for the continuation of an Olson or a Williams tradition. You can't go anywhere if you're not fairly clear about what a line is. Yet I'm not even sure that I want to say what I think a line is, though I've thought about it. I'll describe how I've taught the topic, though that may prevent me from doing it again.

With students in certain places I've thought it was valuable to try to force them to figure out what they thought a line was. A year and a half ago I was at Oberlin, where the students were very gifted. I read a lot of manuscripts and said, "I'm not going to do the workshop thing of going over your papers and making little suggestions. I don't think that's really the most appropriate thing. What I'd like to do is go around the room and make everybody who wants to be involved in this try to figure out what a line of verse is." After two hours, we hadn't got very far. They realized that they'd never really thought about it. We left it with my saying, "I think this is what you have to think about the next time you stop a line somewhere. At the risk of losing a great deal of spontaneity for awhile, you need to look closely, to figure out what in hell you think you're doing: why you stop it after three syllables, why you stop it after two beats, or why you stop it where you do—what are you doing? Are you just writing prose and saying, 'I like it better this way,' or is there really some reason for doing it?"

As far as they could get spontaneously in two hours, these young people who'd read a lot—mostly in their own contemporaries, but they were addressing themselves to poetry with some seriousness—was to realize that a line was a unit of something. What it was a unit *of* was something they couldn't agree on.

CN: Do line breaks seem to come to you naturally as you write, or is that one of the things you have to work with to change?

WSM: Both. And of course there are two things that a line is doing—it's making a rhythm of its own by means of stopping where it does; and unless you're doing it wrong, unless it's working against you and you've lost it, lost this *line*, it's making a continuity of movement and making a rhythm within a continuity. It's doing those two things at the same time. And this is something that you don't see happening very often in these limp, unheard little bits of prose—lines just tacked one after the

other. And their continuity is the continuity of prose. There's no real reason why it should stop at any particular place.

EF: Over the years you've used many different lines. Certainly your lines derive in part from your study of various traditions—I suppose this is one thing that takes you back to Pound, his experimentation with different lines. But does line have any association with breath for you?

WSM: No, I don't think so. It *can*, but I don't think there's any necessary connection. I think of stopping at a given point as a rhythmical gesture, and also as a gesture of meaning—because where you stop, if the rhythm is working, is going to have an effect on the meaning, particularly if you're not punctuating. But it's important to stop in such a way that the stop itself has something to do with impetus. It keeps the motion of the poem going, both in terms of rhythm, sound, and in terms of meaning, denotative meaning.

CN: Your control of line breaks is clearly one of the real strengths of your work over a long period of time. It always seems minutely perfect, yet I have the uncanny feeling that it simply comes to you instinctively.

WSM: I pay a lot of attention to it.

CN: You mentioned punctuation. I don't think you've ever talked about your decision not to use punctuation for such a long period of time. It has always seemed absolutely right. I can't imagine the poetry with punctuation, but have you worked out the appeal and the poetics of abandoning punctuation?

WSM: I don't know about its appeal, but there are various things that led to that decision. I had virtually stopped writing poetry at the end of the Fifties, because I felt that I had come to the end of something and that if I wrote again I'd want to do it quite differently. James Wright went through very much the same process, although we never conferred with each other to know that we had both reached that point at the same time. Of course during the time when I wasn't writing, I was thinking about it. There's a passage from Milosz's *The Captive Mind* about the suddenness with which he had this moment of crisis when he was lying on his face on the cobbles with machine gun bullets going around him and friends being herded into trucks, and thinking, what do I want to remember, what poetry has been most important to me, what poetry do I want now, right *now*, this minute? And I thought, I don't ever want to forget this about poetry again: I want to write something to take with me at a bad time. Because we're going to have a bad time from now on.

One of the corollaries of that is that there's a lot you really don't need

in poetry. You have to pay attention to things and see what their function is. If there's really no function, what are they doing there? Why are you writing poetry that includes things you really don't need there? This process of trying to see what was unnecessary, of strengthening by compressing and intensifying, of getting down to what was really essential, led me to write poetry that was farther and farther away from conventional stanzaic and metrical structure.

Of course none of this was quite so deliberate. It was part of practice more than theory, and discontent with what I was doing and wanting to articulate the direction in which I was going. I recognized I was moving away from stanzaic verse, but I also saw myself moving farther from prose. So I asked myself what the point was of staying with prose punctuation. Punctuation is there as a kind of manners in prose, articulating prose meaning, but it doesn't necessarily articulate the meaning of this kind of verse. I saw that if I could use the movement of the verse itself and the movement of the line—the actual weight of the language as it moved—to do the punctuation, I would both strengthen the texture of the experience of the poem and also make clear its distinction from other kinds of writing. One would be paying attention to it in those terms. I also noticed something else right away. Punctuation as I looked at it after that seemed to staple the poem to the page, but if I took those staples out the poem lifted itself right up off the page. A poem then had a sense of integrity and liberation that it did not have before. In a sense that made it a late echo of an oral tradition. All this gave the poetry new rules, a new way of being, and I haven't really changed enough to want to give that up.

Someone was asking me the other day about what they called my “broken back” line, the two-part line. I was writing it for a couple of years, and I would still like to feel it is available. Indeed I would like to have it generally available in English. You know, meter is never something permanently absent. I think that line is related to the Middle English line of *Piers Plowman*, which to me is the basic line of English, overlaid—we talked about palimpsests—overlaid, as I said earlier, by the Italianate iambic pentameter. But the caesura in the iambic pentameter is like a ghost of the old Middle English line asserting itself all the time, saying I'm here all the time. I think it's there under what we hear in iambic pentameter. And as the iambic pentameter becomes harder and harder to hear or to stay awake through in contemporary poetry, I think the other, the deeper, older line is something one, with the slightest effort, might be able to hear again.

The difference between that line and iambic pentameter, I think, is a traditional one. Iambic pentameter, because of the long tradition, developed a flexibility which the Middle English line never did. The flow-on qualities of enjambment in iambic pentameter became incredibly varied, but eventually they played themselves out, so that there's hardly a meter there at all. By the time you get to someone like Conrad Aiken you're writing essentially a kind of vers libre. But the enjambment of the Middle English line never developed that way, didn't last long enough probably. If you take up something that is like a continuation of it, it seems a little stiff, but it can do things that iambic pentameter probably can't. And I don't even think of that line with the heavy caesura as a strict meter in the way Pope would have thought of iambic pentameter, but as a different kind of pattern or paradigm.

EF: The caesura obviously controls breath—when you read a line, the line controls your breathing. Maybe this has to do with what you were saying the other day—that one problem with “projective verse” as a theory is not that it assigns too much importance to breath, but not enough.

WSM: But the pauses in verse are not necessarily the pauses of breath, breathing. If the pauses of verse are exactly the pauses of anything else, it becomes boring. It has to have its own pauses.

I like some of Olson's poems very much, but I never cottoned onto that “projective verse.” As I remember it, he talks about projective verse and its relation to breath, but it seems to me truistic: the relation of poetry to breath is absolute. And you can come at it from any angle you want to. He talks about it in a rather limited way—that outbreathing and inbreathing in themselves are a kind of metric. I think it's far more complicated, so I doubt that there's much to be gained in pursuing that particular argument.

CN: Different poetry teaches you to breath in different ways. As you read it there's a learning process; you adjust to it. But I've never seen any way of treating Olson's line as the equivalent of a single breath.

EF: Ginsberg is probably the one who has come closest to trying to suggest that that's absolutely true, that he breathes a line and when his breath is out he moves to the next line.

CN: But it takes a tremendous effort to pull that off, and when he reads in public it's by no means easy to establish that relationship in any literal way.

WSM: Yes, and that also rules out something which is inseparable from

it and in a sense more interior or inward—the whole role of hearing, listening, both in writing and in reading or listening. The Ear—the fact that the body is the ear. Breathing also is a way of hearing; they're not separate. But if it's just physical breathing, what role do the ear and listening play?

EF: What's Olson's physiological formula—the Head, by way of the Ear, to the Syllable; the Heart, by way of the Breath, to the Line. Part of his idea, at any rate, is that the *syllable* is what the ear has to do with, not the line. The line has to do with the breathing.

WSM: I don't see that at all, because I think one of the things that happens with all units in verse, in poetry, is tension. There's always one element playing against another one, whether or not it's metrical. In conventional verse the line is made of variations on the iambic pentameter pattern, so you have the pattern and the variation playing against each other, and the tension resulting—and that's one way of seeing the vigor and the energy in the line. And I think this is true in every kind of metric, whether it's conventional and regular or whether it's what you could call organic. There are always going to be two sorts of forces playing against each other: an expectation and either an answering, a refusing, or a variant on the expectation. The expectation sets up a sense of repetition. You either fulfill the repetition or you don't. That tension runs through the making of lines or the making of stanzaic paragraphs, for the whole poem.

EF: That same pattern of expectation and variation is also apparent in the overall rhythm of each of your books as well. Has there been any single one of your books that has affirmed itself to you as *a* book, as a complete thing, more than the others, or do they all have a similar sense of completion?

WSM: They all do, particularly since *The Drunk in the Furnace*.

EF: Including *The Drunk in the Furnace*?

WSM: Including *The Drunk in the Furnace*. The first three seem to be much more gatherings, but they too each finish with the end of a phase. Of course I don't feel that close to them now.

CN: Still, the idea of putting them all together in a collected volume seems inappropriate. I like them as separate objects, even the first four books. But I certainly don't want *The Lice* in the same volume as *The Compass Flower*. They're separate books to me.

WSM: I don't really either. What do you think about a *Selected Poems*?

CN: I can't think of any reason to do it.

WSM: Well, I've resisted it, because I would not like to undercut the separate books.

CN: It may be that if you grow with the poetry and live through the period of time when the poet is actually writing you have a strong feeling of loyalty toward the individual books. Fifty years from now most readers would probably just as well have a *Collected Merwin*. With Yeats, although I am conscious of the huge differences among the books, I'm perfectly happy to have the *Collected Poems*. People who collected the separate volumes, however, often prefer to read them in that form.

WSM: Yes, but Yeats has been collected in the only way that it would make any sense to me. If I were ever collected I would want it done that way, where you're very much aware of the books as divisions. And you'd have to do that with Lowell too, you know, although all of Cal's fooling around with *History* and *Notebooks* presents problems. Nonetheless, you'd want his books very distinct—you wouldn't want *Lord Weary's Castle* and *Life Studies* combined into something like a *Collected Browning*.

EF: One thing that gives your books each a very separate identity are the titles. You tend not to title your books after the name of a poem that is in the book, although you did with *The Drunk in the Furnace*.

WSM: "The Drunk in the Furnace" is really the kind of poem that is about everything the book is about. Generally, though, I don't do that. I guess I made up my mind about it in a conversation with Bill Arrowsmith a long time ago. I'm not proposing this for everybody, but for me a title should contribute something important. So that if you took a poem's title away, it would be missing something. The title should not just be a redundancy. Of course the relation between a poem and its title is far more specific and intimate than the relation between a book and its title, but the title of a book should still make a significant contribution.

EF: Because of the nature of your book titles, the reader is forced to carry the title through each poem, and to allow the juxtaposition of the title of the book and any particular poem to play itself out. The titles of your books force the reader to come to grips with the book as an interrelated whole. At what point do titles for your books come to you?

WSM: I think it's been different. Sometimes I've hung around for awhile, listening for one to come, waiting for it. I had a superstition, in the days when I was writing plays, that if I got my title too soon,

especially if I got the title before I started to write, that I'd never get the play finished. In any case, there's no point in rushing it. I suppose one reason I know the new collection isn't finished is that I don't have a title for it yet.

The title for *The Lice* came fairly early. It jumped out of that passage in Heraclitus while I was working on the poems. *The Moving Target*, on the other hand, came late. I know that I've got several pages of false attempts at that title. I was also a time waiting for the title to *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*, trying to figure out what on earth is the title of this collection. With *The Compass Flower*, however, I had the title before the book was finished.

CN: Do you save notes for titles and drafts of poems?

WSM: I keep all the drafts now. I still have some of the old things I wrote in college, but for awhile after that I destroyed things. Then Graves told me to save everything and since then I have.

EF: Can you reconstruct the process you go through to come up with a retrospective title like *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*? Do you think through the poems in some way?

WSM: I wasn't thinking at all; I was sitting and waiting for the title. I can remember the chair and the room in Mexico. Of course I was doing other things as well, but ten days went by before the title came. When I got back to New York, Adrienne Rich said, "What are you going to call the new book," and I told her, and she said, "That's it, that's what we all want to write." Those were happier days.

NOTES

1 This interview took place on October 11, 1981, at Cary Nelson's home in Champaign, Illinois. Some of the discussions of individual poems build upon a symposium on Merwin's poetry arranged by Mary Slowik and held at Beloit College on April 3-4, 1981. Slowik, Folsom, Nelson, and Merwin formed a panel to discuss Merwin's poetry as part of Beloit's Festival of the Lively Arts. Merwin gave a poetry reading at Beloit in April, and readings at the University of Iowa and the University of Illinois in October, 1981.

2 From *The Lice*. Copyright 1967 by W.S. Merwin and reprinted with the permission of Atheneum Publishers