

THE COMPASS FLOWER. By W.S. Merwin. New York: Atheneum, 1977. 94 pp. \$4.95.

HOUSES AND TRAVELLERS. By W. S. Merwin. New York: Atheneum, 1977. viii, 213 pp. \$6.95.

W.S. Merwin publishes too much. His twenty-seven volumes are beginning to look ostentatious on the M shelf in bookstores, especially since twelve of them have appeared since 1970. Many of these books, it is true, are translations. But just as many are Merwin's own poetry, and the unevenness, the amount of inferior material in his work, leads one to wonder if Merwin is not doing himself a disservice. Apparently the heart of the problem is his admirable reluctance to teach, preferring the perils

of the literary marketplace to pedagogy. No need to get mired down amid tacky academics when you can whip off a poem a week for the *New Yorker*. While such prowess is heroic, profusion may ultimately be a greater foe.

Merwin is, nevertheless, a fine poet, a craftsman, and each volume he publishes deserves at least close scrutiny. Assured, aristocratic, aloof, and precise, his verse and technique are yet protean. Each of his experiments in prosody and form, since *A Mask for Janus* (1952) and *The Dancing Bears* (1954), has occupied a pair of books. *The Compass Flower*, which Atheneum bills as "his first book of poems in four years," is the complement to *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment* (1973). The latter, appearing to explore less than promising veins, attracted scant attention. Hopefully *The Compass Flower* marks the end of the not particularly satisfying exploration.

The most powerful poems in the book resemble Merwin's past work. In such poems as "Encampment at Morning" and "A Contemporary" one recognizes Merwin's motifs: the lonely road, anabasis, the journey, the prodigal son. Though nowhere explicit, his concern with the figure of Odysseus as a metaphor for modern unrest peeks out everywhere. Ships, ports, enchanted isles, and navigators provide subjects; land is, indeed, only a "stone boat." It is worth recurring to one of those older poems, "Odysseus," to illustrate the direction of this volume.

Always the setting forth was the same,
 Same sea, same dangers waiting for him
 As though he had got nowhere but older.
 Behind him on the receding shore
 The identical reproaches, and somewhere
 Out before him, the unravelling patience
 He was wedded to. There were the islands
 Each with its woman and twining welcome
 To be navigated, and one to call "home."
 The knowledge of all that he betrayed
 Grew till it was the same whether he stayed
 Or went. Therefore he went. And what wonder
 If sometimes he could not remember
 Which was the one who wished on his departure
 Perils that he could never sail through,
 And which, improbable, remote and true
 Was the one he kept sailing home to?

But in the closest thing the present volume offers to a statement of voice, the speaker resembles old Laertes more than Odysseus.

What if I came down now out of these
 solid dark clouds that build up against the mountain
 day after day with no rain in them
 and lived as one blade of grass
 in a garden in the south when the clouds part in winter
 from the beginning I would be older than all the animals
 and to the last I would be simpler
 frost would design me and dew would disappear on me

sun would shine through me
 I would be green with white roots
 feel worms touch my feet as a bounty
 have no name and no fear
 turn naturally to the light
 know how to spend the day and night
 climbing out of myself
 all my life.

"A Contemporary"

It is still the prophetic voice, but older, more removed, steeped in itself. A certain resignation appears, for example, in "The Estuary," where Merwin writes "... at the bow of the stone boat/the wave from the ends of the earth keeps breaking." And in "The Helmsmen" the pilots call out to each other,

But can't be sure whether they hear
 increasingly they imagine echoes
 year after year they
 try to meet
 thinking of each other constantly
 and of the rumors of resemblances between them.

The sense of futility that the wanderer feels has increased; his anguish and passion appear to have been eclipsed.

Another distinct feature of Merwin's poetry, continued in the present volume, is what Stephen Spender called his "animistic tendency." "In a dead tree/there is the ghost of a horse," and that is not the worst of it. Stones are moved to utter pained thoughts, disembodied eyes wander forests, and robins invent day and night. What was once a finely honed tool for exploring the penumbra of experience has degenerated into an indulgent habit, an idiosyncrasy.

The new paths explored by Merwin appear, with one exception, not over-promising. Although the poems are divided into numeraled sections focusing respectively on the country, the city, and love (with a final potpourri), no grouping develops a theme or even really shares a poetic focus. The love poems are mediocre. The longest of them, "Kore," which features a stanza for every letter of the Greek alphabet, has a few nice passages but is marred by lines such as "The candles flutter in the stairs of your voice." It becomes so tendentious that one is lucky to get past O. The best of them, "Islands," seems like an homage to Circe or Kalypso, and hence of the old genre.

On the other hand, several of the city poems are distinct and interesting. "St. Vincent's," which first appeared in the *New Yorker*, explores the tension between specific visual detail and general humane comprehension. The casual tone, the manner in which detail randomly evokes detail, breaks with Merwin's usual concentrated perception. The most heartening aspect of the book, however, is the understated humor that often crops up. "The Wine," "The Fountain," and "Numbered Apartment," which concerns a man whose life is inextricably snared by

rubber bands, are superior light poems, tasty as trifle. "The Wine" begins,

With what joy I am carrying
a case of wine up a mountain
far behind me others
are being given their burdens
but I could not even wait for them

If *The Compass Flower* seems disappointing, perhaps it is because *Houses and Travellers*, the more recent collection of prose poems, fables, and parables, is such an ambitious, energetic undertaking. Many of these pieces will be familiar; thirty of the seventy-eight items first appeared in the *New Yorker*. This book, again, makes a pair in a particular vein, continuing the direction of *The Miner's Pale Children* (1970). Merwin here pursues the creation of a new landscape, an almost medieval locale where castles, fields of grain, lonely roads, reapers, peddlers, and beggars predominate. Men travel on foot or on mule; the distinctive qualities of work, love, journey, and paradox are not compromised by civilization but allowed to discover their fates in a limitless Petri dish. It is clear that Merwin, working this field, has his own ambiguous relationship with the masters, Borges and Kafka. The former, particularly, seems to have discovered and staked out the best ground; one senses Merwin resisting the pull of specific detail and specific plot complication that would make his voice compelling, for such specificity might blur the boundary between his landscape and that of Borges. Fortunately Merwin seems to have staked out his own turf well. It is not clear, however, if he has created a viable manner of telling the story, as both Borges and Kafka did. Still other problems are aptly illustrated in the prose poem "A Tree."

A tree has been torn out and the blind voices are bleeding through the earth. Wherever the roots tentatively learned, the voices flow for the first time, knowing. They have no color, except as voices have colors. They do not even have sounds. They are not looking for one. They come together like fingers. They flow out. They explode slowly to where the branches were, and the leaves. And then the silence of the whole sky is the echo of their outcry.

As I was a child I heard the voices rising. I sat by a wall. It was afternoon already, facing west, near a tree, and I had heard them before. All the roots of the earth reach blindly toward mouths that are waiting to say them.

These unseen and unheard secret operations of the world, a sort of counter-ontology of life, often command our total attention — but to no end. As a protest against the complete distraction of the real world, they are certainly valid in and of themselves. But as part of a greater territory, a realm of mythic import, they fail because they operate within the closed logic and limited meaning of animism. Perhaps a third of the pieces in the book escape this defect altogether. "The Taste," "At One of the Ends of the World," "The Reaper," "The Fugitive," and other pieces are well done. "Path" and "Poverty," which are several thousand words

long, demonstrate Merwin's mastery of the short story. These experiments are interesting in themselves, and certainly hold out more hope for the prose poem as a form than, say, the recent writings of Russell Edson.

There are, in sum, many good poems in both new books. The best refine the desert mirages, castaways, drowned men, and impending catastrophes that Merwin presented in 1955 and 1960. But there are an inexcusable number of bad poems; it should be whispered to the poet, so subtle, so delicate, so attuned to nuances in his own work, that he is being indiscriminately prolific.

University of California,
Santa Barbara

WILLIAM MARLING