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"W.S. Merwin and the demystifying power of language."

W.S. Merwin's 1969 prose poem, "Unchopping a Tree," is a theoretical set of instructions for the rehabilitation of a disembodied plant. The tree has no hope of being revived, of course, an implausible feat made all the more absurd by Merwin's solemn call for its revival. By writing about the "unchopping" in a relentlessly earnest way, Merwin finds the language to depict the tree as the helpless commodity we have made her into. He reverse-engineers the destruction we wreak on billions of trees every year and in the process humanizes a breathless object, making her strife impossible to ignore. By creating an intimate scenario between the fallen tree and a person charged with its reconstruction, Merwin expertly illustrates the relationship between the disconnected modern man and nature, who survives only by the whim of that same man.

Merwin utilizes the human universality of language to confront our perceptions and assumptions about the natural environment. As Jane Frazier surmises in *From Origin to Ecology*, "the living world survives as a subject in itself, free from ideology and politics even though those opinions inform [Merwin's] work" (15). When Adam and Eve named the animals in *Genesis*, a hierarchy of ownership and domestication was implied between man and animal. This is a continuation of that same phenomenon Merwin rebels against, and the disconnection between object and word is the payoff. By disembodimenting a tree, we see the object in a totally new light – free from a lifetime of past impressions and cultural precedents. A glimpse of nature without the baggage humans bring with it is the gift of

Merwin's prose. The barrier that our language imposes on our relationship to nature breaks down and a more intimate relationship can be achieved.

Merwin's work is a call to action and an attempt to show nature not only as a humble creature worth caring for, but as an essential entity in need of our attention and protection. For the benefit of this discussion, I will refer to this specific approach to nature writing as *ecopoetry*, a genre more influenced by a proactive call to action and admonishment of apathy than a serene, reflective pantheistic approach of a poet like Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey." Wordsworth's poetry projects a religious aura onto the natural world around us, just the kind of mystification that Merwin is trying to purge from our consciousness.

Ecopoetry is the antithesis of the late nineteenth century naturalist view of "nature as an antagonist" by writers like Annie Dillard and John Steinbeck; ecopoetry asserts that *man* is the antagonist and *nature* the helpless victim. It is poetry on the side of nature, begging for the mercy of a destructive foe. That isn't to say Merwin writes exclusively in the genre of ecopoetry or that it's an entirely apt description of his nature writing, but that "Unchopping A Tree" is both an illustrative example of the genre and a useful word to describe the aims of his poems about ecological loss.

Merwin is astutely conscious of his particular role as an ecopoet and wishes to rebel against the expectations established by traditional genres of nature writing. While I think every poet hopes their musings about the natural world will spark new ways of thinking, deeper understanding, and a renewed sense of awe and respect for the environment, Merwin expresses his ideology in a somewhat more explicit fashion. Merwin knows the majority of his fellow twentieth century earth-dwellers live in urban settings almost entirely

oblivious to, and disconnected from, the natural world. They buy produce from multi-national supermarket chains and consume meat slaughtered and trucked to them from the other side of the planet. He knows that the tightly controlled environs of a zoo or national park is as close to nature as most of his readers will ever come, and he wants to create an emotional bond to an entity our way of life invisibly destroys. Just as Wordsworth was influenced by the affluent region of England he grew up in, Merwin is influenced by an American view of nature as a commodity. "Unchopping A Tree" is a recognition of these truths and a subtle – yet effective – plea for change.

Trees embody a well-established trope in literature and are an icon that recurs in Merwin's poetry. Despite an unlimited number of orchids, ferns, and herbs an artist could point their attention toward, trees remain one of the most oft-depicted representations of nature. I believe this is due to the longevity of trees and every child's early memory of their favorite climbing spot, a moment on which Merwin reflects in the poem "Trees," in *The Compass Flower*. Trees appear as wise, constant, peaceful, beautiful. Their visual beauty and relative pervasiveness (what would a park be without a ornamental arrangement of trees?) make them a particularly fitting symbol for conservation and ecological loss. Merwin takes what may be our original sin against nature – trees have been destroyed to start fires and provide shelter since the beginning of time – and personalizes that relationship in an original, moving way. He takes what the twentieth century reader may see as banal and twists it into a more apt impression: something that's wonderfully unique and unexpendable.

"Unchopping A Tree" is decidedly unemotional, which prompts an even more

affective response in the reader than had it been written in a more zealous tone. Merwin allegorizes the plight of a tree, nature is demystified, and the relationship between an inept man and victimized nature is made abundantly clear. This gesture is best exemplified toward the end of the first paragraph. Man is responsible for this destruction, and only nature itself can help make things right:

"Even in the best of circumstances it is a labor that will make you wish often that you had won the favor of the universe of ants, the empire of mice, or at least a local tribe of squirrels, and could enlist their labors and their talents. But no, they leave you to it. They have learned, with time. This is men's work" (Miner's 85).

Merwin utilizes personification, irony, and satire in "Unchopping." The narrator deliberately paints the chopper as naive and thoughtless, underscoring the fecklessness of the unchopping. He sarcastically suggests that the nature-destroyer has the best interest of the tree at heart: "If the fall was carefully and correctly planned, the chances of anything of the kind happening will have been reduced" (Miner's 85).

Throughout "Unchopping" Merwin treats the reader as the unseasoned arboriculturist they likely are, emphasizing their lost relationship to nature: "With spider's webs you must simply do the best you can. We do not have the spider's weaving equipment, nor any substitute for the leaf's living bond with its point of attachment and nourishment" (Miner's 86). This passage serves to contrast the irreplaceability of nature's tools with the predictable man-made machines we control. Merwin is criticizing the assumption that a fallen tree can be fixed like a defective car stereo; all it takes is the right instruction booklet. Nature is more gentle, unique and mysterious than man-made things and we cannot synthesize her tools ourselves. This suggestion is well-illustrated in the section of the poem detailing the raising of the trunk: "Again we have no duplicate of the original

substance [the glue that holds the splinters together]. Ours is extremely strong, but it is rigid" (Miner's 87). The poet is asserting that humans are good at directing its hubris ("strength") toward nature but lack the finesse of ultimately caring for a creature other than itself.

The more detail Merwin adds to his unchopping manual, the more absurd the reconstruction appears. This is the crux of Merwin's argument: nature is different from a bicycle that clicks too often. We must take care of her, she cannot be replaced, and her plight cannot be solved through technological innovation. You can't simply "unchop" a tree.

While far from idealistic, Merwin's poetry falls short of the bleak realism of a poet like P.B. Shelley in "Mont Blanc." I think Merwin hopes to act as a mediator between the reader and nature itself, relaying its struggle for survival, and conjuring a sympathy in the reader that can't be ignored. "Unchopping a Tree" isn't a poem about Merwin's autobiographical relationship to nature or a quasi-religious affection for the environment; it's about the reader and their individual relationship to nature as a distant commodity.

Perhaps the writer to whom W.S. Merwin owes the deepest debt is Henry David Thoreau. (Indeed, Merwin has said he has the "greatest admiration" for him.) Although Thoreau writes in a more direct, less allegorical mode, they share an approach to nature that, while not overtly ideological, is concerned with how we effect the ecosystem. Perhaps particularly akin to Thoreau is that "Merwin strives for... contact with a lost, original world, free from the ontologically insular and physically threatening forces of industrialization and technology..." (Origin 15-16). As a leading transcendentalist, Thoreau's poetry explores

the notion of nature as a truth-revealing entity. The transcendentalist approach (nature reveals itself to us) is the inverse of the Christian approach (nature contains higher truths that we must aspire toward). While Merwin's poetry explores the truths of nature to a certain extent, I think he's more inclined to explore the intimate relationship between man and nature.

If "Unchopping A Tree" was created to spur an internal dialog about ecological destruction in the reader's mind, "Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Field" (Selected 261) is Merwin's explication of that dialog. The poem's title includes the gist of the content: a tourist, walking through a pineapple field, is stopped by a native who chastises the tourist for their ignorance and distance from nature. The poem is void of punctuation, adding to the sarcastic, accusatory tone. "Questions" is a three page, stream-of-conscious poem taunting the privileged traveller who enjoys nature's harvest ("Did you like your piece of pineapple / would you like a napkin"), but is oblivious of the toll industrial agriculture has on the environment ("what do you think was here / before the pineapple fields"). Adding to the humor and twentieth century relevance is the unceasing allusions to the vernacular of capitalism: "Is it a growth community... do you think there is a future / in pineapple".

Although "Questions" is written in a more blatantly didactic tone than "Unchopping," its goal is the same. Merwin takes the specifics of pineapple farming and creates a personal connection with the process through dialog, forcing the reader to come to terms with a fundamental truth about our culture and the food it eats. The complications of harvesting a tropical fruit for mass consumption is made abundantly clear in the poem, as is our

obliviousness of the destruction our lifestyle wreaks on nature. "Questions" continues the form of Merwin's ecopoetry I previously discussed, portraying man as antagonist and nature as victim. But while "Unchopping" is more directly focussed on ecological destruction, "Questions" is concerned with issues of tourism, industrial agriculture, and the urban convenience of enjoying seasonal food year-round.

"The Fountain" (Miner's 36) illustrates another method Merwin uses to relate to nature, told in the form of a parable. The moral lesson of the tale is clear: civilization can't survive without nature, and animals in particular. "The Fountain" begins with the ending, a clever narrative loop that ties in neatly with the moral of the poem: nature is a cycle. Under the leadership of a "hard-hearted" king, the forest of Morb has completely depleted its water supply. The drought and the king's emotional disposition is excused by his apprehension of nature ("even the light hurt his eyes" (Miner's 43)). An unnamed animal appears, offering a tuft of his own hair that will magically provide the kingdom with a temporary source of water. Unfortunately for the king, one of his sons (and soon-to-be heir to the throne) is sacrificed every time the flow from the tuft runs out, symbolizing the impending end to the king's rein. Ultimately, the animal wants to help, but not until his dominion over the forest is restored; the king isn't willing to concede and the cycle of drought and plenitude continues. The animal offers a tuft in exchange for his rightful dominion one last time, and the king chops off his head.

Upon the animal's death the forest is returned to nature, and from the king's hardened heart sprouts an oak tree. In the forest's second life nature actively persecutes the presence of man: "No one lives in the forest. No building will stand... walls topple and sink into the

earth before they be said to be walls" (Miner's 36). Nature is a provider whose gentility is canceled out by man, who is unable to see how dependent he is on her. "The Fountain" is a poetic illustration of the interdependence of our ecosystem and serves as an ominous warning to the ill-effects an earth dominated by humans and their relics can have on man and animal. "The Fountain" makes it clear that nature is in control of humanity. Anyone unwilling to meet it halfway is doomed and only under its conditions.

Merwin's approach to nature is inherently hopeful; his work serves as a warning siren. "Unchopping A Tree" tells us that if we don't stop cutting down trees, they'll disappear. "Questions to a Tourist Passing a Pineapple Field" says that if we don't recognize the effects excessive consumption invisibly wreaks upon the natural world, we'll be unable to stop it. "The Fountain" is a plea for awareness of our mutual dependency. In each case man is making a decision and has the option to make the right choice.

The poetry of W.S. Merwin works to re-establish a lost connection between the reader and nature, showing it from an ever-surprising, imaginative angle, so we will respect her for the gifts she provides and come to an understanding based more on reality than the fictions of bottled water advertisements. The modern man takes the destruction of nature for granted at best, as necessary at worst. Merwin hopes to express our reliance on nature in a unique, unsettling way, and in the process re-aligning our nature sensibility. Merwin hopes for a sensibility less toward the American view of nature solely as an economic tool and more toward the nomadic topocosm illustrated by Kenge, at one with nature, in Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*. Merwin's poetry attempts to transcend a view of nature that's based on commercial geography, back to one that respects its resources. This is the

ultimate goal of his ecopoetry, a challenge to which he's been dedicated for over four decades, continuously updating and re-imagining his approach. "Unchopping A Tree" re-connects us to an object of nature that we take for granted every single day, re-aligning our attitudes about the natural world toward a simpler, less destructive sensibility. Merwin's poetry transcends the moment in which it was written, constantly evolving in the minds of modern readers, speaking to the specific environmental catastrophes we find ourselves in.

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Appendix: "Unchopping A Tree" by W.S. Merwin.

Start with the leaves, the small twigs, and the nests that have been shaken, ripped, or broken off by the fall; these must be gathered and attached once again to their respective

places. It is not arduous work, unless major limbs have been smashed or mutilated. If the fall was carefully and correctly planned, the chances of anything of the kind happening will have been reduced. Again, much depends upon the size, age, shape, and species of the tree. Still, you will be lucky if you can get through this stages without having to use machinery. Even in the best of circumstances it is a labor that will make you wish often that you had won the favor of the universe of ants, the empire of mice, or at least a local tribe of squirrels, and could enlist their labors and their talents. But no, they leave you to it. They have learned, with time. This is men's work.

It goes without saying that if the tree was hollow in whole or in part, and contained old nests of bird or mammal or insect, or hoards of nuts or such structures as wasps or bees build for their survival, the contents will have to repaired where necessary, and reassembled, insofar as possible, in their original order, including the shells of nuts already opened. With spider's webs you must simply do the best you can. We do not have the spider's weaving equipment, nor any substitute for the leaf's living bond with its point of attachment and nourishment. It is even harder to simulate the latter when the leaves have once become dry — as they are bound to do, for this is not the labor of a moment. Also it hardly needs saying that this the time for repairing any neighboring trees or bushes or other growth that might have been damaged by the fall. The same rules apply. Where neighboring trees were of the same species it is difficult not to waste time conveying a detached leaf back to the wrong tree. Practice, practice. Put your hope in that.

Now the tackle must be put into place, or the scaffolding, depending on the surroundings and the dimension of the tree. It is ticklish work. Almost always it involves, in itself, further damage to the area, which will have to be corrected later. But, as you've heard, it can't be helped. And care now is likely to save you considerable trouble later. Be careful to grind nothing into the ground.

At last the time comes for the erecting of the trunk. By now it will scarcely be necessary to remind you of the delicacy of this huge skeleton. Every motion of the tackle, every slightly upward heave of the trunk, the branches, their elaborately reassembled panoply of leaves (now dead) will draw from you an involuntary gasp. You will watch for a lead or a twig to be snapped off yet again. You will listen for the nuts to shift in the hollow limb and you will hear whether they are indeed falling into place or are spilling in disorder — in which case, or in the event of anything else of the kind — operations will have to cease, of course, while you correct the matter. The raising itself is no small enterprise, from the moment when the chains tighten around the old bandages until the boles hands vertical above the stump, splinter above splinter. How the final straightening of the splinters themselves can take place (the preliminary work is best done while the wood is still green and soft, but at times when the splinters are not badly twisted most of the straightening is left until now, when the torn ends are face to face with each other). When the splinters are perfectly complementary the appropriate fixative is applied. Again we have no duplicate of the original substance. Ours is extremely strong, but it is rigid. It is limited to surfaces, and

there is no play in it. However the core is not the part of the trunk that conducted life from the roots up to the branches and back again. It was relatively inert. The fixative for this part is not the same as the one for the outer layers and the bark, and if either of these is involved in the splintered sections they must receive applications of the appropriate adhesives. Apart from being incorrect and probably ineffective, the core fixative would leave a scar on the bark.

When all is ready the splintered trunk is lowered onto the splinters of the stump. This, one might say, is only the skeleton of the resurrection. Now the chips must be gathered, and the sawdust, and returned to their former positions. The fixative for the wood layers will be applied to chips and sawdust consisting only of wood. Chips and sawdust consisting of several substances will receive applications of the correct adhesives. It is as well, where possible, to shelter the materials from the elements while working. Weathering makes it harder to identify the smaller fragments. Bark sawdust in particular the earth lays claim to very quickly. You must find our own way of coping with this problems. There is a certain beauty, you will notice at moments, in the patterns of the chips as they are fitted back into place. You will wonder to what extent it should be described as natural, to what extent man-made. It will lead you on to speculations about the parentage of beauty itself, to which you will return.

The adhesive for the chips is translucent, and not so rigid as that for splinters. That for the bark and its subcutaneous layers is transparent and runs into the fibers on either side, partially dissolving them into each other. It does not set the sap flowing again but it does pay a kind of tribute to the preoccupations of the ancient thoroughfares. You could not roll an egg over the joints but some of the mine-shafts would still be passable, no doubt. For the first exploring insect who raises its head in the tight echoless passages. The day comes when it is all restored, even to the moss (now dead) over the wound. You will sleep badly, thinking of the removal of the scaffolding that must begin the next morning. How you will hope for sun and a still day!

The removal of the scaffolding or tackle is not a dangerous, perhaps, to the surroundings, as its installation, but it presents problems. It should be taken from the spot piece by piece as it is detached, and stored at a distance. You have come to accept it there, around the tree. The sky begins to look naked as the chains and struts one by one vacate their positions. Finally the moment arrives when the last sustaining piece is removed and the tree stands again on its own. It is as though its weight for a moment stood on your heart. You listen for a thud of settlement, a warning creak deep in the intricate joinery. You cannot believe it will hold. How like something dreamed it is, standing there all by itself. How long will it stand there now? The first breeze that touches its dead leaves all seems to flow into your mouth. You are afraid the motion of the clouds will be enough to push to over. What more can you do? What more can you do?

But there is nothing more you can do.

Others are waiting.

Everything is going to have to be put back.