A Critical Introduction to the Poetry of Howard Nemerov.

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in

The Department of English

by

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B.A., Louisiana State University, 1959
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1961
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ABSTRACT

Howard Nemerov's art is a cultivated, sophisticated achievement. The poetry is especially responsive to the self-reflexive processes of the mind. He has been preoccupied with questions that have likewise preoccupied modern philosophers: the relation between mind and matter, the universe as unity or diversity, and the source of the beautiful.

Nemerov's most characteristic way of looking at the world is similar to that of modern phenomenologists. Central poems like "The Blue Swallows" affirm the kind of knowledge that overcomes the Cartesian split between self and object, human knowledge that can still affirm the beauty of the world. Such poems counter the fragmented knowledge of "scientism," the kind of knowledge that assumes physical science is the system of objective mirror images of brute reality.

The poet's image of the world, symbolized often by moving water, reflects his vision of the constant flux of reality. Whitehead's view of the world as organic process is suggestive of the Nemerovian vision. The "isolated" detail or action is revealed to be a part of the vast unity. Through the poet's intuitive grasp of a very small part of this unity, he is able to affirm some kind of overall unity.
Themes of reality in flux and time pervade the fifteen-poem sequence "Runes," which is remarkable among recent poetry for its intricacy and design.

One of the predominant metaphors that Nemerov uses to convey a reality of flux and rhythm is the mirror. Of the many mirror images that he uses, the most profound is the reflecting surface of a pool of water, thus a mirror which is itself in a state of change.

The poetry seems to divide itself between contemplative poetry, which often springs from Nemerov's encounter with nature, and satiric poetry that finds its nourishment in disparities and paradoxes that reveal themselves in the urban scene, though there is no rigid demarcation. The contemplative poetry dramatizes Nemerov's assertion, "I not so much look at nature as I listen to what it says." Very often what nature says is that the anagoge is always death. The urban landscape presents the poet with disparities resulting often from a tyranny of the past on the present. These disparities are manifested in the way they compel habitual ways of looking at the world. Further, as Nemerov searches the modern terrain he insists that "bad jokes, even terrible jokes" emerge from the nature of things and the nature of the "Great Society." Through this satiric voice he clarifies a liberal, human vision of man and his city-societies.
INTRODUCTION

In a recent volume of essays and bibliography devoted to Howard Nemerov, the editor Bowie Duncan observes in the introduction that there has been a contradictory critical response to this poet. Detractors claim the poetry is "academic" and "over-intellectualized," while his admirers think of it as "self-reflexive and multifaceted."^1

In a generally favorable review of The Blue Swallows, Joe Conarroe remarks that Howard Nemerov is no "undergraduate hero."^2 At least for the present this is surely true. Nemerov's art is a cultivated, sophisticated achievement, and there is none of the uncritical enthusiasms that might create a temporary and faddish audience. When Nemerov is at his best, which is a great deal of the time, his mind and art are certainly uncompromising.

Except for Peter Meinke's monograph, Howard Nemerov, published in 1968, which is a brief survey of Nemerov's poetry, fiction and criticism, no extended study has been


published. It is my opinion that Nemerov's reputation will likely endure because of the poetry (so far there are seven volumes). With these things in mind, I have set about writing this critical introduction.

From what kind of world do the poems emerge? One way of describing this world is inductively—piecing together the fabric of this world by examining individual poems. Generally, the finest poems play the most important role in the description. On occasion, however, poems less finely wrought are just as useful as better ones. Thus, poems like "Debate with the Rabbi" or "Sunday" might not be as satisfying as "Moment" or the excellent "Runes," but may prove just as valuable in such a description.

I have found it convenient in the first part of this study to divide the poems that describe Nemerov's world into three of the categories that philosophers have likewise found useful in inquiring about the world at large: epistemology, metaphysics and aesthetics. Such divisions may not always be helpful in the study of every poet, but with one like Nemerov, I think it is. Meinke has gone so far as to call him a philosopher. Whether one agrees with this or not, it is unquestionably true that Nemerov has been very preoccupied with questions that have likewise

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preoccupied modern philosophers. How do we know what we know (epistemology)? What is the relation between mind and matter, is the self only a series of experiences, how far is the universe a unity and how far a diversity (metaphysics)? What constitutes a beautiful poem or painting and how does a beautiful object come into being (aesthetics)?

In the first chapter I describe Nemerov's most characteristic way of looking at the world as similar to that of modern phenomenologists. There is a degree of oscillation in Nemerov's position, however, and I have tried to show the limits of the oscillation. In some poems he is more convinced of the reality of the world than in others. In the second chapter I discuss what seems to be Nemerov's vision of the world: when it is unified and when diverse. Just as the question "how do we know" overlaps the question "what do we know," certain aesthetic questions overlap and derive from those of epistemology and metaphysics. The consideration of language and its relation to mind and matter I choose to engage in the third chapter which also takes up questions of the art of poetry.

In the second part of my study I examine a ready division in the poet's work. The poetry divides itself between contemplative poetry, which often springs from his encounter with nature, and satiric poetry that finds its nourishment in disparities and paradoxes that reveal themselves in the urban scene.
CHAPTER I

"Because the mind's eye lit the sun"

One element in the poetry of Howard Nemerov that indicates his relevance to contemporary audiences is his awareness of the main currents of thought during his own time. He does not write as if the Einsteinian world picture (or the vastly more elaborate picture of the entire scientific community) had not been proposed. Nor does he write as if the assaults by such men as Descartes and Hume on the very foundations of philosophy had not taken place.

Nowhere is this awareness of the ideas of the times more apparent in Nemerov's work than in the area of epistemology. By "awareness" I do not mean that Nemerov has any systematic position concerning epistemology. He may have, but his poetry would not be the likely place to present it. What one does find is an intelligence that is perfectly content to doubt itself in much the way that philosophy has had to do. There is a sufficient number of poems in the collected poetry to indicate that epistemology is a major concern and, in addition, a concern that has been a source of considerable interest and even anxiety for him.

The well-known poem "The Blue Swallows" (and also the title of his latest volume) deserves the reputation it has and is an example of poetry about the mind thinking. The
speaker in the poem is on a bridge looking across a mill-stream and below him he sees seven blue swallows flying. The invisible paths of flight stick for a moment in the mind, but then dissolve. The speaker considers how often the mind creates relationships that are no more the "fact" than the non-existent "designs" that have been created by the seven blue swallows.

Thus helplessly the mind in its brain Weaves up relation's spindrift web, Seeing the swallows' tails as nibs Dipped in invisible ink, writing...

The speaker then goes on to enumerate some of the various kinds of "spindrift web" that man has woven.

Poor mind, what would you have them write? Some cabalistic history Whose authorship you might ascribe To God? to Nature? Ah, poor ghost You've capitalized your Self enough.

So much then for theology, and Nature as God's "handiwork."

He goes on to remind us that William of Occam "took care of" this problem a long time ago. This habit of the mind, of "weaving up relation's spindrift web," or of conjuring general concepts or universals, has no substance, in one sense of the word, and thinking that it does leads one astray:

That villainous William of Occam Cut out the feet from under that dream Some seven centuries ago. It's taken that long for the mind To waken, yawn and stretch, to see With opened eyes emptied of speech The real world where the spelling mind Imposes with its grammar book Unreal relations on the blue Swallows.
The speaker here might with Bertrand Russell say, "Gradually Occam's razor gave me a more clean-shaven picture of reality." What follows in the poem is very suggestive of the poet's idea of the relationship the mind might have with that which is outside itself, and further is an example of the affirmation the poet can make.

Perhaps when you will have
Fully awakened, I shall show you
A new thing: even the water
Flowing away beneath those birds
Will fail to reflect their flying forms,
And the eyes that see become as stones
Whence never tears shall fall again.

0 swallows, swallows, poems are not
The point. Finding again the world,
That is the point, where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

Just as we have learned that our general concepts and myths are constructs of our own doing and bear no relation necessarily to the "world of things," likewise we may learn to "see" with increasing precision, "things as they are." I think Nemerov would care to stress in such a statement the word "increasing." This is to say, a dynamic process that perhaps by necessity does not reach an end. Our experience would lead us to form this conclusion. Gradually we may learn to see better through the efforts of the poet, the scientist and the philosopher.¹

¹A variant reading of lines 29-35 might be, of course, that in death these false conjurings or errors do not continue; thus tears do not fall, where assuredly, they do not. Such a vision might come only with the loss of what makes us human.
Elsewhere Nemerov has written on matters similar to this, and it is to the point to introduce his remarks here. His essay, "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens" is very helpful in illuminating that poet's attitude toward the relation between mind and reality, and is, incidentally, useful in describing Nemerov's own poetry. While he is suggesting an explanation for Stevens' choice of metaphor and its seeming arbitrary character, he says that he ran upon a description of "the school of existential thought known as phenomenology" in Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus, and it struck him as relevant to Stevens' way of approaching reality, or at least his principle of composition that the choice of metaphor for describing reality is arbitrary. There may be a common ground in Nemerov's own poetry. The passage from Camus concerns Husserl:

Originally Husserl's method negates the classic procedure of the reason. . .Thinking is not unifying or making the appearance familiar under the guise of a great principle. Thinking is learning all over again how to see, directing one's consciousness, making of every image a privileged place. In other words, phenomenology declines to explain the world, it wants to be merely a description of actual experience. It confirms absurd thought in its initial assertion that there is no truth, but merely truths. . . Consciousness does not form the object of its understanding, it merely focuses, it is the act of attention, and, to borrow a Bergsonian image, it resembles the projector that suddenly focuses on an image. The difference is that there is no scenario, but a successive and incoherent illustration.2

To begin with, the idea that "thinking is not unifying or making the appearance familiar under the guise of a great principle," that it is "learning all over again how to see, directing one's consciousness, making of every image a privileged place," is very similar to the theme of "The Blue Swallows." Further, this posture has been a fairly consistent one with Nemerov.

"To find again the world" is used here in a special sense. How exactly is this "finding" different from other ways already known? Nemerov has, in the first place, ruled out understanding particulars in terms of "a great principle," or some "cabalistic history." But what about finding the world by simply looking at "actual experience" in the way that scientists are doing every day? Surely physical science pretends to study experience without imposing "relations's spindrift web." How is this to be understood as any different from the phenomenologist's contention that he is "really" doing it?

In *A First Introduction to Existential Phenomenology*, William Luijpen offers some definitions and distinctions that help to clarify the questions. On the matter of the knowledge of science Luijpen writes that scientists think their science at least gives us "genuine and reliable knowledge."

Such an attitude, however, contains a philosophy which is in principle "complete." One who simply identifies physical science with genuine and reliable knowledge decrees that knowledge, *tout court*, is the kind of knowledge offered by physical
science. But it is obviously beyond the competency of physical science to define what knowledge, tout court, is; that is the task of the philosopher. Moreover, one who proposes a "complete" theory of knowledge cannot avoid proposing also a "complete" theory of reality. For, no matter how he wishes to define knowledge, he cannot escape from admitting that knowledge, unlike dreaming, is a disclosure of reality. Thus, by absolutizing physical science, he proposes as a "complete" theory of reality that whatever cannot be disclosed by science is imply not real. Again, however, it is not the task of the physicist to define what reality, tout court, is; that task belongs to the philosopher.

Scientism is the name given to the absolutism of science, understood in the narrow sense of physical science, for until recently all positive sciences were defined as "still imperfect forms of physical science." But scientism is an internal contradiction. By claiming that meaningful statements are statements of physical science, it implies that other kinds of statements are nonsense. Now, this claim itself obviously is not a statement of physical science and therefore must be classified as a nonsense statement. Those who make the claim, however, imply that it is a meaningful statement; hence the contradiction.3

Now, of course, such a distinction between "scientific" knowledge and "another" kind of knowledge about particular things does not yet explain how Nemerov means "Finding again the world... where loveliness/Adorns intelligible things," but it is a necessary starting point.

What existential phenomenologists claim is that they have overcome the divorce between subject and world that has been apparent since Descartes. Luijpen notes, "Since

Descartes philosophers accepted without question that knowledge was a mirroring of brute reality and that physical science was the system of objective mirror images. Once the divorce between subject and world was introduced, there was the choice of emphasizing consciousness or the world, and thus being described as "idealistic" or "realistic." This divorce does not exist, claims the phenomenologist.

This is not the place to go over so complicated an analysis. In his discussion of Camus' work, Nemerov claims to "have no first hand acquaintance with the school of existential thought known as phenomenology." I too should like to disclaim any first-hand acquaintance but will make a very brief summary of the position as Luijpen has related it.

If one wishes to speak about a blooming tree in a meadow, physical science can say something about the tree and the perception of it, e.g. physical and physiological processes. "But what sense does it make to wish to speak only in this way about the perception of a blooming tree in the meadow." The blooming tree can be fragmented, or "atomized," but this information is not more "objective" when it comes to perceiving a tree. The tree is not a

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4 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
5 Poetry and Fiction: Essays, p. 78.
6 Luijpen, p. 59.
series of processes for us, but a blooming tree in a meadow, and physics or some other science is not competent to explain it as it is to us. It is not that what a science may say about the cerebral processes is not true, but when they speak of such things, "they do not speak of anything at all" unless ultimately they are trying to speak of the perception of the blooming tree in the meadow." When Husserl says "Back to the things themselves" he meant for us to go back to such an "original" experience—an integral way of knowing something as it occurs.

Knowledge is not a matter of "strong cognitive images" in the subject's interiority, but the immediate presence of the subject as a kind of "light" to a present reality. Knowledge is a mode of man's being-involved-in-the-world. The subject, then, is not "first" and in himself a kind of "psychical thing" which "subsequently" enters into relationship with physical things through cognitive images. Knowledge is not a relationship between two different realities, but is the subject himself involved in the world.8

Whatever violence has been done by summarizing Luijpen's analysis of this position, I think the general outlines remain intact.

The closing lines of "The Blue Swallows," "Finding again the world/...where loveliness/Adorns intelligible things/Because the mind's eye lit the sun" (italics mine)

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7Ibid., p. 60.
8Ibid., p. 61.
may not only clarify but help to suggest Nemerov's general concept of how man knows. It may even be necessary to find the world again because science has atomized experience. Just as Luijpen's example of a "blooming tree in a meadow," demonstrates that physical science does not speak about a "blooming tree in a meadow," likewise physical science does not speak about "loveliness." It must be said that Nemerov does not single out physical science in his poem, but physical science is included by implication.

And how does the mind's eye light the sun? In the phenomenologist's position concerning "knowing," knowledge is the immediate presence of the subject as a kind of "light" to a present reality. Perhaps this is the way the world can be "found" again, a world where "loveliness" is still a meaningful reality. This is only so because the mind's eye lights the sun.

In a similar vein I think "Celestial Globe" reflects this human knowledge as "intentionality" (as the phenomenologist likes to name this "immediate presence of the subject as a kind of 'light' to a present reality"). In a characteristic Hamlet-like stance of meditating on skull-surrogates of some kind, the Nemerovian speaker holds a celestial globe in his hand and pursues the associations. At one point in the action the speaker takes the hollow sphere and wears it on his head:
As a candle wears a pumpkin
At Halloween, when children
Rise as the dead; only
It has no human features,
No access to its depths
Whatever, where it keeps
In the utter dark
The candle of the sun,
The candle of the mind,
Twin fires that together
Turn all things inside out.

One of the donnés of the Nemerovian world is of course a universe that "keeps/In the utter dark" the inquiring mind. The speaker in the poem, like Nemerov himself, never has to worry, though, about running out of a sense of mystery, a fear many may have had from various de-mythologizing efforts of man. It is a world that does not seem to have any "access to its depths/Whatever." Yet, somehow the poem does not seem to end on a note of complete negation. There remains the power of the "candles" of the sun and the mind. These powers have the capability to "turn all things inside out." There are many rich possibilities to this last line. The sun was described as "great source" which "Is blazing forth his fires." In a very literal way the sun's insides, the source, are turned from inward, outward. The sun, too, is the power that turns the inward seed outward to life. In the second section of the poem, the mind is "turning things inside out." Homer is the "dark fire fountaining forth/The twin poems of the war/And of the journey home--." It is apparent that this poem was not written with a "diagram" of phenomenology by which the poet simply
fleshed out the model with concrete examples for the reader's quicker retention. If there is a departure from the basic attitude, though, it is a drift inward, a drift that sometimes appears to return to idealism. This seems to be the limit of the movement.

Another poem, "The Rope's End," also in The Blue Swallows, touches again on the kind of knowledge that physical science arrives at because of its methods.

Unraveling a rope
You begin at an end.
Taking the finished work
You pick it to its bits,

Straightening out the crossed,
Deriving many from one,
Moving forward in time
And backward in idea. . .

Having attained the first
Condition, being dust,
No longer resembling rope
Or cord or thread or hair,

And following no line:
Incapable of knot or wave
Or tying things together
Or making anything secure,

Unable to bind, or whip
Or hang till dead. All this
In the last analysis
Is crazy man's work,

Admitted, who can leave
Nothing continuous
Since Adam's fall
Unraveled all.

The idea is clear enough. The basic sentiment has a romantic emphasis about it. The image works very effectively in describing a functional object that has meaning
as long as it is whole (tying things and making them secure), and then becomes useless after its atomization (unable to serve as whip or hangman's noose).

Nemerov obviously understands that a scientist (or engineer) needs to take things apart in order to understand them or make them better. But the poem is about taking things apart, like "a blooming tree in a meadow," which do not have the same reality once they are disintegrated. The "last analysis" of line 27 is the very last analysis and is indeed "crazy man's work."

The foregoing is similar to "Endegeeste," a poem of some nine years earlier in Mirrors and Windows. The scene in this poem is a view of Endegeeste, formerly a residence of Descartes and now a state insane asylum. The speaker is reading, and as he reflects on the scene outside the window he sees a resemblance between his own situation and Descartes' :

I live in a great and terrifying time,  
As Descartes did. For both of us the dream  
Has turned like milk, and the straight, slender tree  
Twisted at root and branch hysterically.

I keep my reasonable doubt as gay  
As any--though on the lawn they seem to say  
Those patient, nodding heads, "sum, ergo sum."  
The elms' long shadows fall cold in my room.

The notion of a disorientation or a disintegration of the psyche or mind is associated with disintegration of the subject-object relation in a fashion somewhat like the one in "The Rope's End."
"Idea" reflects the tension with which the poet considers the mind's abstract capabilities. The tension seems to result from an admiration of abstraction and a sense of its destructiveness:

Idea blazes in darkness, a lonely star.  
The witching hour is not twelve, but one.  
Pure thought, in principle, some say, is near  
Madness, but the independent mind thinks on,  
Breathing and burning, abstract as the air.  

Supposing all this were a game of chess.  
One learned to do without the pieces first,  
And then the board; and finally, I guess,  
Without the game. The lightship gone adrift,  
Endangering others with its own distress.  

O holy light! All other stars are gone,  
The shapeless constellations sag and fall  
Till navigation fails, though ships go on  
This merry, mad advanture as before  
Their single-minded masters meant to drown.  

In the first stanza there is again the association of madness with unbalanced modes of knowledge as in "Endegeeste" and "The Rope's End." In the second stanza one line of consequence is compared to a chess game, whose rules and values are arbitrary in the first place. Finally these are "abstracted" out of existence, even the game itself. The "lightship" of idea which "blazes in darkness" goes adrift, endangering others. The third stanza examines another line of consequence of abstraction. With idea as "polestar" and that only, the light of the other stars is not apparent. The old constellations in the form of mythological figures derived from imaginary lines are no longer to the point; modern astronomy considers them
abstractly. Abstraction of the heavens is rendered through the symbolic language of mathematics. With only the "polestar" of idea to guide the navigators, these "single-minded masters" are meant to drown.

The poem "Thought" is about the mind as it turns to itself. It begins, "thought is seldom itself/And never itself alone. It is the mind turning/To images." This suggests that thought is only thought when it is thinking about something; most of the time this "something" takes the form of images.

The second section offers a little drama of process and reveals an attitude about the mind's conclusion concerning reality.

Leaves shaken in the wind
   Rattle the light till shadows
   Elide, and yet the grass
   Bends to the weight of the wind
   And not the shadows' weight.
   The minnow-waves can mingle
   In shallows at the shore
   As if they were no matter,
   Until they peak and break,
   Taking the sunlight up
   In a shatter of spray.

Matter is therefore real.

The last section proves somewhat difficult.

   And mind in some such way
   Passing across the world
   May make its differences
   At last unselfishly
   The casualties of cause:
   Its likeness changes.

The mind may make the differences, the "apparent" differences and discrepancies the "casualties" of the process
of cause and effect. After this, the mental event, "The likeness changes," the image of the world for now is focused in the way Camus describes it in The Myth of Sisyphe.

No matter how often Nemerov may disparage a useless fragmentation of the analytical process, he is emphatic about not preferring "cabalistic histories" or an unjustified explanation of particular experience in terms of some "General Principle." "The Loon's Cry" is a case in point. As the speaker takes a walk in the cold evening, he is intensely aware of the natural world around him. But he is not permitted to be "Nature's priest" in the way Wordsworth or someone like him would be. As the setting sun's ball of fire is imaged in the sea, the moon is somehow balanced in the river on the other side of him. The "balance" is striking. However there is a significant difference in this poet's response to the moment.

But I could think only, Red sun, white moon,  
This is a natural beauty, it is not 
Theology. For I had fallen from  
The symboled world, where I in earlier days  
Found mysteries of meaning, form, and fate  
Signed on the sky, and now stood but between  
A swamp of fire and a reflecting rock.

What is left of interest when the "symboled world" has fallen? As the speaker continues to reflect (midway in the walk) he concludes that "We'd traded all those mysteries in for things,/For essences in things, not understood--." But as the poet "listens to nature speak," even this possibility is not permitted.
As answering my thought a loon cried out
Laughter of desolation on the river,
A savage cry, now that the moon went up
And the sun down—yet when I heard him cry
Again, his voice seemed emptied of that sense
Or any other, and Adam I became,
Hearing the first loon cry in paradise.

Not even the substantiality of a "reality in things" is allowed. The man thinks now he understands "what that cry meant." The loon's laughter does not seem to ridicule the idea that there is a fundamental force behind a constantly changing reality, although it does seem to deride any notion of a "static idea" or a static reality. The poet is driven to celebrate this force. As he celebrates it, he considers the moon, which may have been a living and changing world like the one he lives on, and then he considers the stars:

    Chaos of beauty, void,
    0 burning cold, against which we define
Both wretchedness and love. For signatures
In all things are, which leave us not alone
Even in the thought of death, and may by arts
Contemplative be found and named again.

These "signatures" are not derived from any immanence that rests in things, no "symboled world," but "truths" of a changing reality that are what they are because of their relationship with man, the poet. Finding and naming these signatures in things is like the theme in "The Blue Swallows" of "Finding again the world. . .where loveliness/Adorns intelligible things." It is interesting to note Stephen Dedalus's thoughts about "signatures" in the beginning of the third chapter of *Ulysses*. 
Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seawrack and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs.

Joyce's conception of "signatures" may not be the same as Nemerov's, but the resemblance is striking.

At this point in "The Loon's Cry" the speaker thinks he may hear the bird mocking this notion that "truths" may be found in the changing reality.

The loon again? Or else a whistling train, Whose far thunders began to shake the bridge. And it came on, a loud bulk under smoke, Changing the signals on the bridge, the bright Rubies and emeralds, rubies and emeralds Signing the cold night as I turned for home, Hearing the train cry once more, like a loon.

How is the tension of ideas resolved in this last stanza? Or is it even resolved? The train shakes the very bridge that the speaker views and which acts as the dividing fulcrum of the initial experience of balance: red sun, white moon. The bridge is not only not static and certain, but the train changes the signals on the bridge. As Nemerov presents the signals, the effect is not to suggest a change from red to green, but rather changing, alternating stop and go, "signing the cold night." And now that the signatures have been "found and named again," what is the relation to man? Perhaps the signature is not ambivalent, but about ambivalence, and about the ambiguity and mystery that constitutes the world. The last "cry" of the
train, "like a loon," is only a double entendre to an already haunting ambiguity.

"The Sanctuary," in the 1950 volume The Salt Garden, is an early analog of the mind and its habits. This is, incidentally, the first volume to reflect the writer's move from the city to the countryside of Vermont. It seems that as he "listens" to Nature, he discovers appropriate correlatives for his mental events with much more frequency. In "The Sanctuary" trout suspended in the water of a clear mountain stream suggest thinking.

...like thoughts emerging
Into a clear place in the mind, then going back,
Exchanging shape for shade.

At such moments his past and his own body seem to dissolve; as he becomes mind, all motion and change seem to stop.

Even at such times
The mind goes on transposing and revising
The elements of its long allegory
In which the anagoge is always death;
And while this vision blurs with empty tears,
I visit, in the cold pool of the skull,
A sanctuary where the slender trout
Feed on my drowned eyes... Until this trout
Pokes through the fabric of the surface to
Snap up a fly. As if a man's own eyes
Raised welts upon the mirror whence they stared,
I find this world again in focus, and
This fish, a shadow damned in artifice,
Swims to the furthest shadows out of sight
Though not, in time's ruining stream, out of mind.

The mind that participates in this "transcendental" experience does not fall away in thoughtlessness, but continues as if by reflex to consider itself. The trout seem to feed on his eyes. The speaker has achieved some kind of
terrifying oneness with the world outside his mind, until, literally, the trout breaks through the water to catch a fly and fractures the smooth film of the surface of the water. Figuratively the world outside his mind, the quiddity of things, seems to invade his mind violently. Or, the persona reflects, did his mind raise "the welts upon the mirror"; did he create what reality there was to this moment? Then the "picture" or image is once again in "focus." The perspective is righted. But the speaker does not forget what an awesome and mysterious sequence took place during this time when the mirror was distorted. In this surreal drama, this fish "like thought" swims back to the subterranean places in the mind, out of sight of consciousness, but the mind knows it was there and is not "out of mind." A poem like "The Sanctuary" is a good example of the modern sensibility in action. Nature poetry can never be quite the same because of this sensibility.

"This, That & the Other" is a dialogue between two attitudes concerning knowledge and reality, that of physics and theology. The subtitle is much to the point: "a dialogue in disregard." The scene of the poem (or dialogue) is a pond. Two figures (This and That) watch the snowflakes fall on the water and as they watch them they comment on the meaning of the phenomenon. "This" apparently is speaking from the point of view of the physicist, although it could be any "realist." Like the symboled
world of "The Loon's Cry," this world has fallen or else never existed for this character. He comments in a commonsensical fashion. His quasi-courteous companion considers the same phenomenon, but "interprets" it in terms of hermetic doctrine.

**THIS:** Though I get cold, and though it tells me nothing Or maybe just because it tells me nothing, I have to stand and watch the infinite white Particulate chaos of the falling snow.

**THAT:** The things below are as the things above. A parable of universal love, To see the water taking in the snow.

"This" says that his companion can thus interpret if he cares to, but in fact he thinks, "There's no more reason in it that in dreams." The answer does not deter "That" for a moment:

**THAT:** Then I'll interpret you this dream of yours And make some sense of it; rather, of course, Some mind of it, for sense is what you make, And your provision is for me to take. First, I observe a pretty polarity Of black and white, and I ask, could this be a legend of the mingling of the races?

"That" continues as a kind of hermetic theologian throughout the little drama. "This" observes in the middle of the dialogue that "One of the things [the surface of the water] does/Is mirror, and there's a model for all thought." This seems to describe the view of the "naive realist," that Luijpen attacked as I have pointed out. Luijpen maintained that one really could not speak about the problem of knowledge from this position, but must become philosophical, something which "This" is avoiding.
"That" "philosophizes" but "This" murmurs "sleeveless speculation" to such thinking.

What is ironic is the last speech of the dialogue which is uttered by "Both."

The Other is deeply meddled in this world.
We see no more that that the fallen light
Is wrinkled in and with the wrinkling wave.

It seems clear that the "naive realist" and the hermetic "theologian" can make the same statement about "The Other" and not mean the same thing, and in fact "disregard" each other's approach to reality altogether. This is possible because "The Other is deeply meddled in this world."

The difficulty or even impossibility of grasping the whole of life Nemerov dramatizes in "Angel and Stone."
One of the habitual scenes for the reflecting "I" in Nemerov's brooding lyrics appears in this poem: a pool of water whose surface serves as a mirror of reality. In this instance, the figure who looks into the pool thinks that so much of the difficulty of understanding the nature of things is a result of the perceiver's inevitably self-centered position.

In the world are millions and millions of men, an each man,
With a few exceptions, believes himself to be at the center,
A small number of his more or less necessary planets careering
Around him in an orderly manner, some morning stars singing together,
More distant galaxies shining like dust in any stray sunbeam
Of his attention. Since this is true not of one man or of two,
But of ever so many, it is hard to imagine what life must be like.

One might derive an orderly system of some sort that could account for the whole of things and the order of such a system appears beautiful. The poet uses the example of a stone cast into the middle of a pool. The concentric circles that move out from it and that touch the limits of the pool only to return to the center of the order-creating stone are beautiful. This same situation obtains if two stones are cast, because the angularities of the intersecting lines are interesting and beautiful: this phenomenon is not yet too complex to be understood and rewarding.

But if you throw a handful of sand into the water, it is confusion, not because the same laws have ceased to obtain, but only because the limits of your vision in time and number forbid you to discriminate. Such fine, quick, myriad events as the angels and archangels, thrones and dominations, principalities and powers, are delegated to witness and declare the glory of before the Lord of everything that is. Of these great beings and mirrors of being, little at present is known.

The "limits of your vision in time and number forbid you to discriminate. . . ."

The speaker then enumerates various ways of accounting for "these great beings and mirrors of being," but the voice persists that little is known about "the manner of their perceiving." They may not be as we imagine them at all. Physics concentrates on the particulars of grains of
sand and the eccentricities of snowflakes. The historical point of view "reckons and records the tides of time." Biology "Reads in the chromatin its cryptic scripture as the cell divides," and mathematics considers such matters as probability and chance in the order of things. All of this "counting without confusion" is going on while what else is occurring?

While the pyramids stand still
In the desert and the deermoust huddles in his hole and the rain falls
Piercing the skin of the pool with water in water
and making a million
And a million designs to be pleasingly latticed
and laced and interfused
And mirrored to the Lord of everything that is
by one and one and one.

In a way this expression of man's perception of reality is similar to the Zen parable of the reflection of the moon-light on the waves of the water. Depending on one's perspective, the picture appears differently, but after all, it is the same moon. But with this Nemerovian parable, there is perhaps not the same confidence. Somehow the pyramid seems quite impervious, the deermouse huddles in his hole quite undetected, and the very stuff or reality continues to feed "into itself" (or maybe from a source outside itself) and changes the very "transactions/Of all the particles."

What is the final effect of the poem? Certainly the "partialness" of vision is there, but perhaps the effect is not altogether one of despair. The poet began by saying
"it is hard to imagine what life must be like," but as the poem moves forward, the poet offers us a picture of reality that is closer to reality, because it images the sense of change and process with humility, and this sense of humility permits the flow of the mind to mingle with the flow of being.

The humility is further apparent in the first poem of that admirable sequence, "Runes." It is a significant example of one side of Nemerov's art and evidence of his relevance to modern readers.

This is about the stillness in moving things,
In running water, also in the sleep
Of winter seeds, where time to come has tensed
Itself, enciphering a script so find
Only the hourglass can magnify it, only
The years unfold its sentence from the root.
I have considered such things often, but
I cannot say I have thought deeply of them:
That is my theme, of thought and the defeat
Of thought before its object, where it turns
As from a mirror, and returns to be
The thought of something and the thought of thought,
A trader doubly burdened, commencing
Out of one stillness and into another.

With the many references to mirrors and reflected images, it might be expected that the camera should figure in the poetry. In the "Sightseers" the tourists walk about recording "Where history was." One of the many "sights" that is recorded is the "Fathers" in the Badlands, and the speaker declares that "Sometimes they dream/Of looking alive," of entering the world of the living. But the camera, functioning literally as camera, and figuratively as mind, does not permit this:
The reflected and static image of the "Fathers" has "Inter­vened" in the dark of the box camera, which only knows the "past" and registers this in the black and whites of shadows and is in a sense a shadow of the "real." By ana­logy, the dream of looking alive was by the power of the imagination, and reflection intervened and "The dark will won/Again." There is a fruitful association, in addition, with the dark of the coffin in this box that knows no now. The mind that reflects on the past and death and on the death of the past has bowed its head among the shadows of shadowy things; as a consequence this mind is less sure of its own reality than the reality of things.

"In the Black Museum" (from The Blue Swallows) is a dark poem thematically and structurally. The darkness comes from a locked-in system or structure when two mirrors face each other:

Or as two mirrors vaccum-locked together
Exclude, along with all the world
A light to see it by. Reflect on that.

In the earlier Mirrors & Windows, the arrangement of the poems resembles in a larger way the structure of "In the Black Museum." But the resemblance is only apparent.
Mirrors & Windows opens with the poem "The Mirror" in which the persona asks "how should I understand/What happens here as in the other world...?" What intervenes or stands between this question and first mirror of the book's beginning and the last mirror of the book's end is the imagination and reflecting light of the poet, who is himself using the mirror of language. The closing poem, and another mirror, is one of the Nemerovian answers.

Holding the Mirror Up to Nature

Some shapes cannot be seen in a glass
those are the ones the heart breaks at.
They will never become valentines
or crucifixes, never. Night clouds
go on insanely as themselves
though metaphors would be prettier;
and when I see them massed at the edge
of the globe, neither weasel nor whale,
as though this world were, after all,
non-representational, I know
a truth that cannot be told, although
I try to tell you, "We are alone,
we know nothing, nothing, we shall die
frightened in our freedom, the one
who survives will change his name
to evade the vengeance for love..."
Meanwhile the clouds go on clowning
over our heads in the floodlight of
a moon who is known to be Artemis
and Cynthia but sails away anyhow
beyond the serious poets with their
crazy ladies and cloudy histories,
their heroes in whose idiot dreams
the buzzard circles like a clock.

There are some "hard sayings" in this poem. In the world the night clouds do not resemble weasels and whales, do not "symbolize" or represent any underlying reality but "go on insanely as themselves." This is a "non-representational world." The moon once was Artemis or Cynthia, but
as in "The Loon's Cry," it has fallen from the "symboled world." The "shapes" that are part of the human reality cannot be seen in a mirror, but these are the ones that break our hearts. In mid-poem Nemerov sadly concludes that man is solitary and that he knows nothing, and all the while, time, death's instrument, ticks on. Such a poem has no doubt led to Meinke's description of Nemerov as a poet of "minimal affirmation." The poem also signifies that the important knowledge for the poet is human knowledge, which can be for convenience's sake described as phenomenolistic.

Two other poems allude to seminal myths in western thought and convey a poignant attitude toward the human problem of trying to see. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" opens with a description of the beginnings of human thought in terms of the Beowulf story: just as Grendel and Grendel's mother may well mythicize or project man's early search for ways to handle fears of the unknown, or at least of terrifying forces, so does thought in general spring from such sources.

The second stanza continues this idea, alluding to various myth fragments, and especially to that relating to the minotaur and the labyrinth.

Our human thought arose at first in myth,
And going far enough became a myth once more;
Its pretty productions in between, those splendid Tarnhelms and winged sandals, mirroring shields
And swords unbreakable, of guaranteed Fatality, those endlessly winding labyrinths
In which all minotaurs might find themselves at home, Deceived us with false views of the end, leaving Invisible the obstinate residuum, so cloudy, cold, Archaic, that waits beyond both purpose and fulfillment.

Truly between theology and metaphysics alone, there are enough endless labyrinths for any and all minotaurs. But Nemerov observes that just as human thought was born in myth, so it returns, creating "pretty productions" that deceive us about the end.

But the sophisticated speaker admits something that yet remains a mystery for him, too. That even with the courage to ignore these "pretty productions" there remains "A something primitive and appealing, and still dangerous,/ That crawls on bleeding hands and knees over the floor/ Toward him, and whispers as if to confess: again, again."

"To a Scholar in the Stacks," is like the foregoing poem. It incidentally is evidence of a man of letters in his late forties who has spent his adult life with belles lettres. In addition, it demonstrates a more distinct affirmation. Again the myth of the minotaur serves as a clarifying analogy.

The poem opens by describing how the scholar began his long journey in search of wisdom, the past, and beauty. The "maze" of all the learning, its complexity, seemed not even to offer an entrance. This is no doubt much like that which most feel as they pursue their liberal arts' studies. "A heart less bold would have refused to start,/
A mind less ignorant would have stayed home." All the action had been completed: Pasiphaë had borne the Minotaur, Daedalus had designed the labyrinth, and Theseus had found his way in and out of it many times. "What was there that had not been always done?" But because the scholar began, the way to the maze did open, and the story did become known.

And now? You have gone down, you have gone in, You have become incredibly rich and wise From wandering underground. And yet you weary And disbelieve, daring the Minotaur Who answers in the echoes of your voice, Holding the thread that has no other end, Speaking her name whom you abandoned long ago.

Then out of this what revelation comes? Sometimes in darkness and in deep despair You will remember, Theseus, that you were The Minotaur, the Labyrinth and the thread Yourself; even you were that ingener That fled the maze and flew--so long ago-- Over the sunlit sea to Sicily.

This is surely one of the most moving testimonies and statements of belief that a scholar and man of letters has made in poetry in the twentieth century, a time not especially noted for either moving testimonies or belief. It may well be that man himself has created the mazes and minotaurs, the devils and most intricate guilts. But just as surely, Nemerov says, he has found his way out and flown "Over the sunlit sea to Sicily."

The poems examined in this essay demonstrate over and over that it is "human knowledge" that Nemerov engages and that the phenomenologists insist is unique. It is not his
desire, nor his error, to seek the "de-humanized" knowledge of naive realism or scientism.
CHAPTER II

"Running and standing still at once is the whole truth"

Nemerov's image of the world is, as might be expected, a consequence of his way of knowing the world. There are, however, important poetic statements that do not seem to be located especially in phenomenology, but elsewhere. Many of the best poems make statements as to the unity and diversity of the world, and the relationship of the mind to this world. I have selected three individual poems, "Painting a Mountain Stream," "The Breaking of Rainbows," "Moment," and a sequence of poems, "Runes," because of their relevance to these essentially metaphysical considerations.

The speaker in "Painting a Mountain Stream" is answering the question, "How does one paint a mountain stream?" The beginning of the answer, and of the poem, makes some observations about the mountain stream.

Running and standing still at once is the whole truth. Raveled or combed, wrinkled or clear, it gets its force from losing force. Going it stays.

Pulse beats, and planets echo this, the running down, the standing still, all thunder of the one thought. The mind that thinks it is unfounded.

The answer finally includes the recommendation: "paint this rhythm, not this thing."
Throughout the poem the poet presents numerous paradoxes. How does the stream run and stand still? How does something get its force from losing force, or by going, stay? We say that a stream is running, and it obviously does; on the other hand, the "stream," the form of the stream remains. By "losing" force in its beginning, the running stream gains force.

Nemerov is here observing and describing a mystery that occupied men at least as early as the Pre-Socratics and probably long before. How does one account for such disparities or paradoxes? Is reality permanent or is it in a constant state of change as it appears to be? Heraclitus, against those of the Eleatic School, asserted that change is the reality. Just as Nemerov has chosen a stream to express this, so did Heraclitus in his famous dictum, "One cannot step twice into the same river."

Heraclitus perceived a unity in all things, a unity of opposites. Nemerov expresses this as a rhythm. He has made a similar statement in an essay, "The Swaying Form: a Problem in Poetry." "The universe itself, so far as we relate ourselves to it by the mind, may be not so much a meaning as a rhythm, a continuous articulation of question and answer, question and answer, a musical dialectic precipitating out moments of meaning which become distinct only as one wave does in a sea of waves."¹

About "Painting a Mountain Stream" the poet has written: "Of the many appearances of this figure of water in my work, I have chosen one that seeks to set the nature of water in relation to human perception and human imagination." In the poem he says, "I have stressed the liberal virtues and neglected the conservative ones, scorning the solids of this world to praise its liquids. This is not the whole truth, for how could you tell the stream but by its rocky bed, the rocks directing the water how to flow, the water—much more slowly—shaping the rocks according to its flow: But maybe I put the accent where I do against this world which so consistently in politics, religion, even in art, even in science, worships the rocky monument achieved and scorns the spring, the rain cloud, and the spark fallen among the leaves." Of course, the poet is discussing human perception, whereas we are discussing reality. However, given the meaning perception seems to have for Nemerov, there is no separation. In addition, we have his observation that "the universe itself, so far as we relate ourselves to it by the mind" may be a "rhythm."

There are a number of poems that seem to express this idea of reality, and often enough in terms of water. In

3Ibid., p. 173.
"Angel and Stone" the world was compared to a pond of water:

But if you drop a stone into a pool, and observe the ripples
Moving in circles successively out to the edges of the pool and then
Reflecting back and passing through the ones which continue to come
Out of the center over the sunken stone, you observe it is pleasing.

The "rhythms" in this poem are not identical with the "rhythms" alluded to in "The Swaying Form," but the example may still hold. The elemental mobile substance is analogous to the entire, mobile "substance" of the water in the pond, but the pond is in constant motion.

"The Breaking of Rainbows" again employs a stream or water metaphor, but the poem may not at first seem to bear immediately on the issue at hand.

Oil is spilling down the little stream
Below the bridge. Heavy and slow as blood,
Or with an idiot's drivel ing contempt:
The spectral film unfolding, spreading forth
Prismatically in a breaking of rainbows,
Reflective radiance, marble evanescence,
It shadows the secret moves the water makes,
Creeping upstream again, then prowling down,
Sometimes asleep in the dull corners, combed
As the deep grass is combed in the stream's abandon,
And sometimes tearing open silently
Its seamless fabric in momentary shapes
Unlikened and nameless as the shapes of sky
That open with the drift of cloud, and close,
High in the lonely mountains, silently.
The curve and glitter of it as it goes
The maze of its pursuit, reflect the water
In agony under the alien, brilliant skin
It struggles to throw off and finally does
Throw off, on its frivolous purgatorial fall
Down to the sea and away, dancing and singing
Perpetual intercession for this filth--
Leaping and dancing and singing, forgiving every-thing.
This oily film serves as a mirror which "reflects" the constant change that takes place: "It shadows the secret moves the water makes." Concurrently, the oil film metaphor functions as something that is not beautiful, that is "filth," and is associated with such unpleasantness as "an idiot's drivel an contempt." What is important here is that the oil film is "thrown off," or in fact assimilated, or transmuted. This stream of reality not only changes but seems to change for the better. The implications of "The Breaking of Rainbows" with the evidence of poems to be subsequently analyzed in this chapter, seem to point to an idea of reality and process that goes beyond a strictly existential position or that of existential phenomenology.

The two philosophers who seem to hold positions that resemble Nemerov's, or two that come most readily to mind, are Bergson and Whitehead. Whitehead may be the most appropriate for our purpose here, and there is evidence from Nemerov's critical writings that he has read Whitehead.

In a volume concerning recent philosophers, Armand Maurer makes the following remarks concerning Whitehead's "philosophy of organism," from which I must draw a somewhat extended passage as evidence:

An event occurs at some place and time, but not at a point in space or at an instant in time ... ...Each event is spread out over space and time
and consequently it has spatial and temporal extension... Another important characteristic of events is that they extend over each other. For example, the endurance of the Great Pyramid is an event that overlaps many goings-on of brief duration in Egypt. Every event, no matter how small its extension, extends over other events that are contained in it as parts, and it itself is contained as a part of other events that extend over it. Accordingly, the universe is a web or network of events, each of which is a unit, but intimately connected with other events. This interconnection of events is not something external to them, like the external relations between bodies in mechanistic physics, or between impressions in the philosophy of Hume; the relations binding events together enter in their very being, with the result that events cannot be completely described without them. In this view, nature is an organic unity in which every event has some bearing on everything else. 'Any local agitation shakes the whole universe. The distant effects are minute, but they are there.' In a sense, then, 'everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world.'

Because of this spatio-temporal interconnectedness of events, prior events pass into subsequent ones and take part in the creative advance of nature. Thus, the "philosophy of organism" is not to be construed to pertain only to the animal and plant world, but includes what is commonly referred to as "inorganic." It is Whitehead's position that the universe as organism is moving in a purposeful direction. God "saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life. It is the judgment

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Etienne Gilson, Thomas Langan, and Armand A. Maurer, Recent Philosophy, Hegel to the Present (Maurer has written the section pertaining to Whitehead), (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 511-512.
of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved.
It is also the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the
temporal world is mere wreckage.\textsuperscript{5}

The first point I shall refer to has to do with the
last passage about a "judgment" that "uses what in the
temporal world is mere wreckage." Consider, for example,
Nemerov's "The Breaking of Rainbows" and the oil film
metaphor. Is not this a similar attitude concerning
process and change? Heraclitus would likely explain the
oil film as one of the necessary "opposites" that will be
united with its opposites in a dynamic process, and thus,
essential to reality. Nemerov's attitude is that the
rhythm and energy of nature can somehow overcome even such
a "wreckage."

A second element in Whitehead's view of reality per­
tains to the relatedness of things, and this element is
often present in the work of Nemerov. Consider this state­
ment of Whitehead's position: "the universe is a web or
network of events, each of which is a unit but intimately
connected with other events... the relations binding
events together enter into their very being, with the
result that events cannot be completely described without
them."\textsuperscript{6} Or in Whitehead's own words: "Any local agita­
tation shades the whole universe. The distant effects

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5}Ibid., p. 517
\item \textsuperscript{6}Ibid., p. 511.
\end{itemize}
are minute, but they are there," (Modes of Thought). 7

"Everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world," (Science and the Modern World). 8 To return to "Painting a Mountain Stream":

> Pulse beats, and planets echo this, the running down, the standing still, all thunder of the one thought.

And of course the waves or "ripples" that result when the pond is agitated by a pebble move "in circles successively out to the edges of the pool and then/Reflecting back and passing through the ones which continue to come. . ." (Angel and Stone).

What has to be considered a "major" poem by Nemerov is the poem "Moment," (major even though it is fairly short). A great deal of Nemerov's world is intensely compacted in these fifteen lines:

> Now, starflake frozen on the windowpane
> All of a winter night, the open hearth
> Blazing beyond Andromeda, the sea-
> Anemone and the downwind seed, O moment
> Hastening, halting in a clockwise dust,
> The time in all the hospitals is now,
> Under the arc-lights where the sentry walks
> His lonely wall it never moves from now,
> The crying in the cell is also now,

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7Ibid., p. 511.
8Ibid., p. 511.
And now is quiet in the tomb as now
In the saddle of space, where argosies of dust
Sail outward blazing, and the mind of God,
The flash across the gap of being, thinks
In the instant absence of forever: now.

It might be useful to commit the sin of paraphrase at this point.

We perceive the scene in "Moment" through the intelligence situated between an open fire and a window that faces the winter night. The snowflake in the form of a star is frozen to the windowpane. The reflection of the fireplace seems to place its fiery glow beyond the constellation of Andromeda. "Beyond" Andromeda, astronomically, is the "fire" of the great spiral nebula M31. This is a moment in the clockwise turn of the constellations, which is also one expression of time. Perhaps the time seems to hasten and to halt relative to the scenes that follow. The sick, the imprisoned, and the dead all seem to be a part of the same fabric, a fabric at least held together by time, this moment, or now. "Crying in the cell" figures not only for the cell of the prisoner, which the sentry guards, but also in some generative sense, crying of birth and the living, the cell as an organic unit, thus juxtaposing life and death.

Simultaneously, the sun of our own solar system explodes while stellar dust moves outward in an expanding universe, the "curved" universe of Einstein. The metaphor for the mind of God recalls the arc-lights under which the lonely figure of the sentry walks the wall around the
cells. The mind of God is conceived in terms of a current of force like that that exists between two carbon rods, a current that leaps across the "gap of being." Again what emerges from the poem is a sense of the relatedness of events. This is similar to the description of Whitehead's conception of time and space: "Each event is spread out over space and time and consequently it has spatial and temporal extension. . . . Another important characteristic of events is that they extend over each other. . . . Every event, no matter how small its extension, extends over other events that are contained in it as parts, and it itself is contained as a part in other events that extend over it." Although there are related clusters of events in the poem, yet there is at first a surface of arbitrariness: explosions in the sun, the quiet in the tomb, and the constellation Andromeda. But these have extension for Nemerov, on the one hand a temporal extension in the "now," and not apart from but concurrent with an idea of being as force that extends across and unifies the world. It might be added that there is a kind of existential emphasis on the present. In one sense of the word, "present," or "now," is all that exists, since the past is not any more and future has not yet arrived. "Moment" is a good example of what Miller Williams was talking about when he said that Nemerov "has carried on the search for a kind of unified field theory, some metaphor to
bring time and space, being and non-being into harmony, and
to say where and what man is in the reality and illusion of all this."9

Nemerov has written two sequences of short poems, the earliest called "The Scales of the Eyes" (included first in The Salt Garden), and the latest sequence entitled simply, "Runes," which follows the short poem "Moment" in the volume of New and Selected Poems. In the first sequence Nemerov has journeyed inward to know himself. Kenneth Burke, who has examined the sequence at length, writes that "The poet has gone into a huddle with himself, to ask emphatically about the essence of himself, which in turn is seen in terms of his vocation."10 The journey results in a new vision as the scales might be said to fall from his eyes.

If the direction of "The Scales of the Eyes" is principally inward, the direction of "Runes" is outward from the self to a world of change, of diversity, but a world that includes an element of permanence. An inscription of St. Augustine is overture to the tensions and paradoxes that load the fifteen-poem sequence: "... insaniam salubriter et moriebam salubriter et moriebar vitaliter," a translation of


which might be, "I was going insane healthy, and I was dying full of life." "Runes" I take literally to mean secrets and mysteries. To suggest the ruins that are part of his subject in the sequence, Nemerov puns.

This is about the stillness in moving things,
In running water, also in the sleep
Of winter seeds, where time to come has tensed
Itself, enciphering a script so fine
Only the hourglass can magnify it, only
The years unfold its sentence from the root.
I have considered such things often, but
I cannot say I have thought deeply of them:
That is my theme, of thought and the defeat
Of thought before its object, where it turns
As from a mirror, and returns to be
The thought of something and the thought of thought,
A trader doubly burdened, commercing
Out of one stillness and into another.

The poet announces in the first poem (which incidentally has only fourteen lines instead of fifteen and may mysteriously suggest that as of yet the "secret" is missing) that he will write of the "stillness in moving things." He echoes what we have heard in "Painting a Mountain Stream," again about time, but a more limited aspect of time, "the sleep/Of winter seeds, where time to come has tensed/Itself." As he has tried to think of such mysteries and paradoxes, his attempts to explain the mysteries or resolve the paradoxes have been defeated. This is because, the poet concludes, the attempts seem to be like turning from a mirror (whereupon the "object" disappears), thinking about perception itself, returning to consider the object in the mirror, and being doubly burdened.
Several images anticipate or commence the development of the themes of reality-in-flux and its relation to time: a stillness-movement cluster, running water, seeds, and trading imagery. Rune II picks up the first of these as it ponders the story of Ulysses. In Homer's account the hero returns to Ithaca and remains in a manner at rest. Tennyson's account would have it the other way, with Ulysses "beyond the gates" and sailing south. The poet concludes that he does not know the right one. Thus we are left with the mystery of the first poem: how is it that things seem to move and yet are still, or vice-versa?

Rune III takes up seed-growth and trading imagery.

Sunflowers, traders rounding the horn of time
Into deep afternoons, sleepy with gain,
The fall of silence has begun to storm
Around you where you nod your heavy heads
Whose bare poles, raking out of true, will crack,
Driving your wreckage on the world's lee shore.
Your faces no more will follow the sun,
But bow down to the ground with a heavy truth
That dereliction learns, how charity
Is strangled out of selfishness at last;
When, golden misers in the courts of summer,
You are stripped of gain for coining images
And broken on this quarter of the wheel,
It is on savage ground you spill yourselves,
And spend the tarnished silver of your change.

The "time to come has tensed" of Rune I here takes on more meaning in the figure of the sunflowers. The sunflowers are compared to "traders rounding the horn of time" because of their characteristic of facing the rising sun and then slowly turning westward as the sun does (time and light moving, one on and the other, out). There is an
oblique continuation of Ulysses-sailor in the daring trader moving around the horn. There may be an undercurrent of pun in "trader" to traitor. The sunflowers are not the traitors, but they are about to be betrayed or robbed. Maybe their indolence and greed ("sleepy with gain") cause them to betray themselves. Thus, the image of opulence, fertility and completeness, begins to erode after "The fall of silence has begun to storm" such riches. The tone shifts rapidly and the sound-sense harmony of "sun-deep-gain" becomes harsher with the bleakness of "whose bare poles, raking out of true, will crack." The conceit is continued as the traders drive the wreckage of their ships on the shore, specifically "the world's lee shore." Besides the ironic meaning of wrecking on the sheltered shore, there is the other meaning of "lee," that is as a sediment, or a dreg, an image which develops the theme of a loss of fertility and growth. The lee shore then is the dry shore where the derelict is left, "high and dry." Charity strangled out of selfishness becomes additionally charged with meaning as the derelict ship is a "gift" to anyone who finds or claims it. This is a heavy truth, the poet says. The trader-ship is stripped of the gold for making coins; the sunflowers are stripped of their seeds. The sunflowers may be said to "coin images" in at least two ways: the seeds will obviously coin new images of the sunflower, and in a punitive sense, the sunflower is being stripped perhaps for coining an
image of the sun. It is being "broken on this quarter of the wheel" which would be the quarter of the year's turning, summer. The trader-ship is broken on the savage ground and spills what is left, the "tarnished silver."

The sunflower has through its change from one state to another, spilled its seeds on the ground. The predominant tone of this poem is, of course, not of fertility, but of loss of fertility, or at best a tarnished or failed fertility. What happens very subtly at the end of the poem drives one back through it again because of the resonances of "spilling or spending" seeds on the ground. Although ironic, the sexual overtones of this image counterpoint the images of growth, fertility, and death of the sunflower. Lines increase this complexity and density:

"... you nod your heavy heads/Whose bare poles, raking out of true, will crack... Your faces no more will follow the sun,/But bow down to the ground with a heavy truth... You are stripped of gain for coining images." And of course it was for this reason that Onan spilt his seed on the ground when he slept with his sister-in-law Tamar: "But Onan knew that the issue would not be his," or that he had been stripped of gain for coining images.

Rune IV might be considered as a micro-drama of the birth of evil.

The seed sleeps in the furnaces of death,
A cock's egg slept till hatching by a serpent
Wound in his wintry coil, a spring so tight
In his radical presence that every tense
Is now. Out of this head the terms of kind,
Distributed in syntax, come to judgment,  
Are basilisks who write our sentences  
Deep at the scripture's pith, in rooted tongues,  
How one shall marry while another dies.  
Give us our ignorance, the family tree  
Grows upside down and shakes its heavy fruit,  
Whose buried stones philosophers have sought.  
For each stone bears the living word, each word  
Will be made flesh, and all flesh fall to seed:  
Such stones from the tree; and from the stones,  
such blood.

This poem begins with an idea that has held the attention of poets rather persistently, and in particular one of Nemerov's contemporaries, Dylan Thomas; "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," and even "Altarwise by Owl-Light" express these themes. The beginning of life is the beginning of death. Likewise, there was no life until there was death. And Biblically, there was no death until there was evil; thus, "A cock's egg slept till hatching by a serpent/Wound in his wintry coil." I presume "A Cock's egg" is expressive of God's creation of Man. This is similar to "Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg," of the poem "Altarwise by Owl-Light." "A spring so tight/In his radical presence that every tense/Is now" may mean, besides the literal spring-like coils tightening around Man, that in the spring (or beginning) that emerges from this winter there is something in the root presence (existing inherently in this presence) that makes every grammatical tense in the now, or present.  
(Note, also, how this returns to the "root" of line 6 in Rune I.)
Out of this evil come the terms of likeness and difference, of gender and sex, of birth, race and species, distributed in language of order and the order of language (syntax), and with perhaps a pun on syntax, e.g. "sin-tax." Out of this head came the terms of judgment and the basilisks who "write our sentences": ambiguously, the sentences of language and the decree on the convicted. Such paradoxical sentences are written and handed out that while "one shall marry," form union, and create, "another dies."

Parodying the Lord's Prayer, "Give us our ignorance," the poet goes on to say that "the family tree/Grows upside down and shakes its heavy fruit," or, instead of the tree growing towards life and sun and generation, it is upside down, growing towards death. "The heavy fruit" are shaken off to die and have buried within the stones that philosophers seek—the stone that will unlock the secret of the universe. The secret found in this "living word" is that of death, reinforced perhaps by the "burial stone" association. "All flesh fall to seed," or die. This is the kind of pain-and-death fruit that spring from this Tree of Life.

Rune V continues the mysterious nature of seed through the language of the harvest. What also might be noted aside here is the feeling for ancient Hebraic history and life that often appears in Nemerov's work.
The fat time of the year is also time
Of the Atonement; birds to the berry bushes,
Men to the harvest; a time to answer for
Both present plenty and emptiness to come.
When the slain legal deer is salted down,
When apples smell like goodness, cold in the cellar,
You hear the ram's horn sounded in the high
Mount of the Lord, and you lift up your eyes
As though by this observance you might hide
The dry husk of an eaten heart which brings
Nothing to offer up, no sacrifice
Acceptable but the canceled-out desires
And satisfactions of another year's
Abscess, whose zero in His winter's mercy
Still hides the undecipherable seed.

Harvest time, the poet tells us, is also the time of Atonement, a time of union, of becoming "at-one" with God; but Atonement is also a day of fasting, and a day for sacrificing the bull, the ram, and the scape-goat. This is the way to redemption through propitiation, (as Christ was to redeem man by becoming scapegoat later in Jewish history). Thus, the dual nature of the harvest is already foreshadowed. This will be a time for "Both present plenty and emptiness to come."

The speaker here confesses that for him the Atonement is a kind of subterfuge whereby he can "hide/The dry husk of an eaten heart which brings/Nothing to offer up." His husk of a heart has no acceptable sacrifice except desires that have cancelled themselves out and satisfactions of sins that have abscessed his flesh. At the poem's end, the "zero" of his sacrifice still does not understand the mystery of life and the seed, "the stillness in moving things" that was announced in the beginning of the sequence.
The motif of winter is continued in Rune VI, with moving water trapped in the stillness of a winter's prison. Madness and insanity are associated with snow.

White water now in the snowflake's prison,
A mad king in a skullcap thinks these thoughts
In regular hexagons, each one unlike
Each of the others. The atoms of memory,
Like those that Democritus knew, have hooks
At either end, but these? Insane tycoon,
These are the riches of order snowed without end
In this distracted globe, where is no state
To fingerprint the flakes or number these
Moments melting in flight, seeds mirroring
Substance without position or a speed
And course unsubstanced. What may the spring be,
Deep in the atom, among galactic snows,
But the substance of things hoped for, argument
Of things unseen? White water, fall and fall.

The dissimilarity of things is emphasized and trader-merchant become "Insane tycoon" in this poem. "These are the riches of order snowed without end/In this distracted globe." In a curious line, the seeds in this winter have become snowflakes: "seeds mirroring/Substance without position or a speed/And course unsubstanced." This seems to recall the idea of mass and light of Einsteinian physics. The "seeds" reflect a substance not in a fixed position, (in other words only relative position) and a speed and direction that has no substance, like light. This recalls the description of Whitehead's view, also, that "An event occurs at some place and time, but not at a point in space or at an instant in time."\(^{11}\) The poem

\(^{11}\)Gilson, p. 511.
ends with a question and a hesitant, tentative answer.
"What may the spring be,/Deep in the atom, among galactic
snows,/But the substance of things hoped for, argument/Of
things unseen?" The answer echoes Paul's consolation
to the Hebrews (11:1) where he writes, "Now faith is the
substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not
seen." "Spring" figures at first in two ways: the season
of spring that will emerge from this winter, and the force
of a spring lying deep within fundamental atomic substance.
But, recalling from Rune IV the "spring" of line three,
there is the association of evil that further enriches
the ending of Rune VI and looks forward to the end of the
sequence.

Rune VII opens with the words of Jacob to his son
Reuben.

Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel12
--Said to the firstborn, the dignity and strength,
And the defiler of his father's bed.
Fit motto for a dehydrated age
Nervously watering whisky and stock,
Quick-freezing dreams into realities.
Brain-surgeons have produced the proustian syndrome,
But patients dunk their tasteless madeleines
In vain, those papers that the Japanese
Amused themselves by watering until
They flowered and became Combray, flower
No more. The plastic and cosmetic arts
Unbreakably record the last word and

12Genesis 49: 3,4: 3. Reuben, thou art my firstborn,
my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency
of power: 4. Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel;
because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst
it: he went up to my couch.
The least word, till sometimes even the Muse, 
In her transparent raincoat, resembles a condom.

The speaker says that Jacob's words are a fit motto for this dehydrated, or unfertile, age. Instead of fertility, a creative act, the age is "watering whisky," deviously making it less potent, and watering stock, which is not real increase, but only additional shares. Brain-surgeons produce the "proustian syndrome," of total inwardness, but these patients do not remember the past. Plastic, unbreakable phonograph records record without creative selection "the last word and/The least word," and the Muse begins to "resemble a condom," which also unbreakably "records," or "preserves" the last and least of the living "words" in genetic language. The irony of this recalls the first line of the poem, "thou shalt not excel," with "excel" having phallic overtones of "to rise above," or "to raise, as columns." Thus, midway in the sequence the seeds are not ending finally in life, but in a futile dead end.

Runes VIII and IX continue to explore water as a force that moves downward, to death and to run. In Rune VIII the water is followed down ditches, under culverts, through swamps, and ultimately to "The dog's corpse in the ditch, to come at last/Into the pit where zero's eye is closed." Rune IX enumerates more facets of "this dehydrated time." Men "Bottle holy water/In plastic tears, and bury mustard seeds/In lucite lockets."
In the tenth poem, the riddle of the white, rushing water is still not clear. "Your utterance is riddled."
But the speaker concludes from watching what the falling water does, how

... history is no more than
The shadows thrown by clouds on mountainsides,
A distant chill, when all is brought to pass
By rain and birth and rising of the dead.

The tensions of seed and death call up the examples of Aaron, Jesse, Adam and the Son of Man in Rune XI.

A holy man said to me, "Split the stick
And there is Jesus." When I split the stick
To the dark marrow and the splintery grain
I saw nothing that was not wood, nothing
That was not God, and I began to dream
How from the tree that stood between the rivers
Came Aaron's rod that crawled in front of Pharaoh,
And came the rod of Jesse flowering
In all the generations of the Kings,
And came the timbers of the second tree,
The sticks and yardarms of the holy three-masted vessel whereon the Son of Man
Hung between thieves, and came the crown of thorns,
The lance and ladder, when was shed that blood
Streamed in the grain of Adam's tainted seed.

When told to contemplate the marrow or pith of a stick to learn its mysteries, the dreams of Aaron's rod, a symbol of authority for the family of Israel; it becomes a serpent also, when thrown at Pharaoh's feet. He thinks of the rod of Jesse, father of David, as the instrument for a long fertile line. But this happy thought quickly gives way to "the timbers of the second tree,/The sticks and yardarms of the holy three-/masted vessel," reviving one aspect of the sailor-trading cluster, this time
commercing into the silence of the death of Christ. The blood of the crucified Christ joins the stream of blood that flows from Adam's tainted seed, the seed that since tainted contains sin and death.

One observes over and over in the body of Nemerov's poetry a vision of the relatedness of natural events, and though events occur "by one and one and one," yet there is a unified fabric, either in terms of the "rhythm" that he often speaks of, or a sense of some elemental unifying force or energy that leaps the "gap" of being. Equipped with such a vision, he habitually reflects a compacted world in his poetry, and, though not as a necessary consequence, poetry in a compacted language. Rune XII is additional evidence.

Consider how the seed lost by a bird
Will harbor in its branches most remote
Descendants of the bird; while everywhere
And unobserved, the soft green stalks and tubes
Of water are hardening into wood, whose hide,
Gnarled, knotted, flowing, and its hidden grain,
Remember how the water is streaming still.

Now does the seed asleep, as in a dream
Where time is compacted under pressures of
Another order, crack open like stone
From whose division pours a stream, between
The raindrop and the sea, running in one
Direction, down, and gathering in its course
That bitter salt which spices us the food
We sweat for, and the blood and tears we shed.

What seems to be true in this poem, and in others, is an idea of individual death, a death that returns an entity to the stream of reality, but a confidence that the stream and rhythm of the universe will continue to ebb and flow,
and this is one kind of affirmation. This may take the Nemerovian world picture beyond the "minimal affirmation" that Peter Meinke has hypothesized. In his monograph, Meinke singles out Rune XII as an example of Nemerov's "impeccable style." He says further:

The water streaming in the seed streams through our world, our bodies, holding everything together in its always-changing permanence. The subtle rhythms support the imagery in a fusion of form and content; run-ons, alliteration, repetition, all playing important roles in the structure. "The "s" sound in "soft green stalks and tubes," the "d" sound in "hardening into wood, whose hide,/Gnarled, knotted" reinforce the meaning; the rhythm, stopped by "whose hide,/Gnarles, knotted," flows forward again with "Flowing, and its hidden grain." The end of the first sentence holds the paradox of permanent impermanence in the ambiguous "streaming still." The onomatopoeic "crack" splits the second sentence, whose alliteration and longer phrases ("gathering in its course/That bitter salt which spices us the food/We sweat for") underline the stanza's conclusion.13

The poem restates this notion of time that has pervaded the work. This time is relative to another perspective and therefore to another order.

The theme of trader and commerce is taken up with a vengeance in Rune XIII. At the same time, the image clusters around running water and the seed (now tainted with blood) and interweaves theme and structure.

There sailed out on the river, Conrad saw, The dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealth, The germs of Empire. To the ends of the earth

One many-veined bloodstream swayed the hulls
Of darkness gone, of darkness still to come,
And sent its tendrils steeping through the roots
Of wasted continents. That echoing pulse
Carried the ground swell of all sea-returns
Muttering under history, and its taste,
Saline and cold, was as a mirror of
The taste of human blood. The sailor leaned
To lick the mirror clean, the somber and
Immense mirror that Conrad saw, and saw
The other self, the sacred Cain of blood
Who would seed a commonwealth in the Land of Nod.

This recalls the opening and closing scenes of Heart of
Darkness where Marlow sits on a ship in the Thames as
darkness comes on the river telling his story of colonial
empire, greed, and murder. "Seeds" of commonwealths take
on additional meaning in this rune, by now having been
highly charged with the imagery of "seeds spent on the
ground," a seed gripped so tight in evil's radical presence,
and seeds that stream with blood. "Germs of Empire" are
likewise germs of reproduction, but also disease-producing
microbes. The "many-veined bloodstream" of men in quest
for wealth and power, like King Leopold's company in the
Congo, has "swayed the hulls/Of darkness" in the past,
now, and in the time to come. The hulls are the hulls of
the trader ships, but also the hull of the heart of Mister
Kurtz, that heart full of horror, and further enrich "The
dry husks of an eaten heart" of Rune V. The echoing
pulse of the stream of greed tastes like the "taste of
human blood." To lick this mirror of human blood is to
see the other self, first offspring of Adam's tainted
seed, "sacred Cain." Thus the time to come that "has tensed/Itself" is slowly being unfolded toward an end that has been well prepared for.

Rune XIV is made of the language of thresholds, edges, tense membranes, all leading to a point just on the verge of falling apart.

There is a threshold, that meniscus where
The strider walks on drowning waters, or
That tense, curved membrane of the camera's lens
Which darkness holds against the battering light
And the distracted drumming of the world's
Importunate plenty.—Now that threshold
The water of the eye where the world walks
Delicately, is as a needled threaded
From the reel of a raveling stream, to stitch
Dissolving figures in a water cloth,
A damask either-sided as the shroud
Of the lord of Ithaca, labored at in light,
Destroyed in darkness, while the spidery oars
Carry his keel across deep mysteries
To harbor in unfathomable mercies.

The poet is punning on "threshold" and it is a felicitous choice, because "thresh" has many connections throughout the sequence: that of seed, of harvest, and again, the "husk of a heart"; "hold" would have the obvious one of "hole," echoing "the pit where zero's eye is closed," and that place where white water may "fall and fall."

The threshold is described in terms of a meniscus, that fragile concavity-convexity of capillarity which disappears when anything attempts to penetrate it, which causes any

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14 The figure of Cain is the object of a full development in the poetic drama Cain by Nemerov.
"strider" who walks on the water to drown. Or, the threshold is like the "tense, curved membrane" of a camera lens, "the battering light" on the side of life and movement, and darkness on the other side. The price of crossing that membrane is to become "fixed" in time and space. Again, the threshold is compared to a needle threaded with a raveling stream" which sews a cloth whose figures constantly dissolve, the fabric of life. There is a sexual level to the language throughout most of this rune: "threshold," "curved membrane," "the battering light." The membrane is crossed and figures are stitched or created in the watery cloth of life. And almost bringing us full circle is the reappearance of Ulysses, "the lord of Ithaca." Penelope sews by day and unweaves by night to save her lord, because once the sewing is finished, her lord is given up for dead and it becomes his shroud. All the while she is sewing, the "spidery oars" (spidery because spiders can walk on the surface of water) carry the sailor across mysteries such as have been pondered in these stanzas, to a harbor of mercies that cannot be measured or known.

The concluding stanza completes, in every sense of that word, the fifteen-poem sequence.

To watch water, to watch running water Is to know a secret, seeing the twisted rope Of runnels on the hillside, the small freshets Leaping and limping down the tilted field In April's light, the green, grave and opaque Swirl in the millpond where the current slides
To be combed and carded silver at the fall;
It is a secret. Or it is not to know
The secret, but to have it in your keeping,
A locked box, Bluebeard's room, the deathless thing
Which it is death to open. Knowing the secret,
Keeping the secret—herringbones of light
Ebbing on beaches, the huge artillery
Of tides—it is not know, it is not keeping,
But being the secret hidden from yourself.

Now that the secret has been unfolded in the sequence, we
know that to watch "running water" is also to know it is
running away. This is to know a secret. And with this
vision, elements in nature take on a complexity: the
runnels become "the twisted rope" with connotations of
death and hanging. "The small freshets" leap but they
also limp down the hillside, or "tilted field." The green
of the hillside is "grave," solemn, but also connoting the
grave, and "opaque," or impervious to the light, and also
obscure or mysterious. The water is "combed and carded
silver at the fall" as it goes over the sluice. "At the
fall" has obvious multiple meanings; "combed and carded
silver" is richly meaningful in terms of the whole sequence.
The long stalks of the sunflower in Rune III were "raking
out of true" to finally crack, raking and combing having
a similarity. The rushing water turns silver, which often
associates itself with age. In addition, silver recalls,
from the same Rune III, the "tarnished silver" of the spent
and fallen sunflower seeds.

Nemerov has written elsewhere that water can convey
for him the dialectic of reality, and maybe this last rune
is an obvious example of the way it can function for him. Running water poses a mystery and one answer is that if one knows running water, one knows a secret. This answer does not satisfy and so he reaches another one which is—to keep a secret. Perhaps this is what the stillness in moving things, or running water, tells him: he has the secret, death, in him like a locked box, a secret that when it is told, or when the box is opened, is death.

The language of falling away and destruction continues, the light ebbing, the running water of the tides compared to artillery.

From this thesis-antithesis meditation comes his synthesis: "being the secret hidden from yourself." As Peter Meinke concludes, "Working, like the metaphysical poets, with paradox, Nemerov implies that to prepare for life one should study nature, at the same time keeping the secret (nature is death) hidden from oneself."

"Runes," it seems to me, is one of the most artful compositions of its kind in contemporary poetry, and is evidence of Nemerov at his best. It is perhaps a cliche to raise the ghost of Bach when speaking of such a rich, polyphonic form, but it is this kind of invention, of resonance and development, that the sequence resembles.
CHAPTER III

LANGUAGE, MIRRORS, AND THE ART

Poetry of course is realized through language; it is the vehicle that reflects the complex relation between perception and things. The complete entity, or "integer" as Nemerov calls poetry in "Lion and Honeycomb," is a result of the tension among perception, things, and words. The certainty about the relationship varies with the individual poem. In this chapter I should like first to examine the poems that take up this relationship. Observing that Nemerov often refers to language as a mirror, I should then like to examine one of his most persistent metaphors, that of the mirror, and explain why this particular metaphor is integral to his vision. Thereupon I would like to consider his preferences and attitudes about what constitutes good poetry, about the value of the imaginative life, and finally, the source of good poetry.

LANGUAGE

In the poem "Firelight in Sunlight" the poet sees deeply into a mystery as "apple logs unlock their sunlight." He responds to this moment ecstatically. "These are my mysteries to see/And say and celebrate with words/In orders until now reserved." There are limitations to what the
poet will do with this experience: he will say and celebrate. He does not say he will explain the mystery. And the concluding passage of the poem tells what is, for Nemerov, part of the vital function of the poet.

For light is in the language now, Carbon and sullen diamond break Out of the glossary of earth In holy signs and scintillations, Release their fiery emblems to Renewal's room and morning's room Where sun and fire once again Phase in the figure of the dance From far beginnings here returned, Leapt from the maze at the forest's heart, O moment where the lost is found.

The value of beauty in the moment is a rather constant one in a sometimes shifting scene.

In the poem "To Lu Chi" Nemerov again engages the relationship of language and reality. He notes that language is not the exclusive property of the poets.

The alphabet, the gift of god Or of the gods (and modern as we are, We have no better theory yet), was not Devised to one use only, but to all The work that human wit could find for it; Is honorably employed in government And all techniques; without it, nothing.

But he is irritated by the use the "active man" and the politician put to language and who in turn disparage the poet's use of language. What is the remedy for this?

. . . Nothing but this, old sir: continue. And to the active man, if he should ask (If he should bother asking) Why? say nothing. And to the thinker, if he should ask us once Instead of telling us, again say nothing,
But look into the clear and mirroring stream
Where images remain although the water
Passes away. Neither action nor thought,
Only the concentration of our speech
In fineness and in strength (your axe again),
Till it can carry, in those other minds,
A nobler action and a purer thought.

The poet, because he believes that in fact he has some
sense of essential reality to convey to the "active man,"
should continue to create an effective vehicle that can
carry the nobler action and the purer thought of this
reality.

Obviously metaphor is an essential part of the vehi­
cle, and something of the qualities of metaphor is sug­
gested in the poem, "One Way." The beginning of the poem
considers the function of metaphor.

The way a word does when
It senses on one side
A thing and on the other
A thought; at either side
It glances and goes deep
Together; like sunlight
On marble, on burnished wood,
That seems to be coming from
Within the surface and
To be one substance with it --

The complex and mysterious character of the word (and by
inference, metaphor) reflects the forces that may (or may
not) feed in to make up its compositon. Sunlight on mar­
ble or burnished wood illuminates the object, but there
is a notion that the object may likewise contain something
that contributes to the illumination: "That seems to be
coming from within the surface and/To be one substance
with it." Thus in this rather concise poem the poet tells us something of the qualities of language and metaphor and then in the same statement offers an example. By calling this "one way of doing/One's being," the characteristically undogmatic attitude of Nemerov and his liberal spirit are apparent. His subsequent development of this "thought" and "thing" is typical.

Whose being is both thought
And thing, where neither thing
Nor thought will do alone
Till either answers other;
Two lovers in the night
Each sighing other's name
Whose alien syllables
Become synonymous
For all their mortal night
And their embodied day:
   Fire in the diamond,
   Diamond in the dark.

The confidence embodied in these poems is mitigated in others. Nemerov reflects the crisis that has existed for sometime in the problem of knowledge. One aspect of this problem involves the very distortion of reality that words and style may create. In a poem entitled "Style," the speaker thanks Flaubert for two novels that he did not write. In the final lines he explains his gratitude.

They can be read,
With difficulty, in the spirit alone,
Are not so wholly lost as certain works
Burned at Alexandria, flooded at Florence
And are never taught at universities.
Moreover, they are not deformed by style,
That fire that eats what it illuminates.
While language may be a very useful instrument which helps the mind grasp reality, the idea that it can is problematic. Cleanth Brooks' discussion of symbolism in *Literary Criticism, A Short History* refers to Coleridge's letter to William Godwin, which bears on this matter.¹

I wish you to write a book on the power of words... is Thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? And how far is the word "arbitrary" a misnomer? Are not words, etc., parts and germinations of the plant? In something of this sort: I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things; elevating, as it were, Words into Things and living things too.

Brooks goes on to note that many modern philosophers have "gone far to destroy the old antithesis between words and things." Nemerov appears to toy with the notion that reality, as far as a man can know it, is a symbolic construction, and that further, the language-makers respond in individual, reality-creating patterns. But that there is something beyond subject and symbol he asserts in the poem, "Writing." In this poem, he says that words "Being intelligible/. . . become/miraculous, so intimately, out there/at the pen's point or brush's tip, do world/and spirit wed." Then he adds that "The universe induces/a different tremor in every hand." Left at that one might

construe this as a fairly radical subjective poetic statement. But there is a persistent faith in the world of things.

Miraculous. It is as though the world were a great writing. Having said so much, let us allow there is more to the world than writing: continental faults are not bare convoluted fissures in the brain. Not only must the skaters soon go home; also the hard inscription of their skates is scored across the open water, which long remembers nothing, neither wind nor wake.

But like most experiences of faith, there are points at which the faith is challenged.

This challenge is evident in "In the Black Museum." The poem seems to reflect an attempt by the self to disengage from its own subjectivity and when it does, "When all analogies are broken/The scene grows strange again. At last/There is only one of everything." Metaphor, a form of analogy, is abrogated and the objects stand alone, like (to use analogy) "bearded herms," "blunt instruments." Perhaps "one mask/To every skull," which is the end of art means that art is a kind of congruent symbolic construct of reality. This is the "hard, two-headed saying." This view of perception and of art concedes nothing to a metaphysics, the speaker insists.

But the symbolic representation of art may be ironic because if the mind reflects reality through symbol, reality may well be a reflection of mind. This has a futility about it "As in my dream one night a sliding door/
Opened upon another sliding door." In addition, the poem concludes with one of Nemerov's ubiquitous mirror images that suggests that language and art as avenues to truth may only result in a dead-end game:

Or as two mirrors vacuum-locked together
Exclude, along with all the world,
A light to see it by. Reflect on that.

Now the reader understands why the museum is black. The circularity of man's attempt to know, as it is suggested in the poem, reminds one of the story about man who rang the hour with church bells and who got the correct time by telephoning the woman who ran the time service, who set her watch by the ringing church bells. In addition, Nemerov's choice of a "museum" to convey the idea of the poem may suggest that perception is always reflecting the past, for one cannot perceive what has not yet happened.

MIRRORS

As one moves about in the poetic world of Howard Nemerov, the poet's frequent use of mirrors as metaphors becomes apparent. It is to this that he so often turns as a vehicle for his thoughts concerning the world outside the knowing subject. There is not a single valence, however, for the mirrors, though their functions relate to one another. He has remarked in a passage from "Attentiveness and Obedience" that water in its many forms, which includes of course a reflecting pool, is a most appropriate
"emblem for human life and the life of the imagination."²

In an essay from his recent Reflexions on Poetry and Poetics (1972), "The Difficulty of Difficult Poetry," he fashions his own version of the Narcissus story, saying that he "should like to redeem Narcissus from the contempt heaped on his pretty head by psychoanalysts."³

When I looked into the still pool, and saw my image, I was not deluded into believing it was the image of another. I knew myself, you see, and on that account, as Tiresias said, I was doomed to die young. Let me remind you how it is when one looks into the still pool. First, there is the water, already hard to describe except for what you see in it, just as it is hard to say what time is except by saying what happens in it. All the same, just as with time you know it is there, a medium in which something happens. You see the water, you see into the water, you see things in the water and things reflected on its surface, all at once and indistinguishably. And in, of, on, rove through all this shimmering spectacle you see your own face, your eyes are searching into your own eyes, which hold also the sky, the water-floor, the doubled tree, and the tension of the surface itself. A fish or a frog swims by, a strider dimples the film of the surface, a drop of water falls from a leaf above, or a breeze arises. The image is troubled, it wavers, vanishes, reappears.

What I seemed to see, what seemed to me to demand such profound, long and loving regard, as they were reflected in the pool, their fleeting images rove through the stuff and fabric of the creation by whose means alone they might define themselves; likewise, then, a breath of air could destroy instantly this beautiful and living tension. Studying the pool, one's own image not more nor less of water-floor and water itself, seemed to me a figure for what poets tried to do;


³ Ibid., pp. 30-31.
and poetry in turn a figure for the contemplation of truth.

So, if I may draw the moral which I consider to be appropriate, I gazed at the double and un-graspable image of myself in the world until I died of it; which is what all men do. And after death I sprung up again as flower; which again, allowing for the poetical ornament—it might have been as grass—is what all men do.

There is a great deal here that helps in the understanding of the poetry and in addition draws together in a kind of picture the poet's position concerning reality, a way of knowing it, and particularly the role of poetry in relation to these things. As the reader searches the body of Nemerov's work, so often he finds that the mirror the poet uses or refers to is the mirror of a reflecting water surface. This is not altogether different from leaded glass (which of course he uses, too), but enough to correspond more closely to the poet's conception of reality as flux and rhythm. The appropriateness of this kind of mirror is evidenced in poems already examined: "Sanctuary," "Angel and Stone," "This, That, and the Other," "Breaking of Rainbows," and certain of the "Runes." The mirror reflections found in nature serve as analogies; language, and particularly poetry, serve as a "means of contemplation"—contemplation of reality. Part of reality, of course, is the self, and it too is included in the poem.

Thus, the mirror of "Holding the Mirror Up to Nature" is poetry. It is a very special mirror. It is the product
of civilization and it can produce civilization, indeed may be crucial to its maintenance.

Some shapes cannot be seen in a glass, those are the ones the heart breaks at.

And these shapes are much of what poetry concerns itself with: matters of the human heart. Through the magic of this mirror, these shapes can be known—shapes that result because of relationships nurtured in the garden of civilization. It is interesting to consider what Nemerov has written in this regard.

Language, then, is the marvelous mirror of the human condition, a mirror so miraculous that it can see what is invisible, that is the relations between things. At the same time, the mirror is a limit, and as such, it is sorrowful; one wants to break it and look beyond. But unless we have the singular talent for mystical experience we do not really break the mirror, and even the mystic's experience is available to us only as reflected, inadequately, in the mirror. Most often man deals with reality by its reflection. That is the sense of Perseus' victory over the Gorgon by consenting to see her only in the mirror of his shield, and it is the sense of the saying in Corinthians that we see now as through a glass darkly—a phrase rendered by modern translators as "now we see as in a little mirror."

Civilization, mirrored in language, is the garden where relations grow; outside the garden is the wild abyss.4

The mention of the mystical attempt to "break the mirror" and to go beyond language is part of the subject matter

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of "The Sanctuary," a poem examined in Chapter I. In that poem perception seemed for a moment to break through the "mirror" of the trout stream and mind and matter took on an unusual relationship. As Nemerov notes in the essay, however, this experience is only available to others through language.

At least for the present, it appears that man can most adequately understand and describe reality, with its beautiful and horrible aspects, in terms of various symbologies such as language and mathematics. Using such "mirrors," Nemerov notes, was the only effective way Perseus could see Medusa and survive. In "Predecessor Perseus," the poet has treated this subject from the point of view of someone who has not yet understood this.

Since he is older than Hamlet or Stravrogin,
Older than Leopold Bloom; since he has been
Stravaging through the Dark Wood several years
Beyond the appointed time, meeting no wolf,
Leopard, or lion, not mention Virgil;
And long since seen the span of Keats conclude,
And the span of Alexander,— he begins
At last to wonder.

Had his sacred books
Misled him? Or had he deceived himself?
Like some he knew, who'd foolishly confused
The being called and being chosen; they
Ran down the crazy pavement of their path
On primrose all the way.

And old friend said,
"The first thing to learn about wisdom is
This, that you can't do anything with it."
Wisdom. If that was what he had, he might,
Like a retired witch, keep it locked up
In the broom closet. But he rides his road,
Passing the skinless elder skeletons
Who smile, and maybe he will keep on going
Until the grey unbearable she of the world
Shall raise her eyes, and recognize, and grin
At her eternal amateur's approach,
All guts no glass, to meet her gaze head on
And be stricken in the likeness of himself
At least, if not of Keats or Alexander.

This solitary figure is older than Shakespear's Hamlet,
Dostoyevsky's Stravrogin, Joyce's Bloom, and Dante's Dante,
creations or mirrors that the creators made to understand
reality--mirrors that now help us to face the Gorgon. He
is solitary and he now begins to doubt if he has been
called to this task of facing the Gorgon. But he accepts
the challenge, knowing that others have failed: "Passing
the skinless elder skeletons/Who smile." Maybe he will
fail; all the others have. But, the voice in the poem
observes, the amateur has guts if he has no glass, and
even if he does not overcome Medusa, there will remain the
permanence of the likeness of himself. Thus, this parable
of the poet-seer and his life-long pursuit of reality is
particularly the parable of the modern artist.

The world reflected in "Dead River" points to the
limits of what can be known by the limits of the mirror.

Passive and dark, dead river,
Drifting beneath the images
Received in one sole moving eye,
Beginning nowhere, never
Arriving, ever to be done;
Reflecting back in black
The leaves, the sky, the silver sun,
Dead river, you still give
Your still moving negative
Down to the still glade
Where the beaver has made
His sill of speckled mud
And saplings silver-dry,
Deliverance of the sun,
Dead river, past which never,
Dead river, beyond which not,

While summer dries away in gold
Jeweled with bright and buzzing flies.

The mirror image in the poetry is not always the same kind. In this case it is dark and dead. Even though the river has been damned by beavers there is still a slightly perceptible drift beneath the images. The river seems to have no source, it never gets where it is going entirely, and its movement is never finished. This could be said about human perception or human knowledge. Yet there are limits: "Dead river, past which never,/Dead river, beyond which not." The world wheels above, and whatever comes into view is imaged there, but nothing beyond the limits of the banks.

Concurrent with the reflection of the "dead" river is a summer that is dying and "dries away in gold." And although the anagoge of these signs is always death, the poem ends in a mystery that is not paradoxically entirely black, although death permeates the experience. The summer is "jeweled with bright and buzzing flies." This recalls, after a fashion, Richard Eberhart's "The Groundhog," where the speaker is walking in the golden fields of summer and comes upon a dead groundhog. As he looks at this he observes:
There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close his maggots' might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick.
The fever arose, became a flame
And vigor circumscribed the skies,
Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling.

For Nemerov, just as for Eberhard, there is a haunting
mystery in the fact that death can dry "away in gold."
Perhaps, too, there is an aesthetic assertion here that
is similar to that found in Stevens' "Sunday Morning"
where he writes: "Death is the mother of beauty."

Mirror imagery appears in at least twenty-five poems
in a very direct way, and indirectly in numerous others;
therefore, it is not possible in this essay to examine
all such examples. Perhaps "The View" might serve as a
final selection, and the Narcissus stance of the persona
is likewise in evidence.

Under his view the wind
Blows shadows back and forth
Across the lawn beneath
The blowing leaves. And now
Into his silent room
Noon whistles, or a cry
Comes from the road where to
Is fro. Inquietude!
He walks from room to room,
From empty room to room
with the white curtains blowing.
He goes down to the kitchen
And takes from the cold tap
A glass of water pale
As glass. In the long hall
He stares into the mirror
And wills that it should break
Under his image, but
It does not break. Once more
He comes to stand before
The window and the screen,
Framing as in a graph
The view he has of flowers,
Of fields beyond the flowers,
The hanging hill, the blue
Distance that voids his vision
Though not as tears might do.
He has no tears, but knows
No one will come, there's no
Comfort, not the least
Saving discrepancy
In a view where every last thing
Is rimed with its own shadow
Exactly, and every fall
Is once for all.

There is again the solitariness that most often accompanies
the speaker in Nemerov's poetry. In addition, the mono-
tony is largely undelineated: "Noon whistles, or a cry/
Comes from the road where to/Is fro." With nothing else
to do, the speaker walks aimlessly about the house, drinks
a glass of water, and then stares at the mirror. Somehow
he would like to break out of himself, or more likely, he
wishes that his perception could go beyond the limits (as
in "The Sanctuary" and others). But the mirror will not
break. As the poem draws to a close, the speaker stoically
accepts the hopelessness of his plight, but there is no
comfort. Somehow if there was a single thing that was not
"rimed with its own shadow" there would be hope. Maybe
the kind of hope that might spring from knowledge that
transcends "normal" human experience.
What constitutes the good poem for Nemerov? Perhaps a good place to begin is his introduction to Miller William's book *A Circle of Stone*.

It may also be said that poems demanding ingenuity are bad, or "out," or whatever. To which I can say only that I prefer poems which want to be read hard and which respond to the closest attention... it is a matter rather of how you approach one thought through another with an effect of surprise; a matter of the steepness of the gradient between the immediate and the inferred.

Nemerov writes the kind of poetry that he admires in others: poems that demand ingenuity, that want to be read hard and that respond to close attention. Sometimes a single reader may feel that certain of the poems demand more ingenuity than he possesses, but there comes the conviction that eventually the hard meaning of the poems is assessible.

However, there is a paradox involved in Nemerov's practice. In several poems he seems to argue for a simplicity, as in "On Certain Wits,"

who amused themselves over the simplicity of Barnett Newman's paintings shown at Bennington College in May of 1958

When Moses in Horeb struck the rock,  
And water came forth out of the rock,  
Some of the people were annoyed with Moses  
And said he should have used a fancier stick.

---

And when Elijah on Mount Carmel brought the rain,
Where the prophets of Baal could not bring rain,
Some of the people said that the rituals of
the prophets of Baal
Were aesthetically significant, while Elijah's
were vary plain.

One could argue that it is simplicity in form that Nemerov
is espousing and if the experience itself is a complex
one, he cannot avoid a complex poetic idea.

The old painting masters manifest the quality of
simplicity that he admires, (the same quality he admires
in the makers of "word pictures"). In "Vermeer," he says:

Taking what is, and seeing it as it is,
Pretending to no heroic stances or gestures,
Keeping it simple; being in love with light
And the marvelous things that light is able to do,
How beautiful! a modesty which is
Seductive extremely, the care for daily things.
.......
If I could say to you, and make it stick,
A girl in a red hat, a woman in blue
Reading a letter, a lady weighing gold. ..
If I could say this to you so you saw,
And knew, and agreed that this was how it was
In a lost city across the sea of years,
I think we should be for one moment happy
In the great reckoning of those little rooms
Where the weight of life has been lifted and
made light. ..

Throughout Nemerov's own poetry, it can be truly said that
he "pretends to no heroic stance." As one critic has
noted, Nemerov writes about history from the point of view
of the losers. 6

6Julia Randall, "Genius of the Shore: The Poetry of
Howard Nemerov," (quoting Stanley Hyman), The Hollins
Critic, Vol. VI, No. 3, (June 1969), as found in Bowie
Duncan (ed.), The Critical Reception of Howard Nemerov,
In "To the Bleeding Hearts Association of American Novelists," he ridicules writers who

.. slop their ketchup in the statue's wounds
And advertise that blood as from the heart.

I like those masters better who expound
More inwardly the nature of our loss,
And only offhand let us know they've found
No better composition than a cross.

The satirical poem, "On the Threshold of His Greatness, the Poet Comes Down with a Sore Throat," is a tour de force that in its own comic, ironic way affirms simple, subtle technique, rather than the complicated. The poem is an obvious satire on some of Eliot's poetry and notes. Nemerov's poem is outweighed by the notes and as the final note ends, "poet and critic have agreed that these Notes will not merely adorn the Poem, but possibly supersede it altogether."

In a poem like "Lion and Honeycomb," though, there is an insistent, candid statement about simplicity, and about an art that can endure perhaps because of its simplicity. This is one of Nemerov's most successful poems and evidence of an older poet, one whose considerations are not now of technique, but of intuitive execution. The title comes from Judges 14, where Samson composes his riddle: "Out of the eater came something to eat;/out of the strong came something sweet." Perhaps one suggestion of the allusion is a recurring one for the poet: the curiosity of creating something beautiful or useful from
something of an opposing nature. Maybe another has to do with Samson himself. At the end of the first section of the poem, Samson might well have been asking himself, "what did he want?"

He didn't want do it with skill,
He'd had enough of skill. If he never saw
Another villanelle, it would be too soon;
And the same went for sonnets. If it had been
Hard work learning to rime, it would be much
Harder learning not to. The time came
He had to ask himself, what did he want?
What did he want when he began
That idiot fiddling with the sounds of things?

In the second stanza the poet asks himself about the importance of technique and form.

He asked himself, poor moron, because he had Nobody else to ask. The others went right on Talking about form, talking about myth And the (so help us) need for a modern idiom; The verseballs among them kept counting syllables.

This attitude towards an over-concern for technique is reminiscent of the remark of Gulley Jimpson, that ageing painter-genius of *The Horse's Mouth*.

Why. . .a lot of my recent stuff is not much better, technically, than any young lady can do after six lessons at a good school. Heavy-handed, stupid-looking daubery. Only difference is that it's about something--it's an experience, and all this amateur stuff is like farting Annie Laurie through a keyhole. It may be clever but is it worth the trouble... .Sit down and ask yourself what's it all about.7

Nemerov asks himself "what's it all about." He writes

that what he dreams for is "words that would/Enter the silence and be there as a light...something that could stand/On its own flat feet to keep out windy time/And the worm."

something that might simply be
Not as the monument in the smoky rain
Grimly endures, but that would be
Only a moment's inviolable presence,
The moment before disaster, before the storm,
In its peculiar silence, an integer
Fixed in the middle of the fall of things...

The integer associates itself with Samson's immortal strength and courage as he stood in the middle of the falling temple at Gaza.

* * * * *

Just as Nemerov's preferences as to the qualities of a good poem are clear, so is his affirmation of the difference between a life lived with imagination and the starkness of the one without. (This is not to say Nemerov's attitude toward the permanence of art does not fluctuate.) The disparity is sharp in a poem from The Salt Garden entitled "Truth," and not unlike what was true in "Lion & Honeycomb." The first part of the "Truth" describes the mental process wherein some idea finds its "objective" counterpart.

Around, above my bed, the pitch-dark fly Buzzed in the darkness till in my mind's eye His blue sound made the image of my thought An image that his resonance had brought Out of a common midden of the sun-- A garbage pit, and pile where glittering tin
Cans turned the ragged edges of their eyes
In a mean blindness on mine . . .

The mental landscape is without beauty; it is a wasteland. But through what seems to be the subterranean processes of the "secondary imagination" there is a magical transformation.

Between dream and guess
About a foundered world, about a wrong
The mind refused, I waited long, long,
And then that humming of the garbage heap
I drew beneath the surface of my sleep
Until I saw the helmet of the king
Of Nineveh, pale gold and glittering
On the king's brow, yet sleeping knew that I
But thought the deepening blue thought of the fly.

How is the "pale gold and glittering" helmet of the king of Nineveh related in the mind to the fly "out of a common midden of the sun"? Maybe it has to do with the Assyrian practice of collecting great spoils from their conquered cities and with the associated cruelty. One Assyrian king, Ashurnisirpal, was in the habit of cutting off the hands, feet, ears, and noses of the captives and raising mounds of human heads. Whatever the connection, the dross of the image in the first section of the poem is transmuted into the gold of the second section through the speaker's subterreanean processes.

The world of the imagination is not an escape from pain and death, valuable though the escape might be. As in "The Snow Globe," the associational links to the beautiful may be very somber.
A long time ago, when I was a child,
They left my light on while I went to sleep,
As though they would have wanted me beguiled
By brightness if at all; dark was too deep.

And they left me one toy, a village white
With the fresh snow and silently in glass
Frozen forever. But if you shook it,
The snow would rise up in the rounded space.

And from the limits of the universe
Snow itself down again. O world of white,
First home of dreams! Now that I have my dead,
I want so cold an emblem to rehearse
How many of them have gone from the world's light,
As I have gone, too, from my snowy bed.

The adult is seeking his "petites madeleines" and "magic lantern" as he seeks an emblem to understand the past.

The world of "Sleeping Beauty" is likewise a complicated one. A child is told the fairy tale of "Sleeping Beauty." Then he dreams of kings and queens. Of course, when the princess is kissed, all the people awaken and "begin to forget/Whatever they dreamed that was so like a dream" Then the speaker asks if he should forget that he was the source of the dream.

And shall I also, with the kiss, forget
That I was the one who dreamed them all,
Courtier and king, scullion and cook,
Horse in the stable and fly on the wall?
Forget the petals' whisper when they drift
Down where the untold princes die in blood
Because I dreamed the thicket and the thorn?

Shall he forget that he is the one who is the dreamer and is capable of making the dreams? But more difficult, shall he forget the sadness of the petals' whisper and the untold princes who die in blood? His dream is not just of princesses who wake, but of thickets and thorns.
"Sunglasses" presents only a qualified refuge. The sunglasses protect the speaker from the blinding light of the sun, and thus he is unpunished by the "outer world." This permits him to dream "unmolested," but his dream's pleasure is alloyed with despair.

Against my glass, all light is pacified  
Here where I lie in green gone deeper green,  
All colors colder; I, dreaming I died  
Where in still waters on illusion's coast  
The cold-eyed sirens sang to sailor men  
Of jewels that charred the zenith, and were lost.

His self-consciousness and wit never far away, the poet ridicules the experience of one fanticizer in "The Map-Maker on His Art." As in the poem "To Lu Chi," the active and the contemplative man are compared, but this kind of "contemplative man" does not fare so well.

After the bronzed, heroic traveler  
Returns to the television interview  
And cocktails at the Ritz, I in my turn  
Set forth across the clean, uncharted paper.  
Smiling a little at his encounters with  
Savages, bugs, and snakes, for the most part  
Skipping his night thoughts, philosophic notes,  
Rainy reflexions, I translate his trip  
Into my native tongue of bearings, shapes,  
Directions, distances.

.......

This my modest art  
Brings wilderness well down into the range  
Of any budget; under the haunted mountain  
Where he lay in delirium, deserted  
By his safari, they will build hotels  
In a year or two. I make no claim that this  
Much matters (they will name a hotel for him  
and none for me), but lest the comparison  
Make me appear a trifle colorless,  
I write the running river a rich blue  
And -- let imagination rage! -- wild green  
The jungles with their tawny meadows and swamps  
Where, till the day I die, I will not go.
Nemerov's attitude toward the permanence and value of the world and works of the imagination moves up and down a scale, from hope to pessimism. In "Lightning Storm on Fuji" he expresses the pessimistic end of the scale. The contemplative stance of the speaker is a typical one for this poet. He first offers his reflections on Hokusai's woodblock. The storm and lightning are in the foreground, and beyond Fuji rises in serenity, high above the violence below. This is art, clearly, he says, not nature.

A picture, then, touching eternity
From time, the way Fuji touches the sky,
Transparency, so that the summit might
Be substance thin enough to pierce with light.
The subject, you may say, is violence,
Or storm, and calm rising above the storm
To the region of serenity and splendor
Where earthly things are seen as a clear light.
This subject is imitated in the form.

Then the poet tells us he has been watching the woodblock for a long while and that from time to time he looks out the window at a small mountain in his native America, which is named after Mad Anthony Wayne, man of action and revolutionary general. The evening light fades and with it both mountains. What follows are some memorable lines by Nemerov:

Between eternity and time there is
Space for the terrible thought that
all things fail.
I try to think it through the evening, while
Shadows emerge and merge upon the mountain
And night grows up the slow flank heaved
like a wave
Out of the first fault of the ancient earth,
To hold in silence till another morning
The folded history which will dream away,
Defined or not in nature, action, art,
Mad Anthony and Hokusai and me.

The eternal value of art and the historical value of action seem to come to nothing during this particular meditative moment. Only the ancient earth appears to hold within itself the power to endure.

In much the same way that the speaker examines the woodblock, does he in "Shells" pick up and study the sea shell. It, too, is a thing of beauty and form, although it is also described as "empty and light and dry." The process of creating the shell by the mollusk is similar to the creating of a work of art by the artist.

The vital waste in composition
With the beauty of the ruined remainder.

And what of the meaning of this beautiful form? Does nature reveal herself in any fundamental way? If she does, it is very economically.

Its form is only cryptically
Instructive, if at all: it winds
Like generality, from nothing to nothing

By means of nothing but itself.

There is little here to be joyous about. And as in "Lightning Storm on Fuji" the poem concludes with a statement concerning the permanence of history and art.

It is a stairway going nowhere,
Our precious emblem of the steep ascent,

Perhaps, beginning at a point
And opening to infinity,
Or the other way, if you want it the other way.

Inside it, also, there is nothing
Except the obedient sound of waters
Beat by your Mediterranean, classic heart

In bloody tides as long as breath,
Bringing by turns the ebb and flood
Upon the ruining house of histories,

Whose whitening stones, in Africa,
Bake dry and blow away, in Athens,
In Rome, abstract and instructive as chalk

When children scrawl the blackboard full
Of wild spirals every which way,
To be erased with chalk dust, then with water.

It becomes apparent, however, that although Nemerov
may sometimes be skeptical about the permanence of art,
his work reveals a faith in the revelatory character of
art, especially art as a vehicle of insight into the
deep and beautiful processes of the natural world. Many
of the poems that we have looked at in this chapter are
evidence of this. While "Lightning Storm on Fuji" closes
on a skeptical note concerning permanence, Hokusai's con­
ception and execution of his vision of Fuji is a two-fold
revelation at least: one part concerning Fuji as an
object itself, and the second concerning the nature of
reality in a larger sense. In "Lion & Honeycomb" the
speaker declares that what he wants is "Words that would/
Enter the silence and be there as a light." This is part
of what Nemerov admires about the master's art in "Vermeer":
it can, by "Taking what is, and seeing it as it is" life
the weight of life and make it light (and I take his
"light" in both senses). In the last four lines of "The Blue Swallows," there is a testament of the powers of the imagination.

Finding again the world,
That is the point, where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

Finally, in "The Winter's Lightning" there is a lucid statement concerning art as revelation.

Over the snow at night,
And while the snow still fell,
A sky torn to the bone
Shattered the ghostly world with light;
As though this were the moon's hell,
A world hard as a stone,
    Cold, and blue-white.

As if the storming sea
Should sunder to its floor,
And all things hidden there
Gleam in the moment silently,
So does the meadow at the door
To split and sudden air
    Show stone and tree.

From the drowned world of dark
The sleeping innocence
Surrenders all its seeming;
Under the high, charged carbon are
Light of the world, a guilty sense
Stiffens the secret dreaming
    Animal park.

So in the camera's glare
The fortunate and famed,
For all their crooked smiles,
Reveal through their regarded stare
How all that's publicly acclaimed
One brutal flash reviles
    For cold despair.

So is the murderer caught
When his lost victim rises
Glaring through dream and light
With icy eyes. That which was thought
In secret, and after wore disguises,
Silts up the drowning sight
Mind inwrought.

So may the poem disparst
The mirror from the light
Where none can see a seam;
The poet, from his wintry heart
And in the lightning second's sight,
Illuminate this dream
With a cold art.

At this point an interesting comparison might be made to certain poems of Wallace Stevens. In an article "Wallace Stevens and the State of Winter Simplicity," George Lensing has singled out (among other poems) "The Snow Man," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters." He says about such poems that "winter represents that dimension of reality totally devoid of subjective imposition: the setting is 'crusted with snow' and 'the same bare place.' The 'mind of winter' is a psychic state toward which all subjective consciousness moves, in order to attain that position of identity with reality." There may be a question as to whether "winter" and "cold" in this context would have a similar meaning in the poem "The Winter's Lightning." As Mr. Lensing sees it, winter for Stevens would be a non-subjective vision and it might well be argued that this is the case in the poem by Nemerov. The poet asks for an art that will cause "all things hidden" to be revealed. And particularly he

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asks for an art that can reveal the difference in the
genuine source of the light and its reflection.

Meinke has called Nemerov a poet of "minimal affirma-
tion," but one positive attribute of his attitude in the
foregoing poems is that the arts, poetry especially, and
the life of the imagination are very valuable. The degree
of this value is perhaps heightened in the face of what
he considers a world where values do not come very easily.

There remains to consider what might be called the
sources of great poetry. In "Maestrai" Nemerov explores
the anomalies that seem to co-exist with mastery.

Maestria

Is where you find it,
And you need not agree with its views
About money or the meaning of numbers,
About the immaculate conception or the divine
Ancestry of Augustus.

Doubtless
It would be better to be always right, refraining
From those millennial expectations, but strangely,
Rising sometimes from hatred and wrong,
The song sings itself out to the end,
And like a running stream which purifies itself
It leaves behind the mortality of its maker,
Who has the skill of his art, and a trembling hand.

It is apparent that the attitude here is an undirected
rebuttal to Ruskin's thesis in The Stones of Venice that
the rise and fall of Venetian Gothic art depends on the
moral or immoral temper of the state. Obviously Nemerov
did not initiate the objections and questions that
"Maestria" raises. In the closing chapter of A Portrait
of the Artist as a Young Man Stephen Daedalus poses one of his famous questions that is related to the ideas in Nemerov's poem. "'If a man hacking in fury at a block of wood,' . . . 'make there an image of a cow, is that image a work of art? If not, why not?'" Whether a man is a Fascist or a Catholic, his poetry stands beyond ideology and contemporary politics insofar as he truly possesses "maestria." After the smoke has "blown off those battlefields," what of Shakespeare remains is not dependent upon his being a royalist or not, an Anglican or not. Therefore, by negation, propaganda of any sort is not the essential source of art, although clearly this may seem to be the beginning to the reader and artist alike sometimes.

So the source of great poetry is "maestria." And how does a young man know if he has maestria in order that he may be encouraged to write poetry? Well, he does not. When Nemerov addressed his fellow professionals at the Library of Congress on October 23, 1962, he had this to say that bears on our question:

"... that the poet may in fact be an inferior soul altogether is an occupational hazard. I mean only that when something comes to you to be dealt with according to such skill and energy as you may have to give it, you give it what you have; which may not be much, or nearly enough, but excludes for the time all thought of whether it will be acceptable to "the public"—an entity, I repeat, of which poets have very little opportunity of forming an image.

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The poet hopes to articulate a vision concerning human life; he hopes to articulate it truly. He may not be much of a poet, he may not be much of a human being, the vision perhaps is not so special either; but it is what he hopes to do. I stress his hoping to do so because much of the available evidence tells us that his effective control in the matter, his conscious will to do all this, may make no difference whatever, or none but a technical and executive difference—which I don't mean to slight, as it is not negligible, but it is not what I am talking about now.10

The source of poetry? For Nemerov it is just as mysterious as it has been for so many poets. The poet is under the power of his "Muse." And attempts to be much more specific than "Muse" are at best questionable. Somehow the vast subterranean labyrinth of the poet's mind does what it seems to have to do. Note that Nemerov says, "...much of the available evidence tells us that his effective control in the matter, his conscious will to do all this, may make no difference whatever."

From what can be gathered from the poems and from certain expository statements, Nemerov's ideas of poetry and the poetry making process find themselves a part and continuation of the modern tradition. This might have been anticipated from someone who has the high regard for learning and criticism that he has. And as he has noted, "we shall do well to learn all we can of what poetry is, and try to see by means of many examples how the art is constantly redefining itself."11

10 Poetry and Fiction: Essays, p. 45.
11 Ibid., p. vii.
CHAPTER IV
NEMEROV AS NATURE POET

Nemerov has noted that the character of his poetry changed after his second volume and that this change coincides with his move to the countryside of Vermont. From this point the landscape has taken over his poetry.¹ For Nemerov's public this was a felicitous turn, and in my own opinion, has been the source of his best work.

As he moved about the Vermont landscape, the poems that have come out of his experience are concrete testimony that what he finally sensed was a mystery. Somehow, though, the land "spoke" to him in the inexplicable way it has spoken to nature poets throughout the tradition of such poetry. One might take for example "A Spell before Winter."

After the red leaf and the gold have gone
Brought down by the wind, then by hammering rain
Bruised and discolored, when October's flame
Goes blue to guttering in the cusp, this land
Sinks deeper into silence, darker into shade.
There is a knowledge in the look of things,
The old hills hunch before the north wind blows.

Now I can see certain simplicities
In the darkening rust and tarnish of the time,
And say over the certain simplicities,
The running water and the standing stone,

The yellow haze of the willow and the black 
Smoke of the elm, the silver, silent light 
Where suddenly, readying toward nightfall, 
The sumac's candelabrum darkly flames. 
And I speak to you now with the land's voice, 
It is the cold, wild land that says to you 
A knowledge glimmers in the sleep of things: 
The old hills hunch before the north wind blows.

Many people have been awed by the exploding colors of a 
New England autumn. This poem speaks of the "simplicities" 
that follow such flamboyance after the tourists have gone. 
The poem embodies some themes familiar by now, themes an­
nounced by "running water and the standing stone," and 
this concern for a mysterious force that rests in the "sleep 
of things" is familiar from "Runes." In addition, Nemerov 
has noted about this poem that "To see certain simplicities 
and to say over the certain simplicities--they are in a 
sense the same thing; a philosopher of language tells us 
that see and say come from the same root, 'for to "say" is 
to make someone else "see" vicariously that which you have 
"seen.""^2

The particular relationship between the world of wild 
nature and the poet's sensibilities is not entirely clear 
to him, he writes, but nevertheless he is certain of part 
of its essence.

Having a dominantly aural imagination, I not 
so much look at nature as I listen to what it 
says. This is a mystery, at least in the sense 
that I cannot explain it--why should a phrase

^2Ibid., pp. 166-167.
come to you out of the ground and seem to be exactly right? But the mystery appears to me as a poet's proper relation with things, a relation in which language, that accumulated wisdom and folly in which the living and the dead speak simultaneously, is a full partner and not merely a stenographer. 3

I should like to consider the poems that reflect this "listening," whether they be listening to the force, listening in exaltation, or in the subdued hush that may follow "the darkening rust and tarnish of the time."

Instead of the ubiquitous "running stream" Nemerov in "Trees" chooses a metaphor of organic process. The trees communicate in the way good poems do, by being and not by explaining, leaving the education to the student.

To be a giant and keep quiet about it,
To stay in one's own place;
To stand for the constant presence of process
And always to seem the same;
To be steady as a rock and always trembling,
Having the hard appearance of death
With the soft, fluent nature of growth,
One's Being deceptively armored,
One's Becoming deceptively vulnerable;
To be so tough, and take the light so well,
Freely providing forbidden knowledge
Of so many things about heaven and earth
For which we should otherwise have no word--
Poems or people are rarely so lovely,
And even when they have great qualities
They tend to tell you rather than exemplify
What they believe themselves to be about,
While from the moving silence of trees,
Whether in storm or calm, in leaf and naked,
Night or day, we draw conclusions of our own,
Sustaining and unnoticed as our breath,
And perilous also--though there has never been
A critical tree--about the nature of things.

3Ibid., p. 166.
The poem mirrors the tree which mirrors the paradox of a world that seems to be "steady as a rock" but in fact is in flux, a tree which represents "the constant presence of process." The tree speaks by its silence about "which we should otherwise have no word," and this word concerns "forbidden knowledge." This revelation is "sustaining," but it is also "perilous." Such language sounds much like the romantic poet, but if so, it is not romantic in a traditional sense. Simply listening closely to what nature says is not enough to afix the label. Others have as much prerogative in this activity as the romantic. Certainly, too, the frequency of mirror imagery would in itself suggest a more mimetic attitude or stance. If one construes the term "romantic vision" to include a transcendental reality, then obviously Nemerov is not a romantic. The point of raising this is that Meinke has described one poem ("A Day on the Big Branch") as "a good example of Nemerov's attitude, which might be called realistic romanticism. That is, the poems seem to be composed by a romantic sensibility which is at the same time too analytical and too honest to see things other than as they really are." I think Meinke understands Nemerov's sensibility, but the terms he uses show a failure or breakdown in terminology. It may be more clarifying to avoid the term romantic altogether.

Man and the things of Man are humble in the face of the awesome force that is immanent in the reality of brute substance. It is never the attitude of the scientist as Faust. As a matter of fact, Nemerov's essay "The Dream of Reason" would seek to blunt the scientist's pride and sometimes arrogance as he (in this case the geneticist) seeks to "rule" Nature. In quite a different way the poet expresses his reverence for Nature in "Human Things."

When the sun gets low, in winter,
The lapstreaked side of a red barn
Can put so flat a stop to its light
You'd think everything was finished.

Each dent, fray, scratch, or splinter,
Any gray weathering where the paint
Has scaled off, is a healed scar
Grown harder with the wounds of light.

Only a tree's trembling shadow
Crosses that ruined composure; even
Nail holes look deep enough to swallow
Whatever light has left to give.

And after sundown, when the wall
Slowly surrenders its color, the rest
Remains, its high, obstinate
Hulk more shadowy than the night.

The poet's reverence for Nature might be said to take the form of a little drama. The action reflects a struggle between the man-made barn and the day and night of Nature. For three stanzas the lapstreaked side of the barn stops the light of day so that "you'd think everything was finished," and even the nail holes look deep enough to swallow the light. But in the fourth and final stanza the dramatic conflict is resolved as the wall "Slowly surrenders"
and becomes less substantial, even "more shadowy than the night."

"The End of Summer School" speaks of a different side of the natural energy. The poet articulates what many have been moved by as the seasons change, intensifying a movement that gives meaning to our lives. In this instance it is the sudden move towards autumn. The lyric voice notes the first few leaves that detach themselves from the branches and is surprised at "How strange and slow the many apples ripened/and suddenly were red beneath the bough." While noting the end of something, he also sees seeds drifting in the wind; early in the poem he observes that the "spider's web was cold," but later he notes baby spiders who sometimes even sail on the wind far out to sea. Of nature's dialectic he writes in the closing two stanzas.

This is the end of summer school, the change
Behind the green wall and the steady weather:
Something that turns upon a hidden hinge
Brings down the dead leaf and live seed together,

And of the strength that slowly warps the stars
To strange harbors, the learned pupil knows
How adamant the anvil, fierce the hearth
Where imperceptible summer turns the rose.

The metaphor of summer school which began quite literally as the end of the summer school semester becomes the "summer school" where one learns of experience and the universe, and most of all, of the mysterious force that is intrinsic to the world. The pupil who studies in this school learns of the terrible and awesome force that
"slowly warps the stars" and simultaneously possesses the gentlest control "Where imperceptible summer turns the rose."

Certain other poems might be said to group themselves around a feeling of joy and exaltation in the presence of wild creatures and wild landscape, just as the first group of poems emanate perhaps from a reflective awe in the presence of the natural energy. "The First Point of Aries" characteristically celebrates Spring, the title referring to the first sign of the zodiac, which the sun enters about March twenty-first.

After the morning of amazing rain
(How fiercely it fell, in slanting lines of light!)
A new breeze blew the clouds back to the hills,
And the huge day gloried in its gold and blue.

The road they walked was shoe-top deep in mud,
But the air was mild. And water of the spring,
The new, cold water, spread across the fields,
The running, the wind-rippled, the still-reflecting.

Life with remorseless joy possessed them then,
Compelling happiness beyond the power
Of prudence to refuse; perforce they gave
To splendor their impersonal consent.

What god could save them from this holy time?
The water, blinking in the sun's blue eye,
Watches them loiter on the road to death,
But stricken helpless at the heart with love.

It is seldom if ever that such exaltation will be unalloyed with an awareness of time passing or approaching death in Nemerov's poetry, but in this one it is not predominant. In the midst of this joy that compels them "beyond the power/Of prudence," the water which "Watches them loiter
on the road to death," is helpless somehow, when confronted with such joy or compelled to mirror such joy—stricken because its heart fills with love at such a sight.

Nemerov writes of spring seven years earlier in "Zalmoxis" (The Salt Garden), this time in a quieter, more meditative way. Spring reveals itself "with a soft/ Suddenness." It "softens/Coldly to life the leaves of pupal sleep." The speaker in the poem is in his study and he responds to these beginnings by throwing open the windows, letting the stale cigar smoke out and, "stares down the field to the wild hill/Where on this day the sullen and powerful bear,/Drunken with deathlessness, lurches from sleep."

The knowledge of some of the "factual" workings of the natural world does not blunt the imagination of the poet but seems to enhance it. "The Dragonfly" is a good example.

Under the pond, among rocks
Or in the bramble of the water wood,
He is at home, and feeds the small
Remorseless craving of his dream,

His cruel delight; until in May
The dream transforms him with itself
And from his depths he rises out,
An exile from the brutal night.

He rises out, the aged one
Imprisoned in the dying child,
And spreads his wings to the new sun:
Climbing, he withers into light.

The eggs of dragonflies are dropped in water or inserted into aquatic plants and the nymphs that are hatched remain
in the water from three months to five years. After many successive molts the adult dragonfly leaves the water. There is an obvious reference to this birth struggle. He imagines the mandatory dream of the nymph who waits out his sentence under water slowly "outgrowing himself." Finally spring lifts his sentence of "the brutal night" and the adult quite literally leaves the "body prison" of his younger self. There is, of course, a ruthlessness at the end of this dream of glory: as the dragonfly begins to feel his freedom, "he withers into light."

There are numerous poems like "The Dragonfly" that reflect an admiration for the courage, the mysterious will to live that establishes a kinship between all earthly creatures. Sea birds for example have often captured Nemerov's attention. One poem that celebrates this courage is "Sandpipers." At first their jerky motions on the beach remind him of funny human analogies, but then he says this comedy is different.

But this comedy is based upon exact Perceptions, and delicately balanced Between starvation and the sea: Though sometimes I have seen one slip and fall, From either the undertow or greed, And have to get up in the wave's open mouth, Still eating, I have never seen One caught; if necessary he spreads his wings, With white stripe, and flutters rather than flies Out, to begin eating again at once. Now they are over every outer beach, Procrastinating steadily southwards In endlessly local comings and goings.

In this comedy it is true that the sandpiper may "take a fall," but the comedy gets much closer to tragedy in the
way of a slip and fall of a Wallenda. The sandpiper is no buffon because he has exact perceptions and the whole action is "delicately balanced/Between starvation and the sea." What saves this tragedy is that the sandpiper gets up, even if he has to flutter instead of flying, and he gets up still eating.

But like humans who can seem comic one moment and glorious the next, the birds leave the poet rapt with admiration.

Whenever a flock of them takes flight,
And flies with the beautiful unison
Of banners in the wind, they are
No longer funny. It is their courage,
Meaningless as the word is when compared
With their thoughtless precisions, which strikes
Me when I watch them hidden and revealed
Between two waves, lose in the sea's
Lost color as they distance me; flying
From winter already, while I
Am in August. When suddenly they turn
In unison, all their bellies shine
Like mirrors flashing white with signals
I cannot read, but I wish them well.

The birds' movement first in the trough of high waves and then as they reveal themselves suddenly in ascendancy strikes the human observer as courageous, though he admits this is in fact meaningless as they take flight and wheel with a precision that is not self-conscious—a prerequisite of courage. This "admission" that their precision is "thoughtless" is additional evidence of Nemerov's rather consistent refusal to anthropomorphize their courage. Such a perspective is often called, too, non-romantic, although such ideas are more characteristic of romanticism at its
worse than at its best. The "bellies shine/Like mirrors flashing white with signals" that the Seer cannot interpret, but he does recognize that they resemble some kind of sign. From what we know of the body of Nemerov's work, these would be signs or "emblems" of the "rhythm" of process and flux, but not emblems of a transcendental reality.

Gulls often figure in Nemerov's nature poetry, one of the most notable examples being found in the often anthologized and often discussed poem "The Salt Garden." In that poem and in the following poem, "The Gulls," there is the beauty of the bird; but it is a complex beauty, a beauty combined with fierceness and brutal savagery.

I know them at their worst, when by the shore They raise the screaming practice of their peace, Disputing fish and floating garbage or Scraps of stale bread thrown by a child. In this, Even, they flash with senseless beauty more Than I believed--sweet are their bitter cries, As their fierce eyes are sweet; in their mere greed Is grace, as they fall splendidly to feed.

And sometimes I have seen them as they glide Mysterious upon a morning sea Ghostly with mist, or when they ride White water or the shattered wind, while we Work at a wooden oar and huddle inside Our shallow hull against the sea-torn spray; And there they brutally are emblems of Soul's courage, summoners to a broken love.

Courage is always brutal, for it is The bitter tooth fastens the soul to God Unknowing and unwilling, but as a vise Not to be torn away. In the great crowd, Because it gathers from such empty skies, Each eye is arrogant and each voice loud With angry lust; while alone each bird must be Dispassionate above a hollow sea.
White wanderers, sky-bearers from the wide
Rage of the waters! so may your moving wings
Defend you from the kingdom of the tide
Whose sullen sway beneath your journeyings
Wrinkles like death, so may your flying pride
Keep you in danger—bless the song that sings
Of mortal courage; bless it with your form
Compassed in calm amid the cloud-white storm.

The tension of the metaphor is not here between comedy
and courage, as in the "Sandpipers," but of a strange mixture of ugliness, brute appetite and, again, courage. Such a fabric, or complex, is similar to that found in poems like "Truth" and "The Town Dump." In these poems the juxtaposition of apparent disparities provides an unusual kind of knowledge or awareness. "The Town Dump" is introduced by the quotation "The art of our necessities is strange,/That can make vile things precious." Such an "alchemical" process likely finds its source in survival. The poet is certainly transmuting base experience into something beautiful. In this instance he says he knows these scavengers "at their worst" as they fight their fellows over floating garbage. But even in this barbarity "their mere greed/Is grace." But there is in the poem a rising curve of admiration for these creatures. As he finds himself bound to sea level, huddled "inside/Our shallow hull" the birds become emblems of "Soul's courage." The beauty of such courage is the theme of the poem and this beauty exalts the spirit of the man. In lines reminiscent of Tennyson's "The Eagle," the sea "wrinkles like death" below the gulls (which quite literally it may be for the gull if it is not quick.) Yet the poet urges the
bird's "flying pride" keep it in danger. Without this threat, and without death, meaning in this context vanishes and certainly the meaning of a virtue like courage. The bravery creates a fortress in the midst of the hostile storm. Even though the poet has "admitted" in "The Sandpipers" that to talk of "courage" is meaningless when compared to the birds' "thoughtless precisions," he identifies so closely with the threat to the gulls that he speaks of their "pride."

"Deep Woods" might serve to conclude this selection of poems that represent the feeling of joy and exaltation in the presence of wild creatures and wild landscape. Elsewhere it was noted that Nemerov speaks of living in an unsymboled world ("The Loon's Cry," "Blue Swallows," et al). From a different perspective the poet has a similar experience and it is the basis for a kind of peace, or even hope. The perspective is not one where the poet demythologizes the landscape around him, but one where mythology has not yet found roots. It is the landscape of New England woods that have never been settled or cut, virgin in many senses of the word. The poem begins, "Such places are too still for history." The poet notes that if others were to speak of these woods they would simply assume that these woods are like any other woods throughout history and throughout the world. But the poet denies this:

This unlegended land
Is no Black Forest where the wizard lived
Under a bent chimney and thatch of straw;  
Nor the hot swamp theatrical with snakes  
And tigers; nor the Chinese forest on  
The mountainside, with bridge, pagoda, fog,  
Three poets in the foreground, drinking tea  
(there is no tea, and not so many as three)––  
But this land, this, unmitigated by myth  
And whose common splendors are comparable only to  
Themselves ......................................

The gist of the poem is like the idea that drew early Americans to the "New Eden" that scholars have long recognized. This is a wilderness before sin and before Cain. The "New Eden" was to be a place to leave the weary troubles and fears of the corrupt Old World. The group of men who came to New England and to other parts of the United States is a kind of macrocosmic emblem of the single figure in "Deep Woods" who feels a relief as he contemplates the virgin woods. Nemerov writes:

But here the heart, racing strangely as though  
Ready to stop, reaches a kind of rest;  
The mind uneasily rests, as if a beast,  
Being hunted down, made tiredness and terror  
Its camouflage and fell asleep, and dreamed,  
At the terrible, smooth pace of the running dogs,  
A dream of being lost, covered with leaves  
And hidden in a death like any sleep  
So deep the bitter world must let it be  
And go bay elsewhere after better game.

The woods are not an unqualified refuge certainly. "The mind uneasily rests" and when it dreams, it dreams of being lost. Yet, "the bitter world must let it be/And go bay elsewhere after better game." Left alone the poet feels free to create his own myths: "And this is yours to work."
The last portion of the poem relates various possibilities that are linked with former legends and myths. As he
entertains these, the first says, "More probably nothing will happen," and at the end of his considerations, he concludes "Most probably/Nothing will happen." But as he continues this, the reader knows the difference between the first Adam before the Fall and this second Adam before the Fall. He is not innocent of the past, though his woods might be.

Even the Fall of Men
Is waiting, here, for someone to grow apples;
And the snake, speckled as sunlight on the rock
In the deep woods, still sleeps with a whole head
And has not begun to grow a manly smile.

Though the poet is not sentimentalizing the possibilities, the deep woods are a source of peace, troubled though it might be, and a refuge where "the bitter world must let it be."

THE ANAGOGE IS ALWAYS DEATH

The omnipresence of Nemerov's sense of death as integral to natural process is soon apparent to any reader. Such an awareness is obviously an attribute of any serious poet, but in Nemerov's case, the awareness of death permeates much of his work. It is significantly so with much of his poetry that is meditative, nature poetry. The emphasis may be on the imperturbability of nature in the presence of individual or particular ruin, as in "Midsummer's Day. The poet is struck by "This ruinous garden an old woman made/And fertilized with tea leaves and coffee grounds,[which] Is wild grass mostly, climbed up to the
thigh." After a fashion, he expresses an attitude similar to "Human Things," that the things men work at seem insignificant compared to nature's work.

I have looked out and seen the summer grow
Day after day between the cracked flags
Of the terrace where no one wishes to sit,
And thought of fortune and family, the fine rags
Brutal desire, poor patience, or a nice wit
Had made to be stitched together in a show
For everyone to marvel at, a pride
That must have been already withered inside.

The final stanza foretells a winter that is implicit in the hot fecundity of summer.

Ruin remains, and nature pays no mind.
This mind, that flesh is and will go like grass
In the brief stubble burnt at harvest or
In the sun's long stare, sees as though sealed in glass
The high and silent wave over the floor
Of summer come, casting up seed and rind;
And, held upon this hill, among the trees
Hears the loud forage of the honey bees.

Mind and flesh "will go like grass" and mind sees the summer "casting up seed and rind"; mind also hears the bees busy working to store up honey as nature moves them toward winter.

"The First Leaf" takes the reader further into the annual cycle than "Midsummer's Day." The attentive observer in the poem notices the first subtle change in the season as the life goes out of summer. The following poem is an example of the work which Nemerov achieved after moving to New England and which first appeared in The Salt Garden.

Here is one leaf already gone from green
To edged red and gold, a Byzantine
Illumination of the summer's page
Of common text, and capital presage
For chapters yet to fall. An old story,
How youth may go from glory into glory
Changing his green for a stiff robe of dry
Magnificence, taking the brilliant dye
From steeped oblivion; going, near a ghost,
Become a lord and captain of the host;
Or cardinal, in priestly full career,
Preach abstinence or at the most small beer.

Success is doubtful, you may be perplexed,
Reaching it rich, and old, and apoplexed
To bloody innocence, teaching the green
One of the things at least that life must mean,
And standing in the book of days a splen-did summary, rubric, index of the end,
Commerced with time to great advantage, high
And singular with instruction how to die--
And immortality, though life be cheap,
For the early turncoat and the Judas sheep.

This is "an old story" the poet says he tells--how youth
becomes instead the older generation and begins to talk in
advisory or ministerial tones. And nature has something
of value to teach. It may "preach abstinence," or that
"success is doubtful." In other lines the poet affirms
that this Byzantine illumination can teach "One of the
things at least that life must mean,/And standing in the
book of days a splen-did summary, rubric, index of the end"; this red and gold leaf is an emblem "with instruction
how to die." Thus, the anagoge of this rubric is death.

The poem ends with what seems to be an anti-climax,
or at least an idea that does not so much complete this
poem as start another one. What the lines say is a true
thing, and the idea is immanent surely in this first leaf
that is dying that it may acquire immortality by being
the first, but "turncoat" and "Judas sheep" seem
inappropriate. Perhaps Nemerov could not resist the "joke" and the opportunity of punning with "turncoat."

Dandelions are another occasion for reflection about the natural teleology. In the first eight lines of "Dandelions" the speaker is struck by "These golden heads" that are numerous and "shine as lovely as they're mean." But the present tense of the golden dandelions quickly becomes the future in the imagination of the poet. The last twenty lines of the poem are surely poignant, laden with the same sense of loss that one can find in Wordsworth:

Inside a week they will be seen
Stricken and old, ghosts in the field
To be picked up at the lightest breath,
With brazen tops all shrunken in
And swollen green gone withered white.
You'll say it's nature's price for beauty
That goes cheap; that being light
Is justly what makes girls grow heavy;
And that the wind, bearing their death,
Whispers the second kingdom come.
--You'll say, the fool of piety,
By resignations hanging on
Until, still justified, you drop.
But surely the thing is sorrowful,
At evening, when the light goes out
Slowly, to see those ruined spinsters,
All down the field their ghostly hair,
Dry sinners waiting in the valley
For the last word and the next life
And the liberation from the lion's mouth.

One element of the poem that Wordsworth likely would not have included (or risked) is the witty observation "that being light/Is justly what makes girls grow heavy," but I think this is an instance where the wit works quite well. It works perhaps exactly as Donne's wit does in his poetry.
Death as the anagoge takes several forms, and sometimes the effect is frightening and terrible (as it is not in "Dandelions," "Midsummer's Day," and "The First Leaf"). Two poems illustrate what I have in mind. One is "Between the Window and the Screen" from The Blue Swallows.

Between the window and the screen
A black fly climbed and fell
All day, then toward nightfall
Despaired and died.

Next morning there one tiny ant
Raced up and down the screen
Holding above his head
That huge black hulk.

I helped not, nor oversaw the end
Ordained to the black ant
Bearing the thin-winged heavy death
Aloft as a proud flag,

But write it out for you to read
And take what it may yield;
No harder emblem had
Achilles' shield.

Death here is a death of the predator and the scavenger. It is the kind of death which is so much more frightening because it reminds us of our own existence, that we too live on the death of plants and other animals. Joel Conarroe, after having noted that Nemerov had addressed a moving poem to Robert Frost ("For Robert Frost, in the Autumn in Vermont"), writes that "There is also an implicit tribute [to Frost], in 'Between the Window and the Screen,' which describes an ant holding a dead fly's wing above his head,
and is thus a sort of ebony 'Design.'

While agreeing about the implicit tribute, one might observe that there is no reason to interpret the lines to mean holding a dead fly's wing above his head, as the lines read "holding above his head/That huge black hulk." Later in the poem the ant holds aloft "the thin-winged heavy death" which I presume includes the whole fly. But this matter is not worth a fly perhaps. Conarroe's main observation is appropriate, though. In addition, there may be several possible associations that the poet makes with this scene and an emblem on Achilles' shield. There are many designs on the shield, certainly, and some of them dark. One of them, one recalls, pictures a warrior dragging a corpse through the crowd. Then, too, Achilles drags Hector about. Maybe a little too ingenious is the concern of Achilles that if he leaves to kill Hector, there will be no one to keep the flies away from his friend Patroclus' corpse (Thetis assuring him that she will).

Unquiet death that is terrible and frightening is also found in "These Words Also." The speaker has apparently chanced on what might be a letter from his wife's mother who is in turn writing about a girl, or even another

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daughter. The exact details may not matter, but what
does matter is the section of the letter the sunlight
causes to stand out: "'After a night of drink and too
much talk,/After the casual companions had gone home,/She did this. . . .'" A characteristic turning of the poet's
mind to his choice of analogy is illuminating here. The
analogy is quite dark, although there are strange beauties
even in the darkness.

The garden holds its sunlight heavy and still
As if in a gold frame around the flowers
That nod and never change, the picture-book
Flowers of somebody's forbidden childhood,
Pale lemony lilies, pansies with brilliant scowls
Pretending to be children. Only they live,
And it is beautiful enough, to live,
Having to do with hunger and reflection,
A matter of thresholds, of thoughtless balancings.

The black and gold morning goes on, and
What is a girl's life? There on the path
Red ants are pulling a shiny beetle along
Through the toy kingdom where nobody thinks.

Sudden, unanticipated death may cause several responses and
one certainly may be to affirm what is possible, minimal
though it might be: "And it is beautiful enough, to live."
But for those who are not inverterate optimists, a dark
counterpoint to this affirmation may accompany it--instead
of affirmation, a question. "What is a girl's life? There
on the path/Red ants are pulling a shiny beetle along/
Through the toy kingdom where nobody thinks."

These curious twins of beauty and death occupy an im-
portant place in Nemerov's mental landscape and reveal his
permanent convictions. That these two facts, beauty and death, exist may be the root of the "impulsion" to write in the first place. The poet has said as much in an address before the National Poetry Festival. His final sentence in that address was, "We write, at last, because life is hopeless and beautiful." This same attitude is found in a poem that is often read by people in public performances and is a moving experience: "The View from an Attic Window." The first section of the poem relates how the speaker, standing at an attic window, watches the leafless trees and the falling snow. Something in the common occurrence of these two things moves him and he says that he cried and fell asleep, only to wake in the darkness of night. The second section of the poem is an "explanation," or reflection on this experience:

I cried because life is hopeless and beautiful.
And like a child I cried myself to sleep
High in the head of the house, feeling the hull
Beneath me pitch and roll among the steep
Mountains and valleys of the many years
Which brought me to tears.

Down in the cellar, furnace and washing machine,
Pump, fuse-box, water heater, work their hearts
Out at my life, which narrowly runs between
Them and this cemetery of spare parts
For discontinued men, whose hats and canes
Are my rich remains.

And women, their portraits and wedding gowns
Stacked in the corners, brooding in wooden trunks;
And children's rattles, books about lions and clowns;
And headless, hanging dresses swayed like drunks
Whenever a living footstep shakes the floor;
I mention no more;

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But what I thought today, that made me cry,
Is this, that we live in two kinds of things:
The powerful trees, thrusting into the sky
Their black patience, are one, and that branching
Relation teaches how we endure and grow;
   The other is the snow,

Falling in a white chaos from the sky,
As many as the sands of all the seas,
As all the men who died or who will die,
As stars in heaven, as leaves of all the trees;
As Abraham was promised of his seed;
   Generations bleed,

Till I, high in the tower of my time
Among familiar ruins, began to cry
For accident, sickness, justice, war and crime,
Because all died, because I had to die.
The snow fell, the trees stood, the promise kept,
   And a child I slept.

This is the vision of the attentive and obedient poet.
As he listens and watches the world outside, he does not
flinch and deny either the beauty of life and growth in
the face of the snow, and death, nor does the splendor
of the beautiful blind him to the inevitable. "The snow
fell, the trees stood," but also "the promise kept,"
recalling the promise to Abraham that his descendants would
be many and blessed. Thus, not only does he recall the
non-human, living world but the mortal, human race as well.
Nemerov's poetry divides itself between contemplative poetry, which most often springs from his encounter with nature, and satiric poetry that finds its nourishment in disparities and paradoxes that reveal themselves in the urban scene. Often such poems take the form of jokes—so say some of the critics, disparingly, and so says Nemerov, but with an explanation.

It sometimes seems to me as though our relations with the Devil have reached that place, so near the end where paradox appears immediately in all phenomena, so that, for example, the increase of life is the fated increase of mortal suffering, the multiplication of the means of communication is the multiplication of meaninglessness, and so on. At the obsequies for the late President of the United States the "eternal flame" was extinguished by holy water in the hands of children; in the material world that may have been an unfortunate accident, but in the poetic world, where one is compelled to listen to symbolic things, it appears as possibly a final warning, a witty and indeed diabolical underlining of the dire assassination itself.

So if paradox and accenting the hidden side of the paradoxical has always played such a part in my poetry, perhaps the seriousness of that view of life, its necessity even, may now begin to appear. The charge typically raised against my work by literary critics has been that my poems are jokes, even bad jokes. I incline to agree, insisting however that they are bad jokes, and even terrible jokes, emerging from the nature of things as well as from my propensity for coming at things a touch subversively and from the blind side, or
the dark side, the side everyone concerned with "values" would just as soon forget.¹

Even though there appears to be a division in the body of the poet's work, he at least sees a unity.

Principally, in this chapter, I would like to take note of Nemerov's urban landscape: the parts that make him laugh, even if it means a subsequent kick in the stomach, and the parts that make him quietly rage. Often, as I have noted, the observations take the form of some kind of joke, though certainly this is not always so.

A number of the poems that embody jokes are grouped in a section of The Blue Swallows called "The Great Society." The second poem of the group illustrates a persistent ironic quality of this part of Nemerov's work.

SUNDAY

He rested on the seventh day, and so
The chauffeur had the morning off, the maid
Slept late, and the cook went out to morning mass.
So by and large there was nothing to do
Among the ashtrays in the living room
But breathe the greyish air left over from
Last night, and go down on your knees to read
The horrible funnies flattened on the floor.

It's still a day to conjure with, if not
Against, the blessed seventh, when we get
A chance to feel whatever He must feel,
Looking us over, seeing that we are good.
The odds are six to one He's gone away;
It's why there's so much praying on this day.

The time and place are familiar in modern poetry, a Sunday where the character or characters are not taking part

in the ritual of the culture. Eliot's "Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" and Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning" are of course the most famous of such poems and much more elaborate than Nemerov's. In addition, Stevens' goes on to a kind of affirmation that is not evident in Nemerov's. In this one "The odds are six to one He's gone away."
Perhaps, the speaker muses, we feel similar to God, since both of us are resting on the seventh day, but he suspects God is not in God's house, as he is in his.

There are several senses in which this poet can be described as "religious," although not in a conventional way. If a deep concern for the world and even for metaphysics is religious, then truly Nemerov is. But it is also true that he persistently takes a few shots at organized religion. This is true of his own faith, and others as well, for instance in "Debate with the Rabbi":

You've lost your religion, the Rabbi said.
   It wasn't much to keep, said I.
You should affirm the spirit, said he,
And the communal solidarity.
   I don't feel so solid, I said.

We are the people of the Book, the Rabbi said.
   Not of the phone book, said I.
Ours is a great tradition, said he,
And a wonderful history.
   But history's over, I said.

We Jews are creative people, the Rabbi said.
   Make something, then, said I.
In science and in art, said he,
Violinists and physicists have we.
   Fiddle and physic indeed, I said.
Stubborn and stiff-necked man! the Rabbi cried.
The pain you give me, said I.
Instead of bowing down, said he,
You go on in your obstinacy.
We Jews are that way, I replied.

Although the idea "behind" the poem is a serious one, this could be described as "light verse." If such verse were the sole achievement of the poet, it would not be enough to create the reputation that he has. With this said, it can be observed that such verse complements his lyric voice and makes a different kind of statement. The rabbi's opponent will not be persuaded by categorical imperatives that he does not feel. He cannot affirm a "communal solidarity" because he does not "feel so solid." This play on words offers a kind of revelation that Nemerov is quick to point out shares a commonality with the lyric. His essay "Bottom's Dream: The Likeness of Poems and Jokes" explores this commonality.

...one mechanism of economy in joking is the pun, either in the use of one word in two senses...or in the use of two words of similar sound which mean different things but still somehow establish a resemblance beyond that of the sound.

Concerning jokes he says:

A joke expresses tension, which it releases in laughter; it is a sort of permissible rebellion against things as they are--permissible, perhaps, because this rebellion is at the same time stoically resigned, it acknowledges that things are as they are, and that they will, after the moment of laughter, continue to be that way. That is why jokes concentrate on the most sensitive areas of human
concern: sex, death, religion, and the most powerful institutions of society; and poems do the same.\(^2\)

Thus, the rabbi's opponent says he does not feel solid, either in his belief or in his hunch about himself and the world, thus he is unable to affirm "communal solidarity." The rabbi attempts to entice by an appeal to tradition, but his opponent insists that history is over, which it obviously is, but less obviously, the opponent thinks, the past should not tyrannize the present, an omnipresent theme of Nemerov's.

As Nemerov searches the modern terrain he insists that "bad jokes, even terrible jokes" emerge from the nature of things and the nature of the "Great Society." In a vein that sustains this criticism of the contemporary Church, he has written a poem called Boom! which was inspired by the daily newspaper. The passage in the Associated Press release that struck Nemerov was the following.

Atlantic City, June 23, 1957 (AP). - President Eisenhower's pastor said tonight that Americans are living in a period of "unprecedented religious activity" caused partially by paid vacations, the eight-hour day and modern conveniences.

"These fruits of material progress," said the Rev. Edward L. R. Elson of the National Presbyterian Church, Washington, "have provided the leisure, the energy, and the means for a level of human and spiritual values never before reached."

The idea of opulence leading to spiritual values, values that had their origin in austerity, pain and suffering, jars the poet's sensibilities. The poem begins:

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 12.
Here at the Vespasian-Carlton, it's just one religious activity after another; the sky is constantly being crossed by cruciform airplanes, in which nobody disbelieves for a second, and the tide, the tide of spiritual progress and prosperity miraculously keeps rising, to a level never before attained. The churches are full, the beaches are full, and the filling-stations are full, God's great ocean is full of paid vacationers praying an eight-hour day to the human and spiritual values, the fruits, the leisure, the energy, and the means, Lord, the means for the level, the unprecedented level, and the modern conveniences, which also are full.

The effect of asserting that the "churches are full" is rapidly neutralized by noting that everything else is full. Besides beaches and filling-stations, all the modern "conveniences" are full, with the suggestion that a particular "convenience" that we fill daily is now running over with shit. Much like the minister's observations. The poem, of some forty-five lines, continues to build up details of the affluent society, but midway in the poem the poet notes tersely: "It was not thus when Job in Palestine/sat in the dust and cried, cried bitterly." Nemerov would insist that if there are "jokes" in his poems, surely there is a horrible joke in the reality of the daily newspaper article.

Such observations on the part of the minister, but repetitously in newspapers and magazines, are additionally dangerous to our culture because such speech takes on the effect of idolatry and dogma. Nemerov is very suspicious of unexamined habits of thinking, or unexamined traditions and shibboleths. He writes:
The thought of statues as representing a false, historical immortality seems clearly related to the scriptural prohibition against the making of graven images: and the category in which the statues finally come, which I generalized out as "effigies," may include also photographs, mythological figures such as Santa Claus, even mannequins in shop windows, or anything that tends to confirm the mind in a habitual way of regarding the world, which habitual way is, to be short with it, idolatry. There are many examples in my work, and I have chosen one which represents newspapers, by a slight extension of the thought, as a sort of verbal effigies, idolatrously confirming human beings day after day in the habit of a mean delusion and compelling them to regard this mean delusion as their sole reality. I say this halfway as a joke with the name of a newspaper, The Daily Globe.3

The poem "The Daily Globe" elaborates his criticism:

Each day another installment of the old
Romance of Order brings to the breakfast table
The paper flowers of catastrophe.
One has this recurrent dream about the world.

Headlines declare the ambiguous oracles,
The comfortable old prophets mutter doom.
Man's greatest intellectual pleasure is
To repeat himself, yet somehow the daily globe

Rolls on, while the characters in comic strips
Prolong their slow, interminable lives
Beyond the segregated photographs
Of the girls that marry and the men that die.

Nemerov says that for the benefit of foreign audiences he
would point out that obituary pages in this country are
almost exclusively of men and the matrimonial pages ex-
clusively of girls. Nemerov things that such habitual
ways of regarding the world, described in the poem, are on
the increase. One of the functions of the poet then is

3Ibid., pp. 170-171.
to help Man see the world freshly. One way that poets have always done this is "hold up a mirror" so that man may see himself, his own nature and the Nature that is outside him. Nemerov notes that "if my poetry does envision the appearance of a new human nature, it does so chiefly in sarcastic outrage, for that new human nature appears in the poetry merely as a totalitarian fixing of the old human nature, whose principal products have been anguish, war, and history."\(^4\) Nemerov's satiric mirror helps man to see himself as he is, and the mirror held up to nature puts him in touch with the currents of Being. If the "anagoge" is always death, such an observation will help man to live. As many sages have already pointed out, one who is aware in an acute way that he is going to die will likely live his life differently from one who is forgetful of this. "Had we but world enough and Time"; but we do not, Marvell reminds us.

Nemerov has noted that makers of jokes and smart remarks resemble poets in another way in that they would also be "excluded from Plato's Republic; for it is of the nature of Utopia and the Crystal Palace, as Dostoevsky said, that you can't stick your tongue out at it.\(^5\) Turning

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 171
\(^5\)Ibid., p. 12.
from the Church to politics, I might select three or four short instances where the poet's tongue is showing.  

No bars are set too close, no mesh too fine
To keep me from the eagle and the lion,
Whom keepers feed that I may freely dine.
This goes to show that if you have the wit
To be small, common, cute, and live on shit,
Though the cage fret kings, you may make free
with it.

So much for the lower end of the political scene, with its hangers-on and opportunists.

Another poem, "The Iron Characters," in one way takes up the other end of the political spectrum, but part of its theme is a kind of commonality that is shared by the great and small.

The iron characters, keepers of the public confidence,
The sponsors, fund raisers, and members of the board,
Who naturally assume their seats among the governors,
Who place their names behind the issue of bonds
And are consulted in the formation of cabinets,
The catastrophes of war, depression, and natural disaster:
They represent us in responsibilities many and great.
It is no wonder, then, if in a moment of crisis,
Before the microphones, under the lights, on a great occasion,
One of them will break down in hysterical weeping
Or fall in an epileptic seizure, or if one day
We read in the papers of one's having been found Naked and drunk in a basement with three high school boys,
Or one who jumped from the window of his hospital room.
For are they not as ourselves in these things also?
Let the orphan, the pauper, the thief, the derelict drunk

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6 The first such example was published in Mirrors and Windows as part of a series of "Epigrams" and was called "VI Political Reflexion, loquitur the sparrow in the zoo." Later when it was collected in the New and Selected it was given the title "The Sparrow in the Zoo."
And all those of no fixed address, shed tears of rejoicing
For the broken minds of the strong, the torn flesh of the just.

There is a tension of sentiment in the poem that insists on our reflection here. The "iron characters" do represent us in responsibilities and because this is so, they are the "keepers of the public confidence." When Nemerov selects certain very pathetic and awful moments when the keepers of the confidence break, it is not done with malice. On only one of the occasions would the newspaper reader feel occasioned to laugh: the figure found naked and drunk with high school boys because our nervous attitude about sexual mystery quickly finds its outlet in some kind of laughter—sometimes. It may be the recent case of Profumo in England or Senator Kennedy in the United States. But these are "horrible jokes" that are no jokes. Thus, there is the sentiment of sympathy obvious in the selection. On the other hand, there is an ironic "pleasure" or affirmation for "all those of no fixed address" when they discover that the mighty are made of flesh also. Surely it is ironic that the orphan and the pauper should shed "tears of rejoicing/For the broken minds of the strong, the torn flesh of the just." The "tears of rejoicing" are shed simply because of a commonality or brotherhood that becomes apparent when the characters cease being "iron," and appear as all too human.
"To the Governor & Legislature of Massachusetts" is turned out with a livelier hand than the preceding poem, and incidentally reflects a part of recent Americana, that following the McCarthy era and the great Communist scare. University professors, among many others, found themselves being forced to sign "security oaths" and to promise that they would not overthrow the government. Apparently this happened to Nemerov:

When I took a job teaching in Massachusetts
I didn't know and no one told me that I'd have to sign
An oath of loyalty to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.
Now that I'm hooked, though, with a house
And a mortgage on the house, the road ahead
Is clear: I sign. But I want you gentlemen to know
That till today it never once occurred to me
To overthrow the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
By violence or subversion, or by preaching either.
But now I'm not so sure. It makes a fellow think
Can such things be? Can such things be in the very crib
Of our liberties, and East of the Hudson, at that?

So if the day come that I should shove the Berkshire Hills
Over the border and annex them to Vermont,
Or snap Cape Cod off at the elbow and scatter
Hyannis to Provincetown beyond the twelve-mile limit,
Proclaiming apocalypsopetls to my pupils
And with state troopers dripping from my fingertips
Squeaking "You promised, you broke your promise!"
You gentlemen just sit there with my signature
And keep on lawyer-talking like nothing had happened,
Lest I root out that wagon tongue on Bunker Hill
And fungo your Golden Dome right into Fenway Park
Like any red-celled American boy ought to done
Long ago in the first place, just to keep in practice.

Perhaps incidental to the poem, there is here an example of Nemerov as liberal, which he certainly is. While he handles the theme with wild hyperbole, there is a reasonable degree of serious anger. This is another occasion of the bad
jokes that he insists constantly emerge from the contem­porary ruins.

"The Murder of William Remington" expresses the poet's horror on hearing that a man was beaten to death in jail and this incident causes him to reflect about the function of the law and punishment, that perhaps much punishment is a grim joke the majority play on the few.

There is the terror too of each man's thought,
That knows not, but must quietly suspect
His neighbor, friend, or self of being taught
To take an attitude merely correct;
Being frightened of his own cold image in
The glass of government, and his own sin,

Frightened lest senate house and prison wall
Be quarried of one stone, lest righteous and high
Look faintly smiling down and seem to call
A crime the welcome chance of liberty,
And any man an outlaw who aggrieves
The patriotism of a pair of thieves.

"The Great Society, Mark X" picks up the phrase that was coined during the Johnson years, years that have signalled to Americans that their society may have rents in the fabric. The affluence following World War II seemed to create as many problems as it solved, or it may have simple given Americans the leisure to reflect on them. Ralph Nader came along during the years of "The Great Society" with his expose of General Motors, and it may be that since the assembly line with its association of the Ford's Model T helped to usher in the era of mass production that gives a foundation to the present affluent society, it is appropriate that Nemerov chooses an automobile that
is falling apart to embody the erosion of the society.

The engine and transmission and the wheels
Are made of greed, fear, and invidiousness
Fueled by super-pep high octane money
And lubricated with hypocrisy,
Interior upholstery is all handsewn
Of the skins of children of the very poor,
Justice and mercy, charity and peace,
Are optional items at slight extra cost,
The steering gear is newsprint powered by
Expediency but not connected with
The wheels, and finally there are no brakes.

However, the rear-view mirror and the horn
Are covered by our lifetime guarantee.

The criticism of the society in this poem has been heard
with much greater frequency in the intervening years, as,
some feel, the wealth continues to accumulate in the hands
of the powerful few. This is the articulated voice of
a liberal. "Interior upholstery is all handsewn/Of the
skins of children of the very poor," is a bit melodramatic,
but the last three lines are, I think, the most haunting.
A contemporary American despair derives from the fear that
there is no way of stopping the monolith, that "there are
no brakes." It is yet to be seen whether the "automobile"
can be steered by anything but expediency, or whether the
machine will have to be destroyed and a new one built.
Two things are guaranteed: there is a rear-view mirror
through which we can see the wreckage-strewn past and see
where we have been, and a frightening horn that can only
blow, hoping everyone will get out of the way. All in all,
this is a terrible, mad-cap machine.
The poet continues to examine the nature of greed, invi­diousness, and injustice in "Money." The figure he exam­ines is the "buffalo" nickel that is now out of circulation. As Nemerov recalls for us, there was a standing buffalo on one side and the face of an Indian on the other. As for the buffalo, "one side shows a hunchbacked bison/
Bending his head and curling his tail to accommodate/The circular nature of money." The main effect of this is to accentuate the overpowering influence of money but it is another reminder of the way greed and unawareness "influ­enced" the buffalo almost right out of existence. By extension, modern industrial society has temporarily made the natural world "accommodate" itself to a very demanding will. Temporarily, because as we are now aware, it was with a price that we may not be able to pay back.

As to the figure of the Indian:

And on the other side of our nickel
There is the profile of a man with long hair
And a couple of feathers in the hair; we know
Somehow that he is an American Indian, and
He wears the number nineteen-thirty-six.
Right in front of his eyes the word LIBERTY, bent
To conform with the curve of the rim, appears
To be falling out of the sky first; the Indian
Keeps his eyes downcast does notice this . . .

Wearing the number nineteen-thirty-six has the association of a prisoner, which of course the Indian was and to some extent continues to be; at the same time there is the association of "his days are numbered" or at least his numbers are scarce. Right before the Indian's eyes, the
nature of money "bends" or perverts any real notion of liberty. In just one or two lines the poet reminds us of much of our American past that we are not proud of, and helps to clarify what many have known about one kind of laissez faire, and that is it often means "Devil-take-the-hindmost."

This poem is also an example of the danger any poet runs, and that is over-writing, or once something has been said, to then take up the expansive process of prose and continue to explain. The passage I have just excerpted was quite enough, I think. But Nemerov goes on to explain, "The representative American Indian was destroyed/A hundred years or so ago, and his descendants'/Relations with liberty are maintained with reservations,/Or primitive concentration camps." While not commenting specifically on this poem, Miller Williams has noted in a review of Blue Swallows, from which "Money" is taken, that "While the beginnings and resolutions of almost all Nemerov's poems are as tight as good craftsmanship can make them, a number have a curious way of going loose in rhythm and almost rambling in the middle, so that the reader has the feeling of crossing a suspension bridge. These are faults, if I read fairly; but they are moved over without serious stumbling, and sometimes are no more than the peculiar mark of the man." The passage from "Money" supports this contention.

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7 Miller Williams, "Transactions with the Muse," Saturday Review (March 9, 1968), as found in Bowie Duncan (ed.),
My own hunch is that this sort of thing occurs more frequently in the satiric poetry about the contemporary urban scene than it does with the more meditative poetry. This may be because abstract ideologies (political or otherwise) are more difficult to turn into poetic images than the quieter insights that Nature may provide. Of course it might be maintained that Nature's insights are not all quiet.

In addition to areas of the Church, the State, and war (which are amply treated in the early volumes but which I shall pass over), there are several poems that reflect his attitudes about race. The first, an example of the terrible jokes that present themselves to the poet and which he continues to joke about, in a serious way, is entitled "A Negro Cemetery Next to a White One."

I wouldn't much object, if I were black,
To being turned away at the iron gate
By the dark blonde angel holding up a plaque
That said White Only; who would mind the wait

For those facilities? And still it's odd,
Though a natural god-given civil right,
For men to throw it in the face of God
Some ghosts are black and some darknesses white.

But since they failed to integrate the earth,
It's white of them to give what tantamounts
To it, making us all, for what that's worth,
Separate but equal where it counts.

After musing on the anomaly of a Christian turning another human being away because of color, the poet turns the situation further on its head and with irony by inversion observes

that the earth is integrated surely in the end as the elements mix themselves and where on one's elements are separate, though truly they are equal.

The poem "A Picture" engages the racial problem in another way and the revelation of this poem is I think of a profounder order. The scene, from a photo in a newspaper is the image of a group of people running down a city street after something; the first part of the poem isolates several of the people with comment, one a man in a "fat white shirt" who is "dutifully/Running along with all the others," and then:

The running faces did not record
Hatred or anger or great enthusiasm
For what they were doing (hunting down
A Negro, according to the caption),
But seemed rather solemn, intent,
With the serious patience of animals
Driven through a gate by some
Urgency out of the camera's range,
On an occasion too serious
For private feeling. The breathless faces
Expressed a religion of running,
A form of ritual exaltation
Devoted to obedience, and
Obedient, it might be, to the Negro,
Who was not caught by the camera
When it took the people in the street
Among the cars, toward some object,
Seriously running.

So much of the powerful inherited legacy of Man the animal, Man the descendant of *australopithecus africanus*, is rendered in this very haunting scene. The ritual of running is acted out as a matter of great solemnity, in the way a pack of hounds follows its prey with single-mindedness, a community effort. In the way that hounds are "driven,"
although they seem to drive, the people are "Devoted to obedience, and/Obedient, it might me, to the Negro,/Who was not caught by the camera." The poet's intelligence roves the contemporary landscape, in this instance an urban one, discovering strange rents in the fabric of civilization, rents that often appear to resemble bad jokes.

Another poem concerning race (of course all these poems embody more than a racial theme) but which does not fall into the category of jokes is "The Sweeper of Ways." The poet himself has written about the poem in his last collection of essays. The occasion for the poem was one of his habitual meetings with a Negro man who swept the sidewalk of leaves at a school where they both worked. Part of the poem reflects a middle-class, liberal embarrassment that anyone has to do work at menial jobs because of his background and not because of his potential. The speaker reflects:

Masters, we carry our white faces by
In silent prayer, Don't hate me, on a wavelength which his broom's antennae perfectly
Pick up, we know ourselves so many thoughts
Considered by a careful, kindly mind
Which can do nothing, and is doing that.

Nemerov has commented that "This kindly old man exemplifies a wrong in society. I didn't do it, but I have to feel responsible. And I detest about society this constant enforcing upon its members feelings of responsibility which are also deeply hopeless and despairing, so that one guilt evokes another, without remedy or end. For even if you could correct the future, what about the past? Many
And the poet is mightily impressed with the patience and apparent lack of bitterness.

Three other poems gradually pull back from specific areas of man's experience until the perspective is quite wide. The first of these, "Cybernetics," is in a fashion directed to someone who is ready to build a human brain, but in substance the poem is much more about the nature of Man and his history. There is only profound, respectful admiration for Man's complexity and his capabilities. The poet notes that for a cyberneticist to make a human brain, he would have to start with an area as big as Central Park and it would cost a little more than the Nineteen Fifty-Nine Gross National Product. He continues to enumerate many other problems the cyberneticist will have as he goes about his project. He observes (and at the same he cannot resist a pun) that the brain "must, of course, be absolutely free,/That's been determined." In the midst of its freedom, it is threatened with "yesterday's disasters" and must at the same time "assure itself, by masterful/Administration of the unforeseen,/That everything works according to plan." Out of the tension may be achieved that which permits Man to endure: "something between/The flood of power and the drouth of fear:/A mediocrity, or golden mean,/Maybe at best the stoic apatheia." Further, if one intends to build a brain, he must install a "limiting

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8 Reflexions on Poetry and Poetics, p. 163.
tradition, / Which may be simple and parochial / (A memory of Main Street in the sunlight)" and the tradition should be as unequivocal as "'God will punish me if I suck my thumb.'"

If the brain-maker wants something rather elaborate, he can have it, but he must understand that this could be expensive.

It runs you into much more money for
Circuits of paradox and contradiction.
Your vessels of antinomian wrath alone
Run into millions; and you can't stop there,
You've got to add at every junction point
Auxiliary systems that will handle doubt,
Switches of agony that are On and Off
At the same time, and limited-access
Blind alleys full of inefficient gods
And marvelous devils.

And in the closing section of the poem, the speaker addresses the budding cyberneticist with irony that may be appropriate to someone who is now taking on the powers of Creator.

O helmsman! in your hands how equal now
Weigh opportunity and obligation.
A chance to mate those monsters of the Book,
The lion and serpent hidden from out sight
Through centuries of shadowed speculation.
What if the Will's a baffled, mangy lion,
Or Thought's no adder but a strong constrictor?
It is their offspring that we care about,
That marvelous mirror where our modest wit
Shall show gigantic. Will he uproot cities,
Or sit indoors on a rainy day and mope?
Will he decide against us, or want love?
How shall we see him, or endure his stride
Into our future bellowing Nil Mirari
While all his circuits click, propounding new
Solutions to the riddle of the Sphinx?

Some reviewers have commented on Nemerov's negativism, or
in Meinke's words his "minimal affirmation." But over and
over again Nemerov emphatically affirms Man, and to use his own words, he is a poet who "has got so far as to believe in the existence of the world."\(^9\) This is not the same thing as saying that he sentimentalizes the goodness of Man and neglects Man the beast. But who would believe a poet, or take him seriously, if he did offer such a sweeping "affirmation"? It seems to me that "Cybernetics" is just such a poem that admits Man's fantastic complexity and yet tacitly admires the courage he does show in the face of what he must confront. He chides the budding scientist for not being aware of just what he may be embarking on, and in so doing Nemerov affirms Man.

"A Primer of the Daily Round" does not require any "explication," because it makes its statement clearly enough, but it is a delightful short poem and ends, to use a word that one has to use often with Nemerov, hauntingly:

A peels an apple, while B kneels to God,
C telephones to D, who has a hand
On E's knee, F coughs, G turns up the sod
For H's grave, I do not understand
But J is bringing one clay pigeon down
While K brings down a nightstick on L's head,
And M takes mustard, N drives into town,
O goes to bed with P, and Q drops dead,
R lies to S, but happens to be heard
By T, who tells U not to fire V
For having to give W the word
That X is now deceiving Y with Z,
Who happens just now to remember A
Peeling an apple somewhere far away.

The last two lines are evidence of Miller Williams' earlier remarks that the "resolutions of almost all Nemerov's poems are as tight as good craftsmanship can make them." This poem, along with the next, is often selected for public readings, because they lend themselves to a first "hearing."

"Life Cycle of Common Man" is specifically about the "average consumer of the middle class." Nemerov estimates some of the consumables, ("Just under half a million cigarettes/Four thousand fifths of gin and about/A quarter as much vermouth"), and the cost of putting him through life, his parents' investment and "How many beasts/Died to provide him with meat, belt and shoes/Cannot be certainly said." He pictures the man leaving a long trail of waste behind him. What did he do?

The usual things, of course,
The eating, dreaming, drinking and begetting,
And he worked for the money which was to pay
For the eating, et cetera, which were necessary
If he were to go on working for the money, et cetera,
But chiefly he talked. As the bottles and bones
Accumulated behind him, the words proceeded
Steadiily from the front of his face as he
Advanced into the silence and made it verbal.

There were countless greetings and good-byes, gratitudes,
and "statements beginning 'It seems to me' or 'As I always say.'" The poem closes with a lonely figure, strangely modern.

Consider the courage in all that, and behold
the man
Walking into deep silence, with the ectoplastic
Cartoon's balloon of speech proceeding

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10 Miller Williams, p. 144.
Steadily out of the front of his face, the words
Borne along on the breath which is his spirit
Telling the numberless tale of his untold Word
Which makes the world his apple, and forces
him to eat.

This is the kind of affirmation that Nemerov makes, affirm­
ing the kind of courage that modern man must have in order
to face a world that "forces him to eat."

In this brief survey of the poems about Man and his
city-societies there emerges the liberal mind, in this
case a particularly civilized and witty mind, which responds
to what it sees. Because of his background, and the uniqueness
that is his as a man, he chooses to single out for
comment what another would not see. Certainly one aspect
of society that Nemerov feels himself to be of particular
concern is that of the tyranny and power of the past which
exerts a force on the present. This force is manifest in
the way it compels habitual action and habitual ways of
looking at the world, whether it is the equation of greater
numbers in church with a spiritual awakening, the customary
selection of males for the obituary page and females for
the matrimonial page, or the ritual force of our racial
prejudices. The poet is responsible for helping others
see the world freshly. Man can also learn to see by being
reminded of his manly qualities, his strengths, and the
attributes that have surely distinguished him on the earth.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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VITA

William Ward Mills, Jr., was born on June 17, 1935, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He attended elementary school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and was graduated from Baton Rouge High School in 1952.

He attended Louisiana State University in 1952 and Centenary College of Louisiana in 1953. From 1955 through 1957 he was in the United States Army. He resumed studies at Louisiana State University in 1958, and received the B.A. degree in May of 1959. He studied at the University of Munich the following year. He received his M.A. degree from Louisiana State University in August of 1961.

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