W. S. MERWIN

In Conversation with Paul Holdengräber

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: . . . Introduce to you the person who will introduce this evening, John Burnham Schwartz, who has a very particular, profound relationship with W. S. Merwin.

(applause)

JOHN BURNHAM SCHWARTZ: Thanks. Thank you, Paul. It was almost thirty years ago in the spring that I took a call on the pay phone in my dorm at boarding school from my mother, who was calling, among other things, to tell me that she had recently met a man—she had been divorced for I think almost two years, and that he was a poet and that she hoped very much that I would meet him soon and she was sure we would like each other. I was alarmed at first because the tone of her voice was a little bit different. There had been others—sorry, William—**(laughter)** but they had come and gone, and the tone of her voice was quite different. There was something quite serious about it, and the notion that he was a poet was a little alarming as well. **(laughter)** I had grown up knowing a few famous writers, but no poets, it was a different species.

At any rate, I was coming home for the summer. I had a job in the city, and I was going to be living with my mother. And William was living downtown, and we met, and in fact he was not the only different species. I was a different species. William, by that time, was well past famous, I would say, and he had had quite an extraordinary life already, had been taught at Princeton by Berryman and R. P. Blackmur. He had been picked out of the lineup early on by Auden and Eliot. He had been friends with Lowell, he had known Faulkner, he had made gazpacho with Beckett—something you should hear about sometime. **(laughter)** He had done all these things and won a Pulitzer and been inducted into the Academy. But I think it's safe to say that at that point in his life William had never really met a teenager. **(laughter)**

We met. The man I met then, whom I had never heard of before my mother's call, not being extremely well versed in poetry at the time, was a different sort of person than anyone I had ever met in my life and remains so. He stood on his own feet, in his own space. If you were going to come at him, as teenagers sometimes do, especially if they feel a little defensive on behalf of their mother, you would have to come at the whole man, he didn't come in pieces, and he didn't have any flourishes or gestures made to the side. He was himself. He spoke, but then when—he didn't move around a lot when he did, and when he wasn't speaking, he listened very intently, looking at you with those eyes. He listened as though he were waiting to hear something surprising that maybe you weren't yourself aware that you were going to say. It was very unsettling at the time.

I also could tell right away that it was very serious between them. They had had dinner, he had walked her home, what seventy blocks, **(laughter)** it's a long way, at any rate, it was—I can't say that I behaved very well during that summer. I think one night I kicked you both out of the house and all that, but you went downtown and had a much better time. But I was so struck by the patience of William, and the centeredness, something I didn't realize at the time, by what he was, that he seemed, without making any fuss about it, to only say what he meant and that he was not going to put on any false notions to meet my false notions, which was something that I mostly did in those days.

So, though I behaved badly, we made it through the summer with his patience, and when I got back to school in the fall, I began to read him, which is something I had never done. A book of his that was about to come out next year was *Opening the Hand*. This is the

good-looking gentleman who I was dealing with at the time. An aside—my mother and I were going through a box of old photos, years later, and we came across an old photo of William wearing some sort of peasant smock and holding a hedgehog in his hand. **(laughter)** I have no idea. At any rate, he did look like a Greek god, and my mother very quietly said, "Boy, am I glad I didn't know him them, he looked like a lot of trouble." **(laughter)**

So, at any rate, I began to read him, and I was reading *Opening the Hand* or some of the poems from them, and there's a poem in there that you may or may not know called "Berryman" about, of course, John Berryman, who taught William at Princeton. These are the last two stanzas, just to give you an idea of what a young man who knew nothing about poetry was coming across. "I had hardly begun to read. I asked how can you ever be sure that what you write is really any good at all and he said, 'You can't, you can't, you can never be sure. You die without knowing whether anything you wrote was any good. If you have to be sure, don't write.'"

And I think that was my first introduction to William's relationship with what is commonly thought of as knowledge and his idea that it's the not knowing, of course, that is the very thing that leads to the knowing. But it would take me a while to figure that out.

Quick snapshot from the end of the year. My brother and I are in town, another teenager, and we are—it was not our idea—having a walk through Greenwich Village at something

like 9:30 in the morning on Christmas day. It seemed very early to us, and we were alternately bickering with each other and complaining to my mother and William, who were walking about twenty feet behind us, about why was it that we were making this walk. I remember turning over my shoulder at one point, very angrily, and looking at them. And I still have this picture of William in my mind, it was something kind of like a nature walk. We were truly another species, and he was doing that, but he was being very patient, he was sort of waiting us out.

And a few years later after they had married and moved to Maui, I was there visiting and, again not thinking particularly much about influences—it was my age, and why should I?—I decided that I was going to write three poems, the first poems I'd ever written, in order to get into Seamus Heaney's poetry writing class in college. And I did this in their house, with William upstairs, and I was downstairs, and I learned something else about William, as I always did and continue to do. He was incredibly supportive, rather quiet about it, he was interested in what it was that I was hearing in these poems, whether I was listening when I wrote them, and how whatever it was that I heard, what it was about that hearing that made me think about where it was that they came from. He seemed less interested in whether they were good in a technical sense, which is something that was probably impossible for me, and more interested in whether they were true in some fundamental sense, again, something that had never really occurred to me.

And I also began to see something that anyone who knows William well will know, that he simply does not believe in criticizing other writers. Now, it's true that his faint praise

can be utterly crushing **(laughter)** at times, but he truly believes that the work itself will do its work for it out in the world and will say what it has to say and ultimately will land where it has to land, and he's never wasted a moment going after anybody and has no tolerance for it. That was something, coming from the world I was coming from, that though it took a while to sink in, I thought was really interesting and true.

Some years later I was in my mid-twenties and living in Paris recovering from having published a novel a bit too early, at least for me, and I found myself after some time there writing hard, not very well, suffering from a series of terrible anxiety attacks that seemed to have come out of nowhere, it went on for weeks, I couldn't sleep. But because of the time difference, Paris being Paris and William living, and my mother living, on Maui, turned out that at four in the morning when I hadn't slept I could call them, and they were awake, and I did this, and so we had a series of nightly conversations, many. Often I would speak with my mother, but sometimes I would get William. I can't really remember what we talked about, but it was the fact that they were there.

And things were not really getting better, and I could sense some concern on their end and then one day William asked me how I would feel if he were to fly over to France and see me and then we might go down to the Lot, where he has this little stone farmhouse that he's had for many, many years, as anybody who's read his poetry would know. And he came, and I'm quite sure that he had never done anything like that for anyone or had to or been in the position to before, and he came, and before we left Paris he went with me to a dinner of the parents of the woman who eventually became my wife, I don't

know if Jan and Vincent are here now, but, there they are. And he came with me and met with them and met Alexandra, and then we off down to the Lot in a sort of *Magic Mountain*–like way, and we spent ten days down there.

And what I'll say about that time is that William didn't say a whole lot. We spent the days mostly doing things. He left me alone. We read in the morning, we wrote. In the afternoons, there was the garden, which I had never seen before, which is a walled enclosure, and if you've never seen William enter a garden, I recommend it. **(laughter)** It is a wonderful thing to see—it had never actually occurred to me, I grew up in the city—to see him opening himself up to a familiar friend, look around for surprises, roll up his sleeves, figure out what needed attending to, and get down to work for hours. And at the end of the day we would eat dinner and listen to old phonograph albums and drink, of course.

And what he was saying in his way, few words, but very carefully chosen, no speeches, was that the period that I found myself in, which for me was a period in which I clearly, I realized that I had no real knowledge whatsoever about the person I thought I wanted to be, was in fact not as it seemed the bottom of some abyss, or the end but in fact the beginning of real knowledge and the place in which poetry grows. And this may be something that years later we all feel we know, but at the time, coming as it did by intimation, and not by speech, through some lecture, struck me profoundly. And despite the fact that I was sleeping in a bed that had been recently inhabited, or years ago been inhabited by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, I managed, finally, to get a few winks of

sleep, strange dreams, and went back to Paris. William went back to Hawai‘i. I eventually soon thereafter went back to New York and called up Alexandra, and we began a relationship that continues to this day. We are married and have a son.

Our son is now four years old. He calls William “Willie.” He loves to have William read superhero books to him, which is, I have to tell you, an extremely amusing sight to me. **(laughter)** His idea of a poet really is one thing, one man. I think his notion of what that means, how it’s about discovering the words everyday. I see him doing a lot of talking, and I see William doing a lot of listening, and I think, “This is the beginning.” This is what I always saw, and this is what, through William, I came to understand is the very essence of how we find ourselves. So with no further ado I want to introduce William, a man I respect deeply and admire and love. And here he is. Thank you.

(applause)

W. S. MERWIN: John. John.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What do you think?

W. S. MERWIN: John, what can I say after an introduction like that? That’s bringing it all out at once. Fantastic. I’m honored and I’m deeply moved, John, by what you had to say. Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's hard to follow that, I must say.

(laughter)

W. S. MERWIN: Well, it was nice seeing you all and—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It sort of makes me wonder a little bit as I was thinking about this notion of inviting you tonight, as I did many months ago, when I wanted you to make a stop here on your way, because a trip from Hawai'i to Washington is rather long, I thought it would be a good thing for you to stop in New York before you take your honors, as it were, at the Library of Congress and to become officially I suppose the Poet Laureate, I wanted you to stop here and honor us, but I was equally perplexed by the fact that though I've interviewed a lot of people, and been in conversation with a lot, a lot of people over this last fourteen, fifteen years I've been doing this strange métier, I have never spoken to a poet.

W. S. MERWIN: It's pretty scary, isn't it?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's pretty scary but it also made me reflect, how does one ask a question to a poet?

W. S. MERWIN: Well, what question do you want to ask?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, before asking a question, I knew it wouldn't be easy, you see. Before asking a question I would like you to read a poem, and I would like you to read the very first poem of *The Shadow of Sirius*, which is the latest book, I believe, and I must say I've read the latest book of yours first, and I find it tremendous, it's a distillation of a lifetime's wisdom, it seems to me, and I'd love you to read—

W. S. MERWIN: I'm rather suspicious of that word, "wisdom," you know. Jung, in his late life, said, "only fools believe in wisdom."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let me take that right back. **(laughter)** Let me take that right back and I will be more careful with my usage.

W. S. MERWIN: I apply it to myself, not to you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I take it back for both of us, then, but I think that's partly the issue in speaking with a poet and maybe perhaps why I haven't done it so far, which is that you just cannot be shabby with your words, you have to be very careful, so rather

than begin with my faltering language, I'd love you to read this poem, which is called "Note."

W. S. MERWIN: Oh, that one. Okay. The early poems, not the first poem, but the earlier poems of the book circle around early childhood, arriving at things for the first time. Called "Note:" "Remember how the naked soul comes to language and at once knows loss and distance and believing. Then for a time it will not run with its old freedom like a light innocent of measure but will hearken to how one story becomes another and will try to tell where they have emerged from and where they are heading, as though they were its own legend, running before the words and beyond them, naked and never looking back through the noise of questions."

I was blundering in the middle of that, I want to read that little passage again. "But will hearken to how one story becomes another and will try to tell where they emerge from and where they are heading, as though they were its own legend, running before the words and beyond them, naked and never looking back through the noise of questions."

The thing about words you mentioned. Words are—words have many faces to them. Words seem to bring us closer to things, allowing us to represent something of them and to present something of them. On the other hand, they make a distance between us. I mean, when we say the word "tree," it is not a tree, and it never will be a tree. The—and that ambiguity is always there in language, and on the other hand when you say the word "tree," you're saying what human beings have always meant when they said "tree,"

everything, every use of that word that's ever been made is in that word, and that's why you have to be careful of a word, the word is alive and the word has that depth to it.

And I think that's particularly true in poetry more than in—if prose is about information, that's not true of informative prose, but it certainly is true of Faulkner or Melville or parts of the Old Testament, you know, the repository of ancient feeling and of ancient ignorance in language is always there and we're always drawing on it, whether we know it or not, and every time we use the word it's different.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The noise of questions.

W. S. MERWIN: The noise of questions. What about it? I mean, we're—part of the time we're always asking those questions. What does the word mean? That's the first question. And Mandelstam, the great Russian poet of the twentieth century, says, talks about the myth of the nightingale, and he said, talks about "the blessed word with no meaning," the word with no meaning, it's hard to believe there is a word with no meaning, but the true word is beyond meaning. You get to that point, you get to that point, and of course it's impossible. It's impossible to write that way, it's impossible to think that way, and yet beyond al the meanings there's still a word. It's the sort of mystery that one lives with—the mystery of language once you start thinking about it. It is—yes, it's communication, but the communication is never adequate—do we ever communicate? When we want to say "thank you," when I want to say "thank you" to John for his introduction, the more

one wants to express gratitude, the less adequate the words are and so how do you say it? You say, “thank you.”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So with this predicament, should we—we should be cautious not to speak too much.

W. S. MERWIN: You don’t have to be so self-conscious that you can’t sputter out a few syllables, **(laughter)** but there’s an awful lot of wasted language. I mean, turn on the television.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you?

W. S. MERWIN: Very seldom. A little bit—five minutes a day to see what dreadful things are going on.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Another poem that I very much like, love, and would like you to read, is this poem about trees.

W. S. MERWIN: It’s about names, too, isn’t it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It is.

W. S. MERWIN: "Neither my father nor my mother knew the names of the trees where I was born. 'What is that?,' I asked and my father and mother did not hear, they did not look where I pointed. Surfaces of furniture held the attention of their fingers and across the room they could watch walls they had forgotten, where there were no questions, no voices, and no shade. Were there trees where they were children, where I had not been then?, I asked, were there trees in those places where my father and my mother were born, and at that time did my father and my mother see them? And when they said 'yes,' it meant they did not remember. 'What were they?' I asked. 'What were they?' But both my father and my mother said they never knew."

I think—I notice this with children often and adults—sometimes it's as though they were speaking different languages to each other. Sometimes it's very intimate, and you see that they are communicating. Sometimes they're talking on different planes and different directions and not hearing each other and, you know, and parents very often can't answer their children's questions, and so, you know, in a sense they don't hear the questions.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This poem in some form or fashion could have been entitled "Unanswered Question." And you were seeking something from your parents and they couldn't supply you with that knowledge you were looking for, that precise knowledge of the variety of trees.

W. S. MERWIN: But, you know, that happens again and again in probably everyone's childhood. There was a tree, one tree behind the house, that was of enormous importance to me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Across the river.

W. S. MERWIN: No, right around in back of the house.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But across the river from Manhattan.

W. S. MERWIN: Across the river, that river, yes, and I would go out and—I would feel there was a communication with the tree, but I was trying to convey by questioning, with my parents, something of the importance of that tree to me, but there was no way of doing it, and I realized that quite quickly, and then I learned that later about various things. I learned it about music. Why would four notes of music sound to me particularly beautiful whereas the rest of the music around it was of no interest at all? When you play the notes and say, "listen to that," but they don't hear anything, and think, well, to me it just sounds that way, but then realizing that there were things that I couldn't express, that I didn't know how to express. And I suppose that urge to try to express them is a lifelong thing, you know, knowing perfectly well that it can't be done.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And that urge is what you brought you about to want to read and to want to write.

W. S. MERWIN: I think so, yeah, yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you were particularly interested to find out more about the Native Americans, the Indians.

W. S. MERWIN: Yeah, yeah, one of the things that fascinated me about them was I saw pictures of them living among the trees and that, and I thought, "having trees all around, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And that made you want to decipher the words.

W. S. MERWIN: Yeah.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Describe that moment of coming to language, of coming to words, when you were growing up in New Jersey right across from Manhattan.

W. S. MERWIN: There was a book. I don't know where my mother got books from. I knew some came from the Presbyterian bookstore over in Lower Manhattan and sales and Gimbels and things like that. And she would come back with books and she was very careful and worked hard at doing it right. And she came back with some wonderful books, and there was one book she came back with, this is well before I went to school, and there were these pictures of American Indians living in the forest, and I loved this

one book, and I went back and forth over it the way children do. I must have been three or four, four, along in there. And it was greatly simplified. There was a picture of a man in leather clothing, and it said, "MAN" at the bottom, M-A-N. I just saw these things, and then the next page he had different, more clothes on, and it said "INDIAN MAN," Indian Man, different words at the bottom of the page, while building up the sentence, and I asked my mother how to pronounce these things, and then went on word by word learning how to read. And only years later I thought it's sort of interesting to want to learn to read about people who did not read and write, and to communicate with them and about them, and then realize, of course, that I couldn't communicate with them and I couldn't communicate about them, either, very well. But the urge—the urge was the important thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you have tried to collect and save some of their verbal tradition, their oral traditions.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes, the—one of the things that—one of the many things that saddens me about that great, sad destructive story, which is to me is like the burning of the library of Alexandria, the destruction of the culture of the peoples of this continent, was that the great generation, the great final generation of anthropologists who did it, Boas and Lowie, and there were three or four really great anthropologists in that period, the early twentieth century, and when they made collections of the oral literature that they had taken down with whatever technology they had at the time, they neglected in pretty well

every case the lyric poetry, and of course the lyric poetry was incredible. What little bit of it has survived is absolutely marvelous.

You know, there's I think it's an Ojibwa poem that goes, a tiny one, in translation there was a Frances Densmore translation, and she says, "Sometimes I go around feeling sorry for myself, and all the time I am being carried by a great wind across the sky." That's the whole poem, but that's a great lyric tradition, if that comes out of it, and not to be neglected. Of course it may have been harder to collect the lyric material, I mean, the narratives, once somebody starts telling a story, you know, they're likely to go on telling the story sometimes when you wish they wouldn't.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: John was mentioning in his wonderful introduction to you that not knowing, being in a state, I suppose, between ignorance, perhaps, and knowledge, somewhere in between, is tremendously important for you and perhaps fundamental for approaching the world in a full way, and I was reminded by this historian whose work I very much love, a man named Carlo Ginzburg, who said that when he approaches a subject, he approaches it with the euphoria of ignorance.

W. S. MERWIN: That's great.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: With the euphoria of ignorance, and I'm wondering if this may not—

W. S. MERWIN: I know what he means.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know what it means. What does it mean for you?

W. S. MERWIN: Well, it's not blankness. It's not blank not knowing. It's—we all know how to—I suppose everybody in this room has ridden a bicycle. When you put your leg over the bicycle and push off, you don't know how to ride a bicycle, you just ride the bicycle, there's a kind of ignorance about it, you know. If you stop to think about diving when you're diving, you're going to come a terrible flopper. You don't think about these things. You don't particularly know about them. There's a point of not knowing. And I think that this is something very hard to convey to students, except that in some way they know it and recognize it suddenly and then they know what you're talking about.

Everything you know is important. All the languages you know and all the history and all of the bits about your own bad behavior and good behavior and other people's behavior of all kinds, that's all very important, but you can't make anything out of it. Doesn't make anything. What makes it is, from the point of view of poetry, I don't know about informative prose, journalism would be something different, I think, because there is basically information, but poetry's not basically information, and where does poetry come from? If anyone tells you they know, you know perfectly well they're not telling you the truth.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have made statements though to the effect that poetry is perhaps—language is perhaps—poetry is perhaps—language is perhaps at the origin of poetry.

W. S. MERWIN: I think probably poetry and language maybe share an origin. I think that, well, nobody will ever know this. I think that the origin of language had to have been an attempt, a desperate attempt, to express something that could not be expressed. Grief, terror, fear, lust, hunger, but beyond expression, beyond any capacity for expression that there was, the desire to express it. I think that's what is the beginning of language, and the beginning of poetry.

I think that when you see that Iraqi woman on the front page of the *Times* with her mouth open whose husband has just been destroyed by a bomb in front of her eyes, and her mouth is open, you know what's coming out of there, it's one long syllable of inarticulate grief, that is the first primal vowel, and the attempts to control it, the attempts to bring it back into, into relation are the consonants, the thing that is trying to sort of shape it and make something of it, and I think something like that is—a very crude description of it—but I think over a period of time, that's probably how language evolved. I can't imagine it happening any other way, and nobody knows enough to argue with it, but I think poetry begins the same way.

I mean, I think prose that's for information is about a subject, it's about what can be said about something, but there's part of poetry that's always about what cannot be said.

When the Twin Towers are demolished and for ten days people who never read poetry in their lives read nothing but poetry. What are they looking for? Why is it that they're doing that? It's because they realize that this is language about what cannot be said. And this is why when people become helplessly in love, or helplessly angry, or helplessly anything else, they often turn to poetry. This is why in wartime people read poetry who never read it otherwise. There are feelings in their lives that they can't deal with in any other way.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I must say I confessed this to you and you had a rather extraordinary reaction to my confession. I confessed to you that I—for the last twenty-five years, I've abandoned poetry in some way and have read very little of it, to which you told me that's fairly ridiculous **(laughter)** because, well, you told me the story of a man you met in San Diego for whom poetry had been so important, and you didn't say to me that I was ridiculous, you told me a story about a man who was no longer reading poetry, but I felt very concerned by your comment that it's something that could apply to my own feeble attempts to read poetry, which were not even attempts because you said, in order to read poetry, just choose. I mean you said it's ridiculous, because it takes one minute to read a poem. If you like poetry, just get on with it. Just get up in the morning, choose a poem, and read it. And if it speaks to you, wonderful, and if it doesn't, read another poem.

W. S. MERWIN: I believe, I really believe, I mean, even in a society such as ours where—with the English language as its basis, where we have one of the great bodies of

poetry that's ever been in any language, there's probably a smaller audience for poetry than there's ever been in any great language. But at the same time I'm convinced that poetry is natural to everybody and that children grow up with the making of poetry in them, and it's—this need to handle words in a way that will express the inexpressible is always with us, it's always there, the sense of inadequacy, the feeling that when one says "thank you" and really means it, it's never enough. This, you know, this is a kind of experience that we run through in our lives all the time without realizing what it is.

So when you, Paul, with your background, say you've given up poetry, that's why I say I think it's ridiculous. That man who you're telling me about in San Diego, his life was going to pieces, because, you know, he had—and he met an old teacher in the street who taught him poetry in a course that he'd taken for the pleasure of it, and the man said, asked him about his life, and he said, "well, I don't know, it's not going very well," and the man said, "Are you still reading poetry?" And he said, "No, I don't have time for it." And he said, "What are you talking about? It takes you a couple of minutes a day. Why don't you read one poem a day that you like, for pleasure," pleasure is very important to it. And he thought, "God, that's true, my wife says I curse in the shower in the morning and I start out for work furious." He said, "I'm going to try to read a poem before I get into the shower," and he said that really made a big difference to his life.

Anything that brings one back, because I think that this is a root experience, this thing of expression of the inexpressible and trying to do it and the pleasure that's involved in it. That's why the Puritans closed the theaters for bad poetry in the seventeenth century. The

joy of it, and, you know, I was at Poets House yesterday, and they have children's programs, and the children are running around saying what fun it is to memorize poetry, to suddenly start remembering lines of poetry, well, you know, if they come at it five years later without having done it, they'll say, "I can't remember, I can't memorize things, they can't do it," you know, and there's this resistance that's grown in. If they start early enough, they realize it's fun and that they've got something that they can carry around with them and have fun with.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yesterday at Poets House, if I'm correct, you spoke to a lot of librarians, didn't you?

W. S. MERWIN: Wonderful people.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We just spent a little bit of time before coming down here in our special collections, where you saw some Blake and some Auden.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes. What about it?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This is exactly what John said. I knew it would happen. Two things, the librarians yesterday and how wonderful people they are and what they do, and your experience upstairs, seeing those manuscripts and seeing Whitman's

handwriting and seeing Ezra Pound's handwriting and Auden and Blake, Blake—Blake especially perhaps was very powerful—and then seeing some of our Merwin holdings.

W. S. MERWIN: You talk about the librarians. There was a young woman there who introduced the librarians, and she took a question from somebody else and said, "Are you prepared—what of your life are you prepared to dedicate to what you say you believe in?" which is a very good question, and I said there's a wonderful thing of Blake's that comes I believe from one of the letters, I'm trying to remember, I keep losing things of Blake's and can't find where I got them from. But there's a marvelous moment where he says, "Oh Lord, make of me what you will, for if you make of me a worm I will move the mountains." That's a way of looking at the world, and that's what's behind Blake all the time, a way of looking at the world. I think often how lucky to have in our native language both Blake and Shakespeare, not that there weren't very, very, very great poets in other languages but there's something staggeringly original about those two, and they're not like anything else, of course no real poet is like anybody else, but Blake and Shakespeare you can't imagine. Blake is so extraordinary, he does it all, he can't not be original, all his life.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You've written many poems about loss, and many of your images are about disappearance, and I was speaking with someone you met this summer, a psychoanalyst by the name of Adam Phillips, who now I better understand after reading you more why you took to him, and I said to Adam I would like you to ask William Merwin, he wanted to be here tonight if he could have from London, to ask him a

question. So here you have a transatlantic question from Adam. And it's daunting always to speak to Adam, because when you speak to a shrink you'd better be careful. "You write a poetry of disappearances. Why is it that disappearances have so caught your imagination?"

W. S. MERWIN: That's what happens at every minute of our lives, isn't it? I mean, it's happening for the first time and the last time inextricably, I mean the first time and the last time cannot be told apart.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Birth and death.

W. S. MERWIN: That's a way of putting it, yes, but how do you distinguish those two? The appearance is the disappearance. I wrote a whole essay about it once, I should tell Adam about that. There was a young man named Sydney Parkinson who was on Cook's second voyage of exploration, very, very gifted young painter. And he did all of the paintings on the early part of Cook's second voyage—which in some ways was the greatest of the voyages—and he died on that voyage. He caught—He hadn't been paid properly, so he couldn't get a house in the mountains when they were on Java, to get away from the harbor. Down in the harbor it was full of malaria, and up in the mountains you got away from it. And all of the officers who could afford it went up in the mountains. And they owed him money and they didn't pay him. If they had paid him, he could have gone up in the mountains. They didn't and he died of malaria at twenty-six and was buried at sea on the way back.

He's writing, he's drawing, he's drawing a world, he's drawing not only the botanical and ornithological wonders that they're seeing that no European had ever seen. Linnaeus, orone of the students of Linnaeus, said to the people going on the voyage, "You know," he said, "I think you'll find there are about fifteen thousand species." After a week in Brazil they realized that they'd seen over fifteen thousand species, and they'd only—they had barely scratched the surface, you know, it was much richer than they thought. But Parkinson wasn't content with drawing absolutely everything that was put in front of him. He would go out and sketch the canoes, the sails, the manner of sailing, the people sailing, what they wore, the expressions on their faces, and they were very rapid drawings, and they caught things that have never been seen since, and I thought, this is one of the fascinating things about Parkinson—seeing them for the first time was seeing them for the last time. The discovery of them was the loss of them, you know, that they were gone. This is probably—this is true of—this is not only true of European so-called discovery of the world but it's true of daily experience, every time we look at things we're seeing it, even if we've seen it a thousand times, we're seeing it for the first time. We may not know that, and we get so blunted that we don't see it, but it's only once, and that time you're never seeing again.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It strikes me that in reading you I was feeling a sense of urgency, a true sense of urgency, hearing some of Rilke's most profound early poems, about, you know, "change your life, you must change your life," I have it here, but I won't—I was going to read it thinking we we were going to have four hours tonight. But

we do have some more time. I would like to come now to some of the very important moments in your late teens, particularly with one encounter you had with Ezra Pound. I'd like us to take a little listen here.

EZRA POUND AUDIO:

For three years, out of key with his time,

He strove to resuscitate the dead art

Of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"

In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born

In a half savage country, out of date;

Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;

Capaneus; trout for factitious bait;

Idmen gar toi panth, hos eni troie

Caught in the unstopped ear;

Giving the rocks small lee-way

The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

His true Penelope was Flaubert,

He fished by obstinate isles;

Observed the elegance of Circe's hair

Rather than the mottoes on sun-dials.

Unaffected by “the march of events,”
He passed from men’s memory in *l’an trentuniesme*
de son eage; the case presents
No adjunct to the Muses’ diadem.

W. S. MERWIN: I love that poem. I think I’ve known that poem all my life, I mean since I was seventeen or so.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you met Pound when you were eighteen.

W. S. MERWIN: Yeah, you know, I think some people find it hard to believe I was so naïve, but a lot of us didn’t know the full story of his politics and his—his, his terrible opinions about his anti-Semitism and so on. We learned within the year, because a lot of this information became much more available, but what I knew about him was that, oh, yes, he’d gone on the air and said very disobedient and exasperating things about America during—” and I thought that was kind of unwise, but there were those of us in my generation who felt that being antiauthoritarian was a very nice thing to do, it was a very good thing to do and it was a very good example. We felt kind of oppressed by authority, I certainly had.

So but he represented for me, that’s a very mysterious kind of sound, you know, that you

didn't hear it from the Victorians, and he represented something extraordinary, somebody who came from a very, very ordinary poor American background, in the middle-class America that had also produced in much the same generation Carl Sandburg, and look at the difference. I don't mean to put down Carl Sandburg, I just say, look at the difference. And Pound turned into Pound and he decided that he was going to be a poet, and I thought, "That's what I want to do, and I'm interested in someone who has done it, you know, and I want to meet him."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Describe, if you could, what it was like to meet him, your arrival, how he received you, and what he told you.

W. S. MERWIN: He was in Saint Elizabeth's Hospital, which was a military hospital at that time in Washington, old Civil War brick buildings and sort of decrepit inside and he came down, he was allowed to receive visitors in this sort of alcove of a big room like part of a train station or something with old green walls, you know, unpainted for some quite a few years, cracked and so forth and people wandering around flushing imaginary toilets and talking to, you know, to the corners, and it was it wasn't violent the way Christopher Smart's Bedlam would have been, but it was pretty weird, and there were sort of shadows of the *Inferno* in it, and Pound loved to be pedagogical, you know. What was it Gertrude Stein once said, you know, "Ezra is a village explainer, which is fine if you're a village, and if not, not." **(laughter)**

And he did, he loved to sort of instruct people. And he loved to instruct me, I was, you

know, had just turned eighteen, and I was fascinated by what he had to say, and he said things like, “If you’re going to be a poet, you have to take poetry seriously, and you have to write every day, and aim to write seventy-five lines a day.” And he said, “You don’t have anything to write seventy-five lines about, you may think you do, but you don’t, so he said, “the best thing to do is to learn a language and learn languages, pay attention to the languages and translate, because,” he said “translation will teach you your own language.”

That is one of the best things he could have ever said to me. I had already begun it because when I was at university there was a very homesick young Spanish man, who went everywhere on a bicycle, with his buena on his head, and he was terribly homesick and he wanted to translate the plays of Lorca and he wanted some help doing it and so a couple of us in his Spanish class would go and see him, oh every couple of days and we’d work on some more Lorca. And the plays were all right, but what really interested me was the poems of Lorca, “El Romancero Gitano,” and the “Poemas de Cante Jondo,” so the first modern poet that I read was Lorca, not in English at all, and I had just begun to read Eliot and Pound and Stevens when I first went to see Pound. And Pound said, he said, “Well, what language do you know?” And I said “well, some years of Spanish,” and he said, “the Spanish,” he said, “is all right, you should pay attention to the romancero,” which I did, but he said, “What really you should try to get is the Provencal, that which was what they called then, what the troubadours never called it Provencal, they called it Aquitaine or Occitan or Limousi but they didn’t call it the Provencal, it ended up in Provence, but it started in what is now the Rodez in what is now Southwestern France,

and Poitiers and one great chateau of Ventadour was where all of the first troubadours came together. They were, some of them were dukes and counts, many of them—almost all of them were noblemen, but many of the people who sang the songs, sang the poems were ordinary commoners, but the point Pound was making was he said the Provencal was written what you have is you have a lost touch with the music, and I didn't know what he was talking about and I had to think about that a lot.

And he also said a wonderful thing, he said, "try to get as close to the original as you can." That sounds like a very easy thing to say, and then you think what is the original, you know, because I'm not hearing the original, I don't know what the original sounds like, and you hear him quoting various things that he doesn't know, what that Greek that he's quoting or what the old French of *l'an trentuniesme de son eage*, he doesn't know how that was pronounced, I don't either. We don't know how Shakespeare sounded to his own generation, and the hearing is very, very important.

I don't know whether anybody nowadays likes to hear something like Pound reciting provencal, whether we like it or not, but it's a sound that was not there in Victorian poetry, it was not there in turn of the century poetry, it was something brand new and startling and probably quite unpleasant to some people, but I've often thought that—and this is what, pretty well any poet you talk to in English, I mean who use the English language, we've got this enigma, we've got Pound, who must have been quite an intolerable person to be around very much, who's so opinionated and you can hear it in his voice, he was very knowledgeable, he was very crazy, I mean, some of—he got shut

up to keep from getting shot as a traitor by a Quaker lawyer who said he was momentarily insane when he did these things, and got him into the psycho ward, into the crazy ward at Saint Elizabeth's Hospital, and somebody asked Eliot, who had known him very, very well, "Was Ezra really crazy?" And Eliot apparently said, "Well, you know Ezra."

But he—we all owe him something enormous and if you talk to other poets, if I talk to other poets of my generation, we talk about it, we mostly gossip, but sometimes we get around to something like this and it comes back to a translation of Pound's who didn't know Chinese who worked from Venilos's work at Harvard and various other things and from other translations and there's a poem of however you call it, Li Po or Li Bo or Li Bai, from the Tang Dynasty, called "The River-Merchant's Wife," and the translation begins, "When my hair was still cut short across my forehead, you came around the house," and the poem begins that way talking, a girl talking about growing up in love with a neighbor boy and then marrying him and then him going off and disappearing and is he coming back, and it's a very beautiful translation, it's a very beautiful poem, it's not like anything else in the Tang Dynasty.

And every poet of my generation that I know read that poem and heard that first line and this is published about 1907 or 8, very early, and a poem that begins "when my hair was still cut short across my forehead," and the plainness and the immediacy of that line was something that you couldn't get out of your mind. How could you make language do that with that apparent absolute simplicity? The Victorian poetry became irritating because of

all of the overlays of rhetoric and phony rhetoric that had been done over and over and over again, and nobody felt it anymore at all, but "when my hair was still cut straight across my forehead," there's something completely new there, and I think when each of us came to read it very young it changed the way we were listening to the language.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You were talking about not being quite cognizant of Pound's politics when you met him—

W. S. MERWIN: I knew he'd been a very bad boy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But that wasn't unattractive to you. But not knowing about his politics afforded you to learn some lessons from him, some lessons you might not have listened to so carefully—

W. S. MERWIN: That's right. I think if I had known his politics it would have been very hard.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Very difficult, and from him you really took on and I'd like you maybe to read a couple of poems, you took on the labor throughout your life, really, and have developed, might be a grandiloquent way of expressing it, but a kind of philosophy of translation, a real deep belief in the importance, value, and ultimately risk and prone-to-error necessity of translating words.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes, and there's one memorable translation I worked over for several years with Clarence Brown of the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, and Clarence, who was responsible for getting Mandelstam's poetry out of Russia. Mandelstam's poetry was memorized by Nadezhda, his wife, because she knew that the KGB were going to come and destroy every single manuscript of his they could find, and they did, but she memorized it all and she kept it in her mind for thirty years and Clarence got to know her and finally she said, "Clarence, I have to recite these to you and you have to write them down and get them out of Russia." They had not been published. And Mandelstam wrote, he didn't write down, he wrote in his head and then he would recite them to Nadezhda, and she wrote them down, she'd always done this. So Clarence said—I've been asked to do a selected Mandelstam, and I said, "I don't know any Russian. I'll have to work with somebody who does and the only person I would want to work with is Clarence Brown," and Clarence said he'd love to do it together on one condition—that I wouldn't try to learn any Russian because he said it was just going to get in my way, so we worked together.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How did that work?

W. S. MERWIN: Well, he would read it in the original, he would make all the notes, give us a literal, and I would work over them, trying to make a poem out of them. And Joseph Brodsky was meantime arguing with me all the time and saying that I couldn't do Mandelstam that way, Mandelstam had to be the rhyme and meter of the original. And I said, "No, Joe, you know, the rhyme and meter of the original is the original. If I did it in

those rhymed couplets and quatrains that Mandelstam was writing, it would come out kind of like Longfellow, **(laughter)** and that's not like Mandelstam at all, and I don't want to do that. The important thing is not that it's—what kind of form it's in, but that it's a poem, what makes it a poem. I don't know what makes it a poem, but I'll try to do it that way.

And I used to get very discouraged working with Clarence and I said, and he said wonderful things to me, he said, "Well, don't worry about it," he said, "no translation ever spoiled the original." **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Fantastic.

W. S. MERWIN: And there's also the consolatory feeling that there is no final translation. If you don't do it adequately, and of course you don't, no translation is adequate because no translation is the original, which is what everybody wants, so there will always be another translation, there will always be something that somebody thinks is closer to some aspect of the original, and they're probably right, and that's okay. You know, one can think of lots of examples of things that have been translated. You were mentioning Rilke the other day.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, yes, and we were talking about that Eighth Elegy.

W. S. MERWIN: I love that, it's one of my favorites.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Really it's so extraordinary and reading you made me think again of Rilke and made me think particularly again of that Eighth Elegy and particularly of a few passages and we were just wondering how one would go about translating both the very first lines and then that very extraordinary ending where Rilke in English as translated by Stephen Spender and J. B. Leishman.

W. S. MERWIN: I still like that translation sometimes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I do too. We agreed that we liked some others less.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes, let's not talk about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We won't. That's why I said we just agreed without mentioning any names. The first lines being, it's a poem dedicated to Rudolf Kassner, and Kassner said that Rilke was a poet even when he washed his hands. "With all its eyes, the creature world beholds the open but our eyes as though reversed encircle it on every side like traps set round its obstructed path to freedom. What is outside we know fro the brute's face alone, for while a child's quite small, we take it and turn it round and force it to look backwards at conformation, not that openness so deep within the brute's face," and then he here, later on, and these were the passages I think we were alluding to let me see, yes, here, "and we spectators always everywhere looking at never out of everything. It fills us, we arrange it, it decays we rearrange it and decay ourselves," and

then this line. “Who’s turned us round like this so that we always do what we may retain the attitude of someone who is departing, just as he on the last hill that shows him all his valley for the last time will turn and stop and linger. We live our lives forever taking leave.” And it’s that passage “Wer hat uns also umgedreht,” you asked me when we spoke, and my German is certainly very imperfect, but what does the word umgedreht mean, and what does it mean, is it correct to say, “it has turned us round?”

W. S. MERWIN: I think so.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes.

W. S. MERWIN: Yes, but there probably are better ways of saying it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How would you start?

W. S. MERWIN: Because it’s also sort of, it’s “turned inside out,” too, isn’t it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Right.

W. S. MERWIN: I don’t know. I mean, I’ve never tried to translate—the only German I ever tried to translate was a little poem of Nietzsche’s which I loved about a snake shedding its skin but I don’t feel that I—I had to learn German to get into graduate school and then I forgot it, and I don’t really know it, but I did once word by word go through

Rilke's poems in German while I knew a little bit of it, and I realized that there's no question in my mind that as long as people are at all interested in Rilke there will be new translations, because a poem like that Eighth Elegy, what isn't conveyed in that poem is the mixture of elation and terror in the Eighth Elegy that are there together, they aren't separate, not one moment elation the next moment terror, they're there together. And also the contrast between the animal world—there's no patronizing, you know, "how nice for these little animals that they sort of see the world in a different way." None of that there. He's saying the great openness with which the animals see the world. The animals see the world as completely open, which of course it is.

I mean, we see it—we see it in terms of habits and conventions and various things, and the animals see it in those terms, too, I mean, the evaluation is all there, but there's also—we can tell from what little we know of animals that there is a great openness. The way we come at it usually, the animal that will show us most about it is the dog, because the dog is the only species that has made us, and we have made the dog, we have a relation with dogs we don't have with any other kind of animal, and we can understand things about animals through dogs that we probably can't understand any other way, but the dog is not a completely wild animal, so there's something we're not going to learn, and the dog, also, the openness is not quite as open as it would be with one of the great cats, or with the wolves, or even with the foxes, you know, one of the only animals that is really fascinated by us.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have written some poems about dogs, quite a few.

W. S. MERWIN: You know, you were talking earlier, Paul, about two things, about poetry about loss, which I think is one of the inescapable subjects of poetry, always there, and grief, and animals, and translation. And I thought you know maybe there's a little tiny translation in here that I should have read at that moment, to what you're talking about.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's go back to that moment and read that.

W. S. MERWIN: Can we do that? It's a little six-line poem that's attributed, and no one's ever disputed it, to the Emperor Hadrian. One doesn't know if he wrote it, what period of his life, I keep saying "if." I have a skepticism which it is not at all scholarly or learned, but it's just hard for me to believe that anybody wrote this poem and never wrote another poem and this is the only poem they ever wrote, because it's one of the most perfect poems in Latin. There it is, did he throw away everything else? Did somebody else throw away everything else that he wrote and just save this one poem? We don't know, and we don't know anything about it. We don't know.

It's sometimes—one of the translations calls it "The Dying Emperor to His Soul," but we don't know that, we don't know who or what he's addressing, he's addressing something extremely intimate to him, and it may be his own soul, but it may be Antinous, with whom he had a long love affair, and it may be—who knows what? And I knew the little poem since I was nineteen or so, since I was in college, and read all the translations of it

that I could find, and they all seemed to me—it never occurred to me to try to translate it myself, I didn't think my Latin was good enough, but I was writing these little elegies that are in the middle of *The Shadow of Sirius* over a period of months and one day I was working in the garden and this poem of Hadrian's came to mind in English exactly, I thought, the way—like a literal translation of the Latin.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why were you in the garden?

W. S. MERWIN: I was in the garden, potting something up in the nursery or something. And this is it, it's called "Little Soul," because *animula* is the first word, anima is soul and *animula* means little soul.

Little soul, little stray
little drifter
now where will you stay
all pale and all alone
after the way
you used to make fun of things.

The last line was the one that trips one up and it's the most mysterious of them all. It's a remarkable poem. It's certainly about loss, and is it loss to come, or is it loss past, or is it loss now, we don't know. So much we don't know about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, you know, I think I mentioned this line to you that I so much love of Rilke once again where he says, "Now loss, however cruel, is powerless against possession, which it completes or even affirms. Loss is in fact nothing else but a second acquisition, but now completely interiorized, and just as intense."

W. S. MERWIN: Well, I think that the illusion of possession is always haunted by the feeling of loss. I mean, I can't imagine it not being so. It would be a little crazy not to have the idea—to feel that, you know, you're holding this object and you can do that for the rest of your life. You're not going to do that, you know, the end of it is coming. The ironic thing is that pleasure, forcibly continued, becomes painful eventually, so you lose it that way, too. This isn't anything morbid or mournful, I mean, this is just a condition, you know. Sooner or later you get hungry again.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So let's see what you brought us. You brought some poems to read, and I'd like to ask you to read some of them.

W. S. MERWIN: You mean the new ones?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, the new ones, and maybe also some of the poems of the troubadours that you brought.

W. S. MERWIN: You know, if you want, maybe I should read one of those first, because I don't want to end with them, and I realize I'm trying to put together the

selected translations of the past few years, but there's a completely selected translations volume, you know, and as I do, I have to go back over them, and of course I find myself redoing some of the translations. This is a poem by the Duke of Aquitaine, Guilhem de Peitieu, who was the first troubadour, he's always called the first troubadour. I question that because he didn't write in his own language, he wrote in another language, he wrote in another dialect of Occitan, which suggests to me that either there were already poems of this kind in it or that he was—that there was a kind of literature or a kind of poetry in that language that has disappeared, that we don't have at all.

So but he certainly was one of the very first, and he's proof in a way that the real root of the entire romance tradition, which we take completely for granted, everything we call romantic, which has certain characteristics that we have only recently begun to think about, begins the root of it was not just folk poetry of Europe or of the Latin of the hymns or any of the Goliardic poets or anything like that. Far more important and far more intimate and far more present was the poetry of the Spanish Arabs and of Arabic Spain and of the eleven surviving poems of Guilhem's, eight of them are in Arabic forms, so I mean—and there's—

And all of these guys from the south who did not think much of France, they were not part of France, they were vassals of the French, but they didn't like the French very much and they thought of them as learned barbarians, they didn't know how to live up there, you know and they thought that the place, the people who did know how to live, were the Spanish Arabs, and they had allies and they spent a lot of time there, and they got music

and dancers and all sorts of things from Spain and learned Arabic and came back with Arabic poetry. And there's a poem of Guilhem's that probably is the first romantic poem in our entire tradition, coming all the way down to Bessie Smith and Country Western music, everything that we think of was romantic in our period, corny and real whether it is, but it's all there, and we take it for granted. And it wasn't for granted, it wasn't for granted in the Roman world, or anything like that

But then there are some other, a few other wonderful poems that he wrote, greatly original, and long fascinating tragic life. He was Eleanor of Aquitaine's grandfather, you know, I mean, it's a great period, but at the end of his life, he's going into, he's leaving, and he feels that if he stays it's going to cause more trouble in his kingdom than if he goes, but if he goes he leaves his son in jeopardy, because he doesn't trust any of the people around him, but he feels there's more chance of peace if he leaves than if he stays and it's terribly sad, it's a poem of leave-taking, and it's his last poem, and it's a poem that's much simpler than the earlier poems, so I'll read you that because it's his final poem, and it's the kind of thing you don't think of as the troubadours, but there were great, great, poems among them.

"Now, if I have the urge to sing, my sorrow will be what I sing. I will not bow to any king in Limousin or Poitou again. Now I must set out into exile with great fear, into great peril, leaving my son at war and all his neighbors set to do him evil. It is anguish to go away from Poitou leaving the domain and the welfare with his cousin in the hands of Fouquet of Anjou. If neither Fouquet of Anjou nor my sovereign will help my son, I can

guess what he will suffer from Gascon thieves and Anjovins. If they think he is weak and young when I am not here anymore they will have him down before long unless he proves cunning and strong. And I beg my companion's pardon for every wrong that I have done her as to Jesus on his throne I pray in my tongue and in Latin. I was a man of strength and joy, but now we must part company and now I must make my way to him in whom all sinners end their sin. I loved high spirits, loved laughing. Our lord wants no more of such things. I can take none of them along as I come to the end of things. To all I loved I say good-bye. Good-bye to knighthood and to pride, so let it be as it please God, and I beg him to welcome me. May all my friends after I die come with full hearts and honor me, for I have known pleasure and joy faraway and in my own country, so I take leave of joy and pleasure, sable and gray and ermine fur."

Great last line, and it's incredibly beautiful in Provencal, in Occitan.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Can you say it?

W. S. MERWIN: Yeah. [Says something in Occitan]. So he's saying dark hair, gray hair, and white hair, the three ages, you know, that I've been through. I find it a very beautiful poem, a very sad poem.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mournful. Mournful.

W. S. MERWIN: Mournful poem. There's a great deal that's mournful in Provencal, and

the idea of love, the love that is untouchable, the love that can never be reached. *Amor dolone*, the love at a distance, part of the whole thing, it runs all the way through the romance tradition. "I hate to see that evening sun go down." That's *amor dolone*, you know, everything that I love is far away from me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I love this poem if you wouldn't mind reading it.

W. S. MERWIN: Oh, "To Paula in Late Spring."

Let me imagine that we will come again
when we want to and it will be spring
we will be no older than we ever were
the worn griefs will have eased like the early cloud
through which the morning slowly comes to itself
and the ancient defenses against the dead
will be done with and left to the dead at last
the light will be as it is now in the garden
that we have made here these years together
of our long evenings and astonishment.

What should I do, read one of the recent poems?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, please do.

W. S. MERWIN: This is a very recent one called “How it Happens.” The sky said, “I am watching to see what you can make out of nothing.” I was looking up, and I said, “I thought you were supposed to be doing that.” The sky said, “Many are clinging to that. I am giving you a chance.” I was looking up and I said, “I am the only chance I have,” then the sky did not answer. And here we are, with our old names for the days, the vast days that do not listen to us.

“Coming of Age:” “It will not be enough to recall stills from along the way, to glimpse from its hill, the long-gone night pasture, the light on the river but not the river, the sunbeam on the scuffed stair in the soundless house but not where it was going, the eyes of a dog watching from beside me, face in shadow, silent as an old photograph, our meeting, our first night, and the waking at home together again, I was there. These same hands and these eyes as they were when they wondered where it was going, where it had gone. It will not be enough. It will be enough.”

“A Step at a Time:” “Now when one eye daylight and one not. It was a lifetime before they flew their true colors, but I must have known since the moment I was born, pans in the balance swinging along with me, always two poles with the seasons rocking between them, the familiar, the unexplored, the city, the country, abroad almost at home, at home never quite there. Just the way it was, left foot, right foot, my way to go, my own way of finding and losing, and in my own time coming to one love, one place, day and night as they came to me, but the knowing and the rain, the dream and the morning, the wind, the pain, the loss, the burning, it seems you must let them come so you can let them go. You

must let them go so you can let them come."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, William, now you make your way after a short stop in New York to Washington to get, to be awarded this great honor, and I know that you have been rather skeptical of honors. You have turned some down.

W. S. MERWIN: Aren't you?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Pardon?

W. S. MERWIN: Aren't you?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you interviewing me? No. **(laughter)** Yes, I am actually, very much so.

W. S. MERWIN: Isn't there always a feeling of let's see?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Pardon?

W. S. MERWIN: Isn't there always a feeling of let's see?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In my case, what's going to happen very soon is the Austrian government is honoring me. My parents are Austrian and I felt very skeptical

about accepting. My parents just escaped and spent the war years in Haiti. And among the very few people who survived, a very small Jewish community existed there, I turned to them and was just very, first of all, I thought it was a mistake, and second of all, I thought I was wondering why I would honor me, I've done nothing for Austria except survive, really, because my parents did. And they, I guess, need to find a few people every year. **(laughter)**

And so I asked my father and mother. My father said, "Paul, they have such guilt, they must do something with it. So accept it. You know, it will alleviate maybe something for a moment," and I turned to my mother and my mother said, "I'm of three hundred minds, I don't know, Paulie, what you should do, I have no idea," and I was speaking to a friend of mine and I was saying, "You know, it's so strange to be accepting this honor, I'm accepting it because they didn't manage to kill us all," and he said, "Accept it in their name," which sort of made me think it was right to do so. But in your case you turned down some early prizes you got and got into a little bit of a disquisition I think with another very famous poet who was very much opposed to your turning—I think Auden was very much opposed to your turning down a prize. And here have you wholeheartedly embraced getting this prize day after tomorrow?

W. S. MERWIN: I wouldn't put it quite that way, but I was very dubious about it, but I thought about it for—I was given almost a month to think about it and we were talking about it back and forth, and I said, "You know, I'm not going to come to Washington and spend a lot of time there wearing a suit and all that," but they worked those details out

quite easily, to make it, to kind of ease it, but the real reason why I thought it might be the moment to do it. I should something that is probably unduly political, but I have great, great respect for President Obama, and I am happy to have a president who was really elected. **(applause)**

And I think he's got just an impossible job to do, but also there's another reason. His link to Hawai'i and all of the stuff that was admired during the campaign about how cool he was handling terrible discussion to put it in its nicest—which is a very Hawai'ian thing, you know. I remember one wild activist meeting where somebody from the Black Power movement had come out to Hawai'i, and was—he was there at this activist meeting and he sort of tried to whip everybody up to get them really passionate about them and a big Hawaiian walked over to him when he had finished and handed him a beer and said, "Cool it, brah." **(laughter)** That's something that Obama grew up with, you know. Don't get overexcited, I mean, because you're just going to make yourself incapable of any kind of judgment. I think he's got a terrible job to do.

But the other thing was I think, and I don't know how to say this, and I'm still struggling to find out how to do it, because I don't want to preach. My father was a preacher, and I don't want to be a preacher, but I am horrified with our behavior toward the rest of life, toward our, I mean, our denying global warming at this point, honestly. The way we have treated the rest of life on the earth ever since the beginning of agriculture but increasingly so after the Industrial Revolution and using the Old Testament to justify it in the Western world, you know, increase and have dominion over everything, which means "exploit it

and throw it away."

I as a child couldn't have accepted that because I didn't feel different from things that were growing and things that were walking around. I mean, I used to horrify my parents because bugs, I was fascinated by bugs, you know. "Don't touch those things, they're filthy!" Oh, really, you know? I was really very, very interested in them all, and I guess in some way I felt that we had something in common, you know, and I think that that's the other attitude. I believe that we've known this for a very long time. I think the Gilgamesh epic, you know, the great tree, yeah, you cut down the great tree, and what happens when you cut down the great tree, the great freedom, oh no, death comes into the world, that's what happens.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And accepting this award then becomes a—what? A symbol of—

W. S. MERWIN: A chance to sort of try to say that there is another way of looking at the world. Our way of behavior, whatever we pretend we believe, our way of behavior is fatal, not just to the world but to us. That we are killing ourselves, and we're doing it steadily day after day as though we have some sort of right to do it, you know. It's bad enough to kill cockroaches, but to think that we have a right to kill cockroaches makes it even worse. There is something totally unjust to the way we live in the world if that's our attitude, and the respect for life is all—There is a different feeling about it. The feeling of being part of life itself is one of joy and elation and, yes, one of great pain and loss and

all of those things, too. But the great privilege of being alive.

I mean, imagine. We don't know anything about the depths of time, we don't know anything really about the creation of the night sky and the stars and the whole of energy and how it all came to focus on one planet here in the middle of the whole thing, which was utterly unnoticeable and the speeds of life going on. I mean, here we are, and we are in the middle of all of this, right here. It doesn't make any sense at all, does it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So will you use this moment when you go to Washington to try and speak of the joy of poetry, the way in which there might be elation, there might be—

W. S. MERWIN: We were just looking at Blake manuscripts upstairs, you know. Blake is a great hero of mine, and there's a passage in a letter where he says, "The tree which moves me to tears of joy to another man is simply a green thing that gets in his way. He says by that man I will not set my proportions, but," he says, "to man of imagination the tree is nature and nature is the imagination," and the what I really believe and then we should leave the whole subject, because I don't know how to say it without getting dangerously close to preaching. But I really believe that the thing that distinguishes our species, our kind of creature, is not intelligence. I mean, the whales may be more intelligent than we are. They don't use memory in the same way, but they're smart. And not language. I mean, there must be language among amoebas, or we wouldn't have amoebas. Language is part of life, language evolves with life.

The thing that distinguishes us from other species, and not uniquely, but I mean to the degree that it characterizes us, is the ability to suffer with the suffering of whales dying in the Pacific or of people whom we will never know dying of AIDS in Africa, or starving to death somewhere in a famine. Or of the people in the camps in Darfur. What do they have to do with us? That's what our imagination—our imagination. We imagine them when we see that that suffering is something that we share, we could suffer in that way, and in a sense we do. And so imagination is the basis of the arts and of compassion, and in a way they never completely part company.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: William, on this note of imagination, on the power of imagination and empathy, and being able to put oneself in someone else's shoes even if those shoes are very uncomfortable, I would like to invite our whole audience here to have a toast with us to the new Poet Laureate. We're going to be opening some champagne. William Merwin.

(applause)