SCIENCE AND NATURE IN THE POETRY
OF HOWARD NEMEROV

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Science has prospered and scientific success, substantial and ubiquitous, is the distinguishing mark of the twentieth century. The marvels and wonders that swarmed half-formed in Bacon's excited imagination have been far surpassed by the marvels and wonders that are commonplace actualities to the present day child. The technique which he thought of as the interrogation of nature... has been perfected by men of science and adopted to every field of inquiry.¹

This technique of which Max Otto speaks is the scientific method, and to many it stands as a monument to the power of the human intellect to reach what may be the ultimate truths of the universe.

The scientific method was first formulated during the Renaissance by Galileo. Investigating the nature of motion, he found that it was not simply a term describing change, as Aristotle had said, but that within the changes in motion mathematical laws could be discerned. The result of his inquiry was the law of falling bodies.² To his scholastic contemporaries, however, his theories defied centuries-old Aristotelian tradition and even smacked of heresy. Skeptical university professors refused to study the evidence he offered as proof of new laws of nature, and the Church forced him to recant his beliefs.

Notwithstanding blind dogma, he continued his pursuit to ascertain the geometric, mathematical harmony of the universe. Whereas his predecessors, and not a few of his contemporaries, pursued the philosopher's stone and worked feverishly to trans-

mute lead into gold; Galileo believed that "the book of nature is written in mathematical characters." Thus, he felt that from certain basic premises based on the quantitative aspects of nature, man could employ a process of deductive reasoning in formulating natural laws and go back to nature only to verify the conclusions. This was what he called the "experimental" approach. But "experiment" to his contemporaries meant only sensible experience; thus, Galileo had to employ a new phrase, "the ordeal of experience." As Howard Nemerov says,

The experimental method was defined by Galileo, I believe, as putting nature to the question, where the "question" meant the judicial process of torture. The definition seems to imply a faith that nature, so treated, will reveal the secret name for a situation; when once that situation has been isolated, treated as a situation in itself, and considered for a moment apart from the flux of all things, nature will, as it were, confess her presumably guilty secret.

Francis Bacon, who was also a Renaissance scientist and philosopher, was greatly inspired by Galileo's epochal researches. He devoted the energies of his mind to establishing the authority of the scientific method as a means of increasing man's knowledge and mastery of the world. Leaving the means of achieving the kingdom of God to the Church, he declared unconditionally that science would "reveal nature's innermost secrets in order to extend human empire over all things possible." His belief that man could gain lordship over the earth makes Bacon sound strikingly

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3 Ibid., p. 228
4 Ibid., p. 228
6 Otto, Science, p. 79
modern. He proselytized what Bertrand Russell calls "power knowledge". And knowledge as power has enabled modern man to usher in an age of technology wherein the domain of nature is continually altered to provide man with undreamed of material comfort. Thus, the ideology of the scientific method has grown from a heretical philosophy to an authoritarian system that is, as Joseph Gallant says, "the bedrock of the contemporary world."

But to some, a predisposition to the acquisition of power-knowledge seems to have led man to the brink of self-destruction. From the Industrial Revolution, to the first world war, the Great Depression, and Hiroshima, man has experienced the more iniquitous effects of applied scientific knowledge. Some may still see science as the saviour of mankind, but others have the lurking suspicion that the Promethean myth will find fulfillment.

Most notably among the artists and humanists of modern society can there be heard a persistent cry of dissent. They tend to be skeptical of the all-pervasive role of science in human affairs, and on a philosophic level, they are opposed to what is called the "ethical neutrality" of science. As Max Otto says,

What then is the scientific method? Stated in the fewest possible words, it is a way of investigation which relies, and relies solely, on disciplined empirical observation and rigorously exact proof. Its aim is objective verification. And by objective verification is meant, first, that the investigator's wishes and wants, his aesthetic, moral, or religious predilections, his faith in or desire for a particular conclusion, have been carefully eliminated as determining factors; and second, that proof extends beyond inner or personal conviction, to outer or public demonstration.

And if the artist or humanist views science as a force for neu-

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8 Otto, Science, p. 96
tralizing man's personal or social sensibility on ethical, moral, and spiritual levels; then he also feels that science effects an equally onerous "neutralization" of nature.

Nature, of course, has long been a source of intellectual and spiritual authority for mankind. From the pantheons of the Indo-Aryans, Egyptians, and Greeks, to the universal schema of St. Thomas Aquinas, man has looked upon nature and found an explanation for being. Perhaps the finest expression of his belief in nature as a guide for personal and social conduct occurred during the Elizabethan Age, when men strove to model their social order on the harmonious workings of nature as revealed by Ptolemy. The Romantic revolution, which was a reaction both to the strident rationality of the eighteenth century and burgeoning industrialism, found its inspiration in nature, where men of a reflective bent could find peaceful consolation. The pantheism of the Lake poets was a fervent affirmation of nature's wonder and benevolence.

But the Darwinian concept of nature, appearing midway in the nineteenth century, sounded the strongest note of discord. Men began to see nature not so much as a peacable kingdom, but as a jungle wherein the only law was the survival of the fittest. And as the Elizabethans had modeled social behavior after the apparent harmony of nature, so nineteenth century man extrapolated the Darwinian concept into economic terms and embarked on a period of corruption and injustice that was only halted late in the century.

With the advent of the new physics early in the twentieth century, the universe began to be revealed as a vast, purposeless
chaos wherein the only motive force was the incessant flux of atoms, rather than as a "most perfect work of art" as Galileo had described it. Thus, nature appeared to some to be stripped of any purpose relevant to human existence. As Wolfgang Kohler says,

Before there was any science nature appeared to man as akin to himself. Things were of his kind, and events resembled his own activities or sufferings - it is still so among those tribes we call "primitive peoples." In consequence of it, intimate relations obtained not only among the most varied parts of nature, but also between man and his environment. Although such relations were often regarded as dangerous and some terrifying, even in this case they were at least familiar in type and to that extent understandable. When science developed, this view was gradually changed. Nature, as the physicists say, bears little resemblance to man. Nor are we allowed to believe that in the relations between one and the other there can be any intimacy. Those particular interconnections which the primitive view finds among concrete parts of our environment are with few exceptions non-existent for the scientific mind.9

This neutralization of man and his relation to nature is often vehemently denied by the artist and humanist. And an examination of the poetry of Howard Nemerov will show both the point of orientation a modern non-scientist finds in today's hurried world, and the peculiar manner in which he views the methods and ideology of modern science.

Robin Skelton, in The Poetic Pattern, traces the antagonism of poetry to science in this way:

The opposition of poetry...to the scientist can be seen most clearly in the work of the so-called Romantics who, at the time when the industrial revolution was at its

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9Wolfgang Kohler, The Place of Values In a World of Fact (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp. 1938), pp. 12-13
height, rebelled against acceptance of the social situation. The Augustans were able to use poetry as a commentary upon society from within; the Romantics were only able to attack society from outside. They felt themselves outlaws and wanderers. They placed more emphasis than their predecessors upon dreams and upon Enthusiasm in an effort to show that the "dark Satanic Mills" of materialistic scientific thought were not the most important matters in the world of their day. Seeing the restraining influence of dogmatic scientific thought, they turned instinctively toward liberty—imaginative, political, and moral. This reaction, natural though it was, separated the poet from the world of common man, and the more recent and more frenzied reactions of Symbolism, Dadaism, and the like, have continued the process. So far had this process gone that when, in the nineteen-thirties, poets began to write work that included reference to scientific phenomena and mechanical things of everyday life, the cry went up, "This is not Poetry."¹⁰

Yet poetry, by the thirties, had reached the point where retreat—in the manner of Dowson, Huysman, or De LaMare—was no longer possible. Poetry had begun to absorb and reshape scientific thought in order to make a more positive attack, and the nature of that attack was not unlike magic. As a sorcerer will get bits of hair and nail from a rival in order to control his spirit, so poetry felt that it could knock some of the bombast from science by turning the scientist's jargoneses to its own use.

The usual method of turning science to the uses of poetry is in the nature of a transformation: the impersonal, mechanical world of science becomes a personal universe wherein the individual finds meaning and purpose for existence. In The Life Cycle of Common Man, Howard Nemerov describes, in the first two stanzas, how modern man is seen by the behaviorist scientist or economic statistician:

Roughly figured, this man of moderate habits,
This average consumer of the middle class,
Consumed in the course of his average life span
Just under half a million cigarettes,
Four thousand fifths of gin and about
A quart as much vermouth; he drinks
Maybe a hundred thousand cups of coffee,
And counting his parents share it cost
Something like half a million dollars
To put him through life. How many beasts
Died to provide him with meat, belt and shoes
Cannot certainly be said... But anyhow
It is in this way that a man travels through time,
Leaving behind him a lengthening trail
Of empty bottles and bones, of broken shoes,
Frayed collars and worn or outgrown
Diapers and dinner jackets, silk ties, and slickers.

This is modern man of the wasteland. He is J. Alfred Prufrock,
George Babitt, an "average consumer of the middle class." His
humanity is not measurable qualitatively, but only quantitatively;
he is the statistical profile or the behaviorist's response me-
chanism. The measure of this man is not made by the depth or
breadth of his humanity—his soul, his dreams, his aspirations,
his achievements, his failures—but rather by the number of
"things" he has consumed or worn or purchased. He is a kind
of grist-mill, ingesting life as it is needed and spewing it out
when used up. He is a mechanism within a mechanical world, for
there is no value upon his life, or the life about him, other
than its value as a commodity. The second stanza continues with:

Given the energy and security thus achieved,
He did...? What? 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

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Steadily from the front of his face as he
Advanced into the silence and made it verbal.
Who can tally the tale of his words? A lifetime
Would barely suffice for their repetition;
If you merely printed all his commas, the result
Would be a very large volume, and the number of times
He said, "thank you", or "very little sugar, please"
Would stagger the imagination. There were also
Witticisms, platitudes, and the statements beginning
"It seems to me" or "As I always say."

In these two stanzas, then, modern man is seen as a trivial crea-
ture existing in a trivial world. But it was said earlier that
the poet's attack upon science, or a materialistically conceived
world, was in the manner of a conversion of that purposeless, im-
personal world into a personal, purposeful one. Thus, the conclud-
ing stanza of the poem says:

Consider the courage in all that, and behold the man
Walking into deep silence, with the ectoplasic
Cartoon's balloon of speech protuding
Steadily out of the front of his face, the words
Borne along on the breadth which is his spirit
Telling the numberless tale of his untold Word
Which makes the world his apple, and forces him to eat.

The single phrase, "Consider the courage in all that, and behold
the man," gives the poem its surprising reversal. For where Nemerov
appears to have been content with cataloguing the infinite dullness
of man's life, he now says, "Ecce Homo!" and makes a startling
fusion of this "average consumer of the middle class" with Christ.
It not only breaks the intentional monotony of the preceding stan-
za, but invests the image of man in the poem with new life, and
with a tragic character revelatory of the poet's vision. For al-
though he is as much aware as the scientist or materialist of the
triviality in human life, he does not consider such trivia the only
exponent of human values. The poet has to be saying that there was
a time when one man, whether in myth or reality, became so "uncommon" as to transform a better part of the world through the power of his own personal tragedy. We can see, then, that the poet is able to transform the materialist's impersonal, mechanical world into a personal, almost mythic vision of humanity. But this is not strictly an attack upon science, even though it does show quite clearly the breach between the scientific and poetic view of the world. Rather the poet has absorbed scientific thought in order to convert it into poetic vision.

But Nemerov does, on occasion, attack out-right, and in Angel and Stone, he uses ridicule in rather heavy-handed fashion to reveal just what he thinks of the scientific mentality:

In the world are millions and millions of men, and 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.

Not only does Nemerov speak as though he were telling a tale to a child—thus reducing the arcane workings of science to "child's play"—but later in the poem he calls science the "Lord of everything that is" and the "Lord of everything that is by one and one and one." His intention is to show that those men who count

The grassblades and the grains of sand by one and one and one And number the raindrops and memorize the eccentricities of snowflakes....

neither perceive nor understand the intricate flux—the complex

chain of events and transformations and inter-actions of nature. Rather, as is necessary to the pragmatic mind, they must itemize nature before they can cognize it. Their approach to nature, like their approach to man in Life Cycle, is quantitative rather than qualitative. They are, to the poet, like those medieval philosophers who debated over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, for he says:

...One is the watcher over chance events and the guardian of disorder. According to the law of the square root of n, so that a certain number of angels or molecules shall fall in irrelevance and be retrograde.

And very often, the poet may rely on the power of a magical vision to create what he feels is an effective counter to the logical, unimaginative thought of a science-conscious society. He hopes to employ images that will reach deep into the mind of his reader's ordinary environment into an extraordinary expression of imaginative vision. Song number seven from Seven Macabre Songs illustrates the poet's use of the so-called "deep image."

My death with a nail in his foot
Came dragging at the ground.
He carried a long tooth for a cane,
He carried his eye cast down.

The sunlight pierced his body through
With shafts of shadow; hung
Under the shadow of his breast
A perching sparrow sang.

My crippled death for my sake bears
(While life is, life is long)
Both tooth and nail, and for my heart
The sweetly beating song.

Or, in *Suburban Prophecy*, we can see how the poet's vision can make the ordinary world a great deal more extraordinary.

On Saturday, the power-mower's whine  
Begins the morning. Over this neighborhood  
Rises the keening, petulant voice, begin  
Green, oily teeth to chatter and munch the cud.

Monsters, crawling from the carpets of the world,  
Still send from underground against your blades  
The roots of things, battalions green and curled  
And tender, that will match your blades with blades  
Till the revolted throats shall strangle on  
The tickle of their dead, till straws shall break  
Cranks like camels, and the sun go down  
On dinosaurs in swamps. A night attack  
Follows, and by the time the Sabbath dawns  
All armored beasts are eaten by their lawns.14

These poems are anti-logical, and hence, anti-scientific in a very fundamental sense. The poet perceives within himself, and in his everyday world, a special kind of reality that is contrary to the pragmatic, limited way of thought of the scientist. And if his vision is communicated, then what he has experienced is valid.

But perhaps one of the most effective methods of attack is the poet's use of scientific terms or concepts as a means of suggesting the poetic value of the scientific discovery. In *Student Dies In 100-Yard Dash*, Nemerov employs the concept of entropy as a primary image. In thermodynamic terms, it states that "entropy is a quantity which measures the disorder of the particles of a body. This entropic state is always on the increase, and thus, the energy level of a body is always

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14 Nemerov, *Mirrors*, p. 84
'running down.' It is not unlikely that in the remote future the universe will consist of a disordered cold soup of matter dispersed throughout space at a uniform temperature of a few degrees above absolute zero."\textsuperscript{15} The poem discusses these ideas like this:

This way or that, student, in the sprint
Or intestine marathon of age
The body of this death is adamant
And stumbles toward the finish after heart
Has broken, earth opened under feet.
Horizon lines are fine, but no mirage,
Student, though breathless now on the cinder path
Where planets run against time in a dead heat.\textsuperscript{16}

In essence, the poet has transformed the terminology of the scientist (as well as the sportswriter), into an expression of hollow despair. Thus, the phrase "dead heat" plays back and forth to create the entire perspective of the poem on the level of meaning that construes our whirling, life-teeming planet as facing the inevitable stillness of a cosmic death; and on the level of man's inevitable personal death no matter how fervent his aspirations; and on the level of meaning of the literal scientific fact: a state of entropic collapse is a state of "dead heat." This kind of poem makes science subservient to poetry because it is capable of employing evocative language and symbolism to contribute to a more immediate and relevant vision of man, even if that vision is tragic. The sole agent effecting this transformation is the power


\textsuperscript{16} Nemerov, Mirrors, p. 80
of metaphor. Even on the level of every-day speech, metaphors are used that have become so common they are called cliched or trite. Time flies, politicians win by a landslide, and good jokes bring down the house. But though they do not strike new responses after long use, such phrases point out the basic nature of metaphor: it serves to make the disparate aspects of experience and observation part of an intelligible pattern. Metaphor concentrates process into instance, yet retains the meaning of that instance in relation to the larger scheme to be understood. Thus, metaphor works in this poem as a kind of translation. Unless one were a scientist, the mathematical formula describing the process of entropy would be meaningless. And where the scientist objects to the vulgarization of scientific theory into anthropomorphic terms (such as Marshall Walker employs in the above quote), the poet, or the ordinary individual feels compelled to accept the immediate and tangible explanation for abstruse technical theorizing that appears in such phrases as "the universe is running down" or "the death of matter." As Moody E. Prior says,

The primacy of scientific learning...explores a reality which finds its ideal expression in mathematical relations, and cares for the individual experience only as it becomes a clue to the possibility of an impersonal formulation in which the individual instance loses its identity in an all-powerful generalization.17

But the artist seeks to convey his perception of the human condition as it is individually experienced. And if his vision of man is tragic, he feels at least that it is an evaluation conveying more of the total human experience than the

17 Prior, Science and the Humanities, p. 38
mathematical formula.

This discussion of Nemerov's attitude toward science and a world predisposed to scientific thought has shown the basic difference between the poetic and scientific experience of the world and the expression of that experience. As W. M. Urban says,

There are two ways of representing the world of our experiences, two ways of "picturing" reality. One seeks to retain and express qualities and values; the other abstracts from these and seeks to express only quantitative and logical relations. In other words, man speaks a double language which may be described as dramatic, or scientific. 18

This discussion has also shown that science, as perhaps the single most over-riding influence in our age, naturally informs the poet's thought. But he is rarely in accord with either its method or its aims. In fact, as far as Nemerov is concerned, science has successfully stifled, or destroyed man's most meaningful mode of response to nature and the world; and has, for the most part, destroyed nature itself by limiting its reality to only what can be objectively and logically said of it.

Nemerov is capable of a transcendental response to nature that is much akin to the traditional Romantic response: he finds a sense of universal mystery and wisdom in the workings of nature. In *A Spell Before Winter*, he describes a harmony of self found through an apprehension of the harmony of nature.

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After the red leaf and the gold have gone,
Brought down by the wind, then by hammering rain
Bruised and dissolved, 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 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, re-dying 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.\textsuperscript{19}

Of course, this sounds a great deal like Frost, as does the

poem, 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.\textsuperscript{20}

This sort of response to nature is traditional in that the
poet expresses a sense of harmonious confluency with nature


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 20
wherein nature acts as mentor. Wordsworth expressed such sentiments in response to nature's outward and immediate manifestations. In *Tintern Abbey*, he felt that to look upon nature is to find "The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul of all my moral being."21 His sense of communion with nature was felt without effort, for he believed his soul to be inextricably linked with the forms of nature. Emerson similarly felt that the forms of nature could give man delight and a sense of beauty, but as he says in his essay on nature,

...this beauty of nature, which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part....The high and divine beauty is that which is found in combination with the human will. Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will....Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness.22

Emerson expresses a sense of disparateness in his approach to nature in that he sees nature as an artistic symbol of the "universal soul" that suffuses all of creation. Whereas Wordsworth felt that a higher form of being was readily apparent in the form of things, Emerson felt compelled to go beyond natural appearances in order to identify with that spirit which he called Reason, where "the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the type of Reason."23 Both men are "intuitive" in the sense that they perceive a higher


23. Ibid., p. 1012
being within, or behind, the outward manifestations of nature. But they are rationalistic in their mode of ordering nature's variety and their apprehension of it. In a sense, they maintain a sort of student-teacher, subject-object relationship with nature that is not far removed from the scientific conceptualization of man's role in nature.

But Nemerov writes another sort of nature poetry that is more Bergsonian in its approach. True, the writings of Henri Bergson early in the twentieth century seemed to carry on the transcendental tradition, for he felt that intuition was vastly superior to the scientific intellect in its power to see all things and describe them accurately. But he deviated from earlier expressions of such a philosophy in that he sought to eliminate the factitious unity that the intellect imposes upon nature from the outside; he sought to break through the "matter acting upon matter" formulation of man's response to nature. For Bergson, nature was an unceasing, undivided process, a vast cosmic flux of which the human mind was an expression rather than a part. Thus, he assumed the need for a basically irrational response to nature and an irrational expression of that response that is drastically opposed to the rather serene and tranquil approach of the Romantic-Transcendentalists as well as to the logical, compartmental approach of the scientific intellect. As he said, "You must take things by storm; you must thrust intelligence outside of itself by an act of will."  

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Nemerov is aware of the qualitative process of duration and endurance that characterizes the flow of time through nature and which gives nature its *elan vital*. He does not geometrize or compartmentalize nature and human intellect, but rather expresses their confluent unity; hence, the expression of his response tends to be in the order of an awareness of what goes on in the human mind when it is functioning naturally. That is, while we sometimes think of ourselves as passing from state to state, from a feeling of warmth to a feeling of cold, from a thought of the sun to a thought of the moon, in which each feeling is separate and distinct, a moment's attention will tell us that this is only a false picture created by a mechanically oriented psychology. Instead of viewing our inner activity as an interpenetrating, organic flux we tend to treat it as an array of solid objects arranged side by side like beads on a string.25 In like manner we view the workings of nature, and it is for this reason that scientific, logical thought overlooks, or deliberately ignores, the rushing flow of time and matter that characterizes the flux of the cosmos about us when it becomes necessary to formulate an awareness of that flux. Thus, in such poems as *Painting a Mountain Stream*, *Runes*, and *Brainstorm*, Nemerov expresses not only an effective counter to the artificial order science imposes upon nature, but he attempts to reveal a higher reality of nature.

In *Painting a Mountain Stream*, Nemerov abjures man not

25 White, *Age of Analysis*, p. 68
to conceive of nature, or himself, as separate objects, but rather as parts of a confluent whole. He perceives the flux and energy of the life-force that flows between man and nature.

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 one thought.
The mind that speaks it is unfounded.

I speak of what is running down.
Of sun, of thunder bearing the rain,
I do not speak of the rising flame
Or the slow towering of the elm.

A comb was found in a girl's grave
(Ah, heartsblood raveled like a rope.)
The visible way is always down
But there is no floor to the world.

Study this rhythm, not this thing.
The brush's tip streams from the wrist
Of a living man, a dying man.
The running water is the wrist.

In the confluence of the wrist
things and ideas ripple together,
as in the clear lake of the eye,
unfathomably, running remains.

The eye travels on running water,
Out to the sky, if you let it go.
However often you call it back
it travels again, out to the sky.

The water that seemed to stand is gone.
The water that seemed to run is here.
Steady the wrist, steady the eye;
paint this rhythm, not this thing.

This image of running, flowing water as representative of
the vital flux within man and nature finds further expression

25 Nemerov, Mirrors, p. 97
in *Runes*, of which a few stanzas will demonstrate the poet's intent.

I

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...

II

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 unsubstanticed. 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...

VIII

To go low, to be as nothing, to die,  
To sleep in the dark water threading through  
The fields of ice, the soapy, frothing water  
That slithers under the culvert below the road,  
Water of dirt, water of death, dark water,  
And through the tangle of the sleeping roots  
Under the coppery cold beech woods, the green  
Pine woods, and past the buried hulls of things  
To come, and humbly through the breathing dreams  
Of all small creatures sleeping in the earth;  
To fall with the weight of things down on the one  
Still ebbing stream, to go on to the end  
With the convict hunted through the swamp all night,  
The dog's corpse in the ditch, to come at last  
Into the pit where zero's eye is closed.

XII

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,  
Unarled, 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 pressure of  
Another order, crack open like a 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.

XV 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 Aprils 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 is death to open. Knowing the secret, Keeping the secret - herringbones of light Ebbing on beaches, the huge artillery Of tides - it is not knowing, it is not keeping, But being the secret hidden from yourself.

Here, the poet obviously desires to merge in substance and essence with the flux of nature. He experiences that flow of time through space that surges behind the appurtenances of the everyday world, and which is most representative of the process of Becoming and Being of life itself. It appears that Nemerov not only draws upon Bergsonian philosophy, and to a degree, Buddhist concepts in that he seeks a kind of Nirvana;* but he is also attune to that mythic concept of man's link with the sea and the cyclic rhythm of nature which has been confirmed by recent findings in science. For man's blood shares physico-chemical properties with the seas, and he has been found to possess a "circadian rhythm"--or inbuilt

26 Nemerov, New, p. 101

* John B. Noss, Man's Religions (New York: Macmillan, Inc. 1964), p. 225. Two schools of Buddhist philosophy--the Madhyamika and the Yogacara--shaped the basic concepts of Buddhist thought. The first described reality as non-attributative and ineffable, and described the voyage into Nirvana as "entering a void, because it meant stripping the attributes from everything and passing into vacuity and silence." (the pit where zero's eye is closed)
time-sense that is related to his orientation in the physical environment. Of course, it would seem that the poet is not really expressing a different view of man and nature than science does, since science, in this instance, seems to share the poet's vision. We might say that both the poet and science have a similar view of nature as far as their perception of the phenomena itself, but they diverge radically in the manner in which they confirm their experience of that phenomena. As Rudolf Carnap says, in discussing the "expressive" and "representative" functions of language,

The aim of a lyrical poem in which occur the words "sunshine" and "clouds" is not to inform of us of certain meteorological facts, but to express certain feelings of the poet and to excite similar feelings in us. A lyrical poem has no assertional sense; it does not contain knowledge.\(^27\)

But the poet would feel, especially in this instance, that the human response to nature finds expression in more than just an awareness of "meteorological facts." Rather, he asserts that the fact must be made part of the entire scheme of man's relationship with nature, wherein his "permanent emotional or volitional dispositions" are as much a judge of knowledge as the logical apparatus of scientific language. As far as the poet evidences this tendency to rely on "feeling", or expressive language, as well as an awareness of "fact" to validate his response to nature, he is "irrational" or "intuitive." Logic enables him to experience nature as isolated phenomena, but it does not satisfy his need to achieve, and express, a response of his total sensibility, which is

\(^{27}\) White, *Analysis*, p. 219
the way a person responds in toto to his environment, and
the means he has of responding.

But perhaps the fullest expression of Nemerov's basically
irrational, intuitive apprehension of nature's omnipresent
energy is in the poem Brainstorm. Here, a man "bent to his
books" becomes gradually aware that his seemingly ordinary
house is coming alive with a strange and ominous power.

He sat alone
In an upstairs room and heard these things; a blind
Man up with a bang, a door slammed, a groan
 Came from some hidden joist, a leaky tap,
 At any silence of the wind walked like
 A blind man through the house. Timber and sap
 Revolt, he thought, from washer, baulk, and spike.
 Bent to his book, continued unafraid
 Until the crows came down from their loud flight
 To walk along the rooftree overhead.28

The house and the crows take on a kind of motive personality
that ebbs and flows about the man. He thinks he hears the
crows calling the house back to nature, since it is, of
course, "only trees stretched on the rack." With this secre-
ret revealed—that man has violated nature in order to make
her meet his practical demands—all nature will rise in re-
venge, and

Fur, leaf, and feather would invade the form,
Nail rust with rain and shingle warp with snow,
Vine tear the wall, till any straw-borne storm
Could rip both roof and rooftree off and show
Naked to nature what they had kept warm.

This man, who sought refuge in a rationally ordered world,
is made helpless by the essentially irrational force of na-
ture. And in his defeat, he can feel "the crows walk on his
head/ As if he were the house..." But then, the final assault

28 Nemerov, New, p. 101
is made, and

...in the ruins of wiring, his burst mains,
The raining wind had been set free to blow,
Until the green uprising and mob rule
That ran the world had taken over him,
Split him like seed, and set him in the school
Where any crutch can learn to be a limb.

Inside his head he heard the stormy crows.

The poem progresses, then, from describing that state where man is "in here" and nature is "out there," to the state where nature invades man's comfortable domain to render him helpless, and finally, to the state where nature, wild, rau­cous, and triumphant, is "inside his head." Here nature comes to man in irresistible fashion--man does not go gently into the "tomb of the earth," as in Bryant's Thanatopsis, nor is he wrapped in that 'cradle endlessly rocking," as in Whitman's poem, nor does he see "the earth and every common sight/...
Apparelled in celestial light/ The glory and the freshness of a dream," as in Wordsworth's Intimations of Immortality. Rather, Brainstorm describes in nightmarish fashion the dissolution of human rationality in face of the irrational forces of nature. Hence, Nemerov is suggesting that whether man wants it or not, he will be forced to accept the realization that a præ­matic or practical approach to nature ill­defines his relation to nature and permits him to dwell in an all-too­easily refuted complacency. This is a realistic statement of man's world, for although he can, at one moment, tear down a forest to turn it into newspapers; he may in the next witness the wrath of nature as she hurls the fury of hurricane,
tornado, or flood against his cities of stone and steel to reduce them to rubble.

We have seen, then, that Nemerov evidences a wide range of thought in his approach to nature and the formation of the human response to nature. His poetic sensibility is essentially based upon an intuitive and anti-rationalistic apprehension of the world, and hence, it is anti-scientific in the most fundamental sense. At the same time, however, that he condemns scientific ideology, his poetry achieves some of its effects by his use of ideas about the world and man drawn from science. But as was illustrated earlier, he attempts to make science subservient to the poetic vision by borrowing his most effective weapons from the enemy. In such poems as To Lu Chi, Orphic Scenario, and The Loon's Cry, he deals more explicitly with the manner in which science impairs man's ability to discover a more meaningful understanding of nature, and he also attempts to show the exact nature of that "reality" seen thru the ever-exclusive "tunnel-vision" of science.

To Lu Chi is cast in the form of a dramatic monologue in which the narrator—a modern poet—discusses the art of poetry as well as the more inclusive topic of aesthetics with a long-dead Chinese poet, the author of the Wen Fu, or Prose Poem on the Art of Letters. The first stanza reveals the narrator

Walking around the orchard...
A silken figure on a silken screen
Who tries out with his eye the apple branches,
The last years shriveled apples capped with snow,
The hungry birds...  

Here nature, caught amidst winter, has prompted the narrator
to ponder a modern theme—"that poetry is dead." He is wary
of beginning such reflections, for they will inevitably en-
tangle him in an argument that has raced for centuries. But
he is finally able to shore up his courage, and plunge in,
for Lu Chi brings him

...by precept and example
Assurance that a reach of mastery,
Some still, reed-hidden and reflective stream
Where the heron fishes in his own image,
Always exists.

The problem he begins to discuss, among others, is that de-
scribed in one of Nemerov's essays, "The Swaying Form: A
Problem in Poetry." In that essay, he says that in much
modern poetry, as well as in poetry of the past,

...the mind curves back upon itself. It is poetry
that reveals to interpretation one reflective di-
mension having to do with the process of composition
itself.... This development...may be always a limit,
not only for poetry, but for every kind of thought.

But the symbolism of the heron "fishing in his own image"
is meant to provide an answer to the swaying form. For
as the heron stands motionless in the water until it spies
a fish, and then spears and devours its prey; so the poet
waits by the "stream" of nature's flux, and casts his per-
ceptive sensibility upon that stream in order to break through
the surface of things and grasp meaning.

29 Nemerov, Mirrors, p. 90
30 Howard Nemerov, Poetry and Fiction: Essays (New Jersey: Rutgers
University Press, 1963), p. 9
The narrator then proceeds a bit more confidently to engage the battle.

Lu Chi, it's said the world has changed, and that is doubtless something which is always said (Though now to justify, and not in scorn) - Yet I should think that on our common theme That sort of change has never mattered much. In letters as in many other trades The active man and the contemplative man May both engage, and both in different ways Succeed. 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. Yet The active man, because he is active, Expropriates as if by natural right The common ground to his singular use; Not knowing, or not caring, that to use Means also to use up. So I have read, In works by sages of the active side, And heard them say, that poetry is dead.

This "common theme" is, of course, the problem of aesthetics, which has been violently argued throughout the history of civilization. Plato scornfully denied the need for poets and artists in his Republic, Aristotle said that Homer first taught us the art of framing lies in the right way, and Nietzsche echoed similar sentiments centuries later. Today, the "active men," who could be construed as scientists or bureaucrats, have decided that their language is the only real language of man, and hence, mirrors the only reality. But as the narrator then says,

This ancient paragon and type of arts, They say, was magic when the world began And when the old magicians died in scorn Among the ruins of unsuccessful spells, Their childish children, living in the dawn Of intellect and conscience, said those spells...
(Which could not move a mountain or a mouse
In a real world) for courage and for consolation,
Making those holy places in their hearts
Not masonry or magic made elsewhere.

The narrator is re-affirming the power of a language based on magic and myth that shaped primitive as well as modern societies. For the "spells" of neolithic, Egyptian, or Greek cultures are present, in part, in the modern rituals of the Masons, social fraternities, and secret societies, as well as in such simple everyday phrases as "God bless you", "goddamit", "go to hell", or "Gesundheit." Of course, much has been said about the relation of science to magic. As Sir James Frazer pointed out in The Golden Bough, "...magic was early men's attempt to coerce the powers of nature by the use of certain procedures...the effect of which was to establish control over these powers."31 And modern science, as offspring of early magic, has refined its procedures to the point where it can control much of nature whenever it wishes. But since some scientists blatantly evidence their stupidity by making such statements as "the aim of science is to foresee, and not as has often been said, to understand,"32 the narrator feels free to enjoy a little rancor.

But now, in the objective, brazen light
Shed by the sciences, they say the arts,
And poetry first, considered as their trunk,
The nearest to the root, and bearing branches
Aloft with flower and fruit, and spreading seed

To all societies, must wither away
By supersession in nature and in all hearts.
So in our day wisdom cries out in the streets
And some men regard her. And in your day,
Lu Chi? We know these theories
Produce, intelligent and serviceable
So long as he can see his language as
Coin of the realm, backed by church and state,
Each word referring to a thing, each thing
Nicely dominated by a word--
A good mind at its best, a trifle dry..

The narrator is quite sure that poetry has not withered; rather,
the mind, as well as the language, of the "active" man has gone dry.
Nemerov is making a fine point here, and it is one that involves
semantic philosophy.

Much of the language of science molds itself around one-to-one
correspondences between signs and referents. If the word "Oxygen"
meant anything other than "that element having an atomic weight
of 16", scientists would be unable to communicate. Hence, the lang-
uage of science as T. C. Pollock describes it, is formed in this
way:

If two people are actually to agree as the referent of
a symbol...it is necessary for them to do two things.
First, they must disregard all of the actual meanings
which the term has for each of them except the reference
to the referent agreed upon. Second, they must choose as
a referent a publicly discriminable stimulus, or reduce
a more abstract reference to publicly discriminable ele-
ments through a logical process...33

That is, the scientist may be a very passionate sort, but to ver-
ify the ends of his experience to others, to ascertain that his
method was sound and the phenomenon described is "real" (true to

33 T. C. Pollock, The Nature of Literature: Its Relation to Science,
Language, and Human Experience (New Jersey: Princeton University
Press, 1942), p. 81
the scientific method), he must strip his perception and description of the object of all connotations. In short, he must use a purely denotative rather than connotative, or evocative, language, and in doing so, drastically limits the nature of his experience. For as Pollock also says,

The major part of the reality of language lies not in the external signs, which through the mechanics of writing, may be isolated and indefinitely preserved, but in the experience of the human being by whom the signs are produced and received.\(^3\)

Thus, the language of science, and scientific thought as well, must dismiss any qualitative experience of nature and the reality therein. Only a quantitative perception and expression will suffice. But, as the narrator of To Lu Chi says,

...in bad times, when the word for bread... 
Dies and grows moldy, (the active man) is, of all men, The likeliest to panic as he sits 
In his bomb shelter and commissions war songs 
From active poets with aggressive views. 
Nor on the day when all civilizations 
Quite visibly and audibly collapse, 
When Paris burns merrily as Sodom 
When London looks like Hell, or Hiroshima, 
Not even then, will this man of his own 
Free choice consult those who consult the source - 
Who, by then, in any case, can do nothing.

What then is the poet to do, if his words exist, yet go unheeded?

...Nothing but this, old sir: continue. 
...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... 
Till it can carry, in those other minds, 
A nobler action and a purer thought.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 48
So much I gather from your poem: continue.
And now the sun shines on the apple trees,
The melting snow glitters with a great wealth,
The waxwings, drunk on last years rotten apples,
Move through the branches, uttering pretty cries,
While portly grosbeaks, because they do not drink
That applejack, chatter with indignation.
How fine the Chinese day! delicate, jeweled,
Exactly spaced, peaceably tense with life.
I shall pretend to be a poet all
This afternoon, a Chinese poet,
My marvelous words must bring the springtime in
And the great tree of speech to flower
Between the two realms of heaven and earth. So now
Goodbye, Lu Chi, and thank you for your poem.

This modestly indignant philosophizing has banished the winter from the poet's soul as it has banished winter from the garden, and he feels a renewal of faith in the wonder and value of his craft.

But Nemerov is not always able to reassure himself that the inimical force of science can be so easily overcome. The power of science to destroy nature, as well the formulation of the human response to nature, finds more vehement expression in Orphic Scenario.

The rather abstruse imagery and symbolism of this poem is often hard to unravel, but the over-all statement might be this: that science, in reducing the world to solely objectified phenomena, and in reducing man's response to nature to a purely objective response, has destroyed the most vital aspect of man's apprehension of the world and himself. The poet, of course, apprehends nature in a mytho-poetic, intuitive or irrational fashion, and uses images of his response to heighten the horror and disgust he feels for the scientific approach to nature.
Hamlet functions as a symbolic figure in this poem. Nemerov has abstracted from Shakespeare's protagonist the "irrational man"—the man who must constantly test the impulse of his will with the checks of reason, yet who must, after all, admit in the face of nature's mystery that intellect alone cannot sustain man in his search for a sense of meaning and order in the universe. There is a constant playing back and forth in the poem between phrases suggestive of life and the life-force: "the seed and food of being," "the yolk or might-be-meat of things," the "fetal" night, "the egg of the great bird of light," "the great bull," and phrases suggestive of the instruments and ideology of science: "splayed as a blaze," "a mystery of infinite reflections," the "prismatic self," "planes of cleavage," and "the egghead's Rorschach." The central images that function symbolically in the poem are Pandora's box (from Greek mythology), the glass prism that Newton found would diffract the sun's rays, life as an egg, life as Karma in Buddhist lore, the Veronica Veil of Christian lore, Minos and Pharaoh as mythic powers, and the Egress of P. T. Barnum fame. The tension of the poem lies, then, in a discussion of reality and the manner in which the apprehension of reality is ordered, and the implications that myth—as a force for ordering a continuity of life—has been destroyed. An examination of the first and concluding sections of the poem should suffice to reveal Nemerov's especial attitude. The first stanza mocks the scientific response to nature, and the reality construed by such a response.
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage
(The world a stage). And bid the soldiers shoot.
Loud the music, drums, and guns, the lights go up.
Cheap. Yes, of course, it's cheap. Reality
Comes dearer, but reality's much the same
As this dark malodorous box of token tricks,
Reality's where the hurled light beams and breaks
Against the solemn wall, a spattered egg,
The seed and food of being. If the seed
And food, split open thus, splayed as a blaze
On the blank of limit, focussed on the yolk
Or might-be-meat of things, should still entrance
The vacant stare, fix it with visions of,
However dripping and impure, an order.
That is enough, or the abstract of enough.
And should the seed and food of order also
Resemble the things we think we see and know,
Lips, nose, eyes, the grimaces thereof
Compounded, playing on the fatal night,
That too is enough. If not too much. Order
Lusts after the productions of time. 34

It could be said that Nemerov's singular aversion to Newton
and his glass prism was preceded by Keats, who, in the
eighteenth century, proposed a sardonic toast to the death
of the rainbow because of his disregard for Newton's sci-
entific methodology. At any rate, Nemerov is essentially con-
cerned with describing nature "put to the test"—the "tor-
ture" of natural phenomena to ascertain the order of reality
through application of the scientific method. But according
to the poet, such an approach only discovers, or creates,
a "spattered egg"—"the seed and food of being", or the es-
sence of nature itself, is destroyed. Nemerov would be hard
put to find a harsher image to convey his sentiments. And,
as he also says, the reality discovered by science will be
purely subjective after all—it will only "Resemble the
things we think we see and know." Thus, as the narrator says

34 Nemerov, Mirrors, p. 50
in the second stanza,

Fastidious prince, consider. It is a play
Within a play, a mystery of infinite
Reflections, nor since Phineas Pluto's cave
No catch-all for the conscience has been found
Meatier, nor more meet. Let each man pay
His own admission: his prismatic self
Will break the godhead into comedy.
He will be purged, order will be restored.
And he may hear something to his advantage,
Viewing, at little cost, his Karma pass
And the wheel spin to honey and to blood.

The reality of science is seen as the reality of the shadows
in Plato's cave, and Nemerov could be suggesting that this
Greek philosopher's discussion of reality was sorely short-
sighted in that it enables the rational man to become the
perfect solipsist when confronted by a situation beyond his
ken. Nemerov seems also to be suggesting an analogy with
that part of Hamlet when the author, faced with the stark
fact of his incapacity to reason out the workings of an ir-
rational world, permits his hero to indulge in a comic brawl
and swordplay that is completely unbecoming to the grave
philosophic dilemma he has proposed. The answer Shakespeare
found in Providence sounds, to Nemerov, like the answer the
scientist finds in his orderly view of nature. For as the
glass prism turns the cosmic fire of the sun into neat little
bands of color on the laboratory wall, so the rational man,
through the virtue of his pragmatic intellect, turns the
mythic powers of nature into "comedy"--the bare fact. The
ends, in comic fashion, justify the means, and rational man
is purged of any dilemma in his confrontation with the ir-
rational forces of nature.
The remainder of the poem is a discussion of the death of myth in a scientific age. The first image of the fourth stanza is that of a dying bull, and here Nemerov uses a symbol that has been representative of the powerful life-generative force throughout man's cultural and religious history. The Cretan, Minoan, Egyptian, Assyrian, and Greek civilizations all recognized the bull as a fertility symbol; and even today, in the pseudo-religious rituals of the bullfight, man still practices a symbolic communion with the fertility power of the bull. But for Nemerov, there is quite a difference between the mythic ritual of the past and the spectator sport of today. He feels that science has destroyed the power of myth, and in the poem, the bull, as symbol of that power,

...staggered, and his blood spouts
At the throat and drips between the cracked floorboards
Over the blackened pit, raining on bowed
And naked heads.

The first line, and part of the second, are clear. But what of the remaining images? It seems that the poet has construed this power of myth in the manner of an omnipotent godhead dwelling in the cosmos about us. But science has exercised awful power and literally destroyed the godhead. In frightening fashion, its "blood" drips through "cracked floorboards"—the outer boundaries of the universe as science has conceived them. Nemerov echoes the words of Phillip Wheelwright, who has said that the poet makes man aware of "transcendental forces peering through the cracks of the visible universe."35

The next section of the fourth stanza is extremely complex in its imagery.

**Priestess and priest display**
The new Veronica, the stiffened face
Light of the world, cast on a hanging cloth,
The egghead's Rorschach in the Holy Wood.

The central image here is based on Christian myth. Supposedly, a cloth was placed over the face of Christ as he was taken from the cross, and an image of his face was miraculously impressed upon the cloth, creating the "Veronica's Veil" of Christian iconology. For Nemerov, the myth is construed in keeping with the thematic development of the poem. "Priestess and priest"—scientists—display a "new" Veil—a picture of nature that is devoid of the wonder of myth. Christ, as the sun and the bull earlier in the poem, represents for the poet a force born of nature that had the power to transform man's world. But here, he who once was "light of the world" has been reduced to a stiffened and lifeless after-image. Thus, as the raging fury of the sun is imprisoned and nullified, so to speak, by the glass prism; so the "light," or anima, of Christ has been imprisoned on the "hanging cloth"—the artificial reality of science that "veils" man's intuitive vision. The poet may also be implying that this "veil" of false knowledge science has given man is but a blinder to his vision of doom, since the covering placed over a condemned man's head before he is hanged is called a "hanging cloth." Nemerov is restating in figurative terms a predominate misapprehension of our age, which is the idea that the knowledge science employs may very well destroy mankind.
The last image in the concluding lines of this stanza is obscure, but it can be assumed that the poet is referring both to the "science" of psychology and the "scientific" approach to poetry that characterizes part of the critical thought of T. S. Eliot. The Rorschach ink-blot is, of course, a rationally conceived device designed to explain the workings of the irrational, unconscious mind. And in The Sacred Wood, T. S. Eliot says as regards the poet,

The progress of an artist is a... continual extinction of personality.... It is in the depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science.  

The concluding lines of the poem, then, state rather explicitly that

Minos is dead and Pharoah buried.
All gone where green grass goes winters.

This way to the Egress.

And see, sweet prince
How all the buildings rise in a colder sky,
Cheaper, and yet more golden, than before,
More high and solemn, borne on a great stage
In a failing light.

Goodnight.

The soldiers shoot.

That's what life is, you may be moved to say,
Reality, and sometimes, in reality,
You may remember how the honey and the blood
Fell from the huge lips of those murdered gods.

The poem returns to the opening lines, where Hamlet, as rational man, was borne to the world as "stage."*

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* Nemerov uses a different concept of the world as "stage" in this poem than he does in The Loon's Cry, which will be discussed later in this essay. But what he essentially is saying here is that man's life can follow a pattern of mythic ritual, but not an artificial pattern of "order" as created by scientific ideology.
poet has discussed that world and asks the "sweet prince" if he likes what he sees. The poet, at any rate, does not. The modern world of scientific man is, to him, a vast farce--a stage-set of "high and solemn" buildings gleaming golden in the last feeble rays of a dying sun. The light in the world is going out, and science has made this so. The line, "This way to the Egress", punctuates the poet's sentiment that science has given man an easy out--an escape from those realities that require more than a rational or practical explanation. The poet alludes to one of P. T. Barnum's money-making ruses, in that Barnum, who said "a sucker's born every minute", had a sign lettered with the above phrase placed over an exit in order to draw customers away from a popular freak-show exhibit to another part of the circus, where they thought they would see an even more spectacular freak--the "Egress."

The concluding six lines of the poem, though, express the poet's hope that although modern man may be inclined to believe that science is better than myth, he may still remember the tragic import of what he has done. For to Nemerov, the force of myth cannot be stifled, since man is ultimately more irrational, intuitive, or emotionally-oriented to his world than he is rational and pragmatic. Thus, man may reach an impasse of the intellect, and come to a new apprehension of the mythic power of nature.

This moment of the close-up and the clinch
Desire sighs, prudence makes up its mind,
While terror moistens on the shining lips
And the dry tips of the hair gigantically
Shake and are swayed: Our stars have fire hearts.
Even more than To Lu Chi, this poem has shown the degree to which science has effected a disassociation of sensibility in the poetic mind. For although Nemerov is attuned to the history of science and its pervasive role in the modern world, he clings in part to an impulse of belief that science supposedly neutralized long ago. He evidences the Modern Temper in that he seeks for a higher meaning in life than that which science offers, yet his sensibility has been so impaired by his nurture in a scientific culture that he is hampered in his attempt to find it. He feels science violates or destroys nature itself, as well as the power of myth, both of which can provide man with a basic point of orientation in the search for harmony and order in an age of discrepancy. As Phillip Wheelwright says in his essay, "Poetry, Myth, and Reality,"

...the consciousness which arises from group-life and group-memories is the original matrix of individual consciousness—that much is a sociological truism—but...when the consciousness of individuals separates itself too utterly from the sustaining warmth of the common myth consciousness, the disassociated consciousness becomes in time unoriented and sterile, fit for neither...great wisdom nor great deeds.37

The poem The Loon’s Cry further expresses this disassociation of sensibility.

In The Loon’s Cry, Nemerov mirrors the aching desolation of modern man, and attempts to posit an alternative to despair. "On a cold evening, summer almost gone" (echoing the opening image of To Lu Chi), the poet walks down to a bridge dividing a river from its estuary, and there, at the point of silence where the discernible river empties into the limitless...
distances of the sea, he sees that

As on the seaward side the sun went down,
The river answered with the rising moon,
Full moon, its craters, mountains and still seas,
Shining like snow and shadows on the snow.
The balanced silence centered where I stood,
The fulcrum of two poised immensities,
Which offered to be weighed at either hand. 38

But he cannot ponder them as ancient mythic symbols of Life
and Beauty, for as he says,

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

He has lost an intuitive, or even religious, sense of the
nature of the world and the universe, and can only think in
the most prosaic of terms. He says:

I envied those past ages of the world
When, as I thought, the energy in things
Shone through their shapes, when sun and moon no less
Then tree or stone or star or human face
Were seen but as fantastic Japanese
Lanterns are seen, sullen or gay colors
And lines revealing the light that they conceal.

The world has ceased to be

...a stage, its people maskers all
In actions largely framed to imitate
God and His Lucifer's long debate, a trunk
From which, complex and clear, the episodes
Spread out their branches. Each life played a part,
And every part consumed a life, nor dreams
After remained to mock accomplishment.

Nemerov casts a theologic light upon his speculations at this
point, and it would seem that he is implying a connection
between the death of religious myth as a force to order men's

38 Nemerov, Mirrors, p. 29
lives, and the death of his intuitive response to nature—
he has fallen from the "symbolized world." These lines are
also reminiscent, to a degree, of Yeat's Vision, wherein
man and nature are seen as part of a confluent ritualistic
patterning. And as Nemerov says in his book Poetry and Fiction:
Essays,

...There is the impulse in poetry to order the world
by viewing it symbolically; this impulse is regarded
as given and immediate. On the other hand is the
critical doubt of poetic function in a world which
may no longer be conceived as a stage, a world in which
an opaque reality has everywhere replaced the idea
of truth, and where every man must contend, not dramati-
cally against evil, but chaotically against irrele-
vance.39

But the poet inquires even further and says,

Under the austere power of the scene,
The moon standing balanced against the sun,
I simplified still more, and thought that now
We'd traded all those mysteries in for things,
For essences in things! Not understood—
Reality in things! and now we saw
Reality exhausted all their truth.

And then a loon, whose cry, in folk-lore, is the voice of a
drowned man, answers his thought. But when it cries again,
he is startled to feel that

...his voice seemed emptied of that sense
Or any other, and Adam I became
Hearing the first loon cry in paradise.

For sometimes when the world is not our home
Nor have we home elsewhere, but all
Things look to leave us naked, hungry, cold,
We suddenly may seem in paradise
Again, in ignorance and emptiness
Blessed beyond all that we thought to know:
Then on sweet waters echoes the loon's cry.

The poet looks back, then, upon that paradise wherein man
knew nothing of either theology or science, yet was "blessed"

39 Nemerov, Essays, p. 170
by his intuitive communion with nature. And he understands the loon's cry,

That its contempt was for the form of things
Their doctrines, which decayed—the nouns of stone
And adjectives of glass—not for the verb
Which surged in power properly eternal
Against the seawall of the solid world,
Battering and undermining what it built,

And whose respeaking was the poet's act
Only and always, in whatever time
Stripped by uncertainty, despair, and ruin
But damned to life again, and the loon's cry.

This "power" of the verb is seen as that aspect of language, thought, and experience that refuses to be stifled into static, objectified forms. It symbolizes the eternally creative and regenerative force of nature whose energy is such that although it "batters and undermines what it builds," it brings new life from what went before. (The fable of the Phoenix expresses such an idea.) Thus, the language of man, as well as his means of responding to nature, should be seen as active and energy-laden, always creating new connotations of reality, rather than fixed, denoted realities that reside only in the "forms of things." And the poet respeaks this energy. His language stands deputy to the life-force of nature. As Nemerov says in "The Swaying Form: A Problem in Poetry,"

A poem corresponds to what is said of the Divine Name in several significant respects:
It is unique.
It can never be repeated.
It brings into being the situation it names and is therefore truly a creation.
It is secret, even while being perfectly open and public, for it defines a thing which would not have been known without it.

As to the poet himself, one might add this: "writing
poetry is a species of askesis, a perservering devotion to the energy passing between self and the world.\textsuperscript{40}

The poet's devotion is almost in the nature of mysticism, and it is flavored with that transcendent philosophy Nemerov expressed in \textit{Runes}. The poet matches his conception of nature with what nature reveals to candid vision: whereas the aim of science is to create an objectivity as nearly as possible universal in character, the poet attempts to represent in the world the movement of a subjectivity as nearly as possible universal in character. This, the poet hopes, gives man a sense of relation—not isolation—with nature. Thus, art shows "of its own nature"

\begin{quote}
that things drawn within the sacred circle of its forms are transfigured, and illuminated by an inward radiance which amounts to goodness because it amounts to Being itself.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

This sounds very familiar, and is, of course, a statement of the aesthetic creed. M. J. Rosenthal, in his book \textit{The Modern Poets}, says,

\begin{quote}
Our poetry since the twenties might almost be described as a concentrated effort to re-establish vital continuities with whatever in the poet is myth-making, wonder-contemplating, and strength-giving, and to discover widened, fresher meanings.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

The poet, then, perceives a marvelous new sense of man's integral relation with the universe. And his knowledge of this vital flux between man and nature makes him all the more sensitive to a world determined to deny it. As he says

\textsuperscript{40}Nemerov, \textit{Essays}, p. 14

\textsuperscript{41}Nemerov, \textit{Essays}, p. 16

in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas of The Loon’s Cry.

The moon, I thought, might have been such a world
As this one is, till it went cold inside,
Nor any strength of sun could keep its people
Warm in their palaces of glass and stone.
Now all its craters, mountains and still seas
Shining like snow and shadows on the snow,
Orbit this world in envy and late love.

And the stars too? Worlds as the scholars taught
So long ago? Chaos of beauty, void
O 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 lines echo the sentiment in To Lu Chi, where the poet realizes that he must look "into the clear and mirroring stream/
Where images remain although the water passes away."

So we have seen how the Modern Temper finds expression in the work of a poet. As an artist, and as an integral member of twentieth century society, he mirrors perhaps better than any other individual the peculiar tensions and dilemmas of the modern world. It is true that he appears to be in a rather constant state of conflict with his world, but as D. G. James says in his book, Skepticism and Poetry,

It is not the elimination of conflict, but the clear beholdment of it, which makes the greatest poetry; it is never the mere experience of a condition which characterizes poetry, but the ability, through the imagination, to arrest that experience from obscurity and relite it to the whole of expression. And it is for this reason that in the reading of poetry, we obtain perception of the human situation as it has been made real to a powerful imagination.

Nemerov is acutely aware of the "human situation". He exper-

iences the effects of science upon man and nature, sees that scientific technology can bring into play vast forces for the coercion and control of life itself, yet also sees that man, in using such power, has suffered a loss of what is vital to a meaningful apprehension of the world and himself. He tries to recover that loss by making scientific ideology subservient to the poetic vision and by showing that poetic vision can discover the vital sense of confluency between "self and the world." True, he relies heavily on the strength of an irrational, intuitive response to nature, but it seems he does so because he has found that intellect alone cannot avail man in his search for whatever is meaningful and valuable in life. Thus, Nemerov echoes the Romantics; Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats. He is attune to a vision of that reality that Yeats called the Anima Mundi, and very often, his "askesis" is almost religious as well as Bergsonian, in its fervor. It is almost as though he sees, if only for a moment, not through glass, darkly, but with a total clarity of perception that breaks beyond the tissue of appearances. He grasps the confluent unity of experience, idea, and expression, and is able, through the agency of a poem, to relate his vision to other men. Thus, he writes, and in doing so, is presumptuous enough to assume that his vision will be shared and his experience emulated. For as Nemerov said in an address read at the National Poetry Festival in 1962,

...if we incline to complain over the want of a large audience, it might reasonably be said to us, as it used to be said in the Air Force, "nobody drafted you, you volunteered..." (But)...this does not in the least mean that poetry relinquishes its large claim on the world, its prophetic claim on the ultimate realization of all possibility.
For the whole business of poetry is vision, and the substance of this vision is the articulating of the possibilities still unknown, the concentrating of what is diffuse, the bringing forth what is in darkness.\footnote{Nemirov, \textit{Essays}, p. 46}
Bibliography


