



MERWIN Studies

Poetry | Poetics | Ecology

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MERWIN STUDIES
POETRY | POETICS | ECOLOGY

Editors

Aaron M. Moe & Rebecca L. Stull

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ed Folsom is the editor of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, co-director of the [Walt Whitman Archive](#), and editor of the Whitman Series at The University of Iowa Press. The Roy J. Carver Professor of English at The University of Iowa, he is the author or editor of twelve books, including (with Cary Nelson) *W. S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry and Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose of W. S. Merwin*, as well as numerous essays on American writers appearing in journals like *American Literature*, *PMLA*, and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. He is now working on a biography of *Leaves of Grass*, for which he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.



Russell Brickey has a BA from the University of Oregon, and an MFA in creative writing and PhD in literature from Purdue University. He has chapbooks out or forthcoming from Kelsey Press, Spuyten Duyvil Press, and his first full-length collection of poetry, *Atomic Atoll*, is due out from Wild Leaf Press this fall. He is a co-founder of the [Driftless Review ezone](#), and his articles can be seen in a number of journals.



A fifth-generation native of Auburn, Alabama, **M.P. Jones IV** is a graduate teaching assistant, studying American literature at Auburn University where he reads for *Southern Humanities Review*. He is also founder and editor-in-chief of [Kudzu Review](#), a Southern journal of literature & environment. Recent poetry is forthcoming or appearing in *Tampa Review*, [Canary Magazine](#), [Town Creek Poetry](#), and elsewhere; memoirs have appeared in [Sleet Magazine](#) and [decomP magazinE](#); he has penned book reviews for *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *A Few Lines Magazine*; and his first collection of poetry, *Live at Lethe*, is forthcoming from [Sweatshoppe Publications](#) this year. He is interested in pursuing a Ph.D. in American literature with a focus on contemporary poetry and literature & environment. Visit his author's page: ecopoiesis.com.

A Ph.D. candidate focusing on 19th- and 20th- century American poetry, **Kate Dunning's** interests include Emily Dickinson, W. S. Merwin, ecocriticism, and third wave feminism. She holds a B.A. in English and French with a minor in Spanish (2008), as well as a Master's in Library Science (2009) from the University at Buffalo. She also spent the 2009–2010 academic year teaching English at the University of Maroua in Cameroon (Central Africa) as a Fulbright grantee. Currently she is working to increase graduate student involvement in the Emily Dickinson International Society through the online graduate community available at www.cdisgrad.org.

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“THE WHOLE WAY / THEY HAVE BEEN THERE”

INTRODUCTION

Aaron M. Moe

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.

Walt Whitman

Shortly after reading *The Shadow of Sirius*, I felt compelled to look at the star with my own eyes, first and foremost. I hoped that the process of finding the star would somehow illuminate the book’s resonate title.

I quickly learned that one need only to follow the three stars of Orion’s belt down to Sirius. For the past decade, I have followed Orion from when he rises at dusk on a late Autumn night, overwhelming the horizon, to when he cycles out-of-sight come Spring. Where I live, therefore, just a few hours south from the Canadian border, Orion and Sirius resonate with the long, cold nights of winter. This contrasts, of course, with seeing Sirius rising with the hot summer sun in late July, signaling the dog days of summer. But the star rises a couple hours earlier each month, shifting from a summer star of dawn to a winter star of dusk. I first saw it as a winter star.

The first clear December night, I went outside, located Orion, followed his belt down to the brightest star in the night sky. Nobody else was outside. The neighborhood felt empty. Along with the many perspectives explored in the following articles, the title also suggests that one must be awake and outside in the night—in my case, the winter night—to have any hope of seeing Sirius let alone any of its shadows. This insight resonates with Merwin’s oeuvre. From “The Cold Before the Moonrise” (*The Lice*) to “Falling” and “The Laughing Thrush” (*Sirius*),

the speaker in many of Merwin's poems keeps vigil in the night, attentively turning to the sound of accumulating frost, or to the sound of rain in the trees, or to the silence of a pre-dawn darkness, or to the first notes of a morning bird's song—all in an effort to listen when most of us are asleep. *The Shadow of Sirius*, then, suggests the nighttime vigil of a poet committed to staying awake, and to keeping us awake, ever reminding us of the growing silences amidst ecological devastation.

As I stood watching Sirius, another thought emerged. The title establishes the vast, cosmological context for the collection of poems. Several years before *Sirius*, Scott Bryson argued that a “place-space synergy” exists within Merwin's work, but that the “process” of place-making “is overshadowed by a space-conscious awareness.” He suggests that the “ever-present space-consciousness” is “perhaps the most prominent characteristic of Merwin's work . . . based on an alert, fundamental humility regarding what we can and cannot know, can and cannot control.”¹ The poems throughout *The Shadow of Sirius*, such as “Just This” or “Worn Words,” continue to cultivate this space-consciousness. Concerning the latter, Merwin (directly or indirectly) alludes to Whitman's statement that a “blade of grass,” a poem, is “no less than the journey-work of the stars.”² In “Worn Words,” the speaker is most interested in turning to the “late poems” as they are “made of words / that have come the whole way / they have been there.”³ In *The River Sound* (1999), Merwin compares words from a poem to “light migrants coming from so long ago / through the sound of this quiet rain falling” (CP 2:390). To arrive in their particular constellation, each word has undergone a journey, a migration, and if one sees a cosmological flux to be the origin of all that exists, a word's journey reaches back to the “gathering of the first stars”—to echo *Sirius*'s “Just This” (CP 2:605).

In the inaugural issue of *Merwin Studies*, each author explores some aspect of the journey of words through Merwin's oeuvre—words that arrive in *Sirius*. Ed Folsom explores the journey of air; Russell Brickey traces the interrelationship between time and animals; M. P. Jones IV

exposes how the lyric-epic mode culminates in *Sirius*; and Kate Dunning foregrounds Merwin's journey from being an environmental poet to an ecopoet. In all cases, the authors reach back to some of the initial seeds that come to fruition as "Worn Words" in *Sirius*.

As I imagine Merwin witnessing the shadow of the brightest star in the night sky, I see him, above all else, listening. A prominent act throughout Merwin's oeuvre, listening emerges again and again, in uncanny places, pushing readers to listen anew. In the interview "Fact Has Two Faces" with Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson, Merwin shares that one reason why he removed punctuation from his poetry—never to return to it again—involved listening:

You have to pay attention to things. . . . Punctuation is there as a kind of manners in prose, articulating prose meaning, but it doesn't necessarily articulate the meaning of this kind of verse. I saw that if I could use the movement of the verse itself and the movement of the line—*the actual weight of the language as it moved*—to do the punctuation, I would both strengthen the texture of the experience of the poem and also make clear its distinction from other kinds of writing. One would be paying attention to it in those terms.⁴

Part of the existential experience of engaging Merwin's poetry, then, involves paying attention to the *weight of the language* as it moves through the poem. Like planting a tree, paying attention is an individual act. Each of us notices slight nuances in the weight (or lightness) of Merwin's language, and these observations manifest themselves while reading the poems aloud. When we attentively vocalize each syllable, word, line, and the silences between these elements, we simultaneously partake in the act of listening—and in the act of keeping vigil alongside the poet. And so, throughout the pages of the inaugural issue, we provide embedded readings by our contributing authors of select poems—readings that foreground a particular way of listening.⁵

It is hoped that *Merwin Studies* further enhances the art of listening—of turning to the poems and to the earth—as it circulates the following discussions through broad audiences.

Washington State University

Notes

1. J. Scott Bryson, *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 111, 104. For Bryson’s earlier work on space and place in Merwin’s poetry, see his “Place and Space in the Poetry of W. S. Merwin,” in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 2002), 101–116.
2. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* in the *Walt Whitman Archive* (Lincoln: Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, University of Nebraska, 1995), 1891–1892, 53. Though Merwin has himself expressed an unease regarding Whitman in “Fact Has Two Faces”—and though Thomas Byers articulates the crucial differences between Whitman and Merwin in “Believing Too Much in Words”—one cannot deny the shared cosmological place of poetry in *Leaves of Grass* and *The Shadow of Sirius*. The similarities ought not override the differences, though. For more on the differences between Merwin and Whitman, see W. S. Merwin, Ed Folsom, and Cary Nelson, “‘Fact Has Two Faces’: Interview,” in *Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose, 1949-82* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), 321; and Thomas B. Byers, “Believing Too Much in Words: W. S. Merwin and the Whitman Heritage,” *The Missouri Review* 3, no. 2 (1980): 75–89.
3. W. S. Merwin, *The Collected Poems of W. S. Merwin*, ed. J. D. McClatchy, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 2013), 2:580; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP*.
4. Merwin, Folsom, and Nelson, “Fact Has Two Faces,” 357.
5. I thank Brian Maki for his assistance in recording my contributions.

THE QUALITY OF THE AIR

MERWIN'S ONGOING ECOLOGICAL SONG

Ed Folsom

*I begin, after about a week in university, I begin to feel the oxygen's
going out of the air very fast and I have to go somewhere else.*

W. S. Merwin to Bill Moyers, 2007

One of W. S. Merwin's most recent poems, "Neither Here nor There," is an examination of how "An airport is nowhere," a nowhere in which we nonetheless spend a lot of time, perhaps as punishment "for something you have done / which you do not entirely remember / like the souls in Purgatory." In that nowhere where you are always "on your way / to somewhere,"

you sit there in the smell
of what passes for food
breathing what is called air
while the timepieces measure
their agreement¹

Such a poem reminds us how often Merwin has been attentive to the stark realities and trivialities of the contemporary world. The poet Mark Halliday has commented, sarcastically, that "a devoted Merwin reader is marvelously ready to be lifted away from the level of quotidian irritation, competition, sexual desire, economic need, envy, humor, cars, movies, blogs, and turnips, up to the level of safely unspecific archetypes."² But poems like this one shock us into the realization that, nestled among the haunted and haunting natural imagery in Merwin's work, among the shadows and absences and fading light, irritating quotidian things like airports exert their own haunted presence. And this particular poem

draws our attention to one of the many vital invisibilities that Merwin so often evokes: here, perhaps, the ultimate vital invisibility—air itself. An “airport,” after all, is not just a port for airplanes, but, like airplanes themselves, a port for air. We all know the odd, unsettling, and dangerous quality of the compressed air we breathe while on a plane and the insulated and recirculated air of the aptly named “terminal” itself (sealed off from the fumes of the jet fuel outside and from the heat or cold of the vast concrete wasteland surrounding the terminal), air which contains that pervasive processed “smell / of what passes for food.” Merwin has long been intrigued with this artificial air: his 1958 “Flight Home,” recording his return to the United States after seven years in Europe, recalls the environment of airplanes and airports as “organized and sterilized and herded and heated and air-conditioned” and recalls how on the plane “the voices” are always “coming from far away, as through the sleep of a child, over the noise of the engines; the pressure of everything seeming to build up in the plane.”³ It is air so artificial it can only really be described as “what is called air.”

David Foster Wallace, in his now famous 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, told the old story about two younger fish swimming past an older fish, who says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two younger fish swim on for awhile, and finally one says to the other, “What the hell is water?” “The point of the fish story,” Wallace says, “is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.”⁴ These invisible and obvious realities, of course, are the ones Merwin has always written about, and the air is that all-pervasive reality we humans move through unthinkingly, like fish through water. Merwin alludes to his own version of Wallace’s fish story in “Still Morning” in *The Shadow of Sirius*, where, turning the fish to birds and the water to air, “the flying birds know / nothing of the air they are flying through.”⁵ That air the birds unknowingly fly through, like the water that the fish are oblivious to, has been altered by humans over the years so that the invisibilities the birds, the fish, and we humans move through are increasingly toxic, and the old fish’s question in Wallace’s

joke is no longer an innocent one: “how’s the water” and “how’s the air” are now urgent concerns.

Throughout his career, and especially from *The Lice* forward, air has permeated Merwin’s work.⁶ Think of “The Widow,” a poem about how the earth—widowed after the extinction of her husbandmen the humans—manages to get along just fine without us:

How easily the ripe grain
Leaves the husk
At the simple turning of the planet

There is no season
That requires us

In that poem, we find the haunting line about how we humans are those “Not seeing the irony in the air” (*MG* 122–23). Part of what is contained in the word *irony* is, ironically, *iron*, and there’s certainly *iron* in the air, a key component of the toxic atmosphere humans have created (iron oxides in the air are one of the main vehicles for transporting carcinogens and sulfur dioxide into the lungs), and part of what allowed humans to begin to *see* the air. The deteriorating quality of the air, after all, increasingly apparent in the late nineteenth century with the development of the iron and steel industry, was the initial and most frightening sign of pollution, of environmental degradation. But the *irony* in the air has to do with what David Foster Wallace was getting at when he said “the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see.” We typically don’t *see* air, so it is not something we represent and thus it seems not “real” (again from “The Widow”: “You confide / In images in things that can be / Represented which is their dimension you / Require them you say This / Is real”).

Yet, ironically, air is the most real of all things, the thing on which life depends, the thing we cannot *not* walk through and breathe in. And, ironically again, when we *do* begin to see the air, it may be too late to

continue to live in it. When humans started to *see* what they had thought of as invisible, when they could *see* what they were breathing, air pollution or smog (as the smoky industrial fog over cities began to be called in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) became words and became all too real. By the 1950s, when photochemical smog was identified, “air quality” started to become an environmental issue, and now we have bureaucracies like the Environmental Protection Agency producing up-to-the-minute air quality maps and forecasts: the quality of the air we breathe is now a standard part of our daily weather reports, the pollution index nearly as familiar as the temperature. But smog comes and goes, and most of us go on breathing, so the improvement of the air (or the argument that the air is not really so unhealthy after all) remains a divisive political issue, when it gets talked about at all. We finally have no choice but to breathe what is there to breathe. And on the days we can’t see the air, the toxic particulates nonetheless continue to enter our lungs and what we don’t see still goes on killing us: that’s the “irony in the air.”⁷⁷

One of Merwin’s most searing and sarcastic poems, “When the War Is Over,” also from *The Lice*, contains a complex and, again, ironic statement about the air:

When the war is over
 We will be proud of course the air will be
 Good for breathing at last

* * *

The dead will think the living are worth it we will know
 Who we are
 And we will all enlist again (*MG* 134–35)

Many years ago, Robert Scholes offered a brilliant reading of this poem, and he analyzed the difficulties of the slippery syntax created by the lack of punctuation and the destabilizing line breaks, which combine to cre-

ate what Scholes calls a “potential zeugma, with its semantic absurdity, [that] haunts the second line of the poem without insisting that we attend to it.”⁸ The zeugma (a rhetorical yoking) is formed by the way “will be proud” seems to adhere to both “We will be proud” (presumably the claim of the victors of the war) and “the air will be [proud],” a zeugma encouraged by the wavering “of course,” which can equally conclude the first phrase in the line or open the second phrase. But, as Scholes notes, the statement that “of course the air will be proud” is absurd, so we proceed by instead attaching the second phrase to the third line: “the air will be / Good for breathing at last.” This statement makes more sense, and Scholes suggests it may be a kind of defamiliarizing of the cliché “We will breathe easier.” Now that the war is over, in other words, we will of course be proud and breathe easier.

But (of course) the text does not say that. What the poem *does* allow is precisely the absurd claim, one of the endless empty claims of progress and cleansing that we regularly hear in political campaign after political campaign and that always seem to result in more regress and fouling. “This is the war to end all wars” is the endless claim of warriors who use the claim to tame the populace while always preparing for the next war (“And we will all enlist again”). So go the claims of the politicians who promise to clean the air and the waters, or the ones who claim that we cannot give in to the global warming zealots because the Bible gives humans dominance over the earth (and, by extension, gives corporations dominance over its resources). It is that ever-migrating, ever-shifting “silence of heaven” that allows humans to invent what the heavens say and then use that invention to destroy the earth while claiming that the destruction itself will make the earth peaceful and safe and clean. We will be proud of how we make the air good for breathing again even as we undermine the most anodyne of efforts (like carbon emissions cap and trade) to control the growing toxicity of what we breathe.



The air, though, is not only what we breathe into our lungs; it also carries what we take into our ears. There are voices in the air, and when they are broadcast they consider themselves to be “on the air,” or just—as the iconic studio signs have it—“on air.” Merwin’s poetry is full of voices heard and unheard, voices that are in the air but detached, seeking a speaker or seeking a listener or both. These are the voices he often speaks of as those we don’t know are there and that may suddenly come to voice, seemingly from nowhere. In a 2009 interview with Bill Moyers, Merwin talked about those invisible voices, the aural shadows that are cast throughout his poetry: “I think that poetry and the most valuable things in our lives, and in fact the next sentence, your next question to me, Bill, come out of what we don’t know. They don’t come out of what we do know. They come out of what we do know, but what we do know doesn’t make them. The real source of them is beyond that. It’s something we don’t know. They arise by themselves. And that’s a process that we never understand.” This interview focused on *The Shadow of Sirius*, which had just won the Pulitzer Prize. Moyers asked Merwin about what seemed to him the obscure title: “Now, Sirius is the dog star. The most luminous star in the sky. Twenty-five times more luminous than the sun. And yet, you write about its shadow. Something that no one has ever seen. Something that’s invisible to us. Help me to understand that.” Merwin answered:

That’s the point. The shadow of Sirius is pure metaphor, pure imagination. But we live in it all the time. . . . We are the shadow of Sirius. There is the other side of—as we talk to each other, we see the light, and we see these faces, but we know that behind that, there’s the other side, which we never know. And that—it’s the dark, the unknown side that guides us, and that is part of our lives all the time. It’s the mystery. That’s always with us, too. And it gives the depth and dimension to the rest of it.⁹

Merwin’s work has been filled with voices in the air. Helen Vendler characterizes his very style as a voice “spoken to nobody within hearing

distance, spoken to the air.”¹⁰ His 1978 *New Yorker* story called “Air” explores an evocative memory of building a boat in an old edifice that had been a church, a movie house, a barber shop, a barn; it’s a place where the speaker hears voices start and stop, of children outside and of friends conversing inside, voices that may be of the dead or the living, the past or the present, all in the air: those voices “fly up, fly up. I stop hearing them. They go out. Then I hear them again, those voices.” The story ends with the narrator “here in midair,” putting up the mainsail of the boat for the first time and hearing “the breeze distinctly, and for a moment I catch my breath, afraid that the conversation behind me has really stopped, and that the voices of the children outside the window were long ago. But no, they are both still there” (RM 85, 87). Even earlier, in *The Moving Target* (1963), Merwin included a poem entitled “Air,” where the air is a song (“Under the overturned lute with its / One string I am going my way / Which has a strange sound”) that the poet sings while “Walking at night between the two deserts” in the dusty air (“This way the dust, that way the dust”) (MG 95–96). And then, from *The Pupil* (2001), there is “The Name of the Air,” about the “old dog” who, finding it hard to breathe, comes to “ask whether there is something that can / be done about it” and does ask “without asking,” as if the silent air itself is the deathly answer (MG 517). The “air” is what we breathe in to live and what we breathe out to create song, poetry, voice. And the name of all songs, all airs, is ultimately the same, as voices are always silenced, one after another, while new ones go on the air and old ones continue to circulate on the silent waves, waiting for someone to bring them to voice again.



Merwin, then, is concerned with the quality of the air in at least a double sense—the quality of the air we breathe and the quality of the airs we sing and hear. It’s ultimately all the same air, and toxic air cannot help but produce toxic poems. Air is at the heart of *The Shadow of Sirius* as well, and I want to explore its appearance there, but first we need to think about the title of the volume, a title that—like many Merwin ti-

ties—has caused some consternation among readers. Bill Moyers is not the only one who has asked Merwin to “help me to understand that.” Gilbert Wesley Purdy expresses a general frustration that the title seems cut off from the book: “First of all, Sirius doesn’t make an express appearance at all, throughout the volume, unless it is in a single reference [‘the star is fading’] in the first poem, ‘The Nomad Flute’;” he says, noting that Sirius is “also known as ‘The Dog Star’ due to its prominence in the constellation *Canis Major*”:

The “dog days” of summer are the days in which the constellation appears in the night sky. The dog days being the hottest days of the year, Sirius has long been symbolic of the sultriest days of human passion. In “The Nomad Flute” . . . the star is, only now, during Merwin’s early 80s, “fading.” The symbol, the metaphor, that is to say, has been expanded. Sirius is passion itself, blazing in the sky of youth and palely glimmering in the octogenarian sky.¹¹

Elizabeth Lund proposes that the poetry in this volume “lingers with readers the way light from Sirius reaches the earth—long after leaving its source,” and she goes on to note that “the book’s second section recalls Merwin’s beloved dogs, a fitting choice in a collection named after the Dog Star.”¹²

To explicate the title, Jerry Harp turns to Merwin’s fascination with how “every word” has “a history that we don’t know,” and so “the *shadow* of Sirius . . . is composed of the stories, lore, and ideas that have become intertwined with it,” from the star’s prominent place in “the mythologies of many cultures” to current astronomical research that has revealed Sirius as two stars (Sirius A and Sirius B) locked in orbit with each other. “Sirius is shadowed by these rich associations,” Harp suggests, and thus forms “a vivid metaphor of the associations that may accompany a given thing—whether a word, a star, or a tree—even if the associations have receded into shadow.”¹³ Helen Vendler deals with the mystery of the title by moving first to astronomy and then to biography:

There is no poem . . . called “The Shadow of Sirius,” and the phrase does not appear anywhere in the book. Some readers may recall a 2005 poem called “To the Dog Stars,” beginning “But there is only one of you / they say,” which sheds light on the re-appearance of Sirius here. The curious reader can turn to Google, and discover that Sirius A, the brightest star in the sky, has a small, dim (but much hotter) companion called Sirius B, a “white dwarf,” which in the past was more massive and luminous than its brother, Sirius A, but which has now exhausted its nuclear fuel.

Even the brightest illumination, for Merwin, arrives, like Sirius A, accompanied by a perpetual shadow, perhaps because Merwin’s own life was shadowed by his knowledge of the harrowing death of his elder brother, Hanson (born a year before Merwin), who lived only a day. And throughout his work, Merwin alludes to the many shadows of inexplicability cast over his youth by the unwillingness of his parents, even under questioning, to explain how things came to be in family relations, and whither they were tending.¹⁴

All of these suggestions are evocative, even compelling, but there is another Sirius that took to the air just a few years before Merwin’s volume appeared. In 2002, with great fanfare, Sirius Satellite Radio began filling the air with voices and songs twenty-four hours a day through over 130 streams—endless voices discussing politics, sports, sex, religion, cars, voices singing from the past (a Sinatra channel, a 60s channel, a 70s channel) and the present. Even Merwin’s voice, in an interview with Terry Gross on (fittingly) *Fresh Air*, was broadcast on Sirius. Beamed down from an invisible satellite, these silent voices filled the airwaves and became audible to anyone willing to pay the subscription fee and buy a receiver that would decode the signals and turn the silence to sound. “Sirius” is also the name of a constellation of communications satellites launched in the late 1990s and early 2000s that has been beaming pay television to eastern Europe and Africa. In the years preceding *The Shadow of Sirius*, then, humans around the world were living more and more in the shadow of Sirius, surrounded by a ceaseless stream of

invisible voices in the air, radiating from a distant object, begging to be heard for a fee. They were another part of the irritating quotidian, simply part of what we learned to take in, listen to, on “what is called air.” Along with the countless other voices of the media-saturated world, they cast poetry itself into a vast cacophonous shadow.

Halfway through *The Shadow of Sirius*, in the section largely devoted to his dogs, Merwin includes an odd and surprising poem called “A Ring,” in which he gives us an image of the earth ringed with “a fine veil // of whispered voices groping the frayed waves” (*Sirius* 50). That ring around the earth is perhaps the atmosphere itself, that fragile and small pocket of air that lets us live, breathe, and sing, the same air that carries the endless waves of voiced sound:

At this moment
 this earth which for all we know

is the only place in the vault of darkness
 with life on it is wound in a fine veil

of whispered voices groping the frayed waves
 of absence they keep flaring up

* * *

without being able to tell whether
 they are addressing the past or the future

or knowing where they are heard these words
 of the living talking to the dead

This ring of voices now beamed from orbiting satellites (and carried over the Web)—an endless babble of voices, a “static of knowledge,” unsure about what or whom they are addressing—is at once an image of the commercial, diminished, time-killing state of what passes for voice in today’s voice-drenched environment *and* an image of the voices of poets

and singers alive and dead, who continue transmitting their airs amidst the increasingly crowded noise that permeates the “frayed waves” of air in that ring of atmosphere around the earth. These voices that emanate from what might be “the only place in the vault of darkness / with life on it” are always “addressing the past or the future,” are always the voices of “the living talking to the dead,” never sure where or if or by whom they are being heard. Like the air in airports, the Sirius-infested air of the past couple of decades—artificial stars beaming voices profitable to the corporations that pay them—reminds us of the deteriorating quality of the air we not only breathe but listen to.

The airs that Merwin still sings, like the airs of poets before him, are barely audible among the commercial din but nonetheless continue to work in their quiet ways to make the air better for breathing. While the increasing noise pollution of the world fills the airwaves, Merwin, with his insistent meditative voice (speaking, as Vendler says, to the air), writes in its shadow, the shadow of Sirius and all the other babble of the present (just as there are two stars—Sirius A and Sirius B—one bright and large, the other in its shadow, smaller and hotter, so are there the political and religious and commercial voices that scream at us, clamor for our attention, and then the poets’ voices that seem always quieter but ultimately more intense, insistent). *The Shadow of Sirius* will be read by far fewer than will hear Howard Stern on Sirius/XM, but it will last longer, will speak into the future—“if there is a future” to speak into, as Merwin’s final *Shadow of Sirius* poem puts it (*Sirius* 113). “A Ring” appears in *Shadow* immediately before Merwin’s remarkable translation of Hadrian’s brief poem called “Little Soul,” a single voice “all pale and all alone” that is heard “flaring up” again, more than two thousand years after Hadrian supposedly spoke it on his death bed, this time vocalized in English in 2006 (after it had been vocalized in English by countless other poets, from Henry Vaughan to Pope to Byron to Pound to Stevie Smith) as the living talk to and through the dead, the dead to and through the living.¹⁵ Sirius radios, for all their growing ubiquity, are not the only receivers making audible the invisible voices in the air.

Merwin's poetry and translations are continually channeling voices, too, and those voices bring news—not the news that the Sirius voices obsess over every day but rather William Carlos Williams' news, that “news / of something / that concerns you / and concerns many men,” the news “men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found” in “despised poems.”¹⁶

So it becomes clear why *The Shadow of Sirius* begins with “The Nomad Flute,” a poem evoking the Han Dynasty poet Cai Wenji, who was kidnapped by nomads and memorialized in Liu Shang's eighth century *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*.¹⁷ The air organizes this opening poem as Merwin tunes in to that ancient song, hearing its “long lifted note” as it travels the air to him in his present:

You that sang to me once sing to me now
 let me hear your long lifted note
 survive with me
 the star is fading
 I can think farther than that but I forget
 do you hear me

do you still hear me
 does the air remember you
 o breath of morning (*Sirius* 5)

Like the light from a distant star, Cai Wenji's song takes its time reaching us and (like Hadrian's “Little Soul”) is mediated through others, but, if we are attentive, we can still hear her voice, remembered by the air. All poems are nomad flutes, creating sonic patterns in the air—wandering airs that might reach ears in distant places at distant times. When the speaker of Merwin's poem asks “does the air remember you,” he is asking both about the poem (Cai Wenji's air) *and* about the air the poem travels through. Does a dead poet's work “remember” the poet, bring him or her back to the living? And do the living, those of us breathing the air in the present, “remember” the poet when we hear his or her

poem? Merwin believes that all poetry is, after all, finally vocal: “poetry *won’t* exist unless it’s heard. If you don’t hear it, there’s no poetry there.”¹⁸ Poetry is song, and it is made of breath; it is quite literally the waving air, unseen but sustaining—“let me hear your long lifted note / survive with me.” As long as the air is fit to breathe, poets will be in the air, on the air, living in the shadow of the commercial noise of airplanes and airports, of Sirius XM and all the broadcast voices that ultimately fail to drown out the “long lifted notes” of poetry that the air always holds and remembers for those attentive enough to receive them.

The University of Iowa

Notes

1. W. S. Merwin, “Neither Here nor There,” *New Yorker* 88 (October 15, 2012), 34.
2. Mark Halliday and Michael Theune, “*The Shadow of Sirius*: A Critical Conversation,” in *Until Everything Is Continuous Again: American Poets on the Recent Work of W. S. Merwin*, ed. Jonathan Weinert and Kevin Prufer (Seattle: WordFarm, 2012), 150.
3. W. S. Merwin, “Flight Home,” in *Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose, 1949–82*, ed. Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), 183; hereafter cited parenthetically as *RM*.
4. Wallace’s 2005 speech is widely available on the Internet, including at [More Intelligent Life.com](http://MoreIntelligentLife.com).
5. W. S. Merwin, *The Shadow of Sirius* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2009), 7; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Sirius*.
6. “Air” is one of Merwin’s recurring tropes: his autobiographical long poem, “Another Place,” begins “When years without number / like days of another summer / had turned into air there” and continues for another sixty-one stanzas with endless rhymes on air (bare, stair, disrepair, square, prayer, pair, somewhere) and then culminates with the detritus of the house of his youth “all heaped up together / naked to the public air”—into which the totality of his childhood vanished (344–353). Merwin often uses “air” as simply, well, atmosphere: it is from “out of the age of the air” that the rain falls (“To the Rain,” 209), and it is what the snow falls through—“the

dust falling in the air” (“Snow,” 282)—and what in winter becomes “the white air” (“To the Grass of Autumn,” 526); it is what carries the songs of birds to our ears—“I hear the same / linnets notes in the morning air” (“Testimony,” 420); it is one of the fleeting things of life—“the brief air the vanishing green”—that comprise “only the age that is left / to be together” (“Before Us,” 277); it is one of “the elements”—“the air for touch”—that the morning makes him remember (“Coming to the Morning,” 279); it is the invisible constant in life that makes “the going / of the age” seem so gradual, because “the air we could not hold had come to be there all the time / for us and would never be gone” (“The Speed of Light,” 382–83); and it is the place where a shed snakeskin—“a shade out in the air”—becomes a sign of “the silent rings in which a life had journeyed” (“Through a Glass,” 512). Air is, for Merwin, like the present, the thing that sustains life but is also invisible to language: if the past, for Merwin, is absence that can only be retrieved by words, the present is absence that can only be accessed in language when it becomes past. The poet’s airs, then, have a complex and intimate connection to the air we breathe. All references are to W. S. Merwin, *Migration: New & Selected Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005); hereafter cited parenthetically as *MG*.

7. Looming images of smog appear early in Merwin’s work, as in the 1969 story “The Flyover,” recording a walk through the city on a “flyover,” an elevated road to facilitate commuting; the protagonist, ironically, leaves his flat “to go out again where at least there was some air,” only to find he is surrounded by “the blue cloud of car exhaust that filled the avenues,” so he seeks refuge on the traffic-congested flyover, which he assumes will take him above that poisoned air, but he finds that “the pressures over the city are full of surprises and the exhaust on the flyover was worse from the start” and that up there was a “permanent exhaust-cloud.” See “The Flyover” (*RM* 73). Merwin’s story is a kind of precursor of the “airborne toxic event” in Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel, *White Noise*, one of the best bizarre evocations of an ecological disaster.
8. Robert Scholes, “Reading Merwin Semiotically,” in *W. S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson and Ed Folsom (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), 72.

9. *Bill Moyers' Journal* (PBS, June 26, 2009). [Transcript and recorded interview available online.](#)
10. Helen Vendler, "Defender of the Earth," *New York Review of Books* (March 26, 2009).
11. Gilbert Wesley Purdy, "The Silence That I Hear Now," *www.electia.org*, (October/November 2008), accessed 15 February 2010.
12. Elizabeth Lund, "The Shadow of Sirius," *Christian Science Monitor* (May 7, 2009).
13. Jerry Harp, "All of Memory Waking: Word and Experience in W. S. Merwin's *The Shadow of Sirius*," in Weinert and Prufer, 173, 175–176.
14. Vendler, "Defender."
15. "Little Soul" appears in *Shadow of Sirius*, 51, and was originally published in *Poetry* (April 2006).
16. William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, Volume 2: 1939–1962, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991), 318.
17. See Jerry Harp's excellent reading of the poem in "All of Memory Waking," in Weinert and Prufer, 176–178; and see Mark Irwin's analysis of "The Nomad Flute" in his "Origin, Presence, and Time in the Works of W. S. Merwin," in Weinert and Prufer, 35–36.
18. Jeanie Thompson and Jonathan Weinert, "Raw Shore of Paradise: A Conversation with W. S. Merwin," in Weinert and Prufer, 118.

TIME AND THE ANIMALS OF *SIRIUS*

Russell Brickey

The Nomad Lions: Initiating and Intimating

The first Animals of *Sirius* emerge in the initial poem of the collection, “The Nomad Flute.”¹ No more than an allusion—“once there were lions in China”—the unheralded insertion of such an exotic concept nevertheless speaks to the many threads that run through *The Shadow of Sirius*: imagination, family, past, future, ecology, limits of perception and ontology, mysteries of evolution and change, and most importantly, the force which subsumes all these other forces into it: time.

The animals of *Sirius* are the latest iteration of W. S. Merwin’s long quest for the mythic self begun as early as *A Mask for Janus* (1952) and given fullest fruition in *The Lice* (1967) and *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970). In these earlier collections, Merwin’s most pressing themes deal with ecology and justice, and to this end the yeoman speaker is what Jane Frazier (citing Charles Molesworth) calls “a disembodied narrative agent.” Frazier explains Merwin’s process as one of “taking himself out of chartered time . . . to remove the body from spatial and temporal restrictions in order to liberate the spirit.”² Essentially, the typical Merwinian speaker is an empathetic but largely generic man (if we allow for the same gender as the poet) seeking Romantic interfusion with a modern version of nature now overlooked, denuded, and imperiled by human cupidity.³ The poetry observes natural processes, finding both solace and guidance in quiet phenomena such as, among many, the “The Dragonfly” (from *The Lice*, CP 1:296), “The Duck” (*The Rain in the Trees*, CP 1:659), or “The Bird” (*The Vixen*, CP 2:15–16) before they are completely obliterated from the Earth. What the disembodied perceiver achieves is a focus away from the solipsistic “I-narrator” and toward the lyrical beauty of the natural world. Such a removal achieves what Evan Watkins names “a renunciation of the peculiar psychic greed which could constitute the nuclear identity of a personality.”⁴ In other words, Merwin’s disembod-

ied speaker is an attempt to retune the hungry ID. While it is admittedly unfair to treat Merwin's extraordinary range so reductively (and this essay is only treating two themes of many), his narrative voice is generally a conduit to the quiet authority of supernature, thereby rendering nature all the more present in the poetry: no more is humanity the acting agent and sole arbiter of natural signs—nature presents its mysterious typology and the poet is left to parse its symbols as best he can without the egotistical, self-aggrandizing prerogatives of the dominant culture. Because they are so multifarious, these lessons are often only re-rendered as abstraction and image. In this way—by decentering the notion of the omniscient narrator as voice-of-god—Merwin's poetry achieves a level of symbolic justice in the era of human technocratic hegemony.

Sirius, on the other hand, while it retains Merwin's basic technique, is focused much more closely on interiority and personal reminiscence, and the quest of the speaker is atypically important. In true Romantic tradition, Merwin communes with an animate universe through the traces of memory and childhood, and the process of spiritual liberation takes place monomythically across the collection as a whole. In this quest the poet encounters mentors in the form of birds, and daemons in the forms of "black dog[s]"; he overcomes the abyss of memory and perception; and finally finds atonement and transformation through the release of temporal time. A clash of consciousness realizes the *agon* of the book, symbolized by alternate images of "shadow" (unconscious) and "daylight" (reason), with the natural, eternal time as created by nature and experienced by animals. The speaker's eventual achievement of spiritual liberation comes by the end of the collection when he awakens (symbolized appropriately by "morning") into the "note" (symbolizing language) of the "thrush" (a perennial symbol of rejuvenation in the Romantic tradition).

It is with all this in mind that the lions in line 19 of "The Nomad Flute" become revelatory of the process as a whole. The lions emerge in the

penultimate turn of the poem, following a declaration about the unknowableness but paradoxical permanence of memory (“I have with me / all that I do not know / I have lost none of it” in lines 12–14) and an admission of the poet’s own limitations (“I know better now / than to ask you [the muse] / where you learned that music / where any of it came from” in lines 15–18). At this point the lions appear and just as quickly re-submerge to the region of the subconscious from which they came, providing no explanation for their appearance other than the probability that they are elements of something once seen or learned. Lions were never indigenous to China, but Guardian Lions figure prominently in Chinese art and decoration. Memory is a cultural artifact in this instance that speaks to the ability of remembered experience and imagination to bridge unredeemable time but, as is often the case in *Sirius*, the exact corollaries are not made clear and are perhaps even unnamable. The lions also offer intimations about memory’s resonance, an important feature of *Sirius*, and how this land-locks the mind: as the lions are left unexplained and unexplored in the poem, so also is memory moored in concepts of the here and now, and not the infinite. Merwin’s genius is to illustrate just such correlations by endowing them with the odd logic of free-association. The lions remind us of this process and subtly initiate the motifs of complex time and the intractable imposition of memory. This, in Merwin’s canon, is what animals offer humanity in their various roles as victims and exemplars. “At their best the animals of all Merwin’s poems can be conceived of as teachers—even teachers of and ‘speakers of the word for heaven.’”⁵

In an attempt to provide a framework for the free-associative themes of *Sirius*, I divide selected poems according to categories (time, awakening, ecology, reason, and enlightenment); together they point toward a tentative conclusion about the overall purposes of the quest motif and thus the book itself. At the heart of this symbology is the animal. Birds and flight become tropes of time, the dog (usually a symbol of fidelity) is correlated to the pain of reality, and wild creatures represent both the quiet power and the intense vulnerability of nature.⁶ This essay attempts

to use these categories to trace just one overarching meaning at a very specific point within Merwin's canon, the relationship between Merwin's system of animal symbols in *Sirius* and the overarching theme of escape from linear time.⁷



Fourth Dimensional Time

In this regard, the idea of nonlinear time complicates but provides an important hermeneutic for *Sirius*.⁸ Orthodox linear time is generally conceived of as unidirectional and finite (it flows irreversibly from birth to death or apocalypse and is thus an adversarial force in nature). To be in linear time means that one is constantly running out of time and that time is ever slipping into the past. Philosophically, this concept of time (as a resource which is fast being depleted) drives Western ideas of progress. The Buddhist concept, on the other hand, is that time has a fourth dimension which is always present in the mind (essentially, time is a shifting pattern of perception as we pass from one state to another, and thus the concept can be equated to cycles of rebirth). The purpose of pursuing fourth dimensional time is to free the mind of the limitations imposed by reliving the past while rushing toward an end-time. "One can cut off memory of the past, by negating the self to be the agent of past deeds," Zhihua Yao writes; "This way one can experience the emptiness of 'no-longer' and 'not-yet.'" Fourth dimensional time frees the individual from the urgencies and constraints of fighting the illusion of time, and in this way aligns the perceiver with nature's processes. Yao explains further:

It is the non-dwelling of the past, present, and future that the true state of one's mind arises. This state, also called the primordial state of total perfection, is the state completely beyond the limits of the past, present, and future.⁹

As opposed to the other three times—past, present, and future, which compose linear time and have definite albeit transient positions in the

mind—the fourth dimension of time allows psychic and spiritual freedom, in the words of Dzogchen Master Namkhai Norbu, “leaving [the mind] in its true State beyond the limitations of past, present and future.”¹⁰ The above explanation is admittedly (and apologetically) brief and simplistic, but it provides an overall paradigm for explicating Merwin’s symbolic and imagistic interplays within *Sirius*.

Natural, cyclical concepts of time are synonymous with the movements of nature in Merwin’s poetry. (This should not be too surprising considering that Merwin is a Buddhist and the translator of Eastern poetry.) *Sirius* is the story of escape from linear time and its concomitant philosophies of impending mortality and necessary consumption. Merwin pursues the “primordial state of total perfection” beyond the limited concepts of time and culture. This is the overarching quest of the narrator in *Sirius* and eventually provides a motive for his emergence as an embodied personality in the collection.



Poems of Flight: Time

“Still Morning,” the second poem of the collection and the one which initiates Merwin’s conversation about time, begins as many of the poems in *Sirius* do with a statement, a question, or a situation that has the challenge of a koan: “It appears now that there is only one / age and it knows / nothing of age” (*CP* 1:544). Such a statement almost seems tautological or even plain nonsense until one recognizes that Merwin is writing from a philosophy that disputes the concept of what an “age” is. The challenge is to us (the readers: humanity) to consider our own chronological concepts of the universe. But these lines can also refer to a concept of time outside the realm of humanity, a time that exists without the scalar, metronymic divisions which artificially extend human thought all the way back to the Big Bang itself. Of course, it is tempting to make the self-inflating leap into the now familiar terminology of physics (harmonic motion, special relativity, the bending of space and time, even time-travel, wormholes, and time-machines) to make sense of

a nonlinear and complex time here, but Merwin's meaning becomes clearer the deeper one gets in *Sirius*. Rather than human definition, Merwin implies that time can be redefined and observed through the movement of nature.¹¹ Time, as observed through a number of processes (memory, image, object, emptiness), is an eternal field that allows some images and memories to survive, others to die off. Time is shown to be composed of mysteriously interconnected fragments of experience, a creation of the mind. The way to make sense of this matrix is to observe the time of animals, creatures of the present and the eternal. "Now" in the first line of the poem, of course, is a relative and variable term (how can anything be "now" when consciousness is composed of what has already happened?), but "now" is an indicator of growing consciousness. The poet has come to a moment of clarity; the overarching theme of *Sirius* is that age brings insight that is hard to define except through the wisdom of hindsight, and this idea provides the form that reifies this movement.

"Still Morning" is divided into two distinct strophes, and the argument of the poem evolves through the free association between these two. The first movement consists of lines one through six, a conceit in which the birds, presumably migrating, "know / nothing of the air they are flying through / or of the day that bears them up" (lines 3–5). Interpretation here offers several possibilities: are the birds more or less in-tune with the element of air and the province of time?—or are the birds synergistic with the mystery of nature?—or do animals lack human consciousness and thus fly (a perennial and vernacular symbol of achievement) unaware of the prowess of nature even as they enact it? Merwin's ambiguity suggests all of these and a frankly unnamable something not entirely open to interpretation. Other poems which utilize "day" or "daylight" do so to symbolize normative consciousness and orthodox concepts of time; these images will be frequently juxtaposed to the "shadow," which I shall discuss below. "Still Morning" establishes these symbols almost as one would a proposition at the beginning of an argument. Likewise, the "one age" in the first line—reminiscent of Eliot's

“Time past and time present” and its implications of an eternal, cosmological instance segmented into discrete moments by consciousness—commences the debate of what an “age” is and how it is created. Eventually through the argument of the collection, one age is accepted and yet as unknowable to us as the air is to flying birds traveling in response to the seasons, unaware of metered, linear time yet acting as part of an eternal, natural cycle of time.

It is with no other preamble that the poem shifts suddenly to the ‘I-narrator’ who initiates the second strophe of “Still Morning.” Birds evoke a memory of a single disembodied moment summed up by an image rising from lost memory: “that patch of sunlight” (line 16). The poet is held up, he remembers that much, and “voices murmur in a shadow” (line 9), but it is the image that remains even as the particulars die out. Sunlight in this instance represents the mystery of memory’s evolutionary survival (why do some memories die out and some live?) and the power of the image to make meaning through abstraction. “Shadow” in the Jungian sense also symbolizes the subconscious. Both definitions are present in the poem and throughout the collection. It is from the eternal, mysterious time of the subconscious that single moments emerge; the patch of sunlight (again symbolic of consciousness) has meaning to the poet, this much is implied, even as “each word they said in that time / [is] silent now” and even though Merwin’s message is never entirely resolved in the poem (lines 14–15). Instead, the poet is left with a moment of frozen time “while I go on seeing that patch of sunlight” just as “the day bears” the birds up (lines 16, 5) without explanation to the wilder flyer.

The matrix of image, message, symbol, and motif unifies *Sirius* essentially in this same manner: ideas are left unresolved in single poems only to be taken up in later poems, left unresolved again, and finally forming global adumbrations of meaning across the book. “Adumbrate,” of course, has synonyms in “outline,” “foreshadow,” “disclose,” or “suggest”—and this is probably the best we can do with Merwin’s complex

intersections of meaning. Time and animal symbols are various and shifting and signify differently within various poems. Nevertheless, the creatures of the wild share the common purpose of reminding the reader that there are differing perspectives.

The next animal poem in *Sirius*, “Without Knowing,” also begins with a koan-like question predicated upon the metaphors of time and flight:

If we could fly would there be numbers
apart from the seasons (*CP* 2:546)

An answer is, of course, implied: the human race, with its rage for empiricism, might conceive differently (and thus respond to the world in a more tenable naturalistic state) if we could travel through the elements as birds do. Flight, obviously not meant to be taken literally during the jet age, symbolizes emersion in the elements and harmony with natural forces. As always in these scenarios, the implication is that we, humanity, lack such accord. It is an epistemological question: Would we number our days—time itself—differently if we were closer to our timeless, natural selves? “Air,” according to Sandra M. Guy, is one of the four elements (including Earth, Water, and Fire) which “present clues to the character of Merwin’s perspective in the continuum of nature.” In Guy’s symbology, “air” carries “violence” and is “the object of violent action”—except when utilized by “crows,” creatures natural to air. Through Merwin’s matrix of symbols, nature’s creatures are juxtaposed to humanity in non-nature. “In most cases in Merwin’s poetry,” Guy writes, “Air represents a metaphor for human existence” in need of guidance. “Air represents the atmosphere through which one journeys across the span of Earth into the realm of mythic consciousness.”¹² This is still early in the quest, and the narrator in “Without Knowing” seeks exactly this “mythic consciousness.” He looks to the migrating birds but can only form the koan/question which begins his meditation. Instead, the narrator is relegated to the hints from the subconscious, the things we know but do not know, where these forces come closest to fruition. The poet dreams, and in the dream he is like the wild birds which un-

derstand time as “numberless.” This suggests a concept of time and animals as coexistent with time rather than as chronographers of time. “Leaves,” another symbol reused throughout the collection, represent the uncountable time of cycle nature. Likewise a reused symbol in “Without Knowing,” “day” represents consciousness which flows one way without end like a river and, like the water of the river, never to return. Merwin has beautifully juxtaposed human time with the greater time of nature accessible to humans only obliquely through the subconscious; yet even this, the glimpse of alternate time, disappears in the human mind.

When Merwin does suggest the union with natural time, it is at the head of “a flock of cranes” in “Far Along in the Story,” a beast fable of sorts. The boy at the head of the flock can hear a voice within the calls of the cranes, and in finding it, loses time until he stumbles and comes to his senses with “the day before him” and “each tree in its own leaves”; at this moment, having walked in the pure reality of time, the path ahead appears pristine even as it obliterates the individual and the boy “had forgotten his name” (*CP* 2:548–59).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the poem is the portrayal of the self in time: while the boy has forgotten his name, he has gained his essence. The poem offers a template, no matter how abstract, for emergence in the fourth dimension of time which comes through the voice of animals. Yet what appears to be a moment of enlightenment can also be read as an injury to the sense of self. Yes, the poem seems to say, clarity comes with a price. To look at time and the world as an animal would mean losing certain abilities. While they are “the very embodiment of the miraculous in the common,” animals “pose the problem of what is perceived. . . . They see and feel, yet having no words, they cannot tell what they see and feel”²¹³—or they can, but in a way overlooked by many humans. Either way, enlightenment comes with a price.



Poems of Morning: Awakening

Nature is also given its measure of provisional authority in “Gray Herons in the Field Above the River” (*CP* 2:594–95), the one poem in which nature addresses the reader directly through the collective voice of its creatures. It is early winter—when the “nights turn longer than the days”—and the “still light after dawn” as the mind of day is coming into consciousness (lines 1, 2). This consciousness is of nature and thus perfection can be seen by the way the seven herons stand in the growing light, “at a perfect distance from all others” (line 6). Nevertheless, the herons self-identify as only “shadows of ourselves risen out of our shadows” (line 7). Once again, Merwin uses the shadow, but as with many of his symbols, it has a retooled meaning; in earlier poems the “shadow” symbolizes human cupidity and hegemony, particularly as a symbol of human avarice and the destruction of the natural environment. In “Gray Herons,” the herons are shades of their former selves raised Phoenix-like out of the shadow-ashes of nature’s former prowess. Of course, seven is a mystical number in both the Western and Eastern traditions with a wide range of symbology, which often alludes to the perfected mind. Likewise, the heron has many symbolic iterations throughout history, usually relating to growth and life: the heron is the creator of light in Egyptian mythology and associated with life and longevity in Chinese symbology. Merwin, however, makes no specific reference to any of these traditions. Rather, the evocation of the heron is meant to endow the scene with the numinous, unnamable power of the landscape. The number seven is meant as intimation, mnemonic, and reminder that we see but do not see in the typology on our fringes. Likewise, the journey of the herons represents both the quiet endurance of nature and, for humanity’s benefit, an image of growth and consciousness: “we have come a long way sailing our opened clouds / remembering all night where the world would be” (lines 11–12). Finally in the poem, we are given the world in its purity, represented by images of water: “the clear shallow stream the leaves floating along it / the dew in the hushed field the only morning” (lines 13–14). Humanity sees the

river, ever flowing one direction, but the herons in nature's perfection see the water, and time, for what it is, the "only morning," the one time. As a last observation, it is hard to overlook the clever structure of "Gray Herons," fourteen lines divided into seven couplets; the form of the poem itself echoes the process of awakening.

"Falling" and "Grace Note" also explore an awakening consciousness (*CP* 2:600, 600–601). As are many of the poems in *Sirius*, they are coupled companion poems which offer nuanced perspectives on the same or similar themes.

"Falling" celebrates a moment of a quiet natural power, one of several in the collection, in which the poet reminds himself (and readers) that the cycles of nature go on without human industry, science, or even awareness. The action of the poem is deceptively simple: a rain shower falls during the night. This scene takes place "Long before daybreak" when, significantly, "none of the birds [are] yet awake" (lines 1–2). In the dark, when the creatures of day are asleep, linear time does not exist, at least not as humans perceive it. In this hypothetical state of both eternal time and transient event, the rain falls with the "sound / of a huge wind rushing" (lines 3–4), a synecdoche of all nature's power. As the argument of the poem progresses, this power becomes analogous to the things humanity overlooks, "a moment of great / happiness" which "we cannot remember" except for the moments in which the proverbial "we" are willing to trust in those forces we cannot control, metaphorized (somewhat ironically) as "coasting with the lights off" (lines 14–17). This ending on a metaphor of the mechanized world is, of course, eminently accessible for modern readers but somewhat jarring given the image palette and eventual message of the poem.

"Grace Note" is the morning follow-up to the nighttime rain-shower as the speaker in the poem wakes "before there is light" to hear

music without repetition
or beginning playing

away into itself
 in silence like a wave (lines 3, 5–8)

On the fringe of sleep and the subconscious, the speaker connects ever so fleetingly to the power reified by the rain which has gone on outside as the speaker sleeps. For the speaker, the quest is in progress, and all he is afforded is a glimpse through the portal to the natural world. He sees,

a feathered breath a bird
 flies in at the open window
 then vanishes leaving me
 believing what I do not see (lines 17–20)

Merwin has fashioned a conceit of faith throughout *Sirius* which here is realized in this instance as an animal-emissary, one singing lauds for the morning, from the eternal time of nature. Merwin is a Buddhist, but he is also a member of the Western tribe, and in “Grace Note” the word *grace* signifies in exactly the manner a Western reader might expect: the speaker in the poem is given a moment of grace as if visited by an angel of the wilderness.

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Poems of Contemporary Nature: Ecology

Still, Merwin does not entirely forget the world of day and its ethical imperatives. “Escape Artist” is an ecological, animal-rights poem (*CP* 2:576–77). Nature in the poem is held in bondage, the foxes stuffed into cages and raised for experimentation and fur. What magic they possess—the numinous natural forces celebrated in “Falling” and “Grace Note”—is relegated to forgotten fabliaux, fairy tales, and beast fables. Reynard the fox comes to mind, of course, considering Merwin’s background as a medieval scholar, and the fox’s variable incarnations as trickster, criminal, and philosopher. Once not so long ago, the poem reminds readers, the fox was a personification of jest and wry wisdom, a creature of influence now “lost in plain sight” (line 29). One of the most

accessible in the collection, “Escape Artist” is not the most evocative or powerful poem, nor does the title exactly inform the meaning except to refer to the possibility that the wily fox will make good use of her or his cleverness at some hopeful future point. “Escape Artist” offers no actual sense of this, however, only tragedy. The fox appears as a victim of Anthropogenic devolution in earlier poems, most notably “Plea for a Captive” (*The Drunk in the Furnace*) which apostrophizes a “Woman with the caught fox” who enticed “with fat ducks / Patiently to your fingertips” a wild fox with the hope it will “turn friend, / Dog your heels, sleep at your feet, / Be happy in the house”; rather, Merwin contends, “It will only trot to and fro, / To and fro, with vacant eye.” “Kill it once,” not twice by killing its spirit, the poet says, “or let it go” (*CP* 1:173). For a poet who invests so much energy in abstraction and surrealism, such a bald statement seems disconcerting until one realizes that accessibility is the hallmark of the protest poem. Merwin’s purpose in these instances is to be evocative, but more importantly to be polemical.

By contrast, the responding companion poem “The Mole” celebrates very quietly the forces of hidden, mysterious nature (*CP* 2:577–78).¹⁴ The mole is “one / more life that we see only from outside” (lines 1–2) after the animal has left its telltale excavations of mounded earth. It is a strangely familiar but unquantifiable process, so close to human habitation and industry, so like us, so unlike us. It “happened when we were not noticing” and so quietly that “we might not have been here / disregarded as we were” (lines 10–11). The process of rising out of darkness and rearranging the earth takes place in the realm of blind animals, the “descendants of roots and water” (line 20); the counterpart to the roaring rain, moles are also synecdoches of the entire natural kingdom. What is most important and most striking about the mole is that, unlike the fox or the dog, it represents nature un-tampered with, still in its pristine state, which goes on “without being seen” and “in the dark without us” (lines 16, 30). This message illustrates how Merwin is a modern Romantic poet: his nature is not the ineffable mountain passes of Wordsworth or stalwart pines of Shelley meant to remind a humble and receptive

humanity of God's sublimated presence—and thus humanity's own prominence at the moment of communion with nature. Merwin's nature is local and, in the end, far more real.

Other ecological poems follow very much in this same manner, appealing to humanity's self-interest by emphasizing the destruction of species and how these losses affect the spiritual life of nature and *homo sapiens*. "The Silence of the Mine Canaries" is an elegy for a number of missing species (CP 2:589–90). "The bats have not flowered" (line 1), "the robins have gone from the barn" (line 19), "the flocks of five kinds of tits have not come again" (line 22), "the cuckoo has not been heard / again this May" (lines 30–31), "nor for many a year the nightjar" (line 32), nor "the mistle thrush song thrush whitethroat" (line 33), nor has the poet heard the song of the "thrush" which provided Felix Mendelssohn with his sound-motif in the incidental music to *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.

Likewise, the first twelve lines of "Remembering the Wings" catalogues the breeds of domesticated pigeons which the poet no longer finds "along the ridge of the barn roof": the "Mondains," "Cauchoises," "Bouvreuils," "Carneauxs," and "Montaubans" (CP 2:597). As with several of the poems already discussed in this essay, the next eleven lines abruptly shift from imagery to memory. "Édouard said the fox would get them" the poet addresses the readers (line 13), and then expands to a meditation upon the "children / who had gone to school with him," and who are now tellingly absent, and traumas of the First World War which perpetually haunt Édouard "out in the summer fields" (line 21). Merwin's messages are direct: as fares nature, symbolized by the pigeons, so fares humanity, realized by Édouard's post-traumatic stress; the tale is cautionary if not entirely resolved: as with the vanishing breeds of birds, so too the human animal is vulnerable to the destruction of nature. When so baldly stated, the idea seems simplistic—and, in fact, it is a simple concept made complex and evocative by the poet. This poetic technique is one that Merwin uses powerfully throughout his poetry.



Poems of the Black Dog: Reason

In comparison, messages about the human condition, especially examinations of the psyche, imply a stagnating spiritual process in the daylight of pure human reason. “By Dark” initiates the second section of *Sirius*; the choice to begin the second book with this poem signifies the overall theme of Section II (*CP* 2:566–71)—overcoming the life lived blindly unaware of anything but the limits of experiential perception. With only eleven poems, it is the shortest section of *Sirius*. It is dominated by images of darkness, sleep, and dreams. The tone is predominantly elegiac and expresses sensibilities of confusion (“Night with No Moon” and “Into the Cloud”), obsession and longing (“Good Night” and “At the Bend” companion poems), and alienation (“Little Soul”). Interestingly, the images of animals are few, relegated to the “black dog,” the “white tern” which sails away without interaction in “Trail Marker,” and the probability that the final poem in Section II, “The Dream of Koa Returning,” is a dream-vision of a dead pet. Moreover, Section II dramatizes the persona of those who “go on / without being able to tell whether / they are addressing the past or the future” (“The Ring,” *CP* 2:569–70).

“By Dark” introduces the bellwether of this curious collection (*CP* 2:566). It is a curious poem in Merwin’s canon if for no other reason than the tone is so overtly tense and dramatic. Interestingly similar to “Still Morning” but reversed in structure, “By Dark” is a poem in two parts: lines one through five are composed of an ‘I-narrator’ who articulates an ever-present sense of mortality, abstractly symbolized by the “black dog”; lines six through twelve articulate the poet’s newfound perspective on the years in which he followed the black dog of reason. “By Dark” begins *in medias res*: “When it is time,” the poet addresses the reader, “I follow the black dog / into the darkness” (lines 1–2). It is a dramatic, foreboding statement given the comparatively temperate tone of the rest of the collection. The poet expresses an unusual moment of doubt and mortality—a very human expression, of course—but qualifies

it by identifying the daemonic black dog with its psychic and spiritual menace: “that is the mind of day” (line 2). Daylight, in *Sirius*, equates to the waking mind, consciousness, and the limitations of logic. From such a vantage, he “can see nothing but the black dog / the dog I know going ahead of me” (lines 3–4). Reason (the daylight) sheds its brilliance on mortality (the end of time, the end of the mind) which can only be horrifying to the perceiver. An exclamation in line five—“oh it is the black dog[!]”—signifies this comprehension and ends the first section. In lines six and seven, the narrator finds hindsight with a “turn after the years / when I had the trust of the black dog”; he realizes that “the black dog” was “leading me carefully up the blind stairs” (lines 11–12). As with much of Merwin’s abstract verse, the exact meaning of “By Dark” must be intuited rather than explicated. Like “Remembering the Wings,” the overall message is fairly straight-forward—beware of blindly following perception and earthly reason—but the evocation is far more complex and hard to define. A summary of the scenario would read something like this: I followed the black dog into the shadows of day where my human vision is all encompassing, but now I turn away, realizing how blind I have been. But this summary does not capture the complexity or pathos of the poem. Merwin’s poetic process often takes what appears to be a simple, essentialist idea and teases out its emotional complexity via surrealistic images and diction. Most of the poems in Section II follow this frustrating and promising tract.

“Calling a Distant Animal” responds to “By Dark” with a counter-story of the first intimations of immortality (*CP* 2:566–67). It comes, just for the instant, from the other side of perception, the “tone torn out of one birdsong”, a “note / from a string of longing” bursting through the veil of perception (lines 5, 1–2).¹⁵ This is the tone spiritual longing plucked from the instrument of consciousness. Just as in “Grace Note,” by the time the perceiver in “Calling a Distant Animal” realizes what he has heard, the singer-musician, the bird, is already lost to space and time, its location shrouded in mystery: “by now [the bird] may be / where a call cannot / follow it” (lines 7–9). Still, a breakthrough has been achieved,

no matter how unexpectedly, paradoxically, or inadvertently. The first realization in the ultimate spiritual process, the poem implies, is to recognize the ephemeral state of phenomena and the ontological issues this realization raises no matter how it arrives. Like the narrator's perception of the event, the "note" of longing echoes outward until it is lost in emptiness, as the listener is lost in time, and becomes part of "old night" of the subconscious where it is identified and "known" (line 12). The poet's final description of his impression is "a silence recognized / by the silence it calls to" (lines 13–14). "Calling a Distant Animal" suggests that longing can only reach into nothingness. Such a position further suggests an existential universe, yet there is the implication—always the undercurrent of moral imperatives in Merwin's poems—that the speaker (and thus the reader) has alternatives. We need not be creatures of unresolved silence, the poem tells us, we can respond to nothingness . . . yet how exactly, as so often the case, is not clear. The poet and reader are still waiting for the catharsis to occur. And this aspect of "By Dark" points to its strange duality, both as a poem of communion and as a poem of human limitations. Nevertheless, it is a poem that posits through image and voice mysterious possibilities for the speaker.

The companion poem on the facing page, "Night with No Moon," explores the scene of spiritual blindness that follows the loss of bird-song—"still hearing when there is nothing to hear / reaching into the blindness that was there"—until the poet is reduced to finding comfort in human companionship, "thinking to walk in the dark together" (*CP* 2:567). The interesting and beautiful overarching theme of *Sirius*, an aspect which virtually every poem in the book responds to in some manner, is the quest to connect with the other side of time and reality; sometimes this quest is through the intricacies of memory, sometimes it is through the paradox of time. At this point the poet has entered the underworld of the psyche, signified by the lack of light, the darkness—the dark night of delusion, known in the poem as "wisdom that I have come to / with its denials and pure promises" (lines 2–3)—and he has lost

memory, time, and language. All he has is the “absence that I cannot set down” (line 4).



Final Poem of Birds and Song: Enlightenment

The final poem of *Sirius*, “The Laughing Thrush,” celebrates exactly this connection to time and reality (*CP* 2:605–606). It begins its celebration of the spirit as if singing a hymn to the light: “O nameless joy of the morning.” This moment rises from the other, eternal side of the shadow and so has no anthropomorphized name, yet the affirmation is unquestionable as is the connection to an animate, benevolent universe: the “note by note” of language tumbles up out of slumber’s subconscious with the melody of awakening (line 2). Unlike the earlier iterations of “song” in his canon, here the music “unquestioning and unbounded” and creates for the speaker the final moment of true communion:

yes this is the place and the one time
 in the whole of before and after
 with all of memory waking into it (lines 5, 6–8)

This is the achievement of a Nirvana-like state in which memory, “the lost visages,” and language, “words that lately have fallen silent,” meet human potential, “the phrases of some future” (lines 9, 12, 13). His apocalyptic vision intrudes, but as an essentially moral and hopeful poet, Merwin leaves the lesson to the reader with the hope that the poem’s cautionary significance will become apparent: “here is where they all sing the first daylight / whether or not there is anyone listening” (lines 15–16). Even though the philosophy of oneness is as close as the leaves of trees, moles in the yard, the flight of birds, few listen to the music of the awakening self or even try to awaken. While Merwin is hardly didactic, his final meaning pointedly refers to the modern world, and the reader is implicated in the zeitgeist of alienation which leaves the animals of *Sirius* as metonymic representations, and representations only, of the greater universe at our doorstep. However, the poem leaves the possibility open

that there is, or will be, a listener. In the final couplet, the poet celebrates the moment when he achieves union with “the first daylight” (line 16), the original consciousness, with the hope that we, the readers who have come through this quest with the poet, will be compelled to find the light ourselves and act.

The “thrush” is a significant animal to end the collection given its pedigree within the poetic tradition. Noted for its beautiful song, the thrush is frequently used by Romantic and Victorian poets for a symbol of nature’s rejuvenating power. The song of the thrush is consistently an anodyne against the dampened human spirit. For Robert Browning, during a moment of weakness for his England home (“Home-Thoughts, From Abroad”), longing takes the form of chaffinches and whitethroats, but it is with the song of the “wise thrush” that “noontide wakes anew.” John Clare’s thrush (“The Thrushs Nest”) sings “hymns to sunrise” from which the narrator “drank the sound / With joy” very much like Merwin’s narrator. And Thomas Hardy (“The Darkling Thrush”), when the “Winter’s dregs made desolate / The weakening eye of day,” finds “a full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited” in the song of the thrush. For Walt Whitman (“When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d”), the thrush is a personification of solace and the indomitable, independent spirit,

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death’s outlet song of life.¹⁶

Merwin’s thrush is part and parcel of this tradition, and almost certainly, while it begs authorial intention, the poet himself must be aware of the animal’s historic significance. Here he is breaking away from Modernism’s authorial dissonance (Eliot’s “hermit-thrush” singing in the “pine trees” where, significantly to this discussion, “there is no water”),¹⁷ and

Postmodernism's questions about the relevance of master-narratives and assertions about the predominance of simulacra. The world for Merwin is very real and never a failed copy of something else. Merwin envisions salvation with a moral certainty (because Merwin is a very moral poet) from one who believes in the possibilities of divine guidance and of humanity acting responsibly in the world. His evocation of the "laughing thrush" enfolds all these imperatives at the same time that it reaches beyond the Romantic tradition and into a new philosophical confabulation, a melding finally of East and West.



Animals in *The Shadow of Sirius*

The poet has finally come to an age when the perspective of time means something, at least something different than it did sixty years before, particularly as he recognizes that time is the capricious arbiter of memory. Problematically, considering the philosophical arc of the collection, Merwin seems to contradict himself: while the ostensible goal is enlightenment, the poet, in an extended internal monologue, is reliving, imaging, and naming the collages that comprise him, and yet he finds himself trapped in the paradox of linear time. Time for humans is forward moving and yet fluid when turned to image, easily interconnected but hard to define. And this is a central paradox to the overall argument in *Sirius*. Repeatedly, the narrator explores his own notions of time. In "The Nomad Flute," time is the muse which the poet must address directly:

You that sang to me once sing to me now
 let me hear your long lifted note
 survive with me (lines 1–3)

This same music is heard in the "one note" of "Calling a Distant Animal," "torn out of one birdsong" so that the force of time becomes a reduced, simplified, quantifiable substance for just the instant. In "Traces," the question of age gives time its perspective (*CP* 2:558–59):

in its time
with all its leaves

and the barking not noticed
in the distance (lines 9–12)

Here the symbols of “leaves” (uncountable time) and “barking” (the aggression of the black dog) sound the warnings early in the quest. Yet by the end of the poem, the poet comes to an understanding of his own youthful confusion, “how could we have known / at no distance”? In the same vein, “A Likeness” ends on a single line, “I have only what I remember” (*CP* 2:554–55). Either of these can be read as theses (if such a thing is possible for something so complex) for the collection. Time, ever moving onward, leaves nothing but the past, yet the distance allows for perspective, insight, wisdom of a kind that is impossible to name, and this offers our best chance at enlightenment. The best hope for spiritual awakening—as it has been throughout Merwin’s career—is to perceive the world and time as animals do, even if this alone does not resolve the essential obscurity of seeing through the eyes of a human. What animals offer are exemplars of what we cannot know. As Hix defines it, “The mystery humans see and try to name in animals matches the mystery we do not see and cannot name in ourselves.”¹⁸

All of this suggests a reason for the narrator’s reemergence as a persona. While earlier collections offer a disembodied narrative agent receptive to, but often outside, nature’s auspices, *Sirius* offers a narrator who has unionized with natural cyclical time. It is not a perfect marriage and the shadow-world of common-day cannot simply be dismissed. Sirius, after all, is “the dog-star,” the brightest star in the night sky, the head of *Canis Major*, and a navigational guide for sailors. We, Merwin suggests, are creatures living in the shadow of the brightest light in our night sky, the black dog. We are creatures of shadow with a bright guide in our spiritual and Earthly-cum-cosmic quest. The ambiguity of this reading reflects

the ambiguity of Merwin's message as a whole. The answer, he says, is not simple, not definable in earthly terms, but it is there nevertheless.

Youngstown State University

Notes

1. W. S. Merwin, *The Collected Poems of W. S. Merwin*, ed. J. D. McClatchy, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 2013), 2:543; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP*.
2. Jane Frazier, "Writing Outside the Self: The Disembodied Narrators of W. S. Merwin," *Style* 30, no. 2 (1996): 1, 2.
3. I see the Merwinian speaker exemplified in, for instance, the very personal poems of *Opening the Hand* and that collection's focus on snapshot memories of the poet's family.
4. Evan Watkins, "W. S. Merwin: A Critical Accompaniment," *Boundary* 4, no. 1 (1975): 192.
5. Cheri Davis, *W. S. Merwin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 60.
6. I have left other categories such as "childhood," "family," "landscape," and "heirlooms," as well as hard to define categories for the abstract discursive poems.
7. To complicate this attempt, Merwin's Pulitzer Prize winning book is intimately connected to his earlier collections and continues a number of symbols and motifs continuously evolving across the poet's sixty-one-year career. Animals have a long history in Merwin's poetry. Anyone familiar with Merwin's work knows how vast it is, so I will not try to definitively name except to indicate the most obvious correspondences with earlier works when their occur. Suffice to say that *Sirius* is the latest in a grand internal dialogue on the part of the poet about the mysteries of existence.
8. Theories of time, both Eastern and Western, are of course far too rich for adequate discussion here, so for the sake of this essay I will, once again, simply adumbrate the theme. I am dependent here on a couple of key sources. To put this into perspective, Anne Bruce, a nursing professor, advises future care-givers to embrace the concept of cycle time as a mode of therapy, particularly in hospice situations when the end of life is near. She

- writes, "Time becomes linked with a circular image where birth and death refer to an arising, changing, and re-arising of the sense of self from experience to experience" (153). See Anne Bruce, "Time(lessness): Buddhist Perspectives and End-of-Life," *Nursing Philosophy* 8 no. 3, (2007): 151–157.
9. Zhihua Yao, "Four-Dimensional Time in Dzogchen and Heidegger," *Philosophy East & West* 57, no. 4 (2007): 514.
 10. Quoted in Yao, "Four-Dimensional Time," 513.
 11. Merwin's Romanticism is a well-critiqued aspect of his poetry and philosophy. Cheri Davis provides two statements in her first chapter which I have taken as definitive of Merwin's aesthetic: "Merwin pursues the darker vein of the Romantic tradition, the vein represented by Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' and Wordsworth's Lucy poems. Unquestioning acceptance of perception, a receptivity to the Other, joy in the pursuit of what approaches a religious experience of consummation, and selflessness in the face of the majesty of nature all characterize this vein of Romanticism" (*W. S. Merwin*, 18); and "Merwin is a visionary poet whose work reflects an engagement in the silence of the self, a receptivity to supranatural experiences, and, in the later work, an openness to participation in the lives of other creatures, and a questioning of the basic structures of perception. In pursuing the negative aesthetic, he opens the way for a poetry that is mystical without being effusive, intimate without being personal, formal without taking itself (or anything or anyone else) too seriously, a poetry that is inspired yet controlled in that it follows a regular, if elliptical, pattern of thought" (*W. S. Merwin*, 21).
 12. Sandra M. Guy, "W. S. Merwin and the Primordial Elements: Mapping the Journey to Mythic Consciousness," *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 38, no. 4 (1997): 416, 418, 419. Guy also makes astute observations about the nature of the symbols of "shadow" and "light" which concord nicely with my own reading in this essay. The "shadow" in Jungian terminology, of course, refers to the subconscious, and Merwin often uses the image of the shadow to symbolize the unknown or unrealized in the human psyche. The shadow moment rises to fruition, much like the motif of the "note," when the speaker comes into transcendental communion with nature; however, as with so much of Merwin's canon, the image/symbol is very changeable. For instance, in "For the Departure of a Stepson" (*The Rain in the Trees*, CP 1:654–55), "the dissolving days / and

the shadows on the walls” are extensions of a geographic space (the ocean) which reify this concept of the unknown psyche; conversely, the call of the cuckoo is a “calling shadow,” an invitation into the mysteries of the natural environment which are distinctly beyond the psyche, in “Orioles” (*The River Sound*, CP 2:380–81); but most often, and probably most potently, “the shadow” represents damage to the natural world, realized most overtly in “The Last One” (*The Lice*, CP 1:271–73).

13. Davis. *W. S. Merwin*, 43.
14. The editors have made an observation about Merwin’s concept of nature—and specifically humanity’s relationship to nature—as reified in “The Mole.” Merwin’s concept of Romantic nature seems to have a dualism about it—on the one hand, the natural world is a constant potential victim of human technocracy; on the other hand, nature is always above and beyond the human speaker and can provide guidance if properly observed—a very Romantic conception. Nature’s double character has an interesting correspondence in the ecological philosophy of Timothy Morton, author of *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007). Morton argues for actively embracing the concept of nature as Other, as dark and unknowable, in an attempt to decenter elder and eventually destructive notions which create an unhealthy distance to the natural world. Contemporary ecology, an after-effect of Romantic culture, privileges nature as a force which sustains humankind; such thinking elevates ‘nature’ to a pseudo-religious status, privileging beauty and iconography over actuality, and thus erasing the true natural world and suffocating dialogue about its survival. At the same time, ecological thought misunderstands the matrix of living and dying cycles which create geography, a further condition of the sanctification of nature. Rather than displacing humanity in this regard (a putative effort to preserve the natural world through aesthetics and philosophy), Morton argues for a reconsideration of these ideals in order to reconstitute a new ecological relationship. Either position (Merwin as a priest of high nature, or Merwin as a proponent of humanity conjoined with nature’s auspices) could be debated; much of this depends upon the individual poem (see the discussion on “Escape Artist” and “The Mole” this endnote is based upon). *The Lice*, for instance, is a collection predicated upon an imperiled Romantic nature. Yet by *Sirius*, the poetry appreciates nature which exists of its own accord, an

iteration much closer to Morton's concept of a world which is not merely conceived of as a product of human consciousness. Overall, however, Merwin is a Postmodern neo-Romantic artist carting the baggage of Green politics so familiar to most Western readers.

15. Merwin's readership will find correspondences in *Sirius* and in Merwin's canon as a whole, particularly the use of "note" to refer to the metaphysics of ontology, where the "note" is a moment of perception, generally of something inexpressible except through a term which is concrete in its denotation and yet abstract in its connotation; like the complex effect of a melody or the singularity of a single key struck on a piano, the "note" of consciousness is recognizable but not clearly definable. Perhaps Merwin's clearest statement (as such) comes early on in the canon, in the poem "The Gods" from *The Lice* when the speaker identifies the source of "The music of a deaf planet / The one note / Continues clearly this is // The other world" (CP 1:284–85). Music, in other words, even in its smallest components, provides a symbol for an indefinite, quasi-religious concept. A more thorough examination of this trope and its iterations would require an essay of its own. Likewise, birdsong has a multifarious symbology within the canon. Readers could look at "Some Winter Sparrows" (*The Drunk in the Furnace*, CP 1:171–72), "December Among the Vanished" and "Fly" (*The Lice*, CP 1:293, 307–308), "Lark" and "Beginning" (*The Carrier of Ladders*, CP 1:337–38, 393), "September" (*Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*, CP 1:457–58), "Migration," "Passage," and "The Flight" (*The Compass Flower*, CP 1:476, 502–503, 525), "The Duck" (*The Rain in the Trees*, CP 1:659), "The Bird" and "The Speed of Light" (*The Vixen*, CP 2:15–16, 26), "The Wren" and "Orioles" (*The River Sound*, CP 2:379, 380), "Unknown Bird" and "Late Song" (*The Pupil*, CP 2:415–16, 422)—and I am certain I have missed many more. What birds represent is variable and may even be so protean that no single meaning can be attached to them (for instance, "Fly" is a anecdote about a pigeon inadvertently killed by the kindness of a speaker who wanted to give the intractably tamed animal its freedom, while "Lark" is an expressionistic rendering of the numinous quality of lark-song at night, and "Unknown Bird," as its title suggests, is a reflection upon the mystery of nature that drives the poet, signified by "notes that began the song / of an oriole last heard / years ago in another / existence there"). Again, these poems deserve their own closer examination. At the heart of these intricacies is the conundrum of language which can both express the

possibility of an inexpressible universe and still never parse its true significance to the speaker.

16. Robert Browning, *Robert Browning, The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew, 2 volumes (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 1:412; John Clare, *The Rural Muse: Poems*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Ashington: Carcanet New Press, 1982), 115; Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976), 150; Walt Whitman, *The Walt Whitman Archive* (Lincoln: Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, 1995), LG 1891–92, 256.
17. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1963), 67.
18. H. L. Hix, *Understanding W. S. Merwin* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1997), 28.

SILENCE AND THE LYRIC-EPIC

HYBRID ECOPOETICS IN *THE SHADOW OF SIRIUS*

M. P. Jones IV

Merwin's groundbreaking collection, *The Shadow of Sirius*, uses silence to undermine the dark emotion that always threatens environmentally conscious poetry: despair. Merwin's poetry is so ardently hopeful because it emphasizes the importance of action, even in the face of destruction and loss. In the poem "Place," he asserts that "On the last day of the world / I would want to plant a tree," and through this rejection of fatalistic philosophies, he engages in the environmentally conscious act of planting a tree.¹ In the profound triumph of ecological action, the speaker, and Merwin himself, may overcome the weight of loss and reconnect with place. Establishing a connection with place requires the evocation of past, present, and future, and *The Shadow of Sirius* imagines this timeless place by engaging the personal, lyric reflection while simultaneously embarking on an odyssey of global ecological consciousness. Through the hybrid lyric-epic, Merwin connects ancient myth and future destruction through the vehicle of silence, and it is in this still, silent moment that he is able to imagine the world as a place deserving of astonishment and respect.

Silence in *The Shadow of Sirius* functions as a vehicle that mourns the destruction of natural environments lyrically while chronicling the epic journey of the speaker through the darkness of despair, toward home. Merwin's silences often represent the dark space in which loss and fear exist. The book's hybrid genre subverts traditional understandings of pastoral nature because, instead of elegizing the past through nostalgia, it conjures the past as a lens for looking at a future where ecological awareness exists without nature, without a lost object at all. To understand Merwin's use of the lyric and epic mode in *The Shadow of Sirius*, I will look at his rich body of work. Merwin had an intimate knowledge of

the epic, for instance. He translated many, and he wrote one (*The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative*). In the epic mode, Merwin employs memory, aging, and loss through silence in order to construct a future in personal and ecological ways. I will also trace the critical treatment of “silence” that pervades contemporary understandings of Merwin’s poetics.



Silence and the Ecological Elegy

Silence is the ever-present yet always-absent shaper of Merwin’s ecological ontology. It threatens, it encroaches, and it resonates throughout the epic, informing a way-of-being in the world that dwells in the present by keeping one foot in the past and one in the future. A reviewer from *Publisher’s Weekly* marvels at this peculiar quality, declaring that “somehow, he manages to dissolve the boundaries between one time and another, seeming to look forward to the past or remember what has yet to happen.”² This timelessness, an uncanny force in Merwin’s poetics, is what undermines any kind of pastoral nostalgia by privileging the present moment as the location of environmentally aware action and thought. His invocation in “The Nomad Flute” suggests that the immediate, lyric moment of the speaker unites past and future in the larger epic. The speaker begins with “You that sang to me once sing to me now” and ends with “I will listen until the flute stops / and the light is old again,” conjuring past to inform an idyll moment in which the future is dimly visible.³ This is not a method of connecting past and present in a clear, cyclical manner because there is a definite sense of loss in the passing of time.

In order to theorize the future as a new mode for ecological elegy, it is useful to engage Timothy Morton’s work on “The Dark Ecology of Elegy.” Morton asserts in *The Ecological Thought* that the “ecological thought is intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open, like . . . an unresolved chord. It is realistic, depressing, intimate, and alive and ironic all at the same time. It is no wonder that the ancients thought that melancholy, their word for depression, was the earth mood.”⁴ Mnemonically, according to

Morton, pastoral can be understood as *past* (history) and *oral*; the fact that the word comes from the Latin word for shepherd, *pastor*, only betters our understanding of the ways in which the pastoral tradition sanctifies an imagined history in which nature was—but is no longer—pure, simple, holy, beautiful, virginal, and life-giving. In contrast, the ecological elegy imagines a future without nature, longing instead for ecology, a way of employing an *ubi sunt* which cries out, as Morton asserts, “where (will) have all the flowers gone.”⁵ Using the bleakness of silence to look forward, Merwin is able to experience loss without a sense of nostalgia. Merwin’s silence undermines linear time and pastoral nature in one elegiac moment.⁶

In “The Pinnacle,” he conjures a very early memory of walking “with Miss Giles / who had just retired / from being a teacher all her life” and so together “went our favorite way / the first time just in case / it was the only time.” The poignant recollection ends in an ecological *ubi sunt*, with Merwin’s speaker wondering “and then where did she go” (*Sirius* 16–17), and this last line resembles what Morton calls the “eco-elegy” which—unlike traditional pastoral writing—“is also about the future, and this future has two distinct modes. In the first mode, there is nothing left for elegy at all. In the second, there is no end to the work of mourning.”⁷ Merwin’s eco-poetics subverts traditional pastoralism by engaging the deepest sense of tragedy in order to move through darkness to a place where the speaker may reconnect with ecological thought and action.



The Trouble with Pastoral Poetry

In *English Pastoral Poetry*, Frank Kermode explores the history of the British pastoral tradition in ways similar to Morton’s theoretical exploration. Both writers agree that traditional pastoral writing fosters a sense of loss which is founded on the imagined trope of degeneration through time. Kermode asserts that “the first condition of pastoral poetry is that there should be a sharp difference between two ways of life, the rustic

and the urban.”⁸ This divide positions the speaker outside nature, in both geographical distance and in time. This divide between speaker and nature alienates the speaker from any relationship with the past, emulating a kind of fall from Eden. The pastoral speaker’s lament is one which constantly looks backwards to a better place in a simpler time. Constructing the progression of time as a perpetual fall from perfection, argues Kermode, leads us to the idea that “the world has been a better place and that men have degenerated [which] is remarkably widespread, and a regular feature of pastoral poetry.”⁹ This alienating sense of loss builds to the paralyzing despair that Merwin’s speaker seeks to overcome in his epic journey. To discover purpose in acting ecologically, Merwin’s speaker sojourns through a wasteland, seeking meaningful connections through wonder and awe.

One way to examine Merwin’s use of silence is as an example of what Morton calls an “ecological echo.” Morton asserts that “echoes are ecological in the precise sense that they render to us a sense of the surrounding world,” and they make a “mockery of exactly who the narrator is and exactly where she is ‘placed,’”¹⁰ but Merwin’s poetics carry us beyond the echo to silence. Silence acts in *The Shadow of Sirius* as the ultimate displacer of nostalgia, allowing the collection to reveal the mockery that dwells *beyond* the speaker’s echo, as the speaker opens the poem “One Valley,” “Once I thought I could find / where it began / but that never happened.” The passage of time is evident to the speaker through the movement of water which carves the landscape over millions of years. Even as the speaker suggests that the motion of the water has left its mark on the surface of the earth, he is unable to find a beginning or an end. The speaker finally concludes that having “saw no sign of it” now listens “for the silence that I hear now / day and night on its way to the sea” (*Sirius* 106). Silence mocks the speaker’s desire for a “sign of it,” but it also offers a space for the imagination to seek a connection with the marred earth.

In “W.S. Merwin and the Mysteries of Silence” Jane Frazier examines the chronological shift in Merwin’s style, “from tight, fixed forms using rhyme and meter to the free form of all his subsequent volumes” that is characterized by a “sparse, image-heavy diction which has been widely noted for its use and summoning of silence.”¹¹ In the time since Frazier’s article (published 1994), Merwin’s poetic images have grown even more sparing; so much so that Matthew Boudway remarks that “Merwin’s phrases are so natural and clear that one wonders why he hasn’t gotten rid of the spaces too, and printed his poems in a solid block of undifferentiated text, like an ancient manuscript.”¹² And there does seem to be something of an ancient quality to the work. It is useful to look at “A Codex” in light of such critical opinions. The poem acts as a kind of thesis for the entire work, “clarifying the whole grammar of waiting / not removing one question from the air // or closing the story” (*Sirius* 37). The book itself is technically a codex, though this term is usually reserved for ancient artifacts, and Merwin is musing on the physical form as a medium for avoiding “closing the story.” A codex, in this case, functions like the kind of open questions Merwin is so fond of posing. The physical attributes of the text serve to underscore the fact that he is not advancing the kind of linear narrative one would expect from an epic which so constantly mourns the passing of time, one which moves us from dawn to decadence. Instead, humanity is caught in a nascent state of arrogance, but through careful self-reflection, through this kind of open questioning, linear narrative—which imagines a distant, unreachable, pastoral past—can be subverted in favor of the present desire to reunite with the earth.

Merwin’s silences contain multitudes, from lost objects to lost friends. In “A Letter to Ruth Stone,” the speaker toys with a sense of knowing and unknowing when he says “Now that you have caught sight of the other side of darkness / the invisible side / so that you can tell / it is rising” (*Sirius* 67).¹³ Stone’s work employed the kind of lyrical force Merwin showcases, such as in her poem “Curtains” in which she recollects a beautiful moment while “Putting up new curtains, / other win-

dows intrude” and then asks “What does it mean if I say this years later?”¹⁴ In an article from *The Explicator*, Michael Thomas examines “For the Anniversary of My Death.” He reveals the paradox in which Merwin’s “elemental imagery” with which, upon a first reading, one might read as suggesting an offering to “the dying mortal (the speaker’s future self) a valediction.” However, Thomas understands that it must also certainly be read as a kind of taunt “flaunt[ing] that energy which, in due course, the speaker will no longer command.” In creating these paradoxical relationships with death, which neither glorify nor horrify the speaker’s mind, Merwin “challenges the usual idea that quotidian life is dependable and (a much abused word) ‘real,’ while death and what it portends are enigmatic and thus frightening.”¹⁵ His portrayal of Stone catching “sight of the other side of darkness” presents death as an experiential image, not something to be feared. This sense of fearlessness is what carries Merwin’s lyric reflections away from pastoral nostalgia and toward meaningful recollection. The significance of the past endows the speaker with a position of responsibility for the present and future, not just the imagined past.

Merwin’s silence mocks the distance of pastoral poetry, but in doing so it emphasizes the power of the present moment for unification, even in the face of death, absence, distance, and loss. *The Shadow of Sirius* expresses what Frazier calls “the desire for completion,” not in some sense of finality, but in the reunion of origin and destination. Frazier stresses how Merwin’s “belief in listening for the writer translates into the poetry as speakers who immerse themselves in silence in order to hear the genuine.”¹⁶ Listening to the silence places the reader in the present moment of crisis. Consider how in “The Making of Amber” Merwin turns to natural scenes for the silent moment of realization and reunion. The speaker recalls how “at daybreak the split fig / is filled with dew / the finch finds it / like something it remembers.” The speaker’s immersion in silence—his position as a transparent *ear*—allows him to observe the moment “transparent and soundless / rich with the late daylight,” and

this still moment is full of pleasure in the speaker's present connection to the world, even as it mourns the passage of time (*Sirius* 97).



Merwin's Personal Epic

The Shadow of Sirius offers many silent moments in its individual poems, but beyond a collection of singular observations, the book works on an epic scale. The work's numerous references to Homer and Milton endow the work with a bountiful literary inheritance which provides authority to the speaker's struggle to occupy the present ecological crisis. He dissolves the boundaries of time in the opening poem "The Nomad Flute" in which he invokes the muse so that he may "listen until the flute stops / and the light is old again" (*Sirius* 5). Future and past become relative to the speaker, bound by metaphors of light and dark, silence and song. It is in this moment that the speaker asks the epic question, but instead of positioning a question of which "the answer constitutes the narrative of the work,"¹⁷ Merwin's speaker says "I know better now / than to ask you / where you learned that music / where any of it came from" (*Sirius* 5). Because the work begins *in medias res*, in the very moment of absence, Merwin's speaker is either too wise or too cynical to ask for the origin of the music, but his yearning defines the epic's search for the source—and with it—silence.

In a review of *The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative*, Michael Thurston writes that the book-length poem is "nothing less than the inauguration of a new poetic form, a form created through Merwin's reimagining of epic and narrative poetics."¹⁸ Because *The Shadow of Sirius* is both the lyric expression of the speaker listening *and* the epic journey to find a connection to a primal source, the work expresses Merwin's desire to overcome the weight of despair and reconnect with the earth.¹⁹ Antony Adolf explores the ways in which many contemporary poets, such as Walcott, Carson, and Merwin, subvert traditional colonial narratives of the Historical expression of traveling Westerner over "native" people. Instead, argues Adolf, Merwin's work can be classified as "the birth of a new

genre that gets beyond the genreotypes of epic and novel put forth by Bakhtin,”²⁰ and he argues that this new hybrid form offers—in place of Historical expression—a poetics which is “not that of an [*sic*] absolute past that makes the present obsolete.”²¹ Instead of allowing the pastoral tradition to place the speaker in a constant state of despair, Merwin is able to occupy the present environment through the combination of genres.

Thurston asserts that through the unique play between epic and lyric, the reader does not “simply follow a family’s story, a nation’s story, a set of events played out in a world richly described. We live it—cognitively, affectively, and even bodily. And in the living we come literally to comprehend, . . . we join [the characters] as we join our voices with Merwin’s voice.”²² Because the narrative behind *The Shadow of Sirius* is more recognizably Merwin’s life, the personal voice comes from lived experience, and the speaker invites us to listen alongside as we journey through Merwin’s struggle to overcome despair. Speaking on Merwin’s life in a *New York Times Online* article, Dinitia Smith reveals some of the personal sorrow that resonates throughout the work:

Merwin was the son of a Presbyterian minister in a poor parish in Scranton, Pa., surrounded by barren, strip-mined land. His mother had been orphaned as a child; then her brother died; then her first baby, Merwin’s older brother. Merwin grew up haunted by this brother, in an atmosphere permeated by grief.²³

In the poem “Blueberries After Dark,” Merwin works through some of the difficult memories of loss and the passage of time to find an important truth about himself:

with her father dead
almost before she could remember
and her mother following him
not long after
and then her grandmother
who had brought her up

and a little later
 her only brother
 and then her firstborn
 gone as soon
 as he was born
 she knew (*Sirius* 6)

What his mother gives him is the knowledge that he is “not afraid of the dark,” and moreover, the title of the poem suggests death as a beautiful corporeal experience. The opening line “So this is the way the night tastes” is tinged with a sort of thanatic, as opposed to erotic, pleasure. This is the moment in which, as Morton asserts, “we have lost the objective correlative for loss itself, and have slipped away from mourning, which finds an appropriate way of symbolizing loss [and have] moved from the work of mourning to the work of sheer suffering. . . . The content may be lamentation, but the subject position is passive enjoyment.”²⁴ What replaces the “appropriate way of symbolizing loss” is the silence which falls after the last line, “she knew,” a realization that he is not afraid and which has life-affirming power. Facing the dark allows Merwin’s speaker to connect to the present moment instead of being tethered to an imagined past.

The individual lyric poems which comprise *The Shadow of Sirius* function like epic similes, and in each work, thoughts of environmental destruction become a “vehicle [which] is developed into an independent aesthetic object, an image that for the moment upstages the primary object or tenor with which it is being compared.”²⁵ Mourning the passage of time—and with it the destruction of environments—is the tenor which the personal, lyric poems in *The Shadow of Sirius* illustrate as vehicles of metaphoric expression. Though these poems can be read as distinct parts, they are best understood within the context of the epic, as parts which build on one another rhetorically.

The three sections can be understood as departure, descent into Hades, and journey home. Of course, these elements are present in all three

parts of the collection, but they are featured in respective ways to achieve a symbolic journey through the process of grieving. Unlike most pastoral laments which rely on the imagined past to inform a loss which has already occurred, Merwin's speaker moves through a thanatic *nostos*, unafraid of the dark silence it moves homeward toward. The speaker's departure is simultaneously into past memories and imagined futures, and the two concepts are crosshatched, overlapped, and intertwined until they become hopelessly entangled, and it is nearly impossible to separate past, present, and future in any definitive way in the text.

The Shadow of Sirius is best understood as a hybrid eco-epic, and careful examination of characters like Sirius and Koa will help clarify the ways in which Merwin combines personal history and ancient mythology to illuminate the current ecological crisis. *The Shadow of Sirius* blends the Ancient Greek myth of Sirius, the dog star, with Merwin's own personal history of loss to create a hybrid ecological myth. Sirius is known both as the "dog-star," a hunting companion to Orion, and also as "scorch-er," the star whose appearance in the sky marks the hottest part of the summer to the ancient Babylonian peoples.²⁶

John Brady writes in the *Clavis Calendaria* (1815) that when "the ancients first observed Sirius emerging as it were from the sun, so as to become visible to the naked eye, they usually sacrificed a brown Dog to appease its rage, considering that the Star was the *cause* of the hot sultry weather usually experienced at its appearance; and they would seem to have believed its power of heat, conjoined with that of the sun."²⁷ *The Shadow of Sirius*, then, could be read as an offering to appease the wrath of Sirius, an epic plea to quell the rising temperatures. However, there is more than just a global, ecological plea at work. Section II of the collection is dedicated "*in memory of Muku, Makana, Koa*" (*Sirius* 41, original italics), which are names of Merwin's pets, but also refer to the mythology of Sirius. Koa was the name given to the priests who prayed for the cool winds to revive the land after Sirius burned it. Koa is also the name of a nearly extinct Hawaiian tree which was used to make dugout canoes.²⁸

The importance of these trees to Hawaiian narratives of initiation in mythology contributed to their over-use.

The Koa tree came close to extinction, and alongside naming his dog *Koa*, he has also spent the last 36 years living on the island of Maui, “in this remote section of Hawaii, obsessively restoring, inch by inch, an abandoned pineapple farm to its original rain-forest-like state.” Dinitia Smith recalls: “One afternoon, in the rain, Merwin takes me on a tour of the garden. ‘That’s a koa tree, what Hawaiian canoes were made from,’ he says as we trudge along a wet, rocky path. ‘I put that in as a tiny tree.’”²⁹ His desire to overcome the despair associated with pastoral environmentalism and reconnect with the present moment of ecological thought is evident in the act of planting a koa tree. The personal and the mythological inform Merwin’s attachment to the pineapple farm, and this attachment forms a hybrid connection to the earth, both individual attachment and collective engagement.

Despite the fact that section II is a kind of descent into Hades, the poems are celebratory, offering ecstatic memories and dreams which are more than just elegies. The section finds meaning and hope in the intermixing of past and future. In the poem “Night with No Moon,” named for Merwin’s pet Muku, which means “no moon,” the speaker addresses the absence of the moon *and* the absence of the pet when he says “Now you are darker than I can believe” and remarks at his “thinking to walk in the dark together.” The poem isn’t about absence at all. It is about the connection which remains very much alive, in the thoughts of the speaker, and in the life of the poem itself. Merwin’s speaker is not simply weeping for the past. Instead, he is dwelling in the absolute joy of darkness. He is “still hearing when there is nothing left to hear” (*Sirius* 45). Smith asserts that since “the restoration of Merwin’s land, since his marriage to Paula, his poetry has become more accessible, more celebratory.”³⁰ *The Shadow of Sirius* reveals that, far from being afraid of the dark, Merwin is quite able to make his home in silence.

In the poem “Dream of Koa Returning,” the personal is mixed with the global. Merwin’s personal loss of the dog Koa reflects the global loss, the fear of the extinction of the Koa-tree. He says:

I looked out to the river
 flowing beyond the big trees
 and all at once you
 were just behind me
 lying watching me
 as you did years ago
 and not stirring at all (*Sirius* 53)

The big trees, we can assume, are the Koa-trees, as they are quite large, imposing figures on the Hawaiian landscape when fully grown. Merwin surely imagines a heaven which includes the reunion of Orion and Sirius, Merwin and Koa, and the landscape with its native flora, the Koa-tree. As Smith and Merwin rounded a bend, she recalls how they had “come to an eroded ledge, one patch he hasn’t restored yet. ‘See there, that’s what it used to be like. It wants to be a forest!’”³¹ The poem is about Koa *returning*, which for now, is merely a dream. Merwin understands the slow process of reforestation firsthand. His supplications for Sirius are not a traditional *deus ex machina*, and he isn’t asking for Eden to be restored overnight. Merwin’s speaker frames ecological destruction, not as some action from the distant past, nor as some cataclysm looming in the distant future. Instead, by facing the darkness and the silence, *The Shadow of Sirius* offers a metaphor for conscious, deliberate action. It insists on the importance of the present moment in ecological thinking. It offers the challenge of hope.

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Merwin’s Dark Ecology

If we consider Morton’s assertion that melancholy represented to the ancients “the earth mood,” it stands to reason that darkness and silence figure so importantly in Merwin’s personal epic, uniting Sirius, Orion’s companion and earth-scorcher, with Koa, the lost pet and endangered

species. Though the significations of Koa point in multiple directions at once,³² Merwin's speaker intertwines the complex references into a unified image of loss, both epic and singular:

When it is time I follow the black dog
into the darkness that is the mind of day

* * *

where the rooms of the dark were already known

and had no fear in them for the black dog
leading me carefully up the blind stairs (*Sirius* 43)

Again, we are reminded that there is “no fear” in “the rooms of the dark” because of Koa’s comforting presence. The relationship between Merwin’s Koa and the dog star elevates his personal loss to the mythological level. When this fear is confronted, Merwin’s speaker is able to unite with “the darkness that is the mind of day,” and by confronting the silence and shadow, Merwin is able to reconnect to a place which would otherwise be “blindness.”

Lee Zimmerman’s article “Against Vanishing: Winnicott and the Modern Poetry of Nothing” reveals much about the project *The Shadow of Sirius* undertakes. Speaking on the contemporary conversation in which “Nothingness, apparently, is a condition much to be admired,” Zimmerman wonders “if this way of conjuring something—or everything—from nothing tells only half the story (or not even half).” Zimmerman concludes that by employing the trope of silence, “[modern poets] are trying to choose, not nothing, not even everything, but their substantiating, potentially painful, connection to the world—trying, that is, to choose themselves.”³³ This is exactly what Morton means by “dark ecological thinking,” the painful realization that loss and passage of time occur locally, at this very moment, not in some distant, pastoral past.³⁴ The desire to locate loss in the present moment drives the epic. Merwin’s speaker seeks an understanding of “the Cimmerians / who

dwell in utter darkness / it is said or perhaps live / on the other side of it” (*Sirius* 36). By inhabiting, or at least seeking to inhabit the darkness, Merwin is able to overcome the trappings of pastoral fancy. Situating loss in the present moment allows his speaker to overcome despair and reclaim the importance of the present moment. Merwin’s connection to “the black dog” reclaims his connection to the earth.

The “black dog” resembles Stevens’ “The Snow Man,” but Merwin’s poem has a “mind of day” instead of Steven’s “mind of winter.” Though Steven’s speaker reaches out toward “Nothing that is not there and nothing that is” doing so places the speaker in the dark position of being able to regard “The spruces rough in the distant glitter // Of the January sun; and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind.”³⁵ Steven’s break between “not to think” and “Of any misery” is similar to the line breaks Merwin employs between “the rooms of the dark were already known” and then in the next stanza “and had no fear in them” emphasizing through the silence of the white space on the page the speaker’s desire to connect with the environment by establishing meaning. It is through the epic narrative that Merwin’s dark, lyric desires are fulfilled.

In a recent article, Neil Bowers asserts that by “pursuing myth, Merwin removed himself from the narrower, more personal concerns of most of his fellow poets; and while they were trying to make poems that corresponded to the breath, the pulse, or the movements of the mind, Merwin was busy enlarging the temple.”³⁶ However, his assertion seems to cut Merwin’s poetic triumph in half. The force behind Merwin’s *The Shadow of Sirius* is not simply its grand, epic scheme, nor is it simply the personal, at times almost solipsistic, voice of lyric reflection—what Bower’s calls poetry that corresponds to “the breath”—but instead it is in the *combination* of these two poetic modes that Merwin creates the hybrid ecological genre which is able to establish meaningful connection to the earth. Bowers asserts that what Merwin “discovered was that myth, by its very nature, is narrative, and yet it offers the opportunity for

lyricism,” and this lyric-epic allows Merwin to more completely engage the earth and the passage of time.

In this hybrid poetic mode, Merwin discovers the “nameless joy of the morning” in the final poem, “The Laughing Thrush.” In it, the speaker “answers” the epic question—not by asking “where you learned that music / where any of it came from” (*Sirius* 5)—but instead by observing in the still, lyric moment that “here is where they all sing the first daylight / whether or not there is anyone listening” (*Sirius* 113). Unlike Stevens’ “listener, who listens in the snow,”³⁷ Merwin’s speaker acknowledges the future in which the listener has faded, but the song of the thrush goes on ringing, echoing, and spreading its wings out against the darkness. As Morton asserts, the echo also makes a “mockery of exactly who the narrator is and exactly where she is ‘placed,’”³⁸ but this mockery serves to undermine the solipsistic lyric voice. By creating a world which is inhabited between genres—like an echo itself—Merwin avoids the trappings of both genres—the colonial force of the ancient myth, and the self-obsessed lyric voice—by blending the two into a world which simultaneously occurs in the localized perspective of the speaker and the larger epic movement of the world. Merwin’s hybrid ecological form acknowledges the past and present, but it underscores the value of the present silent moment as the location for environmental thought.

In this hybrid space, Merwin creates a new narrative form, one which is both nonlinear *and* linear, creating a world in which time passes, yet the past and future seem to exist in the present moment through the intrusion of memory and imagination. Bowers is right, it seems, that Merwin’s use of poetic forms is expansive, yet the “breath” he attributes to other poets is still present in his multitudinous masterpiece. His blending of myth and the lyricism which reveals a life shaped by these myths all guide his profound journey through the darkness. *The Shadow of Sirius* teaches us that the ecological thought is not one of despair, but it does require dark thinking in order to reconnect with the earth, like “the

Cimmerians / who dwell in utter darkness / it is said or perhaps live / on the other side of it” (*Sirius* 36).

Auburn University

Notes

1. W. S. Merwin, *The Rain in the Trees* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 64. In a 1995 interview with Merwin, Dinitia Smith writes, “For 18 years Merwin, now 67, has been living in this remote section of Hawaii, obsessively restoring, inch by inch, an abandoned pineapple farm to its original rain-forest-like state.” Dinitia Smith, “[A Poet of Their Own](#),” *The New York Times Books on the Web*, 19 February 1995, accessed 4 April 2013. The Merwin Conservancy, the foundation which protects Merwin’s restored farmland writes that “over the span of nearly thirty-five years, Merwin built an ecologically conscious home for himself and his wife Paula as well as planted more than 4,000 trees representing nearly 850 species of endemic, indigenous and endangered palms. He has transforming [*sic*] a place that was once considered ‘wasteland’ into a lush and rare 19-acre tropical forest.” See “[About the Conservancy](#),” *The Merwin Conservancy*, 2010, accessed June 27, 2013. His commitment to the restoration of land is part of the forthcoming documentary *Even Though the Whole World is Burning*.
2. “The Shadow Of Sirius,” *Publishers Weekly* 255, no. 29 (2008): 142.
3. W. S. Merwin, *The Shadow of Sirius* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2008), 5; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Sirius*.
4. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), 16.
5. Timothy Morton, “The Dark Ecology of Elegy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 251.
6. Evidence of Merwin’s desire to engage in elegiac writing without falling victim to the constraints of the genre can be seen in early works like in the very short poem “Elegy” from *The Carrier of Ladders* where he simply says “Who would I show it to.” W. S. Merwin, *The Second Four Books of Poems* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1993), 226. This ironic refusal to mourn reveals his desire to—above remembering or weeping privately for the past and the dead—connect to others through his poetic works. For an

- excellent read on Merwin's "Elegy," see Robert Scholes, "Reading Merwin Semiotically," in *W. S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Ed Folsom and Cary Nelson (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), 65–68.
7. Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," 251.
 8. Frank Kermode, *English Pastoral Poetry: From the Beginnings to Marvell* (George G. Harrap & Co. LTD, 1952), 14.
 9. Kermode, *English Pastoral Poetry*, 14.
 10. Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," 252.
 11. Jane Frazier, "W. S. Merwin And The Mysteries Of Silence." *South Dakota Review* 32, no. 1 (1994): 116.
 12. Matthew Boudway, "Christmas Critics," *Commonweal* 136, no. 21 (2009): 21.
 13. For another poem exploring a similar sense of knowing and unknowing, see "A Note from the Cimmerians" in *Sirius*, 36.
 14. Ruth Stone, *What Love Comes To: New & Selected Poems* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2008), 179.
 15. Michael W. Thomas, "Merwin's 'For the Anniversary of My Death,'" *Explicator* 49, no. 2 (1991): 126, 127.
 16. Frazier, "W. S. Merwin," 117.
 17. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 10th edition (Pearson Education Inc, 1996), 193.
 18. Michael Thurston, "The Substance of the Island: W. S. Merwin's Lyrical Epic," *Kenyon Review* 22, no. 3–4 (2000): 181.
 19. Merwin's collection *The Vixen* also has an epic stature to it. In the poem "Vixen" the speaker ask that the vixen "let me catch sight of you again going over the wall / and before the garden is extinct and the woods are figures / guttering on a screen let my words find their own / places in the silence after the animals," and the terror of the echoing silence becomes a place where the poet's words can dwell. W. S. Merwin, *The Vixen* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 69.

20. Antony Adolf, "Contemporary Epic Novels: Walcott, Merwin, Carson And The Birth Of A 'New' Genre." *EAPSU Online: A Journal Of Critical And Creative Work* 1 (2004): 161.
21. Adolf, "Contemporary Epic Novels," 166.
22. Thurston, "The Substance Of The Island," 186.
23. Smith, "A Poet of Their Own."
24. Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," 253–54.
25. Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 193.
26. The Ancient Greeks associated the appearance of the heliacal rising of the star Sirius with the period of extreme heat between July and August. This is where the phrase "dog days of summer" is believed to have originated. During this time, according to Brady's *Clavis Calendaria* (1813), "*the Sea boiled, the Wine turned sour, Dogs grew mad, and all other creatures became languid; causing to man, among other diseases, burning fevers, hysterics, and phrensies.*" John Brady, *Clavis Calendaria; or a Compendious Analysis of the Calendar*, vol. 2 (London: Nichols, Son, and Bentley, 1812), 80–81, italics in original.
27. Brady, *Clavis Calendaria*, 80.
28. See W. D. Westervelt, *Legends of Gods and Ghosts: Hawaiian Mythology* (Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis CO, 1915), 29–30.
29. Smith, "A Poet of Their Own."
30. Smith, "A Poet of Their Own."
31. Smith, "A Poet of Their Own."
32. Merwin's first book of poems was *A Mask for Janus*—i.e., the Roman god who looks in two directions at once. The significance of the word Koa unites past and future, despair and hope, silence and song, lyric and epic, darkness and light.
33. Lee Zimmerman, "Against Vanishing: Winnicott and the Modern Poetry of Nothing," *American Imago: Studies In Psychoanalysis And Culture* 54, no. 1 (1997): 81, 82, 98.
34. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16.

35. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 9, 10.
36. Neal Bowers, "W. S. Merwin And Postmodern American Poetry." *Sewanee Review* 98, no. 2 (1990): 249.
37. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 10.
38. Morton, "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," 252.

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL POETRY TO ECOPOETRY

W. S. MERWIN'S POETIC FOREST

Kate Dunning

[\(Audio File of Dunning Reading her Article\)](#)

Ecocritic Leonard M. Scigaj outlines the differences between the umbrella category of nature poetry, nature poetry's subcategory of environmental poetry, and environmental poetry's even more restrictive subcategory of ecopoetry. While W. S. Merwin early in his career might have been categorized as an environmental poet, by the end of his career not only would he clearly be defined as an ecopoet, but I would argue that Merwin comes to epitomize both the poetic and life practices of the ideal ecopoet. Particularly notable in the shifts his work exhibits over the half century since he won his first major poetry award for *The Mask of Janus* is his poetry's shifting approach to representations of the environment. Beginning with a closer look at Scigaj's claims about environmental poetry and ecopoetry, this essay traces Merwin's ecopoetic development through his presentation of relationships with trees.¹ This tracing shows a clear movement from representing humans and nature as being distinct characters to melding humans and nature together into a representation that literally unifies them in origin, existence, and end. By the time Merwin writes *The Shadow of Sirius*, he has mastered the ability to present humans and nature simultaneously as markedly individual yet inextricably intertwined, without sacrificing either the distinctiveness or the unity inherent to the relationship. Part of Merwin's long-term significance is rooted in his simultaneously practical and beautiful approach to poetry, which is itself rooted in his poetic and personal relationship with trees.

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Defining Nature Poetry, Environmental Poetry, and Ecopoetry

Understanding the difference between the categories that Scigaj outlines in *Sustainable Poetry*—which were used most recently in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013)—proves useful because his categories, each of which ad-

dress “our connection to the natural world” in differing ways, are definitive enough to provide guidance about levels of poetic ecological engagement without subdividing to the point that the categories become so restrictive that they ultimately have no real meaning. According to Scigaj, nature poetry has complexity beyond treating nature “as a convenient background for human concerns . . . [acknowledging] that it sustains human, as well as non-human, life in ecosystems that have been deeply bruised by human exploitation and pollution.”² He cites Jay Parini’s definition from the introduction to *Poems for a Small Planet*, edited by Parini and Robert Pack, in which Parini inclusively categorizes nature poetry as “poems that in some way reflect a highly developed consciousness of the natural world” as an example of a definition too broad to do justice to the complexity of nature poetry. Scigaj explains that Parini’s contextualization of his definition, and Pack’s discussion in the afterword express the need for less anthropocentrism and, instead, some recognition of humans’ ethical obligations to a biocentric view that would acknowledge “that we need to return to the humility and the sense of human limits” traditionally expressed by nature poets. More specifically, Scigaj quotes the introduction to Robert Finch and John Elder’s *Norton Book of Nature Writing* to clarify that “nature writing asserts both the humane value of literature and the importance to a mature individual’s relationship with the world of understanding fundamental physical and biological processes.”³ While Scigaj never gives his own precise definition, he sets up nature poetry as a broad but distinct category that sets the stage for the more explicitly ethics related subcategory of environmental poetry.

Within nature poetry’s more general discussions about the complex interconnections between humans and nature, environmental poetry takes a more active stance than nature poetry. To define environmental poetry, Scigaj turns to Lawrence Buell’s 1995 *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, a text written while ecocriticism as a field was still developing. Buell puts forward four factors that set environmental poetry apart from the umbrella term na-

ture poetry. First, Buell emphasizes the need for a biocentric approach in which humans and nature are inextricably linked from the beginning of any history that includes the two. The interconnectedness implied in Buell's first factor, Scigaj sees also in Buell's second, which explicitly recognizes the existing legitimacy of interests other than human interests in a way that ethically requires moving away from an anthropocentric approach by recognizing "nonhuman living things to have habitats and histories of their own."⁴ The third factor is a sense of accountability stemming from environmental ethics present in the text. Finally, the fourth factor requires, at a minimum, some tacit understanding that the environment is a dynamic process rather than a static entity. Thus, environmental poetry requires a more elaborate understanding of the relationship—both present and historical—between humans and nature, seeing an explicitly ethical responsibility on the part of humans and a dynamic quality on the part of nature.

The growth of ecocriticism and ecopoetry in the years following Buell's text does not negate the relevance of environmental poetry as a category in Scigaj's eyes because the ecocritical views that develop with regard to poetry do not displace those concerning environmental poetry, but rather become part of a subfield of environmental poetry, and thus, also of nature poetry. Within environmental poetry, ecopoetry "has consciously been influenced by a sensitivity to ecological thinking, especially in the areas of energy flow/retention, cyclic renewal, bioregionalism, and the interdependency of all organisms within an ecosystem." The ecopoet's acutely conscious mindset about nature and its relationship with humans means that, for ecopoets, nature is "a separate and equal other."⁵ Thus, more than environmental poetry, "one might define ecopoetry as poetry that persistently stresses human cooperation with nature conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems."⁶ Three years after Scigaj first attempts to define ecopoetry, J. Scott Bryson builds on Scigaj and Buell's respective approaches (as well as Terry Gifford's), putting forward a tentative definition of ecopoetry as a nature poetry sub-category that both maintains and moves beyond

traditional romantic conventions in a way that more easily permits addressing the current nature-human relationship.⁷ This definition gives ecopoetry three characteristics beyond the broader category of nature poetry: first, a considerably stronger focus on the ecocentric view of the world as ubiquitously interdependent; second, the necessity of “humility in relationships” with all aspects of nature; and third, an extremely cautious approach in light of “hyperrationality” and “an overtechnologized modern world,” as well as a strong emphasis on the proximity of potentially disastrous “ecological catastrophe.”⁸ Thus, we see that Bryson’s definitions both clarify and function within the bounds of Scigaj’s preliminary categories, emphasizing, again, the usefulness of the categories’ flexibility.

A potentially critical difference between environmental poetry and ecopoetry is the desire to issue a “warning” of some kind. Buell’s definition of environmental poetry entails an awareness of the human-nature relationship and its potential problems, but it says nothing about working against those problems or finding solutions. Ecopoetry, on the other hand, is very much about the desire for creating change. Bryson cites Jonathon Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* as one of ecocriticism’s foundational texts and, for Bate, “The business of literature is to work upon consciousness.” Just as physical parks function as “re-creational space in which we can walk and breathe and play,” ecopoetic space should recreate the experience of being in nature, and “the true poet has to be simultaneously a geographer of the imagination and a historian of the alienations and desecrations that follow the march of ‘civilization’.” Ecopoetics is not only about ecology and poetry, but also about affecting change; the poem encompasses not only the present landscape of the human-nature relationship, but the potential future as well. Such change, according to Bate, requires “‘ecopoetic’ consciousness but not necessarily ‘ecopolitical’ commitment.” The distinction is critical in that it emphasizes the difference between desiring to achieve change by working on consciousness, and undermining the aesthetic integrity of the poetry by blatantly playing politics. “Ecopoetry is not synonymous

with writing that is pragmatically green,” clarifies Bate, since, “a manifesto for ecological correctness will not be poetic because its language is bound to be instrumental, to address questions of doing rather than to ‘present’ the experience of dwelling.”⁹ In my view, understanding the implications of this statement allows for understanding how ecopoetry maintains to be both activist and aesthetic. Rather than thinking of “green” as a point on the colored political spectrum, as Bate suggests, I would argue that “green” functions like grass in this visual representation. That is, that ecopoetry seeks to inform the foundation of all politics rather than simply to be a singular point of colored political push. This goes hand in hand with Bate’s point that even though ecopoetry is meant to encourage “doing,” its language must achieve this through the re-creation of experience rather than any explicit political activism. It is only by authentically allowing the reader to “dwell” in nature—a term Bate defines by drawing on Rousseau, Burke, and Heidegger—that ecopoetry can work on consciousness and subsequently affect change.



Merwin’s Movement from Environmental Poetry to Ecopoetry

Merwin’s realization about Bate’s concept of dwelling begins much earlier than any of the Merwin or Bate texts referenced thus far. Looking at some of Merwin’s earlier publications allows us to contextualize the major attitude shift that critics see between Merwin’s first four volumes of poetry and his 1963 collection *The Moving Target*. In her book *Understanding W. S. Merwin*, H. L. Hix references a passage from Merwin’s 1990 essay in the *Paris Review*, “The Wake of the Blackfish,” in which he talks about a critical shift that took place in his thinking. Merwin was a week away from having an article on the anti-nuclear movement published in *The New Yorker* (for the spring of 1962 issue) when the onset of the Cuban missile crisis caused *The New Yorker* to decide against publishing the piece at such an “inappropriate” time. Merwin explains that, “Living in downtown Manhattan, the reverberations of the Cuban missile crisis seemed to become part of the neglected architecture itself. On the street corners and in the bars I heard the usual louts and loud-mouths declar-

ing that ‘we should have dropped the bomb on them long ago.’” This extended moment of political tension led Merwin to confront a conflict in his own life. “I began to be pursued by the thought that if, in all this madhouse, someone were to ask me what I thought would be a *good way to live*, I would not have a very clear answer, and it seemed to me that it was time to try to find one.” Merwin viewed his farm in France as a haven and a blessing at a time like this, but realized also that he lacked the basic knowledge about how to grow food, which “all [his] peasant neighbors knew how to do.”¹⁰ In the spring of 1963, Merwin returned to his farm in France, not going to New York again until the fall of 1966, marking a period of considerable transition for Merwin personally and poetically.

The significance of this period’s transition in thinking is evident in Merwin’s philosophy, shared in an interview, that a poet “writes poems hoping that it will make something happen.” The interviewer David L. Elliott asks Merwin about this pivotal period in the 1960s and about whether writing poetry stems out of the “Buddhist paradox [that] because something is impossible and because you acknowledge that it is impossible, you are thereby enabled to try to do it anyway.” Merwin responds that the impossibility is in part the motivation but that such motivation requires caution. Referencing green activism in Thoreau, Merwin observes, “I think it is possible to pay so much attention to how angry we are that we forget why we are angry; and if we are angry for any reason except because we want to save things that we love and can’t pay attention to the fact that we do love them, then we’ve helped to destroy ourselves at the root.”¹¹ Thus, the desires to be political and poetic are somewhat competing interests in Merwin’s eyes, in that the wrong kind of focus on the political can cloud the ability to express the poetic. More importantly, Thoreau’s mistake was not recognizing the extent to which he loved the green space available to him before it was taken away. An appreciation of what currently exists is necessary for maintaining that existence.

For Merwin, then, the political and the poetic, though competing in some ways, are inseparable in others, and the desire to “make something happen . . . is the part of you that’s writing propaganda.” The political desires that form the currents under the lines of poetry are integral. “Poetry isn’t so pure that it’s completely devoid of [propaganda],” explains Merwin, further arguing in line with my take on Bate that “pure poetry is an antimacassar . . . a decoration. . . . You do want something to happen, even if it is only to get somebody to move something.”¹² Maintaining the balance between an approach that seeks change and one that seeks to retain its poetic value is a fine line that many poets cannot write. Merwin, however, makes such a need a central part of his poetry from this moment on, though he does not necessarily know where he is going with his changes, knowing only that change must take place: “Having come to feel dissatisfied with a way of writing, you don’t simply say, ‘I’m going to give up A, because I would prefer B.’ At the point when you’re making this decision, B doesn’t exist, or at least you don’t know what B is. So in a sense, you simply say ‘I have to stop writing this way’.”¹³ Merwin’s shift in style comes at the same time as his shift in perspective about the need for a clearer position on “a good way to live.” These simultaneous changes result in what I will show is a clear movement from the environmental poetry that appeared in his early collections like *Green with Beasts*, through the developing ecopoetic work that culminates in *The Shadow of Sirius* as a window into an ecopoetic life.



Merwin’s Ecopoetic Forest

Tracking such a complex development is the work of a monograph rather than an essay, so in lieu of an all-encompassing consideration of Merwin’s ecopoetic trajectory from its roots through to its fruition, this essay focuses on the way this development manifests itself in Merwin’s use of trees in his poems from the beginning of his career up through *The Shadow of Sirius*. Trees have long played a crucial role in poetry and have more recently become a concern of society and scholarship. Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* was perhaps the first

book-length philosophical exploration devoted to the study of trees. Harrison writes in his 1991 preface, “It is hard to believe that just six years ago, when the idea for such a book first came to me, there was very little talk about forests in the news. Since then the fate of the remaining forests on earth has become a major worldwide issue.”¹⁴ His book tracks some of the complex literary and historical significance of trees and forests, showing the critical role they play in both realms and justifying the use of trees as the thread by which to consider Merwin’s movement from environmental poetry into ecopoetry. Considering some of the attitudes Harrison advocates contributes to a richer understanding of Merwin’s poetic relationship with trees.

Harrison, like Merwin, advocates a shifting of traditional attitudes towards the forest when he invokes Descartes’ metaphorical logic by which travelers lost in the woods should not wander helter-skelter but, instead, should walk in a straight line in one direction, even if that direction is arbitrary because, in such a way, “they will finally arrive at least somewhere where they probably will be better off than in the middle of a forest.”¹⁵ In Descartes’ logic, since the geometric area of the forest cannot be infinite, then, mathematically speaking, a straight line—regardless of where it begins within the forest—must be finite. However, a line that does not move straight through the trees, but rather loops, curves, doubles back, circles, crosses, and otherwise wanders, may indeed be infinite. Descartes’ certainty in his exit strategy contrasts with other representations of forests, like “Dante’s dark forest, for example, where the ‘straight way’ is lost and cannot be pursued.”¹⁶ Without a natural guide like the sun, moon, or stars—that is, without some attunement to the natural world—escape from the forest seems impossible. Harrison’s own view, as evidenced both in the whole of the book and in some of the introductory monologues for his radio program “Entitled Opinions,” is quite different than either Descartes or Dante, and in this way makes his willingness to lose the forest for the trees an appropriate basis for examining Merwin. While Descartes and Dante are both preoccupied with escaping the forest successfully or not, Harrison opens

the possibility that the proverbial end of the line is not outside the forest, but within the forest's means for stimulating exploration, thought, and art. I make the connection between Harrison and Merwin because Merwin, in a Harrisonian way, repeatedly finds the end of each of his lines within both the poetic forest and the physical Hawaiian forest he has spent the past three decades helping to rebuild. For Merwin, finding *a good way to live* does not mean escaping the forest, but rather finding a place within it.

Though Harrison does not wander through the forests of Merwin's poetry, had he done so, he would have found a rich diversity of trees, whose roots, and even branches as roots, work their way deep into the poems. Removing the trees would change the very essence of the Merwin's *oeuvre* as a whole. In Merwin's 1956 collection *Green with Beasts*, his poem "The Wilderness" provides an example of Merwin's early approach to nature, which, generally speaking, involves a complex representation of nature that recognizes and comments on the tensions between nature and humanity but maintains a stark divide between humans and nature.¹⁷ The poem immediately opens with a sense of detachedness, as it declares that, "Remoteness is its own secret" by way of both connecting wilderness with being remote, and thus, detached from humans, and reserving the possibility that remoteness is self-contained and that wilderness has secrets beyond that of remoteness (line 1). The question of what constitutes remoteness is pivotal but ambiguous. The negative definitions typical of Merwin build up the complex wilderness that the poem's "us," as humans, must navigate. At the same time, the "us" of the first stanza does not exert agency to find "this place," but rather, something else has navigated the complex maze and bodies of water whose movement threatens drowning, and "has found us this place" (line 4). There is a momentary feeling of pause in the opening remoteness that the full stop part way through the first line causes. The gerund "avoiding" in the second line allows action without causing that action to punctuate the stillness brought on by the punctuation of the first line, and the preposition "at" in the fourth line implies a sense of

being “at” a destination rather than traveling towards one, in spite of the inherent motion of a “watercourse.”

The reader settles finally on “this place,” knowing that it is neither “holiness” nor “the huge spirit” that “has found us this place, / But merely surviving all that is not here” (lines 4–5). Ending line four with “this place” and line five with “here” gives a sense of being rooted, but the simultaneous reference to “all that is not here” creates an acute awareness of the limitations of the inhabited space, both in terms of that which exists elsewhere and that which seems entirely absent. This dually comparative and inherent absence, whose agency makes it sound suspiciously human, is “that” which “looks up, almost by change, and sees” (line 6). This sense of human perspective being disconnected from the human itself is only exacerbated by what “that” “sees” when it looks: not simply a fragmented human body, but a fragmented landscape as well, “Perhaps hand, feet, but not ourselves; a few stunted juniper trees / And the horizon’s virginity.” Our bodies and the trees are equally “stunted” and disconnected from the seeming impenetrability of the horizon, but this is not a new development: “We are where we always were,” on the edge of wilderness, of remoteness (lines 7–8). Thus, we clearly know where we are—we *are* where we *were*—but it is not as easy to say where we were. The human and the non-human seem to inhabit the same space and yet, for each, there is something about the other that brings the reader back to what is not here.

One of the major clues to discovering where we actually are is the juniper trees, which, though stunted, play a pivotal role in the wilderness of the poem. Juniper trees are part of the genus *Juniperus* and, depending on the source, there are between fifty and sixty different species of juniper trees located around the globe. Juniper is often viewed as symbolic of chastity, protection, and patience: juniper was used in some Renaissance portraits to indicate that a woman was chaste; in the bible, both Jesus’ parents with their infant and Elijah took shelter under juniper trees; and St. Juniper was known largely for his patience. The concept of protec-

tion stems also from the practical uses of juniper to protect livestock by carrying smoking juniper branches through the pasture and from using juniper in wooden chests to deter moths. One of the most famous stories featuring juniper trees comes from Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. In "The Juniper Tree," a mother, knowing she is going to die, asks to be buried under the juniper tree in the yard where she had been granted the wish of having her son. When the father eventually remarries, the stepmother is angry that the son will inherit everything and her daughter nothing. She kills the son, convincing the daughter that it was the daughter who killed her step-brother. The step-mother then agrees to hide the death from the father by telling him the son went to visit his uncle. A bird hatches in the tree and avenges the son's death by dropping a millstone on the stepmother. From the remains of the dead step-mother, the son returns unscathed, having had all along the protection of his mother.

The juniper's symbolic resonance offers an alternative perspective through which to understand the poem's "place." The wilderness would seem to be a space with many trees, pure and untouched by humans, a chaste space, like the horizon's virginity. Symbolically, however, the associations of the juniper tree become stunted as the poem's physical trees are stunted, emphasizing that the chastity is not in the present place, but is just off from where humans are, on the horizon of what we see. But each time we move closer, the horizon moves farther away, leaving us continually in a wilderness of our own making. We come to realize that it is inherently impossible for the human eye to see, or the human mind to conceptualize an entirely human free natural space. At the same time, though we are still in the midst of the wilderness, our proximity, while permeating the landscape, does not necessarily make understanding that landscape any more accessible to us, "The secret becomes no less itself for our presence / In the midst of it; as the lizard's gold-eyed / Mystery is no more lucid for being near" (lines 9–11). We are where we always were, in the wilderness that in spite of our presence retains its mystery and its patience. But we, like the wilderness, are frag-

mented and the Bishop-like moment with the lizard applies to our understanding of ourselves as well.

Closing the poem, “And famine is all about us, but not here; / For from the very hunger to look, we feed / Unawares, as at the beaks of ravens” seems again to be concerned with the physical space, but is instead feeding back into complexity brought in by the juniper tree’s symbolism (lines 12–14). The human desire to see remoteness, that is, to bring that which is remote into proximity, causes us to “feed / Unawares,” with “unawares” as either an adjective or an object. Reading “feed” as a transitive verb and “unawares” as an object underscores the potential anthropocentrism in “famine is all about us” in a more unexpected way than simply reading “unawares” as a descriptor of human action. Whether famine is physically surrounding or metaphorically concerning “us,” there is something about the poem’s space that removes the famine temporarily, but not in a way that promises any long term escape from the fragmented relationship represented in stanza two. However we read “unawares,” its prominent placement puts added pressure on it and the way it runs throughout the poem like a watercourse in which human agency has drowned. The ravens—scavengers and traditionally birds of ill omen—often feed off of human garbage, leading to an increase in their population that corresponds with human population increases. Humans feeding—unawares—the ravens, ultimately leads to the ravens returning as an agricultural nuisance. The ravens’ beaks also potentially reference the weapon that enabled killing the stepmother in “The Juniper Tree,” in addition to the ravens’ dual status as foragers of human garbage and scavengers of agricultural crops. Finally, this reference can be read as a comparison between humans and the beaks of ravens so that we then see humans as the scavenging nuisances in the wilderness rather than ravens as the nuisances in civilization. At the same time, “as *at* the beaks of ravens” emphasizes the distinct separation between humanity and nature that is maintained even as they are being compared.

“The Wilderness” clearly falls under the category of environmental poetry. It creates strong connections between humans and nature, going so far as to fragment the human body and the junipers, and to suggest potential interchangeability between them. As Scigaj emphasizes, human history and natural history are inextricably connected, as in the line, “We are where we always were”; and the poem’s focus is more biocentric than anthropocentric, in part because human agency is removed. This problematizes the moments of potential anthropocentrism through a subtle sense of environmental ethics, bringing forward the “habitats and histories” that Scicaj says eco poets must recognize “nonhuman living things” as having.¹⁸ From this sense of ethical commitment there is also an emerging sense of accountability. Furthermore, the environment “as a process rather than as a constant” hovers in the lines that suggest adaptability, exploration, and movement.¹⁹ In spite of having all of these factors, however, the poem has no feeling of activism and does not suggest an explicit course of action for humanity.

The poem in *Green with Beasts* that immediately follows “The Wilderness” creates a similar relationship between trees and the speaker. As with humans and the junipers, the speaker of “The Wakening” is both connected to nature and distinguishably distinct from it. In this poem, nature is personified as a naked woman bathing in a stream of light. The speaker is waking from a metaphorical dream to see her,

So that his sight was half-dimmed with its dazzling, he could see
 Her standing naked in the day-shallows there,
 Face turned away, hands lost in her bright hair;
 And he saw then that her shadow was the tree. (CP 1:110)

Water, light, and body melt together in the speaker’s eyes, creating a more romantic view of nature than in the previous poem. This poem remains an environmental poem in spite of its romantic moments, partly because of the framing work the title does in suggesting realization on the speaker’s part, either as he is waking up on his own, or as some other impetus makes “to wake” a transitive verb, rousing the speaker. The

title, with its inherent inclusion of the noun “wake,” also sets the stage for the water-related language like “rode and lapped,” “day-shallows,” and “stream” which, blended with the light-related language, gives the poem the mystical atmosphere necessary for creating the speaker’s dreamlike state (lines 3, 6, 12). There are three characters in this poem: the “his/he” speaker, the “her/she” personified nature, and “her shadow” that “was the tree.” The speaker is clearly connected to nature through his vision, whatever the impetus for it may be. The woman is uniquely one with nature and distinct from it in a way that suggests, as with the fragmented body and landscape in “The Wilderness,” that Merwin suggests a fundamental connection between humans and nature, such that they are one and the same. However, in these early poems, the human and natural players still remain distinct from each other, rather than blurred.

Even the mythological figure of the woman is not quite fully dryad; it is her shadow that is the tree so that we see her first, then her shadow, in a way that makes us never really see nature directly, perhaps suggesting that we cannot have access to nature or that nature is constructed in such a way that we cannot ultimately see it because it does not actually exist the way we imagine it. Additionally, the tree is distinctly “the” tree, rather than ‘a’ tree: this simple article choice gives an intangible certainty and specificity to the final six lines of the poem, in which the shadow/tree becomes an independent player, “So that even as she stood there it must reach down.” The power that the shadow tree has over perception in the poem is significant, as, when it reaches “down,” it is, “Through not roots but branches with dark birdsong, into a stream / Of silence like a sky but deeper / Than this light or than any remembered heaven” (lines 11, 12–14). The tree’s branches, instead of roots, reach “down” into the sky in a “deeper” undermining of the reader’s expectations, as sky and ground become one, just as light and water became one, so that the stream that is the sky and the light that is the ground give the perception that everything in the poem is one and, within the oneness, there are the individual figures of the speaker, nature, and the

tree. Here and in “The Wilderness,” we get a clear sense of how Merwin builds relationships between trees and other figures in his early poems, as well as a sense of how this early work fits into the category of environmental poetry. There are important ethical considerations at play but there is not yet a clear solution to Merwin’s search.

A decade later, when Merwin publishes *The Lice* in 1967, he has just come out of the period of change discussed earlier. He is beginning to realize that, not only does he need to find a “clear answer” about “what [he] thought would be a good way to live,” but that his poetry needed to reflect that with the purpose of affecting change through it. The poem “The Last One,” which Merwin wrote in response to someone asking him to write a story, focuses on trees in a considerably different way than in either “The Wilderness” or “The Wakening.” The most notable difference is that there is no “we” in this poem. “They” are perhaps the main characters, and the trees are condensed down to “the last one.” Scigaj sees this poem as focusing clearly on extinction but he is wrong in that the poem never actually allows for the possibility of extinction.²⁰ On the contrary, the poem suggests that personified nature will allow destruction to a certain point before retaliating. Considering this in a non-personified way would reflect the ecological reality that humans would be unlikely to wipe out nature entirely. The dynamic flexibility of ecosystems has, for millennia, adapted to large scale changes and even disasters; the reality therefore, is that humans are likely to cause their own extinction before causing the extinction of nature as a whole.

In “The Last One” (*CP* 1:271–73), Merwin comments on more than an individual forest, and the poem’s personification takes a different turn than the mythological one in “The Wakening.” The poem begins with “They” deciding to be everywhere and to cut everything because they believe it all belongs to them. It appears at first that they have the power to do so, and only “the end of the day” causes them to leave “one left standing” (line 11). The coming of night is a pivotal moment of nature’s decision:

The night gathered in the last branches.
 The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
 The night and the shadow put on the same head.
 And it said Now. (lines 13–16)

First night gathers in the space of the living tree's branches; once there, its shadow reflected on the water then gathers in the shadow of the tree branches reflected on the water. In this way, the shadow of the tree takes on a similar autonomy as the shadow in "The Wakening" but without the mythological aspect. Instead, "the shadow," which is the shadow of the tree mixed with the shadow of the night, takes power as the clear controlling force in the poem. Even when "they cut the last one. / Like the others the last one fell into its shadow. / It fell into its shadow on the water," the tree is not actually gone (lines 17–19). Merwin's perpetual use of light and shadow emphasizes that nature is not simply made up of what is there but also of what is not there, like the shadow that is the light that is no longer there. "They took it away its shadow stayed on the water" (line 20). In this way, extinction is not achieved. The tree's shadow and presence is still part of nature and, at this moment of severe human impact, nature reacts. In the end, nature's reaction is so strong that it breaks the "they" into individuals, swallowing some while letting others escape with changed perspective. But there is always the sense henceforward that nature has control: "The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them. / They went as far as they could. / The lucky ones with their shadows" (lines 62–64). The implications of these lines, and of the poem as a whole, resonate throughout Merwin's subsequent work, including the final phrase "the lucky ones" reappearing in his 2005 poem "To My Teeth," another story poem. "The Last One" marks a turn in Merwin's work: he is eliminating the punctuation that he feels "nails the poem down on the page,"²¹ and he is beginning a long poetic exploration of "a good way to live." For Merwin, this is when the shadow of the tree gathered in the shadow of his poetry. And it said Now.

Merwin's subsequent collection, *The Carrier of Ladders*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970, and he continued over the next two decades to hone his style and his philosophy. In 1988 he published *The Rain in the Trees*, which opens with a short series of poems written for his wife Paula. The second poem, "West Wall," introduces yet another type of relationship between human figures and trees in his poems. The poem begins, "In the unmade light I can see the world," setting a hazy scene without definition or visual content (*CP* 1:617). The haze begins to clear, "as the leaves brighten I see the air / the shadows melt and the apricots appear." Definition materializes as the trees emerge bearing fruit, "now that the branches vanish I see the apricots / from a thousand trees ripening in the air" (lines 2–3, 4–5). Merwin's ability to draw out, alternately, the light, the trees, and the apricots, creates a sense of fluidity between the individual parts of the poem so that describing "a thousand trees ripening in the air / . . . in the sun," the "apricots beyond number . . . ripening in the daylight," and the fruition of "the ripeness of the lucid air" run smoothly together in a sensual ripening of the scene (lines 5–6, 7, 12).

"West Wall," like "The Wakening," is about new realizations in light of familiar scenes; it is about seeing old sites through changed perspective. The final stanza of the poem, with its complete lack of punctuation now characteristic of Merwin's writing, seems to melt all of the aspects of the poem together, as if the words were watercolor paints with no forcedly delineated borders.

Whatever was there
 I never saw those apricots swaying in the light
 I might have stood in orchards forever
 without beholding the day in the apricots
 or knowing the ripeness of the lucid air
 or touching the apricots in your skin
 or tasting in your mouth the sun in the apricots (lines 9–15)

Previous ways of seeing are irrelevant, except as a contrast to the understanding now in relief by comparison. This new understanding does not have the same strict boundaries as the old understanding, allowing the light in which the apricots sway to become part of the apricots, so that there seems to exist an infinite loop between the apricots being in the sun that is in the apricots that are in the sun. Earlier nature was defined by shadow and lack of understanding but here we have a turning point at which the emphasis is on nature as that which is present rather than absent. Another pivotal moment is the entrance of “you,” at which point the apricots have become part of “your skin” through a sense of touch that can no longer distinguish between the softness of the apricots and the softness of skin, just as the sense of sight realized a new ability to distinguish, and yet blend, different aspects of the orchard. Taste, also, reaches a new, intimate understanding of the trees in the orchard and the person who is a part of the orchard. The human figures in the poem remain separate but there is a movement towards a less mystical and, perhaps, more realistically magical connection with nature; and it is important to note the grounding in the real world that this poem includes. Though the speaker reaches a more full understanding of the connection between nature and humans, he acknowledges that his realizations are not inevitable, and that he “might have stood in orchards forever” without seeing any connection beyond what was literally present. Acknowledging the underlying religious aspect of this line suggests that the speaker realizes how being eternally in or faced with paradise does not guarantee an appreciation of paradise. Something must happen or shift in order for the human presence to divine the true connection to nature. The non-mythological speaker’s ability to experience this revelation, perhaps as the result of love, provides hope that humanity has not completely lost its opportunity to see truly its connection with nature.

This line, amounting to poetic fine print, also introduces the idea that some people have the capacity or the willingness to understand these connections, while others do not. Perhaps the reader, standing in Merwin’s poetic orchard, is able to see his vision; but equally possible,

the reader could stand in these orchards forever and feel that Merwin is simply romanticizing. Two poems later, “Native Trees” explicitly confronts this conflict (*CP* 1:618–19). The poem’s speaker explains that, “Neither my father nor my mother knew / the names of the trees / where I was born” and though he asks, they “did not / hear they did not look where I pointed.” The speakers’ fingers, pointing towards the trees whose names he wants to know, connect him with those trees, but his parents neither understand his connection nor have their own. His parents do not see the living trees but, rather, only “surfaces of furniture held / the attention of their fingers” (lines 1–3, 6–7, 7–8). Their fingers hold no understanding of the nature-human relationship, no branch-like connection; only nature through artifice can hold their attention.

The speaker tries again with a new line of questioning, “Were there trees / where they were children / where I had not been” and again, “were there trees in those places / where my father and my mother were born” (lines 14–16, 18–19). The differences between the ways he phrases questions in each stanza reveal the ultimate relationships between trees and the speaker versus the speaker’s parents. In the first stanza, the question creates proximity between the speaker and the trees. The trees are where he was born; they are an integral and inherent part of his story of existence. Without knowing the names of the trees some piece of the story is missing but that does not render the trees any less significant for the speaker. When asking about his parents, however, he does not ask about where they were born. Instead, it is where they were children, where they experienced a younger version of being their adult selves. That is, instead, it is about “trees *in those places* / where my father and my mother were born” so that “those places” get between the trees and the speaker’s parents.

Pressing them for an answer, the speaker’s parents finally respond to the third question—“and in that time did / my father and my mother see them”—with a simple “yes,” which “meant / they did not remember” (lines 20–23). They claim that there had been trees, that they had seen

them; but they have no memory of it, which means that the response “yes” indicates less that there were trees and more that the parents, even in their disconnected state, hold the assumption that there were trees. The parents unconsciously function under the idea that nature is somehow inevitably present even if we do not notice it, even if we are not paying careful attention to it, even if we only see and continue on. At the same time, agreeing to have seen the trees is not the same as agreeing to have known them. The poem begins and ends with an ignorance of the synecdochal trees, and interwoven within this ignorance is the desire truly to know and understand; but the speaker’s parents cannot taste the light in the apricots. While the earlier poems explored the connection between humans and nature, the *Rain in the Trees* poems desire more from the reader, opening up possibilities for the reader to consider changing their attitude towards nature and the way we as humans interact with nature.

By the time Merwin publishes *Migration: New and Selected Poetry* and *Present Company* in 2005, the relationship between humans and trees has transformed even further. This is evidenced in “To Ashes,” which was published first as a preview to new work in *Migration* and then in *Present Company*. “To Ashes” remains initially ambiguous as to whether it refers to a particular type of tree, or whether it refers to ashes as burnt remains. The opening lines begin to clarify this:

All the green trees bring
 their rings to you
 the widening
 circles of their years to you (*CP* 2:507)

The poem begins with the inevitability of dying that living trees face. As the tree rings widen, the tree comes ever closer to becoming ashes, either in a literal sense by burning, or in the figurative sense of death. These opening four lines create an important foundation for the later discussion of human mortality, one of the many symbolic associations of ashes. As the “you” of this poem, the word “ashes” conjures up not

just mortality, but also mourning, penitence, repentance, purification, and rebirth. In Norse mythology, the first man was created from an ash tree. Biblical contexts also contribute to many of these meanings, with sections of the books of Genesis, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Job, Numbers, and Hebrews being common in culture, for example, in Genesis, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return” (3:19); Abraham, also in Genesis, saying, “I who am but dust and ashes” (18:27); or, in Ecclesiastes, “All go to one place; all are from dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20). Additionally, the Hebrew word translated to “ashes” or “dust” is *adamah*, which means ground, land, or earth. So in returning to “dust” or “ashes,” one is returning to the ground or the earth. There is also the mythological significance of Phoenix ashes, which come from the death of the Phoenix and from which the new Phoenix is born, tying in also with seeds dependent on wildfires to initiate their growth, which literally takes place from the ashes. This particular symbolism becomes all the more relevant when accounting for the fact that, though “To Ashes” was published in 2005, *Migration* attributes Merwin to have written the poem on September 19, 2001—a pivotal moment for Americans’ understanding of themselves, their culture, and their connection to the world.

The significance of all of this symbolism ties into the relationship between trees and humans in this poem. Whereas, with the earlier poems, the trees and human figures were presented as distinctly individual though connected, the movement into *The Rain in the Trees* illustrated a stronger connection by allowing the trees and the human figures to blur together at certain moments, while also suggesting, as in the line “I might have stood in orchards forever,” that not everyone immediately sees the connections, but has the potential to see them under the right circumstances. By the time Merwin writes “To Ashes,” the slightly blurred relationship between trees and humans is brought into focus, explicitly revealing a truly ecopoetic view. As the poem progresses, the speaker begins to shift from the trees to humans by slowly incorporating human elements until “out of the spoken / names and the words be-

tween them / the mingled nights the hands / the hope the faces” emerges the ultimate realization. Concentrically paralleling the widening trees rings that eventually bring the tree back to ashes and the earth, are “those circling ages dancing” that will inevitably do the same to humans (lines 15–19).

In this way, trees and humans are in essence the same—in origin and in end. Not only do they both return to ashes, but they are both from or of ashes in the beginning. This means that the connection between trees and humans is significantly stronger and more foundational than humans realize. The poem opens the possibility that humans might have realized this at one point, or at least understood human make up—“you of whom once we were made”—more deeply, but the mere vague awareness that remains, if any awareness remains at all, is not equal to the understanding we had “before we knew ourselves // in this season of our own” (lines 26, 27–28). The difference is not that humans are no longer “made” of ash, but rather that they have forgotten, losing both the spiritual connection associated with the realization and the connection to the natural world that comes from recognizing that, even as distinct human beings, at the most basic level we are the same as nature. The first “O season of your own” references a season of death and subsequent rebirth essential to life on earth (line 10), but the later reference to “this season of our own” invokes a metaphorical death and the possibility of rebirth only if we realize what we lose in forgetting our fundamentally all-encompassing connection with nature.

“To Ashes,” erases any remaining doubt about whether Merwin has shifted fully into an eco-poetic mode, offering perhaps the ideal balance between Scigaj’s criteria, Bate’s desire for eco-poetry to “work on consciousness,” and Bate’s cautions about being overtly political. As Scigaj’s criteria require, the poem strongly implicates human history in natural history by showing that even their separate histories are the same, being born of, made of, and returning to the same essence. The ecocentric rings that open the poem ripple through and absorb the anthropocentric

rings that trigger the poem's criticism of human forgetfulness. Though humans have forgotten, the implication that such a state is a "season" requires future change. The cyclical symbolism of ashes is enough to convey that humans must eventually return to ashes, speaking not simply of death, but of a return to an understanding of that which ashes signifies. The fact that this poem was written so close to September 11, 2001—a fact explicitly revealed in *Migration*—only amplifies the imminent need for change. Just as the Cuban missile crisis affected Merwin's poetry in the 60s, so too do the crises of later eras. However, Merwin is careful that in incorporating the political, he never loses the poetical; hence, part of the reason for the critical decision to include little beyond the date provided to associate the poem with a specific political moment.

The other aspect of Merwin's writing that makes him the epitome of what an ecopoet should be is the way that his life has changed as a result of his poetry just as much as his poetry has changed as a result of his life. Living on his farm in France clearly influenced Merwin's writing during the 60s, and when he moved to Hawaii in the late 70s, the former pineapple plantation that became his home also became a major influence on and reflection of his poetic practice. On the former plantation devastated by poor farming practices, Merwin has spent more than thirty years reviving and cultivating first the land itself, and then various plant species. In *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, Bill McKibben describes Merwin's Hawaiian home:

When Merwin moved there decades ago, it was as barren as any of the other cut-over plantation lands on the Hawaiian Islands. But for many years he has divided his days between writing and planting, and in that time his acreage has become not a formal garden but a palm jungle, with species from around the world that he has grown from seed and transplanted along the small hollow that drops into a stream.²²

The devastation that Merwin first encounters, as well as the rehabilitation process that followed is undeniably present in his writing, as evi-

denced by all three of the poems this paper considers that were written after Merwin had moved to Hawaii. According to Hix, “Merwin sees Hawaii as an illustration of the conceptual errors that underlie the ecological destructiveness at which he thinks America excels.”²³ Poetry was the outlet through which Merwin chose to explore how he wanted to live after his revelation in the 60s and, up through the present, it continues to be a space in which he explores his developing philosophies, perhaps in part as a way of better articulating what they are, both for readers and for himself. The ideal ecopoet is not simply someone who represents particular principles in writing, but is someone who also presents those principles in real life praxis, even if it is not possible for everyone to follow such principles to the same extent that Merwin does. Undeniably, however, Merwin proves the perfect example of a poet living the change that ecopoetry seeks to create, a reality clearly present in Merwin’s most recent collection, *The Shadow of Sirius*.

If earlier collections had begun grappling with the question of what is “a good way to live,” *The Shadow of Sirius*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and which Harold Bloom, a self-professed longtime reader of Merwin, called “wonderful throughout,” is a record of having found possible answers.²⁴ Sirius is the brightest star in the sky, so bright in fact that it is easily mistaken for a planet. The title *The Shadow of Sirius* must inherently have to do with questions of relationships because a shadow cannot create itself; it must be the result of a light source, in this case, the star Sirius, part of Canis Major (which gives Sirius the nickname “the Dog Star”), and some object blocking that light source, whether it be tree, poet, or poem. Choosing Sirius, rather than ‘our own’ star, the Sun, suggests an effort to again decenter the standard human perspective. Even in Merwin’s poems in which he disconnects the shadow from its source—as in “The Last One”—the purpose is to emphasize the interconnectedness by artificially creating disconnections in a situation in which such division is literally not possible, since anything touching the earth cannot be separate from its shadow. In this collection, just as the shadow cannot be detached from its source, neither can the poems be from the po-

et. A particularly personal collection in that it invokes intimate aspects of Merwin's life, like the section of poems "in memory of Muku, Makana, Koa" (CP 2:565), who were Merwin's dogs, as well as a deep, newfound sense of mortality brought on by the deaths of his parents, which happened within months of each other, it is clear that many of the shadows throughout the collection are Merwin's own.

Like Harrison's subtitle *The Shadow of Civilization*, Merwin's title *The Shadow of Sirius* suggests a lack of substance where we otherwise might have imagined permanence. Shadows of traditions, of ecofriendlier practices past, of generations, of family, and of self all shade this collection in some way, and though the emphasis of the book seems more focused on shadows, stars, and light, trees still play a pervasive role. In ninety-two poems, trees are mentioned twenty-two times; leaves, eighteen times; autumn, which is inherently tied to trees, seven times; woods, three times; and forests, roots, branches, and orchards, each once. The collection also specifies that some of the trees are oak, some walnut, some acacia, some apple, and some hickory. These counts do not include words whose primary meaning, in the poem's context, do not directly refer to trees but have trees as their shadow—for example, "palm," "drop-leaf tables," or the verb "to leave." These references keep the collection rooted in one of the threads Merwin has used to weave all of his collections together into a cohesive body of work. Not all of the references function as the main focus of the poem, but even in their supporting roles, they represent the same macro-perspective seen in poems like "The Old Trees on the Hill," in which trees seem to encapsulate the full depth of *The Shadow of Sirius* and of Merwin's larger poetic oeuvre (CP 601–2).

In "The Old Trees on the Hill" the speaker recalls time spent with the "you" of the poem, addressing the figure directly, "When you were living / and it was later than we knew / there was an old orchard" (lines 1–3). The "you" of the poem is a person but in these opening lines the reader could easily think of the destruction of trees that Harrison dis-

cusses and see, in the shadow of “you,” the trees that once were in the old orchard. The poem continues by associating the orchard’s “dark apple trees wrapped in moss” with memory: “cobwebs breathing between the branches / memory lingering in silence / the spring earth fragrant with other seasons” (lines 5, 7–8). The orchard is not a space for stagnant memories, but rather ones that still have life; though perhaps those living memories could not be seen from the “far up on the hill behind the house”—distance afforded while both the speaker and the “you” were living (line 4). Even the fragrant smell of other seasons may not have been enough at the time to trigger the realization of the overlapping lives, generations, and histories that now pervades the poem. The symbolic significance of each of the birds present in “those boughs” implicates the trees in their meanings through the birds’ being there (line 10). The birds’ stories and symbolism also become implicated in the life of the man who planted the trees and who was later buried and forgotten—except, of course, by the “you” of the poem, who has never been to the orchard but nonetheless feels connected even from a distance, and who passes the acquaintanceship on to the speaker, who then passes it on to the reader.

The convergence of the histories takes place in the trees. Though an orchard is a human constructed space, it requires intimate knowledge of nature and of the trees. The man who planted the trees in part represents the portion of humanity that is working to live harmoniously with nature; he is not someone who will be remembered because of what he has done but the orchard that grows will continue to affect future generations. Though others have forgotten “whoever had planted those trees” (line 16), the “you” of the poem still thinks about the person’s presence and shares knowledge of that person’s existence, which gives the “you” a similar function as the original planter who tended the orchard. Instead of tending the trees in a physical way, the “you” cultivates the memories that grow in, among, on, and even, at a distance from the trees. When the “you” is dead, the speaker takes up the task of remembering, and therefore dwells in the orchard where, likely, he too “had

never been”; but in another sense he has been there and is there, as is and was the “you” of the poem: “though it was a place where you / loved to watch the daylight changing / and we looked up and watched the daylight there” (lines 25, 26–28). In these final lines of the poem, the speaker affirms that physicality alone does not manifest presence. Though neither person has ever physically been in the orchard, they “watched the daylight *there*” not just in the sense of the daylight being “there,” but also in the sense of their actually being there in some way watching the daylight. The questions of remembrance are part of the value Helen Vendler sees in this collection’s poems:

The poems of *The Shadow of Sirius* are not, for the most part, fancy or fanciful; if they are to hold their own, it must be with their skeletal plainness of language. Their claims are those of insight rather than of display—or rather, their display is that of a cunning syntax curling the plain words into a Gordian knot. The paradoxes of living and remembering become ever more naked, more exposed.²⁵

The simplicity of the narrative, the simplicity of the language, and the simplicity of the images that Vendler references are precisely what Merwin uses to create the complex relationships between trees and human figures, and consequently between the larger concepts of connection between humans and nature.

Though, in “The Old Trees on the Hill,” the trees and the human figures are not physically collapsed into each other, they are, as in “To Ashes,” implicated in origin, existence, and end. The trees were originally planted by a person and they exist in the orchard in conjunction with human memories, both as they are made and after those who helped make them are gone. After the “you” has died, the speaker’s memories of that person are planted and harvested in the orchard. There is, then, a reciprocal origin, a shared existence, and a potentially simultaneous end (as implied in the opening lines). These realizations are not mere poetic creations on Merwin’s part; they are the result of his own life and his own orchards. They are the culmination of more than half a century of poetic and personal exploration in which Merwin searched not only for

“a good way to live” but for a poetic way to share it. His later poems do not fall under the category of ecopoetry because he was trying to shape his writing to fit a particular critical definition, but quite the opposite—Merwin, as a poet and a person committed to living the ecological philosophy expressed in his writing, shaped a pivotal model for developing definitions of what ecopoetry is and should do. *The Shadow of Sirius* manifests in its leaves an achievement few ecopoets can claim because it is so much about Merwin’s life and ecological activism, and yet never crosses the line into the overtly political. As critics begin to explore fully Merwin’s most recent decade of writing, they will find in *The Shadow of Sirius* not only that Merwin continues to be an indispensable poet and ecopoet, but also Merwin’s inevitable truth that, in considering our own mortality, we are all like stars. We are all finite, as are the earth and the forests, and the life and histories implicated in them; we burn, we live, we continue, but we are always followed by the inevitable shadow that trails behind us like a faithful dog looking for nature’s tree under which to curl up together and take a nap.

Case Western Reserve University

Notes

1. While this essay introduces a number of poems in which Merwin explores relationships with trees, there are countless others. A small sample of those from *The Shadow of Sirius* include “The Song of the Trolleys,” “Far Along in the Story,” “Child Light,” “Traces,” “Unknown Age,” “Cold Spring Morning,” “Parts of a Tune,” “White Note,” and “A Single Autumn.” Merwin’s prose also incorporates relationships with trees, as in “Unchopping a Tree,” a short work from *The Book of Fables* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 72–74.
2. Leonard Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1999), 7.
3. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry*, 9, qtd. in 10.
4. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry*, 10.

5. My philosophical approach to this relationship most closely aligns with that of Jean-Luc Nancy in his work *Being Singular Plural*, Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000).
6. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry*, 11, 37.
7. In *Green Voices*, Gifford explores "the difference between 'nature poetry' and poetry about nature" in the context of the emerging "green" movement of the early 1990s and the foundation that Jonathon Bate sets for ecocriticism in *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Gifford posits that the debates he presents "[illustrate] the need for a theoretical framework for the discussion of nature in poetry." See Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry* (New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 2, 5.
8. J. Scott Bryson, "Introduction," in *Eco-poetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 2002), 5–6.
9. Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 23, 64, 42.
10. W. S. Merwin, "The Wake of the Blackfish: A Memoir of George Kirstein," in *The Ends of the Earth: Essays* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), 37, italics added. This essay discusses some poems indicative of Merwin's search for *a good way to live* but truly only presents the tip of the iceberg. Some other poems from *The Shadow of Sirius* related to this search include "Youth," "Calling a Distant Animal," "Another Dream of Burial," "My Hand," "No Shadow," "The Making of Amber," "Rain Light," and "The Laughing Thrush."
11. David Elliott and W. S. Merwin, "An Interview with W. S. Merwin," *Contemporary Literature* 29, no. 1 (1988): 7, 6, 7.
12. Eliot and Merwin, "An Interview," 7.
13. H. L. Hix, *Understanding W. S. Merwin* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1997), 14.
14. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), xi.
15. Qtd. in Harrison, *Forests*, 110.

16. Harrison, *Forests*, 110.
17. W. S. Merwin, *The Collected Poems of W. S. Merwin*, ed. J. D. McClatchy, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 2013), 1:109; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP*.
18. Scigaj, *Sustainable*, 8, 10.
19. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 8.
20. Scigaj, *Sustainable*, 177.
21. Hix, *Understanding*, 15.
22. Bill McKibben, "W. S. Merwin," in *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, ed. Bill McKibben (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2008), 716.
23. Hix, *Understanding*, 131.
24. Harold Bloom, *Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2011), 323.
25. Helen Vendler, "Defender of the Earth," *New York Review of Books* 56, no. 5 (2009): 37.

