

W.S. MERWIN'S ENVIRONMENTAL VISION

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2009

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To the memory of my grandfather, Samuel Polk Smith, who, as a farmer, understood the value of *place* and the necessity to enrich the land.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Roger Jones whose seminars on poetry of region and place and nature poetry provided me with a direction for studying W.S. Merwin and contemporary poetry. Also, I am grateful to Dr. John Blair and to Dr. Rebecca Bell-Metereau who, as thesis readers, provided me with guidance, encouragement, and support throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank my good friend and fellow classmate, Mr. Clay Stevens, who, with many late nights spent in argument over art and literature, has provided immeasurable guidance. Lastly, I would like to thank my former classmate and future wife, Lauren Pontious, who has joined me in a lifelong pursuit of learning.

This manuscript was submitted on April 3, 2008.

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INTRODUCTION

For the last fifty years, W.S. Merwin has written a body of work, in both poetry and prose, which can be characterized by its attentiveness to the natural world and its search for the relationship between humanity and nature. His writings address the consequences of industrial expansion and respond to the environmental crisis of the later-twentieth century. In “Ecology, or the Art of Survival” (1958), Merwin writes: “I go on the assumption... that there is some link between a society’s threat to destroy itself with its own inventions, and that same society’s possibly ungovernable commitment to industrial expansion and population increase, which in our own country remove a million acres from the wild a year, and which threaten more and more wild life of the globe” (Regions 204). Beginning in the 1960s, Merwin’s collections, most notably *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, have confronted the consequences of our actions, politically and culturally, and have sought to restore humanity’s lost, original connection to sensory experience, language, and to the world at large, which first gave rise to myth and to the arts.

Also throughout this decade, Merwin contributed articles for *The Nation* that chronicled the anti-nuclear peace marches at Aldermaston, England, as well as anti-nuclear protest in the United States. But his more recent writings, beginning with *The Rain in the Trees* (1988), are characterized by a deepening concern for conservation and

environmentalism. In a review of *The Rain in the Trees*, Edward Hirsch suggests that Merwin's work has "always had an ecological consciousness," and the poems in this collection, "take up our desperate vulnerability and our plight as a species, our relentless drive to exterminate ourselves and our environment" ("Bleak," 20). Merwin's environmentalism, too, has been the focus of more recent critical studies.

In Poetry as Labor and Privilege (1991), Edward J. Brunner views *The Rain in the Trees* as a narrative of a Westerner who arrives in Hawaii at "a late point in its destruction." The narrative, Brunner suggests, concerns one who must, "engage himself with the depths surrounding him," rather than following the path of the tourist, or "the disengaged spectator," in order to understand and appreciate the region (272).

Jane Frazier's From Origin to Ecology (1999) calls Merwin an "eco-prophet," who, like Thoreau, strives for contact with a "lost, original world," in which, "humans exist in community with their surrounding" (16). Frazier's study, spanning from the 1960s to *The Rain in the Trees*, uses Thoreau as a reference point in discussion, as Thoreau's writings articulate what the "awareness of the earth can mean to the human"; moreover, Thoreau sought to correlate the contemplation of the natural world with "his own actions and epistemology" (26). Frazier finds in Merwin's writings a writer much like Thoreau, who seeks to bridge the division between humanity's separateness from nature and who affirms humanity's need for reestablishing our lost connections to the source of beginnings, creation, and the mythic.

Leonard Scigaj continues this discussion in "Closing the *Escarts* through the Moment of Green" (1999). Using the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Scigaj explores Merwin's ecological concerns, discussing the *escart* (the distance) between the subjective

self and the other of nature. Central to this discussion is what Scigaj calls the theme of “seeing for the first time.” Seeing for the first time is a phenomenology of perception that leads to an awakening of self-awareness in which the *escarts* closes and the “self and the other of nature are equal, reciprocating participants in the maintenance of the ecosystem” (195).

In continuation, this study examines the work of W.S. Merwin in relation to environmentalism, contemporary nature poetry, and the tradition of environmental writing in American literature. Though this study will focus on Merwin’s later collections from *The Rain in the Trees* (1988) to *The Folding Cliffs* (1999), it will also draw upon his earlier verse collections, his prose *The Lost Upland* (1992), his essays and journalism, as well as his travel narratives and memoirs *Unframed Originals* (1982) and *The Mays of Ventadorn* (2002). This study will seek to establish a larger critical framework and reveal the evolution and continuity of Merwin’s thoughts and concerns as they pertain to environmentalism. This study above all differs from the previous studies in its critical approach to Merwin’s writing, by using the lens of ecocriticism.

Environmental literary criticism (“ecocriticism”) seeks the relation between writers and the physical environment (Glotfelty xviii). This approach to literature has emerged from such notable studies as Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, John Elder’s *Imagining the Earth*, and Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*. Like feminism, ethnic, or cultural studies, ecocriticism strive to reevaluate and enlarge the canon of literary works (Buell, Future 11). It seeks to understand the shifting attitudes and representation of nature in literature, which, like indigenous cultures, has become marginalized by colonialism and the growth of civilization.

As ecology derives etymologically from *oikos*, meaning household, and is the study of “biological interrelationships” within the ecosystem, or “earth household,” ecocriticism examines the interrelationship between writers and the environment, either in their depiction of the phenomena of non-human life or in their own relationship to a particular place or region (Snyder 31). Ecocriticism is the study of the degrees of the artistic or poetic expression of the natural world, along with the traditions that have come to define the genre of environmental writing. This genre includes works as diverse as novels and poems to scientific based writing to travel narratives. Ecocriticism lends itself to the study of W.S. Merwin’s later writings, and helps us account for how the diversity of his own interests and types of writing, from poetry to travel articles to memoirs, form a seamless vision throughout of humanity’s connection and commitment to the renewal of the earth in an age of ecological catastrophe.

The first chapter, “W.S. Merwin and Hawaii,” considers Merwin’s concern for a place, the islands of Hawaii, which biologist Edward O. Wilson describes as a, “killing field of biological diversity” (44). This chapter looks at the connection of Merwin’s writing to environmentalism, which Timothy Morton defines as: “a set of cultural and political responses to a crisis in humans’ relationships with their surroundings” (9). Likewise, the first part of this chapter examines the rhetoric and development of Merwin’s poetry of environmental protest and activism, which reaches its fullest expression in *The Rain in the Trees*. The second part of this chapter will examine the relation of Merwin’s writings on Hawaii to the tradition and theme of environmental apocalypse. Moreover, this part focuses on *The Folding Cliffs* (1998), which tells the story of one family’s resistance to a government that seeks to eliminate native life, both

human and non-human, on the islands of Hawaii during the colonial 19th Century.

Merwin's environmentalism and concern for place surrounds his larger themes of memory, language, transience, and permanence. The last section of this essay discusses the connection through memory and language to a lost and vanishing world.

The last chapter, "W.S. Merwin and Southwest France," considers Merwin's concern for another place: the remote uplands of Provencal France. This chapter looks at the connection between Merwin's writing and the tradition of the pastoral. Southwest France has always been for Merwin a place that has led to an understanding of simplicity, relinquishment, and a Thoreau-like sense of self-reliance. The first part considers pieces from Merwin's memoir *Unframed Originals* and the autobiographical "Shepherds" from *The Lost Upland* to understand his use of the pastoral and his concern for the waning of agrarian traditions in the heart of Europe. In the second half of the chapter, our discussion continues the discussion from the first essay on memory and language in connection to place and the landscape, which is central to *The Rain in the Trees*. Merwin continues this theme on the role of memory in the later poems of *Travels* and the entirety of *The Vixen*. *The Vixen*, for instance, is a narrative of one, who through memory, connects with a place, its landscape and its people. Central to this collection is Merwin's search for the understanding of the "chain of consequences," the nature of transience, leading to a wakefulness of experience.

Both chapters are unified in their concern for place. Place is important because it is at once a foundation for an author's vision, and it can provide a writer with what Barbara Kingsolver refers to as "rooted sense"; a constant reminder "of why we need to hold on to the wild and beautiful places that surround us" (39). Place is also important

because it can provide a writer with a source of inspiration, a center point to the phenomenal world, or as Sigurd Olsen suggests: “some place of quiet where the universe can be contemplated with awe” (22). The concern for place unifies the differing traditions that Merwin’s more recent writings draw upon to express a relationship with the earth, either through a literature of protest, apocalypse, or the pastoral. At the very center of W.S. Merwin’s artistic vision is a despair over species extinction and the loss of place, but also of the effort towards finding a sense of hope and care for all life in a world of constant change.

CHAPTER I.

W.S. MERWIN AND HAWAII

The islands of Hawaii have been central to W.S. Merwin's writings for the past thirty years. In "Living on an Island," Merwin says, "The presence of a Hawaiian tradition, however depleted and damaged, and the discovery of the islands of the Pacific, are inseparable from my deepening feelings for the islands themselves" (30). There has been a growing presence of this Hawaiian tradition in his writings, beginning with *The Compass Flower* (1976) and extending through *The Rain in the Trees* and *The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative of 19th Century Hawaii*. His writings evoke the islands' sense of timelessness and beauty, without losing sight of the islands' tragic history and sense of fragility. Though for most of his life Merwin has been a "wanderer, an exile," living in Majorca, Portugal, France, England, New York City, and Mexico, Hawaii has become a firm foundation for his more recent writings, and a place in which his artistic vision has become rooted in the concerns of the region. Although regions and places were present in Merwin's earlier poetry, from rural Pennsylvania ("The Hotel Keepers" from *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1959)) to New York ("The Crossroads of the World, Etc." from *The Moving Target* (1963)) or Southwest France ("Herds" from *The Lice* (1967)), Merwin's more recent writings on Hawaii express a sense of regionalism that can be likened to what Wendell Berry defines as "local life aware of itself." Berry writes:

It would tend to substitute for the myths and stereotypes of a region particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in. It pertains to living as much as to writing, and it pertains to living before it pertains to writing. The motive of such regionalism is the awareness that local life is intricately dependent, for its quality but also for its continuance, upon local knowledge (65).

Despite Merwin's perspective of Hawaii as a *hanao*, or Western outsider, his writings have aspired towards articulating a sense of place that is more akin to the native islanders' than the Western. He has also aspired towards giving voice to the lives of the islands' native people-- their myths, legends, stories-- which have been marginalized by the progress of the West. And with the marginalization of the native voice, Merwin's writings decry the increasing loss of humanity's connection to the natural world. One can see Merwin's writings on Hawaii as a continuation of the traditions of environmental writing in America; moreover, a body of work that can be seen as an "environmental text" and in relation to "environmental poetics."

An environmental text is one in which the representation and concern for the natural world are the focal point of the text itself. Often the natural world in literary works is represented as a background to the human drama or the human interest. An environmental text, on the other hand, can be characterized by an author's attentiveness to the life of the natural world, either in the depiction or in the concern for non-human life. Lawrence Buell defines the environmental text as a work in which the non-human environment is a presence rather than as a framing device; moreover, the environment is a process or life in motion, rather than as static or constant. Environmental texts suggest that human history is implicated in the larger natural history, and that human accountability towards shaping the environment is a part of the text's ethical position.

Lastly, Buell defines an environmental text as one in which the human interest is understood to not be the only genuine interest (Environmental 7-8).

Buell's definition is important, because it allows one to distinguish between the degrees of literary representation of nature in literary works. For example, Buell cites the difference between Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and Whitman's "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking," albeit birds, either the nightingale or the thrush, are the focus of both. The distinction between the two lies in Keats' own self-absorption, as the song of the bird is only able to momentarily appease Keats' fears of mortality. Whitman's "symbolic bird," on the other hand, is "endowed with a habit, a history, a story of its own" (Environmental 7).

By Buell's definition, environmental texts include literary non-fiction (Thoreau, Henry Beston, Annie Dillard, or Terry Tempest Williams), scientific based writing (William Bartram; Rachel Carson; Edward O. Wilson), or fiction (Cooper's *Pioneers* or London's *White Fang*). But defining an environmental text is often problematic. David W. Gilcrest observes that any definition risks dividing the human from the non-human along the same lines as the split between culture and nature (2). Environmental texts, Gilcrest implies, ultimately seek to bridge the gap between the human and the non-human, or culture and nature, offering a vision of humanity that expresses a connection and sustainable relationship to the earth (3). Environmental poetics carries Buell's definition even further.

Like environmental texts, environmental poetics ("eco-poetics") are characterized by an attentiveness and reverence for the natural world. In the traditions of British and American poetry, this reverence, "worship," or meditation upon the sublimity or majesty

found in nature is a central theme, from Marvell's "The Garden" or "Upon Appleton House," and then to Wordsworth and the English Romantics to Emerson to Wallace Stevens and to contemporaries Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver. Eco-poetics, however, has become much more sophisticated than this Romantic portrayal of the natural world. In Romanticism, nature is often a platform for the poet to explore their consciousness, emotions, or fears (Gilcrest 2). For instance, Emerson writes in "Nature":

Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population (11).

The shift between the Romantic depiction of nature to the representation of the natural world in contemporary poetry has evolved in large part due to the advancements in science. Gilcrest finds that the growth of biological and physical sciences, as well as the development of a sense of time based upon geology and evolution, have de-emphasized the "importance" of human history and the human experience. The understanding of the natural world as something infinitely larger than our previous conceptions has contributed towards encouraging humanity to seek an understanding of nature "on its own terms" (Gilcrest 2).

Contemporary eco-poetics expresses the very spirit of ecology. Both ecology and eco-poetry seek an understanding of the connection and interdependence between humanity and the biosphere. As ecology seeks an understanding of life and its motions and the processes of survival, eco-poetics seeks an understanding of humanity's relationship and role within these processes of life and motion (Snyder 31). The power of the eco-poet lies in what Wendell Berry defines: "a power to apprehend the unity, the

sacred tie, that holds life together” (12). This development of eco-poetics is largely a more recent development. Wendell Berry finds that “nature poetry” is “one of the most exciting and vital kinds of poetry” written in America, beginning with the generation of poets following World War II. In the poetry of A.R. Ammons, Gary Snyder, and Denise Levertov one will find this “sustained attentiveness” to the natural world, and the poet’s search for an understanding and connection to the life of the biosphere (Berry 1). Alan Williamson describes the work of this generation of poets as an “ecological survival tool” against the fears of global and nuclear expansion, which were felt in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (56). He writes, “Almost all of these poets are concerned with the lessons to be learned from animals, Indians, primitive and peasant cultures, the wilderness, as well as simple Wordsworthian solitary walks” (56-57). Underlying eco-poetics is the expression of an ethic towards the biosphere, which is paramount to the growing conservationist and environmental movements in America following the second-World War. The ethical basis for this poetry is rooted in the central concern of Aldo Leopold, “There is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it” (203). For with the rise of eco-poetics, is the dawning of a poetry, a body of literature, that, as Bernard W. Quetchenbach hopes, could “help restore humanity’s membership in the natural community of the earth” (160).

Criticism has regarded *The Compass Flower* as a new beginning in Merwin’s poetry. Charles Altieri calls these poems “examples of faith,” observing that Merwin turns his attention away from the ethereal to the domestic and the perceived. The transition is one from a language of absence and silence to one of presence. Altieri sees in the new poems that “language has become fully present as speech and as an act of

naming,” rather than a reliance upon, “a rhetoric which seemed to embody a process of withdrawing the mind from ordinary realities,” which was the defining characteristic of Merwin’s poems since *The Moving Target* (193). Ed Folsom, too, perceives a transition, suggesting, “Dark, dimly perceived landscapes of absence dawned peopled, full, lit” (225). In *The Compass Flower*, Merwin turns his attention to the domestic, celebrating love and *eros* in a grouping of lyric poems: “Kore,” “Spring Equinox Full Moon,” “Morning,” and “Summer Doorway.” Perhaps the standout of this series is “Islands,” in which the poet not only celebrates love, but also draws inspiration from the beauty of the natural world:

Whenever I look you are islands
 a constellation of flowers breathing on the sea
 deep-forested islands mountainous and fragrant
 fires on a bright ocean
 at the root one fire (Flower 45).

The shift to presence is seen as the poet turns to the natural world to find the metaphors and images to express *eros*. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker emblazons the beloved (“you”) in flowers, birds, and in “island waterfalls and their echoes.” The final lines evoke the ibis and other species of birds that abandoned their ability of flight upon their adaptation to the islands of Hawaii: “and the birds make their feathers/ not to fly but to/ feel of you”(Wilson 43; Flower 46).

“Islands” is a new beginning in Merwin’s poetry, for aside from the language of presence, this poem evokes Hawaii’s sense of timelessness and youth. The lyric poems of this collection, which coincided with Merwin’s relocation to the islands in the mid-1970s, are, perhaps, his earliest response to the region. Merwin continues to draw upon the natural beauty of the islands in the haiku-like sequences that comprise *Feathers from*

a Hill (1978) and *Finding the Islands* (1982). However, Merwin's response to the region shifts in his later collections from this celebration of the islands' natural beauty to a growing concern for its survival.

Beginning with *Opening the Hand* (1983), Merwin's response to Hawaii expresses a deepening awareness of the islands' history and their present dangers, which is continued in *The Rain in the Trees* and *The Folding Cliffs*. In this transition, Merwin's environmental concerns have become the focal point of his writings. Edward Hirsch remarks that Merwin's poems have come to embrace "a dream of pastoral and ecological wholeness" ("Bleak" 20). Leonard Scigaj finds that Merwin's "poetry of absence" has "flowered into an ecological poetry of wakefulness" (195). In an interview from this period, Merwin discusses the *awareness* that informs his writings. These poems stem from the awareness that humanity is losing its connection to the rest of life, as species extinction and the loss of place become more prevalent. He says, "How to make real, imaginative commitment to this awareness is something I think each writer will have to find in each piece of writing" (Applefield 73). His writings speak of a sense of urgency as our own survival is dependent upon the survival of non-human life:

I don't know anything in the world more urgent than this. Sometimes I feel it like an electric shock. That's how desperate it is. Look at it this way: more than a third of the world's trees have been cut in the past thirty years. What a lot of people in cities very often aren't aware of is that each bit of forest is distinct. It's not like a piece of linoleum from which you can cut out pieces here and there and they're all the same. We know we're destroying species at a tremendous rate, but we don't even know at what rate we're destroying them. They're going so fast. And every time a species is destroyed, our own chances of survival are diminished (Applefield 73).

Merwin's awareness of environmental catastrophe primarily focuses upon the concerns of Hawaii, which is regarded by environmentalists as the "endangered species capital of the world" (Littschwager 29).

The threat to the native plant and animal life of Hawaii is enormous. Although the islands themselves comprise only one-fifth of one percent of the total land area in the United States, more than twenty-five percent of the species of plants and animals on the United States endangered species list are native to Hawaii (Littschwager 29). The biodiversity of Hawaii now largely consists of non-native species of plants and animals that have been introduced in a relatively short span of time. Of the twenty-two thousand species of all organisms-- plants, animals, and microbes-- a little over four thousand are alien species, while the majority of birds and nearly half of all plant life are non-native (Wilson 47). The islands' isolation makes these changes to the native habit seem pronounced. This isolation, which has contributed to the acceleration of the change that has overtaken the native habitat, is, sadly, what sustained the islands for millennia as an Eden-like sanctuary. Edward O. Wilson views this phenomena of change as an: "acceleration of the Darwinian process" (47).

Like Wilson, Merwin's writings address the extent of change to the natural history of the region. In the "Foreword" to Remains of a Rainbow: Rare Plants and Animals of Hawai'i, he writes of the islands' beginnings:

The islands began as mountains, with summits high enough to influence weather conditions, wet sides facing the prevailing northeast winds, dry sides to leeward, toward south and west, and the developing life-forms changed in response to highly specific conditions of humidity, altitude, cloud cover, sunlight. Because there were no land mammals and no land snakes, and although there was predation from one-celled life to sea eagles, the environment of the islands must have remained, for millennia,

gentler than that of most places on the planet. Several species of birds abandoned the ability to fly. Some plants stopped producing protective oils and odors. The climate was benign, with seasons but without extremes. The lava flows that periodically burned away swaths of forest on the younger islands were soon covered over with woodlands beginning again, another youth maturing into a biotope of enormous diversity and particularity (21).

Merwin's writings turn to history to understand the destruction of this "biotope of enormous diversity" brought on by the arrival of civilization: first, with the ancient travelers, then the Polynesians; then European explorers, such as Cook; and lastly the arrival of the merchants, missionaries, and farmers that colonized and gained control over the islands. The destruction to the environment of Hawaii was caused under colonization, beginning with the sandalwood trade in the eighteenth century, then the industries of cattle, sugar, pineapple, and tourism. Merwin first addresses these changes to the landscape in *Opening the Hand*.

"Questions Asked by Tourists by a Pineapple Field" from *Opening the Hand*, for example, is concerned with the changes to the Hawaiian landscape brought by agriculture and tourism. The poem draws upon irony and uses a succession of rhetorical questions that draw the reader towards understanding the scars colonialism have left on the landscape:

how do you like these pineapple fields
 have you ever seen pineapple fields before
 do you know whether pineapple is native to the islands
 do you know whether the natives grew pineapple
 do you know how the land was acquired to be turned into
 pineapple fields
 do you know what is done to the land to turn it into
 pineapple fields
 do you know how many months and how deeply they plow it
 do you know what those machines do are you impressed
 do you know what's in these containers are you interested

what do you think was here before the pineapple fields
 would you suppose the fields represent an improvement
 (Flower 136-137).

This poem is characteristic of Merwin's rhetorical strategy. Merwin comments upon the use of rhetoric in poetry: "Do you mean to the attempt to persuade or do you mean the attempt to use sound to influence emotion" (Pettit 19). Merwin cautions against the use of rhetoric, suggesting that if a poem is "purely rhetorical," then what emerges is not poetry, but rather, "a moralist form of propaganda" (Pettit 19).

"Questions" is rhetorically effective, because rather than overtly criticizing the culture of tourism and agriculture, the poem questions the assumptions one has about a region or a particular landscape. For instance, these questions draw the reader towards considering the image of a pineapple, which is often associated with Hawaii, while in actuality it, too, like the industry that produces the fruit, is imported. Without expressing overt contempt for the culture, the poem asks the reader to consider what is *native* or authentic about a place, as well as the very meaning of *improvement* upon the landscape.

Merwin achieves these rhetorical ends through the use of what Ed Folsom identifies as a "double-voice" (Regions 330). The speaker of the poem at once voices a subtle criticism of tourist culture, but remains aware that its voice is a part of the same culture. The irony at times is humorous. For example, the title of the poem itself can refer to an image of tourists parked beside a pineapple field or the title can also refer to the speaker as that of the pineapple field itself. Also, Merwin at times uses humor: "have you taken pictures of the pineapple fields/ would you like for me to hold the camera/ so that you can all be in the picture" (Flower 139). However, these lines resonate with a sense of anger, as the picture captures tourists or foreigners standing in front of

something foreign or introduced to a place that has replaced and invaded the native-ness of the original. This feeling of anger is expressed throughout each of these lines, which continues to the final line: “do you think there is a future in pineapple” (Flower 139).

“Term” from *The Rain in the Trees* continues this rhetorical strategy. Unlike “Questions,” “Term” is in response to a specific incident, rather than an abstract or general concern of the region. Both the poem and Merwin’s *New York Times* article “The Sacred Bones of Maui” were in response to plans to construct a hotel over the ancient gravesite *Honokahua*, which led to the removal and relocation of the remains of the buried. These plans also called for development along the ancient “King’s Road,” which for centuries followed the perimeter of the island and allowed access to the ocean. “Term” begins with a lament for the closing of the King’s Road, which becomes expressive of the uprooting of the islanders’ connections to place, to the sea, to ancestral heritage and traditions:

when the old man has told
of walking as a child
on the road that the chief
built long ago

and has told of his father
walking with him
and his grandfather
when the road seemed to have been (69).

Most importantly, the closing of the road also expresses a loss of dignity: “the road will be closed/ for the rich and foreign/ and the children will wait on them/where the road is now” (70). Like “Questions,” the rhetorical effectiveness of “Term” lies in the questions that the poem asks of the reader, such as what is “sacred” about traditions, language, or place. These questions seek to challenge our cultural notions about progress, like

improvement in “Questions,” as well as challenging readers to reconsider their own values and connections to place and to cultural traditions. Merwin makes one of his most impassioned and poignant appeals to the reader, asking, “what will we need to love/ when it is all money” (70). This rhetorical strategy is not only similar to “Questions,” but is a continuation of “For a Coming Extinction” from *The Lice*.

“For a Coming Extinction” is also a hallmark of conservationist poetry. The poem begins as an apostrophe to a vanishing species:

Gray whale
 Now that we are sending you The End
 That great god
 Tell him
 That we who follow you invented forgiveness
 And forgive nothing (Second 122).

The voice of the poem alternates between a single address, an apostrophe to the gray whale and the voice of the culture, and once again uses the double, ironic voice (Regions 330). The voice criticizes the culture that is “sending” the great whale to “The End,” and acknowledges its inclusion as a part of culture that precipitates this destruction, along with countless other atrocities, with the pronoun “we.” This poem is a marked reflection of what H.L. Hix’s calls Merwin’s “tragic vision,” as individuals aware of the destructiveness of their actions, yet continue to act or take part in the actions of the destructive culture (43). Hix writes, “If a human could be guilty only of something completely in her or his control, all stories would have a morally happy ending. That people sometimes have to ‘chose between the animal in the road/ and ditch,’ that even those who recycle newspapers and soda cans remain complicit in human destruction of the environment, makes stories tragic” (43). The tragedy in this poem is that the

decimation adds the whale to the number of vanishing species. Towards the end, the speaker imagines “The End” as a “black garden” filled with the “irreplaceable hosts,” “The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas” (Second 123). And in the last stanza, the speaker admonishes the whale to:

Join your word to theirs
Tell him
That it is we who are important (Second 123).

These final lines, for instance, convey a tone of anger directed at the culture. And yet the voice seems bitter or angry at times, Merwin’s vision remains transcendent. In the interview “Fact has Two Faces,” Merwin comments, “It would be very difficult and very rare to make a poem out of pure anger, or out of pure anything... Pure anger would just be a scream” (Regions 331). Furthermore, “Questions” and “Term” are not only a continuation of the rhetorical strategy of “For a Coming Extinction,” but are also a transcendent moment; one in which the speaker comes to terms with species extinction and the loss of place and must move past anger and despair. But what makes the later poems different is their focus on the environmental and human issues of a particular place, rather than on universal dangers alone. However, the specific issues ultimately speak on a universal level. Throughout *The Rain in the Trees*, Merwin addresses not only the loss, but also the need for place.

“Airport,” for example, addresses this need for place. The airport becomes the antithesis of the natural world; it is a place in which technology has replaced life: “None of the computers can say/ how long it took to evolve a facility/ devoted to absence in life.” Throughout the poem, the speaker de-familiarizes the airport, perceiving the facility through alien eyes. From this perspective, Merwin is able to comment upon what

makes a place a *place*. For example, the airport itself, the building, is not “inhabited,” but is only a home to “roaches”; moreover, the building does not have any human connection, as the building is not “loved,” but is “serviced” (Rain 55). Ultimately, this poem speaks of a lost connection to place and a lost connection to memory. The life of the airport becomes “a process” in which people move through “a container with signs,” which directs our travels “far and fast” (55). And through this process, Merwin observes, “we forget/ where we have been” (55).

Throughout his later writings, Merwin continues to define one of the roles of memory in its ability to connect us to not only place, but additionally to a vanishing present. One of things that Merwin’s writings teach us is that the life of a place is connected to how we define ourselves as a culture, which is largely based upon our connection to cultural memory and our own personal memory. His poetry teaches us that the authenticity of place is something to value, rather than something to improve or develop. Merwin’s more recent poetry not only comments upon the value of place, but also comments upon our role as humans within *place*.

Merwin’s concern for place extends beyond his poetry. Since making his home in Maui in the mid-1970s, Merwin has restored eighteen acres of land once ruined by the pineapple industry and has become known for his cultivation of endangered palms and native Hawaiian plants. As of 2004, Merwin planted his 823rd species of palm (McKeon 60). Edward Hirsch describes Merwin’s sanctuary for native plants:

Because of his efforts, the grounds are richly alive with native vegetation: huge mango, banana, and papaya trees, looming palms whose leaves have been splayed by the hard winds, flowering pink, yellow, and red hibiscus, white gardenia plants, giant red heliconias that look as if carved from wax, white birds-of-paradise, ferns of all kinds” (“The Art” 1).

As an environmental activist, Merwin has spoken-out against a plan developed by the Department of Agriculture in 1985 to exterminate a species of fruit fly that was attributed to the cause of crop destruction, by spraying 2.9 million pounds of malathion over the islands (“Aloha” 235-236). In 1989, Merwin took issue with a plan to build twenty geothermal wells within the *Wao Kele O Puna* rain forest on “the Big Island” (“Letter” 43). In the article “Living on an Island,” Merwin writes that through gardening, the concern for the environment merges with daily work, allowing the concerns to remain “intimate and familiar rather than abstract and far away” (30). Hawaii has become a place in which concern for the environment is an issue that, as Merwin says, remains “at home in the mind” (“Living” 30).

Merwin’s environmentalism is nowhere more apparent than in “Rain at Night.” The poem begins with despair over the destruction of the natural world for purposes of profit or greed: “someone dead/ thought of this mountain as money/ and cut the trees” (Rain 26). Merwin expresses a lament for the trees while confronting human arrogance and power:

but they cut the sacred ‘ohias then
the sacred koas then
the sandalwood and the halas
holding aloft their green fires
and somebody dead turned cattle loose
among the stumps until killing time (26).

In one sense, this poem concerns coming to terms with history, confronting the catastrophe caused by human action. Merwin’s writings on Hawaii trace the changes and the destruction to the region, searching for an understanding of the cause of this power. But this poem is more than a lament or an utterance of despair. Like “Questions” and

“Term,” “Rain at Night” remains transcendent of anger and despair, finding optimism and hope in nature’s processes of renewal. As such, the final section looks to the resilience and renewal of the natural world:

but the trees have risen one more time
and the night wind makes them sound
like the sea that is yet unknown
the black clouds race over the moon
the rain is falling on the last place (26).

Merwin’s environmentalism is ultimately concerned with processes of renewal.

Merwin finds in the region of Hawaii an urgency to care for universal environmental concerns. “Besides the islands’ haunting reminder of youth,” he suggests, “an observer of contemporary Hawaii may notice its way of appearing to be a kind of hologram, an image on a small-scale of the world at large. So that when we see the human threat to the irreplaceable treasures of the Hawaiian environment we may recognize that we are looking at the similar menace to the natural world everywhere” (“Foreword” 23). Underneath his writings on Hawaii is an ethics based on a relationship to the land that harkens back to Aldo Leopold’s vision for a land ethic: “In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (204). Merwin’s ethics express an effort not only to care for all life, but also the effort to continue to renew life even in the face of “The End.” This conservationist ethic comes to light in “Place,” which expresses the very spirit of conservation:

On the last day of the earth
I would want to plant a tree (64).

“Place” speaks of the imperative to continue to nourish the life of *place* and the perseverance of hope, which like Merwin’s tree in the poem, is rooted “in the earth full of the dead.” Central to Merwin’s more recent concerns is a vision of humanity as compassionate and caring stewards of a rich biotic community. “I believe that our real superiority as a species is not our intelligence,” Merwin writes, “but the quality of imagination and compassion that allows us to care about the welfare, suffering, and survival of lives far from our own, and not immediately or obviously related to our comforts, our prospects, or our acquisitions” (“Foreword” 25). “Place” also leads our discussion towards an understanding of the relation of Merwin’s writings to another tradition in American environmental literature: the tradition of environmental apocalypse.

Environmental apocalypse has been a distinguishing characteristic of Merwin’s poetry since *The Lice*. For example, “The Last One” is a parable that imagines a world laid to waste by the arrogance of human progress, in which civilization is reduced to a primitive state and then destroyed by “the shadow”-- the shadow of the absence of nature or no-nature (Second 88). Lawrence Lieberman writes of *The Lice*, “This book is a testament of betrayals; we have betrayed all beings that had power to save us: the forests, the animals, the gods, the dead, the spirit in us, the words. Now, in our last moments alive, they return to haunt us” (257).

This theme of apocalypse resurfaces in *The Rain in the Trees* and *The Folding Cliffs*, and takes on a new power and new sense of urgency in light of the environmental catastrophe of contemporary Hawaii. Imagining apocalypse or catastrophe allows one to come to terms with humanity’s destructive power, but also leads to imagining a new beginning in which humanity shall remake or renew the earth. The apocalyptic is not

only a central element in Merwin's writing, but it too, like the literature of activism, connects his writings to the tradition of American environmental writing.

From George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864) to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and then to Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* or Williams' *Refuge*, environmental writing has spoken of the consequences of human action to the destruction of the natural world in forebodings of catastrophe and impending disaster. For example, *Silent Spring* begins, famously, with "A Fable for Tomorrow." Carson's fable tells of "a shadow of death" that creeps over "a town in the heart of America" in which all living things, from the birds to the vegetation to the townspeople, begin to wither and die, thus imagining "a spring without voices" (2).

Jonathan Schell in *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) describes a threat even more extreme than DDT; his book seeks to apprehend the immeasurable effects of a nuclear holocaust. By seeking "to grasp the destructive power of present day nuclear weapons," humanity can then begin, as Schell suggests, to, "ask ourselves what our political responsibilities are in the light of these probabilities" (47; 25). Al Gore continues this same design in 2006's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which, through computer visuals, shows the consequences of global warming to population-dense areas around the globe.

The apocalyptic is a powerful rhetorical trope, because when coming to terms with our destructive power as a species, imagining the extinction of life, we awaken to the present dangers that surround us and then seek change. Bill McKibben suggests, "When elsewhere, too, it rains acid or DDT, we can still imagine that someday soon it will be better, that we will stop polluting and despoiling and instead "restore" nature" (58). This sense of urgency gives rise to a sense of hope that the world will be renewed

in order for humanity to survive. “Life without the hope for human survival,” Schell reminds us, “is a life of despair” (184). The apocalyptic, as we can see, is a central element within the environmental tradition.

Lawrence Buell argues that apocalypse is the “single most powerful” metaphor of the contemporary environmental imagination. Buell identifies the principal rhetorical tropes of the apocalyptic. For one, “the myth of personhood” employs the same language to describe ecological destruction as to describe human destruction. For example, environmental campaigns often refer to the decimation of non-human life as a “holocaust” or a “mass murder” (Environmental 304). Two of these tropes seek to alter the reader’s perception, such as “the aggrandizement of the minute” and “the conflation of the near and remote,” which magnify scale or collapse distance (Environmental 304). For example, Merwin himself uses this trope when he calls Hawaii a “hologram” or an image of the world on a small scale. This trope allows Merwin to localize the global problem and to help us realize that we can find the threats as apparent in the world around us, rather than as distant or far away.

Interconnectedness is perhaps the most powerful trope of environmental apocalypse. The trope of interconnectedness gives the apocalyptic a real power and energy, as it makes the reader aware that destruction and catastrophe are perpetuated and diffused throughout the ecosystem (Buell, Environmental 302). For example, what makes *Silent Spring* a rhetorically effective work is that it shows the extent to which DDT is diffused throughout the web of life. These tropes of the apocalyptic are important to our understanding of Merwin’s writings of Hawaii, because they are at times not only central to his technique, but are his central concern. The theme of apocalypse is

one approach that Merwin takes towards expressing the extent of destruction caused by colonization in the Pacific.

Merwin's largest undertaking on Hawaii has been an effort to tell the story of colonization and its effects on the islands of Hawaii. In the interview "Fact has Two Faces," Merwin discusses his plans to write a book of prose on the island of *Kaho'Olawe* and the history of the 'Ohana and the relationship of its people to the islands. Beginning from a first hand collection of oral histories, Merwin set out to write a series of essays that would document what happened to the Hawaiians and their land, what happened to the last of the victims of leprosy, and would show the growing military presence on the islands. In this interview, Merwin describes this project as, "a gathering together of almost all my interests- interest in non-literate peoples, in their and our relation to the earth, to the primal source of things, our relation to the natural world, our relation to and necessary opposition to the overweening authority of institutions and institutionalized greed, the destruction of the earth for abstract and greedy reasons" (Regions 349).

Though this book of prose never materialized as a finished work, *The Folding Cliffs*, on the other hand, is the fulfillment of these ideas. Critic Michael Thurston calls *The Folding Cliffs*, "a sort of anti-Aeneid for Hawai'i, an epic that treats not the founding of a city but the conquering, division, and dispersal of a people and its culture" (184). *The Folding Cliffs* is essentially the story of the islands of Hawaii and the story of its indigenous people who are compelled to resist the growing Western and American presence. The story in essence is, as Merwin suggests, one that expresses the existentialist struggle of, "people feeling helpless in the face of monolithic power" (Regions 350).

Central to *The Folding Cliffs* is the well-known story of Ko'olau and Pi'ilani.

The story of the cowboy Ko'olau has risen to the status of legend, and was first told in Jack London's short story "Koolau the Leeper" (1912) and then in Edward Joesting's *Kauai: The Separate Kingdom*. The story that Merwin tells closely follows its predecessors, relating the events that occurred at the Waimea Valley on the island of Kauai in the 1890s. The central events of the narrative follow Ko'olau and Pi'ilani from birth, childhood, marriage, and then to Ko'olau's and his son Kaleimanu's affliction with leprosy, which begins their struggle in resistance to government mandates, which sought to force their deportation to the "leper colony" on Kaluapapa. Ko'olau's legendary resistance begins after the family retreats to the Kalalau valley, where other leprosy sufferers are in hiding, and he kills the sheriff's deputy Louis Stolz after a "shoot on site" mandate had been passed. Ko'olau then leads a resistance from the cliffs, and thwarts the efforts made by the provisional government for his capture, even after they bring in a Howsitzer machine gun. Following the resistance, Ko'olau, Pi'ilani, and Kaleimanu continue to live in the Koolau Valley, subsisting on food brought by friends until Kaleimanu's and then Ko'olau's deaths. *The Folding Cliffs* is also the story of Pi'ilani who must continue to protect Ko'olau's grave and memory and then tell their story. The story of Ko'olau is very important to the people of Hawaii, for Ko'olau has become, as Edward Joesting writes, "a symbol of resistance to the way those with leprosy were treated" (236).

The Folding Cliffs is also the story of the islands themselves. The second section "The Mountain" speaks of origins, imagining the geological beginnings of the islands: "The mountain rises by itself out of the turning night" (47). And then tells of the

biological origins of life on the islands, speaking in lines that are at once graceful, yet have a marked intensity:

tree crickets swordtail crickets and the sound they made
that in time would be called singing ran through the mountain
born only there were flowering trees and lobelias
and birds that discovered them and were changed when they tasted them
born was the plover into flight born were the birds
each from the wingbeats of the others born were the guardians (49).

The story then transits from imagining these Eden-like beginnings of the islands to imagining the beginning of destruction:

again before the next and the next and still the gods
knew nothing of the light and the waifs of life drifted
back into the future and again into the past
coming to be made by where he woke so that the offspring
of seeds of shrubs here and there grew into tall trees
and so little menace and pursuit was there
that toxins and thorns were given up and generations
of insects and birds forgot flight and the use of their wings
then came the day when fear found the edge and fell into
the age of night fear and day fear an the hiding crawling fears
the time of the hairless ones and of blood on the leaves
and of standing figures arriving from their distance
from the night the time of people coming the time of time (50).

From “the time of time,” the poem then traces the human history of the islands: beginning with the Polynesians; then to Captain Cook and the spread of venereal disease amongst the islanders; and to the arrival of the missionaries and the sandalwood trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the islands were first placed, through ownership, in “the hands of foreigners” (“Foreword” 86). This passage imagines the beginning of destruction as a “fear,” which as it spreads, becomes a web that engulfs all life-- both human and non-human. Fear creates a sense of tension in the story, and the resistance to this fear becomes the story, in essence, of *The Folding Cliffs*.

Like *The Folding Cliffs*, the essay “Snail Song” also uses this trope of interconnectedness to express the how human history begins to mirror biological history. The subject of this essay is Kaniakapupu, the summer palace of Kamehameha III. The summer palace was built in the Nu’uanu Valley and its name can be translated as “the song of the land snail,” referring to the species *Achatinella bellula*. Like the ruins of Kaniakapupu, the land snail is a tarnished reminder of the splendors of Hawaii’s past (Ends 165). Over the course of the essay, Merwin traces the changes in the landscape: the intentional introduction of an avian-malaria carrying mosquito by a British Sea Captain in the 18th Century; the sandalwood trade, which caused substantial deforestation to the islands by the mid-19th century; the lowering of the water table and the efforts to reforest; to the introduction of cattle and the rise of the sugar and pineapple industry in the early 20th Century; and to the introduction of invasive, non-native plants, insects and rodents. Merwin writes peerlessly of the decline of the native, offering a microcosm of the problem at large:

There are four genera in Hawai’i, all of them small and elegant. There were more than forty species of at the time of European contact, most of which had evolved in and for highly specific habitats. Of the original species only about sixteen are left now, and those are all endangered. Habitat destruction again, of course. Pesticides and pollution of various kinds. And the introduction of other species of snails and of slugs, accidentally or ignorantly, many of them in this century. The giant African snail... was introduced in the 1930s as an ornamental, it is said. And then, to control the depredations of the introduced species, several cannibal species... were brought in during the 1950s and ‘60s, and they have probably exterminated entire species of endemic snails, while the African giant and other introductions continue to proliferate (Ends 165).

This passage is characteristic of what Buell calls the aggrandizement of the minute; for in this passage, the snails become symbolic of the native, as the marginalization and demise of this species shadows in miniature the marginalization and the demise of the native

islanders. This same kind of web of destruction in this passage, which builds upon intensity as the measures taken to eliminate the snails becomes more drastic, is similar to the same web of destruction that the islanders are caught amidst of in *The Folding Cliffs*. This theme of apocalypse is also central to *The Rain in the Trees*.

When reading the poems of *The Rain in the Trees*, the reader becomes like Tiresias, encountering the landscape of a *Waste Land* of contemporary America. “Shadows Passing” speaks of a “country of mines” whose impoverished inhabitants have “faces like sawed bones” and the rivers are “full of the dreams of presidents of coal companies” (13). “Glasses” speaks of a place where the inhabitants are “thinking of money,” “fly above the earth reading papers,” “pay the eclectic bills” and “owe money,” but fail to notice “the stars” as they “turn in vast courses around them”; these people fail to notice the phenomena of existence that is much larger than either their dreams or their perceptions (12). But in the last line, Merwin strikes a chord that draws the reader to the present environmental concerns in Hawaii: “the bulldozers make way for them/ they glitter under imported leaves” (12). And central to this collection are poems that use the theme of apocalypse to explore the relationship between humanity and the earth.

In “The Inevitable Lightness,” Merwin imagines the apocalyptic end as coming in a sudden flash: “The roads and everything on them fly up and dissolve” (40). This brief poem echoes “Homeland” from *The Carrier of Ladder*. In “The Inevitable Lightness” the earth exposes its “new scars,” the aftermath of human civilization, whereas in “Homeland” the sky “goes on living” with “all the barbed wire of west/ in its veins” (Second 167). But Merwin’s position on the Earth’s survival in both of these poems echoes “The Widow” from *The Lice*: “There is no season/ That requires us” (Second

101). Merwin insists that the Earth will continue to survive without human civilization. However, it is we, humanity, who need the earth, and with our destruction of non-human life, we are ultimately destroying ourselves. These poems allow us to confront the arrogance of humanity; the power and the illusion that we are in control and in dominion of the Earth and its resources. These flashes of the apocalyptic allow us to confront both the damage that humanity has caused and the arrogance that humanity has in believing that is “we who are important” (Second 123).

Merwin continues to explore the relationship of humanity to the earth in “The Crust.” Like the proceeding, catastrophe comes in a flash: “and I could see just ahead/ that the earth had fallen away/ from the road/ underneath” (Rain 41). The speaker tells of the cause for this event, relating it in terms of the mythic:

in my view it happened
that the earth fell from under
because the tree was cut
whose roots held it together
and with the tree
went all the lives in it
that slept in it ate in it
met in it believed in it (41).

The image of the tree cut away becomes an expression for humanity’s “rootedness” and dependence upon the Earth. Likewise, trees in this collection become metaphors for nourishment and the source of life. But what makes the apocalyptic different in these poems from the ones in *The Lice* is that the end, as imagined here, becomes a catalyst for seeing a new beginning and for sensing hope.

“Chord” expresses the necessity of hope and the role of art. This poem presents the contrasting, yet parallel narratives of the life and death of John Keats and the

deforestation of the sandalwood forests by the native islanders during this same epoch in history. In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats finds in the song of the nightingale an image of immortality that for a moment raises his spirits above the despair over mortality and a world where “youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.” On the other hand, the natives can only hear “the sound of their own axes echoing through the forests” as they cut down the sandalwood, destroying their lives along with the trees (Rain 66).

This poem is not, as Frank J. Brunner suggests, a poem of “missed connections” in which Keats “ignores the monumental social change about him”; rather, it expresses the need for poetry, art, and the life of the senses, which allows us to cope with crisis and despair (279). In “Notes for a Preface,” he writes, “absolute despair has no art, and I imagine the writing of a poem, in whatever mode, still betrays the existence of hope, which is why poetry is more and more chary of the conscious mind in our age. And what the poem manages to find hope for may be part of what it keeps trying to say” (Regions 297). “Chord” expresses the transcendent power of art in its ability to help us cope with loss and despair; art then becomes a necessity in defense against fear. Merwin’s writings teach us that hope has a certain power over fear. Moreover, it is this fear that has perpetuated humanity’s quest to control and dominate the natural world, accelerating destruction and loss. Art then becomes a certain constant in a constantly vanishing world.

The Rain in the Trees as a whole is a collection of voices. Some of these voices might be taken for the poet himself, such as the autobiographical poems “Waking to the Rain” or “The Salt Pond,” as they continue the autobiographical “family poems” begun in *Opening the Hand*, speaking of the poet’s own relationship to his father. Still, there are

voices that are not to be taken as the poet's own; they are voices that bear witness and tell their own stories. The speaker of "Pastures" recalls a variety of pastoral scenes drawn from shepherd life in the uplands, which speak of experiences now "many do not know": the children who, hiding under the cover of honeysuckle, bear witness to a murder; the recollection playing in the ferns as children "in the long sunset/ of an endless summer"; or the reminiscence of driving the flocks of sheep from the winter pasture to the summer pasture (Rain 21).

Likewise, the speaker of "Native" recollects the ecological damage that he has witnessed to *place*, from soil erosion and deforestation to the passing of the agrarian life expressed in the lines: "where mules I never saw/ plowed in the sun and died/ while I was in school" (63). "Memory, as distinct from the past it draws on," Merwin insists, "is what makes the past a key to the mystery that stays with us and does not change: the present" (Follain xii). Memory then becomes connected to Merwin's ecological design throughout this collection; it is the key to understanding humanity's relationship to the natural world. Both of the speakers in "Pastures" or "Native" speak of lost traditions and lost connections to the natural world, but strive to keep the past living in the present, nourishing their survival.

The poem entitled "Memory" is a parable that expresses the power of memory to reconnect us with the past. The opening stanza becomes an allegory for remembering: "Climbing through a dark shower" (Rain 58). When the speaker climbs the mountain and is able to view the past with clarity, the speaker beholds a vision of childhood, ancestors, and the valley. The poem expresses the feeling of remembering and the wakefulness achieved by this reconnection to a lost world and a lost life, even though these memories

can be painful (“wet to the skin and wide awake”) (58). And it is through memory itself that one can continue to renew the connection to the phenomena of the natural world.

“The Duck” expresses the connection made in childhood to the life of the natural world: “and look what I find/ long afterwards/ the world of the living.” The speaker tells us of the first time he was allowed to “take out/ the white canoe.” Floating across the stillness of the lake at midsummer, the speaker beholds a translucent vision of a duck in flight: “I saw the duck catching/ the colors of fire/ as she moved over the bright glass” (59). This moment does not become a moment of transcendence, but rather a moment of connection and of discovery. In addition to memory, language too becomes a constant against change and loss.

Language is a central discussion throughout Merwin’s poetry. In the review “Church of Ash,” Laurence Lieberman writes that one of Merwin’s “profound beliefs” is, “that everything depends on our learning to find our way back in touch with the true spirit behind the life of words” (263). Lieberman is speaking of Merwin’s insistence on the inadequacy of language. Language is inadequate, because it cannot precisely express the phenomena of the referent, as it is an arbitrary system of signs that we use in an attempt to express our feelings of existence; moreover, the phenomena and mystery of things oftentimes is impossible to adequately name. In a 1981 interview, Merwin says:

A poem is a huge leap- from the kind of basic, primitive use of language to a basic, primitive use of poetry. Poetry is in a way the real use of language because, though we can’t name the cushion, there is a way of making a poem in which the cushion and one’s experience of it are not apart. Then you can reach the point where you can’t name the experience, but where the poem is the same as experience” (Jackson 51).

What Lieberman is getting at in this description of Merwin is the search for experience, which becomes a way of making contact with the thing behind the sign, whereby the thing seen and the act of seeing merge in a moment without names.

However, the articulation of experience between perception and object becomes a complicated and impossible pursuit when the things behind the symbols or words no longer exist. Language then becomes an act of memory, recollection, and the words now become mementos to the vanished. The speaker in “Losing a Language” laments: “many of the things the words were about/ no longer exist” (Rain 67). Likewise the speaker in “Witness” descries: “I want to tell what the forests/were like// I will have to speak/ in a forgotten language” (Rain 65). By using language one can then reconnect and experience this lost, original world, like the speaker of “Tracing the Alphabets” whose quest is to understand the past:

I will be glad to learn to read
and be able to find
the stories with green in them
and to recognize
the green hands that were here before
the green eyelids and the eyes (Rain 77).

Language becomes at once a tool for uncovering the diminishment of the past. Memory and language together become a way to connect with not only the natural world, but also to a world of change.

The Rain in the Trees is comparable to Yeats’ *Wild Swans of Coole* (1919). For instance, in both collections the reader finds the poets in middle-age, with Merwin being sixty-one and Yeats being fifty-four when their respective collections were published. The voice too in these collections has reached a tone of maturity, imparting wisdom

learned in life's experiences. The similarities become apparent when considering Yeats' "The Wild Swan at Coole" in relation to Merwin's "Snow," as both poems concern the process of ageing and the nature of transience. Both Yeats and Merwin in these poems relate their coming age to phenomena of the natural world. Yeats in "the nineteenth autumn" since he made his count of the swans, resounds the haunting refrain, "All's changed." But Yeats finds comfort in the swans that remain "mysterious, beautiful," and whose "hearts have not grown old." Merwin, too, like Yeats relates the coming of age to natural phenomena, as in "Snow":

comes with the flowers opening
 comes as the hands touch the sky
 comes with late fortune and late seed
 comes with the whole of music
 comes with the light on the mountains
 comes at the hours of clouds
 comes the white hair (Rain 53).

This poem might perhaps be Merwin's supreme achievement as an ecological poet, for in this poem Merwin is able to make connections and find a sense of balance between the motions of his life, his coming age, and the natural movements and process in the cycle of life. This poem ultimately speaks of a reverence for the phenomenal world, which he will later pursue in recent collections *The Pupil* (1999) or *Present Company* (2005).

"Snow," too, expresses an effort of coming to terms with transience and change, understanding them as perhaps the one constant found throughout the natural world.

Merwin in this poem reconciles his own process of aging with the cycle of nature and the rhythms of season. Though Merwin's poetry at times expresses the anger towards human arrogance or despair over ecological loss, Merwin's ecological vision remains transcendent, envisioning a world of new possibilities and perpetual beginnings.

CHAPTER II.

W.S. MERWIN AND SOUTHWEST FRANCE

Southwest France is another place long associated with W.S. Merwin's writings. It was a place of retreat in the mid-1960s, which gave shape to *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders*. And it is also a place that he revisits years later in *The Lost Upland: Stories of Southwest France* (1992), *The Vixen* (1995), and *The Mays of Ventadorn* (2002). Merwin continues to explore humanity's relationship and care for the diminishing natural world like his writings on Hawaii, but his concern and approach to these regions differ. As an environmental aesthetic and concern for the vanishing native life characterize his writings on Hawaii, a pastoral aesthetic and their concern for the diminishing agrarian traditions characterize his writings on Southwest France. This region for Merwin has taught him the ethics found in voluntary relinquishment, simplicity, and a Thoreau-like sense of self-reliance. Merwin writes of his retreat to the region from New York City in 1963, "But one morning, looking south over the roofs of the city that I thought as my own, I realized that if I were to be asked at that moment what I thought would be a good life I would not have a clear answer or one that would convince me. It occurred to me that I knew next to nothing about things that I took for granted every day: the roof over my head, the things I wore, the food I ate. I was over thirty and I thought it was time to know more about them than I did" (Second 3). The region also holds a certain

fascination for Merwin, as it is the region of Provence, the land of the troubadours. For it was his affinity for the occidental language and to the traditions of poetry that originated in the 12th century, with Bernart de Ventadorn and Guilhelm IX, which initially led him to explore the region in the late-1950s. And like his writings on Hawaii, Merwin's later concerns for this region and place surround his larger themes of memory, language, time, and mortality. If Merwin's regionalism of Hawaii is an expression of environmental literature, then his later writings on Southwest France are an expression of the pastoral. Moreover, if his writings on Hawaii are an effort to come to terms with the diminishment and loss of life, then his writings on France are an effort to come to terms with the processes of change and transience.

In "Hotel" from the autobiographical *Unframed Originals*, Merwin describes his first visit to southern France, the region referred to by its inhabitants as the Quercy (155). He describes the area as a "region of rivers," in which flow the Dordogne, the Lot, the Tarn, and the Garonne, "for long curving stretches, beneath pale cliffs dropping from upland plateaus" (155). Merwin's memoirs tell of his sojourning through the river valleys and up to the *cause*, the red-clayed plateaus above the valley of the Lot, "which was the roof of a network of caverns, underground rivers, and tunnels, as intricate as a loaf of bread" (159). During this wandering through the region, Merwin was led to Lot and to the acquisition of a "neglected" farmhouse, which was purchased from an inheritance left by his great cousin Margie. Later, Merwin recounts the first night at the farmhouse and the mystery of place found in the night sounds: "I was alone in the cool darkness of the upland, afloat among the farms and woods. The good of lying there in the night air and the night smells and night sounds of the *cause* and in the immeasurable

antiquity of place, was something I had not even imagined” (161). Yet as the world seems both new and mysterious to Merwin in this moment of awakening, Merwin is soon visited and haunted by the spirits of the past:

I woke suddenly with a feeling of oppression and fright. In my dream I had been lying there, right where I was, and a gray, greenish light like a luminous shadow had revealed to me, as though by moonlight or lightning, the inside of the heavy front door, a few feet away. An iron bolt ran across it into the masonry. I do not remember whether or not I had locked the door before going to bed. In the dream I could see that it was tightly bolted. But as I watched, fingers, and then a hand, a left hand, more a woman’s than a man’s but not obviously of either sex, and of no determinate color- the color of the light- appeared around the edge of the door, groping along it. The wrist followed, and part of the arm, and the fingers felt their way to the bolt, which began to turn and loosen. I could hear the bolt grate and the door begin to move. Then I woke. The house was dark and the night was still (169).

This passage, with its archetypal imagery of the bolt, the door, the shadows, the light, and the “luminous shadow” who visits Merwin in his slumber, is a mythic passage in which conveys a multiplicity of meanings. For one, the visitation of this spirit of place, or ghost of the departed, becomes a symbol for memory. In a following passage, Merwin writes of his purchase of the land with the inheritance left by Margie: “Over the months and years the thought of Margie, and her intent and role in my having it, and being there, surfaced repeatedly like the questioning of the dream. There could be no explanation, naturally” (170). The dream passage becomes a metaphor for memory, as Merwin throughout *Unframed Originals* looks back upon the shadowy figures that pervade his memories of childhood. Merwin, too, encounters reminders of these figures through his present journeys. But this passage is also expressive of Merwin’s awakening to the spirit of the place, to Provencal France. For this region becomes a key to understanding the past, as the cultural memory and traditions of its inhabitants have preserved the language,

customs, and agricultural practices that are a direct link to the Middle Ages. Merwin writes of his first weeks in the region: “and the early explorations of old, empty, sometimes abandoned or ruined buildings, the awareness of the deep past was inseparable from the lure of the land, which soon held me there, and the structures themselves appeared to me as palimpsests of unsounded age” (*Mays* 56). But Merwin’s understanding of this region, with its “palimpsests of unsounded age,” becomes for him the keys to understanding the answer to his own needs for experience; to live more simply and to understand the necessities for existence. Merwin’s pastoral ideal is much deeper than the classical model of *et in arcadia ergo*, or the “flight from the city to the idyllic country”; rather, Merwin’s use of the pastoral becomes a ground for experience. This experience grounded in presence, in the ordinary realities of place, becomes the keys to understanding life’s processes.

“Shepherds” from *The Lost Upland* is an autobiographical rendering of Merwin’s sojourn in the village of Barrade. This narrative recounts his time spent among the villagers of the upland *causse*, from the spring of 1973 until the fall of the following year (Brunner 273). As a literary work, “Shepherds” is a conscious working of the pastoral. It narrates Merwin’s retreat to rural life, whereby he took to tending a garden in “a ruined village” in “a placed that I had found” (*Lost* 59). Merwin’s poems from this sojourn, which comprise the third part of *The Compass Flower*, express a sense of renewal found in the natural world and a sense of joy found in work. As the speaker in “September Plowing” looks out onto the landscape and sees the freshness of wakened life in autumn (“Two day rain wakes the green in the pastures”), he becomes appeased with the changing seasons and aging, leading him to express, “I consider life after life as

treasures.” As a narrative, “Shepherds” is a story of self-relinquishment; a story of leaving behind the city for rural simplicity. The place that Merwin “found” was one that still has numerous reminders of a past age: of “peasant” life and the Middle Ages; of Caesar’s Gaulic wars and *via appia*; and of the cave paintings of the earliest hunters (Lost 85). In terms of plot, the work is structured on the work of the seasons and perceptions of the life of the region, establishing a bond between a writer a place, or a gardener and the landscape. The literature of “voluntary simplicity,” Lawrence Buell argues, “promises to restore the attenuated bond with nature” (Environmental 156). The speaker looks out upon the landscape and offers the reader vignettes of the life of place in season:

From the hayloft window at the back of the house in which M. Vert’s mother had grown up I watched them come in to the pasture below. In the first hours of the morning in the summer they scattered over the rock acres, moving like clouds among the clumps of sloes, through the shadows of brambles, clattering on the loose stones, the lambs calling. The few bells clonking and tonkling I could hear the small teeth snapping the coarse grass close to the ground, and grinding it. The voices of cuckoos echoes from the far trees, and by nine the shrilling of the cicadas was rising like a tide, and a faint smell of mice wafted under the house roof. As the sun climbed, the sheep moved closer together and gathered in the shade of the walnut trees: under a big one standing alone out in the pasture, and under the smaller ones along the wall just below me (Lost 113).

Merwin’s approach to the region is that of a traveler. As in the essay “Reflections of a Mountain,” which narrates Merwin’s visit to the monastic life along the Virgin’s Holy Mountain at Athos, this region is seen from an outsider’s perspective; a perspective that captures a passion for learning and exploration and reverence for the other’s way of life, but with never the intent to stay.

Like most pastoral narratives, such as *Walden* or *Desert Solitaire*, “Shepherds” ends on the return of the narrator back to world and the life in which he comes from, but

with a renewed vision and with his having learned an important life lesson. The narrator, who echoes what Thoreau says upon leaving the woods that he has “several more lives to live,” says to the shepherd Michael in farewell: “There are other place I think I want to see, things I imagine I have to do there. And friends. After all, I wasn’t born here.”

Michael replies to the narrator: “You weren’t born here. But you’re from here” (Lost 155).

Merwin’s use of the pastoral never depicts the region as solely idyllic or bucolic, for underneath his response to the region is an attentiveness to its darker histories and realities. Merwin recalls, “I did not ascribe a prelapsarian perfection to the past which I glimpsed in fragmentary revelations from my neighbors. I was constantly reminded of the strand of meanness, the harshness, the discomfort and cold that were part of their lives, and of the unheeded sufferings of animals raised for slaughter” (Mays 60). The climax of the narrative in “Shepherds” is both tragic and horrific, as a flock of sheep, numbering more than a hundred and forty, are struck head-on by an on-coming locomotive, strewing the landscape with carnage. Central to this scene is Leo Marx’s pastoral motif of “the machine in the garden.” What Marx says of Hawthorne’s notebook sketches of “Sleepy Hollow” in 1844 is also applicable to “Shepherds”:

And yet there is something arresting about the episode: the writer sitting in his green retreat dutifully attaching words to natural facts, trying to tap the subterranean of flow of thought and feeling and then, suddenly, the startling shriek of the train whistle bearing in upon him, forcing him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream. What begins as a conventional tribute to the pleasures of withdrawal from the world- a simple pleasure fantasy- is transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more complex state of mind (15).

What Marx is accounting for in his study of the pastoral in American literature is how the pastoral ideal has been “incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction,” in which the world of the machine, that of progress and industry, becomes a “counterforce” to the Romantic world of nature.

This, too, is central to “Shepherds” as Merwin’s narrative of restoring a garden in a ruinous village shifts to images that recall the aftermath of war, in which the railroad track is described as “the floor of a slaughterhouse” and the “larger pieces of bodies” are carted off in wheelbarrows (Lost 142). And the villagers tend to the remains of the sheep, their conversation opens up to a discussion on “progress” in the region; to discussion on factory farming, industrialization, insurance agreements, and the arrival of traveling hunters. The locomotive in this narrative is not only a symbol of progress and industrialization encroaching upon rural life, but also it is a haunting reminder of the destructiveness of civilization and of the innocent, non-human victims who suffer. And as the train bears down upon the flock of sheep, this passage reflects our inability as a species to halt the destruction that we have set in-motion. On the other hand, Merwin uses this catastrophic climax to make a powerful statement on humanity. For, because of this incident, two opposing, feuding shepherds (Michael and M. Vert) are reconciled and unified, despite their long-standing differences, in the cause of caring for or depositing of the remains of the flock.

“Shepherds” is also a story of loss and change. One of the central images throughout the story is the walnut tree, which Merwin tell us, are a “kind of unofficial totem to the region” (Lost 91). He writes, “Throughout the country the older inhabitants spoke of a general decline in vigor, productivity, and health of the walnut trees”

(Lost 91). Though one of the causes of this decline is “the ink,” which “seems to be combine cancer and hemophilia,” another cause to the decline of walnut tree is the decline in shepherding itself, as the sheep manure and urine seemed to have “made a difference” to the health of the trees (Lost 91). The decline of the walnut tree becomes a symbol for the decline of shepherding.

Merwin later addresses the industrialization of agriculture and the different approaches to the region. The character M. Pouchou, along with the feed companies, represent the “progressive” approach to agriculture, having constructed a three-story “sheep factory” and private slaughterhouse, which he then ships to cities and supermarkets. As elected mayor of the “commune,” M. Pouchou leads a campaign to close the municipal slaughterhouse of the region, which would then create a monopoly or a “cartel” of the industrial meat producers. In contrast, the eccentric Michael represents traditional agricultural practices and the continuance of “the old ways,” such as shearing his sheep by hand and taking shelter in old huts built into the boundary walls on the pastures (Lost 114). Merwin writes of these shelters, “in the present age there was certain shame attached to the notion of actually entering one and sitting there, taking shelter in so rude and small a place, the kind of protection that humans have been making for themselves in that region, out of the stones lying there, for thousands of years” (Lost 115). M. Vert represents the approach to agriculture between the progressive and traditional. One can see this in the description of his sheep barn, which is constructed of the original stonework, but with modern improvements, such as metal roofing that the peasants disdain for its insulation, and an industrial shed that is built off the barn, which is to house his tractor, hay rake, and manure spreader. But as this narrative is a story of

loss and change to the region in contemporary times, it is also a story of the past generations' efforts to save the region.

One story that is told in "Shepherds" is the story of the region during occupation. During the Second World War, the region maintained its local colors, as the villagers continued to speak their own language and produce their own food, thwarting efforts of the Germans to "take" the region or seize upon their livestock. To counter the efforts of the Germans, the Resistance formed a guerrilla band and was able to obtain gasoline, which led them to move whole flocks of sheep at night when news reached of the Germans approaching. Merwin extols the villagers' valor in their resistance against the Germans:

Most of the people of the region had not considered their own behavior during the war at all remarkable, even when they knew how people behaved in other parts of the country, in the north, in the cities. They were proud of their distances from cities, and always had been. They did not expect much from there. They said that they had acted as they had because that was what one did" (Lost 103).

The story of their resistance during occupation, and even Michael's "backwards" way of carrying on the old traditions, become an example of the necessity to preserve the local colors and traditions of a place or region. "Shepherds" ultimately warns of the threat of progress and modernity to the traditional and rural way of life, the uprooting of culture. These concerns are relevant not only to Southwest France, but are also relevant issues, as has been discussed earlier, to contemporary Hawaii.

Merwin returns to Southwest France in the latter poems of *Travels*. "On the Old Way," for instance, tells of returning to the region after "twelve years and a death" (132). As the "silent train" travels south "through the veiled morning," the poem becomes a

metaphor for remembering, as the speaker begins to see the familiar associations emerging: “the stuccoed walls,” the suburbs, the rivers, “the nude hills” (132). This poem posits on the paradox he encounters as approaches place-- the constancy of associations and memory despite personal change. This realization comes in the final lines of the poem when the speaker senses, “for this is the way/ almost home almost certain that it was/ there almost believing that it could be/ everything in spite of everything” (132). The paradox of constancy and change is central to the preceding poem “On the Back of the Boarding Pass” as well.

In “On the Back of the Boarding Pass,” the speaker expresses the feeling of dislocation and disorientation while walking through the terminals of an airport. The movement of walking through the terminals (“this passage this going through”) becomes reflective of the necessity for remembering (129). For one, memory grounds one to place and to a feeling of constancy, which becomes in this poem a necessity, as the speaker recollects “the morning of mending the fence” in which he was “trying to tie a thread around the valley” to keep it in its “place without changing” (129). The act of remembering becomes the connection of consciousness to both time and place.

Memory, “the vanishing constants,” is long a preoccupation in Merwin’s poetry. (Travels 129). As we have discussed in the first chapter, memory in Merwin’s poetry is more than a connection between the past and the present; rather, memory lends itself to our own understanding of the present. In the later poems, Southwest France becomes a place that is deeply connected to Merwin’s own personal past. Memory then becomes central to Merwin’s own understanding of place, but more importantly what place teaches

him about the present. These connections between memory and place, constancy and change, past and present become the central theme of *The Vixen*.

The Vixen begins with "Fox Sleep," which retells a Buddhist legend. In the poem an old man retells how he was asked by an assembly, "When someone has wakened to what is really there/ is that person free of the chain of consequences" (4). The old man acknowledges that this is so and is consequently changed into "a fox for five hundred lives" (4). The old man, in the form of a fox, accosts the speaker of this passage with the same question. The speaker replies, "That person sees it as it is" (4). This reply awakens the old man to his original self, at which the old man asks those assembled to bury the body of his former self, the fox, "as one of them" (4).

In the next section, the speaker, presumably Merwin himself, is walking home "after midnight" and finds the body of a fox, or "a vixen," showing no signs of how it died ("nothing broken or lost or torn or unfinished") (5). The speaker carries the fox's body home and buries it in his garden "in the morning of the clear autumn" (5). Central to the section is the felt presence of place ("it seemed as though nothing has changed") against the changes that overcome the speaker's life ("this time/ was a time of ending this time the long marriage was over") (5). The speaker seeks to understand the processes of change; moreover, to awaken "to what is really there" and see the "chain of consequences" as they are, thus burying the body of the fox (4).

What Merwin comes to understand throughout *The Vixen* is perhaps the only constant is change. "All phenomena," Peter Mattheissen writes, "are processes, connections, all is in flux, and at moments this flux is actually visible" (64). *The Vixen* evokes the local colors and provincial life of Southwest France, but ultimately becomes

for Merwin a focal point toward understanding the connections between memory and perception, constancy and change, absence and presence.

“One of the Lives,” for instance, concerns the past connections, the chain of consequences, which create the present. Merwin recollects the chance encounters of his life; because of their occurrence, he is allowed his present experiences in Southwest France. He looks back at his days at Princeton that led to his first visit to Europe, which allowed him the opportunity to teach in Majorca and Spain; and even further back, he recollects the chance encounters of his parents meeting. If these chance connections were never made, then, “I would not have found myself on an iron cot/ with my head by the fireplace of a stone farmhouse” (31). At the center of the poem, Merwin recalls the sickness that overtook him when he first began living in the “old farmhouse.” He writes of this incident in “Hotel”: “That autumn, for instance, just as the weather turned cold, after months of hard physical work I caught a fever and lay delirious for days before the symptoms declared themselves as those of a virulent and, it was said, dangerous form of hepatitis” (Unframed 170). But even because of this sickness, Merwin is able to behold the phenomenal world:

I would not have seen through the cracked pane the darkening
valley with its river sliding past the amber mountains
nor have wakened hearing plums fall in the small hour
thinking I knew where I was as I heard them fall (Vixen 31).

Merwin is seeking to understand the consequences of change that led to the perception of the phenomenal world. The very act of perceiving these moments, which seem to lie outside of time (as Eliot says in *Burnt Norton*: “To be conscious is to not be in time”), are consequences of these past connections. These connections, Merwin suggests, often arise

from misfortune or sorrow. For example, because his friend's father was killed by the Germans in World War II, Merwin was able to form a friendship that would eventually lead him to Europe; and because his mother's parents died, his mother, through moving, was able to meet Merwin's father. "One of the Lives" asks the reader to consider the chain of consequences that continue to shape their present realities.

Throughout *The Vixen*, memory becomes connected to place, causing place to become associated with sorrow and loss. For example, "Authority" is a portrait of "the oldest man" in a provincial town who sits on the corner in the afternoon. The speaker shifts the reader's attention to the man's process of remembering: "he said that is what I am doing/ I am thinking/ and things come to me now when nobody else knows them/ he was visited by the dazzling accidents" (10). What the old man recollects is the tragic events of place: the boy that mangled his hand in a "trip hammer;" the man whose legs were crushed; or the woman who was murdered (10). The man also recalls memories of father, the town blacksmith, and how the man never perfected the art of his father. What remains after his father's passing and the blacksmith tools have been sold, is "the die for stamping the name/ of the village in the blade" (10).

Like the old man, Merwin too recalls a memory of his father in "Passing." This poem recalls the sense of distance that Merwin felt as he met his father on "his impromptu journey" through Europe. Merwin feels that his father does not take notice of his house, although it caught fire the previous day; instead, his father inquires about "changing money" (22). Moreover, his father "seemed to see nothing" of Merwin's new place, although he drives him "the long way round so he could see the country;" instead, his father is more concerned about "trains for the Holy Land" (22). Only through the

perspective gained through recollection can Merwin sense the transience and temporality of this encounter with his father (“I did not know that it was the only time”) (22).

And throughout his journey through the landscape of Southwest France, Merwin encounters reminders of sorrow and human suffering. In “The Red” Merwin comes upon a reminder of the past in “a bare place in the woods.” Beside “the remains of a wall,” Merwin reads the “names cut deep into stone” in memoriam of the dead who were executed by the Germans at “that spot” during the occupation (53). Throughout this collection memory, place, loss, and sorrow become the grounds for experience.

Merwin perceives Southwest France throughout this collection through the processes of change and loss. The last of the remaining oaks, the “towering ancient elders,” have fallen in “Oak Time;” swallows are seen “streaking in and out through” the “broken panes over the front door” in “Threshold;” “Ill Wind” tells of the “scourge of harvests,” of the wind, that would devastate vineyards and send the roofs of the houses “sailing,” but also of the “fragile green” that “survived it” (6; 8; 12). “Returning Season” tells of the village now “empty” and as “the year goes on turning and barns remain without breath” (24). Often too, the landscape is shown as a natural process, in motion or in flux. “Season” tells of “the whisper in the tawny grass;” birds waken in “full song and the dew” glitters “in the web” in “The Speed of Light;” and “an age of mist” gathers “in the oaks” in “White Morning” (40; 42; 17).

Furthermore, “Distant Morning” echoes Keats’ “To Autumn” as both poems present the flourishing of animal life at the end of either a day, as with Merwin, or the end of a season, as with Keats. “Distant Morning” tells of the nightwalker “curled in their houses,” “the hedgehogs in the deep brush,” the badger and foxes burrowed into the

ground, and bats suspended “under the eaves,” finding transience, like Keats, to be a part of life (68). Like “Passing,” “none of it” (the transience of the moment) would resonate with meaning until “later” (22). This perspective of the past leads to an elegiac tone throughout the collection.

In fact, the majority of this collection consists of elegies for the waning of peasant and pastoral life in the villages of this region. In “Oak Time,” the speaker laments,

no animals are led out any longer from the barns
they are all gone from the village Eduouard is gone
who walked out before them to the end of his days
keeping an eye on the walnuts still green from valley (The Vixen 6).

“End of Day” continues this, speaking of the threat of progress to the village; a concern that echoes the *progress* in Hawaii:

And Baille has plans now to demolish
the ancient walls of the land and level it wide
so that trucks can go all the way down to where the lambs
with perhaps two weeks to live are waiting (The Vixen 25).

Merwin’s perception of place greatly differs between *The Vixen* and *Travels*. In *Travels*, Merwin continues to find how much of the region continues to remain the same, upon visiting after a long absence. Like memories, place in *Travels* becomes something permanent for Merwin, an invariable link to the past, which contrasts against the changes that have overcome his life since leaving. In *The Vixen*, on the other hand, Merwin awakens to the changes that are always beginning. Throughout the stories of villagers, in the perceived loss and change of the agrarian traditions, and in the cycle and rhythm of life and the seasons, he is reminded of the impermanence and transience that is a part of reality. The role of memory then takes on a larger importance toward understanding

place; for not only is memory a connection between the past and the present, it also provides a sense of constancy in a world of change.

“The West Window” expresses this sense of constancy in its portrait of a house. When the “cracked plaster” and “the patchwork of thin bricks” fall away from house, the speaker is able to see the house in essence: “empty and entire” (9). The speaker feels a presence in the house, seeing, “something that had been there.../ through births ages deaths but that no one had set eyes on” (9). The presence he feels is a sense of constancy of the place (“they had been there before and would remain in their own time”) despite the motion and movement of life that surround the house (“the pigeons of a gable roof”) (9). The house becomes the one constant, a structure that remains both in and outside of time, in which the speaker can sense place. From the doorway opening to the south, the speaker can see the village; from the opening onto the north, the speaker can see the fields and the valley; while from the west window, the speaker can see “the moment” of the closing of the day, as the day moves “in silence through the tall/ casements and ivy” (9). Looking through the west window becomes expressive of facing transience, perceiving the motions of flux and change in the autumn of life.

The perception of time between past and present becomes blurred throughout *The Vixen*. In “Completion,” Merwin writes, “Seen from afterward the time appears to have been/ all of a piece which of course it was but how seldom/ it seemed that way when it was still happening” (54). He speaks of the struggle to escape from “dread news”: “I could not let go/ of what I longed to be gone from” (54). Throughout this collection, Merwin is able to bridge these gaps of division-- the distances between the past and the present and between constancy and change. In “Gate,” the speaker walks out across the

upland meadows to behold the pastures “filled with the radiance of sunset” (7). As he walks across the meadow, he imagines a reunion with old friends. In the final lines, the past becomes merged with the present, as the speaker walks out onto the landscape with the remembered: “we stood here talking about our lives in the autumn” (7).

Merwin continues to bridge this sense of division in “The Vixen.” In his apostrophe to the vixen, the sight of the shadowy agent of mystery and change (“aura of complete darkness keeper of the kept secrets/ of the destroyed stories the escaped dreams the sentences”) becomes a transcendent moment of wakefulness:

when I have seen you I have waked and slipped from the calendars
from the creeds of difference and the contradictions
that were my life and all the crumbling fabrications (69).

“A Given Day” continues this sense of wakefulness, expressing the necessity for remembering: “I am/ remembering the gradual sweetness of morning/ the clear spring of being here as it rises one by one” (*The Vixen* 70). The speaker closes the distances and gaps in the perception of time. For as the speaker continues to recollect the departed (“some that have gone and arise only not to be here”), the friends, family, and the extinct animals, the speaker finds them present in his mind, which opposes the forces of transience, change, and loss: “they are all here/ in the clearness of the morning in the first light/ that remembers its way now to the flowers of winter” (*The Vixen* 70).

In both *The Vixen* and *The Lost Upland*, Merwin’s approach to the region is akin to that of a nature writer, as his attention is to the life of the region, animal and plants both, in the cycle of the seasons. These collections both stem from the tradition of the pastoral in their contention between the city and the country. Moreover, Merwin’s concern in these writings is with the relationship between culture and the natural world,

or between an individual and the landscape. Merwin is seeking a more sustainable culture in a time when agrarian traditions and a culture of simplicity are being lost with the dominance of mechanized technology and factory farming, and when the country itself is being marginalized by the industrial sprawl of the city. In the *Paris Review* interview, Merwin recalls a recurring nightmare that he had as a child of “the whole world becoming a city.” He says, “It doesn’t seem so remote, though I don’t believe such a world could survive, and I certainly would not want to live it” (Hirsch, “The Art” 5). Merwin’s regional concerns for Southwest France ultimately become connected to those that he has for Hawaii. In these later writings, Merwin has written from this awareness that humanity is losing its connection to the natural world, to places, and to the traditions that have defined our culture. Perhaps, though, what makes Merwin’s reputation as a writer so enduring is his effort to create a poetry that seeks to restore and renew humanity’s connection and place within the phenomenal, living world.

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