W. S. Merwin: a poetic cosmology in exploration

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W. S. Merwin:
A poetic cosmology in exploration

by

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<td>The Compass Flower</td>
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<tr>
<td>CL</td>
<td>The Carrier of Ladders</td>
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<td>DB</td>
<td>The Dancing Bears</td>
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<td>DF</td>
<td>The Drunk in the Furnace</td>
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<td>FF</td>
<td>W. S. Merwin: The First Four Books of Poems</td>
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<td>FH</td>
<td>Flower &amp; Hand</td>
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<td>GB</td>
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<td>L</td>
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<td>MJ</td>
<td>A Mask For Janus</td>
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<td>MT</td>
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<td>V</td>
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INTRODUCTION

W. S. Merwin published his first book of poetry, A Mask for Janus, in 1952. This book was chosen by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award and was described almost universally by critics as formalist, traditional, and elegant—descriptions typical of academic poetry of that time (Brunner, 3). As he grew, as a man and as a poet, Merwin’s style and subject matter appeared to shift erratically, requiring critics to continually perform mental gymnastics in order to follow the new twists and turns. Just as critics were getting used to the style of one collection of poetry, he would publish his next volume and push them off balance again. In the forty-seven years that have passed since the publication of A Mask for Janus, Merwin has published fourteen more volumes of poetry, the latest being River Sound, which is just being made public at the time of this writing, and The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative, published in 1998. Each volume has distinctive characteristics that cause confusion for those who thought they had finally found the pattern behind Merwin’s changes.

No two critics of Merwin’s poetry have agreed on what it is trying to say. Although many critics note that myth plays a role in the understanding of his work, each sees that role in a different light. The divergent views of Merwin’s poetry are evident in the differences in the five book-length studies of Merwin that have appeared to date.

Thomas Byers is one of the few who do not look at the mythic aspect of his work. Instead, he considers Merwin in relation to both Walt Whitman’s universal self, the self that is interchangeable with the Other, and Wallace Stevens’ reaction to this concept. Byers maintains that Merwin, unlike Whitman, employs a narrative self isolated itself from everything else, especially in The Lice, the volume Byers uses in the comparison.

Edward Brunner’s main focus is on Merwin’s publications as individual statements, with special attention given to various aspects of structure and their
relationship with the subject matter in the poetry of each volume. He investigates these potential meaning of these statements and their differences in a chronological order, discussing the various poems that exhibit the characteristics of the changes in style and structure. I agree that Merwin uses the structure of his poems to enhance their meaning, but I believe that the more important question is why the change has come about in the first place. I will argue that structure these are used as different avenues in Merwin’s exploration of the possibilities that exist in the world.

H. L. Hix takes a topical approach to Merwin’s poetry and discusses various themes that appear in it. He looks at the changing themes and styles as directly relating to what Merwin was experiencing in his life at that time. I believe that this may indeed help to explain many of the shifts in themes, especially later in his career, but I do not think that Hix places enough emphasis on the role that myth plays in Merwin’s work.

Cheri Davis takes a fairly strict chronological look at Merwin’s work. She represents the works as being distinct from one another on a number of levels, with each having a more or less specific focus and point. Again, I do not think that enough emphasis is placed on the role of myth. Furthermore, I propose that during the course of his career Merwin looked at the same subjects from different angles in an effort to understand more about them, not because his attitude toward them had necessarily changed that much.

Finally, Mark Christhilf provides an extensive investigation on the role of mythic themes in Merwin’s work. He sees Merwin as trying to reinvent other mythologies. I believe that what Merwin is, instead, trying to do is to incorporate many of the traditional mythologies into a much larger framework, not validate any previous one for a contemporary reader.

One of the things that makes Merwin’s work seem unstable to many critics is his refusal to give them a solid grasp of what he is talking about in his works. He hints at his
subject or describes it in such a way that there are few solid statements for the reader to depend upon. I believe that understanding his work comes most freely by looking at Merwin's poetry as a whole, not grouped by individual volumes, and at each poem as a step in a journey toward understanding. By realizing that he is involved in this journey, we are able to see that Merwin is using his poetry as a way to explore a unique cosmology concerning the world and humanity's place in it by investigating our use of language and our relationship to nature.

An examination of Merwin's work toward this end entails looking at a number of aspects. Critical response to Merwin's works has generally been precipitated by the general changes that are easily noticeable in his poetry. Once these changes are explored, one needs to educe the cosmology that prompts them and to identify some of the key elements in understanding it.
CHAPTER 1. THE EVOLUTION OF MERWIN'S POETIC STYLE

At the time that Merwin came onto the scene, two types of poetry were being written. In one type "the overt subject of the poem is a specific experience of the 'I' of the poem at a specific time and place." In the other the "the overt subject is universal and impersonal, frequently a myth, and it is the personal experience of the poet which is implied" (Davis, 26). Most critics agree that Merwin's earliest works fall into this latter category.

In his Preface to _A Mask for Janus_, Auden described Merwin as a "keeper of the tradition of poetic craftsmanship and inheritor of the mythic tradition" (Davis, 26). In this work, Merwin presented a look at traditional mythic themes and subjects from a new vantage. Often this vantage was the point-of-view of one of the participants who has traditionally been silent. This allows the possibility of new meanings for the action of these myths. The language style and subject matter of these early poems were undoubtedly influenced by the translations that he was doing at the time. The perspective that he used in these poems shows that even at this point he was realizing that poetry and myth shared the purpose of directing attention to humanity's unity with the universe. It was this purpose that would come to be the stronger driving force in his later works (Christhilf, 2).

The Modernists writers, among whom most critics placed Merwin at this point in his career, viewed myths as the bedrock of culture (Christhilf, 2), but theirs was a parroting and pirating of these forms (Christhilf, 10). Realizing that there was something more to be explored here, Merwin used these myths as his starting point. He distilled the timeless elements of mythology into his own works, using the elements that could apply to the contemporary as well as they do the ancient, into the narrative voice of his own poetry, even as the subject matter departed from this format. These traditional forms and
the objective viewpoint of them allowed Merwin to gain distance from the ego that drove the other school of poetry that Auden described: the Confessional or Post-Modernists. This in turn allowed him to explore his subject for more meaning than a focus on the personal would allow.

Merwin’s longevity alone assured that his poetry was going to change, but he chose to hasten its evolution, altering the existing forms or subject matter, or incorporating new elements into the existing framework of his poetry—a fact which can make it difficult to place him into the context of contemporary American poetry (Davis, 17). He felt the need to do more than to mimic the ancient styles ad subjects of poetry and began to use his poetry as an avenue for exploring his own cosmology concerning what the place of humans in the world truly is.

His poetic style shifted away from many of the constraints placed on poets by the boundaries of Formalism so that he might unveil new understandings and a message that was more relevant to the times he was living in (Christhilf, 10). He began to stray from purely traditional themes and subjects and also incorporated a first-person narrative style.

His shift away from the more formal aspects of poetry did not push him into the “self-obsessions of confessionalism and the ramblings of the solipsistic voice” that narrated that style of poetry (Bowers, 246). His use of myth (Hix, 29) and the guardedness and moral urgency of his father’s household may well have led to the same distinct features appearing in Merwin’s poetry in a time that prized “histrionic self-revelation” in its poems (Hix, 1). For an example of Merwin’s use of the first-person voice early in his career, one can look at “To Dido” (FF, GB, 126).

With dumb belongings there can be
The gesture that bestows, for its own reasons;
Its mumbled inadequacy reminds us always
In this world how little can be communicated.
And for these, they too are only tokens
Of what there is no word for: their worth
Is a breath or nothing, and the spirit who can convey?
I have doubts whether such things can be dedicated. They themselves determine whose they are, announcing unbidden their conception in a still place of perpetual surprise. Can one offer things that know their own way and will not be denied? These are bodied forth in the country of your love: what other landscapes they may name, from that place is their language. In the cadences of that tongue they learned what they are. How more can I make them yours?

As we can see here, the narrator is present in the poem, but is not the focus of it. Instead, the narrator is exploring something more universally felt and is more focused on how to move beyond it. There is none of the self-aggrandizement or self-pity that is often associated with the first-person in contemporary poetry.

There are many reasons that Merwin chose to abandon the tighter classical forms of villanelles, ballads, sestinas, et al. but Neal Bowers (248) and James Dickey (322) write that the key reason is that Merwin needed the form of his poetry to be an extension of the content. Merwin felt that the traditional forms were limited in their effectiveness in contemporary times. Once he had become comfortable with his subject matter, he felt free to abandon these traditional forms in search of forms that more properly fit his subject. Brunner suggests that many of the symbols that would play important roles in his later works existed embryonically in his earliest works (3). The changes in style and subject matter would come to represent various explorations into the beliefs behind his poetry.

Even though Merwin began to use the free form of the Confessional poets, he did not share many of their other characteristics. Eventually he would write autobiographical poems, but even these were more a record of his family’s history than a record of thoughts and actions (Hix, 105). Merwin chose to not ally himself with either camp in the debate over whether form was a necessity in poetry or not. In the debates about the use of form, Merwin, like many of his narrators, was an outsider, observing but not
involved, alternately claimed or rejected by both factions.

Merwin's use of traditional form was dependent upon the subject matter of an individual poem. His was linked to the Post-Modernists by the style of the poetry while he retained the Modernist attention to mythic subjects. The Modernist lack of personal detail and identity gave a more widespread availability to the message that he was trying to bring than did the tighter focus of his confessional contemporaries (Frazier, 347). For Merwin to focus on the "I" would distract readers from their own explorations of his cosmology.

Even before he began to seriously venture into the realms of free form poetry, he began to relax the subject matter of his poems. The background of classical mythology had been a good starting point, but, like the classical forms, it limited the explorations he was able to embark upon. He began to look at how he, or his narrator, fit into the world which he was observing. The increased presence of the narrator in his poems did not, however, become their focus, as it would in a Confessional poem.

One of the important things that Merwin tries to bring to light in his poetry is how humans are not properly filling their role in the world. They have come to see themselves in a false position of importance in the scheme of creation. This has a great deal to do with the cosmology that he was developing and is discussed in more depth later in the paper. This subject matter could not be explored fully within the confines in which the Modernists had placed themselves because the forms they used in their poetry limited what their explorations. Understanding this helps us to understand the motivation behind his poetic shifts.

Even the change in style and subject matter of his poems did not satisfy him. For reasons that will be discussed later, Merwin continued to seek new ways of evoking more or different meaning from his poetry. His next change was to move away from the stylized, affected language that went so well with the traditional forms. Instead, he began
to use a “nominal grammar” that sought the essence of things through the simplicity inherent in such descriptions and the greater coherency allowed by less specific wordings (Hoeppner, 312). In this less specific wording and sentence structure, the words do not seek to supplant the essence of the thing. Instead, they offer readers the opportunity to see the thing in the manner that best suits them. The manner in which Merwin began to use language forced readers to observe, comment, question, and puzzle out the situation for themselves (Davis, 42).

By using these less specific, generic wordings, Merwin was able to create generic experiences that were potentially accessible to a wider audience and would allow them more freedom in their interpretations of his poetry (Davis, 20). His words became approximations of what we were supposed to come to understand from his poetry. In becoming merely approximations, words would allow us to take note of facets of the world that we might fail to notice or understand if the poet tried to lead us to that understanding. Ironically, this choice of giving the readers the freedom to find their own meaning caused some critics to complain that Merwin was being indecisive as a poet. In actuality, Merwin was intentionally presenting his poetry in a manner that did not speak decisively about the uncertainty of our position in the world but enacted it so that we could better understand and seek to remedy it (Brunner, 55).

To encourage an even freer interpretation of his poetry, he eventually chose to abandon the use of punctuation. The greater ambiguity this presents caused more confusion for his critics. The abandonment of punctuation forces readers “to attend to the semantic movements of the verse” (Ramsey, 25) more closely than they might otherwise. This is yet another way that Merwin allows his readers to choose the meaning that they get from his poetry depending upon how they choose to group various words. “My Friends” (SF, MT, 64) presents us with one example of how meaning was opened or changed by this lack.
My friends without shoes leave
What they love
Grief moves among them as a fire among
Its bells
My friends without clocks turn
On the dial they turn
They part

As this excerpt shows, there are different ways that the words can be grouped, with no certainty as to what Merwin was hoping to get from the poem. The second line shows us that sentences do not have to end at the end of a line and that the line may contain more than one sentence. This opens up the possibilities for other groupings of words. If readers start a sentence with “Grief moves among them” they get a different interpretation if they choose to end that sentence by ending it after “fire” than they do by stopping after “bells.”

Eventually, he came to feel that the broad generalizations, created by his generic wordings could not continue to forward his explorations. In addition, his residence in and attachment to Hawaii created a desire in him to make known the destruction of the natural elements of that area in favor of economic expansion. This presented him with a microcosmic example of what he had been trying to explain throughout his career. He was witnessing the destruction of native ecosystems and cultures in favor of those that were more advantageous to the economically empowered. His poetry now focused on making others aware of how much more was being lost than they realized.

To instill this awareness, Merwin reverted back to using more detail in his description and wordings. The details that he chose to include still did not fix the narrator for the reader, but they did more to describe the things that Merwin felt were being lost through our self-obsession and lack of respect for whatever does not directly concern our well-being. Mythical allusions were still a part of his work, but they no longer served to distance the poem from the personal but to show the broader significance of the moments being discussed (Hix, 146).
By bringing up specific instances he forces the reader to see things for what they are meant to be in the grand scheme and not just as the sum of what they can be in an economic sense. This can be seen in “Questions to Tourists Stopped by a Pineapple Field” *(FH, OH, 136)*. By asking questions such as “do you know how the land was acquired to be turned into pineapple fields” and “would you suppose that the fields represent an improvement” readers are asked to consciously consider whether they are going to respect or exploit a given situation. There is no longer the simple bailout of ignorance. This provides one example of how putting things into a proper perspective can create a sense of humility and respect in those who think about what is being discussed.

In addition to discussing particular places, as he included more detail in his poetry, he also revisited themes he had discussed earlier in his career. *The Vixen*, written in 1995, reaffirms his dedication to themes such as seeing the inherent possibilities of things (*Fox Sleep*, 3), realizing these possibilities recognizing what they are not (*Garden*, 14), or acknowledging the importance of moments in which our conscious perception is obscured (*White Morning*, 17). Again, it was not his focus that changed, but his approach to it. He continues to seek out understanding along new paths or along old paths from new vantages, no longer the expansive vista, but closer and more personal views (*Hix*, 153).

The change in detail and theme were accompanied in these later works by a change in the narrative voice of the poems. The narrator now had a vested interest in the outcome of the situation. In his own life, Merwin’s settling in Hawaii was an opportunity to show how one could “live within the limits of the natural order instead of self-destructively attempting to overcome nature by manipulation, possession, and control” (*Hix*, 124). One paradoxical aspect of this situation was that neither Merwin nor his narrator are native to the area (*Hix*, 133). The resolution of this lies in the fact that
Merwin’s narrator has always been an outsider. Even so, these narrators have always seen clearly what needed to be done and discussed it objectively. Merwin himself has always had an empathy for the natural feel of the world.

It is also possible to look at Merwin’s choice of settling down and focusing more on specific areas as his decision that he had spent enough time showing us various pathways toward achieving balance. With that decided, it was now time for him to show a specific case in which it was necessary for this balance to be achieved and some ways to do this.

Now that Merwin had come to the point in his exploration of his cosmology where he was ready to focus on a more specific locale, he also chose to describe what was occurring in the southwestern region of France, where he had lived earlier in his career. This focus helps to show that what he was witnessing in Hawaii was not an isolated example and that local cultures in what we consider to be civilized areas are also being subsumed into a more bland mass culture that did not allow for such individualized modes of living. In our desire to make everything profitable we are destroying both the natural world and these “lesser” cultures. Both of these examples show that what is being lost has value that is not easily seen. It is these values that Merwin was trying to bring to light.

The changes that Merwin’s work has undergone in the course of his career are signs of his search for a method of understanding what it means to be a human living in a world that does not acknowledge the significance that we have convinced ourselves that we deserve. Many of the Post-Modern poets were focusing on the “self” as the only common point of reference in their poetry and were searching out their significance in the world. Merwin, on the other hand, was pointing out our insignificance and searching for the proper place of humans within the mythic, universal scheme.
CHAPTER 2. THE NARRATIVE VOICE OF THE OUTSIDER

Having discussed the many changes that W. S. Merwin’s poetry has undergone during the course of his career, I need to consider one more technical aspect before beginning my exploration of the cosmology that is developed in his works. Many of Merwin’s poems are written in a first person point-of-view, yet there is a sense of detachment in that narrator. I will discuss how the use of this outsider allows Merwin to critique the society in which he lives by distancing him from it.

Many critics (Bowers, St. John, Hix, and Brunner, for example) agree that Merwin’s narrative voice speaks from a view apart from the society being observed or the area through which it is traveling. One example of such a moment is in his poem “The Station” (FF, GB, 161).

Two boards with a token roof, backed
Against the shelving hill, and a curtain
Of frayed sacking which the wind absently
Toyed with on one the side toward the sea:
From that point already so remote that we
Continually caught ourselves talking in whispers
No path went on but only the still country
Unfolding as far as we could see
In the luminous dusk its land that had not been
lived on
Ever, or not within living memory.

This less than shelter, then, was the last
Human contrivance for our encouragement:
Improvised so hastily, it might have been
Thrown together only the moment
Before we arrived, yet so weathered,
Warped and patched, it must have stood there
Longer than we knew. And the ground before it
Was not scarred with the rawness of construction
Nor even beaten down by feet, but simply barren
As one felt it always had been: something
between
Sand and red shale with only the spiky dune-
grass
Growing, and a few trees stunted by wind.

Some as they arrived appeared to be carrying
Whole households strapped onto their shoulders,
Often with their tired children asleep
Among the upper baskets, and even
A sore dog limping behind them. Some
Were traveling light for the journey:
A knife and matches, and would sleep
In the clothes they stood up in. And there were
The barefoot ones, from some conviction
With staves, some from poverty with nothing.

Burdens and garments bore no relation
To the ages of the travelers; nor, as they sat
In spite of fatigue talking late
Into the night, to the scope and firmness
Of their intentions. It was, for example,
A patriarch herding six grandchildren
In his family, and who had carried
More than his own weight of gear all day
Who insisted that three day’s journey inland
Would bring them to a sheltered valley
Along a slow river, where even the clumsiest
farmer
Would grow fat on the land’s three crops a year.

And a youth with expensive hiking shoes
And one blanket to carry, who declaimed
Most loudly on the effort of the trip,
The stingy prospects, the risks involved
In venturing beyond that point. Several
Everyone knew that it was all decided:
That some, even who spoke with most eloquence
Of the glories of exodus and the country
Waiting to be taken, would be found
Scrabbling next day for the patch of ground
Nearest the shelter, or sneaking back
The way they had come, or hiring themselves out
As guides to this point, and no one would be able
To explain what had stopped them there; any more
Than one would be able afterwards to say
Why some who perhaps sat there saying least,
And not, to appearances, the bravest
Or best suited for such a journey,
At first light would get up and go on.

In this poem, the narrator does not seem to be involved in the action of the poem.
Though he includes himself among the travelers, we learn nothing of his circumstances,
reasons for being there, or even what his final decision is going to be. These are the
elements that would have been the focus for his Confessional contemporaries. We do see
that he has been non-judgmentally observing and reporting to the reader what is
occurring. The reader must seek out the meaning from the hints, fragments, and
suppositions that are presented. One possible meaning is presented in the discussion of
the Journey in the pages to follow.

“The Station” is one example of how Merwin’s narrator betrays little or no
personal identity while speaking from an almost disembodied voice (Frazier, 341). Even
though there is no clear sense of the narrative voice, it is described by Cheri Davis as
having the feel of a world-weary old man (23). She describes this as being an influence
of the spirit of the Middle Ages, telling the audience what it needs to know and not trying
to justify the reason for any weaknesses. As a scene is described, we get hints of the
narrator’s experiences and a feel for the wisdom the narrator has gained through them.
This lack of personal detail serves many purposes. The first of these is providing a
distance from the subject of the poem that a more personal voice doesn’t. A more
passionate and personal voice could be argued to be speaking more subjectively because of its emotional ties to the subject, whereas the distance creates a more objective, logical-seeming stance. It also gives him an aura of knowledge and experience that Merwin feels will lead readers to take the poem more seriously, searching out its hidden meanings and lesson. This leads to a paradox when we look at Merwin’s assertion that we need to go beyond our reliance on logic to understand the world that will be discussed later. The only way to come to an understanding of the poem’s meaning is to search it out, yet this interferes with our ability to interact with the world in the way that Merwin is trying to describe.

The second purpose of this narrator is to deter the poetry from being read as a form of self-exposure. Presenting the details of this narrator’s life would distract the reader from the main point of the poems: the intricacy of the position in which he finds himself in relation to the rest of the world (Brunner, 5). Readers are to extrapolate that they, too, are in that position and that they may well be that narrator. Many critics missed this aspect of Merwin’s poetry in their search for the personal details that they can attribute to Merwin, the kinds of details that inhabited the works of his contemporaries.

A final purpose for the anonymity of the narrator is that it represents Merwin’s own attempt to separate himself from the society in which he was living so that he might observe it more objectively, without overtly presenting his judgment of it. When he does cast judgment, especially in works from *A Drunk in the Furnace* and *The Lice*, it is typically less than favorable. In “The Last One” (*SF, L*, 86) that judgment calls for the eradication of the parasite called man as retribution for his actions.

The view of the narrator that the reader gets in Merwin’s works is a more personal glimpse than we get from traditional Modernist poets but not as open as a Post-Modernist would present. At the same time, the poems still explore the world from a mythical viewpoint. Merwin chose this viewpoint in the realization that he, like the rest of
humanity, is just one part of a whole and is no more or less significant than the rest of creation, regardless of how we try to delude ourselves. He has chosen to stand aside, as author and narrator, in an attempt to evoke the world that he sees as existing beyond us (Brunner, 5) and awakening us to it.

Mark Christhilf suggests that the reader is introduced to the creation of the narrative wanderer in "Ballad of John Cable and Three Gentlemen" (4) (FF, MJ, 15). According to his interpretation, the gentlemen represent the Muse who wants to take this rustic to a city of art in which mankind's spiritual life will subsume the individual's existence (4). By looking at this, we can see that making experience intelligible, even if it requires impersonality and exile, is the task that Merwin has set for himself and his poetry.

Hix suggests that the first actual usage of the persona of the exile narrator took place in Merwin's fourth book, The Drunk in the Furnace, and became more highly developed in his next book, The Moving Target (108). This suggests that even as Merwin was writing his more traditional poetry, he was preparing himself for the steps that would further his exploration of his beliefs.

His use of this viewpoint could be a reaction to the experiences during his years of study and travel in Europe. He learned his trade from the Anonymous poets of European civilization's beginnings, having worked on translating and studying some of the earliest forms of poetry (Brunner, 4). One of the things that this would have taught him is that the narrator is meant to serve as an observer, watching and listening to the world around him and trying to translate what he has seen for those who come into contact with his works. Merwin worked to use these archetypal patterns to describe contemporary concerns (Christhilf, 17).

Merwin's attachment to this outsider narrator is more understandable when one looks at the life that he was leading during these years. From his professional beginnings
in Europe to his return to an America that did not live up to the expectations that he had formed during his absence, to his subsequent ventures back and forth across the Atlantic, we see that Merwin had a desire to remain separate. This allowed him to view the world from a more detached perspective, one that would have given him a clearer view and fresher perspective of what was right where a fixed identity would have limited his ability to explore what he was glimpsing through his poetry. Even after he chose to settle and focus on a particular location, he maintained a sense of being an outsider to the culture that surrounded him. It was now the wanderer’s task to put the knowledge he had gained to some positive, concrete use.

In order to do this, Merwin’s observer exists as an outsider or exile outside of both human and natural realms. As a member of the human race, he finds himself complicit in the destruction that our species wreaks on Nature. Conversely, his attempts to identify with the natural world and animal consciousness intentionally separates him from the rest of his species (Hix, 72). This narrator’s purpose is to seek and gather clues about the original world that Merwin believes existed before the separation. It is this original world that is the crux of the cosmology that Merwin develops in his poetry and which is discussed in length in the next section. This narrator, with his world-weary voice, senses the echoes that lie beyond what we normally perceive and tries to give us access to these echoes (Hoeppner, 322). He is a literal representation of what Merwin himself is doing with his poetry: searching for an answer that is not forthcoming (Brunner, 6). This narrator is now, and always will be, a long way from the answers that he needs in order to return to the home from which our species has separated itself.
CHAPTER 3. EXPLORING THE COSMOLOGY OF MERWIN

"Poetry is the statement of a relation between man and the world." This quote from Wallace Stevens' poem "Adagia" defines what it is that W. S. Merwin is doing in his poetry: exploring this relation and trying to redefine our position in that relationship (Byers, 1). If, as Cheri Davis suggests, Merwin's poetry follows a regular, though elliptical, pattern of thought (21), we should be able to pick out pieces to understanding the mystery that is the cosmology of W. S. Merwin. With a basic understanding of the evolution of his poetry and the narrative voice that leads the reader into the journey of discovery, it is now time to investigate the cosmology which Merwin is developing and exploring in his poetry.

Many of Merwin's contemporaries wrote poetry that reflected what existed in the world around them, but he was seeking to do something more than that. His poetry depicted the search for a contemporary myth of existence. He realized that we had deceived ourselves into believing that our position in the world was as the pinnacle of creation. This deceit was unraveling as the precariousness of our situation in the world was becoming more and more obvious in the wake of the creation of weapons of mass destruction.

The realization that we could all be eradicated with the order to push a single button had encouraged an intense feeling of insecurity. This led to the extreme introversion of the poetic point-of-view of the Post-Modern poets as they delved inward, searching their own psyches and bodies and only acknowledging the outside world where it mirrored the internal workings of the poet.

Merwin's poetry, on the other hand, was an effort to redeem the conditions that he saw in the contemporary world. If we could accomplish this, we might reestablish a connection with a natural world that was being destroyed by the apathy of a society
trapped in bureaucracy (Christhilf, 31). Brunner writes that the poems of The Moving Target portray civilization as being so wrapped up in meaningless intricacies that it is unable to comprehend the fundamental particulars of life (131). This idea also appeared in other poems such as "Portrait" (V, 50).

One ninth of March when for reasons we can only suppose Moseigneur who bore the name of a saint gone into legend had wished to be rendered immortal in tapestry and he had for his agent in this affair none other than the priest who was precentor and canon at the cathedral named for the same saint and the said priest signing for him on the one hand and Adrian a merchant from Brabant on the other having made certain pacts and agreements touching upon the design and depicting of the same Moseigneur to be portrayed with his story in lengths of tapestry of certain form and style determined by those same the said tapestry to be brought by said Adrian to the city of Bordeaux and left in the house of honest Yzabeau Bertault widow for her to send it on to the said priest after making payment of certain moneys and on this same day said delivery having been made and said payment given before two further agents of Moseigneur because they themselves were not qualified to say whether said tapestry made up of eight lengths six long two short was of the same worth and value that the same Adrian claimed and was receiving namely two hundred forty livres ten sous two other merchants experts of that city were present to bear witness to its worth there is no tapestry only the signatures

In this example, the language mirrors the bureaucracy that has become so convoluted that it has obscured the object it is meant to be verifying to the point that one can’t discern where the loss has occurred. In other arenas, this bureaucracy has so overwhelmed us that we are unable to act in a respectful manner toward the world. Trying to preserve nature from the corporate world’s feeling of Manifest Destiny (the belief that everything exists in order to be exploited) calls for more effort than we often deem it is worth. As in the poem, we spend our time trying to ensure that all of the proper forms and protocols that mean absolutely nothing are taken care of.

Merwin’s poetry shows the necessity for change and provides his readers with the
opportunity to alter their viewpoints. When looking at his works, if not too disturbed by the moments that critics see as nihilistic, readers should come away from the exploration with a poignant sense of their own transience (Bowers, 250). This in turn should bring us to the realization that we need to rethink our treatment of the world which surrounds us.

One example of a poem that faces the transience of our creations is “Ash,” from *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment* (SF, 257). In this poem, he describes people rebuilding a church that has been destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. This is similar to our efforts to rebuild our past so that we can point out what we think makes us significant. It is only after we accept this passing and live in the moment, keeping a church “made of ash / no roof no doors” that we can move on and look to the future openly.

This poem is similar to Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” in which a huge statue had been erected in honor of some great ruler. All that the reader sees of this monument is a pedestal in the middle of a desert that bears the inscription “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair.” The despair felt here, and in Merwin’s poetry, is that our efforts at permanence are destined to failure.

The cosmology that Merwin began to develop and explore in his poetry was based on the insignificance of our species and his belief that our treatment of the rest of the world is out of proportion to our place in it. He was seeking to present poetry that would help us define our place in the world, showing us our transgressions and restoring us to our proper place in the overall scheme. Mark Christhilf suggests that the development of this “mythology” may have derived from his desire to supplant his paternal religion with a more supreme authority (3). It is possible that this desire may have contributed to its development, but this initial rebellion against his father introduced him to the ideas that he has spent the rest of his career exploring.

His reaction has been more against some of the doctrines of the Christian faith
than against his father per se. Christianity is one of the many things that have brought about our separation from the rest of creation with doctrines such as that we were placed upon the Earth to rule "over every creeping thing that creeps on the Earth." Merwin believes that we have assumed a false position of dominance over the rest of the world, giving us an unwarranted sense of self-pride and a feeling of pre-eminence over everything else. This, in turn, leads to a lack of responsibility toward what we deem ourselves to have dominion over. Thus, we commit of acts that disrupt the delicate balance of the world (Christhilf, 18).

With these beliefs driving him, Merwin took on the mantle once worn by the Romantics, trying to bring back a sense of unity to the world in which he lives. Unlike poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, though, he sought to re-establish more than just a balance within himself. This internal balance is merely a starting point. The end that Merwin is seeking lies beyond even the ideal, blissful world of the Romantics in which all things existed in harmony. To achieve it one must pass beyond the curtain of the oblivion or void from which that world first emerged. In this place all things existed as one. That ideal Romantic world was a stage between our emergence from the void and the series of divisions that began to separate us from the rest of creation, causing us to lose the sense of balance and responsibility necessary to exist in harmony with the world. The movement away from this ideal existence to our present state is one of the focuses of The Carrier of the Ladders, Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment, and The Compass Flower (Christhilf, 47).

In "Division" (SF, WUA, 252), Merwin shows one way by which to depict this growing separation.

People are divided because the finger god named One was lonely so he made for himself a brother like him named Other One then they were both lonely so each made for himself four others
all twins
then they were afraid
that they would lose each other
and be lonely
so they made for themselves two hands
to hold them together
but the hands drifted apart
so they made for the hands two arms
they said Between two arms
there is always a heart
and the heart will be for us all
but the heart between them
beat two ways
already for whoever
was to come
for whoever would
come after
one by one

The metaphor in this poem suggests that, as in the world around us, everything that should function as one exists apart from the rest, moving toward something else. The consciousness that could reunite it is being approached singly rather than by the group. This statement suggests that it will require more than just the poet’s telling of what he has found here to bring the world back together. We must all embark upon this journey so that we can approach the heart of understanding at the same time. Byers believes that the text of Merwin’s poetry cannot complete the self-annihilation necessary for redemption and achieving oneness (100). The reader must actively participate in subordinating the self in favor of the whole.

In “Their Week,” (SF, WUA, 237) Merwin looks at how “It was on a Sunday/ that the animals were divided/ so that the flood could happen/ and on a Sunday that we were severed from the animals/ with a wound that never heals.” I believe that Merwin is trying to show that we ignore this separation because, as with any wound that persists, we have become numb to the pain of it. He is seeking to reawaken that feeling of pain so that we might search for some way by which to undo the damage we have caused because of it.

According to both Christianity and modern science, prior to this world in which the divisions have limited us, there existed the void, a vast nothing full of possibility. In both of these beliefs, there was some spark that created all that exists now. Merwin’s
cosmology contains this void also. In his view, it acts as a curtain through which all things must pass and behind which everything once existed as one. As we pass through life we are moving toward a return to the void and what lies beyond it.

For many people, contemplation of the void, and its seeming immensity and finality, brings about feelings of insignificance and vertigo. These cause them to look away from it and toward more comforting vistas. Merwin does not shy away from contemplating this void; rather, his poetry exhibits a persistence in seeking out this mothering emptiness (Bowers, 252). He believes that it is only through contemplation of the void that one can gain a proper perspective of the world. As we see in his poems, the insights into the world that he gets from contemplating the void warn him that we are further alienating ourselves from this world. If we follow the example of his exploration, we too can come to this understanding and begin to move toward a more harmonious existence. We also see that he feels most people will only find the courage for such contemplation in death. Merwin tries to show that death is not something to be feared, but to be embraced. In doing so, we open wider expanses of understanding than we otherwise realized (Brunner, 9).

Brunner discusses Merwin’s four-line “The Bones of Palinurus Pray to the North Star” (FF, MJ, 41) along these lines:

Console us. The wind chooses among us.
Our whiteness is a night wake disordered.
Lone candor, be constant over
Us desolate who gleam no direction.

The bones of the dead navigator are no longer fixed on the intensity of the moment, as they had been when they were a part of a living whole. Instead, they now contemplate the spaciousness of the eternal, the void from which the North Star has always guided them. Brunner points out that the poem quickly moves from the momentary consolation that they had sought to the realization of the eternal guidance that can be provided in this
contemplation (9). Merwin has set himself on a far shore and, like the bones of Palinurus, is contemplating the void and presenting his thoughts and findings to his readers in his poetry.

This is not the only poem that presents us with a moment of contemplating the void from death as we see in “The Eyes of the Drowned Watching Keels Going Over” (*FF, GB*, 195).

Where the light has no horizons we lie. 
It dims into depth not distance. It sways 
Like hair, then we shift and turn over slightly. 
As once on the long swing under the trees 
In the drowse of summer we slid to and fro 
Slowly in the soft wash of air, looking 
Upwards through the leaves that turned over and back 
Like hands, through the birds, the fathomless light, 
Upwards. They go over us swinging 
Jaggedly, labouring between our eyes 
And the light. Churning their wrought courses 
Between the sailing birds and the awed eyes

Of the fish, with the grace of neither, nor with 
The stars’ serenity that they follow. 
Yet the light shakes around them as they go. 
Why? And why should we, rocking on shoal-pillow, 
With our eyes cling to them, and their wakes follow, 
Who follow nothing? If we could remember 
The stars in their clarity, we might understand now 
Why we pursued stars, to what end our eyes 
Fastened upon stars, how it was that we traced 
In their remote courses not their own fates but ours

The narrator believes that he has had the time to contemplate the universe. If he could see the stars clearly one more time, he would be able to equate the shivering of the light in the wake with the way he had once let it lead him to his fate. There is no sense of closure in this poem because the dead are not going to see the stars clearly again, so their thinking on the void will continue. Even if they did see them, the reader would not be given their conclusion. As mentioned earlier, the text cannot complete this journey for the reader. Merwin will only take the reader to a certain point; beyond that, we need to do our own contemplation.

That Merwin presents these poems from the view of the dead suggests to the reader that there is something beyond this life. His cosmology suggests that beyond death we will pass behind the curtain of the void, as we see in “For a Coming Extinction” (*SF, L*, 122). The gray whale is being sent to “the black garden” beyond the void where it will find “the sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas / The irreplaceable hosts ranged
countless / And fore-ordaining as stars.” Within this great garden, along with those that have passed before, there exists some controlling being, the Merwinian version of god, The End and The Beginning.

People often assume that this being is the source of the threats and occurrences in their lives. They feel that they have been specifically targeted for reasons that they don’t understand. While there are many threats that our species faces, the most serious of these are not those that lie beyond our control but those that are a result of the choices that we have made in the past and continue to make now (Hix, 60). These choices are those in which we consciously ignore the ecological needs of our planet in favor of our own personal economic gains. Hix describes our actions towards nature as meliorism, a feeling that our actions can aid in the betterment in the world (61). But, in fact, our interference has led to the extinction of many species and every day the list grows and Merwin believes that this can only lead to very negative consequences for our species, as seen in “The Last One” (SF, L, 86).

As the last tree waits through the night for its demise, the night and the shadow, the void’s Earthly manifestations, cast their judgment and wait. When the fateful blow to nature is struck, the people are finally faced with the consequences of their actions.

The next day was just the same it went on growing.
They did all the same things it was just the same.
They decided to take the water out from under it.
They took away the water they took it away the water went down.
The shadow stayed where it was before.
It went on growing it grew onto the land.
They started to scrape the shadow with machines.
When it touched the machines it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with hands.
Where it touched the hands it stayed on them.
That was another day.

Well the next day started about the same it went on growing.
The pushed lights into the shadow.

Where the shadow got onto them they went out.
They began to stamp on the edge it got their feet.
And when it got their feet they fell down.
It got into their eyes the eyes went blind.
The ones that fell down it grew over and they vanished.
The ones that went blind and walked into it vanished.
The ones that could see and stood still
It swallowed their shadows.
Then it swallowed them too and they vanished.
Well the others ran.

The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them.
They went away as far as they could.
The lucky ones with their shadows.
Merwin is using these consequences as a circumstance comparable to that faced by the buffalo which never learned to fear men and were driven to the brink of extinction. Like the creatures that survive us, those in the poem who realize the danger seek hiding places and hope they are left alone.

Obviously, some being has controlled the destruction that was brought on in that poem, and we see the result of its judgment. This being lies behind many of Merwin’s poems, but it is only rarely glimpsed. Part of the reason for this could be that he has no desire to give his readers a concrete grasp of it if they are not ready to accept it. As with anything else, such an action can only result in its being misunderstood or misused. One of the places that we are introduced to this being is in his poem, “Kanaloa” ([RT], 71). This poem brings together many of the things mentioned earlier:

When he woke his mind was the west and he could not remember waking
he had imagined the first mistake
all the humans are coming toward him with numbers

wherever he looked the sun was coming toward him
the moon was coming toward him
they are coming from the beginning to look for him
each of them finds him and he is different

month after month the wind was coming toward him
behind the day the night was coming toward him
they do not believe him at first
but he houses the ghosts of the trees

all the stars all the comets all the depths of the sea
all the darkness in the earth all the silence all the cold
the ghosts of the animals
of the whales of the insects

all the heights were coming toward him
no one had been on the earth before him
he rises in dust he is burning he is smoke
behind him is nothing

all the stories were coming toward him
over the mountain
he is the one who is already gone
he is fire flowing downward over the edge

over the red water the black water
the moonlight
he is the last he is the coming home
he might never have wakened

As Merwin describes in the poem, all things end at this being which seems to exist beyond the void. This is the same being that waits in the “black garden” that waits beyond death. We also see another reason why Merwin cannot describe this being: it is different for each who finds him. It is up to us to make the journey from our own
beginning and come to recognize for ourselves the truth that lies within the void.

One key element of this poem is the eighth couplet: the first mistake led to all of the humans coming toward him with numbers. Numbers represent pieces of the whole. Our reliance on them for everything that we do shows how we are attached to dividing pieces up into smaller pieces, always straying farther and farther from the whole.

Because of our tendency toward division, our actions have created a gap between the self and others that we see as impossible to bridge. Believing that this is so, we create falsehoods to ease our sense of isolation, as seen in “To the Insects” (RT, 49).

Elders

we have been here so short a time
and we pretend that we have invented memory
we have forgotten what it is like to be you
who do not remember us
we remember imagining that what survived us
would be like us
and would remember the world as it appears to us
but it will be your eyes that will fill with light

we kill you again and again
and we turn into you
eating the forests
eating the earth and the water
and dying of them
departing from ourselves
leaving you the morning
in its antiquity

The feeling of superiority that we have woven for ourselves has caused us to forget our true relation to the world. We have also blinded ourselves to the fact that we are at least as destructive to the world around us as the bugs that we habitually exterminate. These kinds of falsehoods are morally wrong and actively interfere with any attempts to span this chasm (Byers, 10). The ethical dilemma created is apparent in the way that Merwin’s poetry deals with these ecological themes and the way that he looks at our use of language to separate and further divide the world.
CHAPTER 4. MAN’S RELATION TO NATURE

Merwin insists that if we are to be at peace in the world we need to realize that we
are not seeing ourselves in the proper perspective in regards to our place in the natural
world. The great sin of our existence is that we have separated ourselves from the fabric
of the wholeness in which we once existed. Because of this we have been yanking other
elements of this world from the unity in which it had existed so that we might put them to
our own uses, even if this results in their destruction (Christhilf, 49). Merwin has used
his poetry to point out the discrepancies between our behavior and the respect that the
world deserves. Because all things have come from and will return to the same void,
there can be no more or less important part.

Merwin disagrees with our tendency to believe that everything has been put here
for our use. In “Plea for a Captive” (FF, DF, 232), Merwin discusses the cruelty inherent
in such a viewpoint. Often this leads to people capturing wild animals and trying to
domesticate them for their own pleasure.

Woman with the caught fox
By the scruff, you can drop your hopes:
It will not tame though you prove kind,
Though you entice it with fat ducks
Patiently to your fingertips
And in dulcet love enclose it
Do not suppose it will turn friend,
Dog your heels, sleep at your feet
Be happy in the house,

No,

It will only trot to and fro,
To and fro, with vacant eye,
Neither will its pelt improve
Nor its disposition, twisting
The raw song of its debasement
Through the long nights, and in your love,
In your delicate meats tasting
Nothing but its own decay
(As at first hand I have learned)

Oh

Kill it at once or let it go.

In the poem, Merwin shows how the captors ignore their knowledge of the fox’s needs
and instincts, expecting the “kindnesses” of “fat ducks” and “dulcet love” to suffice as a
replacement for this. This is the kind of expectation that leads people to keep wolves as
pets, expecting them to become like any other dog. They are stunned when they return to
their instinctive behavior under certain conditions. Such expectations display the
arrogance that results from our belief about our position in the world. The narrator in this poem describes the other consequence of the belief that we can overcome nature's programming. In a domestic environment the decline of the wild creature is inevitable. Speaking from the position of knowledge typical of Merwin's narrators, he asks for a quick release from suffering, freedom or death, the same kind of freedom that we ask for terminally ill loved ones who know nothing but pain.

This is not the only poem in which Merwin discusses the ways in which we pervert the world around us. In "The Coin" (FH, CF, 53), the narrator describes a county fair in which we see the exploitation of many of nature's goods.

I have been to the fair alone
and across the river from the tented market place
and the church
were the green sagging balconies from which
during the occupation
the bodies of many
of the men in town
hung for days in full view
of the women who had been their wives
I watched men in long
black coats selling animals
I watched money going
to a fat woman in white
who held pieces of white cheese
wrapped in white paper
out into the sunlight
I watched an old woman selling cut flowers
counting change
I looked at her teeth and lips
the dark kerchief on her head
there were carnations and
summer flowers rolled in wet newspaper
I considered the wares of a man
With a pile of whetstones
I watched three turtledoves eating in a cage
one of them white
one of them dyed pink
one pale blue
a coin in with their grain
pigeons watching from
the church windowsills
others flying overhead
some few bright clouds moving
all of it returns without a sound

Animals and other natural products are being sold: flowers with their stems severed are wrapped in wet newspapers, and turtledoves are dyed unnatural colors and caged. In contrast to these creatures which exist at the whim of humans are the pigeons flying overhead and watching from church windowsills and the clouds drifting overhead whose movements are not controlled by the humans below. Even though the narrator passes no overt judgment, those not involved with this spectacle clearly recognize the aberrations inherent in this scene. This can be seen in the narrator's reference to this having been the same square where many men had been killed and left hanging during the occupation.
All of this has been forgotten, and the exploitation has continued.

Like the Romantic Era poets before him, Merwin suggests that the way to properly interact with nature, instead of possessing or destroying it, is to achieve a level of coexistence that does not include twisting it to our own ends. Many of Merwin’s poems echo this belief. In them, Merwin presents us with “pure” observations rather than by interpreting what he has observed and thus owning this interpretation (Brunner, 35). These observations often result in poems that do not suggest set answers to the reader. These poems allow us to explore the meaning in our own way, so that we might come away from them with what we feel is useful; not what Merwin feels is useful.

In another poem, “Little Horse” (SF, CL, 169) Merwin tries to reinforce the idea of respecting the freedom of wild creatures in a more positive manner.

The point of this poem is that we need to accept such creatures as we encounter them without trying to manipulate the situation. The feeling of peace that this encounter brings to the narrator comes about because he has made no attempt to dominate it. Merwin suggests that this is the feeling we will have upon reuniting within the void. The feeling of melancholy in the final lines comes from the narrator’s considering the possibilities that now exist, an action that is an unavoidable consequence of our ability to remember the past and project the future.

Our knowledge and recognition of things needs to be the intuitive knowledge of those beings that have not separated themselves from the oneness of the universe. We
need to just accept such insights. Such moments of "precognitive illumination" are the raw materials from which Merwin creates his poems (Davis, 92) and are the kinds of moments that we need to seek in our own lives. Our ability to reestablish an awareness of this oneness is dependent upon our awareness that precedes our conscious thoughts, which immediately begin subordinating it (Christhilf, 31).

Again, we encounter a similarity to the Romantics; in this case to their belief that we need to reestablish a balance between the imagination and intellect before we can see the ideal world from which we came. In his poem "I wandered lonely as a cloud," Wordsworth used a method for doing this that relied upon accepting moments for what they were and not trying to reason out what had just been witnessed. By doing this, a feeling of peace is gained that helps the poet in times of reflection. Merwin uses a similar method in "Little Horse" to show how we can feel once we learn how to properly interact with the world around us.

Because of the misconceptions fostered by our memory and our ability to use language, we see other creatures as being subordinate to us. Merwin's poetry, though, reveals his belief that even our capacity for these things is not sufficient, and this brings about our misunderstanding of our relationship with the world (Hix, 27). We feel that we are superior to other creatures but these shortcomings suggest that we are closer to the animals than we would like to believe.

It is our recognition of our intelligence, based on a species-centered evaluation of the phenomenon, that causes us to place ourselves at the top of creation. From this position, we feel that we have the "right" to dominate the world around us. Merwin wants us to realize that we are lacking the shame and humility that our knowledge of the responsibility we hold for our actions should engender (Brunner, 150). We are so self-centered and have separated ourselves so fully that we are not burdened by this sense of responsibility. This lack, in turn, is what allows us to continue in a relationship with
nature in which we manipulate the world to our advantage, perverting and destroying those things which we don’t see any value in for ourselves (Byers, 85). We place some creatures in zoos while allowing other species to become extinct as a result of actions in the name of sport, greed, or ignorance. Both of these actions show an ignorance of a proper way to interact with the world around us.

We also misunderstand our position in relation to determining the fate of the world. We have the vanity and arrogance to assume that this fate hinges upon our decisions. “The Widow” (SF, L, 101) reveals Merwin’s view of our need to be recognized as important in comparison to his idea of our true position in the universe. As “Masters of forgetting,” we have created this gross fallacy that our actions are proper and call the destruction that we create the norm. Those who begin to understand the impermanence of our position are like Merwin’s contemporaries; those who have chosen to delve into themselves, seeking reassurance there. They create the things that they need and insist that these things are needed by the universe. In actuality they are the ones who require these things to feel important. The universe is indifferent to them and their creations: “There is no season / That requires us.” In the end, all that we create concerns only us, and all that we are truly able to eliminate is ourselves (Brunner, 141). All else will continue, whether we are part of it or join our predecessors, the dinosaurs, in “that black garden.”

“For a Coming Extinction” (SF, L, 86) presents another view of the insecurity of our position and ways in which people try to deal with it. It is presented as a half-hearted apology to yet another species that has been driven to the brink of extinction: the gray whale. There is an ironic tone that filters through this poem, seen in moments such as, “we who follow you invented forgiveness.” It is we who have invented forgiveness because we are the ones who need such a concept. The separation from the rest of creation is made clearer as the speaker claims that “we were made on another day.” The
speaker is trying to increase his feeling of importance by claiming that our creation was a special task of itself, as is the case in the Bible. He is also trying to make himself feel better by drawing the picture of what will be found when the creature reaches the void. These things can only serve to make the speaker feel more at ease with his actions, realizing the many extinctions that the race is causing.

By recognizing the irony that Merwin sees in this belief, we can understand that he wants us to be aware of the arrogance of our attitude that “it is we who are important.” As discussed, it is this attitude that has helped lead to an increase in the separation between other species and us. It also prevents us from understanding the reality that Merwin feels exists beyond what we normally perceive.

Another thing that eases our conscience is that we tell ourselves that we are profiting through the losses that we are creating (Hix, 87). Merwin understands that, because of the arrogance and disrespect that sustains this attitude, the extinction of our species is an inevitable conclusion. This attitude was especially prevalent in The Lice, a collection that disturbed some critics because of the pervading sense of nihilism they perceived in it. The most telling example of a poem advocating the eradication of humanity is one that has already been discussed in this paper, “The Last One” (SF, 86). In this poem, the nothing from which we have come has returned to bring us back into the void, with all that we have used to deny it. At this point in his career, Merwin believed that the extinction of our species was inevitable because of all that we have done in our ignorance (Hix, 67). The most serious blow to our collective consciousness and our arrogance is that our extinction will be no more than any other extinction.

As he developed his cosmology, Merwin came to believe that there were ways to avoid this extinction, but they required our working toward a reunion with the whole. One step toward reconnecting with it is acquiring a sense of humility and the re-evaluation of our position in respect to the rest of the world so that we could finally
realize that nature “was not created for, and does not culminate in humanity” (Hix, 61).

The major step that Merwin is calling for, however, is an actual erasure of the self (Byers, 98). This is the same kind of thing that Merwin is trying to do with his use of his exile narrator. By not having the narrator become involved directly, Merwin is able to exclude his personal view and judgment from overtly coloring the poem. In accepting the moment for what it is, he avoids creating separations and divisions. Furthermore, by using the nominal grammar of the middle stages of his development, he is also able to see more of the possibility that exists within these moments. The lack of judgment provides the same opportunity for the reader. It is only by learning how to use our intuition that we will be able to accept the union with the “other;” all that exists within the void.

Merwin sought to find a method for us to incorporate ourselves more naturally into the world, and the observations that he makes in his poems suggest various ways that we can work toward living in harmony with it instead of imposing our will upon it. He believed that there were lessons to be learned through observing nature, but not the kinds of lessons that can be studied and written down. “The Wilderness” (FF, GB, 140) discusses the mysteries of survival in places that we deem as remote and unfriendly but where life continues with or without our presence or interference. This suggests that one of the things that we need to learn from nature is that what we deem as necessities are not. We need to come to an awareness of the true necessities of life. Nature does not require the meddling that we feel so obligated to do in order to makes deserts and swamps retirement paradises.

An example of how nature does not look to us for its answers is “Lemuel’s Blessing” (SF, MT, 12). It is presented in the voice of a dog that has escaped the servility that has been forced upon it by men. It is asking for guidance in relearning the natural ways of survival, and the things that it requests are the things that Merwin feels we either need to forget or relearn if we are to rejoin the void this side of death. We need to
recognize the shame of our position and to not dominate those creatures around us. We need to trust our intuition so that we do not hesitate just because an action does not seem proper. We need to see things as they really are, not as we want them to be. Finally, we need to recognize the essentials of life. By learning the value of these lessons, we can learn to exist in harmony with the world. This is not the same as the return to an ideal balance of intellect and intuition that the Romantics were seeking, but it is moving toward a unity.

Merwin's poems can also show some of the consequences that we suffer because of our lack of connection with the rest of the world. "Noah's Raven" (SF, MT, 16) takes these consequences back into those moments that we now see as our being closest to perfection. Having been sent to find land on which to land the ark, the raven, a bird that many cultures feel is a portent of the mystical side of life, deliberately chooses not to return. The reasoning is that it knew that what existed in the "desert of the unknown" would be perverted or destroyed in the efforts of humans to understand and quantify it so that we might manipulate it. Even at this early stage, we have moved beyond the ability to perceive it; hence, "It is always beyond [us]."

People are so blind to the potentiality that exists within nature that they assume that what they perceive is all that is to be seen. In doing this, we ignore the other possibilities and assume a complacent attitude towards those things that we are interacting with. We name and describe things in ways that cause us to believe that we hold a mastery over them and that the natural world will comprehend and submit to this mastery (Byers, 89).

To avoid the pitfalls inherent in this attitude, we need to come to the realization that we are going to return the void from which we have come, and none of our assumed mastery over the world is going to be able to change this. In order to make this idea more concrete, Merwin uses the ocean as a manifestation of the mystery that lies beyond the
void. Its depths represent all of those areas that we cannot explore. This makes it an ideal representative for Merwin’s purpose and it is in his use of the ocean that the known and the unknown clash most noticeably (Brunner, 60). We use our knowledge of the world and its workings to try to understand the sea so that we can use it for our own needs, such as for transportation and to harvest it for food. Even so, we are unable to predict many of the events that occur within or upon it or the creatures that exist in its unfathomable depths.

The immeasurability and unknowableness of the sea allow Merwin to explore it on both physical and spiritual levels (Davis, 66). By opening his perception to all of its possibilities, Merwin is able to contrast the timeless, all-encompassing nature of the sea to the brief, localized presence of humans (Brunner, 63). If we can open our eyes to the possibilities that exist in the sea, then we are one step closer to being able to contemplate the void without the feeling of vertigo that accompanies trying to understand something so vast and all-encompassing. Merwin understands that our comprehension of this can only come through our experiences, so he provides avenues by which to explore it on our own.

In Merwin’s work, the sea is the means of bringing us back to the fold. Unlike the shadow in “The Last One,” the sea surrounds us already, and presents itself as a truly natural force for his explorations. If there is anywhere that the secret to coexistence and the way to our proper place in the world are going to be found, it will be in the sea.

The element of comparison to the void is seen in “The Shipwreck” (FF, GB, 193).
Grew gentle, spared them, while they died of that knowledge.

The first eleven-and-a-half lines of this poem tell of the inescapability of our return to the void, about which we receive no warnings or reassurances. Again, our experiences are the only ways that we can become cognizant of the truth. The "elemental violence" of the void is mirrored by the action of the sea as it brings the ship and its sailors into its embrace and swallows all traces of them, down to the last breath. The feeling of peace that the sailors feel in the last moment is representative of what we will feel as we surrender our sense of self and rejoin the void.

Even though nothing escapes moments such as the one described here and in "The Portland Going Out" (FF, DF, 209), Merwin knows that there are still lessons to be learned from them. The most important thing to realize is that what has happened has not had the motivation that our own actions might. The sailors had named the sea treacherous, but that assumes an importance and awareness that does not exist within the ocean. To be treacherous, the sea would have had some obligation to the sailors that it had violated. This is an assumption that shows the self-centeredness of our view. We need to be conscious of the fact that the sea is filling its role in a cycle. It is not a sign of favor that some have survived the encounter or a sign of displeasure that others have died. It is merely something that happens. When we don't realize that we are just one piece in the whole puzzle we ignore the potential of the world around us. It is the consequences of ignoring this potential that Merwin is trying to make clear in poems such as this.

Our destruction of the natural world creates problems for us beyond the obvious. We divert and dam rivers or replace native flora and fauna, creating artificial ecosystems that are in continual dependence upon our intervention for survival. As we destroy things in nature, all that was connected to them—cultures as well as languages—are threatened with a similar extinction if they cannot adapt to the changing situations. Merwin
describes how this can be seen in various native cultures, both in America and around the

globe, as a result of the efforts of various Western cultures to colonize those areas.

It has been the “destructiveness of human economic and technological ambitions”
(Hix, 127) that has led to this expansion. The European expansion and conquering of the

world was based on the desire to accumulate wealth for the mother country. This feeling

exhibited itself as the belief in Manifest Destiny, a creed that was the justification of the

continued expansion of this culture and the displacement and destruction of both

creatures and cultures that stood in the way of the westward expansion. Today, our

ability to get anywhere in our vehicles leads to the disfigurement of the natural landscape

and the disruption of normal cycles. All of this takes place while we continue to exploit

resources to their depletion for the momentary profit that we gain from it.

Merwin discusses all these matters in various works. Having looked at the

ideology behind the work of Merwin and some of the key elements of it, we can see that

he was searching for a meaning to life and an understanding of what we have lost sight

of. He does not believe that we are here to use and abuse the world around us until we

have shaped everything to our liking. In fact, a persistence in these actions only furthers

the separation from the rest of the world that we suffer from at this time.
CHAPTER 5. LANGUAGE AS THE CAUSE AND THE REDEMPTION

The previous chapter has shown how we refuse to recognize the potential of things in nature. Every time that we put a name to an object, a process, or an idea, we are unconsciously limiting the potential of our ability to understand all of its subtleties as well as its existence within our perception. Avoiding this creates a direct conflict with our need to be able to make reference to what exists around us, so we choose the lesser of the two perils and create our names for things.

In order to differentiate among things so that we might notice some of the subtleties, we take this further, making the divisions finer and finer. The result is that we leave out integral aspects needed for understanding, thereby causing more dispute over the usage of the words. Eventually, we become more focused on the word than on what it is meant to represent.

I mentioned earlier that Merwin changed to a more basic word choice so that he might better capture the essence of things. This was not the only method that he used to capture this aspect of things. Another is seen in his “Physiologus: Chapters for a Bestiary” (FF, GB, 127-138). The poems included in this section are meant to be seen as “objects for endless speculation that can never be resolved into simplifying categories” (Brunner, 39). The creature is only clearly recognized through the titles of the works. It is the conditions of their possibility, not the physical reality of these creatures, that is the most important aspect of them (Hix, 25).

In order to avoid the categorization of the creatures that he presents here, he gives us only the barest physical description while discussing the possibilities and purposes of the creatures. The details and descriptions become meaning-charged as the universal aspects of the creatures suggest their potential (Hix, 26). In “Dog” (FF, GB, 133) the animal is described as having a “coat / caked and staring, hang-dog head / that his
shoulders can hardly hold up from the dust / and from it dangling the faded tongue”.
What we get more of a view of is the purpose of this animal and our place in relation to
him: “glazed eyes / Fixed heavily stare beyond you / Noticing nothing; he does not see
you. But wrong: / Look Again: it is through you / That he looks, and the danger of his
eyes / Is that in them you are not there. He guards indeed / What is gone....” With this
description we are asked to think about this forlorn creature along its more abstract
existence and realize that there is more potentiality in this, and therefore any other,
creature than we want to admit. People wish only to recognize creatures in relation to
ourselves. Our efforts to “fix” their presence creates a separation from them and the
whole of creation in our perception (Byers, 81).

This leads to one of the problems with our method of naming things: that to name
a thing is to assume a sense of possession of it. In doing this, we have forgotten that we
are a part of the same ecosystem as all of these creatures with which we share the earth.
In assuming possession of and manipulating them, we alter the state of our own
existence. We have placed ourselves in an unwarranted position of supremacy because of
our ability to use language. Merwin uses his poetry to lead the reader to a more natural
connection to the world.

He also feels that, along with our taking possession of things by naming them, one
of our major misuses of language is our penchant for describing things in terms of
ourselves. We often do this because of the familiarity of those terms. This causes us to
assume a mistaken familiarity with what is being described. In his poetry, Merwin shows
how misguided this attitude can be. While nature may encompass us, it does not
necessarily follow that it corresponds to us, so describing it after our own traits becomes
a deliberate self-delusion (Byers, 87).

One example of Merwin’s recognition of this from early in his career can be seen
in the opening stanza of “East of the Sun, West of the Moon” (FF, DB, 85).
Say the year is the year of the phoenix.
Ordinary sun and common moon
Turn as they may, are too mysterious
Unless such as are neither the sun nor the moon
Assume their masks and orbits and evolve
neither a solar nor a lunar story
But a tale that might be human. What is a man
That a man may recognize, unless the inhuman
Sun and Moon, wearing the masks of a man,
Weave before him such a tale as he
-Finding his own face in a strange story-
Mistakes by metaphor and calls his own,
Smiling as on a familiar mystery.

Here we see the need for us to put the story in human terms so that we might feel that we understand what is happening, even if this is a false understanding. In this example, there is little harm to be found in the misunderstanding, but there are other examples in Merwin's poetry where this is not the case, such as in “The Portland Going Out” (FF, DF, 209). The sailors use terms such as “trustworthy” and “brutal” to describe the elemental forces that have taken the Portland to her doom, when it was merely natural phenomena and complacency with supposed understanding that led to the ship leaving the safety of the port. There was no deliberate action in the sinking of that ship, as much as it might soothe some to think of the self-importance that would necessitate it.

Merwin feels that language is a hindrance to our understanding the world because it is inadequate for grasping the wholeness in which we exist. Language can't grasp the wholeness because it has been developed for dividing and specifying. His search for a method of describing the whole is one reason that Merwin changed his use of language during his career. Even then, he often expressed frustration with the failure of language to capture the essence of what he was describing. The most telling example of this can be seen in “The Unwritten” (SF, WUA, 250) where he speculates about the words that exist
within every pencil but have never been written because they refuse to give themselves to us. He doesn’t know if it is just a few words or an entire language, but he feels that these are, indeed, words that can unlock the true names to things. With these names we would be able to reference things without losing their true essence or possibilities.

This brings us to another paradox in the work of Merwin. As we use it, language causes greater separation in our perceptions of the world and the world as it exists, but, used properly, however, language can help to bring about the connection with the world that he is seeking. The realization that we do not have access to these words leads to a frustration that creates a further hindrance to our connecting with the world.

Finding the proper words can open doorways so that we can come to a more natural understanding of the world. Through them we can also glimpse the wholeness that exists in that “great garden.” Cheri Davis writes that the poet tries to invent the primal language in order to find these names that can offer understanding (91). It is necessary to invent it because we have not come to the point that we can find it, to the point where the pencils will allow us access to them.

Merwin believes that the poet, and others, can not allow themselves to feel complacent with the names that they have given to things. The search for these names must continue if we are to find a way to reestablish a connection with the rest of the world. Until we find these names that give us a true sense of their essence, things will not hold the proper value for us.

In some of Merwin’s poems, we see that sometimes the narrator finds keys that he was not looking for. He cannot throw these keys away just because he does not recognize their function. Instead, the potential must be explored to see what they might open for us. We see this advice in his poem “Apples” (SP, CF, 230). The narrator here is left with one key that opens a door “of a cold morning / the color of apples.” The
significance of this key will remain a mystery unless the narrator is able to grasp it. Merwin does not share his exploration of this because each of us needs to follow our own paths to understanding. Even if he were to begin explaining, the imprecise tool of the language that we have access to would only lead to misunderstanding and misdirection. For both of these reasons, even details such as the type of apple are left up to the reader so that our intuition sets us onto our particular path, not one chosen any further by the poet.

"To the Hand" (SF, WUA, 267) presents another example of the difficulty in searching for the key to understanding.

What the eye sees is a dream of sight
what it wakes to
is a dream of sight

and in the dream
for every real lock
there is only one real key
and it's in some other dream
now invisible

it's the key to the one real door
it opens the water and the sky both at once
it's already in the downward river
with my hand on it
my real hand

and I am saying to the hand
turn
open the river

The first requirement is that we have to be ready to perceive the key for what it is (ways of truly perceiving the capabilities that lie in things are discussed at a later point). Even then, when we are present at a lock, we must intuitively find a way to use its key, even if it should remain elsewhere. It will only be after these seemingly impossible tasks are fulfilled that we will be able to come to any understanding of the world.

Even though our use of language has brought us to this point of separation, Merwin does not feel that we can afford to lose languages that we currently have. At the same time that our use of language is creating divisions, when we lose the words that describe things, we lose sight of that which they had described. As languages lose their vitality or use, our vision of the world is narrowed a little more. Conversely, as the thing described by that word is lost, the words connected to it lose their significance. Because
of this, Merwin is adamant that we retain languages and cultures because of their close
ties with the environment around them. Language is rooted to place, and it loses its
effectiveness when transplanted into a culture that does not place the same kinds of value
on the thing described by the words (Hix, 129).

"Learning a Dead Language" (FF, GB, 176) is our first encounter with this kind
of thinking in Merwin’s work.

There is nothing for you to say. You must
Learn first to listen. Because it is dead
It will not come to you of itself, nor would you
Of yourself master it. You must therefore
Learn to be still when it is imparted,
And, though you may not yet understand, to
remember.

What you remember is saved. To understand
The least fully you would have to perceive
The whole grammar in all its accidence
And all its system, in the perfect singleness
Of intention it has because it is dead.
You can learn only a part at a time.

What you are given to remember
Has been saved before you from death’s dullness by
Remembering. The unique intention

Of a language whose speech has died is order
Incomplete only where someone has forgotten.
You will find that order helps you to remember.

What you come to remember becomes yourself.
Learning will be to cultivate the awareness
Of that governing order, now pure of the passions
It composed; till, seeking in itself,
You may find at last the passion that composed it,
Hear it both in its speech and in yourself.

What you remember saves you. To remember
Is not to rehearse, but to hear what never
Has fallen silent. So your learning is,
From the dead, order, and what sense of yourself
Is memorable, what passion may be heard
When there is nothing for you to say.

The reader sees how all that remains of a dead language is what has been remembered. It
holds no ability to refer to the world it now exists in aside from areas that are similar to
the world that it had functioned in.

We come to a more specific example in “Witness” (RT, 65). In it Merwin writes,
“I want to tell them what the forests / were like .....I will have to speak / in a forgotten
language.” The words necessary to proper understanding do not exist within the culture
that has come to dominate the native culture. In Merwin’s view of the world, native
cultures are in the same need of preservation as the ecosystems that belong there. If one
is allowed to disappear, something vital is lost in the other.
CHAPTER 6. A POETIC PATH TO UNDERSTANDING

Romantic era poets, such as Coleridge and Keats, believed that life was a journey from the ideal world of innocence through the experiences of this life. As we moved through life we were to search for the understanding that would allow us to return to that ideal. Merwin also believes that life is a journey, though we are seeking an understanding of our place in this world and not some ideal. In addition, this journey is an attempt to peel back the veil placed in front of us by our perceptions and see the true possibilities and meanings that lie behind it.

Because Merwin is trying to understand the unknowable, his ventures toward understanding are doomed to be incomplete. Even if he should find the understanding that he is seeking he cannot share with us what he finds. Poems such as “Kanaloa” (RT, 71) and “The Station” (FF, GB, 161) make it clear that we will have to find our own way to that understanding. He can lead us up to a point, but beyond that we are on our own. To facilitate both his own and our journeys toward understanding, Merwin has investigated different methods for approaching this elusive goal during the course of his career.

The journey that he is trying to make is not a simple return to our origins as we might return to our hometown. Instead it is a journey of rupture in which we must separate ourselves from all that we believe that we know, including the self (Byers, 101). It is only through this separation and an intuitive perception of the world that we can approach any semblance of understanding. This presents one reason that Merwin can not describe it. Words fix things in place and limit their possibilities. Any attempt to describe this journey can only be intimated with words, but this might be enough to set
Merwin’s readers onto the path that they will need to follow in order to come to their own understanding.

This journey appears in Merwin’s poems in two ways. In some poems the narrator is involved in a literal journey that is also a representation of something else. In other poems something else becomes a representation of the journey (Hix, 39). The fact that Merwin never completes the journey is often a source of frustration to his critics. They are seeking some kind of closure in his poems that he is reluctant to provide because it limits their ability to find the path that they will need.

Falling into the first category, “The Station” (FF, GB, 161) depicts it as a more spiritual journey. The critics who want closure and answers are like those who sit at the campfires talking. They lack whatever is required to continue the journey. They are willing to lead others to this point but do not dare to venture farther on their own, perhaps because they want to see the reasons behind things and do not have the courage to follow their intuition (Brunner, 113).

That the path ends at the station suggests that beyond this point the journey must be different for each. Maybe it results in a transcendence of thought, an awakened awareness to the world in which they live that cannot be shared with others. Similarly, the text can only guide us to a point and provide a few hints of what is to come later but cannot complete the journey for us.

One of the keys to understanding this journey is to realize that it requires an intuitive, rather than intellectual, resolution if the reader is going to perceive what lies behind the words that Merwin uses to depict it (Davis, 19). It is only by accepting our perceptions without trying to find “reason” in them that we can move forward in this
journey (Davis, 18) and begin to grasp elements of the overall unity. Merwin believes that we are all involved in the journey, whether we realize it or not. The final step in this journey is death, which will bring us back into void.

Merwin uses the inevitability of this end in poems such as “The Wharf” (SF, WUA, 249) and “For the Anniversary of My Death” (SF, L, 115). In the former, Merwin describes our graves setting off from the future to meet us as we move forward through life. We don’t know when our death is to reach us, so we go down to the wharf to see if it is our time yet. What we have to realize is that it will find us, whether we are there or not, so seeking it out while we still have the ability to live is a useless endeavor. In the latter, we see that it is only after we achieve this moment that we will find ourselves in our natural element and will be ready to accept our place.

One might question why we would want to undertake this journey now, if we all come to a similar end. Merwin believes that it is only by actively seeking out understanding that we can begin to heal the separation that we are suffering from and find peace with ourselves.

Merwin uses his poetry to share his exploration into the true meaning of our position in relation to the void. His is a vision of pathways, not of destinations and, ideally, by reading of Merwin’s journey, the readers will find themselves on the beginning on a journey of their own. He does not claim to have the answers for which he and we are searching, but at least we can all begin to understand. Ideally, this will bring about the revelation that will cause us to change the way we interact with the world.
Merwin is not trying to present us with a view of the unknowable beyond. Instead, he holds out some tale or insight as a trace of the truth to which he is pointing. From this, he will often reverse his position, pointing back to the narrative as the only available formulation of the truth, however insufficient that might be (Molesworth, 148). The truth turns out to be a secret that is different for each who is able to glimpse it. He presents us a means to possibly come to that vantage on our own, though some of his poems show that these explorations do not always provide access to the origins for which he is searching.

Merwin is continually changing the way that he approaches the search, using new symbols or subjects for his search, for two reasons. The first reason is a personal one. If he continues to search using the same pathways, he will create ruts that will channel his exploration and limit what he can accomplish as his perceptions of his travels will become more and more fixed. In his discussion of “Anabasis” (FF, MJ, 3), Brunner suggests that the poem gains “length by gathering a number of brief poems, each almost complete in itself, but all dominated by a failure to be so (which in turn creates the need for another foray, the viewpoint restated from an additional perspective)” (7). This discussion can be expanded to include all of Merwin’s career. He looked for new ways to explore the same mysteries of our existence.

In trying to explain the unexplainable, his best hope was to look at it from these different angles so that he could catch greater glimpses of the unfathomable unity from which we had separated ourselves. Maybe he can never tell his readers what truths the void contains, but by constantly searching for that truth, he opens up their own
explorations. This lack of completion creates an emptiness that makes meaning possible by suggesting the promise of the truth (Molesworth, 150).

The second reason that he continues to change the pathways is that he has come to see that the mythical potential of his poetry can become a vehicle with which the rest of humanity can come to the realization of the need for change if we are to find a way back toward the original unity (Frazier, 345). By changing his approaches, he leaves room for his readers to embark upon their own explorations. This is because he, like the guides in “The Station,” (FF, GB, 161), has only brought them to a starting point. This does not prejudice their exploration.

The different approaches that Merwin has used in his poetry to search out understanding of the truth of the void has given him the opportunity to help individual readers find the pathway that is most appropriate for them as he continues his own search. If readers did not respond to his discussion of our relation to nature, it is possible that his investigation into the background of his family would work better for them. This was as far as Merwin was going to guide us, regardless of how much more closure others might want from him.
CHAPTER 7. KEY ELEMENTS TO PERCEIVING THE TRUTH

As the discussion of Merwin’s cosmology has shown, he believes that there is more to the world than we typically allow ourselves to see. Because there is no belief or trust in the imagination in the modern world, we rely upon outward appearances and empirical evidence that prescribes meanings to things (Brunner, 137). Merwin believes that this need to arrange the world into an order that places us at the forefront is a result of our self-awareness. This kind of thinking limits our ability to see the possibility that exists within the world around us and our ties to the original world.

One of the ways that he tries to help us beyond these limitations is by his use of a nominal grammar. By using the generic wordings he was trying to give readers the chance to go beyond the limitations of the words to create a more personal interpretation of the subject of the poem (Molesworth, 149). Similarly, he has tried to find situations in which our conscious perceptions of the world are going to be blurred and use them as symbols for how we can more clearly understand the true connections that exist in the world. This is because we allow ourselves to use our imagination and intuition to perceive those things that we normally don’t (Davis, 34).

In addition to changing the subjects through which he was exploring the connections to the world, he also used a variety of elements to cloud our vision. Water, shadow, and dreams are the three most prevalent elements throughout his career. Each of these create moments when our conscious perceptions are muddled and we become more reliant upon our intuitive perceptions.
In poems where any of these is a dominant element, the boundaries between things merge, and the oneness of the void is mimicked, as seen in “Low Fields and Light” (*FF, GB*, 184).

I think it is in Virginia, that place
That lies across the eye of my mind now
Like a grey blade set to the moon’s roundness,
Like a plain of glass touching all there is.

With a cow-bird half-way, on a stunted post,
watching.

How the light slides through them easy as weeds
Or wind, slides over them away out near the sky

The flat fields run out to the sea there.
There is no sand, no line. It is autumn.
The bare fields, dark between fences, run
Out to the idle gleam of the flat water.

Because even a bird can remember
The fields that were there before the slow
Spread and wash of the edging light crawled
There and covered them, a little more each year.

And the fences go on out, sinking slowly,

This poem shows how we place boundaries and limits on those things that we can concretely measure. These boundaries come apart when we try to place them on the sea, wind, or light. These things will cross the fences we place to separate things and eventually drown out all distinctions. While the sea has always had this sense of immeasurability to it, there are other forms of water that can also erase these boundaries.

In “As Though I Was Waiting for That” (*SF, CL*, 185) Merwin describes a rain that will wash away the taint of consciousness. This will allow us to leave behind all of those things that have made up our lives and pass behind the scenes and the trappings that have obscured our view of the connections in the world. Once these obstructions are removed and we are not tied up in the self, we will be able to move beyond the void.

A final form of water that causes things to be unclear to our conscious perceptions is fog. “Fog-Horn” (*FF, DF*, 203) provides an example of how, in the “shifting blindness” of these blurred conditions, objects can take on a mythic overtone and we acknowledge the possibilities that might exist. In this case the narrator hears the fog-horn and fears that it is warning us of something that we don’t want to acknowledge with its
mournful, wounded-beast moans. Something of our true relationship with the world is awakening in this narrator and it promises to be disturbing, as any contemplation of the void is bound to be. To ignore it, though, may lead to our cries being swallowed and all hands lost in ways that we have not prepared for as the void reclaims us from our willful separation.

Shadows and darkness are other elements used in Merwin’s poetry that serve to help us see beyond the boundaries that our perceptions place on things. We have seen how Merwin used shadows in “The Last One,” (SF, L, 86) but there are other uses for it in his works. In the darkness, our focus becomes contemplation of that which lies around us rather than upon the self. Merwin’s narrators often feel connections in these moments that would be lost when they have a clearer vision.

All of these elements have a similar function in his poetry. They act as doorways that can return us to a glimpse of the original unity. Merwin’s poetry also uses actual doorways for this same purpose. Again, it is only when these doorways are viewed properly that we are able to use them for this purpose. In “Instructions to Four Walls” (SF, WUA, 270), he talks of how each wall represents something different and timeless. One wall has a door that opens on all of time. This does not need to be any special door; it just needs to be approached with the proper attitude as seen in “The Red House” (FH, OH, 131). In this poem what should be a closet door in an upstairs bedroom actually opens onto a woodland scene. Even the house in which it is located seems to have more space than one would expect of it. There are possibilities that exist here that the narrator is aware of but that many others would not be. We need to open ourselves up to the possibilities that these doors can offer us.
While these other elements often provide him with some access to what lies beyond, the most frequently used element is fire. This is something that he returns to in the various stages of his exploration. He seems to realize that this is the doorway that is best suited for him. If he can find the proper angle from which to approach it, his journey will be allowed to move to another level. His poem “The Flight” (SP, CF, 248) describes fire as being eternal and a link to the first moments of creation. “Nothing is native of fire and everything is born of it” (FH, OT, 129).

In the middle of his career, Merwin presented things as he perceived them, using generic descriptions to draw out greater meaning. Both true communication and true poetry are most effective when looking at the silences that exist within the discourses because of the inherent weaknesses of language (Davis, 42). There are often moments in Merwin’s poetry when the narrator is able to come to understanding through silence which is to be respected because of its opposition to the “empty prattle of civilization” (Brunner, 98).

One example of the effectiveness of silence to bring us answers is seen in “Finding a Teacher” (SF, WUA, 285). The narrator has come to ask questions concerning various aspects of life and nature but instead is told to wait in silence. As he waits, the questions in their insignificance, slip away. In return, he has come to an awareness of things that were of more consequence to his situation. This suggests that in the silence of the universe, we are able to come to an intuitive understanding of the world, if we so choose. This understanding in turn, will bring a sense of peace that other answers would not (Bowers, 254).
CONCLUSION

In his poetry, Merwin shows the need to cloud our conscious perceptions of the world so that we might come to a greater understanding of our position in the world. This understanding is not something that we can come to with the ease of reading it in a book. We need to search out the approach that works best for us. When we do find it, we will begin to see how our self-awareness leads us to misuse language. This misuse and awareness creates a separation between humans and the rest of the world. This separation, in turn, allows us to find excuses for our mistreatment of nature.

All of these things are barriers to our understanding of our true position in the world and are things that W. S. Merwin is trying to awaken us to in his poetry. If his work has appeared vague or inconsistent to critics, it is because he knows that he cannot provide answers. The best that he can hope for is to awaken us to the error of our ways in the hopes that we will take the problem as seriously as he does. He has devoted his poetic career to exploring his beliefs and sharing them with us. It is time for us to look carefully in the mirror and try to see what truly exists on the other side.

He has made it difficult for critics to catalogue him, but that has always been his point, that we already pigeonhole too many things and our efforts to categorize living poets act to limit our ability to appreciate them. It is only after they have ceased to write and we have time to contemplate the complete body of their work that we will understand what they were doing with their poetry and decide if they were successful.
REFERENCES CITED


