

TIME AND THE ANIMALS OF *SIRIUS*

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The Nomad Lions: Initiating and Intimating

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Fourth Dimensional Time

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

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

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

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

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



Poems of Flight: Time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Poems of Morning: Awakening

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

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

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

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

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

music without repetition
or beginning playing

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

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

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

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

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Poems of Contemporary Nature: Ecology

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

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

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

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

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

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



Poems of the Black Dog: Reason

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Final Poem of Birds and Song: Enlightenment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Animals in *The Shadow of Sirius*

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

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

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

in its time
with all its leaves

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

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

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

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

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Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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