

SILENCE AND THE LYRIC-EPIC

HYBRID ECOPOETICS IN *THE SHADOW OF SIRIUS*

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

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

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



Silence and the Ecological Elegy

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

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

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

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



The Trouble with Pastoral Poetry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Merwin's Personal Epic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Merwin’s Dark Ecology

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

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

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

* * *

where the rooms of the dark were already known

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Notes

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

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

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

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