

# “THE WHOLE WAY / THEY HAVE BEEN THERE”

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## INTRODUCTION

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

Walt Whitman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### Notes

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