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Literary Criticism

Until Everything Is Continuous Again: American Poets on the Recent Work of W.S. Merwin

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Celebrated American poet W.S. Merwin is notable not only for his accomplishments and prodigious output (publishing twenty-some poetry collections, twenty-some translations, and several books of prose since 1952), but for the shifts in his technique. Over the years, his use of form and diction has changed from "taut and brilliant" to something more open; his stance toward the absence and loss that are central to his work has also shifted, moving from, as Jonathan Weinert writes, "a vision of absence as annihilation to a vision of absence as the paradoxical ground of presence."

In this volume, fourteen essays and one interview address Merwin's recent work, focusing on*The Rain in the Trees,*of 1988, and eight subsequent books. As one might expect from a critical work, the contributors mostly wrestle with notions of poetics: the limits of language, use and energy of the line, narrative versus the lyric, open and organic forms, the qualities of odes. At times the lens opens wider to consider social, ecological, or political concerns. The essays are studded with close readings of individual poems.

What emerges are two portraits. One, of course, is of Merwin: long fascinated by origins, journey, and absence, his remarkable serenity is supported by his belief in the connection "between the human imagination and all of life." Language is his both problematic and exquisite medium, and loss carries not only personal but social and cultural dimensions.

The other portrait is of American poet-dom, or perhaps of academia, preoccupied by its literary theories. The most luminous and humane moments occur when a writer allows him or herself to appear on the page. Debra Kang Dean, for example, recounts "the experience of homecoming that reading [*The Rain in the Trees*] represented" for her, a native of Hawaii. Matthew Zapruder deftly relays the folly of thinking too highly of one's theoretical prejudices.

Sarah Kennedy muses on the relationship of poetry to current events, remembering a soldier student—traumatized, numb—as a symbol of the collateral emotional damage of this era.

Merwin himself states that in "moments of great genius, in all the arts … Suddenly a whole new part of experience becomes available." As at least one essayist in this volume notes, Merwin's work does that—makes parts of experience newly or again available. In particular, he defines the peculiar nature of modern loss: alienation, the failures of language and of cultures. "This loss," writes Eric Pankey, "is one of extinction, a wholly severed connection, and the effacement of tribal knowledge."

Merwin worries about poetry's ability to survive the alienation of the young from direct experience. "Imagination," he believes, "is a sensual thing. It's not an abstract thing." And engagement in the physical world is of paramount importance. Merwin's work, as Forrest Gander writes, "express[es] the possibilities of a deep investment in attentiveness; [it] disclose[s] a quality of awareness through which we might imagine the potential of our lives in the world among others—human and not human—who call forth our responsibility as ethical beings."

This book is best used as a companion to Merwin's work. Readers interested in poetics will find useful detail here. Those interested in a more general discussion will find fewer, but no less valuable, insights into contemporary poetry's project.

While Merwin is certainly proficient and comfortable discussing technical concerns, a perhaps unintended feature of the book is the contrast between esoteric analysis of poetics with the universal value of the sensual. In response to an interviewer who asks, "In what sense is absence the threshold of paradise?" Merwin immediately returns the question to direct experience. "Have you ever lost anything?" he asks. "Yes," says the interviewer. "So you know," says Merwin. And then he laughs.

Teresa Scollon