

Preface

Until Everything Is Continuous Again: American Poets on the Recent Work of W. S. Merwin takes as its subject the poetry of W. S. Merwin since the publication of his twelfth collection, *The Rain in the Trees*, in 1988. The span of over twenty years since can accurately be considered “recent,” as the subtitle suggests, only in light of the astonishing length and prodigality of Merwin’s career. In the sixty years since W. H. Auden awarded the Yale Younger Poets Prize to Merwin’s debut, *A Mask for Janus* (1952), Merwin has published twenty collections of original poems, more than twenty major translations from more than a dozen languages, and eight books of prose, while winning almost every major award that an American poet can win.

The decision to focus on Merwin’s eight most recent collections of poems is not arbitrary, nor is it merely chronological. The critical literature on Merwin—surprisingly sparse for a poet of his accomplishments and stature—identifies *The Rain in the Trees* as a watershed in his work, and the foundation for the very different sort of work that he has produced since. Merwin himself has acknowledged that with *The Rain in the Trees* he had “a sense of coming to the feeling that I’ve done what I wanted to do in that direction, and that the open ground is already somewhere else.”

Merwin began exploring that open ground with his next collection, *Travels* (1993). For readers who had come to know his work through the stark, surrealistic, and bereft poems of *The Lice* (1967) and *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970) or through the increasingly casual, intimate, and occasionally ecstatic poems of the 1970s and 1980s, *Travels* was a startling

departure. In ways that were not immediately obvious, it also marked a return to the formal rigor, linguistic richness, and cultural engagement of his earliest work.

Establishing that there *is* a recent work stylistically distinct from the preceding work says nothing about the *value* of that recent work, aesthetically or otherwise. In his elegant and closely argued meta-essay on Merwin's book-length narrative poem *The Folding Cliffs* (1998), H. L. Hix contends that no reading of a poem can be complete without inquiring into what that poem puts at stake. Merwin's work, always serious and explicit of purpose, seems especially to invite and reward such inquiry. No matter how small their canvas, how intimate their tone, or how simple their language, the poems of W. S. Merwin keep the question of what is at stake continually in the foreground; they are consistently informed (or haunted) by large, public, and philosophically complex concerns. In response, the essays gathered here concern themselves as much with the social, philosophical, political, and ecological dimensions of Merwin's recent work as with the aesthetic, with the poems as a series of artifacts well or ill wrought.

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