Will the animals ever come back? Parting and absence in W. S. Merwin's ecopoetics

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W.S. Merwin's poetry often speaks in tones of anger, denouncing the loss of species and habitats. This paper will dwell, however, on his affection. Its starting point is a recurrent representation of his relationship with non-human animals as interrupted or threatened. For him, these episodes are occasions as much for longing as for protest. I propose that three of Merwin's animal poems allude respectively to a Chinese parting poem by the Tang poet Wang Wei, a lover's complaint by the English renaissance poet Thomas Wyatt, and *ubi sunt* laments by the medieval French poet François Villon. It is difficult to be certain if the allusions are deliberate. Merwin has on occasion acknowledged making deliberate allusions, but he has also frequently insisted that his writing process is largely unconscious rather than preconceived in any way. It is also true that we cannot be certain which Chinese and French translations Merwin may have read, although he was almost certainly familiar with the poems given his translation work and other statements of his. While the resemblances to Wei, Wyatt and Villon are subtle, there are cues – parallel phrasings, parallel figuration, in parallel contexts – that can potentially activate these earlier poems for readers familiar with them.

Merwin's 'The Animals' is written in the aftermath of a mass extinction event. The speaker plaintively wonders:

> "All these years behind windows / With blind crosses sweeping the tables / And myself tracking over empty ground / Animals I never saw / I with no voice / Remembering names to invent for them / Will any come back will one / Saying yes / Saying look carefully yes / We will meet again"[1]

The poem alludes to a poem by Wang Wei that has several closely approximate translations. Wei writes:

> "From here in the hills I've seen you on your way / and closed my wicker gate in the evening sun. / Every year the grass in spring is green – / Will you come back or not, my noble friend?"[2]

Merwin's speaker's isolation is primarily communicated through connotation and implication. Reading 'The Animals' with an awareness of Wei's poem activates an association with friendship and the fondness that this implies. An extra association of travellers' remoteness pervades the speaker's question. Also significant, however, are the differences between the poems, particularly the agitation of Merwin's repetitions. Merwin's condition is like Wei's in its warmth, but unlike Wei's in its anxiety.

In 'Last Morning at Punta Arena', wild dogs disappear from the scene that Merwin views:

> "In the first rays the wandering mountain ridge / above the sand plain with its crowd of gray cactus / kindles to peach and orange and a wave / of color burns slowly down the cliffs / … / I walk toward it once more following my own / footprints through the new morning and I see / three heads rise just beyond it coyotes / wild dogs they watch me and move off slowly / all the time looking back over their shoulders."[3]

Coming to the poem with a knowledge of Merwin's commitment to ecology, it is difficult not to feel it burdened by a sense of responsibility for human beings' destruction of the environment. If human beings have broken their bond, the poem suggests, then animals have every right to withdraw warily from the human observer and the danger he represents. On this reading, the animals' motion and implied disapproval subtly alludes to Thomas Wyatt's 'They Flee from Me', also a poem about rejection that plays on danger and wildness:

> "They flee from me that sometime did me seek / With naked foot, stalking in my chamber / I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek, / That now are wild and do not remember / That sometime they put themself in danger / To take bread at my hand;"[4]

Merwin's poem completely absorbs Wyatt's. It subdues the erotic component in 'They Flee from Me' and

appropriates the lover's rejection as a metaphor for a rupturing of ecological co-existence. The poem also reverses roles. Critics find hostility, aggression, and vindictiveness in Wyatt's poem, as the speaker broods on what his lover is due because of her immorality. In Merwin's poem, by contrast, it is the animals that accuse.

In 'The Wild Geese', Merwin grieves for animals:

> "It was always for the animals that I grieved most / … / in all the great written wisdom of China / where are the animals when were they lost / where are the ancestors who knew the way / … / only in the old poems does their presence survive / the gibbons call from the mountain gorges / the old words all deepen the great absence / the vastness of all that has been lost"[5]

The poem alludes to the *ubi sunt* motif famously used by Francois Villon:

> "Where are the lads who cut a dash / I hung on to in earlier days / … / Some are stark dead. No trace of them remains / … / Now tell me where has Flora gone, / the lovely Roman / … / where is the drift of last year's snow?"[6]

The *ubi sunt* is a formula used in the poetry of the medieval period to meditate on human mortality. The expression "Where are…?" is obligatory since it comes from the Latin "Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?": "Where are those who were before us?" The question is rhetorical, since in all contexts, 'they' have passed. Villon elegizes his compatriots and figures from history and myth. Merwin implies that animals, deceased or soon to be, are entitled to the same register of lament. Merwin also connects the motif to his view that animals should be regarded as ancestor spirits. Speaking of prehistoric cave paintings, he says:

> "In a lot of the paintings, the animals have no feet; they're the great elders, they're the dimension of time. The Neanderthal realized that they are the new arrivals, and they don't know anything. These animal elders are the ones who know the world … I think they were learning from the elders, and learning is part of realizing your connection to these things and that we are not separate from these things."[7]

The ubi sunt motif in 'The Wild Geese' implies that animals have gone before in a double sense. Not only have they died, but they should be revered in the way that traditional cultures revere their ancestors. Merwin would like us to see our connection with nature in the same way, as part of a great continuity.

In 'The Animals', 'Last Morning at Punta Arena', and 'The Wild Geese', genres that have traditionally been used to lament human beings have been absorbed into poems of reverence for non-human animals. Merwin's poems transpose traditional genres, and they substitute animals for people as the recipients of those genres. The poems advocate not through denunciation, as some of Merwin's poems do, but through longing, humility, and reverence. Reading them in this way invites us to imagine that Merwin's sense of grief, when he contemplates the loss of species, is at least as great as the earlier poets' sense of grief when separated from human beings.

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[1] W. S. Merwin, "The Animals", in J. D. McClatchy (Ed.), *Collected Poems 1952-1993* (New York: The Library of America, 2013), 267.

[2] Wang Wei, "A Farewell in the Mountains", in Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone and Xu Haixin (Transl.) *Laughing lost in the Mountains: Poems of Wang Wei* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England), 88.

[3] W. S. Merwin, "Last Morning at Punta Arena", in J. D. McClatchy (Ed.), Collected Poems 1952-1993 (New York: The Library of America, 2013), 304.

[4] Thomas Wyatt, "They Flee from Me", in Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy (Eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (Fifth ed.) (New York: W.W Norton, 2005), 127.

[5] W.S. Merwin, "The Wild Geese", in Garden Time (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press 2016), 48.

[6] Francois Villon, "The Testament" in Peter Dale (Ed.), Selected Poems: Francois Villon. (London: Penguin), 59, 67.

[7] Hal Crimmel, "Nature, Conservation and the Unseen: An Interview with W.S. Merwin", in Conversations with W. S. Merwin (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015), 198-199.