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Surrealism in W. S. Merwin’s “The River of Bees” and Other Poems

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The poet W. S. Merwin has used surrealism in his works to get at the gist of reality. The fantastic or dream-like imagery in his poems serves to highlight very real concerns about existence, war or ecology, among other themes. Merwin uses dreams, fantasy, and myth to elucidate everyday reality or highlight his beliefs about social issues.¹

Interestingly enough, Merwin had an ordinary early life in contrast with his innovative poems. He is the son of a Presbyterian minister, was born in New York, and also lived in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. However, later he moved to Europe for several years as an adult and developed a love of languages there that led him to translate various authors such as Pablo Neruda, Roberto Juarroz, and Jean Follain. His international experience may have influenced his unique style of poetry.

In the chapters that follow I will concentrate on a number of Merwin’s poems from the sixties and after. This is the time when he began writing free verse without punctuation, unlike his earlier, more formally written poems.²

1. Surrealism and the Meaning of Life

Many of Merwin’s poems are psychological or philosophical in nature, even though he has also written about social issues. He presents his views through surrealist imagery based on dreams, fantasies or myths.

“The River of Bees” is one of Merwin’s psychological or philosophical poems. In the poem there is an elderly character that Merwin calls the blind man; a similar character figures prominently in “The Blind Seer of Ambon,”

which I will examine later. These two elderly men rather resemble Tiresias, the seer in *The Odyssey*.

The man in "The River of Bees," which describes a dream, is quite elderly. Merwin writes that "He was old/and he will have fallen into his eyes" (51). In the poem the narrator keeps wondering how he should live:

I took my eyes
A long way to the calendar
Room after room asking how shall I live (51)

Later the narrator states:

Once once and once
In the same city I was born
Asking what shall I say (51)

The narrator sees "one man processions" (51) in the streets and speaks of:

Empty bottles their
Image of hope
It was offered to me by name (51)

This means that the sense of hope of the people around him is empty. (He seems to be living in some ancient kingdom where the royalty are carried around on palanquins.)

At the end of the poem, the narrator recalls that the old man "was old he is not real nothing is real" (51). The old man is an imaginary character in a dream, but he seems to be a kind of spiritual guide to the narrator. Each time he appears the narrator is inspired to wonder about the meaning of life. Indeed, in the last two stanzas the narrator proclaims:

We are the echo of the future

On the door it says what to do to survive
But we were not born to survive
Only to live (51)

In other words, we were born not just to exist but to live in the fullest sense of the word. This stanza is reminiscent of William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in which he stated, "We must not just prosper but endure" (*The Portable Faulkner* 330), meaning we must thrive in life, not just live day to day. Indeed, in the middle of the poem Merwin's narrator says, "Men think they are better than grass" (51). We are not just life forms, but thinking, feeling humans.

The character of the blind man reappears in "The Blind Seer of Ambon" (1993), a more recent work, giving this poem a kind of magical reality. Surrealism in "The Blind Seer of Ambon" is present in its mythic atmosphere. The seer, the narrator, is a magical character, but at the same time he is also a man who has overcome personal tragedy in his life. The poem has both a mythic and psychological dimension. The seer is both an otherworldly figure and a handicapped person who has lost both his family and eyesight.

The seer explains his nature in the beginning:

I always knew that I came from
another language

and now even when I can no longer see

I continue to arrive at words

but the leaves

and the shells were already here

and my fingers finding them echo

the untold light and depth (125)

The seer has an ability that involves a different kind of language. Merwin apparently means that the old man "communicates" with the world in a unique way. By communication Merwin must mean the seer's heightened power of perception that goes beyond ordinary sight. The seer's eyes can no longer see, but he can see through to an inner reality through his sense of

touch.

The surrealist element of this poem is the mythic reality that Merwin has created by featuring a character with seemingly preternatural powers. Despite his special abilities, the seer experiences loss just like any ordinary person. In the middle part of the poem we get a sense of his human side:

when the houses fell
in the earthquake
I lost my wife
and my daughter
it all roared and stood still
falling
where they were in the daylight (125)

He lost his family in an earthquake and has to emotionally survive this tragedy.

Originally, the seer paid tribute to his wife thusly:

I named for my wife a flower
as though I could name a flower
my wife dark and luminous
and not there

I lost the drawings of the flowers
in fire (125)

He realizes it is not really possible to hold onto his wife's memory in a complete way, but he still feels disappointed about losing even the drawings of her flower.

After that the seer states that he "lost the studies/of the flowers/[...] in the sea" (125). Then the flowers were gone and he was reminded of the loss of his family. He sadly says, "afterward my eyes themselves were gone" (126); the trauma that he experienced must have made him blind.

In the next part of the poem the seer starts to rediscover the world

around him by using his other senses. First, he finds out about his enhanced hearing ability after looking at small creatures, but “the next day is this/hearing after music/so this is the way I see now” (126). Now that he is blind, hearing has become his new sense of “sight.”

The seer’s other sense of “sight” is tactile:

I take a shell in my hand
new to itself and to me
I feel the thinness the warmth and the cold (126)

This is a new sensation for the seer. He finally proclaims:

everything takes me by surprise
it is all awake in the darkness (126)

He has overcome his sense of loss and tragedy and discovered a new world of aural and tactile perception. He felt bereft without his wife and child, but now he feels more in touch with his environment than before. He has a sort of spiritual rebirth after the death of his family.

We can observe in these two poems that Merwin’s surrealist style has two approaches: employing a kind of psychological reality or a mythic reality to show the inner nature of life. “The Blind Seer of Ambon” uses a mixture of psychological and mythic reality. “The River of Bees” primarily makes use of a psychological reality, although the character of the old blind seer belongs to the realm of myth. This character appears in both poems but figures prominently in “The Blind Seer of Ambon.”

In these two poems Merwin uses surrealist imagery to explore the nature and meaning of existence and the way to survive life’s many vicissitudes.

2. War, the Apocalypse, and Surrealism

In some of his poems Merwin depicts the absurd, tragic nature of war, and in other works he presents us with an apocalyptic sense that hints at the possibility of an impending war or disaster.

"The Asians Dying" (1967) deals directly with war and the destruction of human life and the ecology in such conflicts. More than likely, Merwin is criticizing American military actions in Vietnam or even Indochina. The American military in this poem is a mythological figure playing the role of a cruel god of death:

When the forests have been destroyed their darkness
remains
The ash the great walker follows the possessors
Forever
Nothing they will come to is real
Nor for long
Over the watercourses
Like ducks in the time of ducks
The ghosts of the villages trail in the sky
Making a new twilight (57)

This can be seen as an extremely negative view of American military aggression in Vietnam, but in fact, the military wreaked destruction all around, both on humans (now "ghosts") and nature ("forests"). America is haunted by the war dead. Indeed, the "ghosts of the villages" make a "new twilight." Instead of the campaign slogan "Morning in America"—Reagan's overly positive vision for America—we have a dark sunset without hope, just regret.

The ghosts reappear in the second stanza: "Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead" (57). Night provides only an uneasy peace:

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed
The dead go away like bruises
The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands
Pain the horizon
Remains (57)

The "great walker" (America) is gone, but the traces of destruction

remain. In addition, the tragic memory of the dead will not go away and ecological damage (“poisoned farmlands”) remains, from battles and air strikes or the defoliant Agent Orange.

In the last stanza Merwin returns to his harsh image of the American military as a monster:

The possessors move everywhere under Death their star
Like columns of smoke they advance into the shadows
Like thin flames with no light (57)

The Americans, the “possessors,” are guided by the power of death, which is depicted as a god-like being here. Merwin reinforces the idea of the military as destroyer with images like “smoke” and “flames.” This may seem like a dark, critical view of America, but it was only natural for the American military to be perceived as an oppressor in light of the number of Vietnamese combatants and civilians killed, various atrocities like My Lai, and environmental damage. The surrealist aspect of the poem is its nightmarish atmosphere and the mythological depiction of the military.

“Late Wonders” (1983) is an extension of Merwin’s concern with war taken to a new extreme. This is one of Merwin’s apocalyptic poems, perhaps written under the negative influence of various wars and particularly the nuclear insanity of MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction, a constant backdrop of the Cold War.

Merwin ironically selects Universal Studios, a place intended for family entertainment, to describe his sense of impending doom:

In Los Angeles the cars are flowing
through the white air
and the news of bombings

at Universal Studios
you can ride through an avalanche (84)

The imaginary bombings in the poem may have been inspired by

Merwin's memories of U.S. aerial strikes in the news during the Vietnam War or by wars in general. The bombings in his imagination set the atmosphere for apocalyptic events at the amusement park in the poem, such as the parting of the Red Sea:

With your ticket
you can ride on a trolley

before which the Red
Sea parts
just the way it did
for Moses (94)

The parting of the sea saved the Jews in the Bible, but it spelled disaster for the Egyptians in one version of the story because God cast the Egyptians pursuing them into the abyss.

More mayhem awaits in the poem: "You can see Los Angeles/destroyed hourly" (94). In fact, you can even watch:

[...] the avenue named for somewhere else
the one on which you know you are
crumple and vanish incandescent
with a terrible cry
all around you (94)

The cry emanates from "[...] everyone you have seen all day/driving shopping talking eating" (94). A mere amusement park can offer visions of total havoc, even an earthquake.

Merwin reminds us:

it's only a movie
it's only a beam of light (94)

The special effects in Merwin's version of Universal Studios have provided us with an illusion as in a movie. In the end, the poem asserts that a movie is only light: a source of entertainment. Afterwards, we can return to real life if

we can forget about the calamities that we witnessed in an amusement park or at the movies.

This poem is somewhat reminiscent of Nathanael West's novella *The Day of the Locust* (1939), whose title by coincidence also refers to the Jews in ancient Egypt in the Bible. The protagonist of the story is attracted to a Hollywood starlet, but his love or lust remains unrequited. His frustration with the world of Hollywood illusion is mirrored by an apocalyptic scene of violence in *La-la Land* in the last chapter of the story. This is a pre-nuclear disaster, but surely the memory of World War I and the prospect of a new war in the thirties must have influenced West.

Similarly, the sense of unreality in "Late Wonders" stems from the surrealism of everyday life, especially in Hollywood. Bombarded by fantastic images from Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and now the Internet, we might sometimes find even our ordinary existence unreal. The feeling of illusion in Hollywood and the like can be repetitive and predictable, but nonetheless it can be quite a sensation. This is particularly true at amusement parks like Universal Studios or Disneyland, in which many attractions are entertaining or even thrilling, but can also trivialize disasters or death in real life. We can thereby become desensitized to destruction and mayhem.³

In the two aforementioned poems Merwin uses dream, myth, and fantasy to expose the evils of war and give us a feeling of apocalyptic foreboding. The surrealist aspect is evident in the mythic portrayal of the American military in "The Asians Dying" and the fantastic description of Universal Studios in "Late Wonders."

3. Ecology, Animal Rights, and Surrealism

One of the main themes in Merwin's poetry is our relationship with nature. He feels that humans have become out of touch with the environment and live in a state of alienation from nature. This feeling of isolation from

nature lets humans feel free to hunt, mistreat, and kill animals, or destroy the environment.

One of Merwin's ecological poems is "For a Coming Extinction," which concerns a gray whale that is about to die and become extinct. This whale is meant to represent all whales in danger:

Gray whale
 Now that we are sending you to The End
 That great god
 Tell him
 That we who follow you invented forgiveness
 And forgive nothing (58)

The beginning of the first stanza refers to the whales' imminent demise, but the mention of forgiveness is intriguing. Merwin regards the human race as cold-hearted and hypocritical. It pretends to care but forgives nothing. Merwin also implies here that humans are the next generation to survive after the whales and presumably other endangered animals. Homo sapiens conquers anything in the way of the pursuit of dominating nature and the world.

Merwin continues in the same vein later in the poem:

When you have left the seas nodding on their stalks
 Empty of you
 Tell him that we were made
 On another day (58)

"Another day" is a reference to Genesis. Humans were supposedly created on the sixth day of Creation after God made the other animals on dry land. (Animals that live in the water were created the day before.) This section of the poem is an ironic depiction of human pride and vanity.

We find the same harshness at the end:

When you will not see again
 The whale calves trying the light

[...] The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas

[...] Join your words to theirs

Tell him

That it is we who are important (58)

Humans consider themselves to be the master of creation, the lord of the animals, but to Merwin it is just an arrogant fantasy in light of the past or future extinction of various animals. The great auks are already extinct, and the gorillas and whales may eventually share the same fate, if the theoretically superior *Homo sapiens* do not give more consideration to conservation of the environment. The last lines of the above quote constitute Merwin's supreme irony in the context of the human damage to the ecology. He instructs the whale to tell God that humans are important, but in fact, environmental degradation could lead to the extinction of the human race too if we do not think more about the ecology.

Indeed, Merwin gives us this warning in the third stanza of the poem:

The bewilderment will diminish like an echo

[...] Leaving behind it the future

Dead

And ours (58)

Humans have to survive along with their surroundings, or they will have no future. We do not live in a vacuum.

Merwin has often written about the ecology and animal rights. In his poem "Fly" we can see that he is at least not hypocritical about the latter. He can find cruelty even in his own heart. "Fly" seems to be a fictional event (unless this is a memory from his youth), but the narrator is quite honest about mistreating a pigeon:

I have been cruel to a fat pigeon

Because he would not fly

All he wanted was to live like a friendly old man (60)

The narrator is disgusted by the pigeon's habits:

He had let himself become a wreck filthy
 [...] Smelling waddling having to be
 Carried up the ladder at night content (60)

The narrator gets so annoyed that he throws the pigeon into the air to try to get him to fly:

Fly I said throwing him into the air
 But he would drop and run back expecting to be fed
 I said it again and again throwing him up
 [...] I found him in the dovecote dead
 Of the needless efforts (80)

The narrator's act of cruelty only reflects on his character:

So that is what I am

Pondering his eye that could not
 Conceive that I was a creature to run from

I who have always believed too much in words (60)

To Merwin, animals are innocent, and humans cannot be trusted. As a poet, he has often focused on the question of language in his work. Here he is suggesting that humans are too rational. We live in our head, but we are out of touch with our heart.

Surrealism in these two ecological poems is evident in the conceit of an endangered whale talking to God (or a godhead) in "For a Coming Extinction." In addition, Merwin has a mythological reference to Genesis in the poem. "Fly," in contrast, may seem more realistic, except that this is probably a fictional situation and Merwin describes the pigeon in anthropomorphic terms.

4. Conclusion

Merwin's particular brand of surrealism is characterized by the use of dreams, fantasy, and myth, all of which constitute a form of higher reality. We could view myth as a collective dream of an ethnic group, country or all of humanity. Indeed, Freud, Jung, and other psychoanalysts have analyzed myths in the same fashion as dreams. Erich Fromm notes in *The Forgotten Language* that "After starting out with the restricted aim of helping the neurotic patient to understand the reasons for his illness, Freud proceeded to study the dream as a universal human phenomenon, the same in the sick and in the healthy person. He saw that dreams were essentially no different from myths and fairy tales and that to understand the language of one was to understand the language of others" (Fromm 7-8).

Merwin, at any rate, uses dreams, fantasy, and myth to create a higher reality to address very real concerns, such as war, ecology, or the meaning of life. "The River of Bees" is paradigmatic in using a dream to explain how to live one's life. This poem may be one of his most surreal works. "The Blind Seer of Ambon" for its part employs myth to show how to survive after experiencing some great tragedy.

When Merwin talks about social issues, there is a grim reality underlying the surreal imagery in his poetry. This is especially true of "The Asians Dying." The American military in this poem is like a god of death or destruction, wreaking havoc everywhere, whereas "Late Wonders" gives us an apocalyptic sense of foreboding that lurks beneath the fantastic atmosphere of an amusement park. As if it were not enough to worry about nuclear war, we have to deal with other disasters like an avalanche or a flood. Such menacing visions, even at Universal Studios, feel like a paranoid fantasy, despite the entertaining aspect of an amusement park.

The ecological poems make use of myth and fantasy to show how the environment is in peril and how cruel and indifferent humans are to the

animal kingdom, even though they are a member of the kingdom themselves. "For a Coming Extinction" shows our haughty, uncaring attitude towards the plight of endangered animals in spite of the efforts of the UN, various governments, and many NPOs to save the planet. Merwin uses mythological references to God and the Bible to make his point, whereas in "Fly" he employs fantasy to describe animal abuse and a pigeon's human-like lifestyle.

Merwin's poetry features incongruous images like the lines "He was old he will have fallen into his eyes" (51) in "The River of Bees" or "I always knew that I came from/another language" (125) in "The Blind Seer of Ambon," as might occur in a French Surrealist poem. However, his type of surrealism is mostly characterized by the depiction of a higher reality shedding light on everyday reality. He uses dreams, fantasy, and myth to achieve his aim, portraying reality through surrealist means. Merwin uses surreal imagery to discuss the meaning of human existence and address political and social issues like war and the ecology.

André Breton puts it aptly in these words from the "Manifesto of Surrealism":

[...] Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.

(Manifestoes of Surrealism 26)

A surrealist approach in poetry can shed light on our daily concerns and problems in life.

Notes

1. Putting it in different terms, Ed Folsom notes that many regard Merwin's poetry as "distant, foreign, alien" (224). Reality in Merwin's poetry can seem like a realm far apart from our everyday world, but I would maintain that, in fact, his works display an underlying interest in quotidian existence and sociopolitical conflicts ("I Have Been a Long Time in a Strange Country," *W. S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry* 224).
2. For more about this later part of his career, see Charles Altieri's paper, "Situating Merwin's Poetry Since 1970," which additionally analyzes some of the poems from the sixties (*W. S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry* 159-197).
3. Now we even have video games like *Streetfighter*, which present violence as a form of entertainment. The ultimate and unfortunate surrealism is the use of drone aircraft that are operated by "pilots" from a remote location, making death and casualties seem like a tragic sort of video game, complete with collateral damage.

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