Spirit in Flame:  
Anonymous Holiness in W. S. Merwin’s Poetry*

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Abstract
This essay explores the substitution of the anonymous Other for the Judeo-Christian Other in the work of American poet W. S. Merwin. Abandoning the univocal salvation theme in Christian theology after the onset of the Vietnam War, Merwin envisions redemption in a vast, anonymous wilderness. The urge of apocalypse paves the way for new existential and ethical grounds outside the existing social order. The poet’s spirit disavows the Symbolic for an exodus into the ultra-phenomenal. This spirit is not only Hegelian/negative but also Levinasian/alternative; foreclosing the existing social order, it attempts to open a new dimension in the interval between humanity and divinity. As the essay tries to delineate, Merwin’s divine comedy does not end with the intrusion of the apocalyptic events of the 1960s but persists in a more devious and spectral mode in his later work, revealing his desire to follow the holy object that eludes Judeo-Christian thematization. Merwin’s radical passivity and deep piety toward the anonymous expose the inadequacy of both technê and epistêmê in confrontation with that which is other than self, logos, God, and named essence. Such a realization beyond knowledge perhaps affords postmodern subjects a chance to obtain individual freedom by forming deeper bonds to the immanent calling for abolishing “in-the-name-of,” self-legitimating forms of theology, ideology, and religiosity.

Keywords
Merwin, holiness, desire, anonymity, Other

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No one could make the dark be still.
—W. S. Merwin
“In Time of Destruction”

A disciple of high Romanticism with all its remoteness, ghostliness, shadows, dreams, fantasies, ecstasies, and nostalgia, William Stanley Merwin (1927– ) claims a unique status in the contemporary American literary scene. Despite Merwin’s deep concern for and involvement with major social issues such as the anti-Vietnam War movement, protests against nuclear arms, and the environmental movement, starting back in the 1970s, his writings have maintained another dimension beyond immediate American social realities. To readers accustomed to modernist urban lyrics, Merwin’s poetry may sound anachronistic, for much of his corpus does not refer to current postindustrial consumer society. Rather, he sings of skylarks and nightingales in the remote villages of Southern France, where he lived intermittently for years, or of the fauna and flora of Majorca and Maui. Like the migrant birds he loves and writes so much about, Merwin has traveled extensively, from New Jersey, where he was born, to Portugal, Spain, France, England, Greece, Mexico, and finally to Hawaii. Like the Templar knights of the Middle Ages seeking the Holy Grail, Merwin in his poetic career has embarked on a spiritual quest for the distant, the transcendent, and the infinite.

The dance around the holy, around what the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas mysteriously calls “the holiness of the holy” (qtd. in Derrida, *Adieu* 4), has mesmerized Merwin since the early 1950s.1 Merwin has remained concerned with the realm of the holy, even when postwar thought tends to discredit all established belief systems, including the Judeo-Christian notion of the holy, which has preoccupied him for quite a long time. In Merwin’s early work, the urge to suspend the existing symbolic order in favor of a “higher reality,” what Jacques Lacan formulates as the real, finds its convenient outlet in religious and spiritual motifs. “Wild as heaven erupting into a child” (“Proteus,” *FF* 11),2 the spiritual revelation that affords ecstasy would ever haunt Merwin and become a major form of divine contact which brings mystical jouissance at the moment of separation. As I will

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1 In Judaism, “the holiness of the holy” refers to the most holy in the sanctuary, separated from the holy by a veil or a curtain, see Exod. 26. 31, 33. Derrida explains that Levinas’s phrase can be read both theologically and ethically, as it may mean holiness of the sanctuary and holiness of the other person. See Derrida, *Adieu* 4.

2 The following abbreviations of Merwin’s books will be used throughout the essay: *FF* for *The First Four Books of Poems*; *SF* for *The Second Four Books of Poems*; *RM* for *Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose, 1949–82*; *BF* for *The Book of Fables*; *EE* for *The Ends of the Earth: Essays*. 
argue in this essay, Merwin’s poetry evokes a kind of fleeting holiness, not only in religious but also in existential spheres, that prompts the self to follow the traces of the posited holy Other. In his obsessional pursuit of the phantasmal object, Merwin attempts to subjectivize the traces of the immeasurable object through poetic fantasies in order to become the authentic cause of his own poetic career. The spirituality of Merwin’s poetry is produced by the poet-speaker’s proximity—forever diminishing yet remaining distance—to the posited sublime object rather than its direct attainment.

Orthodox Christianity had played a structuring role in Merwin’s early texts such as “Rime of the Palmers,” “Dictum: For a Masque of Deluge,” “Carol of Three Kings,” “The Passion,” “Saint Sebastian,” “The Annunciation,” “White Goat, White Ram,” but in 1960, when The Drunk in the Furnace was published, Merwin rejected Protestantism for its primness and narrow-mindedness, calling Martin Luther “that old slider, the Prince of Falsehood” who “took the pulpit,” “mocking me with a schloar’s prim tone” (“Luther,” FF 268). Consequently, he would rather identify with his drunken grandfather the boat pilot than with his Protestant grandmother, who believed in “the strait gate and the needle’s eye” (FF 270). In his later work, Merwin seldom wrote about Christianity at full length, as he did in the 1950s. It seems that Merwin grew more cautious about religious intentions, rituals, and sacrifices, maintaining a distance from it. In 1967, stunned by US military actions in Vietnam, Merwin declared the total lack of divinity in humans, refusing any gnostic spark: “The Gods are what has failed to become of us // Now it is over we do not speak / Now the moment has gone it is dark / What is man that he should be infinite” (SF 100). Had the “receding fires” (“Anabasis,” FF 11) Merwin chased in the early 1950s died when the real, mass-destructive fire broke out in Vietnam? Was the gesture of closure the only thing left for the poet, when the atrocity of history had so repeatedly intruded upon the poet’s imagination, that the idea of the holy itself was reduced to nothing but a failure of divinity to account for the limited state of human beings? After the War, man’s resemblance to God, upheld in the Judeo-Christian tradition, seemed to disappear due to the common failure of both men and God, the failure of the holy.

In his seminal work Das Heilige (1917), which was translated as The Idea of the Holy, Rudolf Otto wrote that, different from the good, the holy or holiness “contains a quite specific element or ‘moment,’ which sets it apart from ‘the Rational,’” because it “remains inexpressible—an ἀρρητον or ineffable—in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts” (5). Alien to the order of the good and the useful, the holy initiates what Otto coined as the
“numinous” experience—creature-feelings and mystical tremor, for example, which cannot be “taught” but has to be “awakened” (7). Otto also placed religious experience in the category of the “wholly other” (26). This designation, together with the formulation of the numinous, has exercised a tremendous influence on contemporary theological, philosophical, and psychoanalytical discourses on the radical status of the other.

Merwin in his poetic praxis similarly espouses such a notion of the holy beyond conceptual realization, but unlike Otto, who analyzes the holy within a theistic framework, Merwin does not locate holiness in any established religion with its respective Holy Scriptures—be it Judaism, Christianity, or Zen Buddhism, the last of which he studied in the 1970s. Merwin’s stance seems more equivocal and elusive. Instead of associating the holy with an orthodox belief that involves rituals, practices, norms, prohibitions, and sometimes even schisms, Merwin, like any post-Romantic poet, understands it as manifested in the essential freedom of human spirit embodied in the poetic process. For Merwin, holiness does not interpellate a person into a religious subject but secretly incubates an umbilical connection with the numinous inside the person.³ In “Notes for a Preface” (1966), Merwin puts forward his rather “Judaic” view on poetry:

The encouragement of poetry itself is a labor and a privilege like that of living. It requires, I imagine, among other startlingly simple things, a love of poetry, and possibly a recurring despair of finding it again, an indelible awareness of its parentage with that biblical waif, ill at ease with time, the spirit. No one has any claims on it, no one deserves it, no one knows where it goes. (RM 295)

Like the prodigal son, the biblical waif is the one who is not at home, out of home, unhomely (unheimisch) and uncanny (unheimliche), whereas the spirit, qua the biblical waif, may refer to the elemental wind, fire, passion, desire, specter that animates and inhabits a poem as a chain of words. The waif incarnates the spirit and is driven forward by it. Merwin suggests that to find poetry again means to release historically conditioned subjectivity into an alienation that alienates the very cause of its own genesis, which further leads to the paradoxical position of being an heir without any property, for the biblical waif, as Merwin says, is the dispossessed yet

³ We may note that Merwin’s skepticism on the matter of the holy, due to his unwillingness to assign the holy a name, contrasts with Allen Ginsberg’s sarcastic numerations of the “holy” objects and sanctification of human parts in the footnote to Howl (1956).
the *inviolable* one. When Merwin states that “[n]o one has any claims on” the spirit, he is asserting its essential freedom to wander wherever it wants, a freedom born of inner necessity and outward struggle against “man-made circumstances” (*RM* 295). 

Seen from a postmodern perspective, what Merwin regards as the spiritual may correspond to a phantasmal, indestructible surplus over mechanic, material life.

Like other contemporary American poets working in the line of spirituality or Godhead (Robert Bly, James Wright, Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan), Merwin’s poetic praxis can be described as both primitivistic and postmodern. It aims at invoking the transcendent, the undefined, unnamed object, the “fecund nothing,” or the “mothering emptiness” (Bowers 252), although at the risk of causing acute psychic pain in both the author and the reader. In *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (1987), David Perkins subsumes Merwin, together with Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, and Gary Snyder, under the chapter title “Against Civilization,” admitting that “[Merwin] is included in this chapter partly because he would be less appropriate in any other” (556). Perkins’ reluctance reveals that Merwin’s style is largely *sui generis*. Early Merwin was more vague than Wright and Bly and more ultra-phenomenal, more apocalyptically fantastic, although all of them were heavily influenced by European surrealism. Perkins comments that after 1970 the “haunting cadences” of Merwin continued into “quasi-philosophical lyrics of a vague, musing, moody description” (582). Although sharing the same melancholic moodiness with Bly and Wright in many of his poems, Merwin’s personae are nevertheless more disoriented and more anonymous. According to Christopher Beach, among the Deep Imagists, Merwin comes closer to Mark Strand and Charles Simic, both of whom work towards a “surrealist mode,” while Bly, Wright, Kinnell, and Snyder remain committed to a “realist or descriptive aesthetic” (179-80). Simplistic as it is, Beach’s classification at least pulls Merwin away from the “descriptive aesthetic” for the Merwinesque elusiveness—that “harvest pallor” (*SF* 103).

While most commentators emphasize silence, absence, lack, void, alienation, self-depletion, fragmentation, asceticism, and generally *via negativa* in Merwin’s poetry in the 1960s, 

I tend to read Merwin’s poems from that period and later as a

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4 Edward Brunner likewise regards Merwin’s “Notes for a Preface” from the 1960s as an analysis of “the limitations of contemporary culture” even though it “explores the connection between a cultural crisis and the rediscovery of the essentially poetic” (137).

Derridean suppletium, a substitutive supplementation, to his earlier Christian poems. Merwin’s divine comedy does not end with the intrusion of apocalyptical events (the Vietnam War) in the 1960s but persists in a more devious and spectral mode in his later work. Critics have noticed the continuous medievalism in Merwin’s early and middle period. Victor Contoski, finding that “[n]ecessary pilgrimages of discovery permeate his work,” places Merwin among “anonymous craftsmen of the Middle Ages, artists whose vision was so fixed on the spiritual world and our journey thither . . .” (319-20). In a more comprehensive study, Reed Daniel Wilson defines Merwin’s corpus as deeply religious, elaborating how Merwin “has journeyed toward an affirmative vision founded on and grounded in an experience of the dark night.”

These studies proposed the existence of a religious consciousness, or what Reed Daniel Wilson calls the “animistic visionary root of all religions” in Merwin’s poetry, but since they tend to link that consciousness to either a known spiritual tradition, or a univocal devotion to nature which can be traced back to American transcendentalism, the existing criticisms on Merwin may not fully address the poet’s longtime engagement with the aftereffects of the divine contact, and his uninterrupted play with the holy and its traumatic self-distancing. The poet’s spiritual journey is not only a “search for a meaningful life in a world apparently devoid of meaning” (Contoski 310) based on the binary opposition of meaning/void; more importantly, this journey is accompanied by highly cathected acts to capture and (re)find the traces of the holy Other as posited by the poet’s imagination. The spiritual aura of Merwin’s work in the 1950s and onward consists of a poetic surplus that stands in contrast to the limitations of ordinary human life, especially of American life during the booming 1950s. Just as artists who “construct a place in which people can ecstatically perceive the traumatic excess around which their life turns” (Žižek, Belief 96), Merwin presents various epiphanic states to enunciate the surplus object of Christian theology in order to work through that theology. If in the 1950s Merwin was chiefly concerned with the “enigmatic” desire of the Judeo-Christian deity—if we can attribute this quality to a holy entity with the understanding of its anthropomorphism—and the death drive of the saints, in the


6 For example, from an ecocritical point of view, Jane Frazier reports that Merwin’s poetic vision, like that of Thoreau, is firmly grounded in nature and its representations. See Jane Frazier, From Origin to Ecology: Nature and the Poetry of W. S. Merwin (Cranbury: Associated UP, Inc., 1999).
1960s and afterwards Merwin’s speakers seemed to directly adopt the status of objet a—“the non-symbolizable surplus” (Žižek, Metastases 179).

The unforeseeable terror of becoming God’s chosen is rehearsed in such rapturous and symptomal poems as “The Passion” in The Dancing Bears (1954), and “Saint Sebastian” and “The Annunciation” in Green with Beasts (1956). These poems palpably convey a sense of pain combined with elation, as if Merwin, with an unusual capacity for empathy, takes up the role of divine suffering himself. These poems also seize upon what Merwin calls “presence”: “Presence is inescapable and at the same time it’s something that we cannot express, we cannot hold, and yet cannot escape. And that’s why one of the main forms in which presence comes to us is through suffering, and sometimes through moments of great joy, too” (Irwin 48). We are caught in a strange situation: the present can only come to us in the form of either euphoria or anguish, as Merwin’s perception of presence normalizes psychic trauma as constitutive of the poetic process. The poets are those who maintain a constant vigilance before the flux of phenomena and a compulsive proximity towards the traumatic present.

Merwin’s spirit and saints answer the interpellation of God while remaining helplessly distant from Him, and the war between one’s corporeality and spirituality produces a voice that is internally split. In “Saint Sebastian,” for example, we witness the speaker’s inability to integrate/contain his traumatic desire for God; as Merwin uses the first-person narrative to present a varied version of the Passion, the scene would come more acutely alive. St. Sebastian died a martyr: he was tied to a post and shot with arrows. In “St. Sebastian,” painted by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (1477-1549), the saint is shown tied to a withered tree, three arrows shooting through his neck, rib, and leg, his head turning upward with a terrible agony on his face, and above him an angel visibly hovers and shines. Merwin might have had this picture in mind when he wrote the poem. What strikes readers first is a painful admittance that welcomes death as the absolute unknown Other, as the final moment of ecstasy/ekstasis, what Heidegger in Being and Time famously formulates as “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein” (294). The poem begins:

So many times I have felt them come, Lord,
The arrows (a coward dies often), so many times,
And worse, oh worse often than this. Neither breeze nor bird
Stirring the hazed peace through which the day climbs. (FF 176)
The repeated conjunctions of sibilant $s$ with long vowels ($ai$, $i:$/ $ə$ in arrows, worse, stirring, peace, times, climes) set up certain Latinate heaviness characteristic of sacred occasions, as if the impending death was all but solemnly silent with each breath prolonged and then fading away. The speaker here, watchful of the “hazed peace through which the day climbs,” epitomizes what Levinas says about awakening and insomnia as “an exigency or demand,” “a more within the less,” “a piercing or a fission” in the subject (God 209-10). In this seemingly peaceful opening, Merwin introduces the violence of the holy Other done to the self, a recurrent topos in Christian spiritual writings as can be found in the works of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. Discourses, poetic or prosaic, on holy afflictions (wounds) abound in church history; Merwin, however, seems to play with the idea of it without truly committing himself, for the poetic mask always invites the possibility of a double reading.

Merwin reports that, like Jesus in “The Passion,” who observed that “virgins darkly / Coming with their lamps untrimmed” (FF 84), St. Sebastian in his own moment of death keenly observed what was happening around him. He heard “few sounds that come / Falling” and doubted whether “the noise of angels, // The beat and whirring between Thy kingdoms” could possibly “Be even by such cropped feathers raised.” Here Merwin intimates that St. Sebastian in his dying moment might have mistaken the sound of the flying birds for “the noise of angels.” The saint’s final fear is surely not death but the possibility that God might have abandoned him in death to death with nonaction, recalling Jesus’ agonized death cry: “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (King James Version, Matt. 27. 46). What if the noise of angels is nothing but the sound effect of the birds in the air? This could be one of the final questions flashing through St. Sebastian’s mind. The speaker was further hystericalized when he stunningly found that he was unable to “fly from Thee,” “for it is / Thy kingdom where . . . I stand in pain” (FF 176; emphasis added). The anticipated passage from the secular world where “the archers move” to the holy kingdom, in its Christian context, appears not liberating but restrictively ominous. The mystical jouissance is engendered exactly in the final cry that initiates the believer into the holy—there seems no other choice—through the crack of wounds:

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7 In Latin, conjunctions of sibilance and long vowels (diphthongs) are common because of the particular morphology and the declensions of the language. In St. Fortunatus’ well-known hymn “Lingua Gloriosi Prœlium Certaminis,” we witness the divine triumph over human weakness similar to Merwin’s poem, delivered in an intricate sound system containing sibilant fricatives and vowels that could be read with much emphasis: “Pange lingua gloriosi prœlium certaminis / Et super crucis tropæo die triumphum nobilem, / Qualiter Redemptor orbis immolatus vicerit.”
“entered with pain as always, / Thy kingdom that on these erring shafts comes” (FF 176).

The tone of the poem is far from univocal, since Merwin frequently engages his speakers in an unironic, or sympathetic, religious narrative in which the subject goes through various symptoms before the enigmatic demand of the Judeo-Christian God. The most epic treatment of this divine affliction is found in “The Annunciation,” a long poem dealing with Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary about the birth of Jesus the holy child. Like “Saint Sebastian,” the poem records the fantastic inner process of divine penetration. H. L. Hix has observed that the poem “appears to focus not on the annunciation but on the immaculate conception, the event in which the Holy Spirit causes Mary to conceive a child,” attributing Mary’s mental confusion to her failure of language and weakness of memory (Understanding 30). Consider the following lines:

. . . . And I thought, Lord, Lord, and thought
   How if I had not gone out on the light
   And been hidden away on the vanished light
   So that myself I was empty and nothing
   I would surely have died, because the thing
   That the darkness was, and the wings and the shaking,
   That there was no word for it, was a thing that in myself
   I could not have borne and lived.
   (FF 166; emphasis added)

As in “Saint Sebastian,” here we witness a hysterical body before the desire of the God-Other when Mary asked: “what am I / That He should be mindful of?” (FF 169-70). What is this recurrent thing that Mary saw? Is it the Lacanian Thing caught in the throat of the believing subject, the Thing as the void-kernel of subjectivity (“myself I was empty and nothing”) placed by the Christian God in her own body? It is impossible for Mary, a mortal woman, to bear—that is, to conceive and to endure—Christ the divine, infinite Thing in her body without some kind of miraculous intervention. Mary tries to articulate this intervention, but her speech at best resembles the discourse of a “psychotic” subject for her verbal hallucinations and confusions of syntax, preposition, and conjunction. Merwin’s transformation of this failure of language into the triumph of poetry is worth considering, for poetry (parole) may proceed, or succeed, where language (langue) blunders.
The linguistic dysfunction resulting from cognitive dissonance is surely a sign of panic in this dazzling play of light and darkness in which the Thing, the embodied Word, emerges. Mary’s breathless repetition of “the thing . . . / was a thing” discloses a tremendous fear that can only be found in nightmares or horror films. In a Dantean stroke, Mary’s cry that “there was no word for it” names the Christ-Thing as the postmodern sublime: “there was suddenly / A great burning under the darkness, a fire / Like fighting up into the wings’ lash and the beating / Blackness, and flames like the tearing of teeth, / With noise like rocks rending, . . .” (FF 166-67). Such an ultra-phenomenon has penetrated Mary’s perception-conscious apparatus and left memory traces, which she tries in vain to integrate. Randall Stiffler’s comment on Mary that “her memory cannot grasp nor her language reproduce the breadth, depth, and intensity that her experience of the body of God possessed” conveniently summarizes the situation (qtd. in Hix, Understanding 32).

The most intriguing thing in “The Annunciation,” however, may not be the failure of language and weakness of memory but the paradoxical notion of encounter as separation. Mary’s meeting with the holy is already a separation, a deferred action, since she could not locate the vital break from pre-creational chaos (apeiron) to origin (arche), from “there was no word for it” (FF 166) to “If I could only remember / The word” (FF 171). For Mary, the “word,” God’s logos, is that ghostly Thing that has disappeared before it can appear, or, the logos appears exactly by fading away. It never appears as such. Merwin’s Mary becomes a melancholic subject whose libido is excessively fixated on the loss of the “word,” for “the subject possesses [the lost object] in the very mode of loss” (Žižek, Plague 195). Hence Mary’s endless sense of guilt and self-recrimination: “Only / If I could remember, if I could only remember / The way that word was, and the sound of it. Because / There is that in me still draws all that I am / Backward, as weeds are drawn down when the water / Flows away; and if I could only shape / And hear again that word and the way of it” (FF 171).

What is “the way of the word”? Did Mary ever grasp it in a certain, univocal way? Contrary to standard Christian theology, which regards the “word” as the Logos or Christ himself, Merwin’s Mary understood it as a plenitude, an undivided One: “It was a word for / The way the light and the things in the light / Were looking into the darkness, and the darkness / And the things of the darkness were looking into the light / In the fullness” (FF 167). Although she believed that she had grasped the “word”: “I knew it, and held it and knew / The way of it,” she soon conceded that “Or almost, Or believed I knew it, believed, like an echo” (FF 168).
Mary’s contact with the divine word is based on an infinite withdrawal of the word which is forever to come (“the coming of it,” “when it comes”), and this coming and going, this non-present trace of the holy, would haunt her till the end of the poem, and as James McCorkle said perceptively, “The poem is itself a recounting or remembering—thus a supplementation—of the loss of the vision, rather than a re-creation of the vision” (135). The ultimate pathos of the poem comes from the fact that after the divine visitation Mary lost her former self and was caught in the predicament of having to articulate that which would constitute her new identity as Mother of Christ, a “terrible” gift. In a compulsive repetition she lamented her infinite (non)separation from the divine thing (Christ, word, logos, revelation) that was once part of her own soul and breath:

If I could only remember
The word, if I could make it with my breath
It would be with me forever as it was
Then in the beginning . . . if I could remember
And make the word with my breath. (FF 171)

The Christian poems in the 1950s, as Merwin’s first stage, laid down a matrix of poetic cathexes that Merwin would employ later in non-Christian modes. The “passion of signifiers” around the holy Other produces a spiritual discourse that does not consist in one’s mystical union with this Other, as some critics have conceived. For instance, Anthony Libby concludes his long essay on Merwin’s 1960s poems: “In Merwin’s world, human union with animals and gods can come only through an acceptance of otherness so complete that it obliterates the doomed human self, now unable to hear the messages that might save it” (40). Libby’s observation of the “complete” “otherness” is accurate, but the “human union with animals and gods” seems too simple a formula to explain away Merwin’s encounter with the holy entity. Instead of a wishful “union,” what happens to Merwin and his speakers comes closer to an anticipated or missed encounter as witnessed by his representations of St. Sebastian and the Virgin Mary.

Through a psychological identification with the holy, Merwin’s saints are those who have replaced desire (spiritual yearning) for the holy with their own drive (repetitive gestures) as holy. Such a Merwinesque reversal is best seen in “The Saint of the Uplands,” which supplements “Saint Sebastian” by continuing what was left unsaid about entering “Thy kingdom.” Customarily, Merwin himself dwells in the consciousness of the saint, exploding the inner nonidentity of the holiness of the
holy: “Their prayers still swarm on me like lost bees. / I have no sweetness. I am dust / Twice over” (SF 20). The repetition of sibilant sound coupled with long vowels, like a long strain of sighs, introduces an elegiac tone, and the decreasing length of each line adds finality to the declaration of a burnt-out holy subject: “dust twice over,” because the saint, unlike ordinary people, assumes the lack not only of humanity but also of “divinity.” It may seem paradoxical that the saint, as the poem tells us, does not possess divine knowledge (a higher value) but disavows it. Furthermore, the following lines exhibit a kind of non-Christian holiness that seems to associate Christian sainthood with a simulacrum, an appearance that refuses or is unable to offer gnosis or salvation:

    In the high barrens
    The light loved us.
    Their faces were hard crusts like their farms
    And the eyes empty, where vision
    Might not come otherwise
    Than as water.

    They were born to stones; I gave them
    Nothing but what was theirs.
    I taught them to gather the dew of their nights
    Into mirrors. I hung them
    Between heavens. (SF 20)

These lines are unusual for their exhibition of the saint’s problematical, surreal denial of a higher vision concerning spiritual redemption. This is not the only place where readers are left with a non-operative deity, and it is easy to conclude that in the 1960s Merwin’s deities were alien to mankind: “irreducibly alien” (Libby 37), or empty: “the nothing behind everything” (Bowers 252), or simply nonexistent: “Merwin is a symbolist emptied of God” (Gross 105). These comments might have overlooked the fact that there is an uncanny, shimmering, and transparent something in Merwin’s God, gods, and saints. In this poem, the saint was both alien and intimate, a mirror reflecting the believers’ own images: “I gave them / Nothing but what was theirs. / I taught them to gather the dew of their nights / Into mirrors. I hung them / Between heavens” (SF 20). In a Socratic manner, the saint of the uplands confessed his own lack and mocked the believers’ blind desire for revelation:
I took a single twig from the tree of my ignorance
And divined the living streams under
Their very houses. I showed them
The same tree growing in their dooryards.
You have ignorance of your own, I said.
They have ignorance of their own. (SF 20)

By presupposing a sort of non-understandable holiness, the believers in the poem confer their asymmetrical, non-dialogical trust in the saint, who ironically exposes his own emptiness as foundational of religious discourse: “I taught them nothing. / Every where / The eyes are returning under the stone. And over / My dry bones they build their churches like wells” (SF 20).

“The Saint of the Uplands” deviates from traditional Christian poetry if we take that to mean carols, hymns, and psalms, and more generally, poetry that centers on God’s supreme powers of redemption and damnation (George Herbert, John Donne, T. S. Eliot). Merwin’s poem is not simply a recasting of biblical themes but an ironic—bordering on “heretical”—treatment of Christian sainthood that overshoots the canonical denotations of the holy as shown in the Old and New Testament. The poem stretches readers’ expectation towards a more primitivist, anonymous, and fragmentary holiness, laying bare the inner contradiction in sainthood. Like the elements of water and light, divinities are phantasmagorical entities showing no concern for humans. In a poem titled “Divinities” Merwin writes: “The air itself is their memory / A domain they cannot inhabit / But from which they are never absent // What are you they say that simply exist / And the heavens and the earth bow to them / Looking up from their choices / Perishing” (SF 116; emphasis in original). Instead of denying the existence of gods, Merwin exposes gods’ own inanities and the false necessities imposed by them, and this redefinition of divinity perhaps constitutes Merwin’s “critical move” typical of his generation—disillusioned Americans in a postwar, postindustrial era.

The exploration of the divine simulacra is relentlessly launched in a later poem “Words from a Totem Animal,” in which Merwin abandons the Christian narrative and lives in the voice of a pagan totem. Similar to Robert Bly, who can feel the “nomad bands” under his own skin (Selected 94), Merwin would inhabit the soul of a nomadic animal, entering, as it were, the sacred spirit to see what happens there and to report it to readers. Consistent with his Christian poems, Merwin would make the divine Thing talk about itself: “Distance / is where we were” (SF 141),
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... echoing an earlier line that “remoteness is its own secret” (“The Wilderness,” FF 156). Fleeing from the socio-symbolic order into the undefined wilderness seems to establish an esti mate aura through which the poetic subject is speciously immortalized: “When you think of the distances / you recall / that we are immortal” (SF 230). The immortal totem goes on to confess “its own secret,” its own Spaltung: “I would rather the wind came from outside . . . / ghost of mine passing / through me” (SF 141). The “wind” inside the totem animal, like M. R. Rilke’s “der Wind voller Weltraum” (150), maddens even divinity itself for the vast, wild, and excessive emptiness. As H. L. Hix aptly puts it, “this wholly disembodied voice speaks from nowhere, to no one, and apropos of nothing” (“Thematic” 73). To explore the inwardness of poetry is a shared concern among American deep-imagists such as Robert Bly, James Wright, and Charles Simic, who endeavor to do what Bly urges as the “journey into dark place,” “leap to spirit,” and “solitary wilderness” (Wildness 48). But Merwin’s strategy here is even more radical in that it debunks the unicity not only of the lyric subject but also of the deified object, which are one in “Words from a Totem Animal.” Merwin has pushed Bly’s program of an unconscious poetics towards the great purge of authorial control, dallying with the alien spirit to create an undead, uncontainable state in which we—readers situated exactly in nowhere, only hear “the repetition / like that of a word in the ear of death / teaching itself / itself” (SF 141).

Although exclaiming the totem as the “god of beginnings / immortal,” Merwin insists on a heterogeneity that resists any anthropocentric categorization: “Caught again and held again / again I am not a blessing / they bring me / names / that would fit anything” (SF 142). The poet criticizes man’s presumptuous act of reducing animals to a “name,” a holy signifier which substitutes and erases its own being. In fact, Merwin has been very cautious about the double use of naming, as he said in a 1988 interview: “[Naming] sets up a concept between you and what you are looking at. The cat doesn’t know it’s a cat until you teach it that it is a cat” (Elliott 18). The naming process, as Derrida would say, is indeed a violent imprint of human signification on innocent nature. What Merwin strives at here is crossing the manmade border of les mots to get into the heart of les choses: “there is an evocation of the thing that is there before there’s a name, before there’s a concept of it” (Elliott 19; emphasis added). This would involve the paradoxical procedure of having to enunciate the phantasmal Thing in words, as Merwin did in “The Annunciation,” before it is subsumed under a fixed identity and to expose its constant flux without resorting to any fixed concept. Looking back at Merwin’s “wild” imagination in the early 1960s, Richard Howard finds that “the generally
unpunctuated poems look as though they had been exploded, not written down, the images arranged so that the lines never enclose but instead expose them” (436; emphasis in original). Through evoking and exposing the desire of/for the holy, Merwin’s images send readers on a strange, vacuum-driven, minimalistic journey few US poets have embarked upon: “My eyes are waiting for me / in the dusk / they are still closed / they have been waiting a long time / and I am feeling my way toward them” (SF 142). As the lack in the chain of signification, the totem is caught in the eternal flux of becoming, entering a domain where “there are no stars / there is no grief / I will never arrive / I stumble when I remember how it was / with one foot / one foot still in a name” (SF 142). Such exposure is not readily available in a postindustrial world where the spirit is daily threatened by machines or produced by them, nor is it a representation of the wilderness that one may simply escape into. It offers a picture of the uninhabitable, the otherwise unseen interval between mortality and immortality as laid down in all theology and philosophy.

Throughout his poetical career, Merwin longs for the redeeming spirit that can elevate one above a life that is all too human, although the nature of that spirit remains unknown and unclear. As in many extant spiritual writings, the ascension takes the form of mountain climbing. The approach to the infinite seems to necessitate a distance from the maddening crowd, so the mountain felicitously serves as a spiritual elevator for its aural proximity to posited divinity. In fact, Merwin’s 1960s poems are conspicuously marked by the climbing gesture: “The heavy limbs climb into the moonlight bearing feathers”; “Climbing northward / At dusk when the horizon rose like a hand I would turn aside”; “I have climbed a long way / there are my shoes”; “and once more it climbs / trying to cast again” (SF 108, 114, 188, 254). “Climbing northward,” Merwin would “once more celebrate our distance from men” (SF 114). Merwin’s endeavor, however, is directed at diluting the Judeo-Christian connotation of the mountain image while maintaining its rapport with spiritual quest. Even in the most manifestly Christian poems we find a landscape quite different from what Dante or Eliot, in his late work, have portrayed. Instead of preaching Christian values, Merwin explores the speaker’s consciousness when it is confronted with the divine. The poet associates the ascent of mountains not only with spiritual advancement of Homo sapiens but also with an eager attempt to explore the division between mortality and divinity, temporality and eternity.

The mountain was a mysterious subject as early as Green with Beasts (1956), which contains a long discursive poem, “The Mountain,” which records the searing power of the divine on high. The mountain, like Sinai, the site of the Judeo-Christian God, remains inaccessible to mortals, except for those like Moses,
enwrapped in a shining aura. “Only on rarest occasions, when the blue air, / Though clear, is not too blinding / ... can one trace the rising / Slopes high enough to call them contours” (FF 172). Allegorizing the mountain in the vein of Dante, Merwin conjectures that “the slope, to be so elusive / And yet so inescapable, must be nothing / But ourselves.” If the “elusive” yet “inescapable” presence of the holy corresponds to an uncontainable longing in the human psyche, then the mountain as the site of the infinite Other would help to release that desire for its intimate strangeness: “its / Strangeness composed of our own intimacy” and “our necessary / Ignorance of its limits.” The sublimity of the mountain escapes common observation, so instead of portraying the mountain from a tourist’s point of view, Merwin approaches it with a folklorist’s curiosity and awe: “No one, / From whatever distance, has ever so much as seen / The summit, or even anywhere near it.” He further compares the mountain to “Mecca / For fanatics and madmen” and calls any attempt to approach it “a kind of holy maelstrom,” “a mode of ritual / And profane suicide.” Manifestly echoing an earlier poem “White Goat, White Ram” while foretelling “Words from a Totem Animal,” Merwin’s holy mountain is again full of “ceaseless wind / With a noise like thunder and the beating of wings” (FF 173), a familiar representation of divinity in the Christian tradition.

There are those who try to approach the inapproachable, and as Merwin reports in fear and trembling, “Very few / Who set out at all seriously have / Come back.” The poet invests the mountain with what Walter Benjamin calls the “divine violence,” which strikes “without vanity, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation” (297). The blinding force on top of the mountain, if not totally annihilating the climbers, at least maims them for their lifetime: “For of those / Who attained any distance and returned, most / Were deafened, some permanently; / some were blind, / And these also often incurably; all / Without exception were dazzled, as by a great light” (FF 174). The symptoms resulting from the tuché (encounter) with the holy consummate in the dysfunction of the signifying chain, as the farthest climbers, when they came back, “completely lost the use of our language” and only “babbled incoherently / Of silence bursting beyond that clamor” (FF 174). The climbers suffered from an infinite vision that could not be contained by their forms of life and speech.

Like a gigantic magnet, the mountain draws the psychic energy of the climbers and pilgrims, functioning as the object of man’s infinite desire. Levinas asks: “Does not the desiring one derive from the desirable a satisfaction in desiring, as if he had already seized the desirable” (God 222)? Similarly, the desirable, the holy mountain, the Promised Land, still remains distant, which only makes the spirit
torture itself in its incessant pursuit. In the prose poem “Hunger Mountain” in *Houses and Travellers* (1977), Merwin shows the possibility of redemption after a long, hard pilgrimage, yet with such indeterminacy that we may divest it of any Christian intention and read it as a manifesto of one’s metaphysical desire—“a bursting of the Same, whom the Other disturbs or tears out of his repose” (Levinas, *God* 195):

Who has been to the top of Hunger Mountain and seen what can be seen from there, and returned? The view of The Promised Land. Most who have come to tell went only part way. Many have died part way. And even they have seen things that no one else ever saw, things they could not describe, too hard for the words, and then too hard for them, the witnesses. But certain ones who never forget and who never sleep gave us their words to eat. They buried their words in us and went away, leaving us hungry, part way. (*BF* 263)

The paragraph is full of allusions to the Bible: the historical exodus of the Israelites, their wandering in the wilderness, Joshua and Caleb, together with ten others, “spy[ing] out” Canaan, the Promised Land, from the top of a mountain in the Old Testament, and anachronistically, the virgins in the New Testament who “slumbered and slept” while waiting for the resurrection of Christ (*King James Version*, Num. 13. 16; Matt. 25. 5). In this paragraph Merwin reveals the presencing absence of the mysterious “things” and their inexplicable hold on travelers’ psyches. In its exigent desire for the Land, provoked by what Derrida calls “the irruption of a speech or a promise,” the *spirit* shatters the repose of the self, “leaving us hungry, part way,” undermining the divine speech that made the very promise. If, as Derrida says elsewhere, “language, the word—in a way, the life of the word—is in essence spectral” (*Sovereignties* 103), then we may regard Merwin’s account as a picture of how desire is exactly maintained on the level of the revealing “words.” Merwin’s climbers are always on the way towards the holy without arriving; it is this immeasurable mirage of the holy that affords unmistakable *jouissance* and directs the projection of the self, which only continues to exist by eating words left by the “witnesses.”

“His is not a poetry of rhetoric, but of spirit,” Amy Newman says of Merwin (127), but we know how much suffering without knowledge, as organized through speech, could inhere in this kind of spiritual recording. If in the 1950s Merwin was still an apprentice of spiritual motifs, honing his talent on traditional carols, hymns,
psalms, in the late 1960s, the time was ripe to launch a less ornamental but more authentic, even bare-knuckled discourse on the matter of the holy. The desire to transcend the mundane permeates Merwin’s most “pessimistic” book in the 1960s, *The Lice*, as a defense mechanism against historical impasse. “December Night,” a poem about climbing, typifies Merwin’s approach to the non-Christian holy in the 1960s and in his later period. Presently he drops biblical figures, experimenting with a sort of anonymous holiness. The poem begins with what he elsewhere calls “a description of darkness” (*SF* 99): “The cold slope is standing in darkness / But the south of the trees is dry to touch” (*SF* 108). The landscape stands in a time devoid of human meanings and intentions, a dark, strange domain: “The heavy limbs climb into the moonlight bearing feathers / I came to watch these / White plants older at night / The oldest / Come first to the ruins” (*SF* 108). Merwin might use *feathers* to suggest the vestige of divinity, partly fulfilling the responsibility of a poet in a “destitute” time: “to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods” (Heidegger, *Poetry* 94). But in Merwin’s stanza the situation is more equivocal for the oxymoronic coupling of “heavy limbs” with “feathers.” Merwin seems to emphasize the interrelation between mortality and divinity, which both Rilke and Heidegger have thought of as constitutive of humanity, while at the same time Merwin intimates that such a relation may be intrinsically ironic and even violent. Though the climbing gesture recalls Dante’s ascent in *Purgatorio*, it still remains undefined for its mergence into the anonymous “moonlight.”

The speaker came to the slope to watch the old trees that were struggling through the hard winter. The “ruins” may hint at historical closure, but they might as well indicate the cycle of nature that begins a new life on the debris of the “oldest” ones. The next stanza continues in its otherworldliness, rendering the speaker “I” a mere spectator in the nightly mountain view:

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And I hear magpies kept awake by the moon
The water flows through its
Own fingers without end (*SF* 108)
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Merwin’s pilgrimage, although conducted in the month of Christ’s birth, proclaims not the birth of a personified savior but an anonymous purification in the wilderness. Merwin ends the poem with lines that Dante would never have written: “Tonight once more / I find a single prayer and it is not for men” (*SF* 108). The lesson the speaker gleans on the desolate mountain slope substitutes cosmology for theology, as the prayer is directed toward the unknown force that operates through animate
and inanimate worlds. But we should not hasten to crown Merwin “a poet of animism,” as some critics do (Hix, “Thematic” 68); Merwin’s climbing spirit desires a holiness that seems to transcend any known formulation or thematization, recalling Zen Buddhism—which Merwin has practiced since the 1970s—which similarly cancels the ontological status of ego to reach a numinous whole. It is on the mountain that Merwin beholds the origin of life and death—the holy water. In another poem, “The Herds,” Merwin also witnesses the hushed baptism of the dead on the mountain:

Sleeping by the glass mountain
I would watch the flocks of light grazing
And the water preparing its descent
To the first dead (SF 114)

The mountain represents the primitive site where the dead, as American Indians, receive a natural and mystical ceremony that welcomes their return to Mother Earth. On this “magic mountain,” life and death are not socio-historical processes but natural mutations, subjected to a higher necessity than intersubjective norms. The juxtaposition of the grazing flocks and “the first dead” has diluted the intensity of personal mourning when the water descending from the high mountain prepares the dead for the netherworld.

The surreal image of the “glass mountain” strikes us as luminous and evasive, producing an auratic shimmer on the height. Climbing the mountain, the speaker discovers an ultra-world where historical time is foreclosed and where light and darkness, life and death, mysteriously interpenetrate. In “The Dream Again,” for instance, the speaker gradually merges himself in the glory on the height:

I take the road that bears leaves in the mountains
I grow hard to see then I vanish entirely
On the peaks it is summer (SF 113)

Manifestly echoing Goethe’s famous lines “Über allen Gipfeln / ist Ruh” (58), this Zenic stanza visualizes the author’s spiritual ascendance towards an anonymous, luminous, and overwhelming presence that felicitously obliterates the individual

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8 In another reading, the poem might suggest Christ’s own “journey into the wilderness” in the Bible, though the naturalistic, impersonal tendency of the poem seems to contradict Christ’s prayer to God the Father.
self, if only temporarily. The poetic aura is completed in the convergence of temporal and spatial altitudes: “On the peak it is summer.”

The title of the poem “The Dream Again” suggests the realness of the epiphany, just as the repeated dream makes known Merwin’s uncompromised drive towards wholeness, even at the expense of erasing the self.\(^9\) That the union with the anonymous presence happens in the season of summer, which is highly transient, as Merwin records in his memoir *Summer Doorways* (2005), exposes the very momentariness of that union. As Edward Brunner has noted, the other unfragmented world sought by Merwin is itself an ephemeral one: “The silent world of immanent origins is viewed, if at all, as a matter of fleeting impressions, flashing glimpses, for that is the only way we can perceive its unimaginable wholeness” (287).

Merwin’s imagination thus rests on the present, which looks so much like death, on the wild anticipation that the old self is dying, making room for the new one. In *The Lice*, Merwin often combines the spatial climbing with a temporal one, standing on the threshold of both space and time: “I desire / To kneel in a doorway empty except for the song” (*SF* 111). In “How We Are Spared,” the mountain image is associated with the beginning of a new time sequence:

At midsummer before dawn an orange light returns to the mountains
Like a great weight and the small birds cry out
And bear it up (*SF* 113)

The birds and magpies have replaced the saints and angels in the 1950s as the anonymous messengers of the divine, bringing the speaker undecipherable news which nevertheless concerns him. Climbing the mountain of time, the poetic self is able to evolve with the constant renewal of the days, seasons, and years.

The “orange light” on the mountain, like the “receding fires” that Merwin’s travelers chased in the early 1950s, animates the poet’s spirit and sets it in “conflagration”—to urge him towards a transcendence of imagined origins. In the discussion of Georg Trakl’s poem “Grodek,” Heidegger explores the motif of spirit as flaming: “The spirit is flaming. . . . Flame is glowing amination. What flame is

\(^9\) In the preface to his translation of the French poet Jean Follain (1903–1971), Merwin notes that Follain’s works all share a “suspended regard,” and it is the “evocation of this ‘impersonal,’ receptive, but essentially unchanging gaze often occupies, in Follain’s work, the place of the first person” (“Preface,” xii). In “The Dream Again” and other Zenic poems, Merwin’s lyric self, as can be found in various mystical practices, is not only *erased* but also *replaced* by an unchanging, divine, vantage.
the *ek-stasis* which lightens and calls forth radiance. . . . The spirit chases, drives the soul to get underway to where it leads the way” (*On the Way* 179-80). Derrida explains that “Heidegger can claim to de-Christianize Trakl's *Gedicht*”; Heidegger ventures to locate in Trakl’s poetry “an *other* birth and an *other* essence, origin-heterogeneous . . . to all the testaments, all the promises, all the events, all the laws and assignments which are our very memory” (*Of Spirit* 108, 107; emphasis in original). The suspension of personal history before the “origin-heterogeneous,” infinite Other who ignites the destructive flame of spirituality prepares the rapturous re-temporization of Dasein by burning away “false necessities” (e.g., military mobilizations, ideological misrecognitions). For Merwin, as well as for Trakl and Heidegger, the commencing and ending of years, the destruction and rebirth of time, claims the status of being “spiritual” and “revolutionary” and thus *historic* (Derrida, *Of Spirit* 89). Merwin’s poems in the 1960s, according to this reading, are conspicuously marked by a quest for what Otto, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Lacan, and Žižek have all thought about in their own different ways—an otherness that constantly dislodges one’s socio-historical identity by returning the subject to an origin that ceaselessly auto-affects its inscriptions.

The initiation of a new temporal-symbolic relation affords a basic pattern for Merwin to stage his search for what is other than the historically determined being. The circle of time brings not sameness but difference; the metamorphosis of the self into the other happens within time and through time. Just as Merwin asks his French neighbor in the early 1970s: “[S]hall we set out for the great days / and never be the same / never” (*SF* 149), every decision to break with the personal past automatically opens a new horizon for projection, though this opening can be quite indefinite. Merwin is in fact highly aware of, and even obsessed by, the passage of time, which can be glimpsed from the titles of poems such as “New Moon in November,” “December Night,” “After Solstice,” “Midnight in Early Spring,” “Late Night in Autumn,” and so on. In “Early January,” for instance, the speaker recognizes the New Year as the heterogonous stranger who has “arrived from an unknown distance / From beyond the visions of the old” (*SF* 110). The desire to supersede history (“the visions of the old”) towards an unknown futurity would even take the poet himself by surprise, since “[e]veryone waited for it by the wrong roads . . . / A stranger to nothing / In our hiding places.” Surely there is pain in suffering existential nothingness, but there is also joy in anticipating that the new beginning may bring an unexpected change. In a later poem, “End of Summer,” Merwin envisions a new self which, though arising from the old one, is different
from it: “High above us a chain of white buckets / full of old light going home // now even the things that we do / reach us after long journeys / and we have changed” (SF 229).

The vicissitude of time brings forth a correspondingly decisive change of the self illuminated by another carrying water or wine “high above us,” yet the “old light going home” evokes not an ecclesiastical holiness but a naturalistic one, and if we take “light” here as a metaphor of time, then time itself becomes luminous. Although disavowing an omnipotent God in the 1960s like many of his contemporaries, Merwin does not abandon faith—he puts it in the wandering spirit that “marched and marched on the candle flame / hurrying / a painful road” (SF 182). Merwin’s redeeming spirit, his personal Messiah, is always on the way, forever to come, yet to come. This encounter-in-anticipation marks Merwin’s works in the 1960s as pious without being overtly religious or animistic. In “Midnight in Early Spring” the speaker was wide-awake and anticipating what was not exactly anticipatable:

some alien blessing
is on its way to us
some prayer ignored for centuries
is about to be granted to the prayerless
in this place (SF 184)

The exteriority of the blessing evokes the radical contingency of salvation in the postmodern age characterized by flux of all kinds, and the question who is going to “grant” the blessing remains unanswered, but it does not mean that it is forever unanswerable.

Merwin’s contact with the divine—Christian, as well as non-Christian—is a mixture of unchangingness and fleetingness, encountering and anticipating, conviction and illusion. In the early 1970s Merwin visited the Virgin’s Holy Mountain of Athos several times and recorded the journeys in a long essay “Reflections of a Mountain,” which was titled “Aspects of a Mountain” when it first appeared in 1975. The essay reveals Merwin’s unusual interest in holy services and the meditative tradition of the Orthodox Church. However, Merwin’s identity, as the Christian monks on the mountain perceived it, was curious: occasionally he was denied entrance into the ikonostasis because he was not an orthodox Christian, while most of the time he was received cordially for his sympathy for spiritual matters. He was fascinated by church histories, buildings, murals, frescos, icons, and legends of the
saints; from the text, we learn that he was already familiar with Church history and Orthodox Christian art before his visit. The Fathers also shared with him their private stories, cooking for him, trusting him as a brother (EE 102).

Throughout the visit, Merwin consciously adopted the posture of an outsider: he was suspicious of those monks who proclaimed themselves the owners of spiritual truths, listening to their theological arguments without truly committing himself. In one episode, a young monk lectured him “severely on the perilous folly of [his] heretical state,” as Merwin was not paying attention to the sermon but looking elsewhere to find that “[t]he courtyard was more beautiful: the smooth pallor of the stones in the open air” (EE 107). He seems to derive more spiritual revelations from amorphous nature, “the open air.” Merwin visited the monasteries for a glimpse of the “living” holy—the Edenic landscapes on Mt. Athos, the hospitality of the monks, and their simple and pious lives. It is with a photographer’s eyes that Merwin captures the flashes of the holiness. He describes the landscapes on the way to Karyes, a settlement on Athos: “Sounds of horsebells, finches. The road switches back and forth, climbing, heads up a wide ravine, doubles back to a point above the sea, turns inland. Holly oak, arbutus, bay trees. Bees. Large languid butterflies in the morning stillness” (EE 61). In this condensed, fragmented, breathless description, the author’s feet could hardly follow the swift succession of scenes, which, functioning as endless metonymies for the desirable, have only left shining traces for him to pick up. The signifiers point to a vacant center that eludes thematization, for the desirable, the real—“The gods belong to the field of the real,” according to Jacques Lacan (45)—presences in its transience. This transient center prods Merwin to climb higher and higher, literally and metaphorically, vertiginously yet indefatigably, till the first view of Karyes:

The ascent continues as steeply as before. . . . The sun climbs but the heights grow cooler. . . . The last mists have burned off; the road winds higher and higher. Then, without warning, a sudden presence, off to the right, across a great empty space: the first view of the mountain. Once it has been seen, the sense of it remains wherever one goes on the promontory, whether or not the peak itself is visible. The road clambers on over the ridge, and the eastern sea, the Holy Sea, comes into sight through the chestnut leaves, and down through the woods the roofs of Karyes appear. . . . (EE 61)

The weavings of emergence and disappearance, visibility and invisibility, literality
and metaphoricity, realism and dreaminess, make Merwin’s travelogue a locus of spiritual discourse. Every natural, phenomenal object he encountered on the mountain—trees, flowers, bees, rocks, vines, stairs, gates, mists, waters, fountains, etc.—was charged with extra denotations, echoing Psalms, a book rich in divine metaphors. But Merwin is not a psalmist; he did not impose the Jewish or Christian God, nor would he expose his state of mind easily. Epiphany is for Merwin a hidden, anonymous, even agnostic matter. Although the openness of Merwin’s text allows no univocal, theological conclusion, the inner joy of the pilgrimage cannot be mistaken: “On the way down from Koutloumousiou to the south there is a high arch over a rocky torrent . . . the hidden water whispering and splashing like mice. Rags of the cloud appeared up on the ridge and vanished over it. Bright sun on the slope to the south” (EE 73). It is the hidden water, the vanishing cloud, the bright sun—the living manifestations of the holy—that have spellbound Merwin in his ascent on the mountain. “I had climbed through a grove with another spring . . . the path growing even steeper and less probable, but the horsebells still rang from above me, in the cloud” (EE 83). With subtlety and grace, nature’s alterity has been sublimated into signs of the infinite. Merwin’s faith seems to lie in exterior intimacy with the holy, in the separation-in-encounter with the object of divinity that eludes Judeo-Christian thematization, though, bearing a conspicuously non-conclusive mark of it. At the end of the visit, when Merwin was preparing to leave, his last glimpse of the Holy Mountain revealed a shimmering landscape embodying concealment and revelation: “The mountain itself had been hidden in cloud all morning. The rain stopped. For a moment the clouds separated and a part of the peak could be seen—then the blank clouds closed over it again. I could not tell which part it had been” (EE 133).

Merwin’s open form has thus approximated the diffusing lights, the shimmering sounds, and the infinitely compelling messages from the fantastic object that resists categorization. The proposition of a trace-leaving holiness as what the self cannot bring into discursive knowledge is especially meaningful in today’s highly administered and systemized world where the exterior is daily encroached upon by technocracy. Instead of offering a dry “secular theology,” as concluded by Thomas Byers (114), Merwin offers a rather precarious deployment of desire: to desire an infinity without God or gods, an alterity without a stable Other—a desire that is problematic and vulnerable, more tenuous than humanity, yet stronger than God. Merwin’s petition that “let me love what I cannot know” (SF 288), as if echoing what Derrida, in a critique of Levinas, calls the “transcendental violence” (Writing 156), exposes the inadequacy of both techné and epistêmē in
confrontation with what might be other than self, logos, God, and named essence. Such a “violent” realization beyond knowledge and dialectics perhaps affords postmodern subjects a chance to obtain individual freedom by forming deeper bonds to the immanent calling for abolishing all forms of “in-the-name-of,” self-legitimating theology, ideology, and religiosity.

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Feng Dong (馮冬) is a poet, scholar, and translator. He received a PhD in English Literature from Nanjing University in 2011 and since then has been exploring the essential strangeness of poetry from the perspectives of philosophy and psychoanalysis. He is the author of *Desire and Infinity in W. S. Merwin’s Poetry* (forthcoming, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2016). His books of poems include *Cruel Raven* (co-authored with Sun Dong, Nanjing UP, 2011), *The Desert Swimmer* (Pulsaris Publishing, 2015), *Parallel Tongues* (forthcoming, Showwe Information Co., Ltd.). He has also published essays on Alexander Pope, W. B. Yeats, and Emmanuel Lévinas. At present he is working on a book on Paul Celan’s poetry.

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