

Raw Shore of Paradise

A Conversation with W. S. Merwin

Jeanie Thompson and Jonathan Weinert

—at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky, November 17, 2006

Jonathan Weinert: I want to start by asking you some questions about your latest collection, *Present Company*.¹ Your poems often make use of paradox to point to understandings that lie beyond what words can typically say. One of the central paradoxes in your work, I think, is the paradox or interplay between absence and presence. I think that this book, *Present Company*, turns in part on the paradox. I wonder if you could comment on that.

W. S. Merwin: I think paradox is built into language itself. We take the language wonderfully for granted once we start to be able to speak it, but every time we use a word, every time we use language, it's unique, and it's completely personal. Every word as we use it is completely our own, and yet it's not ours. We didn't invent it. It has a history that we don't know, which contains felt experience from many other lives and many other occasions, from every other time it's been used. So a word is in process of evolution all the time, and yet it's unique to that moment. That's one paradox.

The moment you have language, the moment you have expression of any kind, the word is not what it's expressing. It's always different, separate from it, and yet it's the most urgent and intimate way of dealing with it.

It both embodies what it's expressing and makes a distance from it. That's another paradox. The more present you try to make the moment, the more absent it becomes, although it becomes something that you can deal with. The present is something that you can't get closer to, and yet that's not what you're trying to do with speech—you're trying to embody the present and pass it on at the same time. That's the paradox, and it's always there.

JW: There's a sense in your work that the present is not exactly present, that it's always slipping away—that it's difficult or impossible to grasp.

WSM: Well, that too. When you're using language, you're using the past, you're not using the present. You don't invent language on the spot. If you did nobody could understand you. When you're trying to describe the present, and when you're trying to imagine the present, when you're trying to *think* of the present, you're actually thinking of the past. The reason we recognize each other is because of our entire lives, you know—we know what other people are, to some degree.

JW: One poem in *Present Company* is addressed directly to *absence*. I wonder if you could read that for us.

WSM: All of the poems in the book are in the second person, so they're all addressed to something, to somebody, or to some concept.

To Absence

Raw shore of paradise
 which the long waves reach
 just as they fail
 one after the other
 bare strand beyond which
 at times I believe I see
 as in a glass darkly
 what I know here
 and now cannot be
 a face I can never touch
 a gaze that cannot stay
 which I catch sight of

still turned upon me
following me
from under the sky
of your groundless country
that has no syllable of its own
what good to you
are the treasures beyond
words or number
that you seize forever
unmapped imperium
when only here
in the present
which has lost them
only now
in the moment you
have not yet taken
does anyone know them
or how rare they are

JW: Thank you. I think something very interesting happens in this poem. At first, it isn't at all clear which world the "shore of paradise" that you mention in the poem belongs to. On closer reading, it's clear that absence itself is that shore. In what sense is absence the threshold of paradise?

WSM: Have you ever lost anything?

JW: Yes.

WSM: So you know. [laughter]

JW: So it's the world into which everything we lose disappears. . . . But it's stored up there somehow, as well.

WSM: Well, what's beyond the raw shore of paradise? Absence.

JW: But it's not a negation, it seems to me.

WSM: No. By that time, affirmation and negation—that's a polarity that doesn't mean anything.

JW: So it's like a treasure house in which everything is stored, yet somehow out of reach.

WSM: Yes. Our lives are made of it. Everything in your childhood is there, after all. What would your life be without what you remember from your childhood? You may have hated it, but it's terribly important to you.

JW: The poems in *Present Company* are all written in the form of odes, or apostrophes, and as such they bring to mind Pablo Neruda and Keats. I wonder if you had them in mind as you were writing this book.

WSM: Well, I didn't, and of course as I got into it I suddenly thought, "Ah, someone's going to be reminded of Neruda." I never thought of these poems as odes, but I guess that's what they are, and the odes that they're closest to are the Neruda odes, where he simply takes what occurs to him in his life. I began to realize that I had been writing second-person pieces all my life, but the poem that made me think of starting this book was "To the Unlikely Event." I thought I wanted them all to be unlikely—but of course the moment you want them all to be something, that becomes a form, and then they become likely [laughter], so that was impossible.

The unlikely event is something that everybody who has ever taken an airplane in our time has heard: "In the unlikely event of a water landing, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device." [laughter] It's part of the incredible language that's been worked up. You don't get off an airplane, you "deplane," and "we *do* advise you to do such-and-such a thing." But again and again you can hear this sentence, "In the unlikely event . . ." in which the meaning of the language has been totally forgotten, and anyway nobody's listening.

So what is the unlikely event? Whatever happens next is the unlikely event, really. [laughter]

JW: No matter how much we anticipate it.

WSM: Yes, that's right.

JW: I wonder if you'd read another poem from *Present Company*, "To the Margin."

WSM:

To the Margin

Following the black
footprints the tracks
of words that have passed that way
before me I come
again and again to
your blank shore

not the end yet
but there is nothing more
to be seen there
to be read to be followed
to be understood
and each time I turn
back to go on
in the same way
that I draw the next breath

the wider you are
the emptier and the more
innocent of any
signal the more
precious the text
feels to me as I make
my way through it reminding
myself listening
for any sound from you

JW: Thank you. There's an extraordinary sense here of the presence of the lines disappearing into the absence of the right-hand margin. You write a number of poems in this book about language and words. I wonder if your sense of that kind of disappearance informs your thinking about the line.

WSM: Well, I suppose so. The line is a form. The line is also a unit of energy. Both of those things disappear—they disappear together in this case.

The line has gone through such mysterious changes just in our lifetimes, beginning with writers such as Pound, and particularly William Carlos Williams, and then Olson.

The phrase “free verse” is deceptive—there’s no such thing as free verse. If a poem works, it *is* its form, and this is true whether it’s in an abstractable form or whether it only happens once. What makes something a line has been shifting since one began to try to write things down. The line was clearly there in oral poetry, too, but there it was different. The line has to do, finally, with the *physical*. It may be very remote from its physical origins, but it’s always there.

One of the things that disturbs me about a lot of recent poetry, undergraduate poetry, and people starting to write poetry at school for the first time—I have a feeling that they don’t hear it at all. I have the feeling that writing on and looking at a computer all day has something to do with that. I don’t know how poetry’s going to survive that—I’m not quite sure that it will. I think it’s going to make the distinction between prose and poetry more obvious, because poetry *won’t* exist unless it’s heard. If you don’t hear it, there’s no poetry there. If you’ve been reading a lot of students’ poems you can begin to sift out quite quickly the ones who are *hearing* it and the ones who aren’t. How do you say “you have to hear it . . .”? If the students don’t hear it, they don’t know what you mean.

JT: I have a follow-up question on “The Margin.” You talk about “the signal” and the preciousness of the text. Do you have anything else you could say about that signal? For writers studying the craft of poetry, what are the signals that you’re speaking of there?

WSM: Well, the line is not bearing any part of the meaning obviously in itself. It looks to be purely formal, and yet there’s no such thing happening there. So that’s what I mean by “innocent of any / signal.” And yet all forms empower what they’re the form *of*; they make it possible. If you take a sonnet of Shakespeare and write it out in prose, you begin to puzzle your head about all sorts of things that weren’t puzzling before, because the form makes them clear. The form *is* an empowerment.

If you say this to students and they look baffled, they really don’t have a

sense of what poetry is yet, I think. When young children love poems, the form is really terribly important, even if it's a hopscotch rhyme. They know that without being able to say it.

JT: Because they hear the music—they hear the line, and they recognize the music of the line?

WSM: What the verse is saying and the form of saying it are the same. But that's true even with a poem which is clearly and apparently free verse, and it was true even when the haiku was written out as one line. It's always true. If a poem works, it's true.

JW: In *Present Company*, the poems look so casual on the page, and the voice is so intimate, that it's not immediately clear how formal the book is—more formal than any of your previous books, except perhaps your first one. I don't remember that you've depended on the sonnet form so much, or counted syllables and lines so much. It's interesting to hear what you say about form being a form of empowerment. What's driving your formal choices here, what do they empower, and what do they make difficult to express?

WSM: Well, I wanted it to be different—apparently different forms all the way through. Also, when you talk about the mixture of syllabics and metrical forms—this is something that's always been there, running through English. I can't speak to it in any other language because, although I have an acquaintance with other languages, I don't have the same intimate feeling for them, obviously, but I think there's been a kind of ambivalence built into English prosody right from the beginning. We think of iambic pentameter as the basic meter of English, but it's not. Iambic pentameter is a meter imported in Chaucer's time from Italy, via France, but it's not a French meter either. It's basically an Italian meter, but by the time you get it into English it's not like the Italian meter. We know what the English meter is based on—the meter of Middle English, which goes back into Anglo-Saxon. It's based on rowing. The people who used it developed it out of chants from rowing, and the break in the middle is the break in between the drawing and the return of the oar, back and forth.

JW: That's the caesura.

WSM: That's the caesura. The English meter isn't metrical in the same sense as the iambic pentameter. It counts only the stressed syllables; it's a syllabic meter. The Italian sonnet has some of the same ambivalence, too, because the Classical meter—the Roman or Latin meter—is a stressed meter; it's not a straight eleven-syllable line like the Italian meter. So there's this play back and forth, and I think this play is essential. When you get too rigid one way or the other, when you get too committed to doing it one way or the other, the meter goes dead. It becomes a dead convention, and very boring. You can go into great tracts of iambic pentameter in the nineteenth century and think, "Oh my God, this is so dull." One of the reasons is that that play, that pull in different directions, isn't there. Pope understood this very well. Pope was one of the two or three strictest users of the iambic pentameter in English. Students are not brought up able to hear Pope, so they think he's very boring. But if you listen to Pope, he's not boring—he's a brilliant, brilliant poet. The variation of cadence and tempo in Pope is absolutely endless, and it's very subtle. He *heard* it. He certainly heard it very, very well. And in each one of his longer poems, he heard it differently.

JW: I want to go back to an earlier point in your career. A lot has been made in the critical literature about the transition in your work starting with *The Moving Target* (1963)² in the 1960s, but it seems to me that there was another watershed in your writing after *The Rain in the Trees* (1988),³ beginning in the 1990s, when you returned to the kind of formalism of your earlier books, and long narrative poems that really had no precedent in your work before began to appear. I wonder if you could say something about what allowed you so thoroughly to revise your style at that point.

WSM: The assumption is that all this is planned in advance. But it's much more a sense of coming to the feeling that I've done what I wanted to do in that direction, and that the open ground is already somewhere else, and it's important to change it. The worst possible thing would be to start trying to do something you've already done. That's spinning your wheels.

JW: Did you feel like you had come to the end of a certain kind of thing with *The Rain in the Trees*?

WSM: Yes. But I would say anything like that with real caution, because this is true for *me*. I'm not saying that this is a prescription for other people. Andrew Marvell basically wrote in much the same form, same tone, and same meter all his life. So did Jean Follain, in French. For some poets that's the way to do it, you know, and for some musicians that's the way to do it. If the poet is really good, you see great changes within a single form, and that's admirable. Look at somebody like Auden. He really did change enormously from his early poems—which, by the way, I admire very much, I think they're very, very brilliant—to the late poems. But his poems are always extremely and obviously and abstractly formal. He said once, with the false modesty that Auden was very good at, that he didn't feel confident about writing without formal structure, that he would have felt lost immediately if he had done it. But then he also said he thought he'd written in every meter that was known in English, and it was probably true.

JT: I'd like to ask you about the collection *The Vixen* (1996),⁴ centering on two things. First, how *The Vixen* is a book that evokes a place, that's so much *of* the place, and second, how the structure of these poems seems to be a kind of enjambed statement. I believe Richard Howard is the one who coined that phrase in a book review. Rather than lines per se, as we've been talking about, the poems in *The Vixen* operate with a kind of an engine of an enjambed statement. In reading these poems, I feel that there's tremendous energy in that form. I've spent a lot of time looking at them and trying to take them apart and understand that, but it's sort of intuitive. I can't really get my hands around a form per se. Is there anything you can say about that?

WSM: That's good, that's good. [laughter] I would like that to be so. I know how the book began, which is probably not an answer, but it's a direction for an answer to your question. It began with the first poem ["Fox Sleep"], which is quite different from the rest of the book, because it's a five-part poem. It's specifically about the vixen, but it's about different ways of

coming to the vixen, whoever the vixen is. Also, I hope it would dispose of the idea of treating the vixen as a symbol. The vixen is more complicated than a symbol. The vixen is an appearing and disappearing presence that is there all the time. I wasn't thinking about writing a series of poems, but when I finished that first one, I wanted to go on to the next one and the next one and the next one. I realized that this is the vixen, you know, that this is where the vixen goes.

I do have a strong feeling of the fox as a spirit animal. I think this is true in our karmic relations with the natural world altogether. I really think there's a connection between the horrors of World War II and several centuries of horrible mistreatment of foxes in the British Isles. Siegfried Sassoon suggested it in *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. He doesn't mean to, but I think that's one of the things that comes through. The attitude to the world that's there in fox hunting . . . there's no reason to hunt foxes, except that they get in the way of our raising chickens. We want to eat the chickens, and they want to, and damn it, what are *they* doing there? We put fifty of them together, which never happens in the natural world, and then we get mad at them because they eat fifty instead of one. You can understand people getting angry with foxes, but if you then go ahead and demonize them the way we've done, you cease to be able to see them. They're amazing because they're one of the rare wild animals who are really interested in us, constantly interested in us. We don't know what the base of that interest is, so they know something about us that we don't know.

JT: In the poem "Vixen," you speak to the vixen as if she were something that has come to you and left you and come back to you, and you're seeking this spirit as an affirmation of life, of writing, of something. It seems very personal to you, not just historical, as you were just saying. It seems to the speaker that the vixen is a totem animal.

WSM: I think so. I didn't know that to begin with. The vixen who is evoked in the first poem, in "Fox Sleep"—all that is historically true, and it's both the vixen and the *place* that go and return. The vixen becomes the kind of spirit of the place, and still is for me. What the future of that is I don't know, in my life or in the world. But the vixen certainly is the

“wild” that Thoreau was talking about. Thoreau didn’t say “In wilderness is the preservation of the world”; he said, “In *wildness* is the preservation of the world.” Wildness does not simply mean a place where you don’t have all-terrain vehicles. It means that deepest and most precious aspect of our lives, which we can never get our fingers around, which we can never possess, can never follow, can never grasp, and yet it’s always there.

JT: It’s always impelling us forward.

WSM: Yes, it’s the most precious thing we have. And everybody has it.

JT: Does that somehow play in with the energy in these lines, these statements? Is that where the energy’s coming from?

WSM: Well, I *hope* so. But there’s also another source of that: the stone mill fox that was the beginning of the whole thing, this stone mill in the form of a fox, apparently asleep. When I wanted to write the poem, the form that suggested itself—which has to do also with age and with time passing and all of that—was an elegiac form, the form that derives from the Roman elegy, which indeed is not a metrical form. It’s a syllabic form, a stressed form. It’s a form that follows its stresses. I haven’t ever counted them, but I think that most of the lines in “Fox Sleep” have basically the same number of stresses. They’re not at all the same number of syllables. That makes something you can hear, and that you can expect.

That’s another link between the prosody of verse and something like the presence of a fox. The prosody of verse, if it doesn’t put you to sleep, sets up an expectation and never quite fulfills it. It always keeps changing. If you get a straight iambic pentameter line over and over again, even if it’s something that has to be sung . . . if you have it absolutely straight, it will put you to sleep. It’s dull. You can’t hear it. So the prosody of verse sets up an expectation and then keeps eluding you. Very important, I think. Very important for the form of verse altogether. Does that make sense?

JT: Yes, it makes total sense, and we could talk a long time about this. But I’d like to switch gears just a little bit here. Although we’re all very inter-

ested in form and content and structure, I'd like to touch on political poetry for just a minute. In the 1960s, you were very involved in writing about the war. And everyone is very familiar with your poems about the environment. Today, we have a situation where writers have the opportunity to choose either to write about what's happening in the world or to turn their faces away from it. I wonder if you have anything you'd like to say to these writers about political poetry.

WSM: It's an endless topic, because you can't really ever say anything definitive about it. The obvious thing is that most political poetry is very bad. That's no reason for not writing it—most love poetry is very bad too. We don't know how to write love poems. But the fascinating thing, I think, is *why* it's bad. Most love poetry is bad because the feeling is a sort of a bully that insists on being the dictator of the whole thing from beginning to end. That didn't happen with Shakespeare. Shakespeare knew what he was doing. You don't know anything about Shakespeare's love life—you recognize it because it's something you recognize from your *own* life.

It's not that there aren't any good political poems. One of the great political poems you can think of immediately is *The Divine Comedy*. It is quite possible to write great political poems, but only if they evolve in the same way and come from the same places that any other real poem comes from. In other words, if they come out of the fact that you are right, and that you have the right opinion about this and you're just going to show other people what the right opinion is, you're going to have a piece of propaganda. It may be brilliant propaganda, but it's going to be short-lived and in the long run boring—maybe in the short run boring, too. To say where a poem must come from to make it a real poem is impossible, as we know. But we know when it's true and when it isn't. When political writing comes from the same imaginative source that makes any other kind of poetry real and good, then you can get a good poem. It doesn't happen very often.

Not all the poems written during the time of the Vietnam War were bad. Some of them were wonderful. Denise Levertov must have written dozens and dozens of poems about the Vietnam War that you don't remember at all anymore, but there are two or three that are quite wonderful. They were unlikely. One or two of them would be about some detail of Vietnam that

had vanished or something like that, and you suddenly focus on something very specific that maybe is completely imaginary, and yet it touches the feeling of loss, the feeling of jeopardy, the feeling of waste, the feeling of unnecessary and mendacious destruction that we all feel at the moment.

I think about this appalling thing that we're all implicated in and deplore, halfway around the world. At the moment, one of the things that I think is frustrating and infuriating is that it seems to be very hard to say anything about it, far more so than in the Vietnam War. You get very little writing about it, very little poetry, very little singing—none of that. The Vietnam War came at the same time as a groundswell of opposition to many, many things in the society. It's as though that groundswell of opposition isn't there at the moment. There's far more acceptance of the details of the world, the social details of the world around us, than there was then. It was a real rejection. It wasn't deep enough, it hadn't got its roots down, it got destroyed by the Chicago convention, the wind all went out of it, but it was *there*, and it did make for confrontations like Kent State and finally the march on the Pentagon and things like that. Nothing like that's in the wind right now. Why, I don't know. That's the difference between the two times. Another difference is that the imaginative articulation in songs and poems . . . I don't see them, I don't hear them.

JT: Thank you. We have a few minutes to entertain some follow-up questions from the audience.

Q: Why do you think that we're not seeing an imaginative articulation about this war? It's really disturbing to me that we're not. Where's Bob Dylan?

WSM: Well, it's a very good question. I don't know. Insofar as I have any notion of it at all—and I distrust it because I'm farther away from it than I was at that time . . . I was spending a lot of time in New York and in other cities at that time, much more than I am now, and feeling more involved with New York, which for me, rightly or wrongly and for better or worse, was the center of history. I felt closer to it then, but there was a preparation for it. My suspicion, insofar as I've got a theory about it, is that it

has to with the media. Kids play in the street far less, they spend more time watching television. Kids grow up spending less time running around in the woods and more time playing computer games. And I think these things may lead to a kind of remoteness from direct experience of other kinds, including social ones. I regret it, but I regret many things happening in the world, and I don't know what to . . .

Q: You mean learning to imagine? Is that what you're talking about?

WSM: Do you think that's possible? I think that the imagination is a sensual thing. It's not an abstract thing. It has to do with hearing. It has to do with seeing and smelling and touching. It has to do with the senses, it comes out of the senses. If you have sensory deprivation, the imagination stops. I think that if you spend all of your time watching a play of images on a screen, which you have nothing to do with except to sit there and watch it . . . I got told things like this when I was growing up: "I don't think it's good for you." [laughs]

Q: This is really just a comment. I wanted to thank you for saying that a poem that takes a form becomes a form of its own. That's something that I've said forever and been argued with. But now I can say, "Well, if W. S. Merwin says it . . ." [laughter] That's important. It's something I've always believed, and it's the first time I've ever heard anyone say it.

Q: You said that although you were familiar with foreign languages, you were most comfortable with English. In your translations of Neruda, I was just wondering how you were able to capture the nuances. I was wondering, if you weren't familiar with Spanish, how you were able to write those poems.

WSM: Oh, I didn't mean that I was not familiar with it, but I mean that the kind of intimacy that I have with English, in which . . . if you set up fifteen phrases which would all theoretically express the same thing—of course they don't—I hear immediately the one that is the right one, or seems to me the right one. I may not be nearly that clear about it even in a language that

I've had familiarity with for many years, like Spanish or French. Sometimes if I know the poem by memory it begins to be clear, but it's not nearly as clear. I just don't hear it, and if it were read out loud I wouldn't hear it that clearly either.

Q: I have a question about revision. How many of your poems land on the page and stay that way, I'm curious to know.

WSM: I can think of only one in my whole life. [laughs]

Q: So you do have to go through the revision process?

WSM: Usually I can't separate writing from revision. I'm turning it until it gets where I really want it to stop. It never stops turning. I don't know why anyone would want manuscripts of mine to study, because they're completely illegible. Everything is written on top of everything else, and nobody can ever begin to figure out the sequence of choices, even if they could read them.

Q: I think a lot of people think that to be a writer you should get it right the first time. We all want to feel that way.

WSM: No, but very often when people say that . . . if they know enough, the example that they cite is preliterate poetry—American Indian lyrics, the few that we have, or Eskimo poetry where someone stood up and said the poem, as if it happened like that. They may have been sitting there for nine or ten or eleven months chewing this thing over before they stood up and said it. People have said, about the haiku of Bashō, "Bashō just wrote it down like that." Yes, he did, but he may have spent years thinking about it, getting it right.