

## Prosopopoeia and classical topoi in W. S. Merwin's "François de Maynard 1582-1646"

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In 1963, the American poet W.S. Merwin (b.1927) travelled to the South-East of France, staying in the Causses, in the Massif Central, for the best part of a year. Over thirty years later, he returned to the area, where he reflected on the destruction of nature in the rural community he had known, and wrote a collection of poems entitled *The Vixen*. The vixen, present throughout the work, ends up dead in the moonlight as an image of all that is lost. The title of one of the poems indicates that it is inspired by the life of the French poet Maynard, who lived in the South-East, not far from the Causses. We are dealing here with the rhetorical figure *prosopopoeia*, as the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet becomes a spokesman for a modern poet. In an interview, Merwin speaks of his interest in foreign medieval and oral poetry (W.S.Merwin, Ed.Folsom, Cary Nelson 1982, 52-53), but does not mention Maynard.

This article will examine the following question: Why would Merwin leave the word to a minor poet who lived four hundred years before him? Merwin does not want to be a militant poet, but he does have something important on his mind at a time which he believed to be a critical juncture in history. His response to this crisis is to give new life to old rhetorical effects in order to contrast the present destruction of nature with the stability and permanence of the past. In *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* Ernst Robert Curtius observes that in turbulent times "(...) faded symbolic figures can be filled with new life, like shades which have drunk blood" (104). The figure of prosopopoeia, the now long dead poet speaking about his life, is one of the important "shades" of this poem. Jane Frazier says that Merwin's narrators "betray little or no personal identity and often seem as if they are voices speaking free of the body (...) Merwin's scheme is to remove the body from spatial and temporal restrictions in order to liberate the spirit" (1996, 1-2). In the poem about Maynard, his narrator is ascribed a personal identity and is situated in time and place, enabling the modern

poet to stay invisible while still expressing his concerns with the destruction of the landscape.

Merwin reminds us that images of landscapes have been used to represent permanence. He shows us, for instance, that in Antiquity the river Pactolus symbolized eternity. Merwin uses Maynard's voice to testify to an attitude towards reality that is no longer tenable, since nature itself is now permanently under threat—it is no longer a constant. By means of the story of another poet's life, Merwin aims to transmit a very specific attitude towards landscape—the idea that the permanence of a landscape, its presence before, throughout and after a person's lifetime, contributes to give meaning to existence. In contrast, the other poems in *The Vixen* challenge the capacity of the present to give meaning to the passing of time by means of the permanence of nature. Ernst Robert Curtius optimistic contention that "[t]he ideal landscape can always flower again in a new spring" (202) does not even countenance the question whether nature will survive. By looking back in time through Maynard, Merwin accesses a way of experiencing a landscape, as continuity and meaning, even where sorrow and death are present. The other poems in *The Vixen*, with their pessimism about the future, echo the underlying despair in the poem about Maynard. For what is left for us when the animals are gone, "in the silence after the animals" (69)?

Literary historian Antoine Adam considers Maynard to be a coward and debaucher (48-49). Maynard was widely regarded as a party animal, a reputation that might well have originated from the drinking songs and audacious epigrams which he wrote. Given his reputation as a reveller, and as a mediocre rather than a great writer, this resuscitated poet may not appear to have been an inspired choice of spokesman for the modern writer. Nevertheless, the contrast in the poem between the young poet's lack of experience and the old poet's wisdom, between past and present, between the life story and the narrative situation, persuades the reader to believe in the speaker's sincerity.

Even though Merwin does not make parallels between his life and Maynard's, Merwin's own life-story is present throughout the poem as a hidden sub-text. What binds the two poets together, I suggest, is their relationship to the same landscape—that of the South-East of France and an attachment to a large metropolis—Paris in the case of Maynard, New

York in the case of Merwin.<sup>1</sup> Both poets can be imagined as inhabiting several different worlds, with one look towards the village and the mountains and another to the world outside. Both have left a village and later returned to it. As such, the poem's final lines can be read as a double portrait of the two poets: "(...) standing where the mountains appeared to open before me/and turning I could still see all the way back to here/ and both ways were my life". In Merwin's poem, thanks to the "double I", the shadows the speaker talks to not only function as a metaphor for the memories of people whom Maynard loved, but also for the 17<sup>th</sup> century reader who is inscribed in Maynard's own poems, as well as for the modern reader with whom Merwin's poem about Maynard communicates.

#### *Prosopopoeia*

Prosopopoeia, "a figure which gives the ability to act and to move insensate things, as well as speech to absent or present persons and things, sometimes even to the dead" (TNPE) is used with the intention to lend more weight to a writer's words. In this case, Merwin seems to consider the words of a poet who had long since died, to be more powerful than his own. Merwin, who expresses a profound attachment to Maynard's native landscape, chooses as his spokesman a poet who is deeply frustrated, because he lives his retirement to this native landscape as an exile. I suggest that what is significant in this choice is not the fact of Maynard's unhappiness, but the fact that he is a baroque poet and comes from a particular region of France.

Merwin begins the poem by citing one of Maynard's poems: "When I cannot see my angel I would rather/ have been born blind and miserable I wrote at one time (...)". The speaker who rejects the superficial life of his youth, does not believe that his past echoes his present. Even though a feeling of continuity is created by the speaker's backwards look, the past and the present are clearly differentiated, by virtue of being associated with very separate kinds of life experiences. Merwin's poem about Maynard is based on a combination of fragments from Maynard's

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance W.S.Merwin, *The second four books of poems*.

own poems and of biographical detail. Maynard was born in Toulouse<sup>2</sup> and studied law before becoming the secretary of Marguerite of Navarre, Henri IV's first wife. Around 1606, when in Paris, Maynard became a disciple of his more famous colleague Malherbe (1555-1628). Malherbe rejected both French and Italian Renaissance poetic models and advocated more accessible poetry. Maynard was a faithful disciple of Malherbe, respecting his demands for simplicity and clarity. As a young man, he was also a great admirer of Ronsard (who is mentioned in Merwin's poem), even though Ronsard was not highly esteemed by members of Malherbe's circle.

Merwin is not particularly concerned with the details of Maynard's life, and he does not even use the correct version of his name (he uses *de* Maynard with its aristocratic connotations instead of Maynard). He does, however, mention the main milestones of his life. There are a number of biographical details about Maynard's life which are commonly known. He was married in 1611 and had eight children. His eldest daughter died in 1626, his eldest son in 1634. In 1643, three years before his own death, his wife also died after a long illness. Maynard lived in Paris for some time before moving to Aurillac and Saint-Céré, from where he often returned to Paris to meet with his poet-friends, Saint-Amant and Théophile de Viau. Although at one point during this period he was tempted by libertinism, he ended up a sympathiser of Jesuitism. After spending some time in Rome (1635-36), he fell into disgrace and retired to Saint-Céré, where, two years before his death, he was given the position of "conseiller d'Etat".

The poem, "François de Maynard 1582-1646", connects to several historical periods, to the age of the modern poet, to Maynard's twilight years in the 1640's, a time when he both looks back and awaits death, and to various other milestones in Maynard's life—his childhood marked by violence and civil war, his youth and manhood filled with writing, success and sorrow, the time in Aurillac, his travels to Rome and the death of his wife. Maynard's life-story is not always recounted chronologically. The speaker goes back and forth in time, but ends up in the present of narration, in keeping with autobiographical convention.

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<sup>2</sup> It is not clear whether the poet was born in 1582 or 1583, according to Charles Drouhet in *Le poète François Mainard (1583?-1646)*.

*Topoi I and II: Youthful foolishness and sadness at the end of life*

Ernst Robert Curtius describes topoi as general truths or common intellectual themes, as kinds of clichés which have survived through the centuries: “[Topoi] could be used in any form of literature, they spread to all spheres of life with which literature deals and to which it gives form” (70). Also in more modern literature, topoi can summon up youthful foolishness and the melancholy feelings experienced at the end of one’s life. According to Ferdinand Gohin’s introduction to Maynard’s poems, the poems he wrote at the end of his life were deeply-felt and highly melancholy. Gohin observes that the sadness experienced in old age is a recurring topos in the poems of early 17th century, adding that: “no one gave them a more personal form than Maynard and a deeper feeling, even if they had subdued colours” (Maynard XVIII).

Maynard’s later poems deplore his youthful debauchery and reveal a fear of death, but they also express aggression and frustration. But feelings of melancholy are more explicit in Merwin’s poem than in most of Maynard’s works.

Merwin creates an autobiographical narrative situation where the speaker gains a new understanding of the past. The poem also expresses the idea of becoming reconciled with one’s past. There is, however, a gaping chasm, between the modern reader’s experience and that of this poet from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, not least created by the loss of God as the ultimate guarantor of meaning and the development of the concept of identity. The idea of telling a life-story as a means of creating continuity and giving meaning to life is in itself a modern concept.

Our memories can present us with a plethora of actions which we regret not having taken or which we wished we had taken differently. In Merwin’s poem, Maynard no longer approves of the attitudes he had and the acts he carried out as a young man. He describes himself as a young man who at times could not bear his life on earth and at other times was completely absorbed by his success as a poet. The speaker creates a distance between himself and his past with exclamations such as: “(...) how long it is since I left/ the court”. He has conducted himself in a way in which the speaker would never accept in the present. Here the poem uses another well-known topos—the idea that young people do not know what is in their best interest and that they do not act rationally. The old poet’s sadness at looking back is connected both to what he regrets about

his former conduct and to the loss of his loved ones, his parents, daughter and wife.

*Structure and images*

The poem is structured by comparisons and oppositions. The absence of punctuation, combined with the occurrences of coordinated sentences and temporal and locative clauses lend the poem a certain orality. The poem moves from long, lingering sections to shorter, more insistent staccato ones. In the last section, where we again find longer sentences, the tone becomes more meditative, the increasing pathos leading to the poet's assertion that he has become reconciled with his past. Despite its oral style, the poem contains many similes and metaphors. The poets of 17<sup>th</sup> century France were particularly interested in metaphor. Their understanding of metaphor was initially based on analogies between macrocosm and microcosm and between vertical and horizontal relations within the universe, these connections were eventually dismissed as irrelevant and, as a result, the metaphor became mostly decorative. Malherbe and his circle argued for a more sober and less original employment of images, in contrast to the imaginative use favoured by other baroque poets. According to Jean Rousset, Malherbe's used metaphor as "(...) a way of subduing the metaphor without letting it disappear, to make it harmless, if one can say so" (*L'intérieur et l'extérieur* 59).

The metaphors and similes in Merwin's poem are neither provocative nor original. The element of surprise usually associated with the metaphor is strongly subdued. This may be due to the fact that Merwin retrieves them from the French original. Merwin deliberately chooses clichéd metaphors, which are inevitably more discreet, and, by mimicking spoken language, these have the effect of lending his poems a conversational tone, giving the impression that the French poet is addressing himself directly to the reader. Similes are conventionally regarded as a more oral form than the metaphor. There is, however, nothing in the poem that indicates a systematic effort by Merwin to follow Malherbe's recommendations for writing good poetry or to try to reproduce Maynard's style of writing. The extended metaphors and similes in Merwin's poem do not fit in with Malherbe's ideas, and quotations from Maynard are transformed and put into new contexts.

The first line in Merwin's poem juxtaposes seeing with blindness: "When I cannot see my angel I would rather/ have been blind and miserable (...)". The same angel, the same contrast, can be found in a galant poem by Maynard, addressed to a woman with a jealous husband: "I would rather have been born blind and miserable, is not this wish bizarre? //But a jealous husband's stern demands/ hinder me in seeing my beautiful angel, / what is the use of you, my eyes? // Submerged by the water from my tears/ I feel the season of the flowers/ has only black on its palette".<sup>3</sup> In his poem, Merwin chooses to drop the rhetorical questions addressed to the poet's readers and to his "eyes", as well as the typically baroque metaphor, where the poet drowns in his tears. He then transforms Maynard's personification of spring as a painter into a new simile: "(...) then the season of flowers I said appeared to be painted black". Life on earth is unbearable for the amorous young man. Merwin elaborates on its meaning: "(...) and it was impossible through those days to imagine how I could have tarried so long/ on the earth"<sup>4</sup>, an assertion which is again inspired by one of Maynard's poems, this time addressed to another woman. According to Charles Drouhet's biography of Maynard, the poet suffered from unrequited love and the woman who represented the object of his devotion, reappears under different names in several of his poems.

A temporal conjunction, "while", links the previous lines to a metaphor and a simile: "(...) while the syllables of thirty Aprils/ had dripped like ice in the mountains (...)". The relation between spring, the melting of snow and the birth of poetic inspiration are once again inspired by Maynard. He describes spring as a time for love. Thirty years before, the Muses had taught the poet where to find the fountain of love, so that he could write about love: "Thirty months of April have made the icicles/ melt in our mountains/ the countryside has won back its green exuberance/ and rejuvenated old bushes,/ since the Muses boasted that they had shown me the fountains/ that had given them so many lovers

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<sup>3</sup> "Je souhaiterois d'estre né/Aveugle comme infortuné./ Ce désir n'est-il pas estrange?/ Mais si la rigueur d'un Jalous/ Me prive de voir mon bel Ange,/ Mes yeux, à quoi me servez-vous?// Submergé dans l'eau de mes pleurs,/ Je croy que la saison des Fleurs/ N'a que du noir en sa peinture (...)", "Ode", Maynard: 171. All translations from French are mine.

<sup>4</sup> "Je ne puis me figurer/Comme quoy j'ai pô durer/ Si long-temps dessus la Terre", "Ode", Maynard: 175.

(...)"<sup>5</sup> In one of the more original metaphors in his poem, Merwin describes a spring mountain landscape, which is associated with song. Here, the reader imagines the mountain landscape with dripping icicles, an image which is then developed into another extended simile: "(...) and I had listened to the water as a song I might know". The drops of water make elusive music whose meaning is not easy to capture. But while Merwin's poem talks of the problem of capturing the songs of nature, Maynard's poem moves from the mountains to a French garden where producing love poems is effortless.

Both poets use the last days of autumn as an image of the poet's old age. Maynard makes Destiny, "la Parque", become tired of spinning new days for him. Merwin personifies the passing days, which are made to feel the same resignation as the speaker: "(...) and the days arrive each one/expecting less". The temporal distance and the change in attitude between past and present are reinforced by the occurrences of "since" and "once": "(...) how long it is since I left/ the court I loved once". The focus then shifts from time to place. The repetition of the adverb of place, "where" is used to create syntactical parallelism: "where my mother... where the banquets... where my daughter", after which "here" (lines 29 and 33) is contrasted with "away and away" (line 35).

Maynard's period at court is described in Merwin's poem through a series of images. "[T]he skins of morning" is an enigmatic metaphor describing what could be interpreted either as an experience or an atmosphere. Could it be about awakening to a new day, or awakening to skin against skin? Jean Rousset describes the enigmatic metaphor as characteristic of baroque literature, where the relations within the metaphor are hidden rather than disclosed. The enigmatic metaphor, another type of metaphor disliked by Malherbe (*L'âge baroque* 186), does not otherwise find favour with Merwin. The personified month of May is vain and resembles the young poet. Its colourfulness contrasts with the black flowers of April. The optimism and ambitions of his youth

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<sup>5</sup> "Trente Avrils ont sur nos Montagnes/Fondu le cristal des glaçons,/ Rendu la verdure aux Campagnes,/ Et rajeuny les vieux buissons./Depuis que les Muses sont vaines/De m'avoir montré les fontaines/ Qui leur donnent tant d'Amoureux (...) C'en est fait, mon Automne passe! (...) Et desja la Parque se lasse/ De me filer de nouveaux jours!(...) Que dira la race future/ Qui viendra voir ma sepulture/ Comme celle d'un demy-Dieu", "A Monseigneur le Cardinal de Richelieu", Maynard: 196-197.

are linked to uneasiness and dissatisfaction: “My hopes always for something/else that would be the same but more and never failing”. The young man is conscious of the inconstancy of success. The plural of “loves” suggests that the relationships he had were many and superficial and gives weight to the last word in the poem—“love”.

Merwin’s speaker considers that he will be lucky if he is: “(...) buried/ as the poor are buried”. He wants to be remembered by an unmarked white wall in the church. The speaker admits that his previous self-congratulation was exaggerated. Maynard’s parallel poem takes the form of an elderly man’s complaint at France’s lack of gratitude towards his poetic gift: “It is over, my autumn approaches its end! (...) and already Destiny is tired/of spinning new days for me! (...) What will people say in the future / when they come to see my burial place/ as if it belonged to a demigod”.<sup>6</sup> Maynard did not just want to emulate Ronsard, he wanted to be his equal, and he even imagined for himself a tombstone which would be a monument “as if it belonged to a demigod”.

In Merwin’s poem, there is no frustration or bitterness, just a hint of regret at not having been as successful in doing something more meaningful with his poetry than he actually succeeded in doing. The speaker has no more ambitions, and, as such, contrasts with the arrogant and insistent poet in Maynard’s poem, who wants Richelieu to speak to the king on his behalf. Maynard wrote a series of poems recommending himself to influential people at court, boasting of his capabilities in order to try to secure a good position for himself there. He was, however, never able to establish himself in Paris again, and his resulting frustration is evident in his poems. In the extended simile in Merwin’s poem, the speaker contrasts his attitude as an arrogant youth with his present more sober attitude: “a demigod whatever/ that may be”. This distance towards his own arrogance is not to be found in the French original, where the speaker tries instead to attain the position which he believes he deserves. However, Merwin’s poem itself becomes an homage to the poet Maynard.

In Merwin’s poem, “those years when”, leads us to the story of the persecutions witnessed in this region at the end of the 16th century, to soldiers on foot and on horseback, to burning farms, wounded people and

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<sup>6</sup> “(...) Que dira la race future/ Qui viendra voir ma sepulture/ Comme celle d’un demy-Dieu”, “A Monseigneur le Cardinal de Richelieu”, Maynard: 197.

blood in the canals. By this rhetorical gesture, Merwin places Maynard's childhood in the same landscape as his old age, even though it is well documented that Maynard was born in Toulouse, and also spend his childhood there. Maynard's life-story is thus simplified, in order to enable Merwin to make a point of the poet coming back home to his childhood valley. The hill with the towers signifies continuity, in contrast to the vagaries of the poet's life: "[T]hose towers on the hill that I would see again and again". Could the ruins of these towers still have been there when Merwin himself arrived in that same valley in 1963? Past and present are united through the extended metaphor of the fingers of one hand, stretching out towards those who return.

Charles Drouhet writes the following about Saint-Céré and Maynard's own home there:

From the small window in his narrow office on the first floor the poet saw (...) a great deal (...) of the area where Saint-Céré was built—an island made by a bend of la Bave and a canal (...) In front of the house one could see a hill with the ruins of castle towers (...) an old castle from the VIIIth century (...) Protected by a range of mountains from the strong and icy cold wind from Auvergne, lies Saint-Céré (...) deep down between mountain sides and forests (...). (140-141)

The river, the canal and the hill with the towers are all to be found in Merwin's poem. Every time the poet comes back, everything is at it used to be. The landscape has not changed, unlike the poet's own life. The cold house becomes a discreet, but effective metaphor for the speaker's sorrow at the death of his daughter, contrasting with memories of partying, worldly success and love affairs.

In the following passage the same sentence structure is repeated seven times, connecting the speaker to words of perception, movement and feeling. When the poet addresses the death of his wife, the same verb is repeated: "(...) I have sat beside my wife (...) I sat here beside her". The image that makes war a vast wave sweeping through the valley, stands out in this section of the poem, where the other descriptions are concrete and lacking in images: "(...) I have smelled rosemary and juniper burning in the plague". The smell of the burning herbs during the plague anchors the poem in the past, as does the following phrase: "I

have flattered evil men (...)”.<sup>7</sup> Even though the sadness expressed could be that of a modern writer, by alluding to obscure customs and using old-fashioned expressions, Merwin reminds us that this story is about the past.

*Topoi III and IV: Carpe diem and life is a dream*

The speaker in Merwin’s poem surveys the autumn leaves of the poplar trees floating on the river. The death of his wife is associated with autumn and with his own life drawing to an end. A connection can be made between la Bave, the river which Maynard could see from his house in Saint-Céré, and the river Pactolus, which he mentions, in that both were known for carrying gold dust (Drouhet 141). When king Midas decided that he wanted to be rid of his magical powers, having killed his daughter in the act of turning her into gold, he washed them away in the Pactolus, which from that moment onwards carried gold in its stream. “Gold” is repeated twice, which lends the word more weight. Might this mention of the river be a hidden reference to Maynard’s relationship to his daughter? Did she perhaps die while he was chasing after honour and power? This reference gives the modern reader another reminder of the poetry of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which is rich in allusions to mythology. Although Malherbe’s circle wanted to play down the importance of mythology, this does not mean, as we have seen, that Maynard’s poetry was without mythological dimensions.

Pactolus was once compared to eternity, the speaker tells us. He appears to reject the notion that nature lasts for ever, since the river he is contemplating, is associated with the passing of the seasons. However, the passing of seasons in a landscape can also function as an image of constancy, recalling the circularity of time. Moreover, the allusion to the passing of life corresponds to the baroque attitude to life, where the poets stressed man’s mortality with the aim of encouraging people to enjoy life (*carpe diem*). This idea recurs in another of Maynard’s poems to a reluctant lady: “While one has flowers, one should bind garlands” (Maynard 134).

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<sup>7</sup> Maynard says something similar in another poem: “J’ay flatté les puissans, j’ay plastré leurs malices (...)”, Maynard: 191.

In an interview, Merwin expresses a view which recalls the baroque idea of the importance of living in the present. He speaks about death being part of our lives, and the present as what we are "blessed with":

Death is part of every moment of our lives. It's always there with us. It doesn't mean that we have to be gloomy about it, but it's always there. I mean yesterday is gone, isn't it? What we have and what we're blessed with is this very moment, with the whole of our past in it and the whole of the unknown future in it, but it's all there.

(W.S.Merwin 2008)

Neal Bowers shows how an image in one of Merwin's poems "concentrates a feeling of mortality and the inherent sadness of human life (...) leaving us with a poignant sense of our own transience" (Bowers 1990), an analysis that can also be applied to Merwin's poem about Maynard.

Line 43 onwards of the poem concerns Maynard's adult life before the onset of old age. It may well relate to his riding back and forwards between Aurillac and Saint-Céré, or to his travels in the wider world. He used to stop where "(...) the mountains appeared to open before me and turning (...) all the way back here (...) and both ways were my life". This extended simile conveys an image of him in the midst of the mountains, where he momentarily appears to experience feelings of lucidity and control. He is standing in a well-known landscape, with roads leading back home and out again. The mountains look as if they open up, and the metaphor "and both ways were my life" again connects life to a mountainous landscape as in the beginning of the poem. There is a rupture between the speaker's two worlds, but this image creates a bridge between them.

The poet in Merwin's poem says that in his life he now has "(...) slept through to wake in a dark house talking to the shadows about love". The story we were told, was a dream. Again Merwin alludes to a well-known topos: Life is a dream.<sup>8</sup> From a baroque perspective, however, the awakening from the dream would take place in a Christian Heaven. In Merwin's poem the speaker approaches death, but wakes up to tell the story of his life. The idea of an awakening is often used as an image of

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<sup>8</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius mentions Calderon's *La vida es sueño* in his study of important topoi from Antiquity on, but only to show how Calderon uses a topos where life is seen as a stage, Curtius: 141.

having reached some kind of insight. While the modern reader may associate dreams with the subconscious, this particular dream is associated with the poet's retrospective recognition that certain aspects of his life—such as his past ambitions and successes—are no longer important, while other relations in his life—the relationships with the people he loved—are now the only value.

The mood of self-acceptance in the poem relates more to Merwin's present than to Maynard's biography. Merwin attributes the speaker more self-insight and peace of mind than Maynard expressed in his own poems. Reportedly, Maynard's frustration at not having been appreciated as a poet and at being exiled from Paris contributed to final illness and death. When the speaker in Maynard's poem sums up his life, he says: "I made my sins into my only pleasures" (Maynard 290). He is: "(...) haunted by the disgust of his own misdeeds" (Maynard 290). He demands the right to be afraid of death and hell and believes that he has no hope for salvation, but he asks God to have mercy on him.

In Merwin's poem the dark house represents the mental state of the speaker. All he has left, is the story of a dream. The dream contains memories of his loved ones, shadows joining him in his last days. Looking back, does love give his life meaning? The last lines of the poem and especially the use of the word "love" imply that this is the case, indicating to the reader that a modern poet's thinking underlies these words. Here, the creation of meaning is the responsibility of the speaker himself. It derives from the love which exists between him and his parents, his wife and his daughter. There is no mention of God.

Maynard in his poem relates shadows and love to an ideal landscape, the Elysean fields, where the poet will boast of being remembered after his death by the loveliest woman in the universe: "I shall go to the loving shadows/ who rest out in the happy fields/ under green myrtle/ to tell that my name has the honour / of living in the memory/ of the loveliest in the universe" (Maynard 173). Meaning is related to the afterlife in the baroque imagination, whereas the modern imagination looks for meaning here and now. Maynard ends his poem by saying that the woman is made of ice and that he cannot expect anything from her, from where he sits in exile.

*Topos V: The landscape as a conveyor of meaning*

The landscape exists independently of experience and memories, but at the same time it is closely linked to the inner space of the poet. Maynard's poem does not ask if a landscape can help give life meaning, it does not adopt this kind of modern attitude to nature. It is described using stereotypical images of lonely woods and beautiful plains, and is related to the poem's images of human life. Nature in Maynard's poem can be hostile. It may threaten and comfort human beings, but is not threatened by them. One can find contradictory assertions in Maynard's poems about his attitude to the landscape he lived in—both the wish to leave: "Farewell, Mountains! Farewell Wood/ I am tired of living as a hermit" (Maynard 130)—and the satisfaction of staying: "You know I love/ to live in this area" (Maynard 133). In the last case the speaker is courting a local lady who needs to know why he wants to go to Paris.

Maynard also relates the landscape to the lack of recognition he experienced as a poet: "You force me to die in the woods, oh ungrateful century!" (Maynard 287). His native woods thus become an image of exile and rejection. We should remember that banishment from the court and from Paris was considered a severe punishment for aristocrats in 17th century France. But Maynard can also look upon exile as something of value: "(...) I am overjoyed by the woods where I live./ Think my resort is good; which permits me to stay/ in the same village where my ancestors have died" (Maynard 32). The family's historic attachment to the place gives the poet a good reason for accepting his exile.

Another much older topos also haunts Merwin's poem, in the description of idealized nature and in the image of *locus amoenus*, where the question of "where" leads to the question "when", thus relating place to time (Curtius 183-202). The classical topoi relate to exotic plants and animals, to nymphs and grottos and shepherds and love, to places where there is no sickness or hunger, and where there is for ever spring. Merwin's descriptions, on the other hand, provide a realistic rather than an idealized representation of nature. The people who appear in the landscape, are threatened by loneliness, sorrow, war and death. On the other hand, the landscape in the poem is not antithetic to *locus amoenus*. The landscape anchors the fleeting life. It is a place where love can blossom and where the poet can come to terms with death. The description of his village has all the conventional classical elements—a river, mountains, a valley, spring, a sunrise, flowers (even though they

are black, the river is coloured by blood and the sunrise takes its red colour from burning houses). The landscape in the poem is another “shade which has drunk blood” (Curtius 104).

This landscape remained the same even after the waves of war had washed over it. It was a place to come home to, after an absence. And the many elements of this landscape which had been created by the local population, also represented an important part of its enduring quality—the church, the towers on the hill, the houses in the village, the house of the poet, even if it was cold and dark, the streets, the canals encircled by mountains. The description of the village and its environment is dramatized by the raging of wars inside and outside of the village. Through metaphors and similes, natural phenomena are related to human creations. The icicles which melt in the mountains, have something in common with the words of the poet, the soldiers set fire to the farms which colour the sunrise red. Spring is an image either of a broken heart or of social success, while autumn cannot be associated with anything but ageing and approaching death.

As we see in the poem “François de Maynard 1582-1646”, Merwin’s poems are often steeped in melancholy. The poem is not sentimental, but it is about a time when God was the guarantor of a meaningful end to one’s life story, and nature represented a stable framework for people’s lives. The experience of time in modernity is related to loss of meaning and annihilation. In Modernism, the idea of a “home” is associated with a space which can never be returned to. This idea presupposes that “home” did once exist as part of a meaningful whole. Life is a dream from which one ends up waking, as Merwin’s baroque poet tells us. The attitude to life found in Merwin’s poem relates to a dream of an ideal life of stability and permanence, founded on an unchanging landscape. In his other poems, Merwin points to the vulnerability of his modern readers. Looking beyond the baroque experience and the modernist conception of the world, he presents us with a new and urgent question—will nature survive us? How can we be reconciled with death and annihilation without being secured by the continuity of nature? And what does it mean to be a poet in a world without this security?

Poetic language tries to hold onto reality, but reality always escapes. In his introduction to *The second four books of poems*, written three years before *The Vixen*, Merwin reminds us how tragically complex—and ambiguous—our relationship to nature is. He warns the reader that

the bitterness which the exploitation of nature can arouse in us, can also make us forget our love for it, a passion which he believes can be so strong as to be impossible for words to recreate. In the following we find an expression of his agenda:

I think it is essential to recognize the probable results of what we have done and are doing, but when we have seen that and its roots in human motives, the menaced world may seem even more to be treasured than ever. Certainly the anguish and anger we feel at the threat to it [nature] and the sleepless despoiling of it can lose their tragic complexity and become mere bitterness when we forget that their origin is a passion for the momentary countenance of the unrepeatable world.

(*Four books 5*)

Jane Frazier sees Merwin's speakers like "wandering prophets" and remarks that although Merwin's poems are marked by a tinge of fatalism, they "close with a sense of the speakers having acquired a small parcel of knowledge in a world filled with questions" (Frazier 1996, 5). *The Vixen* addresses the question of the meaning of a poet's words, after the loss of the nature we know, in the "silence after the animals". The sadness the poet experiences at this idea could well have led to feelings of powerlessness and inertia, but instead the poet continues to write, spurred on by the love and anger he feels at the destruction of nature. By using Maynard as his spokesman, Merwin takes us back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and in so doing casts an unexpected light on a very modern problem.

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*Appendix:*

**François de Maynard 1582-1646**

When I cannot see my angel I would rather  
    have been born blind and miserable I wrote at one time  
then the season of flowers I said appeared to be  
    painted black and it was impossible through those days  
to imagine how I could have tarried so long  
    on the earth while the syllables of thirty Aprils  
had dripped like ice in the mountains and I had listened  
    to the water as a song I might know and how  
the autumn is almost done and the days arrive each one  
    expecting less how long it is since I left  
the court I loved once the passions there the skins of morning  
    the colors of vain May and my hopes always for something  
else that would be the same but more and never failing  
    more praise more laurels more loves more bounty until I  
could believe I was Ronsard and I wrote that I would have  
    a monument as for a demigod whatever  
that might be when I will be lucky to be buried  
    as the poor are buried without noise and the faces covered  
and be gone as the year goes out and be honoured as a blank wall  
    in a cold chapel of the church where I shivered as a child  
beside my father the judge in his complete black those years when  
    soldiers clattered and clanged through the streets horsemen clashed  
under the windows and the nights rang with the screams  
    of the wounded outside the walls while the farms burned  
into dawns red with smoke and blood came spreading  
    through the canals at the foot of those towers on the hill  
that I could see again and again after every absence  
    fingers of a hand rising out of the grey valley  
in the distance and coming closer to become here as before  
    where my mother wanted me where I married  
where the banquets glittered along the river to my songs  
    where my daughter died and how cold the house turned all at once  
I have seen the waves of war come back and break over us here  
    I have smelled rosemary and juniper burning in the plague  
I have gone away and away I have held a post in Rome  
    I have caught my death there I have flattered evil men  
and gained nothing by it I have sat beside my wife  
    when she could move no longer I sat here beside her

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I watched the gold leaves of the poplars floating on the stream  
long ago the gold current of the river Pactolus  
was compared to eternity but the poplar leaves have gone  
in the years when I rode to Aurillac I used to stop  
at a place where the mountains appeared to open before me  
and turning I could still see all the way back to here  
and both ways were my life which now I have slept through to wake  
in a dark house talking to the shadows about love