Dear Premises: James Merrill and the Domestic Impulse
In His Work and In His Life

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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Dear Premises is an unusual close personal look at the poet James Merrill through his 20 years of interactions and correspondence with a family with whom he had a long intimate relationship. Part I includes an analysis of traditional artistic and intellectual elements that can be traced through Merrill’s early works in poetry, fiction, and drama with an emphasis on influential sources in Continental and American literature. His verbal skill with strict metrical forms, subtle illusions, and elaborate word play unites with his own experiments in prose, two works of drama and two of fiction, to produce the poet’s growing achievements in maturity of dialog, narrative sequence and, characterization. The unity of focus in all his early work exhibits a passionate thematic devotion to the artistic and personal dilemma of his social position as it emerges into the freer, looser landscape of modern life. Part II offers five special examples of Merrill’s casual, gentle, and generous behavior in a domestic setting of some chaos and complication. The letters, which cover years between 1974 and 1995, permit the reader to follow both Merrill and the family through their increasing intimacy in a shared personal universe and are included as a separate media attachment. Part III synthesizes these personal and idiosyncratic and epistolary occasions into a broad view of the poet James Merrill as an important cultural icon for redemptive power of the human experience and of love.
The dissertation of Kathleen Bonann Marshall is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles
For Judy Moffett and Mary Bomba whose faith and love helped me see clearly
For Karen Rowe whose encouragement and friendship helped see me through
For James Merrill who is everywhere beside me
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Biographical Sketch

Kathleen Bonann Marshall is a native of Los Angeles, California. She graduated from UCLA with degrees in English in 1971 (B.A.) and in 1974 (M.A.). In 1975 she moved to Iowa where she lived in Iowa City, and worked for 15 years at the University of Iowa in various teaching positions while raising two children, Stephanie and Zachary. After a move to Illinois in 1990, she was Assistant Director of the Center for the Writing Arts at Northwestern University, where she was lecturer in Comparative Literary Studies and a fellow in the Weinberg College. She spent more than twenty five years in the classroom at large research universities teaching humanities courses for undergraduates. She also spent a decade as Assistant to the Provost at Pepperdine University where she was responsible for faculty promotion and tenure cycles in five colleges, supervised major policy revisions, and conducted national searches for deans of the Law and Business schools.

Her passion for James Merrill has taken her often to the James Merrill Historic Residence in Stonington, Connecticut for local research, and to Washington University, St. Louis for research in their Special Collections holdings of James Merrill manuscripts and materials. For 50 years she has studied the work of this distinguished American poet. From 1974 to 1995 while living in Iowa City and Wilmette, Illinois she was a regular correspondent of the poet, and hosted his visits at her home when he gave readings at University of Iowa and at University of Illinois at Chicago. Her letters to James Merrill and his letters to her are archived along with selected photographs at Washington University, St. Louis.
In the spring of 1974, I wrote to James Merrill to inquire about whether I might examine some of his notebooks and manuscripts held in the Special Collections at Washington University at St. Louis. He replied kindly that I could. And (though I knew nothing about it at the time) he wrote to his own friends in St. Louis (especially Mona Van Duyn and Jarvis Thurston) to prepare them for my visit. The University librarians in Special Collections were similarly alerted. This early evidence of James Merrill’s “almost diagnosable thoughtfulness” remains for me an exemplar of the care on his part from the very beginning to introduce me into the Circle that surrounded him. Mona Van Duyn, a poet herself and with whom he often exchanged manuscripts in draft form, had been the certain instrument through which Washington University at St. Louis obtained the Merrill materials that today constitute a significant and enormous collection in the Library’s holdings. Mona and her husband, Jarvis Thurston, who had long served as chair of the English department at Washington University at St. Louis, took me into their home and into their hearts. Since I did not know any poets personally, this first delightful encounter with their ways and lives has never left me. Mona and Jarvis reflected, in their thoughtfulness and generosity, what I would come to discover was characteristic of James’s closest friends. They invited me to dine at the end of each day while I was reading and researching in the Merrill manuscripts, asking helpful questions, and leading me to a better understanding of what I had seen. Sometimes our dinners were in a favorite restaurant; or better still, off trays in their living room with two large affectionate dogs lying comfortably over our feet.
The notebooks and manuscripts which took up my days were awe-inspiring: careful annotations on thin typescript pages; graceful spider handwriting, clear focus on word choice, word order and diction; not exactly methodical, but organized in the ways that creative people often do things—by association, symmetry, sound. Examining and making sense of these materials could have been a horror for an ignorant young graduate student with little experience of life and still less of the centuries of poetic and intellectual history that informed these poems as they emerged into polished form. But I was encouraged by Mona and Jarvis to set aside my bewilderment and to simply read them: to enjoy the linguistic cleverness, the way a word rolls off the tongue, the way a line resonates, half rhymes that inform or surprise. Mona would read aloud. Jarvis would read aloud. I would read aloud. Then we would talk.

One evening when I arrived, Mona rejoiced over a package she’d received that afternoon: recent poems that her good friend had been working on and sent for her entertainment. It hardly seems possible now, but that evening in St. Louis I listened to her read from the opening of “The Book of Ephraim,” that long poem which completed the volume that would become the Pulitzer prize-winning Divine Comedies; and which introduced some of the motifs and persons from the Ouija Board that would later inhabit Merrill’s enormous epic trilogy, The Changing Light at Sandover.

When I returned to Los Angeles that summer of 1974, I produced a short essay and outline about James Merrill’s work [included here for historical purposes because it describes my understanding of the early texts and how these related to each other]. My research goals were quite simple and very traditional.

“I grow old,” James Merrill wrote in “Mirror,” reflecting a decade later upon his own self-conscious poetic vision and revision, “under an intensity of questioning looks.” Some early
critics of Merrill’s *First Poems* (1951) insisted that his poetry seemed to defy penetration, to resist careful and persistent scrutiny, to thwart sensitive reading. But the early critics also acknowledged the challenge and real pleasure in the attempt to understand those poems, and sometimes even their frustration at having failed to do so. In particular, noted literary critic Richard Howard complained of *First Poems* that while Merrill’s language and images are beautiful to the ear and eye, “there is a polite and almost impenetrable patina on these pretty things,” a self-reflexive polish to the poems.² I was myself both appalled and delighted by these very remarkable early poems, which managed a formidable range of technically difficult stanza patterns, and managed them so expertly. And if that perfection of form lends the poems half their difficulty, the poet’s astonishing intellectual rigor and erudition lends the remaining half. Richard Howard called these early poems “nacreous”; I called them hard.

The poems themselves can seem at times provoking, but the poet amply rewards careful attention given. It is not so much as Richard Howard suggested, remarking further on the “decorative” and “glamor-clogged” immature verse of *First Poems*, that Merrill’s early poems (or for that matter all his poems) have designs on us, but that *Merrill had designs on poetry.*³ And that design, the “dream made whole” which Merrill reveals in “From the Cupola” (*Nights and Days*, 1966), relentlessly pursued as aesthetic and realized as a poem, comprises both the reason for and the subject of my research. As a poet James Merrill is not designing only his verse, but his ‘self” as well. For Merrill, the personal and the intellectual are not parallel independent experiences, they are the same experience. He is “having it both ways,” an expression and experience that appears in one form or another for his poetic lifetime.

In his early volumes, Merrill looks through history and myth to find his own history; in later volumes he looks through learning, experience, sympathy, pain, and love to confront his
own life, voice, and story. He finds an identity which reflects (albeit in a highly polished fashion) the past as much as it reveals the present. In the poem “Amsterdam” from The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (1959) the poet writes:

By dark the world is once again intact,
Or so the mirrors, wiped clean, try to reason . . .
O little moons, misshapen but arisen
To blind with the emotions they refract!

Merrill poems demonstrate and develop an identity which recognizes an ironic dimension of tradition and ancestry (whether poetic or linguistic or familial), that at the same time strands him to the past and leaves him stranded in the present. In “Lorelei” from The Fire Screen (1969) he writes:

The stones of kin and friend
Stretch off into a trembling, sweatlike haze.
They may not after all be stepping-stones
But you have followed them. Each strands you, then

James Merrill’s poetic design relies so effectively upon the designs of his predecessors in poetry and fiction, that to examine his use of these traditions is to trace the relationships of several significant strands to our literary past. Reading a Merrill poem is a journey into tradition, whether guided by metaphorical or personal experience, or both. My preliminary investigation addresses this problem of defining and evaluating Merrill’s creative processes without denying his technical conservatism. Merrill learned to use the traditional medium so well that he probably did think in it. Indeed, as he explained in an early interview, the iambic pentameter was a “good friend” to the poet despite its limitations, precisely because he recognizes those limitations and compensates through emotional and ironic dimensions. 4
Thus, Merrill’s poetry requires that one distinguish between an imitation of the models from which the poems develop and a form based on a familiarity with those models. Imitation may have been a means by which the poet developed his early skill, but was certainly not the end of Merrill’s creative aspirations or achievements.

Moreover, his poetic and creative emphasis shifted perceptibly after *First Poems* was published in 1951. Merrill chose to refine rather than discard traditional technique. So it might be argued that entirely too much has been made of Merrill’s formal conservatism without sufficient recognition of his motive for retaining a traditional style. In “The Cruise” he asks explicitly: Are we less monstrous when our motive slumbers/ Drugged by a perfection of our form?”5

It seems to me that the arguments against neo-traditionalists which Stephen Spender introduced in “The Struggle of the Modern,” ignored a very important point. Spender censured the “projection of one’s aesthetic self into the time not one’s own” because that “leads to a dismissive attitude toward one’s own time, and therefore to a total disregard of any current standards by which one’s own work might be criticized.”6 I believe that James Merrill, concerned not with resurrecting the past and its traditions, but with salvaging what is still of value from that past and making it new, requires a new kind of reading, of understanding, of critical apprehension and evaluation that combines recognition, investigation, examination, and discovery. To struggle against his devotion to formal verse, or worse to ignore it, would defeat the very purpose of critical inquiry, which is ultimately a kind of personal confrontation. For these reasons, I hope my own exploration will suggest that the appropriate method of understanding is not to impose but to excavate.
Original Outline by Chapter

To take up Merrill’s poetry chronologically from *First Poems* (1951) to *Braving the Elements* (1972) is my intention. The prose works—spanning a twelve year period from 1952 to 1965—two novels and two plays, will be discussed in a first chapter because of their key position in my principal argument about Merrill’s general artistic development. I suggest that the maturity of dialogue, narrative sequence, and characterization in his later verse must be the direct result of his experiments as dramatist and novelist. My general discussion of Merrill’s prose and verse (in chapter 1) relies heavily on the interviews with him over the past fifteen years which contribute to our understanding of him as a man and as a poet. By starting with a survey of his early artistic career, I can proceed to fill in the details of his developing imaginative universe within each individual book of poems.

The justification for my organization of the second chapter, which treats three books of poems: *First Poems* (1951), *Short Stories* (1954), and *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959, revised 1970) requires some explanation. These three volumes must be taken together because the last book is, in fact, comprised of revisions and re-printings from the first two books, as well as of additional poems written between 1954 and 1959. Merrill’s first novel, *The Seraglio*, and both of his plays, “The Bait” and “The Immortal Husband,” occur between the first two books of verse and the third. Therefore, the effects of these experiments in prose on the revision and subsequent development of Merrill’s poems can be effectively established.

The analysis will continue with *Water Street* (1963) and *Nights and Days* (1966) in a third chapter. A second novel, *The (Diblos) Notebook*, appeared between these two volumes (again encouraging some comparison of technical achievement before and after the prose
piece); and the two books offer together a distinct contrast to earlier poems in subject matter as well as formal characteristics. *Water Street* and *Nights and Days* take up the question of the poet’s personal dis-ease and the influence of that malady on his work, a radical change from the highly stylized and distanced earlier verse which only occasionally hints at a maker behind the poems.

The fifth book and focus of a brief fourth chapter, *The Fire Screen* (1969) includes one long poem deserving of some special attention for its description, using the ballad stanza, of a series of events in a small New England town. The other poems in this volume are a remarkable compendium of the different stanza patterns and imaginative topics which Merrill has taken up before—not much is changed, but a great deal more is revealed.

The final chapter, on *Braving the Elements* (1972), unites several thematic strands traced through preceding chapters: the poet’s technical development; the unmasking of the persona of James Merrill; and the gathering together in one volume of the four elements which dominate his work as much as his life—earth (*The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*), water (*Water Street*), air and spirit (*Nights and Days*), and fire (*The Fire Screen*). And because *Braving the Elements* concludes my study, this last chapter incorporates a modest attempt at assessing the poet’s creative accomplishments.

And so I began Chapter 1 in 1974 of a traditional analysis of Merrill’s early work with a quote from Wittgenstein that exemplified my understanding of the poet’s greatest strength and confessed weakness: “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

An extended lament interrupts a thoughtful survey by Stephen Stephanchev, *American Poetry since 1945*, with a trio of complaints about recent trends he identifies in verse:

First of all, many poets under the influence of William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and the other objectivists
put so much stress on objects, on the “reification” of poetry that they neglect people, the creation of character. One would like to find a larger population in contemporary poetry. Secondly, in their reaction against the metaphysical subtleties of the symbolist poets, many recent poets have achieved a new dissociation of sensibility that involves a rejection of the intellect in favor of bodily and emotional processes that represent only part of the life of man. And, thirdly, many of the poets are indifferent to incident, action, plot—which can help to create life in a poem and give it urgency. A poem can be built of a series of perceptions to be sure, but action is necessary for the best development of character, meaning, emotion.

If one were to choose poets or schools to which Stepanchev must have intended his remarks to apply, then several groups become obvious: the New York School, including Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery, which developed out of an association with the surrealist movement in modern art; the Black Mountain experimental school, founded in North Carolina by Charles Olson, who took as his models both Ezra Pound’s “vorticism” and Zukofsky’s “objectivism” (to produce “objectism”); and the Beats, like Alan Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who also espoused the open form of Pound and Williams in addition to an enthusiastic, even violent, rejection of authority, political as well as poetical.

As a critical objection to recent trends, these three points neatly discriminate between James Merrill and other poets writing in the same period of modern poetry. Merrill, whose work first appeared formally in the United States in *Yale Poetry Review*, April 1946, represents in fact, the very antithesis of these three characteristics that Stepanchev describes. Merrill is reacting against the influence of William Carlos Williams and the objectivists, creating in his poetry an enormous population whose ranks swell with each new volume. He cultivates elaborate metaphysical conceits and celebrates the imagination as the quintessence of the life of man. And he relies heavily on action and interaction, many times superimposing a personal incident on myth or history to create a scene and a story. Moreover, he does not
demonstrate a strong aesthetic debt to his contemporaries in prose and verse. Merrill’s early work is as unlike Lowell or Merwin as it is different from the surrealist school. His position in the 1950’s (unique in contemporary poetry) was not because of what he attempted, but because of what he achieved. Few other poets so completely refused to relinquish the ideal of a traditional metrics; few other poets so steadfastly insisted on the conventions of decorum in social behavior and poetic language; few other poets were so unafraid of doing these things—not to break the back of the pentameter but to reinforce it.

Because it is necessary to have an adequate context within which to read Merrill’s poems, and a perspective by which to evaluate them, it is useful to examine his technical and aesthetic position within the wider Anglo-American literary tradition, including his relationship with his Continental and British as well as American contemporaries in prose and verse—especially the influence of works by poets Elinor Wylie, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop, and most particularly of the novelists Henry James and Marcel Proust. The subject of genre overlaps naturally in my discussion, so I’ve tried not to impose artificial distinctions between works of poetry and prose, except to distinguish the degree to which any condition might affect a reading of one of Merrill’s poems. The work he has done in genres other than poetry deserves serious consideration because while the experiments Merrill made in fiction and playwriting were naturally different in form from his poems, they are not essentially different creative activities. In fact, he probably learned, early in his career, more about writing poems from his formal experiments in prose than from the poems themselves.

In an early Interview with Donald Sheehan, Merrill explained:

I’ve enjoyed reading novels more often—or more profoundly—than I have enjoyed reading poems. There seems to be no poet except perhaps Dante whose work has the extraordinary richness of Tolstoy or Proust; and there are very few poets whose work gives as much fun as James. Oh, there’s always a give and take. For instance, though
a lot of the sound of James is prose, can’t one tell that he’d read Browning? You hear a voice talking in prose, often a very delightful voice which can say all kinds of odd things. For me, to get something of that into poetry was a pleasure and perhaps an object.9

The success of James Merrill’s early poetry reflects the classical distinction in Aristotle’s Poetics which claims that “the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures; and through imitation he learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated.”10 Though the roots of Merrill’s mature poetic impulse can be traced directly back to four more or less distinct literary movements—the Metaphysicals, the Romantics, the Symbolists, and the American poets and novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—his contact with these modes and their practitioners was (at least early in his writing career) curiously oblique. While in school at Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, Merrill explains, he began writing poems regularly:

I wrote my poems out of envy of my friend Freddy Buechner, who was already writing lovely poems. This soon became a habit, and before long I worked up to a poem a day. My first efforts were sonnets, which I wrote as much with French models as with English—the melodic, empty-headed fin de siècle sort of thing.11

Merrill was about fourteen then, and only very recently exposed to literary convention, except for a “bit of Shakespeare, Mrs. Browning, some pre-Raphaelite verse.” Two years later, when he formed a passionate literary attachment, it was to Elinor Wylie, a member of the “lyricists,” as Amy Lowell called the young generation of American poets (1910-1930) who cultivated an intensely personal and keenly intellectual verse. Wylie’s “magical rhyming” must, indeed, have seemed as wondrous to the sixteen-year-old boy as her considerable social position must have seemed sympathetically like his own.12 Through his imitations of her poems, the young Merrill began to learn to manipulate conceit, the structural and imagistic compression of the
Metaphysical mode, and to absorb a bit of Wylie’s own passion for Romantic verse. In *Jim’s Book*, a slim volume privately published by Merrill’s father in 1942, is included (along with various stories of a witty sort and some very lively rhyming verse) a critical exercise called “Angel or Earthly Creature,” an adulatory but carefully analytical review of Wylie’s *Angels and Earthy Creatures*. Even at sixteen, Merrill was well aware of the technical elements he both admired and imitated.

James Merrill took his imitative instincts and poetic gifts with him to Amherst College in the summer of 1943, where, as an honor student in English literature he read widely in Milton, Pope, Keats, Proust, and Yeats. And from the reports of his teachers he wrote analytical prose that was as perceptive and penetrating as his poems. Reuben Brower acknowledges a debt to J.I. Merrill [from an unpublished honors thesis done at Amherst] in a footnote to *Fields of Light* (1951) for an important description of “Proustian mergings” in the metaphors of Shakespeare’s play, “The Tempest.” And a brief essay on “The Transformation of Rilke” by Merrill was printed along with three of his poems in *Yale Poetry Review*, 1946.13

The student essay on Rilke displays the critical and aesthetic sophistication that the young Merrill had already achieved. He makes a succinct comparison between the verse techniques of leading poets in modern Germany:

> What we look for in poetry beyond pleasing language is a quickening of knowledge, an intensification of what happens to us, which can only be found in a poet like Goethe or Rilke who has plunged into the flow of experience and found his wisdom there.

His defense of Rilke’s ‘detachment’ (an attitude which Merrill himself has been accused of overdoing) reflects his determination that “the keenest understanding comes only when the eye and the emotions are both unclouded.” It is not surprising to find, in Merrill’s early poetry especially, those essential conditions: the centrality and control of the intellect, and the constant modifying presence of feeling.
The English Romantics were certainly among those older models which form part of Merrill’s poetic inheritance, though again with curious obliquity. It was through Wallace Stevens that Merrill first confronted the “romantic” seriously. Merrill’s romantic sensibility, already honed by the adolescent admiration for Elinor Wylie, intensified when he “teethed” on Stevens’s “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” The elegant, finished, precise poetry of Wallace Stevens, infused with romantic imagination and tempered with a strong personal reticence, attracted the young Merrill like no other major work of the older generation of Americans. The early experience with “Notes” seems to have been the source of his youthful persistent attempt to establish some value and order in his personal world and against the wider world of seeming chaos. In much of Merrill’s verse, as in much of Stevens, personal values aren’t simply values, they are the only values: To write poetry is to satisfy “the dull need to make some kind of house/Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.”

Because of this emphasis on the personal, the preliminary filter of Wallace Stevens’s concept of Romanticism as “an uncommon intelligence” rather than direct exposure to the English poets themselves was a fortunate circumstance for Merrill. Since he early felt painfully apart from the ordinary world of men—distanced by his homosexuality, his social class, his money, his personal fastidiousness—the blind escape into the merely romantic might have been all too easy. His early attempts to overcome the impulse toward romantic verse learned from Elinor Wylie yielded that brilliant, polished immature verse which reviewers like Richard Howard admired for its facility and vilified for its superfluity. Through the intersession of Stevens however, Merrill learned to reduce the forces of sentimentality and self-indulgence which both poets spurned, and to embrace instead the imaginative and intuitive powers of the self.
The irony is that precisely the uncommon intelligence and the intuition which allow the poet to see clearly also alienate him from ordinary discourse and force him into a position where to see is potentially a “self” centered activity. The English Romantic poets demanded this self-conscious position, of course, and Merrill does too in a limited way. However, the implicit tension of self-consciousness in Merrill’s poetry is controlled by an intense suspicion of the “spontaneous” which he regards as hopelessly self-indulgent. He shares with the Romantics certain fundamental principles about the function of the poet and his poem: particular the emphasis on the primacy of the human mind and imagination as the source of a poem, and the idea that the poet is engaged in re-experiencing the thing he describes. Merrill did not embrace the Romantic ideal of the importance of a spontaneous act of composition. He was bored by “The Prelude” and with Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” because these resembled too much the confessional mode and diminished the importance of revision as an important feature of craftsmanship. Merrill was a poet whose labor of revision produced a great pleasure for himself as well as for the reader. An important distinction becomes clear here: Merrill’s sympathy with Romanticism is more of attitude than technique. That is, while Merrill agrees generally that the poet must use personal feelings and subjective, self-centered images for a poem—childhood for example—he displays a steadfast and formidable intellectual control and a strong sense of the satiric.

To be sure, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” did help to capture and tame Merrill’s romantic sensibility. But rather than insist that either Stevens or the Romantics had a profound effect on Merrill’s work, it is more likely that they were subtle reflectors of his own highly-developed personal and artistic inclinations. Merrill says early in his career that his first reaction to Stevens “was merely that it was wonderful to mention strange colors with big abstract ideas.”
Merrill responded to the sensibilities of a painter’s world that Stevens embraced. It’s use of the impressionistic sense of color. It’s enchantment with the shapes of things and ideas. First Poems, with its painterly enameled abstractions in “The Green Eye,” is the result of Merrill’s sensibility:

A mosaic of all possible greens becomes 
A premise in your eye, whereby the limes 
Are green as limes faintly by midnight known, 
As foliage in a thunderstorm, as dreams 
Of fruit in barren countries; claim 
The orchard as a metaphor of green.16

And it reminds one immediately of the “green baked greener in the greenest sea” of Stevens’ “Notes: It Must Change. V.”

Some years later, when Merrill had obviously thought about and read a good deal more Stevens, he comments, in another interview, on the work of (both Stevens and) Elizabeth Bishop:

[Bishop’s] whole œuvre is on the scale of a human life; there is no oracular amplification, she doesn’t go about on stilts and make her vision wider. She doesn’t need that. She is wise and humane enough as it is. And this is rather what I feel about Stevens. For all the philosophy that Intrudes in and between the lines, Stevens poetry is a body of work that is man-sized. I wouldn’t say that of Pound; he tries, I think, to write like a god. Stephens and Miss Bishop merely write like angels.”17

Bishop, who learned a few things from Stevens herself, appeals to the instinct of the visual artist in Merrill. She is a poet-painter too, though with the eye for the realistic rather than the impressionistic. She offers Merrill an example of the sort of compromise it is possible to make between deep feeling and personal reticence. Bishop uses metaphysical conceits, as Merrill does, to mask emotion or to render it objectified. Merrill especially admired her poems which personify a creature to express human emotion. He certainly follows her example from “The
Fish” (1946) in “The Parrot Fish” in Water Street with the same kind of keen attention to sumptuous details that exemplify feeling:

Chalk-violet, olive, all veils and sequins, a
Priestess out of the next Old Testament extravaganza,
With round gold eyes and miniscule buck teeth,
Up flaunted into death

The parrot fish.

Bishop, who represents a touchstone for the values of modesty, wisdom, and genuine satisfaction with traditional metrics, “avoids that concentration on the self which often leads to emotion that too far exceeds its cause.”18 The carefully curated work of Bishop must have reinforced, for Merrill, the strong reliance on stanzaic form, rhyme, and iambic pentameter which helped him to organize those social, personal, and artistic impulses that might have otherwise yielded to a confessional mode.

By his own admission, and by traces in his poems which are difficult to overlook, it is obvious that the work and the values of Stevens and of Bishop had a salient influence on Merrill’s developing poetic universe and on his choices of image and technique. The emphasis, especially in Stevens, on the quality of intelligence as well as Bishop’s ability to tell the truth about life and love and art without self-indulgence, or self-pity, demonstrated for the younger poet two important techniques: how to subjugate and shape the romantic impulse to his own design; and how to compress the elements of a story—to make a long story short—as in “About the Phoenix” in his own Short Stories which, corresponds to Bishop’s poem, “Over 2000 illustrations and a Complete Concordance.”19

From Stevens’s poetry Merrill also made a casual acquaintance with the French Symbolist poets. Stevens, it has been argued repeatedly, exhibits a “symbolist” imagination which produces an intensely personal set of symbols (florid, wry, perhaps even a little wild) and
an equally sensuous language for presenting those symbols. William Van O’Connor argues in Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry that “the exoticism, elegance, and keen awareness in the poetry of Wallace Stevens suggests the Gallic exquisiteness of taste commonly found in such “ivory tower” figures as Gautier, Mallarme” and others. He continues these observations to document the influence of the Symbolists on American poetry in general:

Symbolization in poetry is the way of getting the utmost complexity, the farthest range, and the most nearly complete degree of feeling and gradations of meaning into language. The way of symbolization is also the way of reconciling the contradictory roles of intelligence and inspiration in the process of poetic composition. The English Romantics had placed the intelligence at the mercy of the poetic “demon,” but the best Symbolist technique requires the intelligence to pattern the life of the imagination into highly conscious and concentrated art.20

This function of symbolism emerges in Stevens’s own concept of the imagination “pressing back against the pressure of reality.” Intellect and imagination along with technical devices permit Stevens to follow Gautier’s advice in “L’Art” to subject the delicate watercolor to “Au four de l’emailleur,” the furnace of the enameler. And Merrill fixed on Stevens’s phrase, first in an early interview (in 1963) and quoting it again in “The Book of Ephraim,” and confessed that he felt the pressure of reality too keenly.

Merrill with his Midas touch followed Gautier’s himself. First Poems has a lapidary quality that even time and the looser forms of Braving the Elements have not entirely eliminated. The brittle, compact opening stanzas of “Willowware Cup,” for example, are full of lacquer work and jewel colors:

Mass hysteria, wave after breaking wave
Blueblooded Cantonese upon these shores

Left the gene pool Lux-opaque and smoking
With dimestore mutants. One turned up today.

Plum in bloom, pagoda, blue birds, plume of willow—
Almost the replica of a prewar pattern—
Merrill’s personal symbolism probably emerged out of an awareness of the liberation from the restrictions of traditional associations created by the Symbolists and a recognition of the value of a unique set of symbols to a poet, like himself, relying so heavily on traditional forms. Some of the symbols Merrill chose—stone, the color green, angels, waves, fire—are both part of tradition and part of the symbolism unique to Stevens. Merrill liked the imaginative flexibility these particular symbols allowed Stevens, and so adapted them to his own poetic universe.

If Stevens made a significant contribution to Merrill’s contact with the Symbolists in poetry, Henry James and Marcel Proust (for whom Merrill had an enduring affection) made as great a contribution to his contact with the Symbolists in prose. The later novels of James (with which Merrill was intimately familiar) through their architectonic sentence structure and labyrinthine development of consciousness on the part of the protagonist, represent that novelist’s artistic sensibility modulated by the symbolist movement. As James’s biographer Leon Edel explains it, “the writer attempting to create the illusion of a mind flowing with thought and image and impression turns to the symbolist poet.” 21 In the last of his three “periods,” Henry James turned energetically to the symbolist technique. Both Edel and Stephen Spender (in an early essay incorporated into The Destructive Element) cite the pagoda passage in The Golden Bowl as evidence of James’s creation of a formal emotional and intellectual complex which exemplifies the symbolist theory of associational evocation of emotion. Merrill’s first novel, The Seraglio, is just about as Jamesian as it could be: his characters function in a highly structured, stylized, and complex emotional atmosphere and social arrangement; his language is fraught with compressions of emotional and intellectual symbolism; his imaginative characterization of Lily Buchanan reminds one strongly of the precocious, troubled, intense young heroine of What Maisie Knew.
Proust’s technique of compressing fragments of objects observed into symbols for an interior life of emotion and feelings, attracted Merrill with its facile and intense craftsmanship. Merrill’s choices of image, his concept of the artist and artistic creation, and the philosophical ideas behind his poems demonstrate a sensibility honed by and indebted to Proust. Both Merrill and Proust use the image of a mirror and its power of reflection and distortion repeatedly in their work: Proust, in Le Temps Retrouvé, wishes very much to become a mirror in order to write well; Merrill, in “Mirror,” actually becomes one, as his personified mirror speaks to a window on the opposite wall. Both Proust and Merrill persistently equate art and life in their works. Indeed their spokespersons (Bergotte, a central character in Proust; “The Victor Dog” in Merrill’s poem) insist that “art is life” because it can protect one from the elements like a heavy suit of clothes. Clothed in language both painterly and harmonic, Merrill, like Proust, consummates the aesthetics of symbolist imagery and technique. The influence of Proust in a poem like “The Broken Bowl” in First Poems is quite clear. Merrill’s own bowl with its “opal signature of imperfection” and “splendid curvings of glass artifice” recall the “nacre opaline” in Proust’s work. That bowl represents the condition of breaking over in time from illusion to reality. And again, one recognizes in Merrill a version of the novelist’s general lapidary effects in his work.

Merrill has spoken of the influence of Henry James on his work, especially in questions of taste and manners. His limitation of subject matter reflects very similar instincts:

We all have our limits. I draw the line at politics or hippies. I’d rather present the world through, say, a character’s intelligence or lack of it than through any sort of sociological prism.

Merrill also eschews the ersatz and the tasteless in the same ways that James did:

In writing a novel or poem of manners you provide a framework all the nicer for being more fallible, more hospitable to irony, self-expression, self-contradiction, than many a philosophical or sociological system. Manners for me are the touch of nature, an artifice in the very
bloodstream . . . They are as vital as all appearance.”

And Merrill acknowledges his obligation to Proust in his wish for deference between writer and reader: “The real triumph of manners in Proust is the extreme courtesy toward the reader, the voice explaining at once formally and intimately.”

If Merrill learned subtlety of tone and manner, complexity of attitude and device, and respect and facility for symbolism from Stevens, from James, and from Proust, he learned still more from the Metaphysical poets. It would be impossible to say how much of his initial interest in the Metaphysicals came from Elinor Wylie, who has been called “the daughter of Donne” by Herman Gorman in an essay on the relation of her “Sonnet VII” to Donne’s “Aire and Angells.” The technical emblem poems, of which Donne and George Herbert were especially fond, constitute almost a sub-genre in Merrill’s early work. One of Merrill’s most contrived poems, “Part of the Vigil,” in The Fire Screen would fit quite comfortably in an anthology of Metaphysical poems containing sustained conceits. The stichic organization describes the penetration and exploration of the chambers in a lover’s heart. In brief, the speaker in the poem “shrinking to enter, did.” An elaborate description of the heart’s internal landscape with “Names, dates, political slogans, lyrics/ Football scores, obscenities too, scrawled/ Everywhere dense as lace” leads to the poem’s climax. The speaker looks down into the aortic valve’s bloody and muscularly insistent motion, crying, “what if my effigy were down there? What/ Dear god, if it were not?” The poem evokes Donne’s “The Legacy,” which depends upon an extended conceit of lover’s exchanging hearts. The marvelous quality of Merrill’s poem, its casually colloquial lines piercing directly to the heart of the matter, extends the metaphysical conceit to its most satiric limit.
Merrill resembles Marvell too, with his use of philosophic subjects and themes, colloquial intimacy, and the unexpectedness of image with a characteristic classicism and restraint. In the middle sketch of “Three Sketches for Europa,” in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, Merrill uses the same octosyllabic couplets for satiric emphasis that were a favorite of Marvell:

The white bull chased her. Others said  
All interest vanished. Anyhow, she fled,

Her mantle’s flowing border torn  
To islands by the Golden Horn,

. . . . . . . . .

The god at last indifferent  
And she no longer chaste but continent.

There is, in this poem, a brilliant juxtaposition of classical and Christian myth and a sarcastic reversal of Goldsmith’s famous phrase where those “who come to pray remain to scoff.”

These characteristics that Merrill’s poetry shares with other twentieth-century writers—the use he has made of the Metaphysical mode, the standards of artistic aspiration that he adopted from James and Proust—contribute to a unique posture that retains a traditional style even as it reflects a contemporary sensibility. Merrill’s poetry asserts and reasserts the possibility of recapturing, even recovering in a limited fashion, the social crutches that make the anguish of living (what he calls “the sickness of our time,”) more tolerable. The underlying irony in his poetry reveals, however, that imposing order and form on language will do little to improve life. “Art is art,” he says, “The life it asks of us is a dog’s life.” Still, Merrill uses that irony to his thematic advantage by purposefully continuing to pursue the timeless affirmation of the creative act.
Merrill’s early fame rested primarily on his poetry, developed by imagination as much as by imitation. So, it is useful to look to his experiments in prose, which span the twelve most methodically progressive years of his early career, for a fuller understanding of how his personal poetic ideology emerged. These include “The Bait,” a play produced by the Artist’s Theater of New York City in 1953, and published in 1960; “The Immortal Husband,” a second play, produced off-Broadway in 1955, and published in 1956; The Seraglio, an autobiographical first novel published in 1957; and The (Diblos) Notebook, a second novel published in 1965. The rapid growth in Merrill’s perceptions of character, his sophistication of technique, and the radical changes in stylistic form from First Poems to Water Street require an explanation that cannot simply be attributed to his experience of writing poems. There are not enough poems to account for the alterations; thus his prose for both stage and page become essential elements to assist in tracing his growth and development in verse.

“The Bait,” a queer little one act play, is almost entirely devoid of characterization and setting, except for the brief opening description and a few stage directions. One would hardly know (possibly not even care) that the action takes place in Venice and the Gulf Stream. The play owes much to Donne’s poem of 1633 beyond simply its title. The language and situation of Merrill’s play, an extended fishing metaphor for love’s precious catch (“casting about,” “sounding for motives,” baiting each other as well as their hooks) dramatizes Donne’s poem. “The Bait” of 1633 was Donne’s reply to Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love,” and substituted the world of fishermen for the pastoral world of the shepherd:

Come live with me, and be my love,  
And we will some new pleasures prove  
Of golden sands, and crystal brooks,  
With silken lines, and silver hooks.
The variety of double meaning in “silken lines” and “silver hooks” must have been an irresistible attraction to the young Merrill.

In the play four characters talk among themselves in language more like verse than prose. The dialogue between Julie, her brother Gilbert, and her fiancé John fills a summer afternoon in Venice with attempts to understand why Charles, Julie’s husband, has left; or why, as Julie claims, she has left him. It is not entirely clear that Charles has left, nor that he wants to leave Julie. Indeed, a neat third of the play flashes back to another afternoon, some weeks before, when Charles, present then on the stage, insists upon being hooked to a fishing line on their boat out from the piazza in Venice. From the opening lines of the play several things are clear though: that Julie lacks not only understanding but the ability to understand; that Gilbert goes everywhere with and does everything for Julie—chooses her husband and discards him—with a sort of fatal understanding of what he does; that John is beginning to understand everything but doesn’t particularly wish to; and that Charles understands everything perfectly. It seems a very clever, ironic amplification of bait and switch.

Understanding, or the lack of it, seems to be a key to the play. Merrill would have his audience see that, like the lady love in Donne’s subtly cynical poem, Julie is “at one with [her] bait” because she has been hooked by Gilbert, a master fisherman, in order to catch Charles. In Donne’s poem the lady love “thyself art thine own bait,” while Julie asserts: “You brought Charles home. You said we should/ make a perfect match.” To which Gilbert replies: “Well haven’t you? Of course you have. Charles/ was a catch.” Julie, it appears, has cooperated as the bait because she longs to see beneath the surface of things, to have a deeper understanding of her role in this complicated set of relationships. She long “to dive down/ Discover, bring back whatever it is, the black/ Pearl, the sense of whatever I am.” After Julie has “caught” Charles,
she uses him to fish for that understanding she knows lies underneath. When she fails with Charles, she arranges for Gilbert to throw him, quite literally, back into the sea. And as the play unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that Julie is presently angling for John, in the hope that he will bring her understanding.

Julie, in her earliest lines to John about the incident when Charles is baited on Gilbert’s hook, claims that “it is less real now that someone other than myself has failed to understand it.” John replies to her, but only at the close of the play, after he has begun to understand despite her explanations. John finally confesses: “I don’t ask for an explanation. What matters is that you be able to explain it to yourself.” These philosophical intricacies of argument in Merrill’s play do not, however, prevent the audience from understanding what lies beneath. In the simplest of terms, the young playwright exposes the contemporary romantic experience as a kind of subtle, if unnatural, recreation. Merrill’s choice of Donne’s poem as source for metaphor and method of representation reflects his own sympathies with the Metaphysical poets and their desire to remain at a distance from the source of feeling as language will permit.

The technical elements in Merrill’s play, “The Bait,” contrive to distance the playwright as much as his reliance on Donne’s poem. Instead of dialogue that imitates speech, Merrill uses dialogue that imitates poetry—that is poetry. Much of the written text is set off in pentameter lines, each line’s initial word capitalized as in traditional poetic notation. The effects are like T.S. Eliot’s verse drama where actors appear to be reciting poetry at one another but for the curious juxtaposition throughout the play of lines which resemble ordinary speech and lines of rhyming, metrical, even stanzaic structure. Merrill has undertaken an experiment with conversation that will, in later years, give his poems their characteristic linguistic distinctiveness. And he takes the exercise even further by using poetic forms to enhance the contrasts in characters.

Gilbert enters
in the first scene uttering dactylic meter—which trips suddenly and lightly down the stage (or page, as the case may be)—with Julie rounding out his lines:

Gilbert:       O! Ben trovato! Ah! Flirting at Florian’s!
             My sweet little sister is beautifully bad!
             Come with me, cara, we’ll go in a gondola!
             Gondoliere!
Julia:   Gilbert, you’re mad!

The dactylic lines and the persistent silly rhyming upon his first entrance reinforce our later impression of Gilbert as a very likeable fellow who “makes everybody laugh.” In contrast John’s speeches, sometimes soliloquies set in stanza patterns, often seem like curious bits of philosophical observation by someone who takes everything very seriously:

John:       For myself I do not enjoy living by the sea. I find a warm climate corrupting.
             Here in this sweetness I am not quite at ease.
             I should prefer Venice in winter
             All flooded and misted and emptied, fixed in a frown,
             To this lax glitter, this warm loose life
             Of drifting palaces and uprooted foreigners.

By the play’s conclusion, a singular abstractness in the exchange between the actors appears both on the page and to the ear as unmistakably poetic in its subject and imagery.

John (to himself):  Now for the first time it is strangely myself I feel
                     Endangered. The lover may not be the loser.
                     I should not care to win at her expense.

Charles (to himself):  No matter what the lines were baited with,
                     The prize was that the fisherman could spare
                     Themselves the knowledge I am weighted with.

Once the dialogue has become poetry we are left with the impression that the play’s effects are primarily linguistic not visual. And though I have not seen it performed, I imagine that I would feel the same way viewing the play as reading it. Little of the play’s imaginative substance exists outside the spoken lines. The stage direction calls for a spare setting, “a suggestion of the
Piazza.” The actors are very nearly limited in movement to entrances and exits (and even those seem to coincide with lights up or down). So, the lack of dramatic form and abundance of poetic language, encourage a reading of the play as a kind of contemporary version of Donne.

The play, whatever its similarities of theme and imagery to Donne’s poem, does not finally resemble much of Merrill’s own poems before or after it. This unexpected circumstance leads to a few conclusions about the experiment. First, Merrill had been writing the elaborate, stylized verse of First Poems just before he began “The Bait.” And so the play coincided with some blank verse monologues. The population in First Poems (and in the second volume, Short Stories) is either mythical or abstract or outrageous—Cupid and Psyche, Midas, Medusa, a “drowning poet,” a child, a fiddler—and fairly inarticulate. Merrill must have felt that the dramatic mode would lend itself most readily to an attempt to experiment with dialogue and characterization. Still, his primary concern was with language and how it appears to the eye. Consequently, the play functions not so much as an exercise in playwriting as a means of learning to manipulate the dialogue and character smoothly in verse, and of producing more dramatic elements in his poems. Second, and no less important, (because of the forgiving genre) Merrill consciously experiments in “The Bait” with the sound of poetic language, tone in particular, in a freer way than he does in his poems. So that, “The Bait” becomes a stratagem for realizing his awakening interest in looser forms, in greater intimacy of subject matter, and in a shorter distance between poet and reader.

Though Merrill is beginning to relax stylistically by the middle of the 1950’s, his move toward a more personal subject matter is diverted temporarily by an interest in myth, a popular topic in poetry at the time. The poems in The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace reflect this pursuit of myth. But “The Immortal Husband,” which dramatizes the myth of Tithonus and
Aurora, explores much more fully the narrative, thematic, and symbolic possibilities for representing human experience and feeling through mythic analogues, “convenient expressions of profound human laws.” In “The Immortal Husband” Merrill confronts the most mysterious and inevitable conditions of human existence, aging and death. He feels and fears these two conditions deeply: his intimate and cherished friend and fellow poet, Hans Lodeizen, has died of leukemia in his twenty-fifth year; his father would die shortly, a victim of an old, much abused heart; his own homosexuality makes him especially aware and apprehensive about the effects of aging on his attractiveness in a gay lifestyle. As a playwright, Merrill can write and talk about this fear in an impersonal way, developing and embellishing a mythical situation.

The traditional story of Tithonus and Aurora probes our most fundamental responses to love, to age, and to death. Tithonus, a young man beloved by the goddess of the dawn, has through her pleas to Zeus been granted immortality. However, Aurora neglects to ask that Tithonus have eternal youth as well. So, Tithonus eventually grows very old and frail, but without the hope of death. Sensing his reproach and feeling disgusted with herself for the omission, Aurora at first shuts him away so only his voice can be heard—finally turning him into a grasshopper in a gesture of pity.

Merrill sets his version of the myth at an English country house in 1854, when Tithonus is eighteen and grieving bitterly for his mother who has just died. It was an interesting choice of year for the playwright since that particular time was full of medical and chemical discoveries that would extend the quality of life for mankind. The other characters in the first act of “The Immortal Husband” are divided between mythic figures and creations quite particular to Merrill. Tithonus is joined by his father, Laomedon; Aurora, his beloved; Mrs. Mallow, a housekeeper for Laomedon and surrogate mother to Tithonus; and young maid and her suitor; the gardener,
John. Tithonus, suspended between youth—which doesn’t really understand about life and death and grief but speaks as if it does—and age—which knows all those things and so does not speak at all. Death brings about the best instincts in the older characters, Laomedon and Mrs. Mallow. But, alas, it brings out the worst in young Tithonus. He fights against the changes which his mother’s death requires, quarrels blindly with his stricken but resigned father, and determines to abandon his social, cultural, and familial roots to wander the earth with Aurora.

When Aurora enters, half-way through Act I, obviously forgetting (or choosing to ignore) that the family is in mourning, she encourages Tithonus to renounce his humanity and its burden of individual and collective responsibilities. She tells him of her gift to him of immortality. And after a momentary confusion, he discovers that eternal youth is not part of the gift. In the brief scene which follows this revelation, Tithonus reaches a level of understanding that even his own mother’s death had not produced. He recognizes that death and decay will touch his own body. He comprehends as well that eternal life, not death, will be his greatest fear. He is condemned to live forever with an immortal goddess who cannot share nor understand that fear.

Acts II and III take place forty and then a hundred years later: in 1894 on a mountain slope in Russia and, in 1954, on the lawn of Tithonus and Aurora’s home in America. In the second act, when Tithonus is nearly sixty and Aurora (still young and beautiful, of course) is pregnant with their son, the aging but immortal husband realizes, with painful irony, the hopelessness of his condition, and longs for the stability of a home and roots. The three Russians who find him painting a landscape on the mountain side—Olga Vassilyevna, her godson Konstantin, and his fiancé Fanya—represent all the choices that Tithonus has lost to his immortal condition. Olga, clearly suffering from a fatal disease, has far more life and hope than Tithonus. Konstantin, a Nihilist, has far more sensitivity to his fellow man, more sympathy for the painful
human experience, more curiosity about his destiny than Tithonus ever had. Fanya has lived all her life in her father’s house, in the village below the mountain, comfortably rooted in the local traditions. This act reveals that Tithonus has learned very little in his wanderings with the goddess Aurora. Moreover, in gaining immortality he has been cursed with Aurora’s fate and can no longer feel.

By the third act of “The Immortal Husband,” Tithonus is completely helpless and must be cared for constantly by Enid, his young nurse. The action in the concluding scenes focuses on a middle-aged Memnon’s return to visit his father Tithonus on the occasion of the old man’s birthday. Memnon is the only genuine adult in the family and, certainly, the closest to a real person. Aurora is slightly embarrassed by her pompous and awkward son, who looks a great deal older than herself (and is). Tithonus, alas, has passed the point where such recognition is possible. As the play ends, Aurora has engaged another, and curiously sinister, Nurse to watch over Tithonus, while she amuses herself with Enid’s charming husband, Mark.

Its highly developed plot, complexity of characterization, maturity and naturalness of dialogue, and period setting display how far Merrill has come in “The Immortal Husband” from the sparseness of “The Bait” just a few years earlier. What the two plays share is Merrill’s determination, in Richard Howard’s terms, “to explore the directions by which he might best work himself out of the lysis into which First Poems had brought him: the direction of prose narrative and the direction of characterized speech.” What “The Bait” merely attempts, “The Immortal Husband” achieves. In the second play, Merrill skillfully interweaves the legendary events of Tithonus’s and Aurora’s lives and quite ordinary human activities. In the first act their talk of immortality and its adventures is undercut by the actions of Laomedon, Mrs. Mallow, and Jeannie who are carefully sorting, repairing, and packing the personal belongings of Tithonus’s
dead mother. While “The Bait” has little action outside the poetic dialogue, “The Immortal Husband” celebrates mundane human existence with activities like pruning a tree, having a picnic, painting a picture, knitting a scarf. In fact, these very activities and the simple pleasures connected with them emphasize what Tithonus has really given up.

Furthermore, the characters in “The Immortal Husband” not only perform these activities with all the care and detail of real people, but they share literally and acutely in one another’s feelings and experiences. That is, except for the two mythic figures of Tithonus and Aurora, the actors in the play repeat the same characters from one act to the next though their names and relative stations change with the times: Mrs. Mallow matures into Olga, and Olga into Nurse; the little maid becomes Fanya, and Fanya yields to Enid; the gardener, John, blossoms into Konstantin, and Konstantin into Mark. Even Memnon seems a contemporary American version of his grandfather Laomedon. In an interview some years ago Merrill explained that the doubling of the characters in “The Immortal Husband” provides “a unity that Aristotle knew about but never bothered to mention: the unity of the performer.”

By doubling the characters, Merrill supplies “The Immortal Husband” with a consistent set of values—a sort of yardstick—against which we can measure Tithonus’s gradual transformation into an aged and bitter, if wiser, personality. The other characters themselves even remind Tithonus of their familiarity with him. On their first meeting in Act II, after she has conducted an amazingly presumptuous conversation with Tithonus, Olga exclaims:

Dear Friend, forgive me. It’s as if we had known each other before in a different life. Think of me as laughing for joy to have found you once again.

Indeed, Olga, who speaks with the wisdom of age and imminent death, has been echoing in her conversation the motherly admonitions of Mrs. Mallow, whose middle-aged complacence and
personal contact with death—it was she, after all, who cared for Tithonus’s dying mother—had appeared both to comfort and to frighten the young Tithonus. In addition, Olga’s station in life, which is not quite familial and not quite servile, is very like that of Mrs. Mallow. Tithonus himself acknowledges the familiar in Olga, and a human memory stirs briefly within him:

Yes, it is so . . . I have no defenses. I feel an extraordinary ease, as though something clogged had been set running again, a stopped watch shaken and set running . . .

In the compound figure of the gardener John/Kosantin/Mark, whose affair with a young woman develops from flirtation (with the maid Jeannie in I), through engagement (with Fanya in II), to marriage (with Enid in III). Merrill carefully contrives a personality (utterly unlike Tithonus) who is comfortable with his own mortality, but nevertheless increasingly infatuated with the goddess Aurora’s youth and beauty. From the beginning of the play, this character expresses disapproval of both Tithonus’s melancholy aspect and his future with Aurora. John’s exchange with the little maid is as simplistic and immature as Tithonus and the undeveloped relationship being described:

Gardener, philosophizing: We’re all of us going to die, so cheer up! It’s not so bad!
Maid: Cheer up, John! What a thing to say!
Gardener: What is bad’s the way the young master takes it. Mooning and moping—as if that changed anything.
Maid: I think the young master’s feeling is beautiful and right.
Gardener: It’s too beautiful. He keeps standing off and admiring it, like he was painting a picture. No, [Looking upward] he’s not the one she ought to have.

By the second act, when the aging Tithonus is truly painting a picture (and John has become Konstantin), the younger man criticizes the lack of reality and purposefulness in the
painted landscape of the distant village seen through autumn leaves that Tithonus attempts.

“There are only the dimmest traces left on your canvas,” Konstantin tells Tithonus, ”a few odd shapes, a few drab colors.” Konstantin is appalled: “The village is real! There is an inn and a blacksmith, there are dogs, men, living dying! All this is hidden away—behind leaves!”

Konstantin, who does not search for experience but finds it all around him, is the opposite of Tithonus, who imagines that life must be everywhere else. The aging Tithonus still doesn’t really see much beyond himself; immortality has given him as much to curse as mortality might have done. When Aurora arrives, as the second act closes, Konstantin marvels (as John did in Act I) at her charm, her beauty, and her connection to the cynical and elderly Tithonus.

By the last act—when Tithonus has reached oblivion of a sort and Aurora, despite her love, cannot endure him—Mark emerges as the perfect combination of John’s pragmatism and Konstantin’s fierce realism. He encourages Aurora to run away from the responsibilities she’s taken up with an aging husband and a mortal son. This action produces an ironic circular plot since it was Aurora who, in Act I, encouraged the young Tithonus to abandon his human responsibilities and accompany her. Mark, however, remains very much a creature of, and keeper of, the natural human world. He wants nothing whatever to do with immortality. On the contrary, it is clear that the pleasures of living are keener and sweeter to Mark because he will one day cease to enjoy them. Mark is no more afraid of dying than he is of living. So different from Tithonus who, we have already been told by Mrs. Mallow’s perceptive analysis in the first act, is afraid of both.

Merrill, a thorough poet as well as dramatist, cannot resist making the contrast between the characters of Tithonus and John/Konstantin/Mark more subtly complex and at the same time more overt through the use of symbol. The central natural symbol in “The Immortal Husband” is
an apple tree, which serves to unify and to illuminate not only the characters but also the themes of the play which are contained within the characters’ interactions. Merrill chooses the apple tree with the intention of superimposing the Christian myth of the temptation of man by woman (or evil or both) onto the classical myth of Aurora and Tithonus.

Aurora has first seen Tithonus (before the play opens) in the apple tree “through the blossoms, reaching with a blossom in his mouth.” She compares their blossoming love to the developing, branching, maturing apple tree which she regards as a mirror of her own loveliness. Something is wrong with the apple tree though: mistletoe is killing it. When John, the gardener, and Laomedon discuss the parasite mistletoe the older man confesses that he is “tempted to let it grow, just the same” because it was such a favorite of his wife, recently dead. But, as he has managed to overcome a natural desire to preserve those articles of clothing and jewelry which remind him of his dead wife, so also Laomedon finally resists the sentimental impulse to preserve the mistletoe—and allows the apple tree to thrive.

This early episode foreshadows the action and characters as the play reaches a climax. The complicated relationship between Aurora, the incarnate apple tree, and Tithonus, her parasitic mate, resolves itself in the play when the aging husband is removed so that the goddess can continue to thrive. Aurora’s final impulse for self-preservation is not all that different from Laomedon’s. They both cut off the choking impulse toward sentiment. And, in both cases, not in spite of their love for their mates but because of it.

The apple tree and its thematic significance in “The Immortal Husband” parallels Merrill’s own impulse to stifle the sentimental in his work so that it cannot either obscure reality nor overpower it. Merrill used myth occasionally in *First Poems* and *Short Stories* to support a theme or an image, but rarely to create one. In “The Immortal Husband” he has begun to use a
layering technique of myth on contemporary scenes or events which will reach its culmination in the three levels of “From the Cupola” (the brilliant and wise anchor poem of *Nights and Days*). This, along with opportunities to use colloquial language and idiom, will produce a poem where the Cupid and Psyche myth, the modern day, and his own peculiar experience (of receiving letters from an unknown person who appears to know rather a lot about him) are superimposed one onto another, then shuffled like cards, into an extended poetic trope on love, and life, and loss.

“The Immortal Husband” led Merrill inexorably toward the abyss of real feeling. In the play he made a half-hearted stab at capturing his father, Charles Merrill, a complicated man with several wives and different lives of preposterous successes in business and in society. But mythologizing only intensified and contained Merrill’s wish to expose the anger and frustration with their relationship which he was just beginning to confront in his creative universe. Until Merrill could write real human characters, he could not escape his own personal limitations—that desire to eliminate every vestige of the vulgar, the natural, the *real* which required his willingness to explore those difficult attributes in an imaginative way. So, in his first novel *The Seraglio* (1958), Merrill mingles triumph with tragedy by extending his own personal and artistic relationship to the “immortal husband” as an archetype. Benjamin Tanning, the patriarch of the family in the novel, is a thinly disguised and vaguely sympathetic portrait of Merrill’s father. This characterization and the drama which animates the entire novel, mark a significant turning point in Merrill’s life and his life’s work. *The Seraglio* embodies, for Merrill and his work, the ultimate creative paradox: getting to truth through fiction, and to one’s own truth by creating a fiction to explore it. Enid Tanning Buchanan in *The Seraglio*—who is as much a layered
character as any in “The Immortal Husband”—explains the fact of life to her younger brother, Francis Tanning. Pain, she says, “teaches us what we can’t avoid.”

Merrill had been avoiding a confrontation with his father, and consequently with himself, through several books of poems and two plays. The hard, bright, impenetrable verse in First Poems and Short Stories, the playful picturesqueness of “The Bait” and “The Immortal Husband” simply had to yield to the pressure of a refining sensibility—and did. Merrill was growing up in The Seraglio along with his fictional counterpart, Francis Tanning. But more important, he was outgrowing the sensitivity to the real which had glazed his vision and his work. In the novel, Francis Tanning cannot at first visualize himself as an adult because he has stood too long in his father’s shadow:

He had little sense of how he sounded or looked. Years went by before he accepted that his voice had changed. And, while a good head taller than his father, taller even than Larry Buchanan by a few inches, he invariably saw himself as littler than anyone else—children and dwarfs aside.

Francis Tanning calls himself a “unique,” the keeper of his father Benjamin’s seraglio. His brother-in-law Larry Buchanan, who is in charge of Enid’s and Francis’s fortunes in more ways than one, explains to him that as Benjamin Tanning’s child (heir to all that is at Tanning-Burr, a mammoth business enterprise), he is exceedingly wealthy and in a “virtually unique position” to help other people. That is the problem, of course: the unique position is not only unbearably uncomfortable for Francis, it is unnatural because he cannot help himself, much less anyone else.

A brief description of the structure of The Seraglio might put Francis, and Merrill’s relation to him, in perspective. The novel covers precisely one year’s time. It opens with a retelling of events on the day preceding Lily Buchanan’s tenth birthday (she is niece to Francis); it closes on the same day a year later. It is primarily a “coming of age” novel for Lily and for Francis. She reaches puberty and makes some fairly important discoveries about her mother. He reaches
“puberty” too in a way—having put it off rather a long time—and makes some fairly important discoveries about himself.

The extremely complicated plot divides neatly into three parts. In part I, Francis Tanning, in his twenties and at loose ends, knocks about Italy on a sort of holiday. Mostly the holiday is from his father, Ben Tanning, possessor of an enormous investment firm and possessed by a rapacious libido (already thrice married and working on a fourth). At the same time, Francis attempts to escape from himself too, by refusing to be recognized in Rome as his father’s son. When an old business associate of Ben Tanning turns up, Francis insists when he is introduced that “there is no relation.” The young man’s problem is basically money—but in his case having it rather than not. Francis feels, in fact, completed disabled by his good fortune. He pleads for his freedom in a short speech which exposes not only his own feelings but the entire thematic foundation for *The Seraglio*:

> I don’t want the power that goes with money. It’s a crippling power; whoever uses it is at the mercy of it. No freedom goes with it. One’s forever being watched and plotted against, or else protected from the very things that don’t do harm! One’s never in a position to find out what’s real and what isn’t—with the result that nothing’s real, nothing in the whole world is real.

He wants “to be free, to really have a chance at life.” Instead, his rakish father is living it up—and Francis is living it down.

At bottom, though, the problem is not simply the power of money, but the power of sex as well. And that, it appears, Ben Tanning has taken from Francis by giving him everything else. Francis returns home from Europe in a hopeless state. He laments that he can never be “fatherless, empty-handed, real” because he is doomed by what he has—which he thinks is the money. But at the close of part I, he has found a way to dissociate himself from his father. He will become less a son by castrating himself in a warm bath. Naturally, everyone around Francis expresses shock at
what he has done, and assumes that he castrates himself because he wants to die. But, of course, he does it because he wants to live. Not for nothing does Francis refer to himself as a “unique.”

Part I ends on this shocked note; Part II opens on a series of indiscreet ones. The scene has shifted to Jamaica and to various petty intrigues (involving some love letters) among the ladies of Ben Tanning’s seraglio. At first, Tanning is only upset by the intrigues because they complicate business matters. But genuine tragedy—the untimely death of the charming if ineffective husband of one of the members of Ben’s seraglio—brings out all his better instincts. Francis, who is in analysis, is little moved by his father’s change of heart since he is fairly caught up in his own. He has taken over a small apartment which appears white but soiled around the edges. And he has a couple of kindred spirits through the Ouija Board: Meno, a “familiar” spirit from that other world of automatic writing; Marcello, a friendly spirit from his slightly shadowy world of homosexuality. Francis is far more enthusiastic about the other/next world than he ever was about this one: “Our lives are not ends but means,” he explains to himself. And that “the other world is real.” He is almost pathetically relieved of the former frustration he’s felt: “I’m like a philosopher in his bath; all the hatred, all the fear has been let out of me, as by an opened vein, painlessly.”

Part II closes with an elaborate and extended description of “Orpheus,” a new opera by Thomas Utter, a friend of a friend of Francis. The opera seems no more dramatic than the scene being played in the box that Francis occupies with his friends. Indeed, when the curtain rises on the underworld in the second act of “Orpheus,” the opera and the audience are one:

Before them, beyond the glowing apron of the stage, could be distinguished the lights and boxes of a theater so like their own that a vast mirror might have been set up inside the proscenium. The view being from the vantage of the stage itself, hence unfamiliar to most, heightened the illusion.

And this was Hell.
Merrill was especially enamoured of this spectacle, the theater of Hell. He continues to rehearse the opera’s action for two more pages. This passage ultimately becomes—in a vastly compressed form, which magically loses none of its elegant lyricism or dramatic effect—“Orpheo,” one of the most attractive and moving poems in Merrill’s next book, *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace.*

When Part III opens, the scene shifts again, this time from Hell to a little Eden. Lily Buchanan has arrived at the Hotel Eden, Rome, with her parents. She disposes of a little gold ring (which Francis had given her) there, and disposes of her childish illusions as well. Francis had disposed of his ring and illusions the Christmas before; but Lily was still not up to facing the truth about things then. Now, in Rome, she is smitten with confessions and tells her mother the unspeakable and unspoken act she performed the day before her birthday the year before (on the day the novel opens): she slashed a portrait of her mother. Enid knew all along, of course, that Lily had done the damage. The mother and daughter are not miraculously reunited by this confession, though, since they are already excellent friends. But it does relieve a certain tension for the reader to have the parallel established: Lily slashed the portrait freeing herself from the parent bond to her mother; Francis slashed himself to achieve a similar kind of freedom from a parent bond to his father.

Francis meanwhile is contriving to win his own mother, Vinnie, second wife of Benjamin, back into Ben’s seraglio. When Vinnie agrees to visit the Tanning home again briefly for the christening of another little boy, new grandson for Ben, Francis congratulates himself as the successful artist of a new drama, “The Prodigal Mother.” Vinnie, however, refuses to be wooed by the luxury of a place in that house; and the hoped for drama dissolves into an awkward little scene. As *The Seraglio* closes, Francis has joined Lily (and a group of her little friends
assembled for her birthday celebration) in a game of hide and seek. Lily is at first aghast and then delighted, exclaiming: “Uncle Francis is It . . . if he wants to play he has to be It.” And that pretty much explains everything for the reader as well as for Francis. In order to play at the game of life, in order to seek out and be sought out in companionship, in order to enjoy selfhood, Francis has to be It:

He was It. He tentatively said so the first time, then once more with an exquisite tremor of the conviction: ‘I am It.’ The words carried with them wondrous notions of selflessness, of permanence. His father coughed behind him in the house. The children trembled against the sea. He knew the expression on his own face. The entire world was real.

Richard Howard dismissed The Seraglio as perverse.30 Perhaps it is perverse, but that doesn’t necessarily make it less honest. It follows quite naturally in the pattern that Merrill has established of designing his life in his work. The Seraglio may not have offered many answers, but it does suggest at least one important question. One evening with his father, Francis asks himself, prompted by his strange discomfort around women (despite the example Ben Tanning sets): “there would be no child?” It is Merrill’s question too; and it took more than twenty years to answer. In time, the answer is provoked by his mother, not his father, when in “Up and Down,” Braving the Elements (1972) she offers him an emerald ring: “For when you marry. For your bride. It’s yours.” And Merrill replies in that poem:

I do not tell her, it would sound theatrical,  
Indeed this green room’s mine, my very life.  
We are each other’s; there will be no wife;  
The little feet that patter here are metrical.

In The Seraglio Merrill has begun to find the way to truth through fiction. He has recognized himself in the character of Francis, in the fullest sense. He has seen himself.

“The Bait” and “The Immortal Husband” allow Merrill to experiment with spoken dialogue; The Seraglio allows him to experiment with written dialogue. In these genre
experiments, the experiences of dramatist and of novelist led him to a more natural speech in his poems. First, the personae in the poems become less ornate and more human, and talk to the reader instead of at him. Second, Merrill’s poetic line becomes looser, freer, more colloquial—again, more like a poet talking to his reader than like a poet talking to himself. Some of the poems written after these genre experiments are almost a compromise with prose, because the once taut, formal stanzas (especially by the time of Water Street) threaten more often than not to break into the fluid line of prose narrative. Merrill has learned how to tell a story, his own story, charmingly and naturally: “If I am host at last,” he writes in Water Street, “It is of little more than my own past./ May others be at home in it.”

In the 1950’s Merrill experimented with prose in order to make poems out of it, to make poems out of his prose. In The (Diblos) Notebook (1975), almost ten years later, he is making a novel out of his poems. For a number of years, Merrill had been keeping yearly notebooks, dated and written in almost daily, of impressions and images for his poems. The (Diblos) Notebook replicates the form of one of those notebooks, possibly is one of those notebooks. Merrill explained in an interview that he was keeping a journal at the same time he began to write this novel:

I had a story in mind several years before I found myself writing the book. During that time I had no idea how to write it, though I made a few conventional beginnings. Then, one summer, when I’d been traveling in Greece, unable to do any real work, I kept a journal. But whenever I tried to interject any of those impressions into my conventional narrative, they went dead on me. The notebook itself, though, still seemed comparatively full of life. It took a while to realize that this was a possible technique and to use it. When the writer in The (Diblos) Notebook describes his proposed novel, the plans and background are, in fact, precisely the plans and background of the author, James Merrill:

I should have made some sort of scheme to refer to. This is my 1st long piece of work, & the problems it raises are new & different
from those of short stories (the single mood or action), yet I keep imagining, wrongly perhaps, that, once I arrive at the right ‘tone,’ the rest will follow.

“Short stories” perhaps also refers to Merrill’s own book of poems by that name. The problem of sustaining tone to unify the fictional work has always been a central concern for Merrill. The layering of characters becomes a feature of this work too: the writer of the notebook (who is and is not James Merrill) claims to be preparing a fiction—The Notebook—a novel about his half-brother Orestes in Greece. In the fictional work, The Notebook, the writer is sorting out his relationship to his half-brother Orestes; while James Merrill is using this fictional notebook to sort out his own relation to his work and to the self that work displays. The (Diblos) Notebook permits Merrill to replicate, in narrative form, the elaborate process of composing a poem. It allows him to experiment with superimposing several stories and several different voices into a narrative sequence. Merrill’s own ambivalence toward his divided self and his homosexuality surfaces clearly in the sexual ambiguity and innuendo in The (Diblos) Notebook. On the Greek island of Diblos—which from a distance displays a series of hills that resemble a sleeping woman—Merrill recognizes that landscape, for him, is a major point of reference. But he also understands that his recognition and perspective are often clouded by proximity. The “Sleeping Woman” formation on Diblos dominates that landscape observed from a distance. The sleeping woman in James Merrill dominates the landscape of his life.

Merrill achieved a series of rewards from the labor of The (Diblos) Notebook. He tried a “modern” experiment in prose—as complex and compressed as a poem—which helped him modernize poetically. He wrote at length about his beloved Greece—complete with vivid landscape, sight and scent—and would ever afterward be able to evoke it with greater ease and skill. But the greatest contribution of The (Diblos) Notebook was surely Merrill’s admission after
it was finished (or perhaps even in the very act of composition) that he really didn’t care to write fiction after all. The novel wants to be a poem. Merrill had compromised with prose long enough.

There is a rare opportunity, with “Swimming by Night” in Merrill’s *Water Street* (1962) to observe the way a prose fragment can be transformed by the techniques already familiar to the practiced poet, of ellipsis and compression, into a poetic meditation.\(^{33}\) Juxtaposition of a prose passage from *The (Diblos) Notebook* reveals the exact images conjured in precisely the same words: “To swim then: one’s limbs, stippled with phosphorescence, bringing to mind—to my mind—ectoplasm, the genie conjured up out of oneself, floating & sporting, performing all that’s asked of it before it merges at last into the dark chilled bulk of its master’s body stumbling over stones to sleep.” In the poem, the swimmer becomes “astral with phosphor” and “the genie chilling bids you limp/ Heavily over stones to bed” as the poet dissolves the usual limits between poetry and prose.

“Swimming by Night” begins, not surprisingly, in the middle of things: “A light going out in the forehead/ Of the house by the ocean” signals to both reader and Merrill that he is already in deep water. Merrill must be swimming in the ocean off the coast of Greece where he spent nearly two decades living half each year. Like the doubling in the prose version of this poem, there is a double darkness of ocean and of night, “a warm black.” The swimmer is “without clothes, without caution” plunged into a kind of self-discovery. And we are going to take this slowly by degrees, the poet seems to say: “Where before/ Had been floating nothing, is a gradual body.” That body is the poet’s own, as well as his craft and body of work.

Essentially lyric in design and character, this poem, expressing subjective feeling and the personal emotions of the poet contrasts with his usual reticence. The poem is collected in *Water
Street which has long been regarded as a distinct break with the remote, symbolist, decorative patterns that dominated his earliest verse from First Poems (1951) through The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (1959). Poems in Water Street are concerned with domestic, personal, even intimate experiences: his own sickness and health, his inspiration, his imagination, his passions (for ideas and for people). Yet the formal and metrical preciseness he embraced in earlier volumes is not discarded here but blended seamlessly into a new concentration on themes of “love and loss.” The opening poem in Water Street, “An Urban Convalescence,” has been often quoted for its explicit description of this new direction that Merrill intends to take in his work: “The dull need to make some kind of house/ Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.”

“Swimming by Night” compresses several poetic themes common in Merrill. He likes to regard a poem as an opportunity to see double. So that he is both finding his psychological depth in this swim, a form of self-knowledge, and losing himself as he merges with water (or submerges his body) in dreams of escape. The poem can be read as an extended metaphor. Though the emphasis on linguistic devices supply the music as well as the meaning of poetry: with broad repetitions of initial sounds (“forehead” “feints” “fade” “floating”) and with slant-rhyme endings (“ocean” with “caution” or “feed” with “bed”). Merrill also employs the useful technique of periphrasis, talking around a subject through diction (circumlocution or indirection would be likely alternatives in prose) where stars are “feints of diamond” and one’s own reflection in water is “astral with phosphor.” Here Merrill, no longer preserves the conventional boundaries between art and life as the powerful swimmer-poet, extracts a subtle implication from the ordinary situation of a swim. Other earlier poems carried the same message, as when, in “The Drowning Poet” in First Poems Merrill explained: “to drown was the perfection of technique/ The word containing its own sense, like Time.” The ritual of immersion in language
as in water permits the poet to grasp his own senses. In “the far break/ Of waves,” with their implied waves of emotion as well, the poet is carried onward and inward at the same time. And in water, like in poetry, there is both adventure and risk where Merrill can enjoy both the actual and the imaginative dimensions at once.

In “Swimming by Night” the boundary between the surface of the water and the dissolution into it are completely erased as the poet becomes part of the ocean of life. The poet observer and the poetic image become one, and reflect each other as Merrill is reflected in the ocean’s water. Indeed, the water in this swim helps to dissolve the usual limits between the real and the imaginary for Merrill, as though water were also the poet’s element as well as language. There is a natural colloquial trace, too, in the poem’s “Wait!” that, along with feminine line endings (of one stressed and one unstressed syllable) throughout the poem, lends a modern rhythm to Merrill’s obvious command of established patterns of versification. In some ways “Swimming by Night” is about figurative language where “By this weak lamp/ The evening’s alcohol will feed” the role that language must play in any poem, but especially in this one.

If one wanted to detect Merrill’s new direction with its evident amusement in playing with language (and with his readers’ understanding of it), then “Swimming by Night” becomes a kind of exemplar. The lovely preference for keeping things in suspense, which this poem does both figuratively and literally, crowns all the other tropes. The unconscious is both on the surface of the poem and underneath. Each line resonates with meanings from myth and history, with tones and overtones of other poems (Merrill’s own and those of poets in other times and places). Finally, the “spinning globe” is Prospero’s (Shakespeare’s dramatic sorcerer in “The Tempest”) to use as much as “word” is part of “world” reassuring the reader that the “master’s
robe” of language worn here is protection against the harsh elements in the midst of a troubled life.

1 Stephen Yenser in an introduction of James Merrill’s reading for the Academy of American Poets, 1992
2 Richard Howard, *Alone with America*, 328.
3 Richard Howard, 329.
4 Donald Sheehan, interview reprinted in *The Contemporary Writer*, 140.
7 This expression in no way implies that I thought the poet was actually sick. In light of what we know now about his illness and death, it can appear so.
11 Ashley Brown’s interview in *Shenandoah* (1963), 3.
12 Merrill’s father, Charles Edward Merrill, was the thrice-married founding partner of MLPFB (Beane then)
Elinor Wylie, was thrice-married herself, very beautiful, comfortably settled, and a social butterfly who flitted at various times in her life from Philadelphia to Washington to England with her third husband, a poet-editor.
14 Ashley Brown interview, 7.
15 “An Urban Convalescence” in *Water Street*, 6
17 Sheehan interview, 143.
18 Stepanchev, 70.

19 Brown interview, 11.

20 William Van O’Connor, Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry, 76-80.


22 Marcel Proust, A L’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs.

23 Sheehan interview, 148.

24 Sheehan interview, 149.

25 “The Bait” in Artist’s Theater.


27 Richard Howard, Alone With America, 335.

28 Ashley Brown interview, 11.


30 Howard, Alone with America, 325.


32 Sheehan interview, 150.

33 “Swimming by Night” first published in 1961 in The New Yorker; collected in Water Street.
Part II: Poet in Person

Days of 1984

329 Lee Street in Iowa City

When James Merrill came to stay in our little house on Lee Street in Iowa City, November 1984, our children were toddlers of 18 months (Zachary) and 3 (Stephanie). After so many letters and phone calls between NYC/Stonington and ourselves, it was a huge relief to have things arranged for his visit to the University of Iowa for a reading. Paul and Hualing Engle, who headed the U of I International Writers Workshop, were James’s official hosts and would pay the bills, free to extend their own invitations to public and private events. The reading would be in the evening with a reception on the U of I Campus. So, I could focus on the time James would spend with us: two full days that eventually would include a breakfast at our home with University of Iowa president, James O. Freedman, who had been an English major at Harvard (muffins with blueberries from our patch) and extraordinary chat; and a dinner one evening along with my then husband, Donald Marshall, and myself alone with James. Over a dinner of pork loin roast and pears poached in port wine reduction, James had a lively discussion about his recently published trilogy, The Changing Light at Sandover with Don who, with a philosopher’s wish for dialogue and a scientist’s demand for facts, was eager to determine whether James actually believed in the Ouija board messages. And our poet insisted he did absolutely, though he felt he was only the medium through which the lessons were conveyed: “a vehicle in this cosmic carpool.” He would take little credit for content, only for form. We know from later inquiries by leading scholars, that dictations from the Ouija board often went through
multiple revisions as James honed them into a coherent message. But it seemed then to establish his complete engagement in this exercise of poetic transmission through that special wireless.

So, James and I embarked on the first of a series of visits to my homes or his [Iowa City, Wilmette, NYC, Stonington] that would continue for 20 years. But, because of the years of fairly frequent correspondence between us since my marriage, even in 1984 our personal relationship was of sufficient intimacy that JM called me his “almost perfect reader.”

With so many differences between us in age and circumstance, I had not expected James to fancy our quiet domestic life. But he was completely charmed. My two small children—we both agreed—were enchanting. James was 58. The human instinct for a child seemed only just to have occurred to him. And being captive in a household with two small children appeared for some reason to be a comfort. Though I knew it was a dramatically different experience from staying with his other friends (generally childless or with only adult children at a remote distance). James took immediately to our gentle rhythm of early supper, bath, and bedtime. He swooned over my “adaptations” of popular songs to sing at bedtime—begging me to record them before the children grew too old. He found himself reading cheerfully from *Peter Rabbit* aloud at the children’s suppertime; though he explained to the spellbound Stephe and Zach, already much impressed by their delightful “new” Uncle James, that his own childhood meals were very solitary. One was supposed to eat, probably to “dine,” with only polite table conversation and certainly not with books read aloud. It occurred to me that, of course, as a small boy often alone with his Mademoiselle at meals—but entirely without parents—he must have been quite lonely. There were dogs and puzzles, marionettes and picnics, an enormous house to explore. But these were not sufficient. James’s half-siblings were years older. And they would not become
companionable until middle-age had assuaged their differences in generation and situation to a considerable degree.

I still believe that it was the recent loss of a child suffered by some close friends—which James seemed to grieve as much as the parents must have themselves—that opened his heart and his imagination to possibilities scarcely considered before. James and I had two long evenings in my living room and his bed-sitting room (a wonderful glassed in winter porch overlooking the tall cypresses beyond our cottage garden). To share our lives and his work without interruption was our immediate objective. But before that I was to see how deliberately James intended to inhabit our home.

James was like having an angel in the house: he would sit at the piano and play Bach or imitate “The Moonlight Sonata,” in that long, slow, dramatic way that Lucia did in E.F. Benson’s books; pulled Proust from our bookshelves and read aloud; sang Cole Porter and opera arias with Stephe and me (we had a singing game at the time which included several flamboyant pieces). James was relentlessly polite though if asked by a host at his reading destination to make some (usually very) unreasonable accommodation, he could be quite self-protective. Indeed, I learned in that first visit that James, warm and open and cheerful, did have boundaries on how he was willing to spend his time—better to reread Proust than see another restored landmark. He had important landmarks of his own, and wasn’t keen on adding random ones, however much of interest to the local community. So we skipped the Amana Colonies, and James took on faith the prosperous result of an immigrant German Pietist tradition which emphasized personal piety and commitment over church hierarchy and orders.

It was during this first visit together that I began to wonder how I would organize, assemble, arrange the personal experiences that James and I had together. Our houses were a
kind of stage on which we could share feelings, as children and as adults. The brownstone in New York City blown up by a bomb blast and featured in “18 West 11th Street” as “Dear premises./ Vainly exploded, vainly dwelt upon” was of more than slight interest because it was the place to which he was taken at birth. But equally important was the enormous Stanford White designed stately home in Southampton called “The Orchard” where from his window on the second floor would emerge both “The Broken Home” and, in his favorite kind of double entendre “the unstiflement of the entire story.” Later, I would uncover the irony of “An Urban Convalescence” which was set back in the New York City of his youth but where each beautiful building was being torn down faster than anyone could “have had time to care for it.” It was no wonder to me that as a young man James had fled East instead of West. There were certain lessons in his preference for Greece with its ancient classical if crumbling monuments.

Here was my first introduction to James wanting to make sense of and to reconcile the inner and outer worlds—imagined life and real life. His immense intelligence, which I was much too young and ignorant to appreciate fully, was the key to a successful endeavor. His poetic language does not impose meaning, I decided then, but discloses it—in order to reveal truth. Reading his work was like watching a re-write of the world through imagination. To understand a poem was to penetrate into an otherwise unarticulated world. Reason, faith, and authority—so often missing in the world around me—shaped the direction of Merrill’s career in poetry, as it did his manner of living. He resisted ideology and politics verbally and formally. But was nonetheless forced to accept the very real impact that each had on his life and his choices. One significant detail that must be emphasized: Merrill wanted to be judged on the basis of his art not his sexual orientation. The gender of his lover really should not matter—it’s wonderful that anyone might have mistaken his homo-eroticism where “Love buries itself in me
up to the hilt.” It also became clear that Merrill’s work had a biographical dimension because we all crave to know how other people ‘manage life.’ Merrill searches for truth in ethical dilemmas that become poems of powerful insight. He uses language to mediate between levels of and kinds of experience. That he wanted to share my experiences, and his with me, was a constant source of delight when we were together.

I pictured James from time to time as a “transfigured bird” from one of his poems: nesting in different places, flying (fleeing) from place to place, making a life first here and then there, trying on different masks with a series of amusing people and interesting faces. The bird imagery begins as early as the title of his privately published first book of mature poetry, “The Black Swan.” It was instructive to view the “cage” that his dining room in Stonington represented for himself and for David. That cage could keep others out just as it keeps the birds safe within its confines.

But then James had parallel universes in Stonington and in Athens. Each of those two places had a historic past that he embraced and a future that he anticipated. It is possible that the social mobility which his frequent change of space/place permitted actually nurtured a kind of optimism because he could realize in Greece a “dream” that fused nature, human and divine, as well as a setting where he could look for self-hood. The difference in culture helped him to see and accept his own culture, with all its limitations, that made him distinctly American.

Days of 1986
164 E. 72nd Street in New York City

After he had spent several days in the cocoon of our modest Iowa City household, James was eager to share his own NYC Coop apartment with us. Shocked that I had never spent time
in Manhattan, he encouraged us to consider a week or more on the Upper East Side in the apartment which originally belonged to his maternal grandmother, passing to his mother and then to himself after a second marriage made Atlanta his mother’s permanent home. Seeing other people’s houses can be surprising, occasionally reinforcing observations made about that person which now extended through rooms reflecting what one had concluded already, what one had imagined, and what had been carefully hidden from view.

Our ride up to the ninth floor at 72nd Street accompanied by an experienced liveried doorman, was fascinating for our 3 and 5 year olds. They had never heard of nor seen a special elevator cage for deliveries—of which our luggage constituted an important category. Trying to explain the niceties of a service elevator to small children can be challenging. But as soon as the apartment door opened, all the puzzlement was forgotten. Here just inside was a charming span: a room which in another era would have served as a vestibule or small parlor was instead the very centerpiece of the apartment. We stepped into a large square room lacquered dark green with a very ornate mirror on the wall, and a formal mahogany dining room suite arranged on a beautiful oriental carpet. This room was peacefully resting between meals or Ouija sessions, so we proceeded into the enormous living room—finally a space, I thought to myself, equal to its name, since according to James a great deal of living could go on simultaneously in it. The room’s proportions were sufficiently spacious that one could easily imagine a gathering of 50 guests comfortably chatting in groups, examining the walls of books, exploring the backgammon table, urging an adept to try the beautiful piano standing grandly in one corner. A pair of female decorator friends had recently taken JM and DJ in hand to provide a softer and more comfortable atmosphere for their parties in this apartment, and it was handsome indeed.
A butler’s pantry led off to one side of the living room and into a well-equipped modern kitchen. Other doors led to a guest room/study and to the master bedroom which shared a spacious tiled bathroom with the guest room. Our children were already dashing about with awe and curiosity: “Uncle James has an enormous mountain of pennies on the dresser next his bed, Mommy.” In the guest room/study where the children would sleep, twin beds were pushed into a seating arrangement against the walls. And the center table—low, large, round—was covered with camera equipment of an obviously serious, expensive sort. As it turns out, the camera, lenses, film, and swag bag belonged to well-known photographer Rollie McKenna. (She must have been very certain indeed of the safety of the Merrill apartment!) Also in this light, bright room was a desk scattered with pages that it took an elaborate explanation to convince the children were to be admired but not moved. Above the writing surface was a poster and newspaper clippings announcing James’s recent appointment as Poet Laureate of Connecticut. I did not know and sat down to add my own note saying how glad, “how well deserved.” Below me on the floor, my son was arranging his plastic Heman and Strato figures from a popular cartoon series into military array. Much later, on our way out of NYC and over the bridge, Zach would glance behind us and call softly, “bye, Strato,” sharing in a gentle voice that Uncle James didn’t have any toys of his own. So, Zach left Strato as a playmate tucked into his bed. The wonderful and funny letter from James that arrived at our home a month later said it all in JM’s usual playful style.3

Everywhere one turned in that apartment there were kind little notes: some in James’s hand and some left by Mona Van Duyn, who had been a recent visitor to the apartment with her husband, Jarvis Thurston. Here and there were suggestions to help us find a few indispensable things like the TV [so well-hidden that we might have been several days discovering it] and the
garbage chute back along the corridor of servants and service rooms. Our host had, with his usual thoughtfulness, provided names in the building of families who might have nannies to share of an evening. He had thought of everything a young family might need: pointing out the nearest green grocery, pharmacy, and a carrousel in Central Park which became a daily destination for our children. One could sit down in a chair with tea cup in hand and find instantly at right or left a cocktail square of needlepoint to cushion the wood furniture from dampness. Reading lights were placed where reading would most likely be done. Chairs were grouped for intimacy but could easily be turned into a larger, more open and welcoming circle. The living room was sober in hues of purple, brown, and green woven fabric in a fine old-fashioned print. In survey, I could see the apartment as having been slowly and carefully adapted by James from items belonging to his family (perhaps for generations) into a gracious, modern palate of color and style much more 1980’s than 1930’s--and very much his own. The Oriental rug spread underneath it all unified the space into little less than a magic carpet ride for me.

I could not help myself in private moments from running my fingers over an obviously well-worn set of Proust or a piece of Murano blown glass. Every surface held an object that I’d like to know the origin of and its value to the owner; propped among the books for all to admire were drawings, some impromptu on envelopes and others quite wonderful finished sketches that would take hours to examine and understand. But James was in China; and I was in fairyland permitted to make up stories about objects that intrigued me. (This was very good preparation for the summers I spent in Stonington after James’s death where, given a key to and freedom to explore the Water Street flat any way I chose, I could make connections to objects he most valued.) I saw immediately as we settled into this lovely New York City apartment that our host,
though now at a distance on his trip to Japan and China, had considered every detail for the
comfort of his fortunate guest, exemplified his promise from “A Tenancy” in *Water Street*:

> If I am host at last
> It is of little more than my own past
> May others be at home in it.

**Days of 1990**

**Stonington with JM and DJ**

When James Merrill wrote “Lost in Translation” in the 1970’s, I was just beginning my long study of his work and stumbling into a kind of relationship with this great poet. By 1990, James had extended to me, to my former husband, to our small children—in whose shadow he often had to fend for himself since children are so determined to be the life of any occasion—a love which embraced our family as if it were his own. He wrote and enjoyed hearing about all the splendid doings that baseball season or third grade science fair could yield. His patience and his interest never failed—though occasionally he might find himself behind by several letters. I counted on the opportunity to share our lives with him (sometimes in excruciating detail) to keep me aware of my own good fortune. He loved our little houses in Iowa City (as he would later settle happily into the farmhouse in Wilmette); and, wandering around my space as he did in his own, would examine the small objects that defined me—as I was soon to find his own collection of objects defined him.

James’s own dearest premises, which we finally visited together as a family in the summer of 1990, was the wonderfully quirky place on Water Street in Stonington where he had lived with David Jackson in a kind of disheveled luxury and casual elegance since 1954. There was a door in the middle of the block at 107 (all the houses and businesses connected together into a
large and substantial block indeed of stone and wood, plaster and concrete) which led to the steep stairs that one would climb up to reach the Merrill-Jackson flat on the 3rd and 4th floors. James had put a post-it note carefully on the doorbell with “Marshall plan” scribbled in his casual hand insisting that we “enter with cries of delight.” We certainly did. It was my first chance to be in the space where so many of the poems I adored had actually been composed, and where at every turn in every room was an object already familiar in my heart and mind: there was the dining table where James and David used their Ouija Board (set over on a sideboard but nevertheless available to see and to explore) to conjure up the spirits of Ephraim and the eventual cast of many more in his now well-regarded *Changing Light at Sandover*. With the children by the hand, he led us into the secret room behind a set of bookshelves heavy with phonograph records where there was a daybed, a window onto the sound, and a very modest desk over which hung a black and white photograph of “The Sleeping Woman” in Greece. My children were immediately on the daybed, testing it for comfort and possibly for inspiration. I looked around the simple, almost monastic, space and marveled at the wonders which a congenial place could produce. It was his workroom, though I would later find that his kitchen, a couch in the 4th floor music room, and many other spots lent their own particular character and flavor to his poems as they were formed. As the children flew up the next set of stairs under the watchful eye of their father, to the luncheon table and star deck, I stayed behind to have a few minutes peaceful, personal conversation with James. It was in that room, on that day, I learned that our friend Stephen Yenser and his wife Mary (who had been a student with me at UCLA in the English department) were going to be divorced. I scarcely knew what a huge difference that would make to our lives, but I did feel—as did James—a kind of “breaking up of the family.” Because I was quite stunned by the news, it wasn’t until letters exchanged in later weeks with James that I
learned the extent of the transformation ahead. But I remember looking intently at “The Sleeping Woman” and wondering if my exact duplicate of that photograph, hanging on the wall in Iowa City (it had been a gift from Stephen and Mary), would also evoke a sense of profound loss.

Climbing up the stairs together, James and I emerged into an enormous room filled with a piano, a harpsichord, a table surrounded by chairs, and several couches pushed aside to make a proper space for lunch to be eaten sitting down and indoors (as any proper reader of Jane Austen knew was an important requirement). But my children had already fled to the star terrace through a convenient set of sliding glass doors, and were eagerly gathering shells and stones and bits of feathers which the obliging gulls dropped on the terrace floor as they flew around overhead. We all accumulated things that day with which to enrich our understanding of “Uncle James”: a walk to the small green in the center of town yielded some spectacularly-attractive-to-small-children pieces of quite round colored plastic which were imbedded in the soil of the town after an awful hurricane in the early 1950’s had destroyed the plastics factory that occupied the opposite side of Water Street down a block or two from the flat. For years afterward I would come upon a tiny red round shape on the floor of a closet or in the corner of a drawer and be immediately back on Water Street under the waving flag. No surprise then that much of my own work on James has turned into a way to gather the different pieces—large and small, valuable or junk—into some kind of puzzle which represents the fractured fairy tale that our lives sometimes appeared to be.

On that same afternoon, we took a long ramble around Stonington with the children, carefully cautioned by their Uncle James to stay on the marked paths in order to avoid ticks that clung to the weedy field flowers. The gentle slopes of land on a peninsula that contains the tiny town of Stonington were, James explained, a regular pleasure to watch for birds. Though not an
avid birder himself, James retained the sympathy that only comes with a story told by someone you love: Mona Van Duyn’s “Letters from my Father” contained an enormous catalog of birds and their habits with which her ailing father was enchanted into living a more comfortable old age. Mona’s work was often a topic of conversation between us. She wrote on such a human scale and seemed to recognize the sublime in the ridiculous as well as the ridiculous in the sublime. That they still exchanged poems for advice was a feature of James’s unwillingness to give up any of the attachments of his youth. Though both poets had grown tremendously in stature and importance, they were as gentle and tender of each other as before either was published. We laughed about “Trip through the Automatic Carwash” which yielded a recent letter to Mona from a fan who thought it rather like a visit to the therapist.

We looked at the lighthouse which dominates “From the Cupola” in Nights and Days. That I could visit, and with him, the scene or place in which a favorite poem was set has never lost its magic quality for me. Just as lines from that poem never lose their magic appeal:

The point won’t be to stage  
One of our torchlit hunts for truth. Truth asks  
Just this once to sleep with fiction, masks  
Of tears and laughter on the moonstruck page.

Days of 1992
James Merrill in Iowa City

In October 1992 the poet James Merrill visited the University of Iowa. During an informal morning session he talked about writing--poetry in general, his own poetry in particular--and answered various questions put by members of the University of Iowa Writers
Workshop and graduate students in the workshop courses. I had not actually seen James in several years, though we talked regularly by phone and wrote often. It was our joint intention to use the few uncommitted hours between the informal session on Friday morning and James’s formal poetry reading on Friday evening (and before his departure on Saturday) to share with each other all we could about our lives and concerns. There are few people in my life with whom I feel as intimate as I did with James. He seemed able to grasp by intuition what others had to have explained to them. Conversation would be comfortable with him and I looked forward to "our" weekend.

During that morning session, one student asked how to explain formal verse—rhyme and meter—to his own students in an undergraduate poetry class. Jorie Graham, one of the most popular and distinguished writers in the Workshop, was sitting on my left and whispered in my ear that all poetry students now had a hidden political agenda. The implication was clear: formal verse wasn’t "politically correct." James replied that it is a pity one needs to explain it to them. "Why," he wondered, "can’t we simply ask them to read it?" At Amherst recently his mention of "Lycidas" produced a sea of blank looks from the assembled undergraduates. He thought this an indication that one could no longer take for granted a background in poetry among students who were studying literature. James said, with emphasis when the question was put to him directly, that form in verse is not intended as an obstacle to understanding but as an enhancement of it. A student asked whether, when one concentrates on the form in writing a poem, the subject or theme becomes more subconscious. James agreed that in his own experience it did. Several students pursued the question of formal verse and whether it is suitable for the personal subject matter that one finds in his work. James said that there are many styles of writing about personal matters and reminded the students that in Life Studies Lowell chose to switch to prose for a large
part of the confessional material. James replied to a question about how he composes (apparently quite often on the computer in recent years) that usually he sits with an open notebook on his lap to write down impressions, ideas, bits of verse, work out relationships. The previous spring included a driving trip through Scotland with another person when he kept an open notebook for many days where he could write whatever he wished about that experience.

On our walk to lunch after the morning session, I asked more about the trip to Scotland. James’s friend Peter Hooten was the driver. James described it happily as nine days of driving in a magnificent landscape. Skye was particularly lovely. I asked about Peter. This produced a saga: Peter in detox at a retreat in the Southwest, Peter in the South at a sort of monastery (where presumably his spirit could be healed as well). James, actively involved in Peter’s treatment, explained that he went himself to meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics because that one (of all that sort of group) seemed to give him the moral support he needed to be helpful to Peter.

At our lunch one hot topic was the memoir that James had given to his publisher, and which would be out possibly as soon as the following spring (as *A Different Person*). He had written to me earlier in the year that his mother objected strenuously to his writing a memoir, saying that "it would be the death of her." Yes, James acknowledged, indeed her friends would "find out things about them both" that couldn’t be discovered by reading his poems. "And," he said, "it is *my* story to tell after all." He then recalled his mother’s anxiety about something she once did to him—for which he was quick to add she’d made ample atonement. He seemed to be almost ruthless about telling everything. Although he was clearly sparing his mother (then 92) by waiting until its publication to tell her the memoir was “forthcoming”.

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James was willing to tell everyone he loved about the failings he believed were unworthy of them. Hearing about my own faults from him seemed so close to a compliment that I worked hard—and I imagined the same of his other friends—to eliminate (or at least diminish) some offending characteristic or behavior. I suspect that James molded any number of us into better people—more sensitive, more thoughtful, effective, creative—chiefly by his own example; but also (when pressed) by a gentle hint. Once, when I was mourning excessively over a shattered relationship, he wrote: imagine it as "part of a song cycle in the manner of the Schumann *Dichterlieber*. This will allow you to get rid of what I see as flaws . . . listen to the Schumann, listen to Schubert’s *Die Shone Mullerin* and ideas will flood you." Another time, when I expressed what was in James’s view unreasonable sympathy at the outrageous behavior of a friend, he said: "I think the experience is meant to be a good deal more aggressive on our own part than it is defensive on [his]." I knew, and James knew, that he was asking me to take a very firm and uncomfortable line (for me at least). But he knew equally well that it was The Right Line, cheerfully prepared to take it himself, and expected no less of me.

So the occasional congratulation was all the more precious because I knew its genuineness. After a few sharp words about someone we both loved and worried over, and who desperately needed renewal of both the spiritual and physical sort, he quipped: "Don’t you wish the whole world were as flexible and resilient as you and I are?" And once in many years he returned a present I sent, a book that I adored: "I’m afraid it’s not for me," he wrote on returning it. But then added: "You have touched in the course of our friendship so many responsive spots in my psyche that it remained only for you to find my blind one; and I’m afraid this book, which to my mind isn’t really a book at all, is too cute and whimsical for this old poet."
Lingering over lunch that October day, we talked about what James had been reading in 1992. He was rereading Mansfield Park with great pleasure. We discussed how Fanny could be so good in the face of such opposition: "She gets down on her knees every night to the spirit of Jane Austen!" he exclaimed. James remarked about the short stories of a young woman (Ms. Isenberg) who was currently in the U of I Writers Workshop: "I read them on the plane and liked them so much (they have a theme in them) that I kept her in a constant blush for about 10 minutes talking to her about them."

After lunch we walked to Prairie Lights (my favorite bookstore on earth) where I pointed out the extensive collection of "little magazines" on a rack at the entrance. James, transfixed, reached instantly for a copy of Antioch Review saying "Melissa [Berton] has a poem in this issue." I looked over his shoulder as he read aloud and when he got to the lines "thin/then" James said "isn’t it wonderful?" After that we had an orgy of book-buying: James for my children, for me, me for James, James for the purpose of having everyone in the Writers Workshop sign their volumes for him—very generous as always. James bought my children each a book in French: Madeleine for Stephanie, Frederick for Zach; and bought Randall Jarrell’s Animal Family for them to share with their parents. James bought me a copy of The Singing Underneath by Jeffrey Harrison, which he’d mentioned to me in a letter (5 January 1987) after he’d chosen the book for a poetry series. We bought each other copies of the Writers Workshop cookbook edited by Connie Brothers (for her to sign). Then James asked if he’d sent us a copy of Selected Poems yet; and when I said "not yet" he suggested that he present me with the copy from which he planned to read that evening. We got a beautiful calendar of Scotland, which James would give to Peter.
Dinner that evening at Linn Street Cafe in downtown Iowa City was a very pleasant and witty meal—with Jorie Graham and Jim Galvin, Phil Levine (visiting the Workshop that term) and his wife, Gerry Stern with his girlfriend, James and me. James (nervous but playful) ordered a pasta dish colored with squid ink "so as to be able to compare it to the offerings at a new restaurant opened recently" on his block in NYC called Squid Row. Much talk by all the others about the intricacies of publishing volumes of poetry. I heard enthusiastic chat about Harry Ford, legendary editor of several of those present (and of other very famous poets). James recalled that he had been edited by Harry Ford since 1959 and knew him as a book designer in the 1950’s. We heard about the Dante translation "by many hands" (including James and Jorie) to be read aloud in New York the next spring. When I thanked Jorie quietly for including me in the dinner, she very graciously said "but you are closer to him than anyone here." Which seemed so odd to me, since I was not a part of their world at all. This led to the story of how I’d come to know James and his work. I described my pilgrimage to St. Louis to explore Merrill manuscripts in Special Collections at Washington University (in the summer of 1974). Everyone was immensely kind and helpful: Holly Hall, assistant to the Special Collections librarian at that time, had a tea party for me and displayed personal items from their extensive collection (including Jim’s Book, which I never thought I’d see, much less peruse); Mona Van Duyn and Jarvis Thurston, who heard I was at work in the library, took me to lunch and dinner nearly every day, and talked to me at length about James. It was all very magical and unexpected. James explained: "But they just loved you!" Later I discovered that James had written to them all when he sent a note to me (a stranger to him and a grad student in a distant city) giving me permission to look at his materials in St. Louis. Needless to say, after tracing (a genuine "scissoring and mending") his poems through worksheet and notebook for that week in St. Louis, and meeting and talking to his
dear friends (Mona had a draft of *Divine Comedies* in the house when I was there and read parts aloud to Jarvis and me), I felt very close to James indeed. It was an extraordinary experience, one that I still regard with some awe.

Dinner in Iowa City ended with expressions of concern over James’s present method of composition, which involved the computer and thus few copies of early versions of any poem. I suggested that one day a student would be editing his back-up disks.

The formal poetry reading on the university campus was introduced by Jim Galvin, quoting from "Yannina" and saying many charming things I am sure. But I was concentrating at the time on James, who is surprisingly nervous before a reading and who was looking for something in his bag that clearly had to be found. James read poems from *Water Street* about the death of his grandparents, and "To a Butterfly" (about which Richard Howard has written at length, describing it as a technical emblem poem and the beginning of James’s psyche/soul motif). James also read from *Divine Comedies*, a section on his friend Maria Mitzotáki, especially her voice from the "other world" talking to "Zimmy." This ability to capture the speech of another person is one of the gifts James had so abundantly (clearest in the transcriptions from "The Book of Ephraim"). James also read from a bound volume of unpublished poems, "because people ask for nature poems" and he had a couple which (barely) qualify. At the end of the reading he did the poem "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek Windbreaker" which was a virtual condition of his appearance in Iowa City. It created a sensation. Jorie and Jim, who had been holding their collective breath through most of his reading were in raptures over his vivid description of a Nature Company store: "vaguely imbecile emporia... crystals,/ Cassettes of whale song and rain-forest whistles,/ Barometers, herbal cosmetics, pillows like puffins,/ Recycled notebooks, mechanized Lucite coffins/For sapphire waves that crest, break, and
recede." At the end of the poem, where the lines include a series of asterisks, out came the object of the earlier search—a flashlight—to emphasize the ******** points. The entire audience burst into spontaneous shouts of joy.

The following morning a much-subdued pair went together in my car to the airport in Cedar Rapids where James would go his way (by plane) to New York, and I would go my own (by interstate) to Chicago. Neither of us looked forward to the significant others we were headed back to. Both of them were ill: mine with some undefined but lingering disease, and his with a clearly defined, acute and soggy condition. Peter was alternately belligerent and remorseful, fitfully capable of contriving wild entertainments for James or of leaving him prostrate with despair and regret. My own partner was equally phlegmatic, ridiculing my unwilling and painful adjustment to a new city and life just as I’d finally become comfortable with the old one, promising me comforts we could not afford and pleasures I could not enjoy. It was a positive relief to tell James everything and to hear his encouraging and steady, if predictably stoic, advice. For a brief weekend (enclosed in time and space and car) I had what I most craved, sympathetic understanding; and James gave me yet another reason for being always his "almost perfect reader."

Days of 1993

210 Sixth Street in Wilmette

In 1993 James came to stay with our family in Wilmette for several days. He was giving a reading on September 9th for the Humanities Division at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus. For the first time I would get to introduce him formally. Now, we had teenagers. But James nevertheless threw himself into activities. Zach was required to lie down on a large
piece of drawing paper while James drew his outline—to be filled in later with whatever anatomical parts were included in a science project. We made scones, and such a mess that the smoke alarm kept going off while we sat eating rescued pastries on the deck outside. Each time the alarm would sound again, James would send the children into peals of laughter by quoting some brief piece of either a poem of his own (“flee at once, all is known”) or a piece from an opera libretto.

There was a dinner party for James at our house with the current writers visiting Northwestern University’s Center for the Writing Arts, where I was Assistant Director, and friends from Don Marshall’s department at UIC (hosting the reading on their campus the following evening). It was a delightful evening full of chat about friends in common: our Evanston guest, Marty Wine, was close to the critic Helen Vendler who had long been a strong advocate of James’s poetry; our visiting writer from New Orleans, Richard Ford, was a summer resident in Maine, living next door to Lizzie [Elizabeth] Hardwick with whom all of us were profoundly engaged through the New York Review of Books. We gossiped and ate late into the night. So the next morning, I was thrilled to have James to myself and at his suggestion we finished the walnut torte from the dinner party as a breakfast treat still in our dressing gowns.

Among our favorite activities when alone together was to share my favorite JM poems. James would let me help him choose the ones he would read in the evening, but before that I was encouraged to tell him what I wanted most to hear and why. He knew that I was an avid listener to his poetry on an audio tape, “Reflected Houses,” which I had nearly worn out. He especially enjoyed being imitated, urging me with laughter and “listen to that,” into reciting lines from “The Broken Home,” in Nights and Days, in precisely his cadence and pronunciation:

Long summer colds, and Emma, sepia-faced,
Perspiring over broth carried upstairs
Aswim with golden fats I could not taste.

The end of that passage makes the mouth move in remarkable ways, like a liquid humming. It made his references in interviews to “the sense of so much sound” a living experience for me.

One entire afternoon, James spent leading me through the Art Institute in Chicago to visit his favorite paintings there. *Le Grand Jatte*, which anchors an entire room in the Impressionist collections, was the focus of our attention for nearly an hour. James was filling my head and my heart with endearments and episodes from his life and my own that the painting helped to recall. What did he like about this particular piece? Its craftsmanship thrilled him because the pointillist skill makes the tiny dots identifiable up close but at a distance the mind’s eye sees the surface as continuous. I have looked at the painting many times since that afternoon and remember his observation that an ocean, after all, is simply drops of water—the finite is fundamental in the infinite.

On the morning before his flight east from Wilmette, James suggested a walk around our neighborhood. I thought he was trying to get me out of the house and my own personal distractions with typical consideration. He told me about some recent changes he’d made in his will, especially proper provisions for a long time tenant on the Water Street property. I realized only years afterward that he might also have meant to prepare me for his death, which would come 18 months later. He was talking in circles around the idea of life’s end and, when we saw a caterpillar, smiled broadly when I began reciting the opening lines of his poem about the soul’s transformation (which he’d read in Iowa City the year before), “To a Butterfly”: “already I miss your feet and fur.” We talked about Jane Austen, whose work I read every year for decades; about Nancy Mitford and her circle; about Lucia (Mrs. Phillip Lucas), whose antics in a small town setting must have been inspiration for “The Summer People.” I realized at once that my
grasp of the domestic life with all its considerations of taste and of form, its formalities of
greeting, and most of all its casual absurdities whether intended to be vexing or not, were pretty
much aligned with James’s own.

1 His dedication in my copy of From The First Nine is “With love to a reader who approaches perfection: Kathe from James” Iowa City, 1984.

2 James had explained early in his visit to us that a recent loss of a child to a couple he knew well, made him deeply interested in a child—having one or caring about one was not entirely clear at first.

3 This letter dated 1986 is included in the Correspondence section.

4 The introduction from 1993 is included separately.

5 George Seurat, 1884
Part III

Dear Premises on Water Street

In the panes of the glass door to the porch in the Jackson apartment on Water Street, I can see reflected houses: those houses that James saw for more than 40 years—beautiful, still in the mild evening light. I need only glance to see the Stonington Harbor with its blue water particular to this town—not quite Greek or Mediterranean in hue, but easily identified on the Atlantic shore from Connecticut and into the Fisher’s Island Sound north of the peninsula. A number of front doors along Water Street are painted a similar shade of blue. This afternoon I followed the path to Dubois Beach to gather small stones, the ocean warm on my toes. I carry a single rose from the hedge near the beach—it came away at my touch or I’d never have dared snatch it. If I turn slightly I can see the street behind me, and the cupola of the lighthouse that dominates one anchor poem in Nights and Days. Here, in this place, James is “everywhere beside me.”

One learns early on that reading a Merrill poem involves ear and eye, heart and mind, soul’s spirit and sense’s erotic capacity. Surrounded by the early evening smells and sounds of the Stonington seashore the poet’s language resonates for me in ways that reading at home never does. In “From the Cupola” James writes “we see according to our lights.” Suddenly, I am enlightened; encouraged to see by whatever light I have to the heart of the matter. Now I would read and reread familiar poems to search for meanings, connections that would help mold and hold my life together without his physical presence, his voice, or his sweet and gentle but spirited hectoring. There are extraordinary opportunities in a Merrill poem to meditate on allusions to myth or fairy tale, to embedded pieces of contemporary experience, to deeply personal
experience. Continuing to read and think about “From the Cupola” as it echoes through time and mind will always be a force of change in my life, will see me through: “Thank you, Psyche. I should think those panes are just about as clear as they can be.” In “From the Cupola” JM is making ample, vivid entertainment for himself. He is at play; words are in play; the careful reader will play along because poetic language has the power to preserve the best of our lives, the highest of our aspirations, to rescue us from personal defeats. Poetic language can also provide courage, understanding, and a hopefulness that does not require religion or social mobility, professional success or economic stability.

Scholars inevitably marvel over Merrill’s skill at intricate metrical forms, and at his intimacy with texts from every discipline and in many languages. He was certainly conscious that writing poetry, full (stuffed almost to bursting) of subtle allusion and elaborate word play, was regarded as an open invitation to critics. When he writes, “I grow old under an intensity of questioning looks,” he could as easily be describing the scrutiny he received from scholars as the “Mirror” of his poem’s title. I wonder still at his generosity as a human being: his willingness to expose himself and his work to dissection and ridicule. And one can scarcely overlook the ridicule: that The Changing Light at Sandover was once described as “high camp” and treated as an elaborate joke. And so I am charmed at his zeal to amuse as well as to instruct his readers.

Gentle unforced suggestions of comparison to E.F. Benson for pure playfulness in situation, circumstance, and conversation emerged from my first encounter with the Sandover trilogy. When Benson’s series of novels about Mrs. Emmeline Lucas was released in a single splendid volume as Make Way for Lucia in 1978, James recommended it to everyone. I never asked directly whether living in a small village (like Riseholme or Stonington) produced the urge to contact familiar spirits. But I don’t doubt for a minute the connection between his enthusiasm
for Benson where everyone from the Diva, Olga Bracely, and her friend Mr. Georgie, with his cape and smart boots, to the Dowager takes up the Ouija Board with delight: messages from Abfu, their control, about a museum; comments on the clothing and character of others usually not in the room; predictions of disaster, of a fire, a flood. The scale and range of Benson is utterly different from Sandover, of course. But the sense that this is, on some level, an elaborate entertainment never fades or fails.

What has concerned me most, in the years since James Merrill’s untimely death, is how to bring his work into the intellectual lives of emerging readers and writers. To convey to them that Merrill has “words to live by,” not simply for his own generation, but for many to come. I thought long and hard about how to properly introduce the emerging reader of poetry to the works of James Merrill. As a teacher of undergraduates in Expository Writing and Rhetoric, I was free to make choices of reading materials, of whom to include and who to juxtapose.

And so in that period of our history in the late 1990’s when vaccination somehow replaced communion as a sacred rite, where man began to worship science as man once worshiped God, and to look to medicine for miracles to solve the human dilemma—I contrived a class model for undergraduates that would emulate and compress the experience of a traditional Great Books course of study into a single term. My fundamental teaching goal in the course was to help students find an intellectual path through the modern era that would permit information (of which there is a plethora) and imagination (an ability remarkably neglected and needing to be exercised thoroughly) to cooperate, to flourish, and ultimately to merge. Since understanding themselves would be a life-long process dominated by skill sets and aptitude tests as youngsters and by analysis (Freudian or some alternative therapy) as adults, I wanted to add a dimension that might in any other age be thought of as “spiritual,” but that would not rely on any single
creed or dogma to enforce its value. The success of such an endeavor depends upon a text for inspiration. So, in the course, my students read, discussed, and wrote about a variety of texts, but a few consistently every term: Plato’s Symposium, Aristotle’s Ethics,” The Declaration of Independence,” Huck Finn, Tolstoy’s story “Family Happiness,” Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas, Zora Neal Hurston’s Their Eyes were watching God, Jane Austen’s Persuasion, Shakespeare’s “The Tempest,” and—in tribute to my devotion to dear James Merrill—“Lost in Translation.”

For those of you afraid that this is about to be a lesson plan, let me reassure you. I prefer narrative to explanation. Though “Lost in Translation” is a paradigm of poems by James Merrill; though nearly every technique that he uses throughout his lyric verse, many of the recurrent themes, rhyme schemes, images, metaphors can be found in this poem, it can nevertheless be read through and enjoyed without much more than an ear for the “sense of so much sound.” My students’ reactions and responses to “Lost in Translation” are thoughtful, eager, unreserved, immediate, quick-sighted, and occasionally inspired. I attribute their positive reaction to one simple practice: they listen to James Merrill reading “Lost in Translation” as their first encounter with the poem.

So, how does one encourage a student to enjoy the complexity and richness of this poem? Only a rare reader (and undergraduates are a special case) brings to an initial encounter or even successive ones the constellation of sheer knowledge, of personal experience, of profound insight that are necessary to appreciate “Lost in Translation” properly. I readily confess that after reading it myself for decades, I truly don’t understand it completely. This is, of course, an intractable problem with works of great literature. While I believe that understanding the poem will be important to my students, I am convinced that being able to feel the poem—not simply guess what things mean—will contribute more to their intellectual and personal growth, their
ability to think independently and write clearly, than any emphasis on interpretation. 

Interpretation, especially with a poem by James Merrill, can come to replace the poem itself. 

It would be possible, of course, to send the students to pgs. 10-30 of Stephen Yenser’s indispensable *The Consuming Myth* where that skilled critic (a distinguished poet himself) has carefully set out the five parts of the poem, “Lost in Translation,” explained about verse paragraphs with iambic pentameter and loose rhymes, closely examined the Rubaiyat quatrains, and described in intimate detail the many circumstances, both personal and historical, that were part of young James Merrill’s life during the summer of 1937 and the year to follow. It would be tempting indeed. But it would also deprive us of the opportunity to *play* with this extraordinary poem. The poem will be our puzzle: we will enjoy it like a game; and we will stage it like a drama.

I want to focus for a moment on the importance of the *play of the imagination*, a form of learning and a skill. The experience of and the sense of how to play together, whether in a game of cards, discussing a poem, or putting the pieces of a puzzle in place is an old-fashioned art which we are quickly losing in modern life. When Merrill composes a deliberately obscure poem so that readers (like Richard Howard to whom “Lost in Translation” is dedicated) can take pleasure in puzzling it out, he creates a wonderful, unique version of a game to play with the imagination. And this activity which necessarily requires connection of one individual to another has a doubled value since it permits shared understanding or a joke. “I grow old under an intensity of questioning looks” could describe our poet scrutinized by readers as well as the “Mirror” of the poem’s title. “Lost in Translation” engages the reader in playing both with the poem and with human experience and memory. In working through the poem and dramatizing its various parts with readings aloud—images or symbols or technically dazzling language
games—a reader can truly piece together the essential parts of life, his own and that displayed or transmuted on the page. The complicated story that unfolds in the poem, and by extension the story that every one of us carries inside pieced together out of fragments of similar memories, games, puzzles (both personal and historic), has its roots in ordinary life and objects. Sometimes discrete bits stand out, just as the pieces of the puzzle that a small JM made stories of before the actual puzzle picture emerged. These discrete fragments represent a much more elaborate experience. As we begin to explore the poem it appears not only as a verbal tour de force but as a verbal palimpsest. When the students begin to discuss the poem in class, a crib sheet is inevitable. I provide the dates of James Merrill’s birth and death, a bit about his family and the various houses and places in which the family lived and in which the poet himself lived. Merrill’s own translation of the Rilke version of Valery’s poem, *Palme*, also helps since the German is wonderful and mysterious (especially hearing JM read it aloud) but usually impenetrable for undergraduates:

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These days which, like yourself,  
Seem empty and effaced     
Have avid roots that delve  
To work deep in the waste.  
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So, we begin on fairly common ground with “A card table in the library,” something solid and recognizable. We begin *with* a card table and *at* a card table which implies games of one sort or another. Indeed, that card table “stands ready to receive” in much the way we do in the opening lines of the poem. Here I mention that this particular card table is in the library of a Stanford White house where the boy James Merrill was living at the time. Students recognize immediately the formality of a library suggests a certain kind of space and time period. The library setting implies learning and information, especially history. The Merrill library will contribute a special stage set that combines an immediate reality and a remembered one for the different acts in “Lost
in Translation” to play out on. The library and the card table also evoke an earlier time, a more formal time, perhaps a stricter set of principles for behavior at the table and in life.

The students don’t yet know these, but here are a few of the pieces, acts, settings, and characters that we play with: a poem by Valery; the translation of that poem by Rilke; JM’s search for a copy of that poem in Athens; a scene from the poet’s childhood; the origin, mysterious and obvious, of James Merrill’s Mademoiselle and her “place”; scenes from the poet’s adult life, including an episode where the hidden fragment in a medium’s elaborate “game” is a piece of a puzzle; the oedipal triangle that seems latent in the poet’s relation to his parents; and then the exotic Arabian scene of the puzzle itself that the boy is assisting to put together. In short, the opening of “Lost in Translation” is a classic Merrill stanza, and a classic Merrill room:

A card table in the library stands ready
To receive the puzzle which keeps never coming.

The oxymoron in line 2: “keeps never coming,” is so characteristic of James Merrill that we stop to ask why he writes in this inverted style and what it conveys. Usually one or another student sees pretty quickly that the oxymoronic form suspends time in a curious way. The zigzag of the grammar suggests that time itself in the poem will not stand still but range through recollection and memory. (I think here myself of the “scissoring and mending” so often a part of a lyric poem by James Merrill.) Time itself is an actor in “Lost in Translation,” not as chronology but as recollection, a function of feeling informed by memory and enhanced by imagination. The form of the poem grows with it—even from it (a characteristic of many works by Merrill). So that experience and memory in the poem are not simply parts of life, they are life:

Daylight shines in or lamplight down
Upon the tense oasis of green felt.
“Daylight” and “lamplight” come next, and with or we know that this isn’t just one day, but a series of days and nights possibly remembered only as a complex sequence rather than separately. The table is illuminated and ready, but as yet empty. We can visualize a stage set very easily. And that stage is “tense oasis of green felt,” offering extraordinary word play. Why “tense,” it is possible to ask? The waiting, of course, contributes to the tension. And perhaps there are other things being covered up, students propose. These other things may be emotions, wishes, dreams. And that oasis most students regard as a discrete one: a place to gather strength, to stop in the progression of trials or stages.

And finally “felt,” a loaded word if ever we’ve met one (adjective, verb, noun, adverb). The fabric of the table’s covering is green felt, a traditional color and covering. But green is also new felt—new feelings—and the risk we take here is in underestimating “felt” since so many possibilities reside in that word. The precise experience of the line nearly exclaims that what is scene is also felt. (Later, the poet will describe this as a place on which the grown-ups gambled; and we will remember how much was at stake even in these early lines.) Sometimes, students suggest they are going to see a little play since the first lines are so like a set piece with stage directions clearly given. “Full of unfulfillment [another stunningly dense oxymoron] life goes on.” This particular line, a great favorite with students, often seems to them a kind of philosophical statement. It satisfies their notions in youth that life is not necessarily full of constant or useful activities. And since nothing is happening yet in the poem, their expectations are as yet unfulfilled as well. Almost a nod to Heraclitus, where “Everything changes, nothing does.”

Mirage arisen from time’s trickling sands
Or fallen piecemeal into place:
The oasis, they cry, in their first encounter with the compression, the obscure references, the double dealing, the glance backward and forward that will dominate the poem. They wonder whether a card table in the library isn’t a mirage, and why the hourglass seems so emphatic. Time, the ultimate act of course, makes its appearance again and again in the poem in different shapes—some more recognizable than others. Then, recalling that our subject is still life and life still, those shimmering memories that everyone has from time to time—incomplete, insubstantial—become part of a past toward which we glance; and become also part of a future that is ahead of us and not quite clear. Just as the poet’s own future in “Lost in Translation” is ahead of him and not quite clear.

Where, someone invariably asks, is that puzzle? So, signal given, we can begin to play with the poem as puzzle. The students now do just what the young James does with the pieces of his puzzle when it arrives. They pick up pieces they recognize from their own lives and experience and make stories of them:

- German lesson, picnic, see-saw, walk
- With the collie who “did everything but talk”—
- Sour windfalls of the orchard back of us.

“He made that up,” one student ventures. “Which part?” we ask. Well, the rhyme: the “walk” and “talk” part. “Why would he make it up?” someone else wonders. “Because it sounds nice.” How often one does hear that explanation. Still, their delight at the playfulness in the lines and of the lines is palpable (and encouraging).

At this point, my students begin to recognize and to accept for themselves that this poem is not simply a report. That the poet can enhance or embroider it in any way he chooses with details that fit the line or rhyme. We usually stop to discuss a particular choice the poet made: that there are quotation marks around “did everything but talk.” So, once again several different memories are evoked—someone else made that comment at another, probably much later, time.
This example becomes a valuable connection in time, literary and grammatical (and the class hour), and across time. (I, meanwhile, am thinking about Proust—but there is not time enough to go there. So, the “Madeleine moment” is mine alone.)

The students quickly attack the list again looking for other recognizable pieces: apples! One suggests “not really apples, but ideas of apples.” And as we move into the lines that follow there is no need to suggest that what might be happening is a world falling down:

A summer without parents is the puzzle,
Or should be. But the boy, day after day
Writes in his Line-a-Day No puzzle.

The boy is alone, like the table in the opening line, set up perhaps deliberately to wait for some kind of action to begin. We sense that something is going to happen and to happen to the boy, two events can be expected. What the boy is doing “day after day” is waiting and, like the poet too, is writing “No puzzle.” The students immediately decide that no means yes and suddenly there are puzzles everywhere.

One looming puzzle they struggle with is the second stanza. Ah, love. That they readily accept, even if the Mademoiselle is “stout, plain, carrot-haired, devout” because as they point out to me and to each other the boy has nobody else. Verdun requires a short lesson in European history; or depending upon how well they listened, an extended explanation, since the geographical complexities will materialize as we move from a library in the boy’s home to a library in Athens when the poem comes to a close. Mademoiselle helps the boy to act, with his marionettes and presumably with his parents; to “keep behind the scene” while speaking for others—foreign languages too—and to wait patiently. Still, no puzzle. Or several, since we puzzle over the German and French linked together in the lines of Mademoiselle. The unexpected parenthesis in this second stanza fascinates most students. What can the poet mean by this digression? Why is it here? Now, a cascade of images, of pieces of the poem’s puzzle:
“Valery, a Rilke version of “Palme,” the tree (not apple, but certainly a symbol of both life and growth), “a sweet wellspring of authority.” Someone who has been reading ahead says the tree comes back at the poem’s end. We look: it’s there—“a self-effacing tree, color of context.” We look back and “the hour comes back.” Patience, we are reminded “dans l’azur.” And then suddenly “out of the blue” comes the puzzle—or at least one that both students and the boy recognize.

A superior one, containing a thousand hand-sawn Sandal-scented pieces. Many take Shapes known already—the craftsman’s repertoire Nice in its limitation—from other puzzles:

A clever student remarks that Merrill must have liked the shapes because he makes his own so carefully. I mention that JM wrote, he tell us, for the eye: “Form’s what affirms.”

But no student is convinced by that, not with the luscious “hand sawn/sandal-scented” pieces fresh in their mouths. It is so comforting that the students never seem to get bored or tired of this game. They want to know what kind of a puzzle is handmade. We secure another a piece which reminds us that we are in 1937. And they embrace the “hourglass” which appears once again almost as an old friend, along with the “innocently branching palm.” We are all excited, like Mademoiselle, as children to see what this puzzle is going to be! Scraps “of highly colored evidence” are pushed aside, stories likely and unlikely are discarded in favor of a plot where “all at once two pieces interlock.”

“Mademoiselle does borders”—wait, that parenthesis again. More pieces of the poem’s own puzzle should emerge, at least we hope. For one thing, they notice that the stanza’s shape changes—“it is shorter” they observe, with “more accents.” We talk a bit about alliteration and look for it. “This grown man . . . A medium” finds a hidden object and, no surprise here (at least for us) it is a piece of a puzzle. But the language of the extended parenthetical aside doesn’t
yield easily to explanation. For one thing, the quotation marks remind us that someone else is talking again. There was the “tree” before, and here is one again—no, more trees—“tense with shock.” Are we back in the boy’s library? “What it seems to show is superficial” yet by now the students can readily make their own parallels. One points out that ”a freak fragment/of a pattern complex in appearance only” is both a puzzle piece and a poetic device. “Nice,” someone replies. “The karma that has/made it matter in the first place,” the students seem to understand better than I do. I ask them what matters. At this point, they say, everything. “Nice.”

“Mademoiselle does borders.” We are back in 1937 again, but moving faster now. It is just like memory, they remark, which can spring open at a single suggestion and provide a series of random moments to be assembled into some recollection. The puzzle in the center of “Lost in Translation” begins to come together “to form a more sophisticated unit,” borders first (color of “sky” and “earth”) then clusters of other colors like “vibrant egg yolk yellow” and “pelt of an emerging animal.” (A tiger skin?) The students adore the strangeness of the puzzle, another traditional picture they compare to the stage set from the opening lines—only this one far more exotic. “Two ragged wooden clouds/have formed” and finally using their imaginations with perfect pitch the students sketch out the scene across “the green abyss.” And if they don’t quite see eye to eye with the poet, they certainly see eye to eye with the boy. A tent, a tiger, a kneeling camel, a “dark-eyed woman veiled in mauve,” even a “small backward looking slave or page boy.” His relationship to that other little boy and to Mademoiselle completes yet another larger piece of the puzzle.

“Puzzle begun”—the italics stop them only for a moment. We are in the middle, they explain, of the past and future. We’re in the present. Tense, too, in a way—how all these double meanings do enrich the play. These students, more sophisticated than an 11 year old by have
already come to suspect something about the absent parents from the opening section. So the revelation of Mademoiselle’s letter to the cure: a divorce perhaps? That trio in the puzzle, that “Sheik” and “dark-eyed woman” and “page boy” seem almost a family unit. Or a triangle? This is an important piece of the poem’s own puzzle, but (most happily) the delay of gratification for the students is a lively incentive.

Another long parenthetical aside is met with gamely: the students now know and expect that more pieces of the poem’s own puzzle will emerge. James Merrill speaks French with a German accent. Mademoiselle was only French by marriage. And it turns out was hiding her real descent, partly out of fear and partly from shame, from the boy’s parents. Everyone it seems, the students conclude, has something to hide. There are still so many missing pieces of the puzzle. They like the couplet conclusion of this stanza: “Schlaf wohl, cheri.” Is that French or German or both, they ask. All at once two more pieces interlock:.the kiss of peace; the provision against “dreams” and things to come.

Now the Rubaiyat quatrains: students are enchanted with these, and no wonder, since the sound and sense together make a blissful mouthful. Even the turn at this point in the poem to combine the real world and the puzzle begun doesn’t daunt them. The “shifting sands” they know only too well from their own experience and from the earlier mirage. And that the puzzle itself must come together now in their imagination and the poet’s is undeniably part of the pattern. The “World” is now clearly time lines, and consolidation is what we are doing. They admire the shift to Rubaiyat stanzas because the strange and glamorous words like “Kef” and the innuendo match the exotic picture the puzzle frames. They tell me that Kef is the name of a loudspeaker manufacturer, and also a Balkan dance group.
Merrill’s aside to Richard Howard about the possible source of this image stands firmly against any possible misunderstanding of the puzzle itself, they propose. It is “hardly a proper subject for the home.” Indeed, the poet now grown looks back on all the puzzles piled up—the one he has pieced together with Mademoiselle, his own situation that summer, Mademoiselle’s situation that summer, his absent parents—and finds “that piece of Distance deep in which lies hid/ Your tiny apex sugary with sun, Eternal triangle, Great Pyramid!” The students, of course, find this particular passage nearly impossible to tease apart and reassemble—they separate the individual words like pieces of a puzzle and make something of the collection. It may remain a puzzle for them long after the poem is finished. But they are now so entranced that the missing pieces, or pieces they are missing, become part of the magic that the poet and his lovely rhymes provide. The “missing feet”—another couple, “you mean couplet” under the table. And “it’s done.”

At last “the dog’s tail thumping” and “Mademoiselle sketching” we are among those lists again that make perfect, ordinary everyday sense. This section, in verse paragraphs once more, signals a completion and a new act: the puzzle “held together—and did not.” Most students are relieved by this turn of events, because they really didn’t want the puzzle to be complete. Or rather, as one student observes, there is a link to that earlier line “Full of unfulfillment, life goes on.” They see philosophy again. They believe this poem and its story, in its value as a piece of great literature. That a poem can both seem and be dawn gently in the last two stanzas: though the puzzle disconnects, the pieces begin to come together.

Some of my favorite teachable moments are ahead in these last stanzas of “Lost in Translation.” The students are utterly captured by now. They point to the puzzle piece in the boy’s pocket as a symbol of all that has been hidden and withheld by everyone in the poem (the
parents, Mademoiselle, the poet himself with his secret source he sends Richard Howard to find, the Rilke version of “Palme”). Even the arcane lists—“Maggie Teyte’s high notes, the vogue for collies”—are quickly sorted into the pile of traditional pieces like libraries and green felt table coverings. But not before they notice that quite carelessly the poet has mentioned “truth”—small t, and Mademoiselle’s “pitiful bit of it.”

From the “Ransacking of Athens” it is all search and seizure: another library, another piece of the puzzle. They love the directness:” Yet I can’t/ Just be imagining, I’ve seen it.” They like to read that both ways, with and without the comma. They have become as sensitive to the language as JM, our poet “choosing the words he lives by.” And they acknowledge the “monolithic Truths” as the power of language to shape and to create. That Merrill made extremely careful choices in language is confirmed: “to walk stanza to stanza’s symmetrical/Rhyme rutted pavement.”

James Merrill would not wish one to claim that reading his work made a better person—a more versatile and resourceful reader certainly, especially after making (along with JM) one of many torchlight hunts for truth. And indisputably better for the experience of reading and re-reading his work, better for his experience as a guide to the art of puzzling out a poem with him and through him. This poem containing all those missing pieces, formed by memory and enhanced by imagination, feed an enormous gift of creativity which can only be glimpsed—like the angel’s hand kissed—in rhyme and in time.

When James died in Tucson on February 5, 1995, I was attending to my young daughter, who was in Evanston Hospital under observation. The entire months of February and March would leave scars on my heart more profound than the break-up of my marriage 20 years later, or my diagnosis of cancer just a few years ago. Stephanie, my adored first born, was stricken by a
life-threatening condition which would leave her in and out of one hospital or another and subject to medical treatment for nearly four years. My only comfort in the days following James’s death was that he would not suffer each blow, each preferred possible diagnosis, each awful period of waiting for the latest test results.

Like James’s Mademoiselle, who preferred to begin with borders, I imagined after his death that I had already fleshed out the pattern in the puzzle that was James Merrill. But my own aging and illness, like growing up from adolescent to adult, would provide opportunities to and alternatives for “seeing” my special poet as part of a development and chronology in our world as different as the study of poetry and that of climate change. What I already understood only in imagination still contained significant missing pieces. I read books about James Merrill’s work by distinguished critics and by his official biographer. But I came away unsatisfied by the life portrait that distinguished stylistic approach, the evolution of an autonomous symbolic system, the synchronic imagination and developing narrative technique, but somehow cared less than I did about the consummate poet, the man behind the manners with his own idiosyncratic features of personal idealistic element and tone. I am not a Merrill scholar at all in the traditional way, though I have been an avid and regular re-reader of his work for more than fifty years. And it occurred to me that as a reader I do know and understand things about his work which do not depend upon critical positions or scholarly analysis. James Merrill wanted his readers to feel deeply—as he or she read, and as he or she lived. He probably cared little whether those feelings were connected either loosely or directly to some prevailing critical approach to literature.

So it was both a shock and a joy to discover the extraordinary fact that James had saved and donated 82 of my letters written to him over twenty years between 1974 and 1995, which were available in the Special Collections Library at Washington University, St. Louis. That his
affection for his “almost perfect reader” did not diminish with distances of time or geography, through many dark years for us both, and dark episodes in our American history was yet another puzzle. That this great poet of love and loss, who set an extraordinarily high standard for human behavior in his poetry and his life, was gratified by my humble act of “writing back” with the ordinary details of growth and change and steadfast affection. Perhaps my words did provide cheer and hope to a man whose immense intelligence begged for evidence that human life was good, even if it was not perfect. I had ample evidence in more than 50 letters of my own from James that life for him was complex.

I wrote to him at Christmas 1978, when I was newly married and working on the first version of my dissertation: “I still have you by heart, dear James, as well as in mind.” On his 60th birthday in March 1986, the message was: “Today is your birthday and I am reminded more than ever how very special you’ve become. I’ve lived according to your lines and seen according to your lights for almost half my life.” At his birthday in March 1992, after the success of an especially vivid poem: “I didn’t need the windbreaker to remind me that dressed in meter, motif, myth, or stripped (of verse) you are my everyman!” And in October 1992, as part of the note of thanks for the weekend we spent together in Iowa which would eventually become a significant feature of my work: “How can I begin to thank you for everything you did and said and gave to me in Iowa City? But then you have never let me down, in print or in person.”

Over several decades of friendship evident in our correspondence, James and I shared many things—including a passionate and unwavering affection for a man both of us had long abandoned any hope of obtaining. For different reasons and at different times we’d reached the same conclusion: that if one truly loved another person deeply, then wishes and dreams must yield to his rejection “without losing temper or face.” Though, as I wrote to James, we “would
always feel *his* every success and every failure as if it were our own. As if *he* were.” To be able to understand and discuss our deepest feelings, to share that thwarted impulse of intimacy and purpose became a kind of touchstone late in my relationship with James. It did not define that relationship, but did help to explain why we were so well suited in temperament to a long devoted attachment to each other.

Hanging on the wall in my present home, and at every other front door in five homes and three states for forty-five years, is the magnificent gift James created for Don and me. In a brushed metal frame that remains as much a part of the gift as the Broadside itself is our wedding present from Stephen and Mary Yenser. Stephen presented it to me. Our own stanza, the sixth of a series called “Five Inscriptions” set by Pomegranate Press in 1974, was written in James’s own hand:

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Stephen and Mary Yenser take out this
Insurance, Don and Kathe: Years of Bliss.
The simple writer of the policy
Prays you will stop each loophole with a kiss.
   21.vi.75    [signed] James Merrill
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This very special gift seemed a hopeful promise of many cheerful exchanges between ourselves. I could scarcely have imagined how important it would become to me. Or how important James would become. Only in recent years—having grown-up, having grown-out of some things and into others, having grown old, and most recently ill—can I appreciate how extraordinary James Merrill was as a poet and as a human being.
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A Selected Reference List


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