ANDREA MARIANI

James Merrill: A Postmodern Poet? Yes & No (With a New Poem by James Merrill)

Scripts for the Pageant, so far the most extraordinary and controversial of Merrill's texts, which was published in 1980 as the third part of his monumental poem *The Changing Light at Sandover,* is itself divided into three sections: "Yes," "&," and "No."[1] The reader, however much puzzled by the heterogeneity of Merrill's materials and linguistic strategies, cannot but acknowledge the final message of the "pageant": men, their lives, science, poetry, the "supernatural" powers which acted in order to dictate hundreds of ambiguous and contradictory truths, all belong to a universe which is both positive *and* negative:

> Yes and no came to be especially telling, the more I realized how important it was—not only for the poem but for my mental balance—to remain of two minds about everything that was happening. One didn't want to be merely skeptical or merely credulous.[2]

In his amazement, the "chosen" poet is forced to see and, at the same time, is frightened by what he sees; "therefore, singing, he *tells"* (Heidegger *505*). Ten years before the publication of the trilogy, Merrill was already aware of the full implication of this dualism; in an interview with David Kalstone based on a discussion of the poem "Yannina" *(Divine Comedies, FF9 327-31*), he concludes:

> People are always asking, Was it real? Did it happen? . . . As if a yes-or-no answer would settle the question. Was it really Yannina I went to? Was my companion real or imaginary? I can only say yes *and* no to questions like this. (R *23*)

Stephen Yenser bases his interpretation of Merrill's work upon an acute analysis of the poet's duplicity and of the implied dualism of his poetics. The double nature of Merrill's universe is seen as a constant *Leitmotif* (Yenser *28-30,111-55*). Willard Spiegelman stresses the fact that Merrill's dualism is not the traditional opposition between antinomic terms as his dialectics admits (and exploits) the parallel existence of twin opinions, pairs, couples, facts which can never coincide, and the sudden and paradoxical coincidence of seemingly irreconcilable elements (Spiegelman 1980). What counts, according to Massimo Bacigalupo, is the freedom, the masterly touch with which Merrill manipulates plot, fabula and registers of various origin, and open and closed forms. His language consists in a precarious and double use of ordinary speech (Bacigalupo *279*). The frequency of puns, that "vertiginous punning" (Berger 1985, *183*) which tends to annoy so many readers, originates from Merrill's belief that puns are no mere tricks of words but, rather, they possess a metaphysical value insofar as they demonstrate that not only single words but also groups of words may have multiple meanings whose interplay works at various semantic levels.

The psychological source of such a duplicity was detected by early interpreters, but it was also acknowledged by Merrill himself:

> A line kept recurring as I wrote my little Greek novel *[The (Diblos) Notebook,* 1965], "the sun and the moon together in the sky." I mean that I was drawn to both sides of things: masculine and feminine, rational and fanciful, passionate and ironic. (R *61*)

The autobiographical protagonist of the early novel *The Seraglio* (1957) was later described by Merrill as "a young man who struggles to see the world singly, but somehow seems doomed to see it doubly" (R *33*). One of the greatest achievements in Merrill's art was to avoid the dramatic train of decisions which that early character takes: castration, withdrawal from human affections, regression, and identification with a negative father-figure. On the contrary, Merrill's dualism has positive consequences especially at an aesthetic level:

> I began to understand the relativity, even the reversibility, of truths. . . . There was truth on both sides. And maybe having arrived at *that* explained my delight in setting down a phrase like, oh, "the pillow's

> dense white dark" or "Au fond each summit is a cul-de-sac." ... I believe the secret lies primarily in the nature of poetry—and of science too, for that matter-and that the ability to see both ways at once isn't merely an idiosyncrasy but corresponds to how the world needs to be seen. (R *80*)

In the universe of science, then, and in the complementary and analogous universe of art, the poet sees "the plus and minus signs of a vast, evolving formula." Helen Vendler's exclusive interest in questions of poetics ("What is this new form [i.e., the language in the trilogy] saying about itself?"), voiced while interviewing the poet." prompts Merrill to answer:

> Something possible to do with the doubleness of its source, spelled out on every page by the interplay between the spirits' capitals and our own lowercase responses. Julian Jaynes' book on the "bicameral mind" came out last year ... reading Jaynes as I was finishing *Mirabell,* I rather goggled. Because the poem is set by and large in two adjacent rooms. (R *52*)

The poet's insistence on the importance of "rooms" and "houses" as features that can help a "cognitive mapping" (to use Frederic Jameson's expression) of inner and outer spaces and, therefore, a global realization of poetry, is one of the most evident aspects of Merrill's postmodernism. An awareness of his *sensus loci* makes possible a correct interpretation of such a difficult masterpiece as the *canzone* "Samos" *(Scripts for the Pageant)* in which an "inborn, amniotic homing sense" ferries the speaker to an "island" that proves to be, for "those who listen," "the Promised Land" ("Samos," *CLS 369-70).* The tone and the rhythm are reminiscent of Poe's sonnet "To Helen," although Merrill's introductory theme corresponds to Poe's final stanza. Most critics tend to reduce Merrill's duplicity to a final unity, both metaphysical and structural. In so doing, however, they lose a firm grip on the manifold articulation of his production. John Paul Russo finds that the "Ouija board, once solidly established, provides structural continuity throughout the epic" (Russo *169*). I find it more rewarding to appreciate a postmodern discontinuity which still does not prevent Merrill from reaching a convincing finale. The trilogy has an open *and* closed ending in *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982) and

in *Voices from Sandover,*[3] which, characteristically, omits the whole "Ballroom" scene; so that the very last words are not the first words of the poem which Merrill starts reading to his audience, but God B's invocation to his brothers in the Pantheon, who do not reply.

After analyzing the "difficulty required to 'transfigure' the scientific messages into complex metaphors ... for human concerns," Russo insists that such a difficulty is not sufficient "to dispel the goodnatured cheerfulness, one of the poem's strongest currents (and meanings). A self-confident unity of tone makes for a coherence of discords" (Russo *157*). Merrill is, in fact, constantly preoccupied with tone, and regularly satisfied and gratified whenever its numberless variations and the resulting shades create a musical pattern; a pattern which, once again, reverberates in endless fugal, polyphonic, and contrapuntal solutions, both in poetry and in prose:

> At one point in *The (Diblos) Notebook* its narrator, the novice novelist, takes stock: "I should have made some sort of scheme to refer to ... Yet I keep imagining, wrongly perhaps, that once I arrive at the right 'tone,' the rest will follow." In a sense, it is *tone,* as both subject matter and manner, that is central to most of what follows. (R *viii)*

The tone and atmosphere of a very early short story, "Rose," remind one of Edmund Wilson's "Ellen Terhune," published a few years later and included in *Memoirs of Hecate County:* both texts are permeated by, or rather "founded" upon, the same use of music as an "uncanny" element which sustains the tension throughout the text.

On the subject of music in Merrill's work, I should add that the poet's musical "dimension" has little or nothing to do with the presence of that impressionistic touch which invaded most forms of art in the late nineteenth century, nor with the modernist rhythm of the avantgarde, though Merrill's references to Ravel, Faure, Debussy, Stravinsky and Satie might make us think otherwise. As Helen Vendler puts it, it is "the music of what happens" which, far from separating the elitistic work of art from its context, helps it come to terms with history, with physical reality, and the objective presence of the body: the vocality, the tone, the sonorous material and the "bodily gesture" of postmodern music, whose invasion in the territories of poetry so intrigues Berio and Sanguineti (Bentivoglio). A "fugal pat-

tern" elaborates the "many-stranded conceit" in Merrill's "minor poems" (such as "Willowware Cup"); "calibrations along a tonal scale" give *The Book of Ephraim* that encyclopedic unity which makes of it Merrill's masterpiece" (Spiegelman 1980, *60*). "The contrapuntal expression of a metaphysics" makes "palatable" *Mirabell, Scripts for the Pageant* and their *Coda: The Higher Keys* (Kuberski *230*); "Voice is the democratic word for *tone.* Tone always sounds snobbish, but without a sense of it, how one flounders" (Spiegelman 1980, *62*).

As a rule, Merrill is less concerned with rhythm ("the best writers can usually be recognized by their rhythms," R *30)* than with *tempo,* as exemplified in the *andante sostenuto* which Baird hears in "Olive Grove" or in "The Lovers," or the *allegro* that he hears in the "spiralling movement" of "Violent Pastoral" (Baird *369-71*). The search for such intertextual and inter-medial analogies can be very tricky. What is certain is the fruitful interplay between spaces and sounds. Merrill's postmodern spaces, his houses and rooms, are appropriately defined by the poet as "acoustical chambers so designed as to endow the weariest platitude with resonance and depth" (R *7*). Needless to say, that all but "dull" platitude is at the very origin of Merrill's process of writing.

Only through music, *tempo* and leitmotifs, does time come to surface in Merrill's poetry. But it is a circular, spatial, postmodern conception of time, as it were; "those basic musical themes in the loom of time are like a wheel endlessly turning" (Baird *374*). This accounts for their presence in "Samos," where I insist in reading the prevalence of space over memory, of a concrete, physical dimension over a spiritual one:

> Wavelengths daily deeply score the leit-
> Motifs of Loom and Wheel upon this land.
> . . . Earth, Air, Water, Fire!
> For once out of the frying pan to land
> Within their timeless, everlasting fire! (*CLS 369-70*)

Merrill's leitmotifs reveal their nature of "diachronic" archetypes in their showing the truth through a slow, hypnotic, almost crystallized movement of time in space, which is the only way to get at the real sense of things. In a recent poem, "The Ring Cycle," Merrill reconstructs the process thus:

> Wagner had been significance itself,
> Great golden lengths of it, stitched with motifs,
> A music in whose folds the mind, at twelve,
> Came to its senses.

Opera, especially when enjoyed in a limited, arcane, circumscribed space, is used by Merrill as a supreme symbol throughout his career: "life as pageant subsumed in music" (Baird *375*). In lieder, arias, and duettos Merrill discovers, and lets himself be penetrated by, an experience which Hindu metaphysics calls *dhvani:* "neither the sound nor the meaning of the word . . . but its suffusion, the vibrating psychic halo around it ... the effect of convergence and context," its "suggestiveness" (Zolla 1978, *169, 173).*[4]

In a play of endless doubles, the poet voices his sounds creating images, and vice versa. The subject, the object, the background, the fictional and the real, the commonplace and the mythical, all mirror each other. "The poet's life is the making of an art of *double* response. Music summons pictures of its sounds. The pictures are then sounded in language" (Baird *361*). A perfect page in Merrill's recent memoir, *A Different Person,* echoes his discovery of the enchantment of the visual arts in Rome in the early fifties (*38*). In Merrill's double-voiced poetry of feeling "emerges the Greek principle of *mousiké* ... the naming of poetry and music as one" (Baird *361*). Baird concludes that Merrill "continues in a double presence of songmaker and mythmaker. There is no other major American poet who has so clearly assumed this double role" (Baird *377*). Merrill's art, then, approaches the mythic "triple perfection" that Pound saw in Chinese ideograms. In *Mirabell* (*6.6*), the spirits explain that even colors derive from sounds:

> ONLY MUSIC & WORDS IMPLICATE THAT LIGHT WHICH BOTH SHEDS & ATTRACTS THAT LIGHT IN WHICH ALONE TRUE COLOR IS SEEN. *(CLS 216)*

Merrill's relationship with Proust is generally analyzed in terms of musical analogies. In his Amherst thesis *("A la recherche du temps perdu:* Impressionism in Literature," 1947), the young scholar made use of a visual rather than a musical terminology in his comparative approach. Later, however, apart from the long list of titles of pieces, names of composers, singers and players which constellate his macro-

text, Merrill emulated Proust in exploiting the function of musical themes, structures and techniques throughout his production (Bruce). Once again, Merrill's appropriation of Proust is dual. On the one hand, he congenially recreates Proustian atmospheres and pre-modernist motifs; on the other, Proust's text appears—and appeals—to Merrill as an *ante litteram* postmodern "tremendous intrigue, a farce network" in which "everything ends by coinciding," as postulated by Roland Barthes (Barthes 1978, *138*; Yenser *8, 340n).*

In Merrill's postmodern reading of Proust, the French master's art of recollection has, again, more to do with the sense of space than with the sense of time; Proust's remembrances, in fact, are felt like "acoustical chambers." In this atemporal, suspended space, echoes of sounds coincide with reflections of images in mirrors. Vertical surfaces reflect horizontal ones, an object reproduces a human being, a bidimensional frame reproduces and imprisons a three-dimensional reality. Reflections and echoes of sounds lead to "introjection ... a defense of identification," for which Harold Bloom detects also American models, namely, Emerson and Whitman (Bloom *3*) and to the restoration of harmony between man and the universe. In a postmodern world, "no matter where you stand, you are always looking at yourself in a mirror" (Centore *13*). And if this postmodern mirror is convex, as in John Ashbery, the artist's self-portrait results in a figure who is "wearing out of doors into the countryside" a sleeveless vest made by others ("Ode to Bill") or a mask, "like a fine white shirt" ("Another August," in *The Fire Screen, FF9* 198; Ashbery 1975).

Through recollection, repetition, rehearsal, and mirroring of past things, memory restores what life denies ("For Proust," in *Water Street, FF9 114*). Merril's mature style reaches "la qualité d'une vision," the Proustian definition for a metaphor which is not a mere rhetorical figure but a "living" one (Macchia). Time remains "Ever that Everest among concepts" which is, in fact, identified with the initially impervious father (Father Time in "The Broken Home," *Nights and Days, FF9 140;* Spiegelman 1980, *60).* The only way to cope with such a disproportionate idea is through the concept of "memory as translation": thanks to translation, when everything seems "buried" or "missing," we discover that

> ... nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
> And every bit of us is lost in it
> (Or found ...)
> And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
> Color of context, imperceptibly
> Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
> To shade and fiber, milk and memory. *(FF9 352)*

A splendid "translation" of Merrill's father, which finally succeeds in catching the "fleeing moment," the solemnity and the banality of his "small, compact figure in smart clothes," is offered in the "timeless present" of *A Different Person:* "His company, by those late years, was an end in itself. As part of his entourage, I no longer questioned how to improve the hour ... I lay back, contented, in the very arms of Time" (*42*). In his recent memoir describing his "life with father" in Rome, Capri and Florence, Merrill creates something similar to that "dignified image of man, nature and architecture set in quixotic disruption" that Jencks sees in De Chirico, the artist whom he considers the greatest forerunner of postmodernism (Jencks 1986, *9*).

The theme of time is obviously related to that of history. Here Merrill's position is perfectly equidistant between modernism (namely, that "schismatic modernism" described by Frank Kermode, *103;* cf. Berger *284*) and postmodernism. He has often insisted that his poems were never meant to be "historical." When David Kalstone expressed his suspicion that "Yannina" was "almost *about* history" Merrill came out with a parodic definition of history as "a kind of time-zoo." And yet his interviewer was right in concluding: "It's as if you need the past as a sounding board" (R *20-21*). Elsewhere, Merrill used the mask of Marguerite Yourcenar to parry an embarrassing question: "all the historical poems are intimate, just as all the intimate poems are historical" (R *102*). Once again, this "yes-*and*-no" answer confirms Merrill's "weak" conception of history. "Postmodern art is both intensively self-reflexive and parodic, yet it also attempts to root itself in ... the historical world" (Hutcheon 1988, *x*).

Equally "in-between" is Merrill's position towards Dante. In this case, the thrust of the trilogy was at the origin of a significant shift: in

Merrill's view, Dante moved from the role of the ancient, most important master of the modernist generation (the poet "first read and met in the 'Prufrock' epigraph," *R 87*) to that of the "turbulent parodist" for whom the spirits of Hell and Heaven prepare a grand show, an illusionistic *mise-en-scène,* a luminous, sometimes frivolous performance (Citati). Merrill suspects that the author of "the electronic marvels of paradise ... a laser show of supreme illusion projected through his human senses and image banks," was probably granted "something distinct from mere 'inspiration'" (*R 88*). His postmodern curiosity will not rest until the universe of the *Divine Comedy* is reconciled with post-Einsteinian physics—which is what Mark A. Peterson tries to do, much to Merrill's satisfaction (*R 90*). From the unique vantage point of his own achievement (epic in more than one sense), Merrill agrees with Jerome Mazzaro that the model for the "smell" of postmodern poetry "is a bouquet or the angelic choir of Dante's *Paradiso*—a unity that does not connote uniformity" (Mazzaro x). Despite all its "bag of tricks ... grotesque farrago ... eclectic middle style," "the *Comedy* throughout sustains the equilibrium we have been told to look for in a *haiku* by Basho" (*R 93*). In such a mood, soon after completing *The Changing Light at Sandover—"* a species of the comic sublime, the assertion of wit and cultivated sensibility in the very throes of an ecstatic seizure"[5]—Merrill writes "Grass":

> The river irises
> Draw themselves in. Enough to have seen
> Their day. (Merrill 1985, *3*)

This very crucial moment, the beginning of a supposedly new phase after the unnerving transcription and revision of the trilogy's otherwordly messages, fascinates the reader. There is a general consensus that, after this period of revision, Merrill emerges with a *souplesse* analogous to Calvino's "leggerezza," without any loss of the astonishing, energetic brushstroke which gave him the capacity to solve every conceivable technical problem. When Merrill "began as a Fabergé among the post-Modern American poets," no one could foresee his extraordinary progress; when he became a subversive presence ... a

writer who will try anything" (Yenser *39-40*), an author who "openly revives the category of the outrageous," who even casts an "uncanny shadow ... on earlier poets" (Berger 1985, *187-88*,) few could foresee his suave, yet not tame, "third phase."

In recent interviews, Merrill has confirmed his old faith in "that kind of submission" which is "one of the darkest secrets of technique" (R *36*). As he put it, much of the trilogy was written "'for' me, at the board ... so that it all went like the wind" (*R 55*); "the Lessons you see on the page appear just as we took them down ... the design of the book just swept me along" (*R 65*). Merrill's work following the trilogy is not inconsistent with his *magnum opus*, just as the trilogy is not in contrast with his previous poetry: a series of nine collections which show no less density, richness and complexity of linguistic and thematic plot than does *The Changing Light at Sandover*. In Merrill's works written between 1946 and 1976, there are hints and forebodings as well as concrete proofs of his postmodern sensibility. Signals of that "ironic *difference* at the heart of what is usually considered a *similarity"* bring along "an authorized transgression of convention" (Spiegelman 1980, *61*); the poet's language, expelled in the late modernist phase from the Eden of "unity," gradually accepts its own division and copes with it (Mazzaro *viii);* popular culture enters Merrill's art decades before the incredible *bric-à-brac*, the *pastiche* so hard to "transfigure," as the poet is fond of saying:

> ... all this
> Warmed-up Milton, Dante, Genesis?
> This great tradition that has come to grief
> In volumes by Blavatsky and Gurdjieff?
> Von and Torro in their Star Trek capes,
> Atlantis, UFOs, God's chosen apes ... *(CLS 136)*

After the polyphonic and polymorphic texture of the trilogy ("a romance in certain way—and perhaps a mock-romance in others?" *R 61*), the reader is faced with artistic works which, though pertaining to clearly definite categories, still present every possible postmodern characteristic. *Recitative* (1986) is a collection of essays, reviews and interviews, plus two short stories ("Rose" and "The Driver") and a psycho-autobiographical piece ("Peru: The Landscape Game"). In

spite of his tendency to quote extensively from his verses, Merrill reconciles himself to the medium of prose, the tricky medium of his early novels (and of the massive typescript, twice forgotten in a taxi, in Georgia and in Germany: "I shall be glad to have these interludes [as he defines these prose pages] assembled, whenever *Una voce poco fa* finds itself with nothing to say, or *Il mio tesoro* falls outside the tenor's range" (R *xiii).* In the book and in his interviews, Merrill expresses "paradigms of non homogeneous rationality . . . tied only to the specificity of their respective field of application" (Russo *161*).

Late Settings (1985) and *The Inner Room* (1988) are collections of poetry. The former includes short, intimate pieces full of mixed feelings—in general, "postmodern" feelings, as the classical virtue of *pietas* revived in nostalgia (Russo *162*)—along with dramatic, "lower key" *codas,* after the "higher key" *Coda* which concluded the trilogy; atoms or remains of souls do not accept that it is all over, and insist on speaking, stammering, moaning, peeping. But there is also a "double" translation (cf. "Palme"), based on Paul Valery's original as well as on Rilke's translation of it, a major theme in "Lost in Translation," written ten years before. There are almost maniacal efforts at explaining things in the trilogy which have remained obscure (starting from the title: "Clearing the Title"), transparent evidence of a sort of post-delivery syndrome. Perhaps the best poem is "Bronze," a long composition in which history is illuminated by expressionistic flashes of postmodern discontinuity (Thompson; Dixon). *The Inner Room* is a kind of "mixed media" output: it includes a series of shorter poems, a one-act play *(The Image Maker,* previously published in 1986), and "Prose of Departure," "itself another striking departure from Merrill's recent work . . . . It intersperses its prose with *hokku* in a manner reminiscent of Basho's travel journals" (Yenser, back cover of Merrill 1988).

A Different Person is, as the subtitle states, *a memoir,* an autobiography "through synecdoche." Merrill's European experience (mainly in Rome) in the early 1950s, so vividly portrayed, proves to be an excuse to illuminate his entire life by means of a network of backward and forward flashes. The superimposition of the author with the narrator and the protagonist of the text does not cancel a subtle

articulation of the self, which can be appreciated as the culmination of a postmodern problem underlying the whole of Merrill's production.

As Frederic Jameson insists, in postmodern literature personal feelings, ideas and impression are left free to "fluctuate" until the subject is possessed by "euphory." Hidden under many masks, deeply buried or projected onto the world through an "oracular voice" by modernist masters, the self emerges again as a fragmented, often gratuitous and frivolous "I." This happens when, finally, the text loses consciousness of any neat distinction between subject and object. The articulation of "confessional" poetry depends on the extent to which the poetic *persona* feels like throwing away all masks-or, rather, prefers different degrees of dilution of the ego.[6]

"In *Braving the Elements* Merrill avoids both extremes ... supersaturation of his world with his own presence and his impulse towards escape and flight. The poet offers poems about the self but without the anxious grasping toward identity of Lowell or Berryman" (Schulman *113-14).* In "An Urban Convalescence" *(Water Street),* McClatchy sees clear analogies with Lowell's "Beyond the Alps" *(Life Studies),* "whose crucial autobiographical emphasis may well have helped Merrill to fashion the circumstantial intimacy of his own poem" (McClatchy *65-66).* Merrill himself confesses, "I am very personal in this poem" (*R 45*). "From the Cupola" *(Nights and Days),* on the other hand, "begins with the statement that this is not going to be a confessional poem" (*R 31*): "to *sound* personal is the point ... Pound and Eliot ... have impersonal, oracular voices" (*R 27*); "John Ashbery is closest in our language to [Mallarme's] tradition.... [T]he means—imagery, tone, and so forth—can be as personal as you like, so long as the end is not to express personality" (*R 39*). The truth is that even though "the confessional poem . . . is the quintessential poem of experience—of personal experience from a lived-in and concrete situation," in explicitly treating his life "the poet is not making his poetry more personal but depersonalizing his own life" (Falck *155*). Merrill's education was very similar to Ashbery's, who confessed: "I always thought that to speak about myself would be immodest" (Bacigalupo *271*). So, if it is true that postmodern poetry is no longer obsessed by the need of suffocating all personal impulses, it is also true that, unlike Romantic, Wordsworthian verse autobiography, it "insists

less on the presentation of a *single* identity, on myths of assured growth." So Merrill, not unlike Ashbery, "has made a career of uncertainty, of multiplying beams of awareness"; in his "major phase," his work is intimately related "to these explorations, to these hybrid works" (Kalstone 129). Both Ashbery and Merrill include narrative elements "in order to question the very nature of the *order* that a systematic plot structure implies" (Perloff 1985, *158*).

Merrill's Ouija board, which Russo perceptively defines "an opportune game," allows the poet to call upon "the vast reservoir of the unconscious in the exercise of the play impulse"; Ouija, a *folie à deux*, is "a means of reaching the personal unconscious" (Russo *149*) and also the Jungian collective unconscious." Thus "Merrill's poem becomes a masque that stages the education of earthly souls in the ways of heaven through a succession of costumes that leads finally to the disappearance of the 'self'" (Kuberski *244*):

> Don't you think there comes a time when everyone, not just a poet, wants to get beyond the self? To reach, if you like, the "god" within you? The board, in however clumsy or absurd a way, allows for precisely that. Or if it's still *yourself* that you're drawing upon, then that self is much stronger and freer and more far seeing than the one you thought you knew. (*R 66*)

Gradually, "mind and nature are wedded" in the trilogy (Spiegelman 1980, *63*), which is precisely what happens in postmodern science (Bateson). The problem of the authorship recedes, identity and revelation coincide, and the ego is able to grasp a "vision" in so far as it becomes "as fluid as the atom" and sees things from within (Spiegelman 1980, *64*).

A contrastive analysis of Pound's and Merrill's poetry helps the critic to distinguish between the modernist and postmodernist sides of Merrill's art. "Zukovsky's *A* and—in its very different way—James Merrill's 'Ouija Board' trilogy, give testimony to the vitality of the 'daedalian art' of the *Cantos"* (Perloff 1990, *144*). Perloff's acute sensibility is not mistaken; Merrill's epic, which "incorporates into the text ... patches of narrative and of dramatic dialogue, allusions to historical and mythological figures, scientific documentation, personal letters, foreign phrases, and typographical play ... could hardly have

come into being without the example of the *Cantos" (120-21).* Its diction is, by and large, more Poundian than that of most postmodern poems, and prefers, in fact, trochaic to iambic prosody. Early poems by Merrill distinguished themselves for their flawlessness and, in spite of their frequent pathetic nuances, for a phrasing which seemed to obey Pound's dictum: "tell it straight" *(125).* The postmodern diffusiveness of Merrill's trilogy never betrays a "superficial choice of words"; on the contrary, it shows "the cult of exactitude, of a stubborn literalness," evident in such passages as this:

> . . . Between our dining room and stairs
> Leading to the future studio
> From long before our time, was this ill-lit
> Shoebox of a parlor where we'd sit
> Faute de mieux, when not asleep or eating.
> It had been prepared by the original people—
> Blue-on-eggshell foliage touchingly
> Mottled or torn in places . . . *(CLS 97)*

("Pound would have omitted the word *touchingly,"* adds Perloff.[8]

Merrill's recent shorter poems reveal the same fluctuation between iambic, anapestic, and trochaic prosody that one finds in Ashbery's lines. Their search for the *mot juste* and for the right image remains unchanged:

> On a vast slide you'll study
> The life in one gold drop of heaven's blood—
> Rapidly overlapping rival circuses,
> Like animated ink
> Drawings by Mirò— ("Walks in Rome," *The Inner Room 78)*

Merrill's fascination with "the other world" and with the mythical paradigm of *nékuya* is both Poundian, modernist, and postmodernist. Its least blatant, most intimate elaboration appears in "Up and Down" (Part 2: "The Emerald," *Braving the Elements, FF9 276*) where a visit to the bank *down*-town becomes a surrealistic descent into Hades—not to meet, like Odysseus, his mother's soul but, accompanied by his mother, to tell her (and tell *himself)* a truth hard to tell. Before that, already *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (and

then, occasionally, almost all the other collections) showed the author's faith in the "sacerdotal function of art ... in a disjointed society" (Spiegelman 1980, *53*). Merrill, however, refuses a final pessimism about both the personal and the collective future. Despite all the negative aspects in contemporary history and in man's exploitation of nature, notwithstanding the terrible warnings, the dangers, and the black holes revealed by the "divine powers," Merrill is far from Gadamer's hermeneutic dimension; the "otherness" of things, events, and people in daily reality does not lead him to the despair of self-alienation and utter incommunicability. In fact, as Harold Bloom remarks, "what is most original and valuable in Merrill's poetry comes out of his otherness, out of a quality that transcends even a sensibility from the highest Camp, as it were" (Bloom *5-6).* Different and opposite "spheres of existence" can establish a dialogue through distance; in the moving final scene of *Coda: The Higher Keys,* Vassìli finds relief from the loss of his wife when he is allowed to take part in a ceremony he does not understand and can only imagine the "other" shore, "Beyond whose depthless dazzle he can't see" *(CLS 560).*

Merrill's refusal of pessimism is all the more surprising if we consider his faith in determinism ("REMEMBER NO ACCIDENT," *Mirabell,* 5.6, *CLS 196-97*); a "truth which he comes to terms with precisely through the practice of the Ouija board," a game being the best way to understand that "chance and determinism ... converge in the inexorable *fatum,* to which one accomodates where one cannot impose" (Russo *158, 159*).[9] Even though Merrill never cared for the pose of the atheist, he had "thrown out the baby with the churchly bathwater" rather early in his life *(R 70).* Polyhymnia, the Muse of the Sacred Poetry, is conspicuously absent from the trilogy; which is "not so much a visionary poem as a revisionary one" (*R 56*). "Merrill remains a secular epiphanist, committed to the Poem of Science" (Berger 1985, *183*). Doubtlessly, his insistence on "the preemptive role of language" (Kuberski *250-51)* is postmodern ("THE REVEALED MONOTHEISM OF TODAY IS LANGUAGE," *Mirabell, 7.9., CLS 239).* Although politically uncommitted, Merrill presents his readers with global issues like the nuclear bomb, the dangers of "science as mere technology," overpopulation, and the ecological claims which became all too obvious in postmodern literature (Zimmerman). The

few critics who insist on finding a "religious streak" in Merrill's metaphysics and in his poetry agree that his peculiar doctrine is very akin to Gnosticism; yet, his "creation-by-catastrophe" is less apocalyptic than, say, Pynchon's, leaving no sense of guilt or of grief in his texts (Bloom *2*). *Late Settings* is a *mise-en-scène* and, perhaps even more, a *mise-en-abîme* of a "mood of catastrophe and mystery ... alleviated by small emblems of hope" (Jencks 1987, *25*, plates 18-20). The significant presence of a "hidden moralistic narrative" groups Merrill with Rauschenberg, Stephen McKenna, Eco, John Barth, and Borges. "Merrill has always been concerned with breaking and interruptions [e. g., "the breaking of the vessels"] and it is to these that we should attend in order to restore and appreciate the harmony of the whole" (Spiegelman 1983, *187-88*). His God B, no less than that of Moshe from Cordova or Issaphar Shlomo Teichtal, needs man (who supports, like Atlas, the divine *kosmos)* and his "transgressions" (Mopsik). The "heights of degradation in 'Days of 1964' are the only possible habitation of that illusion where a God breathes through one's lips" (Bloom *6*):

> If that was illusion, I wanted it to last long;
> To dwell, for its daily pittance, with us there,
> Cleaning and watering, sighing with love or pain.
> I hoped it would climb when it needed to the heights
> Even of degradation ... *(FF9 165-66)*

A similar, necessary "ceremonial" degradation appears more than three decades later in "Walks in Rome," where a modern Antinous, "despite / The warm blue honey of his glances, / Golden hair and mornings at the gym, / ... didn't get the part":

> He smiles, blowing a kiss
>
> And gliding off—our cavalier of stealth
> Turning the nearest corner, lest we see him
> Make for that blackest mass, the Colosseum,
> Whose faithful have stayed up to drink his health. *(The Inner Room 77)*

If a god sometimes breathes through the poet's mouth, other gods often impose reticence and silence. This is the case with Cavafy who, with Elizabeth Bishop, is Merrill's ideal modern poet (Merrill

1986). Poetry at its best, therefore, is "silence underscored with words, words offered up in sacrifice to silence" (Zona 1978, *166*; A. Mariani).

When in search of a comprehensive adjective to define Merrill's poetry, critics shift from "manneristic" to "baroque," from "rococo" to "Augustan," from "neoclassical" to "Alexandrinian." His *horror vacui,* the sense of *déja vu,* the lack of critical distancing, the extreme elegance of "flat" landscapes and emblems which can be found in his early lyrics, are all signs of a *rétro* mannerism, a primary, unaware postmodernism. Recently, the theory (and practice) of "text as performance" found expression in a performance that turns to a perfectly balanced text. The description of the poetic "I" who disperses a friend's ashes in the ocean bypasses the risk of pathetism thanks to the controlled mannerism of its sapphic strophes:

> Peter who grasped the buoy,
> I who held the box underwater, freeing
> all it contained. Past
>
> sunny, fluent soundings
> that gruel of selfhood taking manlike shape for one last jeté on
> ghostly—wait, ah!—point into darkness vanished.
> ("Farewell Performance," *The Inner Room 93)*

The term "baroque," as applied to Merrill's art, bears no negative connotations. Like all postmodern poets, Merrill discovers and accepts the fact that "the baroque and the artificial—the impossible—are no less real than the realistic and low-keyed." In Derrida's words, "unheard-of-thoughts" "sought from across the memory of old signs" help the poets to understand that "the medium they use to imagine is identical in form to what they imagine" (Kuberski *251*). Back in the 1950s, reading Wallace Stevens' *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction,* Merrill had found himself "basking in a climate that Proust might have called one of 'involuntary philosophy.' A world ... charged with novel meanings; or potentially charged with them; or alternately charged with thought and (by the enchantment of language) absolved from thought as well" (*R 117*). In such a reading, Merrill reveals another postmodern trait. If, as Stevens said, "God and the imagination are one," poetry can be charged with meaning

and/or freed from it—a "freedom from representation" contemporary art always longed for. This heuristic, "world-comprehending" attitude is both modern and postmodern (Falck *65*). Merrill's trilogy is possibly the most "revealing" and the least "representative" *summa* of a universe which prefers to be "uncovered" rather than "reproduced." Like Ephraim's educational technique—so much in the vein of Stevens and in keeping with Jung's teachings—Merrill's heuristics can also be traced back to Rousseau's urbane irony and to his smiling confidence in the value of paradox for *self-education* (Spiegelman 1980, 62). In *The Book of Ephraim* "it becomes clear that the self, as Lacan has written, is a representation that can become a subject for another representation" (Kuberski 247). Literature (and Merrill's trilogy more so than other texts) "is not a discourse that can or must be false . . . it is neither true nor false . . . this is what defines its very status as *fiction"* (Todorov 18).

The "rococo representation of nacreous objects," which charms Spiegelman in Merrill's early poetry (Spiegelman 1980, *54*), returns in his recent phase; real objects, however, stay in front of the author ready "to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances," as Cassirer would have it (Spiegelman 1980, *58*). Realism, in a postmodern perspective, "is an incoherent and allusive notion" (Falck *150-51*). In "The Blue Grotto" the clash between reality, imagination, expectation, symbolic activity, and feeling finds a solution in "The astute sob, the kiss / Blown in sheer routine / Unselfconsciousness" of the native boatman who, singing "a vocal gem / Ten times a day rehearsed" (an apparently banal cliché), redeems a stereotyped "reality" through fiction and, again, through performance, puts all other characters "to shame" *(Late Settings 62*). Here, as in other recent texts, Merrill seems to run the risk of landing in a world of "hyperreal simulacra." The danger is avoided thanks to a strenuous resistance to Utopia (Hutcheon 1988, *xiii).*

Bianca Tarozzi links Merrill's sedate and equanimous tone to his Augustan and neoclassical register, which is perfectly attuned to the self-referentiality implicit in the opening of the poem and in its conclusion (Tarozzi; Falck *153, 159*). But the highest praise comes to Merrill from those, such as Yenser and Bloom, who compare his art to Mozart's: "Merrill's work develops from itself. In this respect he is a

different kind of writer from Yeats, with whom he has strong affinities. The latter, in Northrop Frye's clear assessment, 'is one of the growing poets ... He belongs with Goethe and Beethoven, not with the artists who simply unfold, like Blake and Mozart'... Merrill, ... however, his own innovations notwithstanding, belongs with Mozart" (Yenser *31*). As it is always the case with Mozart, in Merrill at his best all mannerist, baroque, rococo and neoclassical elements are consumed as if in a sublime melting pot, and a quintessential, classical light is produced: "the changing light or perfection that consoles, even though, like every true manifestation of the strong light of the canonical, it is also necessarily the perfection that destroys" (Bloom *7*).

* * *

Mr. Merrill has kindly granted *RSA Journal* permission to publish for the first time one of his recent poems. I shall take advantage of these remarkable "rimas dissolutas" in the Provençal tradition to conclude my observations.

VOLCANIC HOLIDAY

1
Our helicopter shaking like a fist
Hovers above the churning
Cauldron of red lead in what a passion!
None but the junior cherubim ask why.
We bank and bolt. Shores draped in gloom
Upglint to future shocks of wheat.
Your lips, unheard, move through the din of blades.

2
A Mormon merman, God's least lobbyst,
Prowls the hotel. All morning
Sun tries to reason with the old mad ocean
We deep down feel the pull of. And in high
Valleys remote from salt and spume
Waterfalls jubilantly fleet
Spirit that thunder into glancing braids.

3
Thunder or bamboos drumming in the mist?
Tumbril or tribal warning?
Pacific Warfare reads the explanation
For a display we'd normally pass by:
Molars of men who snarled at doom
Studding a lava bowl. What meat
Mollifies the howl of famished shades?

4
Crested like palms, like waves, they too subsist
On one idea—returning.
Generation after generation
The spirit grapples, tattered butterfly,
A flower in sexual costume,
Hardon or sheath dew-fired. Our feet
At noon seek paths the evening rain degrades.

5
Adolescence, glowering unkissed:
The obstacle course yearning
Grew strong in. Cheek to cliff face, sheer devotion
To be loved back, then, would have been to die.
Then, not now. Show me the tomb
Whose motto and stone lyre compete
With this life-giving fever. As it fades

6
From the Zen chapel comes that song by Liszt.
Is love a dream? A burning,
Then a tempering? Beyond slopes gone ashen,
Rifts that breathe gas, rivers that vitrify,
Look! a bough falters into bloom.
Twin rainbows come and go, discreet,
As when together we haunt virgin glades.

7
Moments or years hence, having reminisced,
May somebody discerning
Arrive at tranquil words for . . . mere emotion?
Meanwhile let green-to-midnight shifts of sky
Fill sliding mirrors in our room
—No more eruptions, they entreat—
With Earth's repose and Heaven's masquerades.

The texture of the poem is, once again, more spatial than temporal. No explicit spatial or temporal reference is given, but precise allusions to Japan are offered, so that the reader's *sensus loci* can respond to the author, and the "scenario" is set. On the contrary, the time coordinates are characteristically hazy. The poem is somehow crystallized between an atemporal simple present and a sudden, punctual simple past (st. 5: "The obstacle course yearning / Grew strong in"); a hypothetical future hinting at a wish is soon put aside (st. 7: "may somebody discerning / Arrive...). The present tense (both the flash-back present of the individual memory and the historical present of the collective unconscious) prevents the reader from determining whether the poem recalls an early visit of perhaps decades ago or a most recent one. Moreover, actions and events do not actually "happen": what is revealed, then, is a crowded pastiche, a cluster of details, a bunch of indirections, pieces of a puzzle, clippings, echoes, snapshots in a collage.

The only way to cope with such a demanding challenge lies in detecting the various tricks (and tics) of the old conjurer, magician, and medium. Elements of an ironic masquerade run through the text and, in the last line, are sealed in the very word "masquerades" —which embraces and sums up the plotless, many-fragmented story. The harsh combination of elements deriving from high and popular culture, myth and reality, fiction and biography, establishes an evident trait of continuity through postmodern discontinuity. "Mormon merman" (st. 2) delights in the narcissistic, acoustic *qui pro quo;* the couple "junior cherubim" *(not* "cherubs"; st. 1) shows Merrill's insistence, after the trilogy, in playing with fire—namely, the fire of the supernatural, of the "angelic spheres." More intriguingly, the couple "Zen

chapel/song by Liszt" (st. 6), another emergence of Merrill's enduring dualism, presents us with two ambiguous terms: a Zen chapel in twentieth century Japan, far from being "the real thing," is a cliché, i.e., that which the typical tourist wants to find. Liszt is its Western equivalent: a popular icon of (or substitute for) the "real" cultural heritage.

In a similar vein, "What meat / Mollifies the howl of famished shades" is a heterogeneous triple image, with a Virgilian and Dantesque far background, an expressionist center stage, and a postmodern foreground, worthy of a zombie film. The temptation to escape from the context (and from the text itself) is exemplified by "high / Valleys remote" (st. 2), which, happily enough, is counterbalanced by the (once again) double and dubious *rappel à l'ordre* which opens the third stanza: "Thunder or bamboos," "Tumbril or tribal." But through the text creeps another, and subtler, temptation: that of "mourning" ("Show me the tomb," st. 5), whose "solemnity" the text regularly, though *in extremis,* resists. The couple "Hardon or sheath dew-fired" (st. 4) is reminiscent of Georgia O' Keeffe's fascinating blow-ups, literally "flowers in sexual costume." The ancient idea of love as "necessary degradation" appears in "paths the evening rain degrades" (st. 4).

The intricacies of these stanzas provide vast territories for an endless exercise in rewarding close reading. Merrill's style, his metaphors, his linguistic creations, absorb and reflect light like a manyfaceted prism. The *mise-en-scène,* the pageant, the "performance," have curious affinities with Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams:* a splendid film, though a hybrid product, openly based on the supposed expectations of the Western public. The gist of Merrill's discourse did not change much through the years: sooner or later somebody will "arrive at *tranquil* words for . . . mere *emotion"* (st. 7). Who, if not the poet?

The seeming banality of "Is love a dream? A burning, / Then a tempering?" (st. 6) is redeemed by the lines that follow, and which, in my opinion, are the best in the poem:

> . . . Beyond slopes gone ashen,
> Rifts that breathe gas, rivers that vitrify,
> Look! a bough falters into bloom.

As Barthes reminds us, a banal theme or image is often necessary to set in motion the process of (postmodern?) literature (Barthes 1978b; Ashbery 1979, *74*). Here Merrill reaches an icastic concentration, a pregnancy of "vision" in a flash, precisely fighting against a worn-out *topos* and his own age-old tendency towards sentimentality. A thorough master of his art, as both a modernist and a postmodernist, Merrill continues to evince an essential and priceless gift: openness to surprise—a gem-like characteristic he noticed, admired and envied in his friend and fellow poet, Hans Lodeizen. The words with which he describes Lodeizen in *A Different Person* can thus be read as a self-portrait in retrospect:

> However vital to him the writing of poetry, good manners made him treat it as something that simply "happened," as if a tree should say with a rueful shrug, "Look, these little pink what-d'you-call-'ems have broken out all along my branches." *(47)*

[1] Quotations from the nine collections preceding the trilogy, *From the First Nine*, are identified as *FF9*. Quotations from *The Changing Light at Sandover* are identified as *CLS*.

[2] "An Interview with Fred Bornhauser," *53*; henceforth, *R*. For the metafictional paradox implied, see Hutcheon 1988, *x*.

[3] *Voices from Sandover*, a "dramatic reading with the author, Leah Doyle and Peter Hooten, directed by James Sheldon," was videotaped at the Agassiz Theatre, Cambridge, MA, in the summer and fall of 1990; cf. Merrill 1993, *266-67*. On the advertising leaflet, Merrill explains: "Since *The Changing Light at Sandover* would take over seventeen hours merely to read aloud, it seemed wiser to extract from the many narrative and thematic strands that compose this very long poem an arbitrary few and weave them into a script for three voices." Yenser adds his opinion: "rather than an abridgment of his monumental poem, James Merrill's *Voices from Sandover* is a work in its own rights, a splendid lyric drama." Merrill calls it a *libretto* waiting for the appropriate music.

[4] Cf. Baird: "... the aural response to music and the impulse to put 'the sound of meaning' back into words" *(371)*.

[5] See Lehman *40* and also Sontag *290:* "The two pioneering forces in modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony" *(290)*.

[6] *Recitative 25*. Cf. also: "I've always been suspicious of the word experimentation. It partakes too much of staircase wit ... Poets have simply recognized afterwards the newness of what they've done."

[7] "Schiller said 'All art is play,' but it will nevertheless need to be an art which goes beyond the ludic in its currently mainly trivial interpretation" (Falck *148*; cf. also *150-51*).

[8] Perloff 1990, 144. As early as 1956 Alfredo Rizzardi observed that Merrill at his best succeeds in showing the possibility of semantic disgregation, but keeps it well within the word and the phrase.

[9] "Freedom is just a crack in the wall of determinism" (Russo *159*).

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