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SOUNDING THE HIGHER KEYS:
COMIC VISION IN JAMES MERRILL'S
THE CHANGING LIGHT AT SANDOVER

by

James Panabaker, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate studies in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August 15, 1987

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"Sounding the Higher Keys:
Comic Vision in James Merrill's
The Changing Light at Sandover"

submitted by James Panabaker, B.A.
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis examines the comic vision of James Merrill's The Changing Light at Sandover, especially as it moves from perceptions of limiting dualities toward a vision of unity and affirmation. Focussing initially upon Merrill's experimentations with form and language in his earlier work, this study traces the development of a poetic voice capable of sustaining the scope and complexity of his trilogy. The comic impulse is then discussed in relation to the poems of love and secular drama in "The Book of Ephraim," the blend of science and myth in "Mirabell's Book of Numbers," through the transforming mysticism of "Scripts for the Pageant," culminating in the resolution of the "Coda: The Higher Keys." Central to his vision in The Changing Light is an understanding of Merrill's poetics of imaginative translation, where the creative act brings disparate perceptions and dimensions into a healing aesthetic conjunction.

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To Melanie Panabaker

Legend

- AQ Labrie, Ross. "James Merrill at Home: An Interview."
Arizona Quarterly 38 (1982): 19-36.
- BE Braving the Elements.
- CL The Changing Light at Sandover.
- CP The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (Rev. ed.).
- DC Divine Comedies.
- DN The (Diblos) Notebook.
- FP First Poems.
- FN From the First Nine: Poems 1946-1976.
- FS The Fire Screen.
- ND Nights and Days.
- NY Vendler, Helen. "James Merrill's Myth: An Interview."
The New York Review of Books 3 May 1979: 12-13.
- R Recitative: Prose by James Merrill. Ed. J.D. McClatchy.
- S The Seraglio.
- SC Lunn, Jean. "A Conversation with James Merrill."
Sandscript: By Cape Cod Writers 6 (1982): 2-22.

Chapter One

The Poetics of Imaginative Translation

The poet isn't always the hero of a movie who does this, does that. He is a man choosing the words he lives by. (R 21)

"The ability to see both ways at once," suggests James Merrill, "isn't merely an idiosyncrasy but corresponds to how the world needs to be seen: cheerful and awful, opaque and transparent" (R 80). This idea of an essential duality in all perception lies at the heart of Merrill's poetics. Adhering to an early conception of the "relativity, even the reversibility, of truths" (R 80), Merrill remains suspicious of dogmatic solutions for interpreting experience. This is evident in his play on the celebrated dictum of William Carlos Williams:

No thoughts, then, but in things? True enough, so long as the notorious phrase argues not for the suppression of thought but for its oneness with whatever in the world -- pine woods, spider, cigarette -- gave rise to it. Turn the phrase around, you arrive no less at truth, no things but in thoughts. (R 109)

Merrill rejects the generalizing effect of ideas preferring a close examination of the various layers of consciousness coexistent in perception. Embracing diversity and opposition comes naturally to a poet who acknowledges being

"drawn to both sides of things: masculine and feminine, rational and fanciful, passionate and ironic"(R 61). The result is a poetry of inclusive vision, one that moves through duality toward a unity based upon balance and relation. Composition becomes "the essential act," where the poet-magician "heals what ... [is] divided"(R 20) and opposites are brought "into peaceful coexistence"(R 115).

By exploring the protean capacities of language, the ability of "any word [to] lead ... from the kitchen-garden into really inhuman depths"(R 28), Merrill creates a poetry of resonance and power. For him the potency of the imagination resides in its ability to make the "inessential suddenly felt as essence"(R 35), to invest the mundane and accidental with universal elements and a sense of perceived design. The process of poetic creation becomes the "search for magical places ... acoustical chambers so designed as to endow the weariest platitude with resonance and depth"(R 7). Commenting on the work of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop, Merrill admires the way their poems remain "on the scale of a human life"(R 28), yet also resonate to the furthest reaches of the human imagination. Merrill finds in their seemingly hermetic approach to experience the potential for touching upon fundamental concerns. He declares that a "[t]otal, clear-eyed immersion in one's own little world produces ... an excellent likeness of the universe"(R 39). By focussing upon the "act of

transition"(R 7) made possible through language, Merrill works toward a sense of the "unities of home and world ... world and page"(R 7).

Like perception and expression, unity in other facets of experience also hinges upon this central concept of translation. Describing a poem as "an act of self-purification"(R 8), a movement through language toward a clarity initially unforeseen, Merrill touches upon the importance of discovery in the act of creation. He remarks:

You hardly ever need to state your feelings.
The point is to feel and keep the eyes open.
Then what you feel is expressed, is mined
back at you by the scene. A room, a landscape.... We don't know what we feel until
we see it distanced by this kind of translation.(R 22)

What begins as a mirror dissolves into a window, and the act of observation becomes a process of revelation. Artistic expression incorporates a like combination of outlook and insight, a language capturing the interrelation of differing realities. Whatever the initial emphasis, for this poet meaning "turns out ... to be metaphor, which leads one back towards language: wordplay, etymology, the 'wholly human instrument' ... used ... to ground the lightning of ideas"(R 70-1). By putting his faith in the power of language, Merrill reflects his conception of the paradoxical nature of truths and his yearning for a means to embrace and resolve these ambiguities.

Acknowledging the autobiographical impetus behind much of his writing, Merrill nevertheless strives to avoid the limitations of simply baring his soul in a strictly "confessional" recounting of experience. He remarks: "[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). "Hot" tenses, such as the first person present indicative active, must be tempered with "cool pasts and futures"(R 21). By developing a style centered around "an intimacy of tone, not of content"(R 23), Merrill avoids the "addictive, self-centered immediacy" of the confessional, an approach to poetry which "calls to mind a speaker suspicious of words"(R 21). Truly effective expression of the personal, for Merrill, necessitates a "veil drawn, a sublimation of the active voice or the indicative mood, as if some ritual effacement of the ego were needed before one could go on"(R 21). Rather than impose a fixed exposition of the subject, the poet employs language and form to create a "fabric of illusion"(AQ 26), an "ironic leotard"(Moffett 13) of mannered revelation.

In his depictions of overtones and undercurrents, Merrill seems to be aiming for "a novel or poem of manners ... a framework all the nicer for being more fallible, more hospitable to irony, self-expression, self-contradiction, than many a philosophical or sociological system"(R 33). Similarly, by adopting a decidedly human voice, Merrill

comic affiliations, the impulses toward a sense of unity and regeneration. By creating a design that is all the more pleasing for its fecundity, its aestheticism and its inclusiveness, Merrill seeks the affirmative ground found in all comic depictions. As Christopher Fry eloquently says of comedy, the driving vision of the poem emerges from an "angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time; where our tragic fate finds itself in perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in"(16).

both the nature of his perception and the unifying power of art. In a self-reflexive interpolation included in "The Thousand and Second Night," the poet states: "How and when / Did he 'affirm'? Why, constantly. And how else / But in the form. Form's what affirms"(ND 15).

The pyrotechnics that result from Merrill's devotion to words reflects the breadth and depth of his reading, the sharpness of his perception, as well as a sensitivity to the fundamental attachments in life. Born on March 3, 1926, the son of financier Charles Merrill and his second wife Helen Ingram, James Ingram Merrill has been free to devote a lifetime to the pursuit of poetic excellence. After attending Lawrenceville Preparatory School, then Amherst College, Merrill augmented his formal education with travels around Europe and the Orient. Retreating from the cultural life of New York in the early 1950's, Merrill and his companion David Jackson established homes in Stonington, Connecticut; Athens, Greece; and most recently Key West, Florida. These alternative environments have provided him with a means of refreshing his relationships with place and language, renewing the familiar by remaining "American in Europe and exotic at home"(R 52). His facility for a variety of languages, among them French, German and Greek, enables Merrill to consider his native English as "merely one of many ways to express things"(R 4). An early exposure to the world of opera engendered a similar fascination with

the capacity for music to augment and modulate expression. He has remained, since age eleven, entranced with "the way [opera] could heighten and stylize the emotions -- a kind of absurdity dignified ... or transformed by the music" (AQ 24-5), and in maturity draws upon musical analogies to overcome an impasse during composition.

Merrill's first collection of verse, Jim's Book, was privately printed in his senior year at Lawrenceville. A surprise gift from his father, the volume "thrilled [the poet] for days, then mortified [him] for a quarter-century" (R 6); yet it served to perpetuate a desire to pursue a poetic vocation. His earliest writing is meticulous work, demonstrating a "fondness for given arrangements" (R 3), an inbred facility for the metaphysical conceit and a penchant for the outrageously ingenious pun. Subsequent volumes, bolstered by his experimentations with drama and the novel, put him on "fresh terms with language" (R 51) and reflect an emerging balance between the personal and the symbolic. Merrill's most recent publications, including the trilogy, The Changing Light at Sandover, illustrate his mature style, where the blend of narrative and lyrical impulses indicate a rapprochement between the stylist and the storyteller.

One of the most intriguing and unusual poetic endeavours in recent American poetry, The Changing Light, traces an inclusive vision of human potential. From the

poems of love and secular drama in "The Book of Ephraim," to the poems of science contained in "Mirabell's Books of Number," through the transforming mysticism of "Scripts for the Pageant," this volume culminates with an imaginative rebirth depicted in "Coda: The Higher Keys." Based upon his sense of the protean nature of experience, and information provided by his spiritual guides, Merrill investigates the possibilities inherent in a poetic recounting of this "received" design. Merrill's "divine comedies" create a distinctive contemporary vision that is "religious in its etymological sense, of religio, of tying things together" (SC 5). The Changing Light expands, onto a grand scale, the affirmative impulses evident in Merrill's previous work. The comic vision, with its motions of resolution, transformation and ascendance, thus becomes an eminently suitable vehicle for assessing the elements instrumental to Merrill's most ambitious work. Until quite recently, there existed little serious criticism of Merrill's work; beyond scattered articles and introductory surveys.¹ The comments

1 The first critical texts were Judith Moffett's James Merrill: An Introduction to the Poetry, Ross Labrie's James Merrill and Essays in Criticism: James Merrill, edited by David Lehman and Charles Berger. An increase in scholarly attention to Merrill's work is evident in the "flurry" of publications that became available in the spring of 1987. These include J.D. McClatchy's collection of Merrill's prose writings and interviews, Recitative, the collection of new and previously published articles James Merrill edited by Harold Bloom, and the publication of the most comprehensive treatment of Merrill to date, Stephen Yenser's The Consuming Myth.

of these critics have been helpful; yet, in order to follow the poet's recommendation of keeping "one eye on the [trilogy's] ever-emerging ... whole, and another on the details"(R 54), this thesis relies instead upon a close textual reading in the light of Merrill's interviews.

The Changing Light at Sandover can be seen as the latest in a line of visionary works, each moving to encompass, reconcile and transcend the limited nature of secular experience. Merrill's consciousness of the affirmative nature of this literary tradition is nowhere more evident than in his remarks concerning Dante's La Divina Commedia:

The point -- my point and everyone's by now ... is that the Comedy throughout sustains the equilibrium we have been told to look for in a haiku.... There is no rift, as in conventional allegory, between action and interpretation, physical and moral, "low" and "high." All is of a piece. "It is a mystic's view of the world, if you like. It is also a scientist's."(R 93)

Merrill's trilogy partakes of the completeness he finds in Dante, a vision of opposites brought into peaceful conjunction and affirmation amid the threatening chaos of the world. Merrill shares the traditional comic virtues of a "deep involvement in the world"(Scott 94), a perspective that includes both the "sacred and secular"(Sypher 221) elements of human experience. Being a contemporary version of the "ceremonial cycle [of] birth: struggle: death and resurrection"(Sypher 210), The Changing Light taps ancient

comic affiliations, the impulses toward a sense of unity and regeneration. By creating a design that is all the more pleasing for its fecundity, its aestheticism and its inclusiveness, Merrill seeks the affirmative ground found in all comic depictions. As Christopher Fry eloquently says of comedy, the driving vision of the poem emerges from an "angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time: where our tragic fate finds itself in perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in"(16).

Chapter Two

A Life as Fiction in Disguise

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(Or found ... (DC 10)

"One's life," comments James Merrill, "is ... a kind of self-revising poem" (SC 12). By drawing together in one phrase the quotidian reality and the imaginative creation, Merrill suggests the kind of ongoing contributory relationship at work within his own body of poetry. Having developed, in his earlier poetry, an ironic and self-conscious veil that allowed him access to the personal without becoming mired in the limitations of the self, Merrill has drawn his readers into the center of his intellectual and emotional experience. By rejecting the confessional, yet retaining the hospitable, through personal

references and literary allusions, the poet has created a "consuming myth" (ND 53), a continual texture of interrelation. For this reason it is essential at this point to examine the continuity of nuance, motif and theme in his early poems that gives rise to the vision of The Changing Light at Sandover. Merrill himself suggests:

"It's as though after a long lapse or ... displacement of faith, I'd finally, with the trilogy, reentered the church of those original themes" (R 76). The whole of Merrill's canon anticipates and deepens in relation to this master-work.

Merrill's earliest work, although displaying a highly developed sensitivity to wordplay and formal poetic conventions, illustrates an inherent division between the artist and reality. Consequently, this chapter traces the poet's development away from the "lacquered surfaces" (Moffett, James Merrill 13) of First Poems and The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace, as he modifies his highly mannered aestheticism by addressing the emotional realities at its base. This integration leads to the most readily identifiable turning point in Merrill's career, the emergence, with Water Street, of a distinctive poetic voice. Commenting upon the absence of the traditional associations linked to metrical forms, Merrill suggests that "if anything can fill the void left by these obsolete resources ... it would have to be diction or 'voice'. Voice in its fullest

tonal range"(R 80). This chapter, then, examines the liberating effect that introducing "some of the pleasure of prose into poetry"(R 44) has upon Merrill's work, both in the exploration of motifs and themes, as well as his use of form. The final section of this chapter focusses upon the affirmative impulse evident in the lyrics comprising part one of Divine Comedies (1976). Of central concern is Merrill's conception of the redemptive potential inherent in memory and language, how the essential elements of a comic vision lie in the artist's capacity for retrieval and ordering through acts of imaginative translation. The discussion revolves around aspects of these poems which anticipate developments within the broader spheres of "The Book of Ephraim" and The Changing Light at Sandover.

Merrill has called his early verse "occasions for self-discovery"(R 55), poetic experiments that were "undertaken, by and large, without [his] knowing what [he] wanted them to say"(R 55). This reticence regarding source and emotional engagement is most evident in the "emblem" poems, lyrical set pieces constructed from elaborately extended figures of speech. Throughout First Poems there exists an underlying sense of the poet's reluctance to move past the fascinating intricacies of surface presentation. Merrill recollects that he "thought of poems as visual artifacts back then"(R 42), as creations geared to the eye rather than the ear or the heart. While he mastered the techniques of expression, he

remained unwilling to venture past the surfaces of things.

Merrill recalls:

Four years after graduation my First Poems had appeared. I was living alone and unhappy in Rome and going to a psychiatrist for writer's block. The doctor wanted to hear about my life. It had been flowing along unnoticed in my absorption with the images that came and went on its surface. Now its very droplets were being studied on a slide. "Real things" -- was I condemned to write about them after all? (R 6)

The poems written during the eight-year interval between First Poems and The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace

capture "Merrill's sense of the perilous real and the safer apparent" (Moffett, James Merrill 13). The poet struggles to reconcile his "high romantic ideals" (Lehman 24) with a growing awareness of the necessity to acknowledge the informing presences of "real things."

Evidence of this search for balance can be found in Merrill's exploration, between 1951 and 1959, of alternative means for expression in fiction, drama and narrative poetry. In the mid-fifties he "confused an exercise in dramatic form with 'writing for the theatre'" (R 51) and produced two plays, The Bait (1953), "a surrealist comedy of manners" (Yenser, The Consuming Myth 40) and The Immortal Husband (1956), an updating of the Aurora-Tithonus legend. Both provided valuable experience in writing for character, in the use of alternative voices, and the possibilities for contradiction and reversal. As well, the publication of his first novel, The Seraglio (1957), "a veritable treatise on

the subjects of personal concealment and the fear of being known"(Moffett, James Merrill 14), provided a means for exploring narrative and themes not easily handled in his poetry.

The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (1957)

reiterates this sense of transition, experimentation and adjustment. In this volume, the "patinated narcissism has been literally roughed up, and the resulting corrugation of surface corresponds ... to a new agitation of the depths"(Howard, Alone 397). Although it still contains "emblem" poems, what Merrill has called lyrics designed to resist "the intelligence almost successfully"(R 23), the volume also chronicles a shift toward concentration upon the artistic process, a questioning of attitudes regarding perception and expression. In a poem such as "Mirror" this restlessness finds a powerful symbol. Here, where a dialogue between mirror and window points up the strengths and weaknesses of openness or insularity, feeling or thought, prose or poetry, Merrill touches upon a fundamental dichotomy in his own work. The two aspects of expression remain parallel and unavailable to each other, an ordered comfort at odds with the chaos of emotion and time.

Merrill's self-consciousness regarding his artistic attitudes and values provides an underpinning for many of his discussions of perception. He entertains the notion of his art as analogous to that of the craftsmen in "The

Cruise." In this poem the vision of actual icebergs, "of which nine-tenths is a possession / By powers we do not ourselves possess"(CP 47), reduces itself to "monsters wrapped in silk," uncomfortable truths "[d]rugged by a perfection of ... form"(CP 47). "The Doodler," another symbol for the artist, shows him condemning his creation, saying: "[N]othing I do is at all fine / Save certain abstract forms. These come unbidden"(CP 54). Out of a preoccupation with abstraction comes the desire for a more emotionally honest, human expression. The sketch of the boy, completed by the poem's end, because the doodler has "learned / To do feet"(CP 55), signals a sense of promise, a growth away from the intricate sterilities of geometrical designs. The artist has discovered his means, both for expression, motion and stability; yet, like the boy shown "gazing down a flight of stairs"(CP 55), the voyage of discovery is fraught with dangers. Images of descent, movements toward the unknown, figure in a number of poems in The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace, which as a whole confronts the reality of death and the possibility of meaning.

"The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace" and "A Dedication" open and close this volume and suggest the emotional impetus behind the sentiments of reassessment it contains. Both poems revolve around the figure of Hans Lodeizen, a friend and fellow poet, who died at the age of

twenty-six of leukemia. Merrill has remarked how this "first deeply felt death" was connected to a "spell of aimless living in Europe" and how "The Country" embodies a "foreknowledge of where [he] needed to go next, in [his] work" (R 12). Indeed, the emotional reactions of loss and waste associated with Lodeizen's death are equally balanced by a desire for a spiritual level of connection and purpose, one that draws upon aesthetic concentrations as well as human figures. In "Voices from Another World," the first "oui ja" poem, Merrill remarks:

Because, once looked at lit
By the cold reflections of the dead
Risen extinct but irresistible,
Our lives have never seemed more full, more real,
Nor the full moon more quick to chill.
(CP 70)

Despite its polish and metaphysical wit, The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace seems predominantly a volume of reflection, a reconsideration of Merrill's early desire for "[s]tars, oblongs linked, or a baroque motif" (CP 55), at the expense of emotional engagement. Appropriately, the work finishes with a dedication to a memory of lost potential, to the realities of man's mortal condition, and the power of poetry to overcome these realities by its moments "when speech is but a mouth pressed / Lightly and humbly against—the angel's hand" (CP 83). Just as the doodler desires to move beyond his cold and crafted forms and another aspiring artist, Maryas, finds himself "skinned / Of every skill [he] labored to acquire" (CP 52), so the poet must "begin

again"(CP 55). Returning to his art with a renewed vision that acknowledges the human, the doodler starts over and cries; "Again / Emerge, O sunbursts, garlands, creatures, men, / Ever more lifelike out of the white void!"(CP 55). Creation becomes a movement through abstraction to a fusion with humanity, of imagination in tune with feeling.

This resolution translates into the vibrant, engaging poems of Water Street three years later. Merrill has embarked upon his "inner / Adventure"(CP 28) in a series of poems that establish his pivotal themes of love, time, and loss. Here he has embraced the stratagem that to "sound personal"(R 27) in tone, voice and subject does not necessitate a violation of the sanctity of the self. If Hans Lodeizen were the "tutelary spirit" of The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace, then Proust becomes the guiding figure of Water Street (McClatchy, "On Water Street" 63). Merrill has opened his verse to the possibilities of "symbolic autobiography"(Kalstone, Five Temperaments III), the blend of personal, metaphorical and mythological elements which elevates the everyday to the universal. Merrill the mannerist merges with the personal and addresses the "dull need to make some kind of house / Out of the life lived, out of the love spent"(WS 6). "For Proust" reflects this new attitude regarding art and life. Like Proust, Merrill has gone "into the world again"(WS 18), moved through the facades of language into his past, into a

texture of memories and thoughts that provides a unity for experience. The poem emulates the process of discovering, in the incidental keys to artistic resolution, how life is reclaimed from time and "[t]he world ... put[s] on a thin gold mask" (WS 19). By focusing upon the means whereby "[w]hat happened is becoming literature" (WS 19), Merrill has discovered how to make the past "truly available and nourishing" (Kalstone, Five Temperaments 86). Water Street explores how art creates unities, how the mind creates a life, from a web of coincidences, resonances and detail.

Water Street finds Merrill introducing themes that remain constant throughout his later work. The discovery of an authentic voice, a means for combining the personal and the imaginative, as well as the development of a liberated approach to form, allowed Merrill to address questions at the heart of his experience. Memories of childhood, familial relations, speculations on time, and poems of love's power and transience, coalesce in intricate textures of confession, meditation and remembrance. His style has become "an instrument of discovery and freedom, [and] finally of reconciliation" (McClatchy, "On Water Street" 81). The perception of dualities inherent in experience is now accepted as a given for his art, as he acknowledges in "To a Butterfly," an "emblem" poem gone awry:

... ENOUGH
 Goodness, how tired one grows
 Just looking through a prism:
 Allegory, symbolism.
 I've tried, Lord knows,

To keep from seeing double,
 (WS 43)

Yet this is how he sees; although he is "not yet / Proof
 against rigmarole"(WS 44), the poetry has grown enough to
 encompass this duality, creating unities out of natural
 contraries. Merrill's style moves into conjunction with his
 sensibility, one capable of "the apprehension of angels on
 earth, the recovery of paradises misplaced or extinct, the
 redemption of time, [and] the outwilling of
 mortality"(Lehman 24).

Having begun with images of dissolution in "An Urban
 Convalescence," a poem dealing with the necessity of
 confronting the nature of mortality and self, in order that
 art might circumvent them, Water Street fittingly closes
 with the celebration of a new home, arrivals and future
 promise. "A Tenancy" acknowledges the realities of the
 temporal process, yet moves confidently through memory to
 create continuities and order. This assertion marks the
 fruition of a bargain made with "the source of light"(WS
 52), the muse, the embodiment of inspiration. In return for
 time, "[t]o spend in love, in a country not at war / [He]
 would give in return / All [he] had"(WS 52). Feeling "the
 light change [him] also"(WS 52), the poet acknowledges both
 the passage of time and the culmination of a literary

apprenticeship. The bargain with his muse becomes itself a birth, a liberation, celebrated in the secular nativity which follows. The renewed poet rises to answer a call, ushering in the present embodied by three friends, three "magi", bearing gifts. They bring the things of life, the plant, the wine and love. Free of the necessity to know, the poet embraces instead the necessity to remember. He says: "If I am host at last / It is of little more than my own past. / May others be at home in it"(WS 53).

From Water Street, until the major narrative departure of "The Book of Ephraim" in Divine Comedies, Merrill has refined and deepened the resonances found in this poetic voice through an increasing radical use of form and language. Having discovered, with "An Urban Convalescence," the "self-reflexive side of the poem"(AQ 29), Merrill becomes more daring in his use of "expedient form"(Lehman 45). "Form [is] what affirms"(ND 15), as it envelops disparate events and impressions by "scissoring and mending"(DC 29) time, memory and language. Merrill's interest in "multiple meanings ... contrasts and disruptions of tone"(R 79), doublings and pimenti, finds its most extreme expression in his nouveau roman, The (Diblos) Notebook, published in 1965. Containing a combination of diary, memoir and first draft of a novel, complete with erasures, false starts, revisions and contradictions, the notebook weaves a complex tapestry illustrating the relative

nature of truths. Merrill raises these "issues of identity"(Yenser, The Consuming Myth 93) through the novel's confusion of time and the division between perception and reality. The (Diblos) Notebook anticipates much of his later poetry with its "indecisions, pentimenti, glimpses of bare canvas, rips & ripples & cracks which, by stressing the fabric of illusion, required a greater attention to what was being represented"(DN 132). This "wonderful feat of balance without symmetry"(Eaves 156), through its inversions and evasions, provides Merrill's formalist talents with new methods for encompassing his perception of the human condition.

The four volumes which followed, Nights and Days (1966), The Fire Screen (1969), Braving the Elements (1972) and Divine Comedies (1976), demonstrate the refinement of Merrill's poetic voice through increasingly complex and accomplished poems. He has moved a long way from earlier ambitions, when the "ideal poem was less than a page long, with all its connections visible, its overtones audible, and no loose ends"(R 54). Poems such as "The Thousand and Second Night," "From the Cupola," "The Summer People" and "Lost in Translation," all explore a complex conjunction of temporal states, emotional conditions and personal or cultural associations. From the microcosm of his own emotional and intellectual experience, Merrill invites resonances from the greater worlds of myth, history and art.

Commenting ruefully on this "middle-aged spread," he remarks: ideas that in youth were translated straight into allegory, must, in middle-age, "first cross rivers infested with razor-toothed memories, or be obliged to stop for weeks at a time with a tribe of digressions, naked and giggling" (R 54). Merrill's themes of love and loss, of reality and the imagination, become inextricably linked to the processes of time and recollection.

The affirmative nature of Merrill's vision, the impetus of his poetics for a means of gathering together disparate and contrary elements into a unified whole, is nowhere more evident than in the poems of Divine Comedies. Centered around Merrill's primary themes of time, love and art, these poems create a seamless texture of personal, cultural and mythic resonances. The lyrics of the first section also serve to announce various concepts pertinent to the first installment of the trilogy, "The Book of Ephraim," contained in section two. By briefly examining these shorter poems one can discern Merrill's essentially comic vision, his faith in art's consoling and affirmative potential.

The volume opens with a short annunciatory lyric, a habitual strategy, introducing motifs that reverberate throughout the whole. With "The Kimono" Merrill touches upon the ebbing of passion, the recognition of the changes which accompany age, and the possibilities of an imaginative transformation as recompense. Moving from a microcosm of

the cyclical nature of love, where "[j]oy, incomprehension, pain ... like seasons come and go"(DC 3), the poem widens its scope to spiritual levels and the possibility of renewal outside the secular and temporal. The "sudden beam" of this insight brings on another sort of transformation, one found in the magic of art, capable of encompassing these "[t]imes out of mind"(DC 3). Having announced his intentions in this fashion, donned the ritual robe, the kimono of the poet, the volume then proceeds into a number of extended lyrics dealing with the restorative aspect of memory and the imagination within the human condition.

Drawing upon the notion that one discovers essential elements in the act of translation, from language to language, from past to present, from mind to page, Merrill sets out in "Lost in Translation" to depict the complexity of this process. The poem is based upon two incidents, one in the present, the poet's search through Athens for a Rilke translation of a Valery poem "Palme," and the other, the memory of the summer his parents' marriage was disintegrating and he stayed alone with his nanny, awaiting the arrival of a promised jig-saw puzzle. The poem itself comes to mirror the puzzle, creation becoming an act of ordering, chance association and discovery. Eventually, the imaginative process itself is celebrated, the means by which the poet, fashioning his memories in language, observes the implications of continuity and beauty. What was painful or

hidden in the past emerges refreshed by this translation.

He suggests that

hidden here is a freak fragment
Of a pattern complex in appearance only.
What it seems to show is superficial
Next to that long-term lamination
Of hazard and craft, the karma that has
Made it matter in the first place. (DC 6)

Each section of the poem, whether free verse, lyrical
include or pentameter lines of rhyming couplets, adds
another layer to the initial remembered association of the
palm-shaped puzzle piece and the poetic rendering of
"Palme."

Essential to "Lost in Translation" is the sense of
recovery possible in a poetic recounting of experience, how
the concealed or incomprehensible past is clarified by the
present and how the act of remembrance leads to resonances
of significance and beauty. Everything is lost and found in
the imaginative translation of life to the printed page.
What time and temporal change removes, imagination can
recover:

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. (DC 10)

Such a conception of the power of art affirms Merrill's
comic impulse, the nature of his work's preeminently
inclusive character. This conception allows the existence
of the absurd, the spiritual and the humanly fallible, not
simply as evidence of man's potentially tragic condition,

but a~~f~~ the means by which an encompassing and compassionate art can affirm the human spirit. As John Unterrecker notes, the comic vision creates bold artistic systems, which, by their artifice, their celebration of imaginative potential, "please[s] us inordinately because of [their] comic evasions of chaos" (Moffett, James Merrill xviii).

Central to Merrill's poetic vision is his belief in the power of art to encompass the ambiguous nature of truth and wrest meaning from the juxtaposition of contraries. In "Yánnina," the poet explores how time remakes history by relating the legend of Frossini, the martyred wife of Ali Pasha, absolute ruler of Yánnina. Merrill illustrates the double nature of "fact", the inversion of values possible between the event and its retelling, by incorporating in the poem the divergent threads of objective history and popular folktale. Using quotations from William Plomer's account of the event, which debunks the traditional depiction of a virtuous Frossini, the poet lets the "[g]rounds of our footnote infiltrate the treat" (DC 26). From this initial premise, the poem quickly branches out into an examination of a myriad of "sleeping presences" (R 21), demonstrating its comic impulse to encompass all manner of "double occasions, double premises, [and] double values" (Sypher 213). Frossini, and Ali Pasha's second wife Vassiliki, become "two versions of the Feminine" (DC 27). By adding a layer of personal association, Ali's resemblance to Merrill's father,

the poet examines the threatening and attractive aspects of the paternal. And, finally, the divergent visions of the poet and his companion regarding Yánnina and its history, the one romantic the other realistic, bring the poem back to its central premise about the nature of perception. By creating this intricate web of balanced perspectives, Merrill asserts his faith in the unifying power of the imagination, its ability to "[s]ee through [him]. See [him] through"(DC 29). In his exploration of the multi-faceted nature of truth, the poet-magician-healer draws all disparate parts together in a momentary, illuminating conjunction. "[A]n escape, not from truth, but from despair: a narrow escape into faith"(Fry 15) makes Merrill's vision unequivocally comic.

In a more contemporary setting, "Verse for Urania" examines the idea of dualities linked by rituals, in this case the baptism of Merrill's godchild, Urania. Here, in a tender, celebratory poem, Merrill asserts the legitimacy of such rites in the face of a modernity jaundiced by its technological and consumer ethics. The poem recognizes these rituals as necessary acknowledgements of the cyclical nature of human experience, as a bonding between youth and age, the spiritual and the secular, the imaginative and the empirical sciences of today. Its comic significance lies in the poet's preeminently inclusive impulse, a desire for the recognition that "[o]ur bond was sacred, being secular: /

In time embedded, it in us, near, far, / Flooding both levels with the same sunrise"(DC 36). In the final analysis, his ability to perceive the existence of an opposite, to see the duality of truths, resolves itself into a union; for "[n]ow [he] was seeing double -- which was which? / No thing but stumbled toward its heavenly twin, / No thought but helped its subject to undress ..."(DC 35-6). What Merrill creates are poems which recognize that "[m]oments of truth are moments only"(DC 13), a plunge through "plus and minus both" into an "inmost space" where "[a]ll things in time grow musical"(DC 14). These glimpses of completeness are a comic vision fueled, "not by a vulnerable optimism but by a hard-won maturity of delight ... an active patience declaring the solvency of good"(Fry 17).

An appropriate place to conclude this brief discussion of Merrill's early work is with an examination of "The Will," the sequence of thirteen sonnets, which create an interconnected narrative, serving as a prologue to the second section of Divine Comedies, "The Book of Ephraim." Here Merrill depicts a process of loss and retrieval, a miniature comedy, that begins in overtones of death and dissolution and moves through various transforming adventures toward the celebration of a wedding, a ritual of new beginnings. As well, it introduces his readers to the mechanism of the ouija board, its principal players and the background to the origins of "Ephraim." Out of a depiction

of the chaotic nature of experience, the human condition fraught with accident, chance and uncertainty, Merrill wrests a vision of purpose and renewal. Under the gaze of the poet, unsettling events coalesce into a "healing hieroglyph" (DC 43), an image of "spiritual rejuvenation and artistic rebirth" (Lehman 56).

"The Will," constructed around the punning reference to the two aspects of volition, the conscious and the unconscious, the will of this world and that of the unknown, introduces many of the motifs found in "Ephraim." At the center of the poem lies the figure of the carved stone Ibis, "SACRED TO THOTH" (DC 40), wedded by chance to the poet's manuscript version of Ephraim's story. Around this conjunction circle the contraries of possession and loss, creation and destruction, intentional design and involuntary wish. Pursuing the fiction of a controlled, willed life, Merrill is made to recognize the presence of another "significant cargo" (DC 41), the existence of the intuitive and spiritual. The Ibis, with its "funerary chic" (DC 39) and its relation, through Thoth, to creation and composition, captures the poet's sense of a muse that both "spears and spares" (DC 39). Similarly, the two dream visions that bracket the body of the poem reiterate the dual aspect of the Ibis: the first dream presages inner discontents and the notion of dissolution and loss; the second, the idea of imaginative restoration. Just as the

"accident" of the manuscript's loss leads to the creation of "Ephraim," so the "bric-a-brac" (DC 43) lodged in memory and the unconscious will "break // One fine day at any chance unsealing, / To shining leaf and woken shades of feeling" (DC 43).

From this ferment of other-worldly intervention, the influence of the unconscious and accidental, comes Merrill's sense of the ordering imagination. Facing the desolation of his loss, the poet's faith in the ability of the imagination for recompense emerges. Just as the cycle of life moves toward a fruition and maturation, "pint-size amphibian / Wiggler from murky impulse to ethereal act" (DC 40), so too the poet must embrace the uncertain nature of experience and "hazard the dimensions of a man // Of means. Of meanings" (DC 40). Throughout this volume Merrill attests to his faith in the power of art to do just this. In the end, he gives tacit assent to Ephraim's belief that "the Word [is] by definition good" (DC 41). He heeds the warning: "IF U DO NOT YR WORLD WILL BE UNDONE / & HEAVEN ITSELF TURN TO ONE GRINNING SKULL" (DC 41). Similarly, the whole elaborate construction of the poem, the use of a variety of sonnet patterns to highlight changes in the narrative, the severing and mending of forms to mirror alterations of perspective, the wordplay and the self-reflexive elements, all reenforce the inclusive impulse underlying art. Even as Merrill works to have his forms encompass their contraries, through interruption and digression, the narrative moves to embrace

the whole by recovering, from memory and time, its lost elements. By ending with the image of a wedding, unmarred by the hovering "bad fairy Carabosse" (DC 43) of chance and change, Merrill asserts his comic faith in the "sunniness beneath" (DC 43), the intimate vision of human existence blessed by love and creative power.

Chapter Three

The Valkyrie's Baffle: Ephraim, Eros and Time

Weren't we still groping ... toward
Some higher level? -- subjects in a vast
Investigation whose objective cast,
Far from denying temperament, indeed
Flung it like caution to the winds, like seed.
(CL 19)

"Don't you think," remarks James Merrill, "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?" (R 66). The potentials of this freedom are precisely what enticed Merrill to create a poem based on "a Thousand and One Evenings Spent / With David Jackson at the Ouija Board /

In touch with Ephraim Our Familiar Spirit"(CL 4). Taken as a metaphor for the imaginative process, a postulation which does not necessarily discount a genuine mystic experience, this unusual method of composition reiterates "the doubleness of its source"(R 52), the fundamental interplay of the secular and the spiritual. Containing the complete alphabet, Arabic numerology, and essential discursive elements of "ampersand," "yes" and "no," the ouija board provides what Merrill considers to be "the raw materials of language -- of thought itself"(R 53). The dialogue amongst players and spirits, recreated in the narrative flow of the poem, "accommodates inconsistencies, [and] represents clashing planes of consciousness"(Kalstone 132), becoming a liberation from the lyrical authority of a single sensibility. Thus, for Merrill, the upper case voices of the board represent "a range of metaphor, a depth of meaning"(R 71), unavailable to his previous work. He goes on to explain that even if the board is "still yourself that you're drawing upon, then that self is much stranger and freer and more far seeing than the one you thought you knew"(R 66).

In keeping with the tenets established in his earlier work, Merrill employs the device of the ouija board as a means of reiterating his sense of the doubleness inherent in perception and the relativity of truths. As a result, this chapter focusses upon his treatment of the conjunction

between spiritual and secular worlds found in "The Book of Ephraim" as it lays the foundations for the process of ascendent revision at work throughout the trilogy. Of initial importance is the nature of Merrill's conception of the board as a process whereby the strictures of a personal perspective are loosened and vision extends itself toward an idea of universal relation. The second area of concern for the chapter centers upon the role of Ephraim, how the mediums' original relation, dominated by Eros, evolves into a broader consideration of the natural and historical elements at work in the world. Here, the poem anticipates the configurations of Nature and Psyche that dominate discussion in the following books of the trilogy. Finally, the chapter examines the poet's treatment of time, the secular realities of change and loss, and the potentials of artistic vision to transcend them. Fundamental to Merrill's idea of retrieval and recompense is his depiction of the role of art and the imagination as they relate to a redemptive process.

By modulating "into time and language, what might have come to a saint or a lunatic in one blinding ZAP" (NY 13), the mechanism of the ouija board assumes, for Merrill, the role of a "displaced religion" (R 70), a forum for confronting the spiritual questions that would have a diminished currency in more traditional expressions. The board holds as well the additional attraction of providing

"forms of ritual, the processes that prepare one to receive a vision of, and a communion with, divinity"(Lehman 27), without the constrictive excesses of dogma. Finally, as the poet, and the poem, continually stress, "the point remain[s] to be always of two minds"(R 51), to participate in a willed suspension of disbelief. Merrill discovers a similar balance in the poetry of a visionary precursor; he explains:

To believe ... that Dante in any real sense had
seen God threatened both the poem
and us. Who wanted song to curdle overnight
into mere scripture, or himself to be
trivialized in the glare of too much
truth? (R 87)

Merrill carefully circumvents this danger in the creation of his own work. The tone of the first half of "Ephraim" is light and the information startling; the reader is immediately captivated, as were the Rover Boys themselves, by the play of wit and invention. Confessing a similar intention, the poet admits that "huge tracts of information / Have gone into these capsules flavorless / And rhymed for easy swallowing"(CL 9). The first few sections comprise a deliberately pleasant treat, a fascinating anodyne, equivalent to Ephraim's presence for JM and DJ, a conditioning and acclimatization for the revelations that follow.

The ouija board, with its unusual occult overtones, is treated by Merrill with a carefully cultivated ironic distancing, an attitude which allows the articulation of skeptical reservations without destroying the authenticity

of the experience. This interplay between credulity and doubt, by anticipating the problems of belief and providing equally plausible options, spares the poet any need to retreat into an apologetic denial or self-defensive arrogance. In fact, the tension between doubt and credulity provides a fundamental momentum in the poem, an initial conjunction of contrary impulses essential to the fabric of his vision. Throughout "Ephraim" the dynamic of resistance and belief becomes evident in the wide variety of explanations of "who or what [they] took Ephraim to be, / And of what truths (if any) [they] considered / Him spokesman" (CL 31). Alternative explanations, rational evasions for this familiar spirit and his revelations, all chronicle a movement from nonchalance toward acceptance. By incorporating a range of possible theories, from the quasi-spirituality of a "bypassed religion" (CL 20) to the psychiatrist's "folie à deux" (CL 30), from Wallace Stevens' analogy of "the imagination / And God as one" (CL 66) to Jung's hypothesis that "God and the Unconscious are one" (CL 74), Merrill disarms the necessity for belief without inhibiting its possibility. The final result is that the question of Ephraim's reality, initially so visible and important, fades behind the questions he poses. With a certain tenderness, and resignation at the end of section "U", Merrill declares: "Ephraim, my dear, let's face it. If I fall / From a high building, its your name I'll call, /

OK?"(CL 74). Ephraim accommodates all explanations and allows the players to move past the means and closer to the meaning.

The duality of spiritual and secular leaves both the mediums and the reader on "unsteady ground. Earth, Heaven; / Reality, Projection ... which came first?"(CL 46). Merrill has translated some of his most fundamental original concerns regarding reality and perception to a larger, more inclusive sphere. Encompassing the twenty-year relationship of DJ and JM; the text of a lost novel, the composition of the work itself and the revelations of Ephraim, the poem becomes a texture of simultaneous layers, "[u]pper story, lower, doublings, [and] triplings"(CL 74). This multi-dimensional construction focusses upon the interchange of temporal spheres and the connections possible through the imagination. As a result,

it is sometimes difficult to say which story we are in, especially since the tenses shift not according to historical time but according to narrative exigency. Imagination hashes chronology.

(Yenser, The Consuming Myth 230)

This subversion of linear chronology is particularly evident in the construction of the two time frames existent in the poem. Overlapping and intertwining with the triangle of DJ and JM's relationship with Ephraim, from 1955 to 1973, are the events of the year of the poem's composition, January to December, 1974. Through this blend of disparate times, places and experiences -- the mirrorings and doublings of

event reflecting across the linear abecedarian structure --

"Ephraim" creates a sense of totality, a vision of interrelation and connection.

Merrill constructs his poem around modulations in vision, where meaning includes the hidden or only partially revealed. Like the Giorgione painting that he uses as a paradigm in section "X", the poem abounds with pentimento presences of past lives, future possibilities and constantly refracted truths. The fluidity of the design captures the passing of time and the transformations of the players. Moving from the opening four sections which depict, with high-spirited wit, the setting for the poem, the work then branches out onto broader planes of time and subject, and begins to reveal its "[o]ther significant cargo[es]" (DC 41). Merrill touches the central themes of the incarnation and withdrawal of Eros, the relation of art and life, and the recompense possible through memory and the imagination. From the "play" of the board, the poet shifts to the drama of events and experiences, from the farcical to the profound, in a truly comic vision of relation and ascendance.

Of initial interest to the players is the framework of Ephraim's world, the hierarchy and mechanism of "heaven", "that dimension [the mediums] could neither / Visualize nor keep from trying to" (CL 16-17). Acting as their guide, entertainer and confidant, Ephraim reflects the attitudes of

the Rover Boys at thirty. He assumes a promethean aspect, one resting upon the transmission of their communication through his "IMPARTIAL FIRE"(CL 59), untouched by the consuming human passions of "HOPE & DESPAIR THE MEMORY & THE PAIN"(CL 59). These surreptitious discourses, "IN A SENSE UNLAWFUL"(CL 59), circumvent the temporal and the immediate, appealing to the frivolous, adventurous natures of the players. JM and DJ discard the restrictions of time and mortality and enter a new dimension a place where all are "CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER DEAD OR ALIVE"(CL 59). The world of the dead is redefined, becoming what the Rover Boys would most desire it to be, a "SURROUND OF THE LIVING"(CL 59). The primary revelation rests upon the fact that the living are "each the REPRESENTATIVE of a PATRON"(CL 9). The patron's connection with his charge involves observation and non-intervention while life continues, and then frenzied activity and re-education in the "entr'acte between / One incarnation and another"(CL 10). These tutelary spirits rise on the scale of nine levels as each of his representatives achieves a position in the celestial bureaucracy, "that point of no return, / A footing on the lowest of NINE STAGES / Among the curates and the minor mages"(CL 10). With each step comes a renewal of the senses, beginning with stage one, "that of vision pure / And simple"(CL 12) and, leading, as Ephraim clearly hopes, to a resurrection of all the sensual delights. There comes, as

well, at this higher level, a degree of "PEACE FROM REPRESENTATION"(CL 10), a lessening of the patron's responsibility for earthly souls. Ephraim admits that this constitutes an evolution "OF SORTS"(CL 57), one that seems to be both a blessing and a loss, an ambiguous paradise coloured by his preoccupations and the Rover Boys' own earthly orientation.

Yet part of the comic structure of "Ephraim" depends on its embrace of elements that ultimately revise the vision. Even in the first book the seemingly straightforward, "closed" nature of Ephraim's description of heaven is undermined. True to the comic nature of this universe, even "Divine Law"(CL 28) is not without exception. The figure of Maya Deren, who functions as her own patron and whose life was "her FIRST LAST ONLY" one (CL 23), illustrates this inversion. The strictures against intervention can also be waived in certain cases of overpowering affinities and remembered connections between souls. This is the case with Plato and Wallace Stevens or JM and Hans Lodeizen. Similarly, the farcical episode of the players' attempt at a kind of celestial midwifery indicates a certain flexibility in the heavenly stratagems. This ambivalence regarding the fixed nature of heaven's composition reflects both Ephraim's limitations as an oracle and the mediums' inclination not to take life, or the after-life, too seriously. The poem prepares for its own revision, setting up hypotheses only to

display at once the fissures and cracks from which the next level of understanding is born.

Concurrent with this confusion regarding divine laws, Ephraim reveals the existence of a crisis in heaven, an impending breakdown of the cosmic machinery. The world's population explosion, an example of man's irreverence and neglect for the organic whole of God B's creation, has engendered a need for more souls than the dying can produce. To balance this deficiency of supply the guiding spirits of heaven cultivate new soul material from the animal world creating "MEAN CLOSEQUARTERED THINGS WHO SELF / DESTRUCT YET SPARE A NUCLEUS TO BREED BACK / ONE CAN BUT HOPE A SHARPER-SIGHTED PACK"(CL 52). This reductive element results in quick-burning, animal natures such as JM ascribes to Strato, a lover, who in 1964 is "IN / HIS 1ST MAN'S LIFE" (CL 50). Suspensions regarding Ephraim's omnipotence are also reinforced by the intimations of another celestial bureaucracy, something greater than the nine stages of sensual reawakening. In "P", he mentions, somewhat off-handedly, having encountered "SOULS OF A FORM [he] NEVER SAW ON EARTH / SOULS FROM B4 THE FLOOD ... MEN B4 MANKIND"(CL 56). Thus the poem, and the familiar spirit, provide for the possibility of an ascent to greater truths, anticipating the emergence of the bats in "Mirabell" and the words of the angels in "Scripts."

Amid the panoply of Ephraim's discourse regarding the organization of the heavens and the more earthly adventures of the Rover Boys, there exist inklings of a projected concept of values. At the center of these stands the ideal of relation that Ephraim outlines in his long dictation in section "Q". "Devotion" embraces the ideas of connection and communication, being "THE MAIN IMPETUS"(CL 59); the concept at the heart of Ephraim's philosophy. Whether on a primal level or on a more abstract plane, devotion binds the disparate elements which make up the "SURROUND OF THE LIVING"(CL 59). By stressing the notion that their communications are the "SILENT LOVE" of "SUCH SILENT BUT URGENT MOTIVES"(CL 59), Ephraim highlights the wider spiritual aspect in contrast to the players' secular ones. Through his devotion, man, according to Merrill, has a limitless potential to generate and fulfill the "MOULDS OF HEAVENLY PERFECTION" that mirror the "IDEAL OF THE CONTINUUM"(CL 59). His power lies with his exploration of this possibility.

Power, as section "P" establishes, remains the motivating force behind the machinery of heaven. Good or bad, its possessors provide the impetus by which man moves, the dynamics upon which his evolution is based. Power in this context rests not on the sense of control or domination, but rather on the ability to construct and retain relations, to communicate and participate in the

intertwined nature of the universe. The cloudy incident half-revealed between Hans and JM, where virtue or intellect triumphed over instinct, exemplifies an abdication of this primary force. The failure of communication inhibited Hans' ascent to his rightful level in heaven. Mozart's power, resting as it does in his creative ability to communicate through music, allows him the freedom to reject the bureaucracy entirely. Conversely, the worst abusers of power, such as Caligula and Hitler, who seek to quell this interrelation, are banished from a link to earth and held "strictly INCOMMUNICADO / [as] CYSTS IN THE TISSUE OF ETERNITY"(CL 55). Even casting back to the first impressions of Ephraim's connection with the mediums, one can feel the verse resound with vibrancy and force, an affirmation of communicative power, where "the line singing writes in lakeflesh / Highstrung runes, the reel spins and mind reels / YES a new and urgent power YES"(CL 6).

Power possesses a dual aspect, being both a harbinger of the creative and the destructive capacities. The invocation beginning section "P", "[p]owers of lightness, darkness, powers that be"(CL 54), intimates the twin elements, the potential for blindness or illumination. With his new technologies, Ephraim warns that man has reawakened the "[p]owers at the heart of matter"(CL 55), the modern serpent of destruction that will "open baleful, sweeping eyes, draw breath / And speak new formulae of megadeath"(CL

55). This annihilation destroys both the body and the soul.

As Ephraim reveals, after Hiroshima, "EARTH WORE A STRANGE NEW ZONE OF ENERGY / Caused by? SMASHED ATOMS OF THE DEAD MY DEARS"(CL 55). Heaven, to prevent the debacle of non-communication, searches for a new St. Theodore, a spirit of significant power, capable of confronting this dragon of man's creation. Salvation comes through the increased communication of heaven's ideal of devotion; by tapping the well-spring of love and relation in DJ and JM, Ephraim seeks to "improve the line / In every sense, for life"(CL 91).

This fundamental aspect of communication resurfaces in the context of the Rover Boys' relation to Ephraim. As time passes his need for them contrasts strangely with their often callous nonchalance. Maya Deren points out in the quotation from Divine Horsemen included in "Q" that perhaps it is not the gods who wane, but rather man's ability to connect with them, for

the gods have known other twilights,
and the long nights, and then the distant
but recurrent dawn. And it may be that
they weep not for themselves, but for
the men who served and will soon cease
to serve them. (CL 58-9)

The possible withdrawal of the gods comes about, as JM and DJ discover, when men surrender to a sense of the purposelessness of action and communication. Faced with the idea that there are larger forces at work in the universe, the mediums give way to an indifference and despair, saying: "Let what would be, be; let the diamond / Melt like dew into

the Cosmic Mind. / Somehow the thought, put in those words, hurtless"(CL 56). To this abdication of responsibility Ephraim replies in scathing tones: "SOBER UP IT IS YR DRUNKENNESS / SENDS THE [cosmic mind] LURCHING TO ITS FATE"(CL 56). The neglect of man's power to communicate and realize heaven's messages leads to the most fundamental of horrors, the loss of a conception of heaven and the continuity and purpose that it implies, for "when the flood ebbed, or the fire burned low, / Heaven, the world no longer at its feet, / Itself would up and vanish ...

Götterdämmerung"(CL 56). With the poem's conclusion comes the resolve to reopen the conduit to heaven, to begin the poem and thus expand the possibility of vision and recompense. This devotion finds its echo and authority in the alphabetically complementary quotation in "Q", where Heinrich Zimmer states:

The powers have to be consulted again directly -- again, again and again. Our primary task is to learn, not so much what they are said to have said, as how to approach them, evoke fresh speech from them, and understand that speech. (CL 62)

Thus the role of the poet and the function of art and language are understood to play a significant part in the process of the world's redemption. Art reenforces the ideal of devotion, postulates connections, and allows for the transformation of man's temporal situation from loss and decay into a vision of continuity:

The medium's relationship with Ephraim also highlights the idea of ascendent transformations. For the first half of the poem, generally up until the section "L", which ends in JM's reliving of a previous death, the conversations serve as a moveable feast, replete with the "sheer gemütlichkeit / Of insupportable hypotheses / Hovering there"(CL 26). In these sections the tone of their guide, the mystery of the board, and the youthful exuberance of the players, are probably of greater importance than any kind of message. Ephraim's injunction, to "TAKE ... FROM SENSUAL PLEASURE ONLY WHAT WILL NOT / DURING IT BE EVEN PARTLY SPOILED / BY FEAR OF LOSING TOO MUCH"(CL 15), exactly suits the players' temperaments. Ephraim, as an epicurean, a "smiling Hellenistic / Lightness from beyond the grave" (CL 15), draws their attention and invokes their trust. Ephraim's origins, his sketchy and unverifiable history, with its many coincidental similarities to JM's past, links this messenger more firmly to the players' world of sensuality. For all its other-worldly focus, "Ephraim" becomes very much a poem centered upon the human, a reevaluation of the poet's attitudes towards the spiritual and secular values in the mortal world. As the Hebrew translation of Ephraim's name suggests, his presence conveys the "double fruitfulness"(R 55) of human possibility.

Ephraim's significance as the pivotal point for this odyssey through secular love and relations is emphasized by

his alter ego of Eros in the lost but recycled novel. Eros, as J.D. McClatchy reminds us, was a mythical figure "born of Need and Resource as spiritual mediator between the real and ideal worlds to bring forth the beautiful" ("Lost Paradises" 312). Ephraim-Eros also personifies the emerging balance whereby "heaven went / A step beyond its own enlightenment / And taught the slave of intellect to feel" (CL 47). He functions as a conduit between two worlds, the translation of thought and feeling, as well as the metaphor for the passionate conjunction of JM and DJ. Ephraim, like the mirror which serves as his presence and symbol, becomes both the window and the reflection, the "silver-hearted guest, / [They] saw each other in [and] [h]e saw [them]" (CL 6). This twinning of heaven and earth results in a sum greater than the whole of its parts, a blend of natures and experience whose comic effect, being "[t]wice as entertaining, twice as wise. / As either of its mediums -- enthralled them" (CL 7). Thus the poem prepares the way for incorporating a doubleness of perspective, a sense of expansion and cumulative embrace, that translates into the visionary.

An important element in the book's spiritual evolution involves charting an odyssey of maturation, the growth of awareness that begins with DJ and JM's "FORTUNATE CONJUNCTION" (CL 15). The power of their passionate connection, their insularity in love, sets the stage for

Ephraim and opens the way for a sense of larger devotion, a more universal connection. The first half of the poem emphasizes the sensual and passionate natures of the Rover Boys, when the cup "[t]ook heart from [them], dictation from [their] guide"(CL 6). "Ephraim," as the work of an older Merrill, becomes a reassessment or retrospective of the youthful ascendancy of Eros. Ephraim's presence as the informing spirit at the beginning of the poem appropriately chronicles a "marriage begun in passion and enduring in companionship"(Moffett, James Merrill 175). The sensual orientation of Ephraim's directives, to "USE USE USE / YR BODIES & YR MINDS"(CL 15), leads to a feeling of emancipation in JM, whose "thirtieth summer ... freed [him] ... to do the homework / Fiction had optimistically assigned / To adolescence"(CL 15). Ephraim's presence, and the influence of his sensual preoccupations, capture JM's sense that passionate animal disguises "encipher / Obligations it is bliss to suffer"(CL 53). Strato, volatile, and driven by appetite, illustrates JM's attraction to this side of human nature. He eventually moves beyond his sensual myopia, finding in this surface "a skin / Through which its old sense glimmers, of the soul"(CL 53). So the theme of the lost novel, "an old, exalted one: / The incarnation and withdrawal of / A god"(CL 3), encapsulates the process of confronting and assessing the spirit of Eros, a "making sense ... of long attrition"(CL 48) and "the difficult

dynamics of intimacy, disillusion, and endurance"(McClatchy 309). From the halcyon days of passion and unquestioning acceptance of life's offerings, when "[c]auses / Were always lost-on [them]"(CL 14) and no idea violated the self-sufficiency of love, JM matures into one who looks for a "twilight presence"(CL 13), the palimpsest beneath the flesh.

With the pivotal section "L", the process of Eros' withdrawal begins. Being a point in the poem where the two temporal dimensions of past and present meet, "L" also handily underscores the gap between youth and age, between "steak au poivre" and "jellied sole"(CL 40-1). The older Merrill now recognizes that an essential aspect of age and mature understanding entails "a death's-head to be faced"(CL 41). Like the symbolic heart by which Maya Deren consecrated the Rover Boys' devotion, Eros undergoes a gradual change:

Heart once intricate as birdsong, it
Hardened on the spot. Much come-and-go
Has blackened, pared the scabby curlicue
Down to smatterings which, even so,
Promise to last this lifetime. That will do.
(CL 25)

The "[c]onsuming passions"(CL 50) that the Rover Boys so desired transform themselves into memory. The intensities of Eros give way to "such regret and wit as MERRILY / GLOW ON when limbs licked blazing past recall / Are banked where interest is minimal"(CL 50). The fate of Maisie, the household pet, plagued by the mating calls of alley cats in

Greece, coincides with this change in her master, his lost allegiance to the sensual and passionate, for "the side of [him] that deeply took her side / Was now a wall" (CL 51). Similarly, the death of Maya leaves JM and DJ at odds with their past assumptions and "much less equipped to face the Sphinx" (CL 52), the riddling dualities of life and love.

Time turns the tide on Ephraim-Eros and his influence. His power, the "stream-of-consciousness" (CL 9), that had so attracted the players in sections "A" through "L", now begins to fade. Where once "the least / Dull fact had shone of old, a wetted pebble, / Now along crevices inch rivulets / At every turning balked" (CL 71). The end of section "O" provides a telling alteration, the introduction of a new muse, one that has supplanted Eros and anticipates the emergence of a deepening consciousness at the poem's conclusion. Kleo, the frowzy housemaid in Athens, is revealed as Clio, the muse of history. The former embodied JM's feelings for the physical and erotic that dominates the first half of the poem, representing "the royal feline / Who seduced Caesar, not the drab old muse / Who did" (CL 53). What emerges in the later sections is JM's sense of acceptance regarding the flow of history, a reconciliation with Clio as the poet matures toward a broader conception of time and life. Helen Vendler notes:

If the divinity of youth was Eros, the divinity of middle age is Clio; if the metaphor for being thirty was embrace, the metaphor for being fifty is companion-

ship; and if the presence in the
mind was once love, it is now death.
("James Merrill" 212)

Thus "Ephraim" depicts this revision from the immediate to the historical, from Eros to the passions of the spirit.

The poem recounts a process of loss and retrieval, a departure from, and refiguring of, the precepts upon which life, love and art have been constructed. The relationship with Ephraim, as it waxes and wanes, mirrors this realignment. After the intrusion of the threatening Scribe figure in "U", an event displaced from its chronological situation in order to emphasize the mediums' conscious unwillingness to accept and assimilate the nature of the change, the role of Ephraim as conduit diminishes. The conjunction that fueled the first half of the poem is no longer adequate to sustain communication. The players, feeling "no less bowled over than used up, / By mutual accord left it at that. /(Not quite. Next week [they] called him and he came, / But things were not the same)" (CL 73-4). The players have surpassed their smiling Hellenistic master and "reached a / Stage through him that he will never himself reach"(CL 85). Like Eros, Ephraim becomes part of the cumulative cycle, "the latest / Recurrent figure out of mythology / To lend his young beauty to a living grave / In order that Earth bloom another season"(CL 85). The story of Ephraim's presence, like the comic cycle of birth, death and renewal, bodies forth a new

and heightened state of vision. What is lost, what fades in time and disappears from space, remains in language and memory, completing the circle created by an imaginative assent to comic resolution.

Essential to the secular perspective of "Ephraim" is man's relation to time, the fact of his mortality and the means by which he confronts this most arbitrary and elusive of limitations. The adversarial relation of man to time surfaces early in the poem, as Merrill races "the deadline"(CL 3) and pits himself against its ongoing flow. The poem can be understood as an effort, through the exercise of memory, to examine the "shadows of the past that live on and in fact shape and define the collection of responses we call the self"(Kalstone, "Persisting Figures" 132). The past becomes a source and a solace, as opposed to the uncomfortable reminder of mortality and death. Assuming another St. Theodore guise, Merrill casts himself as a knight errant facing the dragon that is time. He draws its teeth and quenches the destructive fires by employing the redemptive powers of the imagination. He cannot vanquish time but, rather, turns its destructive flow into the regenerative play of the creative spirit. The failure of recollection is time's victory, and the poet, through his recreation and assessment of "dead selves", steals for mankind the promethean fire, the creative flame to counter its destructive force. The poem, with its self-conscious

and self-reflexive nature, becomes "an argument for art's power to resurrect"(Yenser, The Consuming Myth 235) not only the poet's individual past but cultural history as well.

An aspect of this heightened vision in the poem is Merrill's acknowledgement of this genius in Proust, one evident to JM only in maturity. What the young JM mistook "for an unconvincing / Trick of the teller ... [becomes] truth instead / Babbling through his own astonishment"(CL 71). Just as Sergei, in the "novel", moves behind the waterfall, the ongoing flow, toward an inner sanctity or revelation, so Merrill addresses the figure of time in his own reflection, that "unrelenting fluency" and "steel[s] himself to move beyond its range"(CL 70). The reality of man's temporal condition must be overcome before the vision can move forward.

The figure and his reflection represent dual purposes, two divergent approaches to ordering experience, both with "[d]esigns on the same backwardly emerging / Notion rich in dream-deposits"(CL 69). Yet, the whole of Merrill's poem works to accept "the test of time that all things pass" (CL 65) and also to circumvent that reality by acts of retrieval and reorderings of linear chronology. By clasping to himself these recreated personages of his past, Merrill thwarts the destructive impetus of time and achieves a new relation with the world. "Zero hour"(CL 90) at the poem's conclusion presages not an end, but a beginning, the symbol

of absence that comes to represent circular completeness. Here emerges the figure of the "ancient, ageless woman of the world"(CL 92), the Magna Mater or spirit of nature, who draws the mediums out into a sense of the comic integration of experience.

The poem's discussion of art figures prominently in the process of redemption. Ephraim's dictations illustrate many of poetry's capacities, both for illumination and concealment, as well as for playfulness and profundity.

--Ephraim's voice represents memory, the unconscious and the sensual; all qualities connected with the articulating power of speech. JM suggests: "[F]lesh made word, became through him a set of / Quasi-grammatical constructions which / Could utter some things clearly, forcibly, / Others not"(CL 31).

Just as a sign language mediates between the chimpanzee Miranda and her master Temerlin in "F", so too the other world of the spirit becomes accessible through translation. Quite early in the poem the mediums recognize the centrality of this process, as

The profusion dawned on [them], of "languages"
Any one of which, to who could read it,
Lit up the system it conceived? -- bird-flight,
Hallucinogen, chorale and horoscope:
Each its own world, hypnotic, many-sided
Facet of the universal gem. (CL 31)

As the players monitor Ephraim's language, growing in scope and expertise, they notice too the vital significances that exist beneath the play of words and wit. His communications become "like a Haydn / Finale marked giocosso but shot

through / With silences -- regret / foreknowledge?"(CL 18).

The Rover Boys learn gradually to read the silences as well as the words, to move past the immediate towards the palimpsest of meanings and new planes of conception.

Evidence of this changing nature in the vision can be found in those final sections of the poem where JM reasserts his sense of self and artistic faith. As he wanders through Venice, surrounded by the beauties of man's creative spirit, he rejects the propensity to "overlook a subject for its image, / To labor images till they yield a subject"(CL 76).

By accepting the idea of alternative dimensions in experience through memory and imagination, Merrill demonstrates a process of growth and transformation. The image of the mirror now becomes a window: he has moved into the "far side of reflection"(CL 49), broken down the barriers that inhibited a synthesis of secular and spiritual, individual and universal. The poet now hears "waking echoes of that give-and-take ... Between one floating realm unseen powers rule ... And one we feel is ours, and call the real"(CL 20). He learns the potential for the spiritual in this world and discovers the "neutral ground" from which to "measure by triangulation / Heights up there beyond the height of self"(CL 66). All he can attest to is the continual need to balance contraries, to accept and encompass the dualities of experience. In "X", JM admits:

And so brought at least me these spells of odd,
 Self-effacing balance. Better to stop
 While we still can. Already I take up
 Less emotional space than a snowdrop. (CL 89)

Memory and consciousness have been brought onto a new sphere. The power of Eros has been tempered, Ephraim outgrown; but rather than a complete loss there remains the promise of imaginative regeneration, for "nothing's gone, or nothing we recall" (CL 92). The loss of youth and passion, like the vanished novel, returns through the agency of the mature poet's understanding of the comic nature of the world. As Ephraim fades, the woman of the world emerges to fill the void, preparing the way for the material discussions of Mirabell. The conclusion of "Ephraim" becomes a beginning, a genesis "[o]f reawakening, recirculation; / Pulsars intuiting the universe once / More" (CL 85). J.D. McClatchy observes that

the poet knows ... that even if we half-
 create what we perceive, compensation
 is also the origin of vision, whose
 signifying "systems" are as varied and
 as valid as the ways the imagination
 can body forth the forms of things
 unknown. ("Lost Paradises" 310)

From the wreckage of the old selves comes the promise of a new relation, the "elate / Burst of satori, plucking final sense / Boldly from inconclusive evidence" (CL 91). What is saved from the fire fuels the next stage of the ascent. "Ephraim" depends not so much on closure and finality, as

upon the ongoing cycle of loss and retrieval, of scissorings
and mendings, discovery and redefinition.

Chapter Four

Orion Discovered: Mirabell's Poems of Science

Say we've reached again some relative point--that of fear-- on a spiral forever widening. Why couldn't the whole adventure, as before, just graze peril on its outward curve to insight? (CL 111)

Approaching the second book of The Changing Light, with its daunting length and reams of upper case dictation, one could easily agree with Mirabell that "THIS IS NO AGE FOR EASY REVELATION" (CL 247). "Mirabell's Book of Numbers" seems more than just a "partial / Turn of the screw toward grandeur" (CL 97) as it continues the trilogy's process of revision, a movement into new and more complex levels of revelation, a "spiral forever / widening" (CL 111). In his light-hearted recounting of the years spent redecorating the "blue" room at Stonington, Merrill recaps the development of the troubling undercurrent present in "Ephraim," the revelation displaced into "U", that there were other forces,

more threatening and potentially illuminating than their "familiar spirit." Having crossed the threshold in section "V" of "Ephraim," the players now move toward a vision of man's relation to nature, answering the call of the "ancient, ageless woman of the world" (CL 92). Drawing upon an analogy he later discovered in Julian Jaynes' discussion of the bicameral mind, Merrill explains this emerging balance between the two functions of the mind, the creative and rational, as embodied by the "two adjacent rooms: a domed red one where [they] took down the messages, and a blue one, dominated by an outsize mirror, where [they] reflected upon them" (R 52). Thus, with his setting, Merrill announces the visual correlative for his ideal of "remaining of two minds" (R 61), yet bringing both together within the developing scope of the poem.

Ushering in a new cast and reassessing the roles of the earlier principals, "Mirabell" takes the players' exploration out into the world of matter, widening the scope of their celestial investigations from the concerns of "Ephraim." Consequently, the first section of this discussion of "Mirabell" deals with this new "visionary landscape" (AQ 32), establishing Merrill's revised view of the heavenly organization and the nature of those voices which speak "WITHIN THE ATOM" (CL 113). Of primary importance are the roles of Mirabell, Auden and Maria Mitsotaki, as they, with JM and DJ, "[n]ucleate a kind of

psychic atom" (CL 191) and explore what Merrill considers to be a "more or less/ original vision of life" (AQ 32).

Having laid out the foundations of these poems of science, this chapter examines the central tenets contained in Mirabell's tales of "the way / Of our own world" (CL 232) and how the book moves out toward the broadest reaches of existence, addressing the fundamental question of the relation between mind and nature. The last section of the chapter discusses the elevated importance of language and imagination in the role and person of the scribe, as he reflects the creative principle at the heart of the "SOURCE OF LIGHT" (CL 251). Essential to this book is how the "ENTIRE APPARATUS / DEVELOP[s] THE WAY TO PARADISE" (CL 180) as the players move through Mirabell's world of logic, formula and number in preparation for the healing mysticism of the angels in "Scripts for the Pageant."

Appropriately, Merrill focusses upon the minutiae of daily life to establish the relationship in "Mirabell" of the players to the other world. The board, like his Stonington surroundings, becomes the smallest of scales capable of reflecting the grandest of truths. Touching upon this dimensionality, JM muses that "'small town' is / Largely a state of mind, a medium / Wherein suspended, microscopic figments ... Catch a steadily more revealing light" (CL 97). By assessing the seemingly insignificant,

Merrill reaches toward the universal. In keeping with his poetics of translation, he suggests that

poems, even those of the most savage incandescence, can't deal frontally with ... huge, urgent subjects without sounding grumpy or dated ... [As a result, Merrill dramatizes] on a human scale a subject that couldn't have been handled otherwise. Which is what a "poetic" turn of mind allows for. You don't see eternity except in the grain of sand, or history except at the family dinner table. (R 72)

Thus the first section of "Mirabell" introduces an intertwining of temporality and eternity, the creation of a forum where microcosm unfolds into macrocosm. Or, as JM suggests, punning on Wittgenstein's definition of being:

The world was everything that was the case?
Open the case. Lift out the fabulous
Necklace, in form a spiral molecule
Whose sparklings outmaneuver time, space, us.
(CL 274)

This conception of the interchange between scales becomes a fundamental motif in "Mirabell," a way of addressing the problems of perception and expression regarding existence. Forestalling an allegiance to either the material or the purely intellectual, the poem leads toward the concept of a balance based upon the fundamental play of the imagination.

A primary embodiment of this conjunction of scales is reflected by the bat voices, speaking from "WITHIN THE ATOM" (CL 113), yet functioning in the widest spheres of earth and heaven. This interchange, established early in the poem with Merrill's "watercolour" on Avebury, captures his sense

entails an acknowledgement of duality. The poem announces its intention, like the divine nature of the Stonehenge monoliths, to "[d]raw things back into focus" (CL 112), to act as a pivotal point between secular and spiritual, "both a holy and a homely site / Slowlier perfused than eye can see" (CL 112). Later revealed as an ancient anchor point between the bat world and earth, the image of the monument now reveals a new mode of exchange. In a later sonnet, JM proposes that the best approach to this vision involves the ability to encompass its divergent scale:

Central to this book
Are lenses, the twin zeros. Take a look
Through them (it all depends which way) and see

Now vastness and impersonality
Brought near, now our own selves reduced to specks.
Our peacock, both a subatomic X
And a great glaring bugaboo, like Blake's flea,

Discourses just beneath the skin
No less than from the farthest reaches
--How can it be?-- of Time and Space.

How can it not? Given such crystalline
Reversibility, the toy spyglass teaches
That anything worth having's had both ways. (CL 174)

The poem's vision necessitates this dual perspective, one that establishes the primacy of the imagination, as it expands outward from the human surround into a conception of universal principles.

Similarly, the image of the board comes to represent a movement into metaphor, a subversion of the reality of life, a "fictive darkness" (CL 148), into which JM and DJ

descend. Grappling with the intricacies of matter, the players' existence in the world is reduced to "a safety door / Left open onto light"(CL 148). They have moved into the intermediary stage of an ascent toward illumination, "[t]he blind bright spot"(CL 148) of what is still an incomplete vision. Thus, "Mirabell" becomes a purgative process, entailing the delineation of the fundamental dichotomy in man between mind and matter, that leads toward a means of imaginative conjunction.

At the center of this progression toward compatibility is the players' resistance to the proffered subject matter of the discussions. "Ephraim," having been revealed to be "BUT A PROLOGUE" (CL 113); their familiar spirit suggests a new agendum, a poem investigating "ALL LIFE & ITS WORKINGS" (CL 108). This intimation is reiterated by the intrusion of the bat-tutors, whose brusque tones demand a new seriousness necessary to "RAISE A SONG TO OUR REAL ORDER MYND AND NATURE WEDDED" (CL 113). From these voices come the disquieting information that "3 OF YOUR YEARES MORE WE WANT WE MUST HAVE / POEMS OF SCIENCE" (CL 113). The poet objects: "Poems of Science? Ugh ...Science meant / Obfuscation, boredom --" (CL 109), "[p]owers so naive about the world of men" (CL 109). Assuming that this knowledge will be gleaned from conventional sources, JM begins consulting various introductions to the world of science in order to grapple with "the maze / Of meanings to be stumbled

through blindfolded" (CL 110). Yet, this abdication of his poetic voice and imaginative nature leads to an impenetrable wall. The frustrated search for illumination through science reflects only the poet's limitations, the point where his "learning evanescent ... / Colliding in the mirror with itself," leaves him wondering "[h]ow on Earth to recompose the bits" (CL 111).

The voice of an older science, in the form of his god-child Urania, named after the muse of astronomy, provides an answer. Auden later explains that the poet is creating a new vision; hence,

A MUSE IN HER RECURRENT INFANCY
PRESIDES ... BABBLING ON THE THRESHOLD OF
OUR NEW ATOMIC AGE THE LITTLE LOVE
AT PLAY WITH WORDS WHOSE SENSE SHE CANNOT YET
FACE LEARNING (CL 261)

Having absorbed the lesson of Heinrich Zimmer in "Ephraim," that the primary task is not to repeat old meanings but to "evoke fresh speech from [the gods], and understand that speech" (CL 62), the mediums brace themselves to overcome the "relative / point -- that of fear -- on a spiral forever / widening" (CL 111) as they consult the powers again.

These new tutors, the voices from within the atom, described by Auden and Maria as gigantic bat-like figures and identified with "[s]ymbols of eternity" (CL 98), draw into play the timeless nature of their discussions. Mirabell, their chosen spokesman, suggests: "THE ATOM / WAS MEANT TO CONVEY DYNAMICS / SCALE / IT IS THE VOID FILLED / WE

MEANT TO CONVEY DYNAMICS / SCALE / IT IS THE VOID FILLED / WE ARE THAT VOID"(CL 174). Initially perceived as fallen angels, "THE SONS OF CAIN"(CL 114), the bats are ultimately linked with the fundamental composition of nature and the absence of imagination. David Kalstone explains:

now the powers of extinction are introduced center stage, and the bat figures are their ambassadors. They introduce the potentially inhuman aspects of mind and power, the dwarfing vistas of chemical and biological force. ("Persisting Figures" 133)

These bat figures now "GUARD THE EMBERS WHICH ARE MIND," the aspect of rational thought, which "SHOW MAN THE WAY TO PARADISE"(CL 114). The initially negative aspect of these voices, linked as they are to the death of close friends and DJ's parents, turns the players "OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES"(CL 216). JM reflects: "Where else to look for sense, comfort and wit?"(CL 100) than in the place, beyond the temporal, a realm of meaning outside the human realities of decay and dissolution. Thus, the bats' presence provides the next level in Merrill's expanding hierarchy, figures drawn from the universal realm of matter and rationality to balance the sensuality and self-oriented nature of Ephraim.

The poem reflects this alteration of focus by the revision of information regarding the make-up of heaven. Ephraim's description of nine stages, geared to a redemption of the senses, is immediately discounted as merely a "GREAT DULL / BUREAUCRACY OF PATRONS"(CL 145). It becomes a system

of reincarnation that simply recycles souls, giving the world "THE SAME OLD HORSE / RESHOD"(CL 145). Instead, the bats belong to the Research Lab, described as

An EMPTINESS PACKD FULL. No language here
But formulas unspeakably complex
Which change like weather. No raw material
Other than souls ranging in quality
From the immortal Five to those of lowest
Human density. Even animals
Who've lived near man, obeyed and studied him.
(CL 140)

In the R/Lab, a creation of God B after the near annihilation of earth, the bats enact a complicated process of cloning the most promising of human souls. Mirabell boldly asserts: "ALL LIFE / IS A LAB QUOTE UNQUOTE BUT ALL VIABLE LIFE (THE LIVES / OF THE DOERS & MOVERS) IS A PROCESS OF THE R/LAB"(CL 144). From the various ranks of soul "densities," the bats fashion new combinations "MORE RESISTANT TO THE ATOMIC ACID & TO THE / FATIGUES & ABRASIONS OF HUMAN THOUGHT"(CL 185). All these variants revolve ultimately around the original five souls; "the immortal Five" designed by God B, "[r]ecurrent presences / Whose drawn breath keeps the ribs of Time and Space / From snapping, and the furthest stars in place"(CL 143). Their allegiance to this process is geared to the preservation of creation and the avoidance of a nuclear holocaust similar to that which destroyed them.

As the familiarity of the bat voices is established, the players' fear and resistance lessen. Auden observes that they are not Faustian, but more like "INFORMATION BANKS

TO TAP / NO NEED TO SIGN AWAY THE SOUL"(CL 129). Being representatives of "the atom's / Negative potential"(CL 224), the bats come to symbolize not a destructive aspect -- at least not if they function as a part of the whole -- but as an untapped potential of the mind. Just as Julian Jaynes theorized about the unconscious interplay between the two spheres of the mind in the development of man, so the bats, as "INSTRUMENTS OF REPLY"(CL 140), assume the voice of an ongoing process, the accumulated knowledge of evolution. Working "IN FRIENDLY RIVALRY WITH NATURE"(CL 196), but not exclusive of her, the bats seek to redeem man from "THE VOID ... A WILL TO NOTHINGNESS"(CL 120). For this they use the tools bestowed on them by God B, "MIND WORDS REASON /[and] LIGHT"(CL 114).

Instrumental to the progression of the poem is the emergence of Mirabell, that "PARAGON OF COURTLY GENTLENESS"(CL 175), who helps create "THIS WORLD OF COURTESY"(CL 155), balancing the darker aspects of his revelations. Suitably, it is Mirabell who suggests adding punctuation to the board, "as if to humanize, add nuance to, the communications"(Kalstone, "Persisting Figures" 136). This accords entirely with his identification with "MERCURY"(CL 246), the quicksilver of the mirror, the god of aspiring intellect and mediator between the human mind and divine wisdom. As well, essential to Mirabell's nature is the idea of intermediacy, his role as "MIXING AGENT"(CL 155)

between earth and heaven, time and eternity. At the nexus of the mirror, Mirabell's field, the ongoing progression of life meets the "secret backward flow" (CL 249) of memory. Attempting to look "beyond [himself]" (CL 249), man confronts his own "black / Alter ego" (CL 249), seeing through Mirabell's "permeable impasse" the necessity for balance between mind and nature.

Another interesting facet of the Mercury figure is based upon Jung's examination of the alchemical properties of mercury, as the creative force imprisoned in matter with links to the elements and the spectrum of primary colours (Yenser, The Consuming Myth 265). To consolidate this ideal of balance and relation, Mirabell becomes

A person, not a peacock, not a bat;
A devil least of all -- an impulse only
Here at the crossroads of our four affections.
OR MAKE OF ME THE PROCESS SOMEWHERE
OPERATING BETWEEN TREE & PULP & PAGE & POEM (CL 173)

Indeed, Mirabell's manifestation as process enables the creation of this "psychic atom" (CL 191), the means whereby a fruitful interchange of mind and nature is achieved. Helen Vendler points out that the deaths of Matt and Mary Jackson signal the disappearance of "the parental and therefore of the filial; JM and DJ can no longer be 'boys,' but must put on the morality of the survivor" (225). Mirabell himself reminds them: "KEEP IN MIND THE CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE THIS TURNS US / OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES" (CL 216).

The emerging roles of Auden and Maria Mitsotaki serve to recreate, in the larger sphere of the poem, a new filial relationship, a sense of connection beyond the temporal, in their embodiments as "father of forms and matter-of-fact mother"(CL 135). They create a new center of devotion, a familial image representing Ephraim's ideal on a wider scale. From the "SURROUND OF THE LIVING"(CL 59), postulated by Ephraim, the players have moved to a point where "all things alive / Or dead that touch [them] ... Are droplets in a 'probability fog' / With [them] as nucleus"(CL 191-2). The quartet forms a balance of the elements, a prismatic crystal capable of receiving the vision of light. Mirabell explains:

FIRST OUR 5 SOULS MUST BEGIN TO BE A SINGLE POWER:
5 IS THE MIDWAY NOW BEGINS THE LIFE OF OUR MINDS 5
AS ONE IT IS A VERY UNION OF THE ELEMENTS
THUS: WATER (MM) EARTH (WHA) AIR(JM) FIRE
(MY POOR SELF) & LAST THE SHAPING HAND OF NATURE(DJ)
(CL 159)

Here, at the "CRISSCROSS"(CL 159) of their thought, 741 is transformed into Mirabell, from subatomic bat to Congrevian peacock. From symbol of the atom's duality, to an emblem that holds the promise of unity, Mirabell's metamorphosis reflects the potential for a healing conjunction. The lyrical song of the Elements explains: "MIND HAS THIS FORCE, / IS DEATHLESS,...[and] MANIFEST IN 5 RINGS AROUND THE SOURCE / OF LIGHT"(CL 161). What the players embody is the imagination working in the world, resisting the negative push of chaos and forming the means by which man can work

toward a vision of paradise. From the realm of matter, the players move toward a vision of perfection, a balance of the twin qualities of mind and nature, reality and the imagination. Yet, prior to the revelations heralded with the arrival of Michael in the closing section of "Mirabell," the players must undergo a process of "purgation," the stripping to essences contained in the lessons of Mirabell.

What follows is a brief encapsulation of "the way of the world," the history of earth and man as retold by Mirabell. It is an intricate blend of reshaped myths, warnings about the dangers of our nuclear age, metaphors of science illustrating evolutionary process, and finally a comment on the loss of myth for the modern imagination. JM explains: they "sit us down to what [they've] needed all Along: his legions' genesis and fall / Retold in the vernacular"(CL 167). The bats emerge as messengers between grazing points of the centaurs' world; cloned from mutated flies, they are atomic in nature, the antithesis of their masters. Because of their immortality, the centaurs' chief problem was overpopulation: "THIS LED TO A FATAL DECISION: KILL THE IMMORTALS / SO BEGAN EXPERIMENTATION WITH ATOMIC BLAST / FOR WE WERE CHARGED (WHO ELSE?) WITH RIDDING THEM OF THEIR RELICS"(CL 168). The bats gain ascendancy and, using their atomic power, create a "VAST ATOMICALLY POWERD WORLD"(CL 168), based upon fourteen sectors that contained "OUR SIGNAL & / ANCHOR STONES"(CL 168). In their pride they

neglect nature, "THE / VEGETABLE ADVERSARY"(CL 168), and eventually lose their terraced world, falling back to earth to mingle their remains with those of their masters.

Auden sums up the tale:

MY DEARS THOSE 2 POOR WORLDS WITH THEIR CONTROLLED
CLIMATES SLAIN ANCESTORS BETRAYAL'S OLD
SHOCKING STORY THEN THE RISE TOO FAR
ABOVE IT ALL & BRINGING DOWN THE FIRE ...
IS NOT THE MORAL THEN AS NOW: BE TRUE
TO SOMETHING TRUE TO ANYTHING (CL 170)

On a similar, albeit human vein, they tell of Akhnaton and Nefertiti, rulers of Egypt, who, because of their childlessness, become "devotees" of the mind: "THEY SAW THEIR LOVE DOOMD TO GIVE BIRTH TO IDEAS ALONE"(CL 225).

This allegiance, similar to the bats, gives rise to a near apocalyptic disaster when they create a crystal pyramid to harness the power of the sun. Their devotion to the material and the mind in its rational, scientific sense, labels them "THE GENIUS & & / THE WARNING"(CL 228). From this debacle God B develops the central law of existence, the main thrust of Mirabell's dictation, the clause of "NO ACCIDENT"(CL 179).

Having reached the point of this fundamental alteration, Mirabell discusses his essential message. He explains: "PRIOR TO / AKHNATON HAD BEEN ONLY CHANCE"(CL 179); yet, because of the danger of losing this third Atlantis, God B institutes a new order. The Research Lab is created and the cloning process begins. With Akhnaton and Nefertiti, "WE BREAK INTO HISTORY"(CL 180). From then until

the present, there is no accident. God B exercises a complete control, "FOR GOD B HOLDS / THE SCALE: 2 GOLDEN TRAYS OF WHAT MAN CAN DO AS AGAINST / WHAT HE CANNOT OR RATHER WHAT HE IS NOT READY FOR"(CL 260). "Accident" now becomes a tool, a means whereby man is saved from himself and his allegiance to the scientific. Mirabell explains:

THE GAP BETWEEN CAUSE & EFFECT NOW HAD TO BE NARROWD,
B4, GOD B HAD ALLOWD AN AMPLE MARGIN (NOTHING
PROMOTES BELIEF QUITE LIKE THE BENEVOLENT ACCIDENT)
.... ACCIDENT HAD BEEN USEFUL
.... NONE OF THIS AS U SEE TRULY ACCIDENTAL
(CL 194)

Mirabell also reveals how this determinism is camouflaged under the apparent liberties each individual exercises. JM wryly comments: it is "the art that conceals art"(CL 195), where everything "UNFOLDS FALLS INTO PLACE AS THEY HAVE PLANNED"(CL 215). JM muses:

All, all, it sinks in gradually, was meant

To happen, and not just the gross event
But its minutest repercussion. We're
Awed? Unconvinced? That too's no accident.

The clause is self-enacting; the intent,
Like air, inscrutable if crystal clear.
Keep breathing it. One dark day, what it meant
Will have sunk in past words, No Accident.
(CL 197)

From this pivotal point the poem becomes a process of resistance and acceptance, an illustration of the means by which the imagination can redeem man, can reconcile him to the elements of the natural world. The race is between "Chaos and Mind"(CL 201), the two aspects of man reflected within the encompassing sphere of God B, who is "NOT / ONLY

HISTORY BUT EARTH ITSELF"(CL 187). God B "IS THE GREENHOUSE"(CL 187), both the cell and the universal, as well as the power of mind, "THE ACCUMULATED INTELLIGENCE"(CL 276). What the poem works toward is a vision of how these interact and complement each other, a revelation to be imparted by the angels.

Significantly, it is JM's "starstruck hymn to Mother N"(CL 235) that turns the tide of the poem toward balance. Coming just before the advent of the herald announcing the visit of the first angel, this lyric draws the focus away from an allegiance to the purely rational, asserting the necessity of man's duality. Employing the motif of a "broken home," a fundamental division that resonates throughout his work, Merrill muses upon the reasons "[w]hy everyone is so anti-Nature"(CL 231). Alone for the evening in Stonington, JM resolves to call his mother, yet is distracted by the "stardeck's otherworldly light," the attraction of the "stratosphere / Of ... Mind"(CL 232). Contemplating the bats' and his own inclination toward "artifice"(CL 232), Merrill recognizes how such distancing eventually circles back to the real. The extremes of rationality, the divorce of mind from nature, leads only to a yearning for their reunion. Merrill's arguments leave JM "like any atom, / Two minded"(CL 232-3). Yet, the possibility of Nature's withdrawal, the revelation of a complete severance, invokes in the poet an immediate

resistance. Having brought nature back into the poem, JM feels an inexorable attraction, as "the mind's ear registers her vocalise," her notes of "lashing hail and rapturous farewell"(CL 233). The terror of her possible loss, like his worry over the delay before his mother answers the telephone, asserts the necessity for man to achieve a balance, or at least a bemused acceptance, "[c]ommuning where we don't communicate"(CL 233). From this assertion follows Michael's invitation to the next level of revelation, when the players will perceive mind and nature in the form of God B and his Twin.

In the face of this world of formula and necessity, man also retains access to a source of transforming potential. The bats explain this through the metaphor of light, a pure light, whose beams encompass the entire spectrum, revealed to the players in the dream-vision lessons of the cell, the "HEART OF LIFE"(CL 207): In its whole unprism'd form, the source of life is available to man, being "OF THE ELECTRICAL & / RULING WORLD"(CL 252). This aspect of man, the source of possible completeness and unity, is alien to the bats. They "KNOW ITS POWER EMBODIED IN MAN BUT KEPT FROM [them] / IS ITS FULL MYSTERY. ... AN AIR [they] CANNOT BREATHE"(CL 251). Man alone is capable of receiving the angels, "FOR SUCH A FORM IS ONLY / TO HUMAN MINDS IMAGINABLE. THUS THE S/O/L IS ROOTED IN THE LIVED LIFE, ONLY MAN RECEIVES GOD B'S / MAIN MAGIC: IMAGINATIVE POWER"(CL 251). This power,

identified with growth and fecundity, is "THE GREEN THAT WILL BE PARADISE"(CL 207).

Central to the reconciliatory impulse, the wedding of mind and nature in "Mirabell," is the idea of a meeting place for science and art. When Ross Labrie suggested this could be observed in the title of the book, Merrill responded enthusiastically, saying: "[T]hat makes perfect sense The old-fashioned word for poetry was , 'numbers'"(AQ 33-4). With the elevation of the scribe and the predominance given the role of science, Merrill seems to be exploring "what work [humanity] can find for that part of the mind hitherto occupied in inventing religious systems"(Vendler, "James Merrill" 228-9). Science, now forced "MORE & MORE TO SHARE THE RELIGIOUS FIELD OF CONSCIOUSNESS / MUST TRY TO REASSURE"(CL 137). The bats, in requesting these poems of science, aim to establish a new ritual, "TO RENOVATE THE HOUSE OF MAN"(CL 239), opening the way for belief and the mind to function in a consoling way. Mirabell suggests:

WE HAVE PULLED DOWN THE SUPERANNATED CHURCH
& RAISED AN ALTAR TO THE NEW HOUSE GODLET: PURE REASON
NOT IN THE VOLTAIREAN SENSE BASED ON KNOWLEDGE MERELY
BUT REASON RUN THRU THE FIRES OF MAN'S CLONED SOUL
(CL 239)

From this cloned soul come the tools of the aspiring scribe, the faculties of imagination and language. "METAPHOR"(CL 239) becomes the ritual "OF THIS NEW REASON"(CL 239) and language the rites. Mirabell's contention, that "THE

REVEALD MONOTHEISM OF TODAY IS LANGUAGE"(CL 239), leads to an assertion of the potential inherent in man.

The bats recognized in the ape child this S/O/L, the presence of God B's benediction. It can be traced through the development of language, which creates the "MOST REWARDING OF MAN'S V WORK ... CULTURE ... HIS ENTIRE LIFE-FABRIC WOVEN OF LANGUAGE"(CL 241). Through the use of reason man develops and, after its fallibility is proven with Akhnaton, the bats respond by creating "A REASOND INDIRECTION"(CL 242) embodied in language. The birth of the imaginative arts of "SCIENCE POETRY [and] MUSIC"(CL 242) becomes the means by which humanity aspires toward paradise. Early in the poem, Mirabell asserts: the "ARK WAS THERE / THE LIFE RAFT LANGUAGE"(CL 119). The communicative powers of poetry and music, "THOSE 2 PRINCIPAL LIGHTS OF / GOD BIOLOGY"(CL 156), reside in their capacity to "INDWELL & CELEBRATE THE MIND ... HEART IF U WILL"(CL 156). These arts, free of the necessity for corporeal manifestation, move into the realm of religiosity, fostering belief. Marie observes:

IS MUSIC NOT LIKE TIME
RETOLD? LIKE THE NO ACCIDENT MOTIF?
A WAY OF TELLING THAT INSPIRES BELIEF?
WD AN UNMUSICAL MIND TAKE IN THE PEACOCK?
(CL 206)

Thus, the creative mind emerges as a central element in the celestial process.

Foremost is the function of the Scribe, whose role "(Shades of Matthew Arnold) ... must now be to supplant / Religion"(CL 178). From this sacred gift comes the means for encapsulating the creative process. JM asserts:

Less a matter of judicial sense
 Than of a gift which hallows as it grows,
 This law sheds light, now on the cult of Liszt,
 Now on the stutter of the physicist,
 And banishes to outer darkness those
 Who grimace when the lingo's vatic antics
 Deck with green boughs the ways of God to man.
 (CL 178-179)

The scribe, having replaced the priest, "it is, therefore incumbent on the poet to marry science and poetry (and music), matter and man, nature and spirit, to reconcile all the dialectical contraries"(Harrington 587). Having established his first law, "SURVIVAL," God B amends it with this clause endorsing the centrality of the imagination, which then allows "THE ENTIRE APPARATUS / [to] DEVELOP THE WAY TO PARADISE"(CL 180). Yet the job of the scribe, "TO HELP SPEED ACCEPTANCE / OF THE 5'S WORK"(CL 143), remains a problem to be solved. The poet, "CONFINED BY SPECIALIZATION"(CL 247), works amid a vacuum created by the limitations of his audience. Mirabell's grim depiction of those who "HOWL & PRANCE SO RECENTLY OUT OF THE TREES"(CL 247) attests to a certain skepticism regarding the imaginative potential of contemporary society, reinforcing the idea that "THIS IS NO AGE FOR EASY REVELATION"(CL 247).

Despite this negative assessment of the modern imagination, Merrill's poem abounds with incidents of the

transforming powers of language. One of the most telling of these revolves around JM, as he develops from the reluctant poet and rational skeptic into the willing participant in this revelation of the means to paradise. The necessity for belief becomes paramount to the process of the poem.

Mirabell suggests: "DANTE'S STRENGTH & THAT OF HIS TIME WAS FIERCE CREDULITY"(CL 132). Yet, Merrill's more contemporary vision, one that leaves theology to embrace the realities of science faces a more extreme challenge. Auden observes:

WE MY BOY DRAW FROM 2
SORTS OF READER: ONE ON HIS KNEES TO ART
THE OTHER FACEDOWN OVER A COMIC BOOK.
OUR STYLISH HIJINKS WONT AMUSE THE LATTER
& THE FORMER WILL DISCOUNT OUR URGENT MATTER.
(CL 147)

From the onset of the book, there exists this continuing comic dialogue between the two extremes of message and means. As the progression of characters and the process of the lectures carry on, Merrill creates an underlying element of humor and play to offset the bats' didacticism. If the message is the "masque" proper, then the underpinning of doubt and resistance forms the "anti-masque". Both react against the other and bolster the cumulative power of the whole. They operate, not as a negation or cancellation, but as a synthesis of wit and severity, of the rational and the imaginative.

Merrill carefully states, in his interviews, the necessity of remaining of two minds. JM reiterates this concept as a formative force in the poem:

Tomorrow all will be lucid, crystalline:
No opposition graver than between
Credulity and doubt, or thumb and forefinger
Of a same hand, that, as we watch, commence
Twirling the hypnotic bead of sense.

(CL 125)

By using the poem itself to establish the position of the
scribe-vates, Merrill engages the reader more closely in the
evolutionary process of the talks. Auden points out: "HAS
IT NOT STRUCK U THAT YR DOUBT MY DEARS / MAY BE THE KEY THAT
OPENS THOSE GREAT DOORS?"(CL 175). Railing at the
questionable beauty of this "[w]armed-up Milton, Dante,
Genesis"(CL 136), JM asserts the impossibility of turning
such material into poetry, "[w]ithout first turning down the
rheostat / To Allegory"(CL 136). Eventually, the poem
encompasses its contrary by passing the bats' message
through the purgative fires of doubt. Mirabell points out:
"CURIOUS THAT U ACCEPT THE CUP & NOT THE SAUCER FOLIE
A DEUX FOLIE A 2,000,000 WHAT DIFFERENCE?"(CL 137). By
providing this opposition in the poem, Merrill prepares the
way for the more abstract nature of the angelic revelations.
The point, Auden suggests, is to establish the grounds for
belief:

FACTS JM WERE ALL U KNEW TO WANT.
WRETCHED RICKETY RECALCITRANT
URCHINS, THE FEW WHO LIVE GROW UP TO BE
IMPS OF THE ANTIMASQUE
THE ELDER FACTS IN LIVERY OR FABLE
HAVE JOINED THE DANCE FOR, FACT IS IS IS FABLE:
THIS IS OUR GIFT FROM MIRABELL MY DEARS.

(CL 263)

The establishment of belief, an imaginative assent to the unknowable, remains, according to Mirabell, an intrinsic part of the human condition, the quality which "ALLOWS FOR THE DIVINE TRANSLATION"(CL 200).

By exercising that "REASOND INDIRECTION," the power of the imagination, man can transform his world, just as the players transform Mirabell. The figure of the peacock, an apt symbol of this conjunction, recalls a blending of colours, a totality and unity, as well as the Christian motif of immortality. Mirabell's translation becomes a "charming and comic tribute to the power of human language ... which clothes and ornaments matter"(Kalstone, "Persisting Figures" 136). Language as a function of the imagination widens the spiral of vision. Explaining his own ascent, Mirabell comments:

FOR ME TO INSTRUCT & TO ANSWER U THEY (MY MASTERS)
OPENED THEIR FILES OF MYTH & LEGEND, FACT & LANGUAGE THIS
HAS NOW BECOME AN UNCHANGEABLE PART OF MY NEW RANK
FOR HE WHO KNOWS THE MYSTERIES; IS HE NOT BEYOND THEM?
(CL 264)

Similarly, the players undergo various alterations as they move "UP THE SCALE"(CL 133) towards a "RELEASE INTO LIGHT"(CL 234). Even Hell is redeemed by language, as Robert Morse observes: "In this guidebook of yours, how do you tell / Up from down?"(CL 256). Merrill consolidates the point of this concentric and restorative world by recalling a childhood misunderstanding:

It's the hour

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When Hell (a syllable identified
In childhood as the German word for bright
--So that my father's cheerful "Go to Hell",
Long unheard, and Vaughan's unbeatable
"They are all gone into a world of light"
Come, even now at times, to the same thing)--
The hour when Hell shall render what it owes.
(CL 274)

The whole impetus of the poem is to reinforce this idea of
retrieval within a continuum. Echoing Ephraim in "Q",
Mirabell states: "NOTHING IS EVER EVER LOST THE WATERFALL
WILL HOLD / YR 2 BRIGHT DROPS & YOU WILL SPLASH INTO THE
GREAT CLEAR POOL"(CL 117).

The epigraph for "Mirabell," drawing upon Laura Fermi's
memory of her husband's role as one of "the first men to see
matter yield its inner energy, steadily, at their will"(CL
94), becomes a paradigm for the expansion of vision. The
investigation of JM and DJ illustrate a similar process in
the realm of the mind. What "Mirabell" entails is a
reduction of life to its essences, mind and nature. Just as
Auden and Maria are being "STRIPPED REDUCED TO ESSENCES /
JOINED TO INFINITY"(CL 209), so the human players grow away
from the limited aspects of the ego. Musing upon the
continual balance of loss and gain, Merrill encapsulates the
interconnected fabric of existence, using the heroes of The
Lord of the Rings as exemplum:

They of course come through
--It's what, in any Quest, the heroes do--
But at the cost of being set apart,
Emptied, diminished. Tolkien knew this. Art--
The tale that all but shapes itself -- survives
By feeding on its personages' lives.
The stripping process, sort of. What to say?

Our lives led to this. It's the price we pay.
(CL 218)

The concerns of eros and ego that have dominated the lives of the players are being translated into a different realm. From the preoccupations of the individual, the poem moves through this purgative stage in preparation for the mystical abstractions related by the angels. The poet must recognize "WHAT A MINOR / PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART / COMPARED TO THOSE GREAT GIVENS"(CL 262). Merrill himself has suggested that "the issue of profane versus divine comes to be that of the self versus the selfless"(R 56); as a result, "Mirabell" introduces the necessary element of sacrifice to art and to the integrity of the vision. The process of preparation provides a breadth of scope sufficient to sustain "THE GREAT / MIRACLE [of "Scripts"] ... THE REINCARNATION OF THE GODS"(CL 225).

The close of the poem leads seamlessly into the next, as it returns full circle to the world, now properly revealed as "[l]argely a state of mind"(CL 97). Fittingly, the players have been guided into "the heart / Of matter only -- when the smoke clears -- to find / Another antechamber of pure mind"(CL 224). Having stripped matter and mind down to their essences, the players are ready for "the radiance inching into place"(CL 274), the advent of the source of light, "THE VERY POLLEN OF / THE POWER PLANT"(CL 251). This arrives in the form of Michael, whose closing speech, ringing in Biblical tones, ushers in a vision of

light and the intimations of the presence of God B, "AN
ANCIENT / AND IMMORTAL INTELLIGENCE"(CL 276). Once again
the mediums have outgrown their tutor, sensed his
"encroaching obsolescence"(CL 267), and move out toward a
more encompassing vision.

Chapter Five

The Outstretched Palm of God: "Scripts for the Pageant"

We want unwilling excursions and ascents,
Crave the upward-rippling rungs of fire,
The outward-rippling rings (enough!) of water
We keep trying to make sense
Of what we can. (CL 370)

"Scripts for the Pageant," the final book of Merrill's trilogy, raises the mediums' vision to its most eloquent and mystical perspective. If "Ephraim" were the "play" of life, and "Mirabell" charted the dualities of matter and antimatter through masque and antimasque, then "Scripts" becomes the "MASTERMASQUE" (CL 297), the culmination of the poem's revisions. Mirabell, whose "courtesy and skill ... took away [the players'] dread / Of heights" (CL 311), is superseded by Michael and his brothers. With these angelic voices, the illuminations are brought closer to a depiction of the nature of God. The seamless transition from the end of the second book to the beginning of "Scripts" reflects "MAN'S EASY / LEAP ONTO THE OUTSTRETCHED PALM OF GOD" (CL

287), his affinity for the source of light. The whole of the third book is awash in changing light, in the intimations of illumination and immortality appropriate to Merrill's vision of a "WEIGHTLESS LOFTY & PURELY COMIC LIFE"(CL 427). The players have braved the elements of Mirabell's dictations, examined the duality that rests at the heart of matter and, with the aid of the angel-tutors, begin to "MAKE SENSE OF IT"(CL 346). From the densities and darkness of "Mirabell," now seen more as a "Tower of Babel // Than Pyramid"(CL 311), JM and DJ move towards a vision of "THE MYSTIC UNION"(CL 291), the healing conjunction of opposites. "Scripts" becomes a "dance / Of slow acceptance"(CL 335), a final movement that transforms the nature of life into a vision of purpose and potential.

With the entrance of the angels in "Scripts," the poem moves to its highest plateau, broaching the "Grand / Design outspiraling past detail"(CL 478). Of initial interest in this chapter is Merrill's creation, through character, setting and structure, of an atmosphere in keeping with the ascent to a conception of spirituality. As well, the chapter focusses upon the lessons which anchor the tripartite structure of "Yes", "&" and "No". Of central interest is the poem's elaboration of the dualistic vision proposed by "Ephraim" and "Mirabell" and the impetus in "Scripts" toward an affirmative conception of universal interrelation. Finally, the chapter investigates how this

third "revision" reflects, on all levels, the essential comic act of completion conjoined to continuance. Merrill's concern for "grounding" the lightning of his ideas, reconciling the imaginative odyssey with the realities of the quotidian world, becomes of paramount importance to the poem's comic resolution. The nature of the conclusion, comprised as it is of unmaskings and rituals of release, also serves as a celebration of the comic elements of regeneration and futurity. Without destroying the integrity of the revelations, Merrill moves the poem toward a reintegration with the world of experience, the human realities of time, love and loss.

An important aspect of the formality of "Scripts" is the definite sense, as Auden says, of "THE PATTERN BLEEDING THROUGH" (CL 425). From the onset of the volume, there are hints of "A GRAND DESIGN" (CL 375), the promise of an encompassing vision that reconciles and contains the dualities inherent in the world. In keeping with the thematic impetus towards a unified vision, "Scripts" becomes a "temple" built to celebrate the presence of God. With its classical symmetry, the ascendant "Yes" section balancing the descendant "No", the whole volume pivots around the fundamental "&", forming an elegant triadic structure. The balance is further enhanced by the interior constructions of each section: "Yes" with its introductory lyrics initiates the first ten lessons, "No" beginning with the last ten

lessons leads to the final closing lyrics, and then the "&" section balances the whole with its five central lessons surrounded by lyrics. At the center of the book, Merrill establishes the paradigm for his own poetic construction, the fabled Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Both poem and temple, striving for a sense of "GRAND / & SIMPLE BEAUTY," are designed in accordance with the twin virtues of "PROPORTION . . . and SPLENDOR" (CL 373). By juxtaposing the more mundane and commonplace corollary of his Athens home to the image of divinity, Merrill stresses the necessity of proportion and simplicity.

The key factor throughout "Scripts" is this impulse toward balance. The dialogue itself entails a continual intertwining of the grandeur embodied by the angels, described variously as Homeric, Biblical and Shakespearean, and the informality of the discussions amongst players. Similarly, the sections compose a process of elevation grounded by the fetes and interludes, a structure designed to pace and balance the revelations. This sense of stylized emotion and presentation is in keeping with Merrill's affinity for the operatic or the interplay in Noh drama, between serious set-pieces and farcical or comic asides. As the vision rings constant changes towards a glimpse of totality, so each step is reflected in the emotions of the players or the events in JM and DJ's lives. The "FEARFUL FORWARD MARCH" (CL 326) towards knowledge, propelled by the

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friction between opposites, is also mitigated by the elements of circularity, as the poem celebrates the completeness of a balanced vision.

The progress of the poem reflects this impulse toward an enveloping circularity. Creating an emblem for "Sandover", Merrill sheds light upon the relation between the two sections of the poem:

The schoolroom stretches to a line. It breaks
Cleverly into two floating poles
Of color that in dark 'air' glow and pulse,
Undulate and intertwine like snakes. (CL 336)

Both Michael and Gabriel represent the polarity of this vision. Yet, each punctuates his lessons by asserting the ultimate enigma at the heart of creation, how the end points dissolve into the unknown. Robert Morse tells us: "MUCH HERE IS PURE AND SIMPLE MYSTERY" (CL 499). What the furthest reaches of the investigation point to is the center which holds. By the conclusion of "Yes", the affirmative has been cast into doubt, while the negative discussions lead towards a positive assessment. The two polarities contain their opposites, drawing the poem finally back to "&". The focus of understanding remains the point at which the hourglass turns and the necessity for the continuance of that motion.

Having things both ways lies at the heart of Merrill's vision; yet his conception of the inherent duality of all things comes to reflect an affirming unity in this last major volume. Sandover becomes an acoustical chamber where JM realizes that "[e]verything merges and reflects" (CL 415).

Just as Auden announces at the beginning of "No" the theme of interrelation, JM recognizes that the drift of these "negative" lessons implies "in one swoop tenacity, / Harmony, resistance"(CL 441). Having arrived in Michael's lessons at the apotheosis of "I come to Be, is the Idea"(CL 357), the poet understands that this is but half the equation. The material remains a fundamental aspect of the balance, the resistant force by which the grand design can be fulfilled. For the continuity that men desire, the futurity which brings hope rests upon the essential premise that

history's great worm
Turns and turns as it does because of twin
Forces balanced and alert within
Any least atom ... (CL 478)

Reflecting this ideal of conjunction the interior poems of "&" offer the most striking images of the interrelation between mind and matter. Beginning with the "Samos" canzone, Merrill deliberately signals the theme of a seamless connection, a "Promised Land" (CL 369), where the physical senses are augmented by a sixth sense, that of "a great untapped mind ... in the natural world"(AQ 35). The "twins of Sea and Land"(CL 369) take on a new transparency, where

Translucences that go dead in daylight
Asked only the quick dip in holy water
For the saint of cell on cell to come alight --
Illuminated crystals thinking light,
Refracting it, the gray prismatic fire. (CL 369)

It is a vision of the world replete with "leit- / Motifs of Loom and Wheel" (CL 369), images of interpenetration and continuity. In this heightened vision of nature, the poet depicts a symbolic synthesis of the eternal cosmos at one with the earthly passage of time. "Samos" indicates arrival at the still center, the unmoved mover.

Having survived the glare of Michael's light, Merrill draws the poem back towards matter, seeing in nature "the great Eye that sees by its own light" (CL 370). Here, the players are reminded that "COUNTLESS THINGS / GONE FROM THE WORLD ENDURE IN ITS (M) WINGS" (CL 373-4), an ideal all the more comforting when the deaths of Robert Morse and George Cotizas are announced. Understood initially as loss, the deaths become "no matter how reluctantly, / ... gains. Gains to the work. Ill-gotten gains" (CL 376). When the poem approaches its center, the traditional oppositions become less and less distinct. The final message, that abstraction must merge with material reality, is found in the poet's reminiscence regarding how far they have progressed since they, as The Rover Boys, viewed the Cranach Venus in Berlin:

Not having found Greece yet, we spent a while
Admiring "values", "volumes",
"Relationships" of brat
To smiling, cat-faced goddess,

As if in that long hall
The work had been a wonder
Dreamlike, neat, abstractable from all
The moods and codes of matter. (CL 434)

From this initial disjunction of mind and matter, the players have moved towards an apprehension that the two function as one. Auden explains: "& RELIABLY ENOUGH / HOLDS BACK THE NOTHING WE HAVE FOUND TO SAY / ONLY IN OUR WORST MOMENTS"(CL 461). With this illumination the poem moves into a new shade of light:

Not
 . The lights we've seen according to thus far
 --Spectral gems, first waters of a star --
 But Light like bread, quotidian, severe,
 Wiped of the sugar sprinkles of Vermeer,
 Light gazing beyond thought as from a dark
 Material cowl, abstracted patriarch
 All-seeing yet Itself unseen. (CL 437)

The light of mind, the idea of the intellect beaming back, becomes intertwined with the material. Idea is set to innocence and the vision toward mystical union.

The series of poems introducing the angels at the beginning of "Scripts" serves to create another pyramidal structure, with God B and Nature at the apex. Although the ratio of 88:12, which Mirabell so insisted upon, was dismissed by Pythagoras as "FAULTY READ-OUT"(CL 377), the two sections of the poem, in one of its positive revisions, endorse the bats' numerology. In "Yes" the multi-dimensional qualities of the four angels serve to create one twelve; in the "No" section the addition of Robert Morse, George Cotzias and the Twins establish another. The number twelve, in its component parts, also encapsulates the poem's blend of duality and unity. As well, the numerology is

encompassed in the "Quincunx" (CL 493), supplied by God B during the final lesson of the book, a symbol of both positive and negative attributes leading back to "our willow &" (CL 494). Similarly, the play of letters offered by Auden just prior to the first lessons reflects this consolidating impulse. Using the phonetic equivalency of the letters G and K, Auden takes the four angels names to spell "MEEK ... [setting] FORTH INITIALLY / THE WHOLE DESIGN" (CL 318). Just as Michael and Gabriel are tied to the opposites in all their associations, the twin brothers Emmanuel-Elias and Raphael-Elija form a neutral meeting ground. Suspension and substance respectively, this first set of twins prepares the way for many others, a line weaving "BACK TO THE PRIMAL (M)ADAM / EVE" (CL 341), God B and Nature, or God B and his Adversary. Thus the series of angels and senses, the variety of dimensions, leads back to the final juxtaposition offered in "&", the fundamental pact between "GOD BIO & THE BLACK" (CL 440). God B, whose name in heaven is "'ABBA'" (CL 478), becomes a reflection of himself, two opposites inextricably linked, a duality that is at essence unity. On the other end of the spectrum this process of dimensionality reduces to the nature of man, for as Auden observes of the angels: "THEIR POWERS ARE IN US QUITE AS MUCH AS OVER [us]" (CL 345). Once again the poem completes the circle, the cast being, as JM suggests, "[m]uch smaller than [they] thought" (CL 405).

In this final book, the heaven whose appearances baffled JM and DJ from the onset of their investigations has become a particular and highly visualized place. With the advent of light, in the person of Michael, the imagination is given free reign, providing for "Scripts" the "WHOLE SQUARE MILES OF TROMPE L'OEIL"(CL 385) that Robert desires for heaven. An important contribution to the poem's sense of grandeur and ceremony is its continual grounding in the particular. One form this takes is the descriptive details provided about the various characters; Nature, for instance, makes her entrance in

a smart white summer dress,
Ca. 1900, discreetly bustled,
Trimmed if at all with a fluttering black bow;
Black ribbon round her throat; a cameo;
Gloved but hatless, almost hurrying (CL 407)

Another form of this stage setting can be found in the variety of homes, the players' in Athens, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, and the ballroom of Sandover. Using italicized script to etch "the unseen [the players] blankly contemplate"(CL 482), Merrill draws more closely together the twin poles of the poem, demonstrating how "Real and Ideal study ... compatibility"(CL 320). The heightened artifice of the poem, its appearance on the page as script, complete with stage directions and character definition, serves to enhance a vision of actuality. This form of presentation dramatizes a poem which is essentially a play of voices; it fleshes out the individual characters and

defuses the impact of the upper case dictées so intimidating in "Mirabell". By modifying the starkness of the presentation, Merrill stresses the idea of intergelation, of man's shared heritage with the inhabitants of heaven. This stratagem of balance, used in both style and form in "Scripts," underlines the thematic impetus of the volume towards a vision of coexistence.

At the center of this celestial drama stands the schoolroom-ballroom of Sandover. The image of the palatial schoolroom, first introduced by Auden in "Mirabell," provides an example of the elevation and interconnection this volume strives for. The name Sandover introduces the central image of the hourglass, the continual turning, which represents the essential interplay of opposites in an ongoing process of evolution. It also anticipates the ideogram provided by Gabriel in the "No" section; it encapsulates the twin elements at work in the world, "that distinguished tree / Through whose high leaves light pulses and whose roots / Rove beyond memory" (CL 319). Sandover, as the nexus for these communications, represents "THIS FICTIVE SPACE" (CL 451) where time does not obtain. It is the meeting point between the forward time of man's life and Michael's imagination, and the backward flowing time of Gabriel and the Black. As well, the name Sandover, in its "corruption" of the French "Saintefleur" (CL 319), echoes the image of the rose, the vision of totality that lies at the

heart of Dante's Comedy and at the mid-point of Merrill's. Akin to this process of association by translation is the Italian version of Sandover, "Santofior" (CL 319). This connects the schoolroom with the character of Rosamund Smith from Merrill's lost novel, "[a] twilight presence ... Perennially youthful, worldly, rich, / And out of sight until the close" (CL 13). Her description suggests, with its conjunction of the rose motif, aspects of rejuvenation in which Rosamund becomes another image of connection, a vision of totality. Thus, at the still center of Sandover, one senses intimations of the presence of both God B and his twin figure of Nature.

The teaching aids present in the schoolroom, "Star-map, globe and microscope" (CL 320), announce Sandover's properties of interdimensionality, how the poem seeks a mode of continual interrelation. Scale becomes less important as the poem strives for vision. Similarly, the image of a home finds its resonances, its anchor, in figures of historical and earthly reality, such as the Temple of Artemis and the players' home in Athens. While the italicized description of this heavenly abode is sending the poem outward, Merrill's Roman-scripted interpolations find echoes of the schoolroom's presence in his immediate surroundings. Most significant is the recently acquired piece of antique statuary that stands in the corner of their Athens parlour. Here lurks another female presence holding an apple in her

outstretched palm, an ancient symbol with its echoes of the fall, the judgement of Paris and the apocryphal story of Newton's discovery of gravity. Like almost all the symbols in "Scripts" it leads back to the twin properties inherent in God B and Nature, the purity of mind and the necessity to incorporate the realities of the quotidian world.

Sandover also finds its echoes in the tale of a primal division that Merrill has touched upon again and again in his poetry, the "broken home." In a poem of that same name in Nights and Days, Merrill explores feelings centered around the dissolution of his parents' marriage, drawing upon the Oedipal triangle that always resulted in "that same old story -- / Father Time and Mother Earth, / A marriage on the rocks"(ND 28). Faithful to his primary poetic creed of grounding the imaginative exploration in the realities of experience, Merrill finds a telling image for the harrowing possibility of universal disjunction through a betrayal of the essential unities. He reflects: "That bit in 'The Broken Home' ... isn't meant as a joke. History in our time has cut loose, has broken faith with Nature"(R 72). The poet, by drawing upon memories of the ballroom of his father's Southampton mansion, finds in Sandover the means of creating, or exploring, "a thousand unrealized possibilities"(R 75). In an entirely personal vein, yet one in keeping with the affirmative nature of the poem, Merrill offers another interpretation of the schoolroom. Noting its

mythopoeic references, Merrill recounts the suitably paradoxical image "of how Cronus cuts off the scrotum, or 'ballroom,' of his father Uranus and throws it into the sea, where it begins to foam and shine, and the goddess of Love and Beauty is born"(R 75). From separation, from the perception of duality and the image of division, emerge anticipations of a healing or redemption through the powers of art and the imagination.

At the center of "Scripts" lies Merrill's idea of a unity created from the dual presence of the positive and the negative, how in conjunction each redeems the other. Thus, the motif of twinnings, dominant in the interweaving of characteristics and the dimensionality of settings and characters, creates a process of reduction and consolation. As Psyche-Nature-Chaos reveals in the pivotal section of "&", "DUALITY IS DIMENSION, TENSION, ALL THE GRANDEUR / WANTING IN A PERFECT THING"(CL 408). Here, the poem brings forth its "EQUIVOCAL NEWS"(CL 391), the depiction of God B's "TWO EDGED GIFT"(CL 392), that at the essence of being exists an "IMPLACABLE / CONTRADICTION"(CL 396). From the beginning of creation, there was present this "HEARTBEAT / OF ATTRACTION & REPULSION"(CL 396), the conjunction of God B's idea resisting the "MONITOR'S RAGING WILL"(CL 393). At the furthest reaches of the source of light, one meets the Black, "THE REFLEXION, THE UNDOER TO DOING"(CL 476), just as at the innermost recesses of man's mind one encounters the

unknowable, the bicameral divide. The hedge that rings Sandover illustrates this sense of the essential division of mind, the schoolroom at its center standing "for the isolating privilege / Of Learning"(CL 320), the place where "[t]ales shape us, of all kind. / Myths. Novels. Awful books about 'man's mind'"(CL 382). On the other side, the "LOWER WALL / OF CONSCIOUSNESS"(CL 371), man is restricted by the barriers of self. The breaching of the wall, the point of connection, lends "BRAIN-MATTER ITS PROVERBIAL GRAY"(CL 447), that intermixture of thought with the "BLINDING / REVEILLE: IMAGINATION"(CL 447).

The final lesson of the poem teaches that man's drive, to "MAKE SENSE OF IT"(CL 346), must move further than pure idea. The limitations of a one-sided allegiance to intellect are demonstrated by the downward spiral of the "Yes" section. The discussion of man's reliance on mind leads to Auden's remark, "WHERE IN ALL THIS IS THE AFFIRMATION?"(CL 331). Without the conception of a balanced totality offered in "&", Michael's endorsement of mind leads to the vision of God B, "singing to the Pantheon. OR ALONE / KEEPING UP HIS NERVE ON A LIFERAFT"(CL 362). These "[e]erie undercurrents of distress"(CL 361) are a vision of ideas in isolation, before the lesson of interrelation brings forth his completing Twin. Auden claims, with his either/or explanation of God B's song: "THOSE TONES WERE EITHER / THOSE OF AN ETERNAL V WORK OR A MACHINE / SET TO LAST. UNTIL

THE BATTERIES / RUN DOWN"(CL 363). Suffused with images of abstraction, the initial section devolves into a conception of life as mechanical process, an entropic drift. JM observes, as idea gains prominence, that the vision of totality and possibility fades:

Dante saw
 The Rose in fullest bloom. Blake saw it sick.
 You and Maria, who have seen the bleak
 Unpetalled knob, must wonder: will it last
 Till spring? (CL 363)

Religion, being the province of Michael, the first vision is of a degenerate faith, of an imbalance within the realm of man. As this resistance runs down, the poem seeks "NEW MATERIALS . . . FOR A NEW FAITH"(CL 446), one based not upon the division of heaven and earth but upon a vision of their essential interrelation. Gabriel reinforces this with his rejection of the traditional conception of heaven and hell, the belief in "PUNISHMENT / AND MERCY ... [that] SIN EXISTS, RIGHT & WRONG"(CL 452). There "IS NO HELL"(CL 452), but only a final blankness, an "ETERNAL IDLENESS"(CL 452), that comes when man neglects the principle of resistance. Man must "MINE MEANING"(CL 346), not relegate the responsibility to heaven.

The idea of interrelation at the center of "Scripts" finds its most vivid and mystical presentation in the three ideograms presented to illustrate the nature of the universe. The first of these revolves around the design, described by Auden, that is found in the carpet of the

Sandover ballroom. Invoking resonances of the wallpaper at Stonington which announced the arrival of the ~~dark~~ this image, "[a] dark rose -- at whose center, black on white... is that thornscript firman or mandala"(CL 398), captures the twin properties of an unequivocal decree, or meditative contemplation geared to the self. It reiterates the essential vision of Dante, the rose of the Godhead, yet is cast in darkness rather than light. Similarly, it sends the reader's mind back to the figure of Time at the beginning of "Ephraim," where this dark presence, "the very attar of the Rose"(CL 3), loomed over the poem's composition. At the center of the trilogy lies this dual perspective, the twin properties, whose positive or negative aspects, inseparably yoked, vary in intensity according to the changing light.

Having introduced this image in the closing lines following Psyche-Nature's revelation, Auden later offers an elaborate explanation, one suitably compressed into a "gem" by the pressure of the poet's imagination. Gleaned from a "SLOEYED SUFI"(CL 454), introduced to them by Ephraim, the explication revolves around the Western misreading of "reversed" Arabic calligraphy. The figure is "some ornate / Bismillah ('in the name of Allah')"(CL 454), a mystical representation of the name of God. Here, to the reader's untrained eye, the two letters "ba" -- in Egyptian belief the soul, in Merrill's cosmology the dual aspects of the universe -- enclose the phrase "Ism (world of names, empty

phenomena)"(CL 454). The entire phrase rests upon a "diacritical dot"(CL 454), closing like a fist upon the essential nature of man and the world. This image of compression conveys the poet's frustration at the possibility of engaging "the Whole Point"(CL 454), relating through the limitations of language the totality of the highest vision. JM is left, like other mystics, skimming the "lost heavens for that inky star"(CL 454), forever searching for the means to convey what is most intangible and profound. In an excellent discussion of this passage to which this synopsis is indebted, Stephen Yenser has pointed out: "At exactly this point, duality can hardly be distinguished from unicity"(The Consuming Myth 299). From the moment that the vision began to widen in "Mirabella," Merrill has been preparing for this inevitable compression. In an article discussing Dante's Comedy, Merrill focussed upon its two pivotal points, the nexus of Hell centered around Satan's link to the non-generative and the final vision of the pilgrim in Heaven that resembles the totality of the atom, the essence of creation. The Changing Light arrives at a like conjunction of polarities, yet binds them together in an ongoing spiral of necessary interrelation. At the heart of his poem, dedicated to examining "THE STRUCTURELESS STRUCTURE OF THE SOUL CELL"(CL 290), Merrill confronts the ultimate enigma, one encapsulated only in the

incomprehensible simplicity of a mystic image. Man is left with the imagination pressing back upon reality.

Having broached the dual essence at the heart of matter with the first ideogram, the poem moves toward a more complex depiction of man's relation to the universe. Gabriel offers the second of these crucial images, answering the poet's plea for a means of encompassing the essence of the lessons. JM muses:

It all fits. But the ins and outs deplete us,
Minding the thread, losing the maze, we curse
Language's misleading apparatus.
For once I rather sympathize with Pound
Who "said it" with his Chinese characters --
Not that the one I need here could be found.

(CL 453)

Yet Gabriel supplies it. In a homely image of the players' relation to the other world, what the angel draws, white on black, JM recreates, in reverse, upon the page. It is the "SYMBOL FOR ENIGMA"(CL 474), the image of the monitor and resistance, as well as resembling the oriental character for man. Beginning as "GOD'S IDEA"(CL 474), abstract and unfathomable, it depicts, when placed upon earth, man's quest for meaning, for "REASON & LIGHT"(CL 474). Yet, having been mixed with matter, the process of time begins, and the inherited properties of the Black make themselves felt. The final addition to this cumulative picture, somewhat like the creation of the poem itself, suggests the reverse existence in the realm of anti-matter. What is created is a continually running hourglass, the process of

resistance between two contraries that lies at the center of The Changing Light at Sandover. By illustrating the "TWO MINDS OF MATTER"(CL 475), Gabriel recapitulates the figure of the four angels, the process of interrelation between mind and matter that leads to the apex of the vision, the Twins. His figure also resembles the spiralling molecule of the DNA in "Mirabell," the "minute intelligences that indwell/ The chromosome and educate the cell"(CL 203). With Gabriel's "apt ideogram"(CL 474), man has been firmly placed within the weave and web of creation, the process of resistance, of "fire fighting itself -- fire its own screen"(CL 475). Having reached the limitations of the vision, a certainty regarding man's own role in the cosmos, the players recognize the poem's completion. There is no necessity to broach the "one last revelation" (CL 477), the "lofty enigmas" of the Pantheon. It is enough to understand that all is of a piece, that there is a connection. By making "SENSE OF IT"(CL 478), seeing the "[g]rand / Design outspiraling past all detail"(CL 478), the poet can revel in a sense of completeness, "a glowing / Tide-pool dram of bliss, [a] diminuendo"(CL 491). They have reached, "the most ... their outflung arms could hold"(CL 491).

The last of the ideograms, presented by God B himself in the final lesson, puts the seal upon the poet's V work. Like the poem he commissioned, God B's figure of a quincunx

contains "BOTH PAUSE AND HOPE"(CL 493). It reiterates the two-sided nature of existence, encapsulates the meanings contained in the previous points of meditation. In the figure of man, "FULL OF TIME [struggling] TO HOLD IT BACK"(CL 494), God B sees his own fulfillment. Like the vision of Ephraim, that heaven depends upon the continued existence of earth, God B acknowledges that man through his resistance will

CREATE FOR ME A PARADISE I
IN MY OWN OUTSTRETCHED ARMS WILL SHOW CRYING
SEE BROTHERS WE HAVE HELD IT BACK SEE SEE
I AND MINE BROTHERS IN OUR DAY SURVIVE (CL 494)

Both man and God are promethean figures, striving to assert an individual volition, resisting in order to create. Early Mirabell explained in the poem: "THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS / IS OUR STORY"(CL 199). Resistance begins at the "MINGAN WAIST"(CL 475) and moves outward to the farthest reaches of the universe. Once again the two polarities are brought into conjunction. Taking his cue from this image of God as a reflection of man on a larger scale, Merrill begins immediately to move the poem back towards the particular, offering his own history of the "broken home" as a means of grounding the poem. Yet, as Maria reassures him, the union of God B and Nature, "He with His proven innocence, and She / With Her rich wardrobe of ideas and motives"(CL 494), creates a couple whose "SEPARATION / REMAINS UNTHINKABLE"(CL 495-6).

Just as the thematic aspects of the vision move in a continual relation to the center, the linear development of the plot builds towards a conclusion. After the presence of God B at the end of the first section, the poem begins a process of contraction. Having reached the outward limits of the vision, the light changes to reflect a movement back towards the worldly. This is reenforced by the lyric interludes regarding Samos and Athens, the first introducing the vision of the temple and the ascent towards the pinnacle of Nature's dictates in "&", while the Athens lyric signals an incorporation of the quotidian. In a similar vein, the vision of God is balanced by Auden's announcement of the impending end to the communications, the severance of the bond that has fueled the quest. "QUITE LIKE PROSPERO"(CL 364), they must destroy the means by which they have achieved their vision, releasing their captive spirits back into the world.

Despite an initial resistance, JM realizes that half measures will not suffice:

No. Back to flames, back to the green
Rhine go the rings in Wagner and Tolkien.
The poem's logic, though I hate to say,
Calls for the shattering of a glass. (CL 364)

Once again, what is initially perceived as an absolute loss, a complete dissolution, comes to be seen as a gain. Just as Maria feels the urge to "MARCH ON"(CL 418), so JM foresees the need "to put / These headlong revelations finally / Between the drowsy covers of a book"(CL 418). To balance

the ongoing and heady nature of the revelations, Merrill builds this undercurrent of loss, invoking in the players and the readers an impulse toward completion. The poem becomes a "DREAM / [Maria] LONGS TO WAKE FROM"(CL 500), as the poem retreats into the mundane realities of this middle world between the Black and God B. The movement of "Scripts" begins to reflect Maria's wish for a "GRAND SCHEME / [that]. LET[s] A MIRROR NOW & THEN MATURE / INTO A SIMPLE -PIECE OF FURNITURE"(CL 500). The poem is constructed to be a "dance / Of slow acceptance"(CL 335) in a number of senses, that of the final revelations, that of man's necessity to judge, to assume responsibility, as well as the acceptance of the conclusion of the visions. Like the image of the sea-turtles who have laid their eggs eggs, the players desire to "[r]egain the ebbing world they mustn't fail"(CL 501).

A similar undercurrent that propels the poem forward is the idea that man remains ultimately responsible for the final decision between "Yes" and "No". At the onset, Auden explained: "WE MAKE OUR DEATHS MY DEARS"(CL 304). Despite the poem's movement toward the grandest of elevations, the final choice revolves back to our own natures, "PRECIOUS IF BANAL"(CL 308). With the arrival at each new pinnacle in this final ascent, the poet is enjoined to relinquish his neutrality. Auden asserts: "YR JUDGEMENT LENDS WEIGHT TO THE SCALE ONE'S NOT ... BRUSHED BY SUCH WINGS TO BE /

STILL OF TWO MINDS"(CL 399). Man must exercise his own version of those senses possessed by God B and connect the universals of mind and matter. By this means the grimmest aspects of the conversations, Mirabell's implied determinism and the reiteration of the No Accident cause, are modified, brought into balance. The notion of man's responsibility is stressed, as "Determinism's thistle, seed by seed, / Drifts outward, silken"(CL 391). Maria-Plato asserts in her "Sermon at Ephesus":

PREPARE TO WEAN
YRSELVES OF THE FATAL DELUSION OF ALLPROVIDING
HEAVEN. MAN MUST PROVIDE
MAN ALONE
MUST UNDERSTAND THAT VANISHED MARBLE TREAD
GIVES WAY IN TIME TO THE STEEP & SOLITARY
PATH OF MIND (CL 496-7)

If mankind cannot achieve the balance required, then the end of things will come. Robert Morse complains: "It's everything one loathes about the Dance..."(CL 528), this continual interplay of mind and matter, loss and gain.

The final lyrics of "Scripts" revolve around the poet's growing sense of the necessity to move back into the world. Thus, the poem begins a gradual descent after the last lessons, a movement to "rouse / From its deep swoon the undestroyed heartscape"(CL 517), the world of youth and Ephraim cast in a new light. Invoking the image of the winged horse at the poem's close, Merrill both sends his vision out into the world and rejects the final hubris of Bellerophon. Like Milton in Book 7 of Paradise Lost, the

poet prays for a "counterclockwise drain / Of chanted phrase on equilibriums"(CL 505), a movement back toward personality, the "STAR WE ENTER / TO FIND OURSELVES"(CL 499). Once again, the "screen / Of self [begins to form] between God and His creature"(CL 499), as Merrill chronicles the "long road taken back to earth"(CL 501).

These concluding lyrics resonate with images harking back toward the more secular concerns of "Ephraim". The terza rima poem, entitled "Venetian Jottings," recalls the pivotal sections of "V" and "W", where the "great cloudburst turned [JM] to a glass / Model of stamina"(CL 503), a receptacle for the vision that was to come. Now, as the poem edges away from the purgative and illuminating centers of "MirabelI" and "Scripts," the personalities harden into types and the fluid interchange into a work of art. The "window fiery-mild"(CL 77) that JM moved through in "Ephraim" becomes a portal back into the world. Like the trinkets made by the Venetian artisans, the "rose-hot blob" of the poem begins to "translate // Itself to souvenir"(CL 504). Merrill acknowledges this in his own self-deprecating reference to the poem as "commedia dell' arte"(CL 505), the visionary masque dwindling to low comedy. They return to the "old resounding bridge"(CL 503), undergoing a last metamorphosis back into the realities "of the life lived ... the love spent"(WS 6). It is also a return to the bridge of "&", the place where belief and doubt, mind and nature are

brought into conjunction. Here, the loss of friends, whose presence has continued past death, must be confronted by the gains of the vision, the continuance of "LIVE / ALEMBICS"(CL 497) that make up the ongoing human adventure.

What the players see is a world of death, paradoxically linked to the world of life. In a number of reversals and inversions, such as DJ's experience viewing the film of Maya Deren, where "[they] are the ghosts, hers, the ongoing party"(CL 505), Merrill draws the sting of this final separation. They have come to realize that the two worlds are never exclusive, that the presences of past lives, in memory and art, serve to create the cumulative life of mankind. The reemergence of Maya in the final moments of the poem, and the dual nature of the images in her film, cushion the return to reality. Although the uncertainty of a "Happy Ending?"(CL 506) recalls the final sense of man's responsibility, the players have become inured to the "[t]ricks of the darkroom"(CL 362), and eschew the necessity for a definitive confrontation with "the confusing terms: Dance, Gods, Time, Stars"(CL 506). What matters is not absolute belief but the suspension of disbelief.

Thus, the finale of "Scripts," in fitting comic fashion, becomes "NOT A DEPARTURE BUT A WEDDING"(CL 513). The players exercise a ritual similar to that mentioned in the poem's epigraph, the breaking of a glass that represents not separation, but the formation of an indestructible

union. The completion of the vision becomes part of an ongoing process, the way "[t]ales shape us, of all kind. / Myths. Novels. Awful books about 'man's mind'"(CL 382). The final cascade of water into the cassia plant sends the "IMAGINED SELVES / FALLING ... THRU THE ETERNAL WATERS ... & INTO THE GOLDEN BOUGH / OF MYTH"(CL 516). The image of the waterfall, resonating through the poem, promises that from time's passing "NOTHING [is] LOST"(CL 472) and that the process of severing and mending feed "the earthward flow / Of Paradise"(CL 426).

Chapter Six

Sounding the Higher Keys

And whether in time a room, or a romance,
Fails us or redeems us will have followed
As an extension of our "feel" for ...
Immaterials, the real right angle,
The golden section -- grave proportions here,
Here at the heart of structure. (CL 557)

By sending the vision of the poem, in the final stages of "Scripts," upward toward that "whirling point of Light" (CL 517), Merrill stresses the "[i]rreducible uncertainty" of mystic apprehension. Having broached the ineffable center, the poet employs the "Coda: The Higher Keys," to summarize and integrate the imaginative journey of the entire work. Drawing the poem back to the secular concerns so prominent in "Ephraim," Merrill prepares to redress the imbalance of that earlier perception, bringing together nature and mind through the healing light of the imagination. The "Coda" is not a conclusion in the sense of

finality or completion, but rather a recapitulation of the vision of life transformed by the informing spirits of the poem. Although the work, in keeping with Merrill's poetics, comes to a formal resolution, its comic impulse is reasserted by the acknowledgement of "REVELATION'S CONSTANT PROCESS"(CL 553), the ongoing spiral of heightened consciousness. The comic cycle necessitates this final dimension, where the regenerative aspects, evinced by births and deaths, encompass their contraries. To this end we are offered information about the graduates of the academy, the continuing presence of Auden and George in the world, and the promise of Robert Morse's and Maria Mitsotaki's new incarnations.

These "higher keys" reenforce the notion of balance and continuity, the enduring process of vision and revision that mirrors the "IDEAL OF THE CONTINUUM"(CL 59). The final unmasking, which reveals that Ephraim was Michael, both caps and revises the entire poem, illustrating how the coda serves as a "HIDDEN 4TH DIMENSION / ... [a] REGISTER COMPELLING HARMONIES"(CL 551). Having created three dimensions with the trilogy -- secular, scientific and mystical -- the poet now grounds them in the idea of universal interrelation. Even JM's adversary, Time, becomes simply the "[b]ase to just one of ... 'Elevations' inexhaustibly / Roving within a pyramid" whose apex of "power and ... glory"(CL 555) they have now glimpsed.

Merrill enhances the rudimentary paradigm of his trilogy, "the tyrant Three"(CL 530), by adding this cumulative dimension, one capable of looking both forward and backward, retelling and revising. Thus, the last word of The Changing Light, "'Admittedly ...'"(CL 560), becomes its first, ushering in another imaginative translation that subverts the poem's own impetus to closure.

When JM rises, at the "end" of the poem, to present his work to the assembled audience, both the living and the dead, he stands at the center of the vision. He speaks from that "FICTIVE SPACE ... THE STOP TO TIME"(CL 451), just inside the mirror frame"(CL 557), where man's imagination brings into conjunction the secular and the divine. Similarly, the preparations for Robert Morse's reentry into the world, his experience of the womb, demonstrates a like point of transition, both "REAL & IMAGINARY ... UNBORN AND BORN"(CL 533). Merrill points out that the knowledge man possesses of his own responsibility in the world, "far from freeing us ... has become a paralyzing weight"(R 82). By deciding to shoulder this burden, to submit like Robert to the duality of loss and gain, the poet forestalls the curse of "imaginative laziness"(R 82), and even though "HOBbled ... WILL LEAP"(CL 535) to new vistas of affirmative potential.

The whole of the coda, with its alternating tones of sadness and celebration, participates in this apotheosis of

the comic vision in The Changing Light. Based on the premise of coexistent dualities established in the previous books, the "ending" illustrates how the imagination can offer redemptive potential amid the continual flux of human existence. These final poems resound with the imagery of birth, as Merrill blends heaven and earth, myth and experience, in a final interchange. By juxtaposing the untimely death of Mimí Vassilikos, whose "finery reverts / To homespun rags" (CL 544), with the ceremonies surrounding Robert Morse's rebirth, the poem confounds human mortality, offering an affirmative balance to the ambiguity of Nature's last message. Merrill admits no finality, no absolute, other than the essential process of the ongoing evolutionary cycle. Even the boundary of time, the reality of death, that "TERRIFYING INTERVAL," becomes converted into a comic nexus, where "PURE FACELESSNESS ATTEMPTS TO SMILE" (CL 538). Thus, the funeral rites intoned by Raphael are inverted into a celebration of possibility, when "DUST TO DUST" (CL 539) becomes life to life. In a last defiant nod toward his old life, one that ends in an "operatic / Unity" (CL 538) of the living and the dead, Robert Morse asserts: "IT'S EVERYTHING ONE LOATHES -- about the Dance" (CL 538). The passing of time, the danse macabre, resolves into the celebration of the creative principle at the heart of existence.

What emerges is JM's sense that "[a]ll [is] a felicity" (CL 556). The riddle or charade of life's mystery

gives way to "long, enchanted certainty"(CL 550). Just as the unveiling of Ephraim leads the poem back into itself, so too the explanations of its origin break down the last barriers of resistance. Like the image gracing the ceiling of Sandover, where myth and science are brought together, the coda's "restoration" of the ballroom promises other resolutions. The new dimension of the "higher keys" revives in the poet a feeling of "foreign, youthful grace"(CL 556), a sense of personal wounds healed. As well, the poem, representing his completed imaginative quest, compensates for the impending dissolution of his visionary company. In an image recalling the arrival of Michael at the end of "Mirabell," the setting sun "meets, in Sandover's tall time- / Dappled mirrors, its own eye"(CL 559). Reflection and illumination are brought into a cumulative balance.

Drawing together the trilogy of stars that closed each of the terza rima sections of the poem, the coda fashions a final center based upon man's own ability to wrest purpose and continuity from experience. From Ephraim's "entitling star"(CL 541), his relation to divinity, to the "RED MATRIX"(CL 531) of the womb, to the final star-like glimmer reflected upon the page JM opens to read, Merrill points back to that "dimensionless / Point of Light"(CL 555). He commences to practice man's version of God B's highest sense, the one directed "OUTWARD"(CL 351). Like the transformation of Uni, Mirabell and Ephraim-Michael into a

mythic figure of creative potential, a "Pegasus part Man" (CL 549), the poet assumes his promethean role and sends his vision out into the realm of men, the muses and the gods.

This impulse toward a larger vision has inherent restrictions in the modern world. These are in keeping with the dissolution of accepted beliefs and a contemporary suspicion directed against the limitations of perception and expression. Merrill has been at pains to point out throughout The Changing Light that he has not the benefit of Dante's credulous audience or the accepted theological traditions employed by Milton. Contemporary poets must ground their visions in the realities of the day, must incorporate into its center the conceptions of relativity and indeterminacy that have radically altered man's understanding of the world and his relation to it. Similarly, the prevailing suspicions regarding the ability of language to depict reality imposes restrictions upon the viability of a poetic recreation of man's relation to the cosmos. Merrill's own understanding of poetics, and his previous work, attest to reservations about the finality of expression. These very uncertainties and the poet's ability to create momentary glimpses of unity through his poetics of translation become an underlying strength in the production of such a post-modern poem.

Commenting upon the skeptical response of contemporary audiences to mystical poetry, Merrill suggests that this

reaction rests upon a fundamental failure of imagination. If belief in a particular conception of divinity has been lost, then man "must redefine God, as a principle of intelligence and creativity"(SC 16), either within the self or outside it. The point remains that Merrill's own imaginative odyssey, depicted in The Changing Light at Sandover, reflects this belief in the ongoing capacity of creative endeavour. At the center of the poem, and his poetics, lies this affirmation of the consoling power of the play of the mind. The Changing Light, with its scope and complexity, its ability to combine "mythopoeic power and metaphysical themes with human intimacy and appeal"(Perkins 638), stands as a grand assertion of the vitality inherent in this drama of the spirit.

By his adherence to a comic view of life, the "shifting, open world that continually transforms itself without being emptied of the cruelest actualities"(Sypher 251), Merrill reflects how man's creative activities can realign thinking and offer a world of potential to set against the "centripetal paranoia"(R 58) of our age. As well, the intricacies of the poet's forms, the structures created to house the mythic nature of his vision, supply a considerable part of the poem's strength. Merrill's polished diction and wit, the endless capacity for wordplay and allusion, draw together the disparate elements of his poem. Even if his exuberant use of language seems to

surface occasionally at inappropriate points in the poem, for the most part it serves to balance the fabulous nature of the material. In a like manner, the access Merrill provides to the commonplace realities of his personal life and relationships becomes an attractive and welcoming part of his canon. As a result, one truly begins to feel at home in Merrill's work, sharing in the wry, comic and serious depictions of his range of subjects.

Epíc in length, The Changing Light stands as somewhat of an anomaly in later twentieth-century literature; as the attempt of a primarily lyric sensibility to move beyond the limitations of the self and out into the concerns of Western civilization, Merrill's trilogy partakes of an impressive lineage. In its visionary and arcane aspects, the trilogy draws upon a poetic tradition as varied and intriguing as Dante's Divine Comedy and Blake's prophetic books.

Merrill's major poem takes its place amid a twentieth-century tradition of American poetic sequences, tracing its literary heritage back to Whitman and progressing from Eliot's The Waste Land, through Pound's Cantos, to the work of Stevens, Williams, Olson and Duncan. Each has been concerned with testing the relationship between the singular lyric sensibility and its larger cultural manifestations. Having lost the accepted certainties that created the historical expositions of man's relation to his world, poets such as Merrill look to establish the authenticity of an

individual vision as it expands to a universal scale.

Touching upon this idea in the coda, Robert Morse suggests:

THE POINT'S TO FIND / A PURE PIED PIPER IN THE

WESTERN MIND / WHO'LL CHARM THE RATS AWAY"(CL 530-531).

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