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Axley, James Howard

IRONY AND THE SELF IN THE LYRIC POETRY OF JAMES MERRILL

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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA  
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IRONY AND THE SELF  
IN  
THE LYRIC POETRY OF JAMES MERRILL

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BY  
JAMES HOWARD AXLEY  
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IRONY AND THE SELF  
IN  
THE LYRIC POETRY OF JAMES MERRILL

APPROVED BY

Robert L. Davis (chair)  
Robert L. Davis  
J. M. M. S.  
David J. S.  
John A. S.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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## INTRODUCTION

James Merrill is one of America's most important contemporary poets. He is the son of Charles Merrill, the wealthy and powerful founder of the brokerage firm of Merrill-Lynch. He was born in New York City, where he spent his early childhood. He has also lived on Long Island, and maintained a home in Stonington, Connecticut, and Athens, Greece (where he has until recently spent six months of each year). He spends a great deal of time travelling, and occasionally lectures at universities and colleges. He has won a number of important literary prizes for his work, including the Bollingen Prize in poetry, The National Book Award in poetry, and the Pulitzer Prize. He is the author of nine books of poetry, two plays, and two novels, and continues to publish poetry in a number of prestigious magazines and periodicals. Although he is a prolific writer, and has won critical acclaim for his work, his reading public remains relatively small on a national scale because of the nature of his work. His poetry is extraordinarily dense and requires close reading to understand and appreciate its many levels of meaning.



In fact, the poetry of James Merrill is in one way or another a study in self. For the purposes of discussion I have classified his work into two categories, the lyrics and the trilogy. The lyrics are found in six volumes which span twenty-one years from 1951 to 1972. The trilogy is composed of three book-length poems published in 1976, 1978, and 1980 respectively. Though the trilogy may prove to be Merrill's most ambitious work in a still active career, my paper is centrally concerned with the lyrics. And Merrill's lyrics are centrally concerned with the self: what it is, and if and how it changes. The great theme of all of his work to date, in fact, is the evolution of the self. But here, too, this theme reflects the two parts of his career. The first concern, illustrated again and again in his lyric poetry, is a personal concern with his own past. This is reflected in the great number of poems he writes about his childhood. The second, illustrated in and by the trilogy, is a concern with the whole of mankind, past, present, and future. Ultimately, in the trilogy, Merrill's role as a poet shifts to that of a visionary.

Within this great theme of the evolution of the self, Merrill focuses upon two sub-themes, childhood and its effect upon his own development as a man and poet, and love both in immature and mature relationships. His childhood poems are, for the most part written from a child's perspective, and deal with the often painful process of discovering

what love is. His adult poems tend to be written from an adult's point of view and deal more with what love means. But Merrill is also a fine formal poet. It is my contention that he uses form as a distancing technique. As my discussion will illustrate, in those childhood poems which recount particularly painful events, he often uses very strict form. This use provides him with distance and the necessary protection while making the subject matter bearable. As he begins to resolve the problems and the pain of his childhood, however, he also simultaneously begins to write more formless verse. In this respect, his career can be arbitrarily divided into three parts. His first two volumes contain a great deal of formal poetry about childhood. Beginning with his first novel, The Seraglio, some resolution occurs. This novel is followed by Water Street (1962) in which he writes both formal and informal poems, and in which many of the problems his childhood created appear to be resolved. Following Water Street, he publishes his second novel, The (Diblos) Notebook which is a book that is practically formless. These three works, the two novels and Water Street can be seen, then, as the central portion of his career where a great deal of resolution occurs. My contention is supported by the kind of verse he writes following these works which tends to be both less formal and less painful. But all of the lyrics are a necessary step in his preparation for the trilogy, a monumental work of visionary stature.

And it is vision which ultimately overcomes the irony of the lyrics.

Though Merrill's lyrics are often self-revelatory, he is not strictly speaking a confessional poet (see Chapter I). He does make use of some confessional tactics, but close examination of his work reveals a calculated periphrasis which is so consistent as to be a characteristic of his poetry. What he reveals, he often reveals more by silence than by statement. A favorite technique he uses is to simply stop short of complete revelation, while changing the subject. The reader is then left to finish what he has started by using contextual clues. Nevertheless, Merrill's work is centrally concerned with uncovering the self. And his approach to discovering his identity is to write about his past until the problems the past has created are resolved. This resolution occurs partially through writing itself, which he believes to be cathartic. But Merrill has also a fundamental distrust of language as an effective communicator of ultimate meaning, and for this reason he comes often to silence in many of his more important poems.

The question I wish to consider here briefly, and which is considered at greater length in the paper, is the question of the lyric poem and the self. What is the connection between them? How can we talk about the lyric without talking also about the self? Why does Merrill choose lyric poetry to write about himself?

To begin with Merrill defines the self as the essence of the human personality (see Chapter I). He maintains that the self is a created entity incarnated in human form in one lifetime after another. It is influenced by (and influences) events, feelings and thoughts which the individual experiences during successive incarnations. This information, Merrill claims, comes to him through the course of a twenty-year use of the Ouija board. These experiences are part of a process of evolution whereby the self is gradually refined until it no longer must inhabit a human form or dwell in any form on earth.

The self is capable of expressing itself in a variety of ways, but Merrill indicates that one of the more important is through artistic endeavors. This, of course, includes all art forms, though music and poetry seem to be in his opinion the two most important. Language, though falling far short of ultimate expression, is nevertheless one means of communicating meaning. Though he believes that language is fundamentally ironic, always saying more or less than it means, it is still valid. It is here that the question of the lyric and the self is important.

A lyric poem is usually a short poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker. Originally, as the word suggests, a lyric was sung, accompanied by a musical instrument such as a lyre. Often a lyric is written in first person, and generally lyrics tend to be reflective poems with

little action, though action may be used to illustrate some feeling or thought. Given these aspects of the lyric, it is entirely logical that Merrill would use lyrics to write about himself. Because of its origins, and its use throughout literary history, it lends itself to personal disclosure.

For Merrill, the expression of self is crucial in the process of resolving the problems of his past. He tends to view poetry as a cathartic experience which helps dissipate stored pain and disarm memory. His lyric poetry, beginning in 1951 with First Poems, reflects this dedication to the expression of self. He is, after all, throughout all of his lyric poetry, the central subject of his work. He confronts the past through language so that he may be free of it. Only by resolving the traumas of childhood can he live in the present and face the future unencumbered by his own history. It is my contention in this discussion that Merrill considers the stakes very high in the issue of self. It is, in fact, the survival of the self itself which is at the center of his work, and which he addresses again and again through the ironic tone of the lyric poetry in six volumes. Merrill believes life to be fundamentally and finally ironic, and this belief is supported by virtually all of his verse, as well as his prose.

Friedrich Nietzsche in Chapter V of The Birth of Tragedy makes some comments about the lyric poem, the lyric poet and the self which are relevant to this discussion and to Merrill's work. He notes that the lyric poet,

himself becomes his images, his images are objectivized versions of himself. Being the active center of that world he may boldly speak in the first person, only his "I" is not that of the actual waking man, but the "I" dwelling, truly and eternally, in the ground of being. It is through the reflections of that "I" that the lyric poet beholds the ground of being.

(The Birth of Tragedy, trans. Francis Golffing, New York, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956, p. 39.)

Nietzsche distinguishes between what may be termed the superficial self and the true or profound self, which he calls the "ground of being." He also indicates, as does Merrill, that the "I" of this being is eternal and indwelling. And it is from this "I," this self, that the lyric poet draws his expression. It is precisely this "I" that Merrill seeks to reveal and understand. It is this essential self he confronts again and again in his lyric poetry.

But Nietzsche also comments that through "the reflections of that 'I' . . . . the lyric poet beholds (his) ground of being." Here, too, he has described Merrill's method, the way in which he chooses to confront the self. Merrill reveals his self to himself (and to the reader) through the "reflections," or poems, which deal with his history. As an expression of the self, his poetry then becomes a reflection of his feelings and thoughts, his "ground of being." Thus his verse exposes the self as much to himself as it does to the reader. And it is through this

exposure which is often painful that he comes to understand what the self is and how it functions in his work.

Because the lyric is by definition and historical use the expression of the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker, it is perhaps the only appropriate way for Merrill to express the essential self. This expression of the self is his major theme, and in his view must be realized for the growth and evolution of the self to occur. But Merrill expresses more than just the superficial self in his work, rather through words he attempts to get to the core of his being and the existential dilemma in which he feels he is caught. In his lyrics he does this at times in formal ways, and in informal ways as well. But regardless of whether he uses the protection of strict form, or the more open and less defended formlessness of free verse, he is committed to his search for self. And lyric poetry is the means by which this search is conducted.

IRONY AND THE SELF  
IN  
THE LYRIC POETRY OF JAMES MERRILL  
CHAPTER I

THE ANONYMOUS HEROISM OF SURVIVAL

In 1951, James Merrill begins his professional poetic career with the publication of First Poems. He reveals himself to be an accomplished craftsman with considerable technical skill. First Poems was followed by The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace in 1959, Water Street in 1962, Nights and Days in 1966, The Fire Screen in 1969, and Braving the Elements in 1972.<sup>1</sup> These volumes comprise what I shall call the lyrics. With a few exceptions, the poetry in these six books is relatively short and lyrical in nature. He deals with a variety of themes. But among them the more important are time, the past, culture, love and the self. And among these, the most important of all his major themes is unquestionably the evolution of the self. 1972, however, was by no means the end of Merrill's career. In fact, in some ways, it was just beginning.



In 1976, Merrill published Divine Comedies.<sup>2</sup> The volume contains nine lyrical poems of varying lengths and the eighty-nine page "The Book of Ephraim." Divine Comedies was followed by the publication of Mirabell: The Books of Number in 1978, and Scripts for the Pageant in 1980. "The Book of Ephraim" and these last two mentioned volumes comprise a trilogy; a monumental work which discusses in rather unorthodox fashion the entire history and organization of the universe. It focuses specifically upon the evolution of the self and how and why man has developed as he has. The trilogy traces Man's history, with supernatural help, from his origins to the present day and eventually issues a warning about his chances of survival in a nuclear age.

Merrill's poetic career to date falls into two parts: the lyrics and the trilogy. His interest in the themes of time, love, the past and the self remains consistent in both the lyrics and the trilogy though in the former they are concerned with their reason for existence while in the latter they are put in the perspective of a divine plan as explanation for their existence.

In other words, the lyrics, Merrill's earlier work, asks the questions for which the trilogy provides answers. The lyrics ponder the relationship between the past and the present, the reason for suffering, the nature of love and love relationships, the meaning of self and many other lesser concerns of human existence. The trilogy attempts to supply explanations for these phenomena.

One of the more remarkable characteristics of Merrill's work is its consistency. Without question Merrill's poetry improves since the publication of First Poems in 1951. But these improvements are not so much changes, either philosophical or technical, as they are refinements of a major talent. That is, in the thirty years he has been publishing professionally the characteristic skills so evident in First Poems are simply refined. His work is consistent in style, and technique (rhetorical devices, organization), theme, tone and philosophy. It is with his philosophical stance that my discussion will be most concerned, although in the course of illustrating it, the other elements of his work will correspondingly be illustrated.

I intend to discuss this stance with regard to Merrill's concept of the self, and the fundamental irony upon which the self is built. Furthermore, as the means by which this concept may be more fully understood as it works in his poetry, it is necessary to explore the relationship between the literal and the figurative, between what he says and what he means. It is through the figures in his work that irony is most clearly illustrated. I will limit my discussion to a consideration of two of his more important themes: childhood and love. Both, however, will focus upon Merrill's characteristic mode of apprehending reality and how his poetry reflects the process by which he comes to terms with the self, its past and present.

It is my contention that Merrill's philosophical stance, his mode of apprehending reality, is essentially ironic. To James Merrill, life itself is ironic, both fundamentally and finally. Indeed, personality, selfhood, is impossible without irony. As a result, language as the means by which the poet communicates life, or his sense of life, must reflect this ironic stance, both superficially through ironic figures of speech, and profoundly through the underlying philosophy of his work which can only be discerned with close examination. The use of ironic rhetorical devices, the consistent juxtaposition of opposites in his work, as I will show, reflects a deeper irony with which and through which he first establishes and defines selfhood, and then annihilates it. Yet the moment of annihilation is also paradoxically the moment of infinite possibility. But the best way to illustrate this rather complex and abstract concept is to use a concrete example. The process through which the poet moves will emerge in the course of my discussion. Implicit in my discussion, furthermore, are certain notions about irony itself which I will address after looking closely at a single poem.

Of all of Merrill's lyric poetry, perhaps none can offer a more complete picture of his ironic concept than a poem entitled "Scenes of Childhood" (Water Street, 1962). This early poem contains in brief many of Merrill's more important themes; the past, parent-child relationships,

time, love and the self. The first seven stanzas reflect Merrill's concern with himself, with his personal history so evident in most of his lyric poetry. The last seven stanzas, however, reflect the concerns essential in the trilogy; those of the whole human race. The first seven recount a literal event, the watching of home movies by the narrator and his mother. Though it is essentially a straight narrative, as I will show, Merrill lays the groundwork figuratively for the second half of the poem by introducing the dominant images. The second part is a meditation upon the effect of the experience of the narrator's confrontation with his past, and consequently his self, through seeing that past portrayed on the screen. He returns in the second half of the poem to the principal images he has introduced in the first seven stanzas. Clearly in the first part of the poem the experience being retold is singular; it happened and happens to an "I." But in the second part, the "I" becomes plural. This dispersion or pluralization of "I" to "we" is precisely what occurs in Merrill's career. The lyrics tend to be ego-centric and self-indulgent. As Merrill explores himself, his past, and the experiences which have created it, and reaches some resolutions to the dilemmas of existence, gradually he shifts the focus of his poetry from himself to Man. The trilogy, while never losing the personal presence of the poet, is centrally concerned with all human existence. Furthermore, in the poem, and in his career, with this

pluralization, simultaneously the past is mythologized. It is repeated in his work as myth, complete with archetypal figures as characters. This will be illustrated in my discussion.

Because so much of Merrill's lyric poetry deals with his own life, and so much of what he writes takes the form of revelation or confession, it is necessary to consider briefly if Merrill's work can be seen as part of the "confessional" school of poetry that developed in America in the 1950's and 1960's. Fundamentally, confessional poems "originate in their subject matter, and the corollary that poets mean, at least literally, what they say."<sup>3</sup> Such poetry includes the work of the poets Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, to name a few. Robert von Hallberg in his essay "James Merrill: Revealing by Obscuring" comments that many of Merrill's more important poems "originate in calculated reticence: whereas confessional poets characteristically hold a sharp focus on subject matter."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, von Hallberg asserts that Merrill often writes around what he terms "interpretable silences" and that "loaded silences are a rhetorical trope for Merrill."<sup>5</sup> Although Merrill invokes the conventions of confessional poetry, von Hallberg comments, he also "artfully" eludes them.<sup>6</sup> This view is entirely consistent with my suggestion both here and in several places in chapters two and three that Merrill often says more with silence than he says with words.

Ironically, in fact, it is often silence which for Merrill is the ultimate communication of meaning. Moreover, as I will show, one of his characteristic approaches to emotional crisis in his work is simply to back away from it; in some cases breaking off a line before it is finished. Nevertheless, he always constructs the situation in such a way that the reader is able to finish what Merrill has started and discover the poem's buried subject. Merrill himself in an interview with Ashley Brown indicates that buried subjects are a kind of hedge against trivia. "Without something like them, one ends up writing light verse about love affairs."<sup>7</sup>

Karl Malkoff, in his study Escape from the Self believes that "in the end, it is the Confessional's attitude toward madness that most clearly distinguishes him from the poets in whose traditions he writes."<sup>8</sup> He continues to point out that most of the major contemporary confessional poets have had severe problems with mental stability, even spending time in mental institutions about which they later wrote. Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke are two examples.<sup>9</sup> Assuming Malkoff's observations are pertinent, this of course disqualifies Merrill as a member of the movement, though it is also necessary to point out that many of his poems have a nightmarish quality. X. J. Kennedy comments that "Merrill may well be our subtlest examiner of waking nightmares, some of them apparently his own."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless,

Merrill's sanity, even in the most bizarre of his poems, is never really at issue, and even though he may write about altered states, he is always in control. Mona Vay Duyn, commenting upon these kinds of poems suggests that even in these cases where "the bizarre appears, untamed by context, and the movement of the story is disjunctive, as in dreams or in very old movies shown without subtitles," that all is still very much subject to Merrill's control, his "satiric tone."<sup>11</sup> It is this control, perhaps more than any other element, and the extraordinarily civilized world about which Merrill writes that may disqualify him as a member of the confessional school. To reveal himself so completely, his inner psychic states both normal and pathological, in the end would simply be a breach of taste, a lack of control it would be hard to imagine in his work, or in his life.

Suffice it to say, at this point, that though Merrill may use confessional conventions, he is not strictly a confessional poet. Though the self is the central issue of his poetry, ultimately Merrill retains the privacy of the life about which he writes. Though he reveals particular events, archetypal situations, the unhappinesses and joys of his life; though he writes often about his childhood, his father, his money, his travels and other times and places he has experienced, his privacy is never invaded, nor is his ability to cope with life in doubt. Confession, for Merrill, is not so much a matter of honesty, or literary fashion, as it is a

matter of taste and breeding. We can count on him, throughout the entire course of his career, never to reveal more than is decorous and appropriate for a man of his social and economic class. This will become more evident during the course of my discussion.

"Scenes of Childhood" has a complex framework which is successful in achieving a doubling effect. The literal situation involves the showing of home movies. The narrator and his mother are home alone. The old projector is difficult to focus and eventually breaks down altogether. The breakdown occurs at the end of stanza seven, whereupon the narrator's mother retires, leaving him alone to meditate upon the meaning of his past. But the breakdown comes at a crucial thematic and philosophical point when the self, through reliving the past, must confront its own figurative annihilation. Metaphorically, the narrator becomes the focus (the projector) of his own past and as the literal projector explodes, so too does the figurative projector. The stakes are very high, for it is identity which is called into question and which forms the bridge between past and present, between survival and nothingness.

Two images dominate the poem. The first is the image of fire; the second is that of a snake. Both images are rather complex. It is fire which destroys the projector when it breaks down. The scene on the screen is also destroyed. This scene is of course the narrator's past which



literally "catches fire" (p. 21). But this literal description is also figurative in that the film represents the past. The movie both is and is not the narrator's past. It is a depiction of the past, a repetition but it is not the past; rather, it is a metaphor of the past. But this fire is also repeated in miniature in lightning bugs which the narrator sees outside. These lightning bugs are modulated both into stars which become symbols for the cosmos, and into "shining deeds" which exist as metaphors for acts of heroism and myth, both in his imagination and in the past. Eventually in the second half of the poem, the fire image becomes the sun. And the "sun" becomes the "son," or the narrator himself. But this will be clarified when I examine the poem.

The second image, that of the snake, is also complicated. It is used as a metaphor for death. But the figure of the snake is also used as a metaphor for rebirth. That is, late in the poem, the narrator seems to hear from upstairs his mother's breathing "that faintest hiss / And slither, as of life / Escaping into space" (p. 23). With his mother's figurative death ("as of life / Escaping into space,") he is freed from at least part of his past; therefore he is reborn, independent at last of his own history. But he also refers to the "broad / Path of vague stars . . . floating / off" as a "shed skin" (p. 24). The snake sheds its skin, its old self, because it has grown, and growth is

change. It is here that Merrill links the two images through the juxtaposition of the stars (i.e., fire) and the snake's "shed skin." And here, too, he draws the connecting line between the literal and the figurative.

The film itself, the pictorial representation of the past, is a kind of snake, uncoiling through the projector. As it literally goes through the projector, repeating the past, it figuratively sheds its skin (i.e., the past). It figuratively destroys itself but is simultaneously renewed as the snake is renewed through shedding its skin. When the projector catches fire, then the film is destroyed. From the literal (the film) the past constructs the figurative (what the film represents). He then uses the figurative to represent the literal. This representation both is and is not the thing it represents in that it is a repetition of a past which no longer exists. It is not the thing it represents in that one thing (in this case a film of the past) cannot be another thing. But before beginning my discussion of the poem, it is first necessary to establish as nearly as possible what Merrill regards as a definition of the self, because it is with the self that the poem is ultimately concerned.

As difficult as it is to accomplish a definition of irony, it is perhaps equally as difficult to define self in Merrill's work. It is an elusive concept which has changed historically from one age to the next and contains staggering

considerations which cross all boundaries from religion to science. Nevertheless, because of his concern with self, Merrill seems to have arrived at a definition which he can accept and which he incorporates, albeit obscurely at times, in his work. In fact, it is in "Scenes of Childhood" in the lyrics, that he most nearly suggests his view of the self. Characteristically he does so in the use of a figure, the snake shedding its skin. It will be necessary, however, to consider briefly work which is not within the scope of my discussion to understand this concept; that work is Merrill's trilogy.

Robert Langbaum in The Mysteries of Identity points out that "the word [identity] did not take on its current psychological denotation . . . until the unity of the self became problematic."<sup>12</sup> (For the purposes of my discussion the word "identity" and the word "self" will be used interchangeably.) That is, as long "as men believed in a soul created and sustained (continuously known and seen) by God, there could be no question about the unity of the self."<sup>13</sup> With the crisis of faith, however, and the failure of traditional religious views in the twentieth century, this concept becomes more troublesome. Nevertheless, it is one with which Merrill is vitally concerned, and thus feels compelled to address. He does not, however, address it directly in any of his lyric poetry, although he does approach it obliquely through figures. This may well be because in the

early part of his career and through the work which precedes Divine Comedies (1976) he may not have had any clear notion of what the self is. In the trilogy, however, with the conspicuous help of the many "voices" who speak to him through the Ouija board, he is told about the nature of the self. And the concept, as it comes to him bit by bit throughout the course of both Marabell: The Books of Number and Scripts for the Pageant, is predicated upon an acceptance of evolution and reincarnation as indisputable facts. Merrill's views of evolution, however, are not strictly Darwinistic; or rather they go beyond Darwin's theories to touch upon areas of the supernatural which scientific objectivism cannot admit. That is, along with biological evolution, Merrill maintains (or more accurately the "spirits" maintain), there is a corresponding evolution of the self; an essence which once created by "God B." (the "B" stands for biology) is permanent, though there is some fear expressed that radiation (as in treatment for cancer) can alter the composition of the self. This is possible because, Merrill states, the self is 88% chemical, composed, in fact, of metals such as gold and silver, and 12% spiritual. The 12%, we are told, is the exclusive property of God B. as to its composition and the way in which it is combined with the chemical 88%. That is, the spiritual essence of Man remains a mystery, even in the trilogy where practically every other consideration of Man's relationship to the cosmos is explained. Admitting then, as Merrill does,

that ultimately the key which would unlock complete knowledge is missing, some conclusions can nevertheless be reached.

The trilogy concludes that the souls of men come into being essentially as a result of two processes, one explained and explainable, the other ultimately mysterious. That is, man evolved from lower creatures who also have "souls," though not of the kind in man. At some mysterious point in the evolutionary process, determined by God B, the animal souls, which apparently are entirely chemical, have evolved far enough to be ready for the addition of the 12% spiritual matter. With this 12% they become human; they become, in short, a "self." Once having attained the status of selfhood, these "selves" are apparently permanent, though they also continue to evolve much as man evolves biologically. They (the selves) also return again and again to inhabit the bodies of humans. By being human and by being subjected to all that is human (joy, sorrow, pain, success, failure, etc.) they grow, expanding their essence until at some time, again determined by God B, they are no longer required to be incarnated in a physical form. The self, then, is apparently recycled until sufficient progress and growth have been attained, and the lessons existence on earth teaches have been learned. At this point, the self is qualified for existence on another plane, and takes its place in the larger context of an unseen, albeit real, universe.

It is obvious, then, with this explanation in mind, that the self is a created entity beyond the control of man. In the end, Merrill retreats into a somewhat unorthodox view of the supernatural to explain the origins of the self. Though his explanation is partially traditional (the existence of God, etc.) and partially nontraditional, it is nevertheless ultimately theological.

Returning now to the figure of the snake shedding its skin, in "Scenes of Childhood" we can see how appropriate it is as a metaphorical explanation of the self. The self exists just as the snake exists. Though the snake eventually must die, other snakes are born to replace it, and each contains an essence we might call "snakeness." From birth the snake is a snake; that is, the essence of the snake exists continuously as itself though the snake sheds its skin many times in its life. Though the skin is shed, the snake remains, in one sense, unchanged. Its essence, as in Plato's famous analogy, is at once unchanging, and capable of growth and evolution. Extending this analogy (as Merrill does in the trilogy), this essence exists prior to birth and will exist after death. The snake's essence, then, is permanent and as itself is in some sense immune even from death. But just as the snake has a skin, a point of contact with all that is external to the snake, so too does the self have a skin. And just as the snake must shed its skin because the interior (the essence) has grown too large to be contained within it,

so must the self shed its skin, its experiential point of contact with time; that is, with its own history. Just as the snake's skin is patterned, so is the skin of the self patterned with images of its past, its experience of the physical and psycho/emotional world. In other words, the self grows, evolves in its understanding of existence until it must shed its skin. This process, and self ultimately in this sense is a process, is continuous. But it is also paradoxical.

Here again I arrive at the crux of irony. The self is always the same, and it is always changing. At any given moment, the self both is and is not. It is in the sense that its essence exists outside of change and time, and it is not in that it is always changing from one skin to another in time.

Thus in "Scenes of Childhood" this paradox is manifested in the changes which occur between the two parts of the poem. Seeing the film of his past precipitates a crisis of identity--of attempting to discover the essence of self. This in itself, just as the evolution of selfhood, is a process whereby conflicting elements are juxtaposed suddenly; the past and the present; the interior and the exterior; illusion and reality; body and self. All work to bring the moment to crisis when the past is confronted and shed as a skin, leaving Merrill adrift in the "abyss of night," a spiritual darkness in which he must somehow discover his

essence--his self--stripped of any of the conventional methods (his history) of locating himself in time and space. Paradoxically, he finds self by simply becoming an .ymous, by figuratively annihilating the singularity of self, and becoming a "hero" without "name/or origin." My discussion of the poem will illustrate more fully how the figure works.

It would seem at this point that citing the definition for identity in the Oxford English Dictionary would be partially acceptable to Merrill. Identity is defined as "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances." In that the self--the essence--persists "at all times" the definition is correct for identity/self. In that it does not account for change or evolution within self, it is incomplete. Thus self is built upon the fundamental irony that all is changed and nothing is.

Returning now to the poem, Merrill begins by setting the stage.

My mother's lamp once out,  
I press a different switch:  
A field within the dim  
White screen ignites,  
Vibrating to the rapt  
Mechanical racket  
Of a real noon field's  
Crickets and gnats (p. 20).

In stanza one, the poet is already making some fundamental distinctions between the literal and the figurative. He also suggests the first use of the fire image. The vehicle for such distinctions is the film itself. He comments that as the screen "ignites," he sees "a real noon



field's / Crickets and gnats" (p. 20). The movie, as it is originally filmed, captures the present; yet it is also the past in the context of its presentation. The past survives itself through memory which is recorded both on film and in the mind. This process is then reversed when the movie is shown. The past, while remaining the past, also becomes the present on the screen, which then, in turn, recalls the past in the mind of the viewer. The narrator of the poem is both inside and outside this reality; inside the experience of the child which he is and is not, and outside the experience as the adult which the child has become. Furthermore, and ironically, he labels the picture on the screen, the past, as "real," as literal. From a philosophical viewpoint, as reflected by the rhetorical duality of the word "real" the poem opens with this paradoxical doubling which it will sustain until the end. And this doubling effect is a reflection of the fundamental irony of Merrill's position.

In stanza two he expands this image of the past-present and likens it figuratively to death and resurrection. The present experience of the past is painful, yet necessary.

And to its candid heart  
 I move with heart ajar,  
 With eyes that smart less  
 From pollen or heat  
 Than from the buried day  
 Now rising like a moon  
 Shining, unwinding  
 Its taut white sheet (p. 20).

He repeats the reality of the picture on the screen in stanza one with a reference in lines three and four of stanza two to

the effect of the "real noon field's" experience. His eyes sting not from "pollen or heat" as they did in the field in childhood, but rather from the memory of that time that is present in the present; the memory of the pain he felt then and feels now in remembering it. Thus the reality of the situation is both literal and figurative; literal as it happened, and now, in the vivid "memory" of the film a senecdochal figure of the narrator's life. Crucial however, to the process of coming to terms with the self, is the repetition of the experience. And this is an essential irony of the poem; that he must repeat his life, i.e., live it a second time, so that he can understand the meaning of the first time it was lived. Yet in understanding its essence, he also destroys it; and only through destroying the past, can he survive it. The past is resurrected in the film, but now no longer resurrected as itself, but as a figure for something else. And the individual follows the same process; the child is and is not the father to the man.

Here too in this stanza as in many of his poems Merrill juxtaposes opposites. The "buried day" rises "like a moon." Day is likened to night. Day is day because of the presence of light, i.e., the sun which is fire. Night is night because of the absence of this light and the presence of lesser lights (both reflected and real), the moon and stars. But here the day is "buried" in the figurative darkness of the past which now "rises" from the dead in the figure of the

moon, dimmed perhaps metaphorically by the passage of time, but nevertheless still capable of casting light upon the darkness.

Stanzas three and four give the first literal picture on the screen of the narrator's past. Simultaneous to this picture begins the process of reliving it. Merrill contrasts the mindless grace of insects which alight on the screen to the emotional chaos the scene causes in the narrator. Here the insects in stanza one, the "real noon field's / Crickets and gnats" of the past are recalled by placing their figurative descendents on the screen in the present. But once again, even in this seemingly trivial detail, there is a doubling. The insects are on the screen, an external and present reality as opposed to the internal and past reality depicted in the film.

Two or three bugs that lit  
Earlier upon the blank  
Screen, all peaceable  
Insensibility, drowse  
As she and I cannot  
Under the risen flood  
Of thirty years ago--  
A tree, a house.

We had then, a late sun,  
A door from which the primal  
Figures jerky and blurred  
As lightning bugs  
From lanterns issue, next  
To be taken for stars,  
For fates. With knowing smiles  
And beaded shrugs (pp. 20-21).

Again in stanza three Merrill juxtaposes opposites, "Under" and "risen." The past is a "risen-flood," and

reviewing it is in some sense a life-threatening situation. The image, however, is appropriate in a dual way. The narrator can figuratively drown in the flood of his past, but this metaphorical flood can also sweep the past away, cleansing him of any vestiges of his own history.

In stanza four Merrill returns to the fire imagery but here it is three-fold; the lightning bugs, the lanterns and the stars. Yet all are figuratively linked to the "primal / Figures jerky and blurred." This image from his past introduces the question of focus which also works in the poem in a metaphorical way. Time perhaps has "blurred" the focus of the narrator's history. Still, the old projector which in a later stanza is described as "headstrong" is also out of focus. But the narrator himself is figuratively the focus of his own history. This question of focus is both literal and metaphorical; literal in terms of the projector and figurative in terms of perspective. Central to the issue of understanding and surviving the past is getting it in perspective, "in focus." Before the past can be seen and consequently understood, it must first be focused. And this focusing is essentially the first step in the process through which the poet moves. The second half of the poem which I have called a meditation, is also in some sense a process of focusing. Once focused, the past can then be relived.

In stanza five the past and present are brought together suddenly when his "white-haired mother" reacts to the scene on the screen.

My mother and two aunts  
Loom on the screen. Their plucked  
Brows pucker, their arms encircle  
One another.  
Their ashen lips move.  
From the love seat's gloom  
A quiet chuckle escapes  
My white-haired mother (p. 21).

The past is silent, yet ironically it speaks. The "ashen lips move," but there is no sound. Still the scene speaks to the narrator as surely as if the ashen lips of the dead were suddenly reanimated to speak to the living. This speaking silence is contrasted to the "real" sound his mother makes as she sees herself and her own past visually depicted. Here again is found that ironic doubling, that juxtaposition of opposites, sound and silence. One both is and is not the other. Silence both is and is not sound. Stanza five, however, must be seen in relation to stanzas six and seven. We discover it is not this scene which causes the response of the narrator's mother, rather it is the next scene.

From the love seat's gloom  
A quiet chuckle escapes  
My white-haired mother.

To see in that final light  
A man's shadow mount  
Her dress. And now she is  
Advancing, sister-  
less, but followed by  
A fair child, or fury--  
Myself at four, in tears.  
I raise my fist,

Strike, she kneels down. The man's  
 Shadow afflicts us both.  
 Her voice behind me says  
 It might go slower.  
 I work dials, the film jams.  
 Our headstrong old projector  
 Glares at the scene which promptly  
 Catches fire (p. 21).

The man whose shadow "mount[s] / Her dress . . ." and whose presence (and memory) "afflicts" them both is the narrator's father. It is his father, in fact, who is filming this scene.

Merrill brings together both images in these stanzas, the last of the poem's first part. The child "strikes" his father, as a snake strikes. The film, a figurative snake "jams," and the projector "catches fire." In this case, on one level both of the figures are destructive. But they are also self-destructive. In this somewhat Oedipal family triad, the son strikes the father who "afflicts" him. The film, uncoiling as it runs through the projector, as it reveals this past and present affliction, jams, stops in the moment of its most crucial revelation. This jamming overheats the projector which then catches fire, consuming itself and the history it is repeating. Since the narrator is the figurative projector, the focus of his own past, he also figuratively overheats and is consumed. Repetition affirms the past. By viewing it again through the film the past is reinforced. But it is also new because of the time lag between the original events pictured on the screen and their repetition in the film. Because what is being repeated no

longer is, then the events have the character of novelty. And in the sense that they are new, the past is then repeated.

It is worth noting that technically Merrill puts this crucial scene primarily in spondees. The absence of multisyllabic words, and thus unstressed feet, has the effect of underscoring the lines and slowing the pace. In lines six, seven and eight of stanza six and line one of stanza seven there are only two words, "fury" and "Myself," which are not spondaic.

The stanza also contains another important image; the image of the shadow. As I mentioned previously the narrator's father is filming these scenes, thus it is his shadow which "mount[s] . . . her dress: and which "afflicts" them both. The verb afflict is a very strong word. It suggests disease, and because he uses the present tense, he suggests that this affliction is contemporary as well as past. This view is supported by the shadow image. A shadow literally is not. That is the shadow marks an absence like the father in the film and the scene. It is a presence not there, yet a presence repeating itself in memory. The shadow exists in the past and present, yet it is also an absence. Literally the man who casts the shadow existed in the past and now is repeated as a figure, but a figure for something else.

Significantly, it is at the moment of greatest tension that his mother breaks the silence with the monumentally trivial request that the film "go slower." Incapable

of responding, either mechanically with the literal projector, or emotionally with the figurative projector, the scene simply "jams," then explodes.

Stanza eight is the transition stanza. Here the "scenes of childhood," of the past, are brought into focus through the figurative projector of the narrator. Stunned by what has just occurred, he is momentarily confused. As the smoke clears, both literally and figuratively, he gradually regains a sense of what has happened--a sense of his own meaning. As this meaning emerges in the second half of the poem, it does so ironically in darkness. That is, like Oedipus, the narrator is enlightened in darkness.

Puzzled, we watch ourselves  
 Turn red and black, gone up  
 In a puff of smoke now coiling  
 Down fierce beams.  
 I switch them off. A silence.  
 Your father, she remarks,  
 Took those pictures; later  
 Says pleasant dreams (p. 22).

Much of the irony which underpins these scenes in which the narrator's mother responds to the film is created by the consistent inappropriateness of her comments and her nearly complete unawareness of the emotional effect the entire situation is having on her son. It is the kind of irony so typical of Greek tragedy; irony created by the discrepancy between what the audience knows and what the players know. Hidden from the participants, the real meaning is nevertheless known to the audience from the beginning. Just as we know who Oedipus really is long before he does, so



here we can read the character of the narrator precisely because we are outside his experience. When the scene on the screen is most threatening to the narrator, his mother requests that it "go slower." When the narrator is all too painfully aware of the "man's shadow" afflicting them, his mother reminds him that his father "Took those pictures." When his self stands poised on the brink of emotional isolation and annihilation, she comments, "pleasant dreams." And like Jocasta, she then retires, later to figuratively end her life. Toward the end of the poem in stanza fourteen this is precisely the metaphorical suggestion he makes. In this sense, as in others which have been suggested thus far, the parallels to an Oedipal identity crisis are evident. The narrator is looking for himself and his self. He finds self-definition and ultimately figurative self-destruction through the films of his past. As he discovers his own identity, as he metaphorically and literally sees his origins, the aggressive response to his father, and the protective even jealous response to his mother, then with self-knowledge he enters an enlightened darkness.

Stanza nine begins the second half of the poem, and it begins in darkness. It is the beginning of a meditation upon the meaning of the first half, and as I have suggested, it is also the beginning of a focusing process. Here the narrator gradually works his way through the crisis brought about by the confrontation with his past. Clearly, Merrill

describes the metaphorical dissolution and reassemblage of the self.

Says pleasant dreams,

Rises and goes. Alone  
 I gradually fade and cool  
 Night scatters me with green  
 Rustlings, thin cries.  
 Out there between the pines  
 Have begun shining deeds,  
 Some low, inconstant (these would be fireflies)  
 (p. 22).

He is alone and like the projector he has become, and as the focus of his own life he "gradually fade[s] and cool[s]." But the experience of his own past has taken its toll. Again, there is doubling in the images Merrill uses. He is alone, as he must be in confronting the self, but this aloneness is both literal and figurative. His father is absent. His mother has "retired," soon to figuratively end her life. Thus the physical/literal presence of his parents, his origins, is negated. But with this literal aloneness there is a corresponding figurative aloneness; a spiritual singularity terrifying in its way, with which he must confront the dissolution of his past, a past living now only in memory. He feels scattered, disassembled, psychologically and emotionally disoriented. It is the night, both the literal and the figurative darkness in which he now exists without a past, that "scatters" him with its "green / Rustlings, thin cries." This scattering of the self is a kind of dispersion. Without a history, a personal past

which is used to define self, the personality has no anchor. It is freed of itself. Yet this freedom, like Sartre's famous existential concept, is also a condemnation.

He returns in this stanza to the fire image. He attaches himself to an historical perspective and to the great and the small of the cosmos in an attempt to find his identity. The "shining deeds" of line six have the suggestion of heroic acts, yet they are "low" and "inconstant"; they are, in fact, fireflies, tiny points of fire, of light in the spiritual and literal darkness. But there are "others," other greater fires which are eternal. These "others" are the stars.

Others, as in high wind  
Aflicker, staying lit.  
There are nights we seem to ride  
With cross and crown  
Forth under them, through fumes,  
Coils, the whole rattling epic--  
Only to leap clear-eyed  
From eiderdown, (p. 22).

Under the stars, the vast human drama is played out with heroisms both great and small. In his dreams, the dreams of childhood, "with cross and crown" the "whole rattling epic" takes place. But it is, after all, just a dream from which we must awake. It is significant that Merrill pluralizes the experience. This pluralization is a result of the figurative annihilation of the self. That is, the narrator's confrontation with his past, and its subsequent destruction, also figuratively destroys the self. This

self-destruction is seen as a dispersion, a scattering of the unique and individual essence of self. The essence of self is singularity. When it is pluralized, when the "I" becomes "we," then it is no longer self, no longer singular with all its singular essence. Thus it has ceased to exist as self, and now exists as something else, as a synecdochal figure of a larger whole. I am reminded in this regard of Emerson's famous drop of water in the sea metaphor. The individual is absorbed in the collective. There is, in other words, a dispersion, a scattering and absorption of the "I" into the "we" as the past is negated through literal and/or figurative death. Yet, ironically, this process both is and is not death, for the self survives but not as the self, rather as part of something else. The last stanza of the poem will clarify this point later in my discussion.

In stanzas eleven and twelve the narrator considers the effect of the film and of his father's "shadow." As he mediates upon it, and thus focuses it, upon the present, its power is lessened.

Only to leap clear-eyed  
From eiderdown,

Asleep to what we'd seen.  
Father already fading--  
Who focused your life long  
Through little frames,  
Whose microscope, now deep  
In purple velvet, first  
Showed me the skulls of flies,  
The fur, the flames.

Etching the jaws--father:  
 Shrunken to our true size.  
 Each morning, back of us,  
 Fields wail and shimmer.  
 To go out is to fall  
 Under fresh spells, cool web  
 And stinging song new-hatched  
 Each day, all summer (pp. 22-23).

In keeping with the Oedipal parallels, Merrill uses the sight-blindness image in the first line of stanza eleven. This ironic reversal is continued with the question of focusing which he reintroduces. We are, he comments, "asleep" (i.e., blind) to what we've seen in our dreams as we awaken from them, just as we are perhaps blind to the meaning of events in our lives as we live them. In reliving them, we discover their meanings, just as Oedipus discovered his meaning in repeating it. Furthermore, his father is "already fading." This is again one of those double images. The reference is both to the film, which his father shot, and which is "fading," and to the shadow, i.e., memory, of his father which has "afflicted" his life. But he adds yet another level to the significance of the image. I could even say, like film, he adds another image to the first to create the illusion of movement, just as repetition often does. Both the film and the narrator were focused through and by his father. In fact, life itself, the life of the narrator as a child was focused by and through his father, just as it was his father's "microscope," which first showed him life. As the microscope now rests "deep / In purple velvet" so too rests his dead father. As he confronts the

shadow of his father, the memory, it is "Shrunk to our true size." That is, as a child, the adult world and the adults who people it, particularly father/God figures, appear to be much larger than they are. Growing up puts all in a new perspective, shrinking their physical and emotional size as the child correspondingly expands his. And it is here that the reversal occurs.

The narrator, as an adult, running the literal projector, focuses the film. But as the figurative projector of his own life, he also focuses the past on the self. As the narrator's life was focused by and through his father, now his father's life is focused by and through the narrator, both literally as the manipulator of the "dials" on the projector, and figuratively as he confronts and manipulates memory. The focusing is a process of putting the past in perspective so that it can be confronted and destroyed. Coming out of the darkness of his confrontation with the past, he emerges into the light "And stinging song new-hatched / Each day, all summer." The "stinging song" which is both the song of insects in summer fields, and this song, this poem that "stings" which the poet sings, is "new-hatched." But the process is not yet complete. One ultimate fear must be confronted and resolved. But it may not be a fear of who he is, but rather a fear of who he is not; a fear, in fact, of non-being.

A minute galaxy  
 About my head will easily  
 Needle me back. The day's  
 Inaugural Damn  
 Spoken, I start to run,  
 Inane, like them, but breathing  
 In and out the sun  
 And air I am.

The son and heir! In the dark  
 It makes me catch my breath  
 And hear, from upstairs, hers--  
 That faintest hiss  
 And slither, as of life  
 Escaping into space,  
 Having led its characters  
 To the abyss

Of night. Immensely still  
 The heavens glisten. One broad  
 Path of vague stars is floating  
 Off, a shed skin  
 Of all whose fine cold eyes  
 First told us, locked in ours:  
 You are the heroes without name  
 Or origin (p. 23).

Stanza thirteen opens with a rather poetic description of what are probably simply gnats; the kind which move in little clouds about one's head. But the language is calculated to fit generally with the references to stars in other sections of the poem. In the latter half of the stanza he suggests his connection to the universe, the "sun and air" that he is. He runs, perhaps from himself, "Inane" like the gnats which surround him, mindless and pure as the elements of which he is composed. Yet there is more, there is mind and memory. There is a past.

With the first line of stanza fourteen the narrator is returned to darkness and to the present. "Sun and air" becomes "Son and heir," and "in the dark" it makes him catch

his breath. Simultaneously he hears his mother's breath "That faintest hiss / And slither, as of life / Escaping into space." His father is dead, and now figuratively in the image of the snake his mother also dies, leaving him alone to face the "abyss / of night." In his confrontation with his own past, recalled by his reference to "son and heir" and his relationship to all that has been, that past is negated. But with the negation of the past, so too the individual, the personality created by that past is also negated. It may be that the narrator fears the absolute nothingness beneath his own seeming existence; that his fear is not of death, but of destruction of self. Robbed of the past, he is condemned to the negative freedom of the present; a freedom which is negative precisely because he has no identity once the past is negated. Yet, paradoxically, without the burden of the past, self is also open to the infinite possibility of the present. And this is perhaps the ultimate irony of the poem and of the process through which the poet moves within it. He both is and is not.

He emerges from the darkness momentarily to establish his link with all living things, with the "sun and air" that he is both literally and figuratively. He is part of a greater whole, yet the whole is also contained within him, within the part which he is and is not. The self, in all its singularity, is a microcosm of the world



at large, containing the base elements. But the self is also a figure for the whole and for itself. As the self, the individual, he is the "Son and heir." But when the self is scattered, dispersed, he becomes the "sun and air." And this is what he fears. When the realization comes upon him that he is also the "Son and heir," that he is more than just "sun and air," he is mind and will and intellect as well and paradoxically that he is less than these elements because he is mortal, then he comes suddenly and fully to understand the ironic dilemma of existence. In that moment, the darkness returns. Simultaneously he hears from upstairs the figurative death of his mother and the one remaining tie with his own history is severed. He is alone, utterly alone in the universe, without a past, straddling the twin terrors of absolute annihilation and infinite possibility, adrift, at last, in the "abyss of night."

Yet in the final stanza of the poem, he finds a resolution of sorts, and acceptance perhaps of the basic ambiguity and irony of existence. And ultimately he finds silence. "Immensely still / The heavens glisten." In the utter silence of the eternal cosmos, he discovers that something does survive through paradoxically it must die to live. The self must relinquish itself, its singularity, to find existence in plurality; to exist not as an "I" but as a "we."

He returns to the dominant images of the poem and connects them. He sees the stars, the fires of the heavens which are never extinguished, as a shed skin. I suggest that the shedding of the snake's skin is like the process through which the narrator has passed in the poem. This process is also figuratively linked to the film. The film is a figurative snake upon whose "skin" are imprinted images of Merrill's history. As the film goes through the projector, these images are illuminated one after another. They affirm his past by repeating it as points of light in the literal and figurative darkness. But they are also new because the past is past, and he is not now the same as he was. Nevertheless, the self remains, just as the snake remains even after shedding its skin. The "skin" in this case is the snake's history, and thus a record of the experience of its life. So then does Merrill figuratively shed the skin of his past and face the future. Fire has destroyed the film as it reveals the past. But the fire of the first half of the poem is modulated in the second half into the fires of the universe, the stars.

In the silence, the silence itself speaks to him, giving him, as it were, the essence of the self he has now become.

One broad  
 Path of vague stars is floating  
 Off, a shed skin  
 Of all whose fine cold eyes  
 First told us, locked in ours:  
 You are the heroes without name  
 Or origin (p. 23).

The fires of the stars are also the eyes of heaven. Without his past, he has no name and no origin. Yet he exists in the anonymous heroism of survival itself. Though the universe is darkened, it is also lighted by the stars and by the "shining deeds" of all who dare to challenge the self; to lose the "I" that they gain the "we."

Thus "Scenes of Childhood" is a poem about the evolution of the self. Included in this major theme and its treatment are also the themes of time, the relationship of the past to the present, and love and family relationships. The poem, like most of Merrill's work, is very dense, establishing and exploring the relationships between the literal and the figurative, between the real and the ideal, between external reality and internal reality, and ultimately between what is said and what is meant. And the trope which governs this treatment both philosophically and rhetorically is irony.

Traditionally, irony refers to the disparity between what is said and what is meant, between language and meaning. Yet language itself has a dual nature. In an essay entitled "Irony, Identity and Repetition: On Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony" Ronald Schliefer addresses this issue and comments that, "Language can be seen as corresponding to its 'essence,' transparently referring to the world, the presence of the signified; or it can be seen as essentially self-referential, referring only to itself (to a signifier)

and thus drawing attention to the silence which lies behind it, which it 'speaks.'"<sup>14</sup> In this regard, language can be seen as essentially ironic, always meaning more or less than it says, always referring to something beyond itself, or to its own emptiness, that is, to its own silence. Given this fundamental condition, the great irony is then that irony itself must be defined with irony. Notwithstanding this proverbial vicious circle, certain suppositions can be made about the concept of irony, and certain distinctions can be stated.

Among the more important distinctions is that between rhetorical irony, i.e., the ironic figure of speech, and philosophical irony, i.e., the fundamental mode of apprehending reality which informs an author's work. In this regard it is helpful to consider briefly two writers, Wayne Booth and Soren Kierkegaard. In The Rhetoric of Irony, Booth deals principally with ironic figures of speech.<sup>15</sup> Among other things, he contends that an ironic figure of speech must meet four conditions. It must be intended as ironic by the author, it must be stable or fixed, it must be covert, i.e., intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from the surface, and finally it must be finite, containing a limited number of possible interpretations.<sup>16</sup> Essentially Booth maintains that in perceiving irony, the reader must first reject the literal meaning of the words, and reconstruct a new meaning or cluster of meanings. Irony,

therefore, involves a demolition and reconstruction process, and is on the part of the writer a deliberate act of communication in which he says one thing and means another. Irony, then, deals with the juxtaposition of opposites, of contradictions.

Kierkegaard, however, in The Concept of Irony disagrees that the ironic figure of speech is a means of communication. "The ironic figure of speech cancels itself out, . . . for the speaker presupposes his listeners to understand him, hence through the negation of the immediate phenomenon the essence remains identical with the phenomenon."<sup>17</sup> When the disparity between what is said and what is meant is thus reduced, then irony is not present. That is, Kierkegaard's irony is not a means of communication at all, but a negation of communication because the ironic figure of speech turns back upon itself, devouring itself and leaving only silence. In fact, Kierkegaard contends that irony is ultimately silent (p. 63). And it is silent because true irony is ". . . the playful expression of the desparate fact that there is nothing to express."<sup>18</sup> If, in fact, rhetorical irony cancels itself out, communicating despite its ironic figures, and philosophical irony is the expression of nothingness, subverting meaning, then we are left with silence as the only possible expression of irony. Yet irony, in turn, is the only possible expression of experience because, he contends, irony is fundamental to

existence. Yet true irony, i.e., silence, is what he calls "infinite negativity."<sup>19</sup> In devouring itself, turning back upon itself, irony also devours the experience it is attempting to communicate and in this way negates or invalidates that experience because it cannot be communicated except in silence.

But Kierkegaard also gives us another point of view. The emptiness of irony, the nothingness it expresses, can also be conceived of as infinite possibility, as beginning which is not yet an actuality.<sup>20</sup> The ironist, therefore, is negatively free because nothing yet has been actualized. Herein is the essence of personality and the nature of the individual--of identity--of self--continually being, yet always becoming. This is accomplished through repetition. That is, the individual continuously repeats his essence, his meaning, constantly becoming what he already is. In this regard, irony tends to negate the past by constantly attempting to make it present. And since, in one sense, all personality is its past, as the past is negated, then irony also negates the individual. Yet Kierkegaard also states, "No authentically human life is possible without irony."<sup>21</sup> This is the inherent paradox of personality and of irony. We constantly become what we already are. Irony frees us of our own history so that we can open ourselves to the full experience of the present and the infinite possibility of the future. Yet, if the past is negated, and hence the self

with it, for what are we freed? That is, if the personality is freed from its past, and the process of freeing is simultaneously the process of negation of self (since self is its past), then what is left? What lies beyond this simultaneous freeing and negation? Perhaps, with regard to this discussion, only the ultimate contradiction of irony itself and of the individual: irony both is and is not. It is the infinite possibility in the non-actualized moment, and the absolute nothingness in negation. In existing we are forever choosing between possibility and nothingness, and the paradox of existence is that it contains its own annihilation. Thus the self both is and is not.

While Booth contends that irony is always intentional, Kierkegaard believes that you can't have intentions or the individual without irony; that is, true irony is the condition for intentions and for the individual. Thus any discussion of intentions is meaningless. The self cannot exist without irony because irony "is itself the first and most abstract determination of subjectivity."<sup>22</sup> Yet paradoxically, irony cancels itself out, and with itself the individual. In this regard, Schleifer comments that "Irony is nothing but a standpoint for personality which looks in two directions."<sup>23</sup> Therefore irony, and personality, hover between the past and the present, between realization (actualization) and annihilation (negation). This contradiction, this paradox, is precisely what Merrill contends

with generally in his work, and more specifically in "Scenes of Childhood."

In a very real sense, all of Merrill's work attempts to answer the question "Who am I?" Essential to revelation is an understanding of his past, for the past provides at least a partial answer in that it explains motivation for behavior in the present, as well as feelings, insecurities, strengths, weaknesses, desires, needs or any of the other myriad responses a human being makes from moment to moment. In this regard, behavior and feeling at any given time in the present can be seen as partially dependent upon experience and feeling in the past. The personal present is a figure for the personal past. In this sense, the present is continually being acted upon by the past. And the presence of the past in any given moment of the present to some extent determines response and feeling. It is irrelevant, in one sense, whether or not awareness of the past is conscious because the past is simply there, recorded on some level, and the human being acts both from conscious and unconscious motivation. It is relevant in another sense in that with awareness of why one acts as he does (past events, etc.) he can then destroy the power of the past as a determinant of behavior.

Basic to any definition of irony is opposition; difference. The past is different from the present. Since Merrill existed in the past and exists in the present, then



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act of the past. This review, in itself, is ironic.

Only after the fact does he understand the fact.  
Only after acting does he understand the act. Though he  
does not repeat the act in the present, he does relive it  
through memory. Memory is then the catalyst which triggers  
his meditation upon meaning in the second half of the poem.  
The act as it happened meant one thing; an angry, threatened

a fundamental fact of his existence is difference, the constant interplay and opposition between what was and what is. Thus personality constantly "hovers" between the past and the present and is essentially ironic. Andrew Ettin comments on precisely this point in Merrill's work.

He is conscious of time's flow, and  
what interests him is the past  
apprehended now after a moment  
of change, the juxtaposition of  
past and present so separated by  
an instant in which revelation has  
taken place.<sup>24</sup>

It is this juxtaposition which creates the irony of the situation and the poem.

In the first part of the poem Merrill sees a film which depicts a specific event that occurred when he was four years old. The film is essentially the juxtaposition of images in rapid succession. Doubtless when the event was happening, the four year old boy did not understand fully, if at all, the significance of his action. Only in reviewing the event as an adult does he begin to realize the importance of what may have been an unconsciously motivated act of the past. This realization, in itself, is ironic.

Only after the fact does he understand the fact. Only after acting does he understand the act. Though he does not repeat the act in the present, he does relive it through memory. Memory is then the catalyst which triggers his meditation upon meaning in the second half of the poem. The act as it happened meant one thing; an angry, threatened

child striking out at his father in a spontaneous, albeit unconscious way. The act as he relives it in memory means something else in the larger context of his life since it happened. In the present, he can now place it within the parameters of his understanding of his relationship with his father, his unfulfilled need for love, his Oedipal jealousy, his love-hate feelings and all of the other deeply psycho/emotional responses with which he is concerned. Thus the act (and the film which recounts it) is a reflection of the fundamental irony of life. It means one thing when it occurs, and nothing beyond that. It is complete. Its meaning is simply in its happening. Yet, it also means something else when he relives it. It means he did not feel loved; it means that his father threatened him (literally as he was at that time, and figuratively as the shadow in the poem). In the film the act was literal, though the film itself is figurative. Again, there is that was-is juxtaposition. In reliving it in his mind, the act, this part of his past, is a figure for a life-long response to his need for filial love and acceptance.

Though he cannot alter the fact of its occurrence because it is past, in reliving it and understanding its meaning, he can alter his feeling about its occurrence. He can, in fact, strip it of any power to hurt him in the present through understanding. This understanding can bring with it a kind of emotional control. It is precisely in

this understanding and control that the figure of the snake shedding its skin is appropriate. He can shed the skin of his past and therefore live in the present. Thus the experience of the poem shows Merrill one of the ironies of existence, the difference in meaning between what was and what is, and how personality must constantly hover between the past and the present.

As I have suggested earlier in my discussion Merrill links this situation in the poem to the Oedipal cycle. Interestingly, this is not the only poem in the lyrics to suggest that he sees certain parallels between the psychology of the Oedipal stories and his own family. But here, in "Scenes of Childhood" he draws connecting lines. The absence of the father, as in Oedipus Rex, is the first of these parallels. Yet the father's "shadow," a presence not there, remains to haunt the narrator. It is, as I have suggested, one of the major influences on his life. It is this shadow which is both an absence and a presence; it is both literal and figurative. Furthermore, the son "strikes" the father, figuratively killing him so that he might replace him in his mother's affections. Here, too, there is a doubling; a literal and figurative "striking" or destruction. Yet, as in Oedipus, the son is unaware of motive as the act is being committed. Only in retrospect, does he begin to understand its significance. It is this act, moreover, which triggers the narrator's moment of crisis--of identity--not the first

time, but the second time as it is relived both literally in the film and figuratively in memory. The narrator's aging mother watches her past and this single significant act with amused interest. The son comes to understand who he is and who he imagines her to be with regard to the shadow. This realization of the narrator as the "Son and heir," leads him to the "abyss of night," to figurative darkness and his ultimate confrontation with self. Simultaneously his mother figuratively dies. Stripped of the last vestiges of his origins, the shed skin of his past, he must now confront the unknowns of the essential self. He is faced with the terror of discovering whether or not the self exists beneath or beyond its appearance (its skin) or if its history is the self.

Merrill arrives at this central irony through repeating his essence, but he repeats it not as itself, but as figures for itself--i.e., Oedipus, Jocasta and Laius--and in figures which represent the process he must go through--i.e., the film, fire, the snake, the shadow, the shed skin, etc. Yet this repetition is accomplished not so much by what he says, as by what he doesn't say; by the silence, in fact, beneath his words. That is, what he says in the poem on the surface has nothing to do with Oedipus. What he doesn't say has everything to do with Oedipus through the reader's recognition (and indeed his own) of the figures which he has created. Furthermore, in the final stanza of

the poem Merrill suggests the significance of this silence, this "speaking" silence, when occurring within it ("Immensely still / The heavens glisten") is the ultimate revelation of his status as a hero "without name / Or origin." As he stands poised between possibility and annihilation, gazing at the heavens, the stars are reflected in his own eyes, eyes which now have new sight. And it is the eternal and silent stars "whose fine cold eyes" first tell him, "locked in ours," that the self has been lost, and it has been found.

As I have suggested, on a rhetorical level Merrill juxtaposes opposites. As I will show in my later discussion of the lyrics he does this so much that it is a characteristic of his work. The effect generally is the creation of a surface tension which reflects a more profound ironic stance beneath the surface. As evidenced by "Scenes of Childhood" this stance is seldom stated directly, but it is there in the figures he uses, giving his work its characteristic tone; sometimes cynical and worldly, sometimes intense and romantic, but always controlled. Merrill is always the master of his verse.

"Scenes of Childhood," more than any other of the lyric poems reflects the fundamental ironies of his life and perhaps of existence itself. Here he encapsulates many of the ideas with which most of his lyric poetry is concerned; love, time, parent-child relationships, and ultimately the survival and evolution of the self. The poem is a quest for

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self. In reexamining his past, he hopes to discover the clues so vital to self-definition. He knows, even before the past is relived, that the experience will be painful. Yet he also senses its absolute necessity. Gradually, through the course of the poem, he comes to understand the magnitude of the crisis. It is not just the momentary pain of reliving painful experiences; it is confronting existence itself. And in this confrontation the stakes are everything. He must risk all in order to gain or lose all. Paradoxically, he discovers that he must lose everything in order to gain everything. In the final loss of self--of singularity--of individuality--he gains selfhood. He learns that he always is what he is constantly and inevitably becoming, and he is continually becoming what he already is. He learns that he is part of a greater cosmic whole, yet simultaneously that whole is contained within the part that he is. As self is destroyed, through destroying its past, self is revealed. Every moment of existence is a moment of choice between infinite possibility and absolute annihilation. And the ultimate irony of life itself is that in choosing one, we also choose the other.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>James Merrill, First Poems (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1951); The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (New York: Atheneum, 1959, enlarged edition, 1970); Water Street (New York: Atheneum, 1962); Nights and Days (New York: Atheneum, 1966); The Fire Screen (New York: Atheneum, 1969); Braving the Elements (New York: Atheneum, 1972). Hereafter all subsequent references in the text will refer to these editions. Page numbers for specific poems will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup>James Merrill, Divine Comedies (New York: Atheneum, 1976); Mirabell: The Books of Number (New York: Atheneum, 1978); Scripts for the Pageant (New York: Atheneum, 1980). All subsequent references in the text will refer to these editions which will henceforth be collectively called the trilogy.

<sup>3</sup>Robert von Hallberg, "James Merrill: Revealing by Obscuring," Contemporary Literature, XXI No. 4 (Autumn 1980), 549.

<sup>4</sup>von Hallberg, p. 550.

<sup>5</sup>von Hallberg, p. 550.

<sup>6</sup>von Hallberg, p. 551.

<sup>7</sup>Ashley Brown, "An Interview with James Merrill," Shenandoah, XIX, 4 (Summer 1968), 10.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Malkoff, Escape from the Self (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>Malkoff, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup>X. J. Kennedy, "Translations from the American," The Atlantic Monthly, March 1973, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup>Mona Van Duyn, "Sunbursts, Garlands, Creatures, Men," Poetry CXXVI No. 6 (September 1975), 201.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Langbaum, The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 25.

<sup>13</sup>Langbaum, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>Ronald Schliefer, "Irony, Identity and Repetition: On Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony" Sub-Stance No. 25 1980, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup>Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

<sup>16</sup>Booth, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, trans. Lee M. Capel (London: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1966) p. 265.

<sup>18</sup>Schliefer, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup>Kierkegaard, pp. 154-55.

<sup>20</sup>Kierkegaard, p. 299.

<sup>21</sup>Kierkegaard, p. 388.

<sup>22</sup>Kierkegaard, p. 281.

<sup>23</sup>Schliefer, p. 47.

<sup>24</sup>Andrew V. Ettin, "On James Merrill's Nights and Days, Perspective (Spring 1967), p. 46.

## CHAPTER II.

### CHILDHOOD SCENES

Letting his wisdom be the whole of love,  
The father tiptoes out, backwards. A gleam  
Falls on the child awake and wearied of,

Then, as the door clicks shut, is snuffed. The glove-  
Gray afterglow appalls him. It would seem  
That letting wisdom be the whole of love

Were pastime even for the bitter grove  
Outside, whose owl's white hoot of disesteem  
Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

He lies awake in pain, he does not move,  
He will not scream. Any who heard him scream  
Would let their wisdom be the whole of love.

People have filled the room, he lies above.  
Their talk, mild variation, chilling theme,  
Falls on the child. Awake and wearied of

Mere pain, mere wisdom also, he would have  
All the world waking from its winter dream,  
Letting its wisdom be. The whole of love  
Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

"The World and the Child"<sup>1</sup>

This poem illustrates one of the central themes in the lyric poetry of James Merrill. Its refrain underscores the enormous effect Merrill's early life has had on the development of his literary career. Though Merrill does not state that the poem is autobiographical, because of the consistency in the lyrics of this theme and its treatment, we

assume that the "child" who appears here and in so many other poems is in part Merrill himself. A few words about Merrill's personal background lends credence to this view. As the son of Charles Merrill, the wealthy and powerful founder of the brokerage firm of Merrill-Lynch, his childhood was no doubt privileged. Yet, paradoxically, much of Merrill's better poetry deals with a child who has felt emotionally and psychologically deprived. In most of the poems which deal with childhood, and specifically with a male child of considerable material wealth, again and again he describes a situation in which the "poor little rich boy" is given everything except love and stability. He is particularly concerned with an "absent" father. Consequently much of this poetry (and in fact, much of all of his poetry) exhibits an emotional and psychological search for father figures, both secular and sacred. The amount of poetry and prose which is devoted to this subject confirms the assumption that Merrill is writing about himself. Undoubtedly, this paradoxical situation in which he had material wealth and emotional poverty has helped shape the fundamentally ironic stance which underpins so much of his work.

Furthermore, as I will show, one of the more remarkable characteristics of Merrill's later work is its candor. He is surprisingly open in writing about himself and his pain. Not only does he do this in poetry, but in his two novels as well. The result of two novels and six

volumes of poetry is a clear picture of certain fundamental facts of his life. He was wealthy, yet emotionally deprived. He was never sure of his father's love. He lacked family stability and believes himself to be the product of a "broken home." His father remarried several times (every "thirteenth year" as one poem states). Neither parent seemed to have much time for him, and he grew up principally in the care of governesses. This situation led to a sense of emotional and psychic isolation, and ultimately to existential despair. Yet, Merrill is also a survivor and throughout the course of his long and distinguished literary career he has resolved many of the emotional problems his childhood created. This, too, will be illustrated later in my discussion.

Returning now briefly to the poem used to introduce this chapter, much of what I have suggested both here and in the introduction can be illustrated. Fundamental to Merrill's poetics is an ironic doubling. In this respect, the title itself is significant. It has two parts: "The World" and "The child." They are different and they are the same. That is, the world at large is distinguished from the world of the child, or the world as the child perceives it. Yet, as the poem illustrates, the world for the child is as it is perceived by the child. If he perceives the world to be one thing, then for him, the world is that thing; its reality is his reality.

Yet Merrill is careful to distinguish between the perceptions of the child "awake and wearied of" and the perceptions of the adult the child has become, remembering this time and this perception. Notice, for example, that he comments "It would seem / That letting wisdom be the whole of love / Were pastime even for the bitter grove / Outside." But the emotion is real, so real that it is projected into the "owl's white hoot of disesteem." Even nature seems to reinforce his parent's indifference to his pain. Moreover, the poet does not say that though seeming to be wisdom, his parents' actions were foolish, rather he simply states that "Letting his wisdom be the whole of love" his father leaves him alone and in pain. The point is that here, as in much of his work, there is a perceptual doubling which is written into the poem. As an adult writing about a childhood experience, he can see the justification of his parent's action, but as the child both then and now which he is and is not, the pain is still very real.

This subtle juxtaposition of twin perceptions is most clearly seen in the sixth stanza. He precedes both "pain" and "wisdom" with the word "mere." The adjective reduces them to the same level, simultaneously diminishing and undercutting his previous use of both terms. For five stanzas he maintains that his father's action is "wisdom," but nevertheless caused pain. And for five stanzas, he leads us to believe that the pain was for him a devastating

experience. Suddenly, in the sixth, he shifts the perspective of the poem by undercutting with the word "mere" the very seriousness of its subject. Two alternatives present themselves immediately. Either the adult now realizes for all its seeming devastation, the pain was indeed "mere pain" and "mere wisdom," or so completely devastating was the experience that the child has concluded that he simply doesn't matter and his pain, as himself, is unimportant, is "mere." To complicate matters, furthermore, he ends the poem by repeating, but splitting, the initial line, "Letting his wisdom be the whole of love."

Mere pain, mere wisdom also, he would have  
All the world waking from its winter dream,  
Letting its wisdom be. The whole of love  
Falls on the child awake and wearied of.

It is love, after all, which "Falls on the child" and not pain. Yet, paradoxically, love is pain, for the child remains at the end, just as at the beginning "awake and wearied of."

But there is also in the poem the suggestion of something much bigger than just its own situation; and that is survival itself. At the end of stanza one and the beginning of stanza two he comments, "A gleam / Falls on the child awake and wearied of, / Then, as the door clicks shut, is snuffed." This "gleam" is both literal and figurative. Literally, it is a gleam or beam of light coming from outside his darkened room. But figuratively this "gleam" is associated with his father's presence, both in the room and in his

life. As his father withdraws literally, so he also withdraws figuratively, leaving the child alone in the "glove / Gray afterglow" which appalls him, which intensifies his sense of aloneness and isolation. He is left alone literally and metaphorically to confront his own pain without guidance, without love or support from his absent father. And this "absence" here as in "Scenes of Childhood" leads him ultimately to confront his own being, his very existence. It is this confrontation which will occupy a large part of my discussion in this chapter.

This poem also illustrates a very important concept which is central to my discussion of Merrill's concern with the self. As I have suggested, Merrill is a very good formal poet. He is adept in a wide variety of forms. But in viewing all of the lyric poetry, an interesting pattern emerges. Much of the poetry of his first three volumes is formal, whereas much of the poetry in the last three volumes is informal. The question of form then becomes an important issue in his work. With regard to the self, and Merrill's self concept, it is my contention that form allows Merrill to both distance himself from the feelings being expressed, while providing him with a way to express them. That is, in the early lyrics he can use form and strict formal conventions as a mask behind which he can hide, therefore achieving distance. In light of the often painful feelings he is expressing in these formal poems, the distance is important to him.



But equally important is the expression of the feeling. Form, then, is the solution.

Furthermore, the poems through the first three volumes which treat his childhood tend to be written from a child's point of view. Many of the poems in the third volume, Water Street, and those following tend to be written from an adult's point of view looking back upon the experiences of childhood. This corresponds to my suggestion that with Water Street many of the feelings of childhood begin to be resolved; thus there is no longer as great a need for Merrill to distance himself from the material through form, though the need to express the feelings remains. With the poems in Water Street, he begins to write less formal poetry and I suggest that this indicates a change in both his view of his childhood as well as his view of the self.

One of the more consistent characteristics of his work is what I have termed a perceptual doubling. This doubling is most clearly seen in the poems about childhood and is the foundation of his irony. Achieving a sense of the self, which is certainly his aim throughout his entire career, is dependent upon a dual perspective. That is, if he were simply a child he would not understand either the feelings about which he is writing or the implications of those feelings. On the other hand, if he were simply an adult, he would not understand the feelings of the child. He must be both at one and the same time in order to achieve

this sense of self. In other words, as Kierkegaard indicates, it is necessary for the individual to be both himself and not himself at the same time in order to gain a sense of the self. This dual personality gives him an understanding of who he is. Retrospective poems then are the best kind for this task of discovering the self because they allow him to be himself while not being himself. Formal poetry is a vital part of this process.

He can, in effect, remain within the relative safety of a formal expression, while benefiting from the expression itself. Form becomes an expression of itself, while simultaneously it is the exact opposite. And this is irony. "The World and the Child" is a villanelle, and the villanelle is a fixed poetic form. In its highly structured organization of five three-line stanzas with a concluding four-line stanza only two rhyming sounds are permitted. The first and third lines of the first stanza are repeated, alternately, as the third line of the subsequent stanzas until the last. In the last stanza, the repeating lines become the final two lines of the poem. We must ask why Merrill uses such a strict form to express such strong feeling? The poem is essentially about pain. When this pain is subjected to the strictures of form, as in the villanelle, it allows him the luxury of distance from his own feelings while permitting their expression. Thus this formal organization is important in his early work because it enables him

to write somewhat more objectively (and less painfully) about his own past. Until such time as the feelings associated with that past are resolved, it is necessary to approach them in this way. Once resolution has occurred (and it begins in Water Street) then he no longer needs the mask of form to protect himself and can (and does) write less formal poetry. In my subsequent discussion of his childhood poems, this point will become more clear.

As suggested in the opening chapter, the ultimate irony of Merrill's work is his realization that life itself is forever a choice between absolute annihilation and infinite possibility. It is my contention that the lyric poetry represents in large part one side of this philosophical stance, annihilation of self, while the trilogy represents the other, infinite possibility. It is for this reason I have focused, in discussing the lyrics, on what Kierkegaard calls the "infinite negativity" of irony. But both choices are inextricably tied to the past. It is with the past, after all, that so much of the lyrics is concerned. To illustrate this important point, I will discuss both Merrill's poetry and his prose. Interestingly, though Merrill candidly admits that he is a better poet than novelist, it is the prose which provides the clearest explanation of his position in the poetry.<sup>2</sup> So I will discuss his two novels with regard to this point, as well as the poems which deal specifically with his past and, even more to the point,

with his childhood and young adulthood. Furthermore, much of his adult love poetry also reflects this idea found in "The World and the Child" that love is pain and ultimately can lead to a confrontation with the self and its survival. So I will also discuss the love poetry which is germane to this point. I will focus upon the poems and sections of his prose which represent in one form or another the annihilation of self. In the course of my discussion, which will be chronological, certain fundamental principles of Merrill's poetics will emerge, as well as the important foundational aspects of his philosophically ironic stance.

In 1951, Merrill published First Poems in a limited edition.<sup>3</sup> The volume contains thirty-two poems and half of these are concerned with childhood and with the perceptions of children. The other of the volume's dominant themes is love. Generally speaking in both the childhood poems and the love lyrics, Merrill projects a sense of sadness in the discovery that love and indeed childhood can be filled with pain for the uninitiated and the unprepared. Significantly, even in his later work, this quality is never lost. Though problems are resolved, the man remains the child.

Of the volume's thirty-two poems, two are particularly relevant to this discussion, "The Black Swan" and "Wreath for the Warm-Eyed." In light of his later work, in fact, these two poems are vital in understanding the whole thrust of his

emotional-philosophical development. The emotional and psychological scenes depicted in both are repeated again and again, with variations, in his work for the next twenty-five years. Regardless of their biographical validity, they become figures for what he perceives to be a recurring pattern in his life: a psychic isolation, leading ultimately to an existential confrontation with the self. Interestingly, the conclusion of the second poem "Wreath for the Warm-Eyed," is repeated, though in prose, as the crucial concluding scene of his first novel The Seraglio.<sup>4</sup>

The first of these two, "The Black Swan" (pp. 2-3) is a poem of five, seven-line stanzas. It is the opening poem of the volume and sets the emotional stage for all the poems which follow. It is perhaps significant that this poem is also the first in a thirty year professional career which will deal again and again with the conflict depicted here. The poem has two principals, a "black swan" and a "blond child." Figuratively, the swan and the child both are and are not the same. The child comes to understand that in an emotional, psychological sense, he is the black swan, the one who is different among all the white swans of the world. Yet, literally, as self, he is individual and unique. In the opening stanza he introduces both characters.

Black on flat water past the jonquil lawns  
 Riding, the black swan draws  
 A private chaos warbling in its wake,  
 Assuming, like a fourth dimension, splendor  
 That calls the child with white ideas of swans  
 Nearer every paradox means wonder

(p. 2)

At first, the child is fascinated by the swan's difference: a difference which draws him as if spellbound nearer to the object of his wonder. Like all children, he tends to see the world in black and white and the juxtaposition of these opposites is figuratively crucial. He is a "blond" child. The swan is black. As he gradually comes to identify strongly with the swan's difference, its blackness, then he also identifies emotionally with the swan. This emotional sameness violates his "ideas of swans:" that is, the way in which he perceives both himself and reality. And this jolting disparity leads him to the edge of despair in which he must, at last, defiantly proclaim his right to exist.

Notice, also, Merrill's line construction. Even in his earliest work he exhibits what becomes a characteristic. He often writes extended periodic sentences, as in the stanza above. This he later admits is the influence of the novelist Henry James, for whom he has great admiration. Again, here there is an issue of form. The poem is formally organized. But the basic form of the periodic sentence includes a series of qualifiers which act in an ironic way and help distance both the poet and the reader from the material. That is, he says one thing, and then qualifies it

again and again until the thing which he has said is no longer what he says. Using this technique is another way of achieving the necessary distance from the subject.

In stanza two he continues to give more observations about the meaning of the swan. Here, too, he also introduces another technique which is so characteristic of his work, an often complex use of puns.

Though the black swan's arched neck is like  
 A question-mark on the lake,  
 The swan outlaws all possible questioning:  
 A thing in itself, like love, like submarine  
 Disaster, or the first sound when we wake;  
 And the swan-song it sings  
 Is the huge silence of the swan.

(p. 2)

Still the child identifies white with good and black with evil. The swan is an "outlaw," and though it visually forms a "question-mark on the lake," it "outlaws all possible questioning." This questioning is the child's who is compelled because of this confrontation with the swan to question his own position in the scheme of things, his own existence and the meaning of his life. Yet the swan is complete; a self unto itself; a thing "like love" which perhaps cannot be explained with the inadequacies of language. Thus ultimately, as in "Scenes of Childhood" and "The World and the Child," only silence remains, but it is a "huge silence," a silence which like the silent movies in "Scenes of Childhood" nevertheless speaks more eloquently than words. It does so by figuring--that is "realizing"--emotions which the

the poet for some reason cannot (or will not) express. Merrill introduces an allegorical equation which reinforces the necessary distance he maintains from his subject. The swan is poet in other. Because the poet both is and is not the swan, and both is and is not the child (and therefore is "other") then he creates distance.

Here, too, the figure of the "swan-song" is important. A "Swan-song" traditionally and figuratively is a metaphor for death. It is particularly appropriate in this case because the swan is also black, the traditional color of death. As the child comes to identify more clearly with the swan, then his own figurative annihilation becomes more imminent, and is all the more startling because of the juxtaposition of the swan's blackness with his blondness. In a larger sense, then, this poem may represent Merrill's first realization of the essential philosophical dilemma of existence; that it is a mixture of annihilation and possibility.

In stanza three he concentrates upon the swan and its meaning in the world at large. But it must be remembered that the child is figuratively identified with the swan, so in explaining his perception of the bird he is also talking about himself.

Illusion: the black swan knows how to break  
Through expectation, beak  
Aimed now at its own breast, now at its image,  
And move across our lives, if the lake is life,



And by the gentlest turning of its neck  
 Transform, in time, time's damage  
 To less than a black plume, time's grief.  
 (p. 3)

There is, however, a third meaning in the figure of the swan, though merely suggested in light of Merrill's career. The close identification between swan and child can also be taken a step further to the man and poet the child has become. The poet is a singer; a singer of songs (poetry). Scattered throughout Merrill's poetry are his views about art and about poetry in particular. Here, he combines these two divinely inspired and respected art forms (music and poetry) into a single figure; that of the "swan-song" linked figuratively to the child and to the poet the child becomes.<sup>5</sup> Given this figure of the swan as child as poet, then, these lines acquire a new dimension. The poet "knows how to break / Through expectation," and with his artistic ego, his self, "beak / aimed now at its own breast, now at its image, / . . . move across our lives." Here, too, Merrill simply states the metaphor with characteristic candor. The "lake" is "life" and the swan moving upon it is the poet who has the power to "Transform, in time, time's damage; To less than a black plume, time's grief." The introduction of this third meaning is obliquely supported with the mention of the black plume, a figure for the poet's pen which in this case then also becomes a figure for what the poet does, record "time's grief." Paradoxically, however, that record, that "swan-song" is a "huge silence."

In stanza four he continues to explain what he means essentially by "time's grief." In the process he introduces a new figure to illustrate not only the secret of the swan, but the central dilemma of human existence.

Enchanter: the black swan has learned to enter  
Sorrow's lost secret center  
Where like a maypole separate tragedies  
Are wound about a tower of ribbons, and where  
The central hollowness is that pure winter  
That does not change but is  
Always brilliant ice and air.

(p. 3)

The swan as child as poet "has learned to enter / Sorrow's lost secret center." Thus "time's grief" is the poet's perception of the "separate tragedies" of life: life which is a "central hollowness." It is worth noting here that a balancing joy is conspicuously absent. That is, life for the child, for the man the child has become, is not a mix of joy and sorrow, but rather a singular "central hollowness" that "does not change," but is "Always brilliant ice and air." What has been lost is springtime which has become "pure winter."

The final stanza returns to the perceptions of the child as he asserts his emotional validity. It also indicates that "time's grief" is timeless both in the child and the child who lives within the man.

Always the black swan moves on the lake; always  
The blond child stands to gaze  
As the tall emblem pivots and rides out  
To the opposite side, always. The child upon  
The bank, hands full of difficult marvels, stays  
Forever to cry aloud  
In anguish: I love the black swan.

(p. 3)

The world "always" is used three times, indicating that figuratively this event is timeless for the child who has entered "Sorrow's lost secret center" who is, in fact, the black swan among "white ideas of swans." And for this child the world is full of difficult marvels," but the most difficult of all is the paradox of life's "central hollow-ness" and the tragedies of existence. He cries out, forever in anguish, "I love the black swan." It is significant that Merrill does not use quotation marks to set off this direct expression of emotion. Their absence removes the barrier between character and author. He is not quoting someone else, but rather himself. The child recognizes in a sudden agonized revelation that he is inextricably tied to the black swan, that he is in fact, the "tall emblem" he is forever becoming. Though the blond child will grow, will change, he will also paradoxically always be a blond child standing on the shore trying to make sense of life's difficult marvels; trying to make sense, perhaps, when ultimately no sense can be made. One expression of this irony is the poem's anxiety for form. If no sense can be made of "life's difficult marvels," then perhaps form itself is a kind of hedge against despair and formlessness. Thus the poem is brought full circle back to the figure of the swan. And the experience has led the child and the poet to a confrontation with self: self he expresses in an anguished declaration of kinship, of feeling for a kindred spirit against the "central hollowness" of life itself.

The second of the two poems is "Wreath for the Warm-Eyed" (pp. 25-26). It too is a poem about childhood loneliness and psychic isolation. It consists of four, eight line stanzas with irregular rhyme. Again the central character is a child, though this child seems somewhat older than the little boy in "The Black Swan." The overall picture that is created is of a lonely boy who feels himself to be an outsider. He cannot somehow make meaningful contact with others. Even though he is included in their games, he remains emotionally and psychically isolated.

The poem is written both in third person and in first. This mixing of points of view creates a curious effect. Merrill often does it in his poetry, writing in third person, then suddenly coming personally into the poem. Usually this first person intrusion occurs in the form of a revelation. The narrator seems to be talking about someone else, then quite unexpectedly he realizes he is talking about himself. These personal intrusions are almost confessional in nature, and because they are unexpected their impact is always great.<sup>6</sup>

The poem is also about death; an interesting subject for a poem whose principals are children. The ironic juxtaposition of death and youth gives the poem a peculiar tension which is never resolved. As in "The Black Swan," there is nothing in the poem of the joys of childhood and of innocence, but rather a sad sense of despair and resignation

about the pain and cruelties of life. In this sense, the poem is a kind of eulogy, a "wreath for the warm-eyed," for those who mourn the passing of innocence, and the death of youth. But the death is a figurative one and is perhaps on the part of the narrator simply the realization that though he was a biological child, he was never young, he was never free of the knowledge that life is pain.

He begins in stanza one by introducing the central image, flowers. Put these flowers are the flowers of a funeral wreath.

Flowers inside the thirteen-year high walls  
 Rehearse the profane virtues: Golden Coins  
 For Constancy; and Sweet Indulgence twines  
 Above the small pale bells  
 That natives call White Lies. Here children run  
 Among the blossoms, pointing, calling,  
 Each with his toy behind him trailing,  
 A deformity worshipped, an introduction to pain.  
 (p. 25)

Not until the last line is there any suggestion that all is not as it appears. Nor do we realize that these flowers are not flowers of life, but of death. Not, in fact, until the end of the poem is the impact of this juxtaposition felt. The children run and play among the flowers. But these flowers form figurative wreaths on the tombs of innocence and joy. The irony is that only the narrator, who both is and is not a child, understands the significance of the situation. Here again it is necessary to understand the perceptual doubling in order to feel the impact of the irony. He must be both inside himself and outside himself

in order to achieve a sense of himself, in order to grasp and record these feelings. As an adult he has achieved distance from these childhood emotions. As a child which he is also he is still within the feelings. And again form plays its part. By organizing the poem formally, and using slant rhyme (walls-bells, coins-twines, run-pain, calling-trailing), he is able to retain some distance from the poem's serious and painful revelations. It is for him an "introduction to pain," a funeral ritual among the light and the color and the life of the flowers. As the children begin life, so also do they figuratively end it.

In stanza two, with the opening line, the narrator comes directly and suddenly into the poem in a startling revelation. It is all the more startling because it is understated. Or perhaps more properly, its effect is undercut by a triviality which intensifies it.

I have loitered by the wall, being somewhat taller,  
 Wanting to die, but that life was a flattery,  
 And seen children pose in their vanity  
 Of pearls round a throat of color  
 Beside the peepholes they have made in the brick,  
 Rolling their eyes at these, although  
 No one but God knows what they know  
 Playing I-Spy, Red Light, the Marriage Trick.  
 (p. 25)

The jarring incongruity of "being somewhat taller" with "I have loitered by the wall . . . Wanting to die" explodes the scene that has thus far been pictured. And then with scarcely a pause he returns to more descriptions of the children and the games they play. Clearly, however,

the narrator/child separates himself from others. It is his realization of potential annihilation which drives the wedge between himself and the other children, which makes him different. And this realization, expressed in "Wanting to die," would not be possible without a perceptual doubling: that is, without irony.

Here, too, there is the juxtaposition of childhood games with death. For the other children life is a game, but for the narrator it is serious business; it is, in fact, the business of survival. The games for him are not merely games, but rather "an introduction to pain," figures for life itself and the ultimate confrontations of the self with loneliness and figurative annihilation.

In stanza three he explains, in part, the meaning of the games by making himself a participant in them. But the games he plays become a metaphor for his life, its loneliness and despair.

In such games one shuts his eyes, unclosing them  
Only to find all playmates hidden, never  
Completely sure of how he will recover  
Those vanished in the sun-stream;  
A deportment formal as his cries at birth,  
The roulades of relinquishment,  
Shows him how change is never sent  
Like a valentine, but waits, a plot of earth,  
(p. 25)

The games do not give him a sense of participation, of community with the others, rather they underscore his essential aloneness. Like the child who questions the meaning of the black swan, the child in these games is forced to

confront the self, to confront an absence, a presence not there. In light of Merrill's entire career, perhaps an important irony is that he never does recover "Those vanished in the sun-stream." He never does recover either his playmates or his youth.

He compares the ritual of the games to the ritual of birth. But birth is also death. Birth is a "relinquishment," a resignation, a giving up to the pain of life. He supports this birth-death image by juxtaposing it immediately to an image of the grave. His life and its pain cannot be changed but by death. Change does not come "Like a valentine," a message of caring, but through annihilation. And that annihilation, since it is forever a potential within him, simply "waits." It "waits," in short, for the moment when the self realizes that in confronting itself, it risks figurative destruction.

In the final stanza, the revelation is complete. He, at last learns how utterly he is alone.

A green conspiracy against the heart who is It,  
 Counting his pulse, face in the slick leaves pressed,  
 Feeling at first just the thrill of being lost  
 In leaves; then bit-  
 By-bit of learning how utterly they have gone,  
 How only he is prisoner, must  
 Love and forswear them and, at last,  
 Outplayed, play out his Patience quite alone.  
 (p. 26)

Change is here a "green conspiracy against the heart who is it." All of nature seems to conspire against him, just as in "The World and the Child" where the owl's hoot



was one of disesteem. So here he is the "heart who is It." He turns inward, since that is all that is left to him, and feels the "thrill of being lost / In leaves." And then gradually, he learns how completely he is alone, and how this aloneness enslaves him. Alone, he must face the self, must "Love and forswear" those with whom he has failed to make contact, and "Outplayed" by them, by life, and by himself, "play out his Patience quite alone."

It is worth noting here that technically in thirty-two lines, Merrill has actually written only four sentences. Just as in "The Black Swan," his lines have a complex, layered construction. This form allows him distance. Also this poem illustrates again Merrill's complicated use of images and rhetorical devices such as the reversal in "Outplayed" and "play out," as well as the multiple meanings in the word "play." Games are played, yet the participants are also "players" in the theatrical sense of acting out the rituals of life. Yet, the players, and in this case the narrator as the final player, is outplayed by the very games he plays. Much of the revelation of the poem is precisely in the realization that the games are not games.

In these two poems, "The Black Swan" and "Wreath for the Warm-Eyed" the themes are essentially the same. And they repeat the fundamental message of "The World and the Child" (Although chronologically they precede this latter poem). In all three, there is a child who feels a profound

sense of loneliness and isolation, and who fails to make meaningful contact with the world at large and with those, both parents and peers, who mean the most to him, and upon whom he depends for support and love. He is left in these cases confront the self alone and to arrive at self-destruction without the support system which family and friends normally provide. His father withdraws and the "glove / Gray afterglow" appalls him. His peers vanish in "the sun-stream" and he must "play out his Patience quite alone." And even the black swan with which he so closely identifies sings a song which is a "huge silence."

But poetry is not the only place where Merrill deals with this subject. He repeats it in much more detail in his first novel, The Seraglio, published in 1957, six years after the appearance of First Poems. The Seraglio, meaning the harem, is an autobiographical novel wearing only the thinnest of fictional disguises. It is Jamesian in technique, concentrating on subtle psychological states in the minds of its characters and the seemingly endless inner debates so typical of a James' character. Yet there is action and movement and the tension created by unresolved problems. Generally in the novel Merrill attempts to deal with his own past, and the trauma of discovering his identity, particularly his sexual identity. This is a trauma repeated again and again in his poetry. He also presents a

rather extensive delineation of his father's character as well as that of his mother. Caution, of course, must be taken in crossing the line between fact and fiction, but because of the recurrence of this theme so often in his poetry and the availability of biographical data, I feel it is safe to make certain assumptions about the book and its principal characters. They may indeed be fictional creations, yet they are also most certainly modeled upon real people, including Merrill himself as the main character.

The main character is Francis Tanning, the son of a wealthy fanancier, Benjamin Tanning. His mother is called Vinnie and his sister, Enid. His niece, who figures prominently in the story, is called Lily. It is significant that Merrill dedicates the book to his "nieces and nephews" because it is essentially about children who must grow up, surrounded by material wealth, without familial love and support. The title refers to the women who form a kind of harem around Benjamin Tanning. These women give Francis, the sensitive and often confused son, a chance to speculate upon the roles they play both in his father's life and his own, as well as the apparent need that they play them. Generally, Merrill is not overly hard on the father, though as I have suggested, at times in his poetry he is. Rather he views the father's behavior (and infidelity) as somehow fitting for a man who has grown accustomed to the power inherent in wealth.

But actually there are several plots which run concurrently in the novel. The first is that concerning Francis: his sexual identity crisis resulting in self-castration, a sexual annihilation, and his subsequent recovery and change. The second is that dealing with the past and present of his father, Benjamin Tanning, which involves wall street intrigue, several divorces and marriages, and continual ill health. The third focuses upon Vinnie Tanning, his mother, and her husband and her son. The fourth deals with the growth of Lily, Francis' niece, her hostilities and insecurities. Merrill seems to have a particularly strong sense of identification with Lily. She is a child struggling to survive in an adult world where great privilege of position is taken for granted. Yet it is not "things" that Lily needs, but love. The fifth plot involves a number of minor characters who are tangled up in one way or another with the central actions of the other plots. They move in and out of the lives of the principals. Merrill is particularly skilled at weaving an intricate plot structure where what may appear initially to be irrelevant is always shown to be vital.

The novel is divided into three parts and each becomes increasingly complex. "Part One" opens with Lily, who in a moment of extreme frustration takes a knife and slashes the face in a portrait of her mother.<sup>7</sup> This symbolic act, although she is unaware of it, is necessary for her growth. Immediately the reader is plunged into the

central problem of the novel, the relationship between child and parent in this privileged environment. "Part One" ends with Francis' self-castration, and the child grown to adulthood as a product of a moneyed, but loveless atmosphere. The two acts of violence run parallel. The first is directed by the child toward the source of her frustration, the parent, while the second is violence against oneself as a reaction to that same frustration.

At the end of "Part Two" Merrill describes the highly symbolic opera, "Orpheus," as it is interpreted by one of the minor characters in the story, a composer named Tommy. The opera serves as a kind of mirror of the lives of those who view it, therefore becoming a statement about the purpose of art. "Part Three" ends the novel, and it too is metaphorical and literal. Francis takes part in a children's game. It is essentially the situation of "Wreath for the Warm-Eyed." He is chosen by the children to be "It." After he closes his eyes, the children simply vanish and he comes suddenly to understand how utterly alone he is.

The novel begins and ends with children engaged in acts which have a great figurative significance. In both cases, the scenes depict children who are painfully aware of their loneliness with regard to adults or to other children. In the opening passage Lily figuratively destroys her mother in anger and frustration by ripping her portrait with a knife. In the closing scene, though Francis is an "adult,"

he participates in a game with the children with whom he feels a greater kinship. But they, too, desert him. Thus, The Seraglio continues the themes in Merrill's poetry.

Early in the novel Francis expresses what must undoubtedly be a fear peculiar to the very rich; that of being loved not for what you are, but for what you have. He is talking to Xenia, a European sculptress who continually seeks wealthy patrons. Francis has gone to Europe to both forget himself and find himself. His wealth has proved itself to be an obstacle to relationships. Xenia has just discovered that Francis' father is Benjamin Tanning and that despite his denials, Francis, too, is wealthy.

"I knew there was a mystery about you, Francis! Here we all thought you were one of us, a poor writer trying to make ends meet on Via Margutta. If it weren't so funny, I'd honestly be annoyed. . . . How dare you allow me to pay my share all the times we've gone out!"

He shook his head wistfully. "I loved it, I loved it. I felt it was me you liked . . ."

(p. 28)

Two things are worth noting here. The first is that Francis is a "poor young writer." Though undoubtedly Merrill was never poor, he certainly was a young writer in the early fifties when the book was being written. Secondly, Xenia comments that she thought he was "one of us." Part of the novel's point is that Francis never feels as if he is "one of [them]." As I have suggested thus far, Merrill also struggles with this conflict of being different, isolated, cut off from meaningful contact with others. In this case,

it is wealth which separates him. But as I shall show, wealth is only a superficial manifestation of a much deeper alienation.

It becomes very clear throughout the course of the story that one of its principal concerns is vulnerability in feeling. Francis, having been denied love as a child, feels unable to take a chance in any relationship of intimacy. He simply closes doors to his feelings. He is particularly concerned about a loss of control. This fear of the loss of control expressed here in the novel, may also be applied to Merrill's poetry. I am suggesting that Merrill compensates for this fear by using strict forms. As his poetry illustrates, in large part, when he uses strict poetic forms (sonnets, villanelles, etc.) he is often talking about childish feelings. On the other hand, when he writes retrospective poems, he can be less formal. But here in the novel it is that fear of loss of control that ultimately hurtles him toward self-mutilation and figurative annihilation. To feel openly is vulgar, and the Tannings, if nothing else, must never be vulgar. One of the most important scenes in the novel is this castration scene. But as vital as the scene is itself, it is also important to see what triggers it.

Francis has been to see Jane, a girl he met in Europe and came close to loving. His very closeness, however, frightens him, as does his own lust. After fleeing in

confusion from her apartment in Boston, he takes the subway home. His state of mind distorts the entire experience. As he sits in the subway, hurtling toward his destination he observes that, "The whole group struck him as wrong. Each face wore the dazed look of a person in a state of shock, limp and unresponsive. . . . Each might have recently died, Francis among them, heading now for his predestined place in hell" (p. 163). He sees this entire situation as a figure for death, and it foreshadows the grotesque panorama he is about to witness, as if he has already died. He is seated next to a woman with a very small child and his attitude is striking when compared to his usual sympathy for children.

The child itself showed no sign of hearing or feeling. Too young to talk, too small to think, it lurched back and forth in the alert stupor of infancy. When the train slowed down for a stop the little thing lost balance briefly, recovering itself by resting a hand not much larger than a postage stamp on Francis' knee. He glared at the child, at its brainless faith in the world as a kindly place, where upon reaching out one was steadied by powers gigantic but benign. It hadn't yet learned that one wasn't welcome to lean on others. . . . It tottered and clung, its tiny translucent hand flexing in an almost celestial incapacity on the giant knee. It lacked even strength to plead for its life; all simply it trusted the knee would be merciful. Francis stood up in rage.

(pp. 163-164)

Notice that the child has no sex; Francis himself is soon to become an "it." Perhaps his impatience, his rage, is really with himself and with a life of emotions he does not understand and cannot conquer. His usual compassion for children has been changed. He bolts from the car to escape,



deciding to walk the rest of the way. To do so, he must pass through a public park which becomes for him something like a walk through Dante's hell. He describes the experience in a series of fleeting, almost dream-like images.

Now human figures began to detach themselves from doorways; others came walking, bearing down on him. . . . When they had passed he heard them stop, humming softly or whistling, turning like tops. Once he saw a tall shadow revolve against a building and set slowly out in his direction. . . . In the dark turnings of a Public Garden a woman called to him. Within a thicket a boy lit a match and smiled. Farther on, leaning over a railing a figure considered its image in water . . . And then the figure turned, an old man with his clothes open, beckoning, Francis hurried past. He understood what had gone on in the hearts of those who now and then were found dead in parks at dawn, grass-stained, anonymous.

(pp. 164-165)

Everywhere Francis sees distorted or illicit sexuality. Everywhere he is confronted, like a living man among the shades of hell, with those who grasp at him as he passes. He is a stranger in a grotesque world of almost surrealistic figures, whores, exhibitionists, and male hustlers. This experience sharply underscores his own sexual confusion. There seems but one way out, to simply neutralize himself and destroy what he considers to be the source of his despair.

Francis undressed and went into his bathroom, locking the door. While the tub filled he watched his body in the mirror that backed the door. He couldn't feel that it was his. It belonged to Xenia, to Jane, to a whore whose name he had never known; it belonged, no less, to Vinnie and Benjamin, of whose love it was the only living reminder, disturbingly marked with the two flat rose-brown

eyes set in the chest, the navel, the patch of  
hair, the thing, a desolate pallor of skin  
encircling, dividing.

(p. 165)

His disassociation is very real. What he describes echoes the disintegration of the self in "Scenes of Childhood." He loses contact with himself and personality seems to splinter. In the poem, the confrontation with his own past momentarily disorients him, and the night "scatters [him]" with its "green rustlings" and "thin cries." Remember, too, in the poem that this confrontation (through viewing the film of his childhood) leads ultimately at the end to survival in anonymity. When he acts here in the novel, he acts as one outside himself, completely disassociated from his own reality.

Up to his neck in warm water now, almost afloat, he used his last defense against the flesh. The blade was very sharp; something began easily to separate, then to resist, tougher than a thong of leather. The water, so dazzling clear when he began the cutting, turned red instantly. . . . He could no longer see what he was doing, or tell, when the severe pain overcame him, whether or not he had succeeded. He cried out once, and lost consciousness.

(pp. 165-166)

It is significant that this literal scattering and annihilation of self is triggered in part by his encounter with a child--a child in whom he sees himself. Contributing to this is confusion about his sexuality and the guilt which accompanies it. This guilt is essentially homosexual and is rooted in his relationship to his father. Twenty years

after the publication of The Seraglio, Merrill confronts it directly in "The Book of Ephraim" the first part of the trilogy, and again later in the trilogy.<sup>8</sup> It is obvious as I will show, that he has resolved some of the problems associated with his sexual preference. But in 1957 and in The Seraglio that resolution has not yet occurred.

I mention this simply because it is an issue in his work, particularly the poetry, and does recur, though carefully veiled, in some of his better poems. It may be, in fact, that the poems themselves are part of the resolution process. They provide him a way to write out much of what he has felt and therefore purge himself of these feelings. Many of his poems which deal with guilt, childhood, and sexuality can then be seen as cathartic. Organizing his feelings into formal arrangements render these feelings more manageable to Merrill, and less threatening because they have been objectivized, in part, by the forms themselves. In light of his homosexuality and his struggle with it, the poems I have thus far explicated can now assume a new dimension. That is, part of his identification with the black swan, part of his loneliness and psychic alienation, part of his heightened sense of difference, of being "the heart who is it" is undoubtedly tied to his sexuality. Furthermore, the negative response to his father so evident in "Scenes of Childhood" can be traced directly to this fact. Merrill writes these poems as an adult who is aware of his

sexuality, and who is perhaps conscious of the disappointment his parents, particularly his father, may have felt, had they been fully aware of who and what he was and is. Here, then, is another motive for his childhood poems through which, in a species of irony, adult perception and awareness run.

In Section "I" of "The Book of Ephraim," for example, Merrill speaking as Merrill comments, "Somewhere a Father Figure shakes his rod / at sons who have not sired a child" (Divine Comedies, "The Book of Ephraim," p. 74). I will return to this element of his work as the work itself warrants it, but suffice it to say at this point that Merrill's sexuality is important in understanding the emotional / psychological aspects of his work. It is particularly significant in light of his choice of his own life as the subject matter for much of his poetry and prose.

"Part Two" of The Seraglio ends with a recounting of an opera, based upon the suffering of Orpheus, and written by one of the minor characters, Tommy Utter. It is essentially a skillful literary manipulation by Merrill to move the action thus far in the novel into the realm of allegory and underscore its developing themes. As we have seen in "The Black Swan" where Merrill allegorizes the swan into a question mark as a self-conscious figure, he favors such a device. Furthermore, Merrill intersperses scenes of the opera with the equally dramatic happenings in the box he has filled with his characters, Jane, Xenia, Francis, Tommy

and Marcello. The technique is very effective in making some statements about the purpose of art and in illustrating the double perspective found so often in his poetry. That is, what occurs on stage is an allegorical reflection of what is happening in the audience with the principal characters. The suffering hero Orpheus is Francis is Merrill, all a kind of black swan.

From the first, suffering was taken for granted  
 A suave overture brought to mind less the  
 enormity of Orpheus' loss than the miracle  
 of his charm by which all things--even  
 it would shortly appear, the impassive dead--  
 were drawn to him. Whatever his mourning  
 for Eurydice, by the time the curtain  
 swung apart, it had given way to the  
 lively prospect of his search for her.

(p. 250)

Francis is the suffering Orpheus who must regain what he has lost. And Orpheus, of course, is a poet who sings of (and thereby enchants the world) the joys and sorrows of living and losing, while Francis has a poet's nature who must live in a world where the family money speaks louder than words. And this world is at odds with the self.

Act two of the opera opens as an opera opens. That is, "Vague voices filled the theater, laughs and coughs. The two bald old men in the next box glared about, failing to realize, like many others, that with these rude noises the second act had begun" (p. 261). Merrill's metaphorical statement becomes pointedly clear.

So this was hell.

Before them, beyond the glowing apron  
 of the stage, could be distinguished the lights

and boxes of a theater so like their own that a vast mirror might have been set up inside the proscenium . . . Somewhere infernal musicians tuned their instruments. The ranks of the damned chattered, called to one another . . . until at a nod from a horned demon in white tie, a bit elevated above the unseen players, the music began.  
(p. 261)

Aside from the fundamental "life is hell" metaphor here, there is another very important idea being expressed. Once again, as with the poetry, the issue of form and forms is crucial. The idea is expressed through the use of the figure of the mirror, and through Merrill's choice of an opera to illustrate it. One of Merrill's favorite devices, throughout all of his poetry including the trilogy, is the device of the mirror or reflecting surface. Here he combines this with an opera to create a complete figure for art and its purpose as he sees it. It is interesting that Merrill would choose an opera to illustrate his views on art. The opera is a figure for art. But it does not reflect life exactly as it is, or even imitate it in the Aristotelian sense, rather it distorts life and then reflects the distortion through the device of the mirror. That is, the mirror reflects and distorts life at one and the same time. It may be that Merrill is suggesting that seeing life as distortion is the only way he can face it. But it is distorted in a formal way. The opera is a highly dramatic, highly formalized and structured distortion of life. As I have suggested in discussing the poetry, Merrill uses poetry and more

specifically formal poetry to help purge himself of painful feelings. Here, with the opera as mirror figure, he suggests that the purge may consist of finding a mirror in which he can both forget himself and find himself.

Orpheus, the suffering hero with whom Francis identifies, sings of living and losing. The opera, then, recounts the emotions of loss which in a broad sense is a concern not only of the entire novel, but of Merrill's poetry as well. Art, (the poetry, the novel, the opera), reflects and distorts living and losing. It is thus an appropriate and ironic figure for Merrill's views. And again, it is form (in this case the form of the opera) which lends form to the loss and suffering and makes it bearable. This position can be supported by a comment Merrill makes in a lengthy poem from Nights and Days entitled "The Thousand and Second Night" (pp. 16-24) when he says "Form's what affirms." Form affirms the loss, the feeling, by subjecting it to an organization which provides distance, thus enabling Merrill to control his feelings, and through control to purge them.

Returning now to the opera, Orpheus steps into a pool of light and begins his lament. "Eurydice had been taken from him, was lost forever-." <sup>9</sup> And when he had finished, "the damned souls . . . rose from their seats, weeping." But where was Eurydice? Slowly the central box of this stage set--this hell--is illuminated, revealing Eurydice.

Little remained but for Orpheus to hear the song that, with his own and the chorus that reconciled them, wove so mysterious a braid; to hear in the music how she was perpetually unmoved, how alone (or was there a figure behind her, tall shadowy?) in her box, narrower it seemed than the others, she sat beyond the reach of his wooing. At last he would know that he had placed her there himself, for at her death he had enshrined in his song not Eurydice but her loss, her absence that, growing unbearable through his art, had as well grown irrevocable.

(p. 263)

Here again we can see this ironic doubling so characteristic of Merrill's work. Orpheus enshrines not Eurydice, but loss itself, just as Merrill's poetry enshrines his loss: loss of love, loss of meaning and loss of self. In the novel, loss of self is reflected in the castration. In his poetry, this loss is reflected in a variety of ways: the absent father, the loss of love, the loss of childhood and innocence, the loss of hope that he may recover those "vanished in the sun-stream," and others. Though his work enshrines loss, it also in one sense recovers what is lost through memory. As the film in "Scenes of Childhood" recovers an experience of his childhood, so, too, do his retrospective poems recover the experiences they record. The result is simply that loss both is loss and is not loss.

"Part Three" of The Seraglio returns its focus to Francis and his coming to terms with his family. The novel ends quietly, but with an extremely important scene. Francis, unwilling to share himself with his parents and sister, goes outside where children are playing. As the



book opens with Lily, Francis' niece, so it also closes with her. She asks Francis to join their game but only on the condition that he be "It." This is significant for several reasons. Literally, Francis is now an "It," having neutered himself through the castration. Being "It" also reinforces his own sense of isolation and alienation from the world in which he lives. Furthermore, the act of physical violence which opened the novel (Lily slashing her mother's portrait) is here echoed by an act of emotional and psychological violence upon Francis, a figurative child, perpetrated ironically by the very children with whom he most closely identifies. As in "Wreath for the Warm-Eyed" even the children reject him.

When Francis closes his eyes, the children return inside, leaving him totally alone to play the game by himself (pp. 310-11).

The game had broken like a bubble--or had not, had rather, by ending on terms so incongruous, left him still inside it, sustaining it all by himself . . . . He felt ridiculously lonely.  
(p. 312)

Francis returns to the house, where his mother is playing cards with the others. They all ask for a drink of water. Francis, still the dutiful child (though he is in fact an adult),

. . . Hurried to the pantry, positively afraid lest now, too late, he should hear from somewhere a chorus of mocking voices sing out the start of a fresh game, in which he, once again, would be It.  
(p. 312)

Suddenly Merrill shifts the entire perspective of the experience as Francis becomes a child. "On his return Natalie Bigelow asked for water. The grown-ups did not otherwise detain him" (p. 312). Though Francis is "grown-up: he refers to the others as "grown-ups." Even though he is biologically an adult, he remains a child in his perception of himself.

Significantly, Merrill ends the novel with reference both to children and his father, and to the novel's ultimate revelation.

But only after coming upon the children building castles at the sea's edge, oblivious to him, did Francis stare out over the lulled water and understand. He was It. He tentatively said so the first time, then once more with an exquisite tremor of conviction "I am It."

The words carried with them wondrous notions of selflessness, of permanence. His father coughed behind him in the house. The children trembled against the sea. He knew the expression on his own face. The entire world was real.

(p. 312)

His moment of revelation is triggered when he witnesses the children building sand castles, imaginary and impermanent homes which ultimately must be destroyed by the sea. As he comes to understand how utterly he is "It," how completely he is alone in the endlessly repetitive games of life, the revelation is punctuated by his father who "coughed behind him in the house." He is literally and figuratively separated from those in the house, those on the inside. And this separation, now and always, is his reality,

is his world. Just as he stood on the shore of the lake and cried in anguish, "I love the black swan," so here, a child still, he comes to accept the "permanence" of his aloneness. Through acceptance of this condition, he simultaneously annihilates any hope of change. In coming to terms with figurative death, he can perhaps begin to live.

In the final sentence of the novel Merrill makes a very important point. He says "The entire world was real." I am suggesting that this statement indicates a significant change in the way he views his past, and this change will be reflected in both his poetry and prose. When he is a child he cannot see the real world. It is distorted as art distorts life. Everything is clouded by his anxiety about himself. But, later, as an adult, his perception clears and he is able to see the world as it is. The world, then, becomes real. The experiences of the novel, and the experience of writing the novel help to clarify his perception of the world. This view is supported by the poetry which follows the book, particularly the poems of Water Street where it is clear that he has begun to resolve many of the problems of his childhood.

The Seraglio, then, helps to clarify much of what concerns Merrill about art and life. He deals with his childhood, his absent father, his insecurities about sexuality, and loss in many ways. But loss, as the end of the novel testifies, is also gain in his ability to perceive

reality. He indicates that art is both a reflection and a distortion of life, and that form in art is necessary both for the artist and his audience because it provides enough distance (again for both artist and audience) to achieve some measures of control over experience. Life is manageable, and survival is assured, if form can be imposed upon it. Once that has been done, as in his formal poetry, and control is achieved, (control which leads to catharsis and resolution), then form becomes less important, and the poet is freed to express his life in increasingly less formal ways.

Merrill's second volume of poetry appeared first in 1959, and in a revised edition in 1970; it is entitled The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace.<sup>10</sup> Although the book contains forty-seven poems, only three are concerned with children. None of these are particularly enlightening with regard to the present discussion. The volume does, however, contain a great deal of love poetry, and makes some significant statements about Merrill's views on adult love relationships. I will discuss these in Chapter III.

It is with his third volume of poetry, Water Street, published in 1962, that he returns to an extensive reworking with new awareness of these themes of childhood and the past.<sup>11</sup> Water Street is the name of the street in Stonington, Connecticut, where Merrill has lived. This is a

significant choice of titles. To begin with there is no title poem in the book. Therefore, all of the poems have to do with Water Street, or with residence. This personalization of the title is echoed in the personalization of the poetry. Nearly half of the volume's twenty-nine poems deal in a remarkably candid and direct way with the themes of love, parent-child relationships and the neglected child. Here, too, Merrill explores the relationships between these themes and the evolution of the self. Generally speaking, it becomes clear that the child who is pictured here in these poems believes himself to have been neglected; starved, ironically, in an over-abundant atmosphere, for the love of his wealthy and socially minded parents.

Yet here he does not pass a moral judgment upon his own past. Rather he sees it for what it was and is as it lives within him. Here, as in much of his work, he is able to translate the individual experiences in his relationship with his parents into archetypal events which shaped him. There is about many of these poems an air of sadness, of resignation to what cannot be changed. But the poems are also a "tour de force" of Merrill's talent, moreso here than either of the preceding volumes. Justifiably Water Street won the Bollingen Prize in poetry. It contains many of his best poems.

The book opens with a remarkable poem entitled "An Urban Convalescence." Although it does not deal explicitly

with his childhood, it does concern itself with his past. Its premise is the observations Merrill makes on an afternoon walking in New York.<sup>12</sup> He has been ill for a week. Now he revisits the place where he once lived, but finds it being torn down to make room for a new building. Appropriately, because of the medication he is still apparently taking, the poem rambles from subject to subject in a loose, running narrative which is nevertheless connected by the thread of the past. This poem is also an important introduction to the volume's major themes--the effect of the poet's past on his present, and the subsequent evolution of the self. In this sense, Merrill is "convalescing" from his past, a convalescence which as I will show is completed with the final poem. Furthermore, the poems in this volume, summarized by the last one entitled "A Tenancy," are about residency, but a residency with oneself and one's past.

"An Urban Convalescence" also introduces a less formal side of his style than one so far exhibited. It is, in fact, conversational and intimate, much as if he were talking to us directly. As I have suggested, Merrill no longer feels that form is essential to expression. It begins by simply setting the stage.

Out for a walk, after a week in bed,  
I find them tearing up part of my block  
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the  
dozen  
In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane  
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.

Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man  
 Laughs and curses in her brain  
 Bringing to mind the close of The White Goddess.  
 (p. 3)

He is "dazed and lonely" as he watches a crane mechanically  
 destroy part of his past. But this past still lives within  
 him and only he can truly destroy it.

As usual in New York, everything is torn down  
 Before you have had time to care for it.  
 Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try  
 to recall  
 What building stood here. Was there a building  
 at all?  
 I have lived on this same street for a decade.  
 (p. 3)

Notice in this interior monologue in which the reader is  
 included that Merrill writes a kind of line that defies  
 classification. It is part prose, part poetry. We are  
 taken into his confidence and the reader becomes the confi-  
 dant to whom he reveals his true feelings.<sup>13</sup>

Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises  
 Some five floors high, of shabby stone  
 --Or am I confusing it with another one  
 In another part of town, or of the world?--  
 And over its lintel into focus vaguely  
 Misted with bloods (my eyes are shut)  
 A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves,  
 Which years of grit had etched until it thrust  
 Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.  
 When did the garland become part of me?  
 I ask myself, amused almost,  
 Then shiver once from head to toe,  
 (p. 3)

Not only are we witness to his feelings, but we are  
 also witness to the creative process itself. This is a  
 peculiar tactic, which is peculiarly effective in drawing  
 the reader into the poet's mind. That is, here we

participate in the process of creating the poem by seeing him think it through. He asks questions, he changes his mind, he tries to remember in print what he has forgotten.

I must also note the subtle reference in line six above to the Jewish passover ("And over its lintel into focus vaguely / Misted with blood (my eyes are shut),") a celebration of life and death, enslavement to and freedom from the past when the first-born of Israel were spared by the Angel of Death because of the lamb's blood on the lintel of their homes in Egypt. This image is a particularly effective reminder of the theme of the poem, Merrill's past and his relationship to it.

In his mind he returns to the house where he lived, even as it is being torn down.

So that I am already on the stair,  
As it were, of where I lived,  
When the whole structure shudders at my tread  
And soundlessly collapses, filling  
The air with motes of stone.  
Onto the still erect building next door  
Are pressed levels and hues--  
Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.  
Who drained the pousse-cafe?  
Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.  
(p. 4)

The silence of his memories is contrasted to the cacophony of their literal physical destruction "at the shrine of noise." So too is contrasted physical progress with emotional progress as he works through the past.

But suddenly the poem becomes more intimate. He speaks both to himself and to the reader.



Well, that is what life does. I stare  
 A moment longer, so. And presently  
 The massive volume of the world  
 Closes again.

Upon that book I swear  
 To abide by what it teaches:  
 Gospels of ugliness and waste,  
 Of towering voids, of soiled gusts,  
 Of a shrieking to be faced  
 Full into, eyes astream with cold--  
 With cold?  
 All right then. With self-knowledge.  
 (pp. 4-5)

Unexpectedly, Merrill comes directly to the point of the poem and of the experience, and it is self-knowledge. It is gaining knowledge of the self; what has created it and shaped it; what has sustained it, and the significance of memory and the past. Beginning with memory and physical evidence of his past which even as he revisits it in memory is being destroyed both literally and figuratively, he writes himself into a revelation about its significance. The poem unfolds before us as he guides us from the literal to the figurative, from language about the past, to meaning. As he arrives at this point in the process of the poem, the poem changes. He slips easily into four line stanzas, rhymed abba. Appropriately he also shifts the focus of the poem, speaking until the end about art and specifically about poetry. In fact, he discusses this poem as it is being written. But he also changes the rhyme scheme after a few stanzas.

Indoors at last, the pages of Time are apt  
 To open, and the illustrated mayor of New York  
 Given a glimpse of how and where I work,  
 To note yet one more house that can be scrapped.

Unwillingly I picture  
 My walls weathering in the general view.  
 It is not even as though the new  
 Buildings did very much for architecture.

Suppose they did. The sickness of our time requires  
 That these as well be blasted in their prime.  
 You would think the simple fact of having lasted  
 Threatened our cities like mysterious fires.

There are certain phrases which to use in a poem  
 Is like rubbing silver with quicksilver. Bright  
 But facile, the glamour deadens overnight.  
 For instance, how "the sickness of our time"

Enhances, then debases, what I feel.  
 At my desk I swallow in a glass of water  
 No longer cordial, scarcely wet, a pill  
 They had told me not to take until much later.  
 (p. 5)

Merrill is a master of the facile line. This reflexive quality is a technique he employs in many poems. His poetry in these cases is about his poetry. But there is always a point when he comments, as above, on his own work. In this case, the loose narrative gives way to a more formal structure, whereupon he makes statements about the very artificiality of art as it is a reflection of life. Language "Enhances" what he feels, but it also "debases" it, undervalues it and perhaps is ultimately an ineffective communicator of meaning. This is the essential irony of language, that it both says and does not say what it means. And Merrill is well aware of this inevitable and inherent contradiction basic to all language, and indeed, too all forms of communication.<sup>14</sup> He is aware in ways the child was not, as if growing and selfhood, as Kierkegaard said, requires irony. Of course there is an irony in this: that

of the seemingly inevitable mixture of what I have called annihilation and possibility. Or as I put it another way, the fact that poetry expresses loss--here the lost childhood house.

He ends the poem with a strong and beautifully stated return to the central metaphor of the house. It is also, in his view, the meaning of the experience.

With the result that back into my imagination  
The city glides, like cities seen from the air,  
Mere smoke and sparkle to the passenger  
Having in mind another destination

Which now is not that honey-slow descent  
Of the Champs-Elysees, her hand in his,  
But the dull need to make some kind of house  
Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.  
(p. 6)

His life and his love must rebuild what progress has destroyed. These last few lines reinforce the opening image of destruction of the past. But now, having relived it at least in part, he can begin to "make some kind of house," with the knowledge of the self he has gained. These lines also are a statement of one of the volume's principal concerns. The poems which follow this first one in Water Street will in part be dealing with the past so that he can establish a residency within the self. Essentially, his walk through memory at the opening of "An Urban Convalescence" is continued throughout the volume, until with the final poem, "A Tenancy," he has at last made "some kind of house."

In a more formally organized poem entitled "A Vision of the Garden" (p. 8) the narrator considers the effect of a tiny experience he had as a child. The poem consists of five, four-line stanzas with a basic rhyme pattern of abab. It is worth noting that the poem expresses a strong emotion and a painful memory, and it does so formally. He recalls how as a child he once drew a face on the frost of a window in winter. Through the lines of this face, he sees the garden. The frost becomes a figure for emotional coldness and for the fears associated with love. Though the poem has twenty lines, these lines actually form only three long sentences.

One winter morning as a child  
 Upon the windowpane's thin frost I drew  
 Forehead and eyes and mouth the clear and mild  
 Features of nobody I knew

And then abstracted looking through  
 This or that wet transparent line  
 Beyond beheld a winter garden so  
 Heavy with snow its hedge of pine

And sun so brilliant on the snow  
 I breathed my pleasure out onto the chill pane  
 Only to see its angel fade in mist.  
 I was a child, I did not know

That what I longed for would resist  
 Neither what cold lines should my finger trace  
 On colder grounds before I found anew  
 In yours the features of that face

Whose words whose looks alone undo  
 Such frosts. I lay me down in love in fear  
 At how they melt become a blossoming pear,  
 Joy outstretched in our bodies' place.

(p. 8)

The lack of punctuation and word inversion make this poem particularly complex in construction. Despite these complications, however, the meaning is clear. The physical setting is significant and reflects the narrator's emotional state. In the "thin frost" of his feelings he draws "Fore-head and eyes and mouth" of nobody he knows. Yet later, he calls this face an "angel." His reference to the face as the face of an angel reinforces the child's perception which is the focus of the poem. In the final stanza, furthermore, the narrator paraphrases part of a child's prayer, "I lay me down in love in fear," and this particular prayer is a prayer for mercy and safe-keeping during sleep. Figuratively, sleep can be seen as death. The poem then deals essentially with fears of figurative annihilation which the loss of love, or at the very least the vulnerabilities of love, bring to the surface.<sup>15</sup>

Yet is also about survival made possible by the presence of love and a lover. It is the lover's "words" and the lover's "looks alone" which undo "Such frosts," such fears which the child has. As the frosts melt, they are replaced by a "blossoming pear," a traditional sexual symbol, and "Joy outstretched." The "winter morning" of the opening of the poem becomes spring at the end.

Water Street contains two poems that have already been discussed, both "Scenes of Childhood" and "The World and the Child," that deal with an unhappy child (and adult) who

feels neglected and unloved. But Merrill also includes in this volume a poem of another sort about children, or more properly the lack of them. This he calls "Childlessness" (pp. 28-29). The poem has a complicated metaphorical structure, dealing with the weather and the tainted environment of earth. It is set within the confines of a dream the narrator has "this winter night." Again, the season is significant, a time of barrenness and death. Appropriately, the earth itself (including the weather) is the narrator's "dream-wife."

The poem contains a curious focusing experience. That is, through the device of the dream, the focus of the poem shifts, growing in scope, then suddenly narrowing at the end to focus not on the narrator, but upon his parents. The central image, that of his "dream-wife" both opens and closes the poem.

The weather of this winter night, my dream-wife  
 Ranting and raining wakes me. Her cloak blown back  
 To show the lining's dull lead foil  
 Sweeps along asphalt. Houses  
 Look Blindly on; one glimmers through a blind.  
 Outside, I hear her tricklings  
 Arraign my little plot:  
 Had it or not agreed  
 To transplantation for the common good  
 Of certain rare growths yielding guaranteed  
 Gold pollen, gender of suns, large, hardy,  
 Enviaible blooms?

(p. 28)

One technical point is worth noting here. Merrill frequently uses internal rhyme as "plot" and "not" in lines seven and eight above. This technique gives his lines the

sense of rhyme, of being poetry without the rigid structures of end-rhyme. Here, too, he juxtaposes the dreary barrenness of a "winter night" with the fertility images of "certain rare growths" and "Gold pollen, gender of suns, large, hardy / Enviably blooms?"

Suddenly the narrator comes directly into the poem by contrasting himself with the fertile image of mother earth, "But in my garden / Nothing is planted" (p. 28). This admission of infertility then throws the "Enviably blooms" of the preceding line into a new light, suggesting that the narrator himself envies the fertility of nature, and indeed of others who produce offspring. But the line is also crucial to understanding the reference to his parents at the end of the poem. He reinforces the image of barrenness with one of darkness by referring in the next line to an earlier reference to light, "Neither / Is that glimmering window mine" (p. 28). This recalls the previous mention of "Houses / Look blindly on; one glimmers through a blind." The houses are blind, but he also is blind in the darkness of his infertility and alone without comfort or companion.

I lie and think about the rain,  
How it has been drawn up from the impure ocean,  
From gardens lightly, deliberately tainted;  
How it falls back, time after time,  
Through poisons visible at sunset  
When the enchantress, masked as friend, unfurls  
Entire bolts of voluminous pistachio,  
Saffron, and rose.

(p. 28)

That which gives the sunset its brilliant array of colors, here contrasted to the "dull lead foil" of the rain, is also that which is poisoning the atmosphere. Implied in these lines, moreover, is the suggestion of the eternal cycle of life as seen figuratively in his description of how water is taken up from the sea, to fall as rain, only to be returned to the sea to begin again. Into this cycle he places himself and his "garden" in which nothing grows. The cycle is broken, stopped in and by his homosexual barrenness.

But in his dream,

. . . other slow colors clothe me, glide  
To rest, then burst along my limbs like buds,  
Like bombs from the navigator's vantage,  
Waking me, lulling me.

(p. 28)

This sexual imagining both "wakes" him and "lulls" him as the "buds" become "Bombs." He follows this strange metaphor with another equally strange image of destruction and death.

Later I am shown  
The erased metropolis reassembled  
On sampans, freighted each  
With toddlers, holy dolls, dead ancestors,  
One tiny monkey puzzles over fruit

(p. 28)

The "metropolis" has been erased figuratively by the bombs "from the navigator's vantage" which are also the "buds" bursting along his limbs.

He returns at the end of the poem to the figure of mother nature, which here is not now life-giving, but in a dramatic reversal is instead destructive.



The vision rises and falls, the garland  
 Gently takes root  
 In the sea's coma. Hours go by  
 Before I can stand to own  
 A sky stained red, a world  
 Clad only in rags, threadbare,  
 Dabbing the highway's ice with blood.  
 (p. 29)

His dream of fertility has become a dream of violence and destruction. The world, once cloaked in the "dull lead foil" of life-giving rain now dawns "stained red / Clad only in rags, threadbare." But the poem's startling conclusion is yet to come.

A world. The cloak thrown down for it to wear  
 In token of past servitude  
 Has fallen onto the shoulders of my parents  
 Whom it is eating to the bone.  
 (p. 29)

He suddenly becomes intensely personal, revealing perhaps something of the sexual guilt implicit in The Seraglio and in other works. The burden of his barrenness falls upon his parents "whom it is eating to the bone." Notice that Merrill is no longer as concerned with the effect of his barrenness upon himself, but rather its affect upon his parents. That is, there is a change from the concern with self in the poems of First Poems to a concern for others here in the poems of Water Street. It is worth noting that The Seraglio comes between these two volumes and thus is important in bringing about changes in his views. The cycle of life, then, both of nature, and his own, is stopped because as a homosexual he produces no offspring to continue it. It is worth suggesting here that on a personal note

some of this guilt may be attributable to who and what he is. As a bearer of the family name, and a famous one at that, without children, the name dies, the "garden" withers. In this sense, the poem contains an implicit fear of annihilation, not only of the narrator, but of the family line as well since he is its principal progenitor. As insignificant as this may seem, Merrill is very much aware of his position in twentieth-century American history as the son of "old money" and a politically and economically important family. Both of his novels attest to this, as well as a number of his better poems. The point is that with Merrill and his family this is a very real issue, and as a homosexual he is particularly concerned with it because it is the base of at least some guilt.

In another poem in Water Street entitled "Prism" (p. 16) Merrill writes as if he were seeing his world through a glass paperweight. It is a strange perspective and he complicates it by seemingly moving from subject to subject, and all are distorted by the distortion of the prism. In keeping with the volume's general themes, this poem is essentially about residency and the self. Within it, however, he reveals some of his more intimate feeling. It is the kind of poem that he seems to write best; both personal and public. An unusual point of view is one of his favorite tactics.

As always, he begins by simply telling the reader what is happening.

Having lately taken up residence  
 In a suite of chambers  
 Windless, compact and sunny, ideal  
 Lodging for the pituitary gland of Euclid  
 If not for a "single gentleman (references)",  
 You have grown used to the playful inconveniences,  
 The floors that slide from under you helter-skelter,  
 Invisible walls put up in mid-  
 Stride, leaving you warped for the rest of the day,

Notice that he apostrophizes the poem. Yet he is really talking to himself, musing upon the meanings of his life and his new residence. But suddenly in the middle of the poem he stops to question himself and his past.

Look:

You dreamed of this:  
 To fuse in borrowed fires, to drown  
 In depths that were not there. You meant  
 To rest your bones in a maroon plush box,  
 Doze the old vaudeville out, of mind and object,  
 Little foreseeing their effect on you,  
 Those dagger-eyed insatiate performers  
 Who from the first false insight  
 To the most recent betrayed of outlook,  
 Crystal, hypnotic atom,  
 Have held you rapt, the proof, the child  
 Wanted by neither. Now and then  
 It is given to see clearly.

(p. 16)

He begins this interior monologue with images of death, of annihilation in "borrowed fires" and "depths that were not there." Perhaps here in these vague references he is speaking of his own career as a poet, the influences of others ("borrowed fires") and his own sensitivity which now he doubts ("depths that were not there"). He juxtaposes his

his current residence to the final one in a "maroon plush box." The "their" of line seven above may be a reference to his parents "Who from the first false insight / To the most recent betrayal of outlook" (through the prism) "Have held [him] rapt. . . ." And he is the proof of this, the child "Wanted by neither." Paradoxically, as he looks through the prism, "Is it given to see clearly."

Though the poem is obscure in its references, I suggest in light of his other work that he is speaking of his own past, of figurative death as he does in so many other works. As a serious craftsman he has wished to "drown" in his work, to make it his life. As a child he could not foresee the effects his parents would have on him. Yet, they "Have held up rapt." They still hold his attention and occupy much of his life, though he was the child "wanted by neither." Now, as an adult, he can begin to see clearly, though ironically he must distort vision through the prism to do so. The prism has given him a vision of his own past, as it lives in the present.

He returns at the end of the poem to his present residence and residency.

There  
Is what remains of you, a body  
Unshaven, flung on the sofa. Stains of egg  
Harden about the mouth, smoke still  
Rises between fingers or from nostrils.  
The eyes deflect the stars through years of vacancy.  
Your agitation at such moments  
Is all too human. You and the stars  
Seem both endangered, each  
At the other's utter mercy.

The search for the self has exhausted him in spirit. What is left, "What remains of you," is a "body / Unshaven, flung on the sofa." He feels empty "through years of vacancy" and his "agitation at such moments / Is all too human."

Yet the gem  
Revolves in space, the vision shuttles off.  
A toneless waltz glints through the pea-sized  
funhouse.  
The day is breaking someone else's heart.  
(p. 17)

The "gem" is the prism and the vision it gives him "shuttles off." The waltz he hears is "toneless," and his new residence is a "pea-sized funhouse," distorted by the prism. Though he says that the vision he has seen has enabled him to see clearly with regard to his own past, and that now it "shuttles off," it is still very much with him. For even the waltz he hears is joyless and empty. And though he claims that "The day is breaking someone else's heart," I suggest that it is his own which is being broken figuratively with the memory. The movement in the poem from playful sarcasm at the beginning to despair at the end supports this point. The experience of remembering has darkened his mood. The "suite of chambers" mentioned in the opening of the poem is simply a figure for the self. As he explores its rooms, so too does he explore the self and the past it contains.

Though Merrill's view of his past as portrayed in his poetry tends to be serious, it is not completely without

humor. His humor is Popeian in nature. That is, it is created by rhetorical incongruity. In fact, in "The Book of Ephraim" Merrill lists Alexander Pope as one of the principal influences on his work.<sup>16</sup> The influence is as much in the area of wit as it is in more obvious areas such as formal organization or line type. Two examples of this can be found in a series of five poems collectively called "Five Old Favorites" (pp. 32-36). The first I want to consider is "A Dream of Old Vienna." The title refers to the work of Sigmund Freud. The poem translates the Oedipal triad into the family situation of the narrator. The poem is arranged in four, four-line stanzas, rhymed abcd. The first three stanzas treat respectively the mother, father and child. Despite the Popeian mock-seriousness of the lines, there is a subtle undercurrent of violence that is created by the use of the color red which in stanza two is called "blood red." He gives us a kind of thumb-nail sketch of each of the three characters.

He begins with the mother. Each character is identified simply by its biological relationship to the others.

The mother sits, the whites of her eyes tinted  
By a gas lamp of red Bohemian glass.  
Her one gray lock could be a rosy fireworks.  
She hums the galop from Lehar's Requiem Mass.

(p. 32)

We see her eyes, figuratively stained with blood by the literal lamp of red, Bohemian glass. Her "one gray lock" is

also red, reflecting literally the red of the lamp, and figuratively the blood on her mind. She hums, perhaps half absent-mindedly, a funeral mass.

Next is the father and he, too, is figuratively blood stained.

Deepening a blood-red handkerchief the father  
Has drawn over his face, the warm beams wreath  
Its folding into otherworldly features  
Now and then stirred lightly from beneath.  
(p. 32)

The father sleeping is also figuratively stained red by the "blood-red handkerchief" and is appropriately blinded to the world around him, just as Oedipus was blind to his identity. It is the mother, just as it was Jocasta in Oedipus Rex, who is alert and awake to the knowledge of the situation.

Finally, we see the child:

The child, because of his extreme pallor,  
Acquires a normal look as the lamp glows,  
For which the mother is and is not grateful,  
Torn between conflicting libidos.  
(p. 32)

Because the child is so pale, the red of the lamp causes him to look "normal." Paradoxically, this both is and is not a normal situation, and the child both is and is not a normal child. That is, given the Oedipal implications of the scene, and Freudian psychology, the child and the father are the same. Yet, they are not the same. The child remains the child until the twin crimes of Oedipus are actualized, at which point he becomes the father, while paradoxically remaining the child.

Merrill brings this complex tangle into focus in the final stanza, then explodes it.

To wed the son when he has slain the father,  
Or thrust the brat at once into the damp . . . ?  
Such are the throbbing issues that enliven  
Many a cozy evening round the lamp.  
(p. 32)

The first two lines of the fourth stanza connect the poem and its situation clearly with the Oedipal cycle. And they do so in a light, almost frivolous way. The enormous tragedy of the Oedipal situation is undermined by the tone of its treatment here.<sup>17</sup> The mother, with her blood-red eyes sits humming a Requiem Mass and contemplates with seeming foreknowledge the death of her husband and the sexual future with her son, whom she calls "the brat." Though it is true that Jocasta in Oedipus Rex was the first to discover the reality of her life, she did not know on a conscious level who she was in relation to her son-husband until it was too late. Here Merrill juxtaposes her apparent calmness with the knowledge of what was soon to happen. But at the crucial moment of her decision, Merrill simply breaks off, backing away, and in the process explodes the entire scene.<sup>18</sup>

In the final two lines of the poem, he undercuts the potentially tragic enormity of the crisis by juxtaposing "throbbing" and "cozy." The sexual connotations of "throbbing" are ironically appropriate in this seemingly calm and calculated atmosphere. Strangely, "cozy" is also an appropriate term in describing the situation he has pictured. It



is a cozy, family gathering. But "throbbing" and "cozy" are wildly incongruous. The two adjectives cannot coexist peacefully. The result is that the entire poem is simply exploded by this juxtaposition.

We get another picture of the family triad in "The Midnight Snack" (p. 33), the second poem in the series "Five Old Favorites." This poem is a light treatment of a very common occurrence. Here, too, we get a view of a fairly typical family.

When I was little and he was riled  
It never entered my father's head  
Not to flare up, roar and turn red.  
Mother kept cool and smiled.  
Now every night I tiptoe straight  
Through my darkened kitchen for  
The refrigerator door--  
It opens, the inviolate!

Illumined as in dreams I take  
A glass of milk, a piece of cake,  
Then stealthily retire,

Mindful of how the gas stove's black  
Browed pilot eye's blue fire  
Burns into my turned back.

(p. 33)

In terms of the present discussion only two points need be made. The first is the mild humor of the situation. The second concerns parental influence and the brief glimpse we get of the narrator's parents which is perfectly consistent with the view thus far established of Merrill's parents. So conditioned is the child to the rules of an authoritarian household, that even as an adult this conditioning persists. He tiptoes "straight / Through [his] darkened kitchen" to

elude detection. The irony is that there is no one there to detect his breaking the rules except the memory of his father he holds within him. But this memory is so strong and so alive that even now he feels guilty. His father survives figuratively in the "gas stove's black-- / Browed pilot eye's blue fire," a kind of evil eye which watches (and disapproves) of his action. The mother sits calmly, just as in "A Dream of Old Vienna," somehow removed from the contest of wills in which her son and husband are engaged.

Though the situation is light and humorous and very much a kind of "slice of life" of the typical American household, in light of Merrill's other work, the premise is very serious. It must be remembered that the volume which contains this poem also contains "Scenes of Childhood" and "The World and the Child," two poems which call into question the very survival of the self and its confrontation with memory and the "shadow" of the poet's father. Here the "shadow" is less seriously threatening, but nonetheless real. The absent father is reincarnated as a single, humorously sinister eye which watches still in the silent darkness of the adult's home. This supports one of my principal contentions that until the man can confront and resolve his past, he remains a child. And as I have suggested the entire volume of poetry is in part the process of establishing the self, independent of its past, through the figurative annihilation of memory. And this is accomplished through confronting the past of his work.

The final poem in Water Street is one of the best in the volume. It is also a summary of the book's major concerns. Entitled "A Tenancy," it is written in a loose, narrative style with irregular rhyme and stanzas of varying lengths. Its position in the volume is significant. The title is also important. The book opens with "An Urban Convalescence," a poem about the past, about the self, about self-knowledge, and residence within the self as it is represented in the figure of the house or home. The residency, therefore, is as much an emotional and psychological one as a physical one. Poem after poem in the book approaches this theme in a variety of ways; from the silent movies of "Scenes of Childhood" to the humorous premise of "The Midnight Snack." But all deal in one way or another with the poet's coming to terms with his past and establishing the self independent of it. "A Tenancy," though by no means Merrill's last word on the subject, is the last word in this volume about the subject. His "convalescence" can be traced from the first poem to the last, when he reaches some conclusions about his residency within the self. Notice that the title is a flat statement which establishes the fact of his residency. That is, implicit in the title, and supported by the poem, is the assertion of the narrator's occupation of a residence. He is at last "at home," established at least figuratively within the home of self where he plays host to others. Therefore, with "A Tenancy" the book

reaches some resolution to the search for self which the poet has conducted throughout the course of the volume. Interestingly, this poem is dedicated to David Jackson, Merrill's long time friend and romantic interest.

The poem falls roughly into two parts; the past and the present. It is also in some sense a private meditation made public. That is, Merrill is in part talking to himself and simply sharing his musings with an audience. The tone is intimate and conversational. And it is ultimately very revealing of his life. He begins in the present, but very quickly returns to the past, focusing upon place and object as manifestation of place. This sense of place, which is very strong in Merrill's work, is essentially both emotional and physical.

Something in the light of this March afternoon  
 Recalls that first and dazzling one  
 Of 1946. I sat elated  
 In my old clothes, in the first of several  
 Furnished rooms, head cocked for the kind of sound  
 That is recognized only when heard.  
 A fresh snowfall muffled the road, unplowed  
 To leave blanker and brighter  
 The bright, blank page turned overnight.

(p. 51)

Along with the figure of place, of residence in the poem, the metaphor of light is also important. It is of course, both physical light and figurative enlightenment. And it is tied closely to the search for identity; the listening for "the kind of sound / That is recognized only when heard," and the "signs I should not know until I saw them" of the next stanza.

A yellow pencil in midair  
 Kept sketching unfamiliar numerals,  
 The 9 and 6 forming a stereoscope  
 Through which to seize the Real  
 Old-Fashioned Winter of my landlord's phrase,  
 Through which the ponderous idees recues  
 Of oak, velour, crochet, also the mantel's  
 Baby figures, value told me  
 In some detail at the outset, might be plumbed  
 For signs I should not know until I saw them.  
 (p. 51)

In the first half of the poem, the past is still being explored--explored to find the self. This search is conducted through the sense, through sound and sight by which he may locate himself within his own past. But it is not through sensory perception that he will ultimately reach self; rather it is through spiritual cognizance.

But the objects, innocent  
 (As we all once were) of annual depreciation,  
 The more I looked grew shallower,  
 Pined under a luminous plaid robe  
 Thrown over us by the twin mullions, sashes,  
 And unequal oblong panes  
 Of windows and storm windows. These,  
 Washed in a rage, then left to dry unpolished,  
 Projected onto the inmost wall  
 Ghosts of the storm, like pebbles under water.  
 (p. 51)

The objects, he comes to realize are simply figures of his past which under scrutiny grow "shallower," stripped of significance as the past is resolved. Here, too, he speaks of storms and of rage. The windows were "Washed in a rage," both literally by the storm and figuratively by the storm within him. Now, as the light comes through it is "Projected onto the inmost wall." Again the "inmost wall" is both literal and figurative. It is the wall of his residence and

the wall of the self where the past, these "Ghosts of the storm," are superimposed.

In the fourth stanza he brings the past into perspective and connects it with the present.

And indeed, from within ripples  
 Of heat had begun visibly bearing up and away  
 The bouquets and wreaths of a quarter century.  
 Let them go, what did I want with them?  
 It was time to change that wallpaper  
 Brittle, sallow in the new radiance,  
 Time to set the last wreath floating out  
 Above the dead, to sweep up flowers. The dance  
 Had ended, it was light; the men looked tired  
 And awkward in their uniforms.  
 I sat, head thrown back, and with the dried stains  
 Of light on my own cheeks, proposed  
 This bargain with--say with the source of light:  
 That given a few years more  
 (Seven or ten, or what seemed vast, fifteen)  
 To spend in love, in a country not at war,  
 I would give in return  
 All I had. All? A little sun  
 Rose in my throat. The lease was drawn.

I did not even feel the time expire.  
 (p. 52)

Through the figure of the wallpaper, appropriately marked with "bouquets and wreathes" as at a funeral, he begins the process of letting go of the past. It is, he concludes, "Time to set the last wreath floating out / Above the dead, to sweep up the flowers," time, in fact, to change--to be changed--by being free of the dead; "The dance / Had ended." He suggests the metaphorical connection between the pain and darkness of the past and freedom from it through the "dried stains / of light" on his own cheeks. As the light comes in, the tears dry and life begins. But paradoxically,

figurative annihilation in the death of the past, precedes beginning which is both present and future.

At the end of the stanza, he negotiates a literal and figurative "lease." He strikes the classic bargain, but it is with the "source of light," for the survival of self--for the infinite possibility of the present and the future. For time "To spend in love" he proposes to give all he has. But commitment to love, to vulnerability, also gives him pause. Yet in the end, the choice was made with or without his consent.

In the second half of the poem he comes back to the present and to resolution.

I feel it though, today, in this new room,  
 Mine, with my things and thoughts, a view  
 Of housetops, tree tops, the walls bare,  
 A changing light is deepening, is changing  
 To a gilt ballroom chair a chair  
 Bound to break under someone before long.  
 I let the light change also me.  
 The body that lived through that day  
 And the sufficient love and relative peace  
 Of those short years, is now not mine.  
 Would it be called a soul?  
 It knows, at any rate,  
 That when the light dies and the bell rings  
 Its leaner veteran will rise to face  
 Partners not recognized  
 Until drunk young again and gowned in changing  
 Flushes; and strains will rise,  
 The bone-tipped baton beating, rapid, faint,  
 From the street below, from my depressions--  
 (pp. 52-53)

The past and the passage of time is heavy upon him. But the light has come and he has been changed. This change he likens figuratively to death when the "light dies and the bell rings." Yet it is also survival; life, though he is

its "leaner veteran," a veteran of the war with self, and he will rise "to face / Partners not recognized / Until drunk young again and gowned in changing / Flushes." Given new perspective about his past, given the annihilation and survival of self, which here he calls "soul," he will endure and continue, ultimately at home with his past and his own nature.

From the doorbell which rings.  
 One foot asleep, I hop  
 To let my three friends in. They stamp  
 Themselves free of the spring's  
 Last snow--or so we hope.

As he returns suddenly to the "now" of the poem's beginning, he also has changed the seasons. The snow at the beginning was the snow of "Real / Old-Fashioned Winter," figuratively referring both to the past and death, but here at the end of the poem, it is the last snow of spring, a time of renewal. This subtle shift has occurred because of the process of the poem, and his confrontation with the past. His friends "stamp / Themselves free" of the last vestiges of the past and the season of death, and bring with them metaphors of life and love.

One has brought violets in a pot;  
 The second, wine; the best,  
 His open, empty hand. Now in the room  
 The sun is shining like a lamp.  
 I put the flowers where I need them most.

(p. 53)

The funeral wreathes "floating out / Above the dead" have been modulated into the flowers of life and of beginning. The light which changed him, which dried like tears



upon his cheeks is now "The sun shining like a lamp." He puts the flowers "where [he needs] them most," both on the tomb of his past, and in the room where he has established the self.

And then, not asking why they come,  
 Invite the visitors to sit.  
 If I am host at last  
 It is of little more than my own past.  
 May others be at home in it.

(p. 53)

In the beautiful and quiet resolution of the poem he has also come to terms with his own history; no longer struggling against it, but living, and surviving within it. Paradoxically, as the volume and the poem ends, life begins.

Of all the lyrics, the poems in Water Street deal most consistently with Merrill's past. Because of that, it is my contention that much of that past is resolved. The book is in some respects amazingly tight. He writes himself through a convalescence into residency. Though the conflict with the past is not fully resolved by any means, as my discussion will show, much of its power over him has been dissipated. In his work to date, he never returns with quite the same intensity to this theme, though there is still some psychological and emotional focusing to be done. Nevertheless, it is with Water Street that Merrill most clearly and consistently confronts the essential ironies of his existence and comes to understand the paradox of annihilation and possibility.

As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, Merrill uses form to create distance between him and the subject. As he resolves the pain of remembering these childhood experiences, then form is not as important as a distancing device, though it is still important and he continues to write formal poetry. This same idea can be applied to his prose. The Seraglio is a traditional, formal novel. It deals with childhood, parent-child relationships, love and the past. Throughout the course of the book much of the pain associated with these themes is resolved. The poems in Water Street, following the The Seraglio, continue the resolution process. These lyrics contain both formal poetry and poetry which is informal, but the latter dominates the former. Following Water Street, in 1965 Merrill published The (Diblos) Notebook. As the title suggests, it is literally a notebook rather than a novel in a conventional sense. In fact, this book is informal in the extreme. Though it contains one finished "chapter," the bulk of the book is actually just a collection of dated notes, much as would be found in a diary. Here in these notes he collects information and observations which presumably will be used to write a novel. But instead of writing a novel from the notes, the notes themselves are published. And as will be shown, they are full of sentence fragments, crossed-out words, quick sketches of people and places, and revisions.

It is my contention that with The (Diblos) Notebook Merrill no longer feels the need to distance himself from his material, or from the reader. As the last lines of the last poem in Water Street indicate, he is finally at home with his past.

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

He is ready then to deal more directly with his own history without the protection that form provides. He can, in effect, expose himself more fully as he exposes his past and write a book that is formlessness itself. The only form that the book has is provided by its chronology. The notes do follow one another in chronological sequence, and they are composed by the same writer. But that is all the form the book supplies. Thus, Merrill is indeed "at home" in his own past and with formlessness.

In many ways The (Diblos) Notebook is a technical masterpiece. Merrill gives us the process rather than the product. More clearly than in any of his other work, we see the creative process itself in operation. The framework of the novel, as the title indicates, is literally a notebook. It is a kind of highly intimate diary in which the central character, whose name is tentatively given as Sandy, records his impressions, thoughts and feelings while staying on the Greek island of Diblos. I used the word tentative in referring to the name of the central character and this is

precisely the case. In fact, Merrill never quite decides what to call his main character, nor two other important characters in the story. He actually changes their names from time to time, trying to find names suitable to the roles they play. These roles are part fact and part myth. And he quite clearly draws the connecting lines between myth and reality, the past and the present. The entire story, furthermore, is underpinned by two important Greek cycles, the Oedipal cycle and the Oresteia. In both, he leaves no room for speculation that what occurs in the story is clearly and simply a repetition of the patterns established in the myths. For example, Sandy's older brother in the story is first named Orson. Then his name is changed to Orestes, and finally shortened to "O." But he is both the avenging Orestes of the Oresteia and also Oedipus in that he marries a woman (whose name is also tentatively given, as Dora) some twenty years his senior, soon after her Greek husband, Tasso, dies. It is, in short, an incredibly complex web of myths and reality, of past and present which frames the story. Ultimately, however, the story is a search for self, for identity, which Merrill reveals quite blatantly, not only in the main character, but in all of the characters. And it is about this search that I want to make a few points.

Technically, The (Diblos) Notebook is extremely interesting. Merrill gives us the process rather than the product. Faithful to its journal or diary premise, it is

full of sentence fragments, false starts, incomplete thoughts, notes, and myriad of changes which occur right before our eyes. At one point, he even writes one paragraph upside down. Despite its apparent randomness, however, the story continues to unfold before us, bit by bit. As in The Seraglio, the main character is a writer who intends to take notes upon his observations and after rewriting, submit a manuscript for publication. But instead of the finished novel, we get the notes themselves.

From the first word of the book, it is apparent that Merrill intends to involve the reader in the actual process of writing, showing us in effect the raw materials of the art before they have been subjected to literary organization. Notice the fragmentary character of the book's opening section.

**Orestes**

The islands of Greece

Across vivid water the islands of Greece  
lie.

They have been cut out of cardboard and  
set on bases of

at subtle odds with one another, upon  
bases of pale haze. Their colors are  
mauve, exhausted blue tanned rose,  
here & there crinkled to catch the light.

They do not seem

It is inconceivable that they are of  
one substance with the warm red rock  
underfoot.

rock of one's own vantage point (?)

One early evening

(p. 1)

It is prose, yet also curiously poetic. Unlike all finished products, this technique provides us clearly not

only with what Merrill chooses to say, but what he chooses not to say as well. That is, rather than guessing at the alternatives to a particular word or phrase choice, we are given the alternatives. All through the book he crosses out words, changes his mind, explores the mechanics of a sentence or a phrase, and experiments with punctuation. The reader is required to participate in the process because he is given the possibilities and must therefore make choices that the writer normally makes. This unusual form also creates a sense of immediacy, of present tense, to the work. It is being created as we read it. We see the writer making decisions about plot, characters, images and style. Notice, for example, in the following passage, how Merrill talks to himself (and to us) in the course of making a literary decision.

At this juncture, I think, no serious evocation  
of landscape. What else will serve?  
Let me see. Orestes can give her ice-cream  
at the cafe. (It must be Summer. O's sabbatical  
year will just have begun.) A mild dusk  
The awnings that close me in won't be needed  
It will divert her to sit in full view of the  
populace--the grande dame of the island,  
already on such jolly terms with the  
newcomer.  
He will talk.

"I was born 35 years ago in Asia Minor of  
Greek parents. My father, a goatherd, fell  
in love with a beautiful etc. Dead of cancer.  
Poverty. New York. Mother remarried,  
lives in Texas. A step-father  
No. Avoid plunging stupidly into  
exposition.  
Let him be felt a bit. Let her be felt.

(Orson-Orestes. Now another  
name for Dora.)

Maria  
Psyche  
Fifi (Serafina)  
Kiki (Pulcheria)  
Artemis

And let me not be part of it. It's  
hard enough being O's brother in  
life, without sentencing myself  
to it in a book.

~~Orestes~~

Little stream, have you petered out so soon?  
(pp. 3-4)

Merrill is writing about what he is writing about. He is immersed in the creative act and manages to draw us in as well. But the passage also suggests something of the novel's central dilemma, the conflict between reality and illusion. And this dilemma is in turn linked to personal identity. Throughout the entire book, the central character, Sandy, uses the notes to define himself. That is, he writes as much to himself as he does to the reader. He continually explores the somewhat tenuous relationships between himself and the other "characters." These relationships are always changing as he changes his mind about their natures. He never completely decides exactly what they should be, or how to manipulate events and people to finish his story. And central to these constant changes is the question of the writer's identity. He asks again and again how much of the "real" in his life he should use and how much he should mask behind illusion. Applied to the entire book, the question then becomes how much of his story is real and how much is

illusion, and indeed, how much of art itself should be real and how much illusion? As I will show later in quoting from the book, Merrill opts for reality and not for what he calls "presumed experience." He believes that a writer has an obligation to deal directly not only with his material (now without recourse to form as a distancing device), but with his audience as well. Several times in the notebook he faces this issue squarely. Early in the book, for example, he breaks the narrative to comment.

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Something too odd has happened. The Enfant Chic knows me. He has a photograph of me. The coincidence tells me I must face up to the "reality"--actual events & people behind my story. How much to conceal, how much to invent? The name Orson, which still, to my ear, sounds truer than Orestes, has had to go already. But who he is (Orson/Orestes)--and by the same token, who I am--ah, that I keep on evading.  
(p. 11)

Yet ironically, with all of its twists and turns, the notebook does reveal its creator and the struggle he has in finding himself. In fact, far from evading the issue of self, the entire notebook is a study in self and of the self in art. It becomes clear that Merrill believes that the writer must be willing to risk his essential self by exposing it in his work; by using first person rather than third. His poetry reflects this insistence. In a passage in the notebook he distinguishes between what he calls "presumed experience" and first hand knowledge.



Besides, in reading, isn't one most moved by precisely this refreshment of familiar relationships?

The word "grandmother," thanks to Proust, will have wind in its sails for the rest of time. Why shrink from doing my best for "brother"?--or half my best for "half-brother" !

speaking of grandmothers what irritates me most in what I read (& write) is the whole claptrap of presumed experience. P.C.'s new book, forwarded here, describes itself as "based on his grandmother's early life in Kentucky." It is full of her sensations, moral beauty, prowess in the saddle, & I don't believe a word of it. Premise & method both seem false. As if one could still see to write by the dead, pocked moon of Madame Bovary.

Always those "he's" and "she's" scattered about like intimate pieces of clothing, when one wants nothing so much as "I"--the anonymous nudity.

(p. ?)

In his view, it is essential that the writer establish his creditability with the reader. And this can best be done simply by writing what you know, what you have lived directly. In making this point, however, he uses the impersonal "one" and describes the desired result as an "anonymous nudity."

Before returning to Merrill's poetry, I want to quote one further passage. It is a lengthy section in which the narrator discusses these dilemmas and in the process reveals a great deal of himself. He is referring in the passage partly to a finished "chapter" which he inserts suddenly into the ramblings of the notebook. Unlike the rest of the work, it is the product rather than the process, polished and complete and subjected to the principles of

chronological literary organization.

I reached a standstill after copying out these last pages, plotted & written & rewritten over 3 weeks on separate, unlined sheets. I had hoped to escape the tyranny of the Notebook--all my false starts, contradictions, irruptions of self, bound together, irrevocably. Books ought to consume their source, not embalm them. The finished pages are the best I can do. They have their own movement, & are often believable. But they have become fiction, which is to say, merely life-like. I nearly stopped transcribing them when I came upon that upside-down, how many-weeks-old dream (whose meaning is so disturbing today) & again when that most recent entry turned up--I'd have ripped it out but was too tired & indifferent to recopy one side of the page already covered.

Yesterday & today I read the whole notebook through. Actually this last passage struck me as less artful than the earlier ones, with their indecisions, pendiment, glimpses of bare canvas, rips & ripples & cracks which, by stressing the fabric of illusion, required a greater attention to what was being represented. (How telling me never finding a name for Dora--only parenthesis as for something private or irrelevant; and my reduction of Orson/Orestes, oftener than not, to his initial: a zero.)

When I reread it, the finished section troubled me. It has Dora & Orestes separating at the end of 8 months in America instead of the nearly four years, it took them to reach this decision. Their visit to Houston is not described, or Sandy's to New York. I leave out dozens of people, notably O's student Harriet, & their affair. This telescoping produces a false perspective. The characters, hurried through what was in fact a slow, painful action, become often trivial, like people in a drawing-room comedy. With Sandy absent, his viewpoint gets transferred, and a lot of valuable space given, to another 3rd person, Arthur Orson, who is unnecessary to the story, or at least figured in it differently, having refused--

but who cares! My point is that I did do my best, but as the Gorgon's face was mine, never succeeded in getting a full view of it.

Throughout, I observed considerably more interest in D's & O's estrangement than in their love for one another. Why? Did their love threaten me, or their estrangement comfort me? It was surely no fault of theirs if I were still on this island playing with them in effigy, loving the effigies alone, masks behind which lay all too frequently a mind foreign to them. Dora's amnesia--which comes off as well as anything--is largely my experience at the slaughterhouse (p. 17) transformed. Would I have thought to make her feel shame afterwards, if I hadn't felt it myself vis-a-vis Lucine? I was "Dora." I was "Orestes." They--whoever "they" were--kept mostly beyond my reach. "The sun & moon together in the sky." I wanted to set down these thoughts first, before seeing if I can write what happened on Saturday. Then I will (figuratively) drown my book. Blind I go. Love hasn't worked, not this year, & art isn't the answer.

(pp. 132-133)

Here the narrator--the keeper of the notebook--admits that he is all three of his principal characters and has transferred his own feelings and experiences to them. But only in retrospect does he understand how much of himself has gone into the words he writes. He has not achieved distance--enough at least to see the "Gorgon's face" as his own--until he rereads and reevaluates. Paradoxically, the intimate form of the notebook obscures temporarily that which it reveals. The revealing of self, for the narrator, is both a conscious and unconscious activity. Yet the notebook and the narrator are always examining themselves, turning back upon themselves to establish and define themselves. The book

is never finished precisely because it is never begun. Yet, ironically, it is complete and is forever becoming what it is, just as the self, the personality of the narrator, is forever becoming in the notebook exactly what it already is. But he is also continually revealing himself to himself. He discovers himself in the process of being himself. The book's revelations point both outward and inward.

Significantly, here too the narrator makes some comments about art, and they are fundamentally paradoxical. Through the notebook, through art, the narrator is revealed to himself and to the reader. Yet, art is not life, but "merely life-like." He expends time and energy creating art, both here in the notebook and indeed in all of his other work, only to discover that "Love hasn't worked . . . & art is not the answer." For one as dedicated to his work as Merrill, this is an interesting admission. Even his own art, his own words, are not the answer. To place his faith in them then would be to misplace it. Ultimately only the integrity of the self remains.

The (Diblos) Notebook is a novel that both is and is not. Never begun, it is never finished, but is nevertheless complete. It is a reflection of its creator, yet exists apart from him. Its structure is deceptively complex, it is multileveled. In this case the means is the end, but in some sense the book goes beyond itself to examine the creative process which paradoxically is finally rejected. It is life

itself for which Merrill opts, though he will always use art to comprehend it.

In Merrill's fourth volume of poetry, Nights and Days (1966), he includes only two poems which deal directly with the themes of the self and parent-child relationships, but both are revealing of him.<sup>20</sup> The first is called simply "Time" (pp. 24-27). Although the poem takes a scatter-shot approach to subject, Merrill eventually focuses upon the death of his father in a powerful and candid section. The poem's structure is as shifting as its points of view. He uses loose narrative stanzas which give way to prose which in turn gives way at the end to five, four-line rhymed stanzas. The form is significant and illustrates the points I have made earlier in the chapter about distance. Here he includes both informal and formal poetry as well as prose. Although the poem's central subject is the death of his father, Merrill apparently feels no need to organize those sections formally. And this indicates that he is willing to participate more directly in the feelings he is recording. Only the final section of the poem is formal, and this section does not deal in any direct way with the death of his father. Through the course of the poem he refers to card games, love, age, and death. But the most persistent images are those of letter-writing and the passage of time. Time, Merrill comments in the opening, is "Ever that

Everest / Among concepts . . . " In the third stanza he comes to the central issue of the poem, his father's illness and aging as a manifestation of the passage of time.

All day you had meant  
 To write letters, turn the key  
 In certain friendships, be ticked through at dusk  
 By hard, white absent faces.  
 Let's say you went  
 So far as to begin: "It's me! Forgive. . ."  
 Too late. From the alcove came his cough,  
 His whimper--the old man whom sunset wakes.  
 Truly, could you bear another night  
 Keeping him company while he raved, agreeing  
 To Persia on horseback, just you two! when even  
 The garden path had been forbidden,  
 He was so feeble. Feeble!  
 (pp. 24-250)

The "old man whom sunset wakes" is his dying father, as we discover in a later stanza. Although Merrill is less kind and less patient with his father than with his mother, he is not without compassion and understanding. In the fourth and fifth stanzas his impatience gives way to anguish. Notice, however, that Merrill speaks of himself as if he was not himself.

He grasped your pulse in his big gray-haired hand,  
 Crevasses opening, numb azure. Wait  
 He breathed and glittered: You'll regret  
You want to Read my will first Don't  
Your old father All he has Be yours

Hours you raised the dark rum to his lips.  
 Your eyes burned. Your voice said:  
 "All right, we'll read Cervantes, we'll take trips.  
 She you loved lives. You'll see her in the morning.  
 You'll get well, you'll be proud of me. Don't smile!  
 I love you. I'll find work. You'll--I'll-  
 (p. 25)

This odd perspective, referring to himself in second person, is essentially the same as in other poems which deal

with the painful reminder of childhood. It represents a fragmenting of self. But it is also informal, almost conversational, and is therefore more direct. Stepping out of himself, he views himself from a distance, but as is almost always the case, he suddenly comes back into the poem directly. Curiously, he quotes himself as if someone else was speaking. But the anguish is real and reflects his father's effect on him. "You'll be proud of me" expresses his sudden fear of the absolute loss of his father and his desire still to win his approval. Merrill also, however, projects his feelings, or perhaps his understanding, into his father. Here we see a man who realizes that his own son has been deprived of the thing he wanted most--his love, and thinking that he can make it up, he mentions his will. As is often the case in Merrill's work, what he doesn't say is more telling than what he does say. Projecting himself into these fragments, Merrill reveals what he perceives to be his father's feeling:

You'll regret  
You want to Read my will first Don't  
Your old father All he has Be yours

These lines indicate that the tables have turned and that perhaps now, moments from death, the father pleads with the son for understanding. This ironic reversal, however, is an empty victory, and Merrill's anguish is real. More directly than anywhere else in his poetry, he expresses his feelings in the simple "I'll find work. You'll I'll--." But just as

quickly as it appears, the emotion vanishes and he steps back to coolly assess the situation.

It was light and late.  
 You could not remember  
 Sleeping. It hurt to rise.  
 There stood  
 Those features' ice-crowned, tanned-by-what?--  
 Landmark, like yours, unwrinkled in repose.  
 (p. 25)

At the end of the poem he returns to the card game metaphors and the image of Everest. The figures in the cards represent human history, and juxtaposed to this is his own history; a history circumscribed by the life and death of his father.

The pen reels from your hand. Were you asleep?  
 Who were you writing to? Annette? Me? Jake?  
 Later, smoothing the foothills of the sheet,  
 You take up your worn pack.

He still speaks of himself as if he were outside himself. He brings the images of the card game and Everest together with "smoothing the foothills of the sheet" and "You take up your worn pack." The "pack" is both the pack of cards and his metaphorical hiking pack as he sets off to scale Everest, or time.

Above their gay crusaders' dress  
 The monarchs' mouths are pinched and bleak.  
 Staggering forth in ranks of less and less  
 Related cards, condemned to the mystique

Of a redeeming One,  
 An ace to lead them home, sword, stave, and axe,  
 Power, Riches, Love a place to lay them down  
 In dreamless heaps, the reds, the blacks,



Old Adams and gray Eves  
 Escort you still. Perhaps this time . . . ?  
 A Queen in the discarded suit of Leaves,  
 Earth dims and flattens as you climb

And heaven darkened, steams  
 Upon the trembling disk of tea.  
 Sixty or seventy more games  
 And you can go the rest alone maybe--

Arriving then at something not unlike  
 Meaning relieved of sense  
 To plant a flag there on that needle peak  
 Whose diamond grates in the revolving silence.  
 (pp. 26-27)

Climbing higher and higher, alone with the loss of his father, the future rises before him. He hopes at last to arrive at "something not unlike / Meaning relieved of sense," at understanding of himself and his past.<sup>21</sup> There high above his past, having left childhood behind, he hopes to plant a metaphorical flag "on that needle peak / Whose diamond grates in the revolving silence." Just as in other poems which deal with this subject, it is silence to which he ultimately comes. And in that silence waits understanding and resolution.

The second of the two poems in Nights and Days which treat this subject is entitled "The Broken Home" (pp. 30-33). Typically, the poem wanders among a variety of subjects, but all in one way or another concern parent-child relationships. Again in this poem, he uses that curious perspective, speaking initially as an observer, then gradually replacing the "he" with "I."<sup>22</sup> He moves in and out of the past. His technique here is to create a scene, into which he then steps and participates.

I should say a word here about form. Although at first reading the poem appears to contain a series of short stanzas, varying in length from three to eight lines, a closer reading reveals that the poem is actually a collection of seven sonnets. The divisions are subtle, however. In effect, he gives us different pieces of a picture puzzle, different "scenes" from his childhood which when added together become a mosaic of a "broken home." This broken home is his own. The subtlety of the form is characteristic of Merrill's work and of his concern with formal poetry. But appropriately the "broken" sonnets reflect the "broken" home. Thus though he returns to formal organization, it is not strict or conventional.

In the first sonnet of the poem he creates a kind of still life, then quickly steps into it.

Crossing the street,  
I saw the parents and the child  
At their window, gleaming like fruit  
With evening's mild gold leaf.

In a room on the floor below,  
Sunless, cools--a brimming  
Saucer of wax, marbly and dim--  
I have lit what's left of my life.

I have thrown out yesterday's milk  
And opened a book of maxims.  
The flame quickens. The word stirs.

Tell me, tongue of fire,  
That you and I are as real  
At least as the people upstairs.

(p. 30)

He moves literally and figuratively from the outside to the inside. Juxtaposing the exterior scene to the interior, he quickly sets the stage for this examination of his past and of the self. But to examine the past is to confront the reality of the self. These lines bring together through their images the past and the present. He has "lit what's left" of his life. He asserts that he has "thrown out yesterday's milk," a reference to childhood, yet the assertion is ironic for the rest of the poem will, in fact, be "yesterday's milk" which has not been thrown out at all. The "a book of maxims" is a reference to wisdom and maturity and the "word" that stirs is his own. Then with sudden intensity he addresses the flame, and asks the question the entire poem will ask. Is he, indeed, real? Does he exist beyond his own past?

In the second sonnet he immediately clarifies the connection between the "parents and the child" of the opening stanza, and himself. He does so by speaking candidly about his own father, Charles Merrill.

My father, who had flown in World War I,  
Might have continued to invest his life  
In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife.  
But the race was run below, and the point was to win.

Too late now I make out in his blue gaze  
(Through the smoked glass of being thirty-six)  
The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex  
And business; time was money in those days.

Each thirteenth year he married. When he died  
 There were already several chilled wives  
 In sable orbit-rings, cars, permanent waves.  
 We'd felt him warming up for a green bride.

He could afford it. He was "in his prime"  
 At three score ten. But money was not time.  
 (p. 30)

Now it becomes clear that the broken home is Merrill's.  
 His father's world was a world of "sex / And business," but  
 in the end "money was not time," and all the money in exist-  
 ence could not buy him life.

In the third sonnet he recalls what he regards as a  
 fairly typical scene, making reference obliquely to the world  
 of power and influence in which his father lived and to the  
 turbulent times in American political and economic history.  
 Clearly, his father was one of the makers of that history.  
 But such men have enemies.

When my parents were younger this was a popular act:  
 A veiled woman would leap from an electric,  
     wine-dark car  
 To the steps of no mater what--The Senate or the  
     Ritz bar--  
 And bodily, at newsreel speed, attack

No matter whom--Al Smith or Jose Maria Sert  
 Or Clemenceau--veins standing out on her throat  
 As she yelled "War Monger! Pig! Give us the vote!,"  
 And would have to be hauled away in her hobble skirt.

What had the man done? Oh, made history.  
 Her business (he had implied) was giving birth,  
 Tending the house, mending the socks.

Always that same old story--  
 Father Time and Mother Earth,  
 A marriage on the rocks. . . .  
 (p. 30)

This sonnet deals with his father, but the fourth concerns his dying mother. He remembers how "One afternoon" the Irish setter, Michael, led "The child I was to a shut door." Inside, his mother lay dying, "clad in taboos." There, mystified in the presence of death, he watches her silently until, at last, feeling the need to touch her, he reaches out. "Her eyes flew open, startled strange and cold. / The dog slumped to the floor. She reached for me. I fled" (p. 31).

In the third and fourth sonnets he deals with both father and mother, drawing a picture of infidelity, sex, money, power, and death. In the fifth, he returns to 1931, including them both. But here, too, he comes to terms with the meaning of their lives and his own.

Tonight they have stepped out onto the gravel.  
The party is over. It's the fall  
of 1931. They love each other still.

She: Charlie, I can't stand the pace.  
He: Come one, honey--why, you'll bury us all!

Here Merrill modifies the sonnet form, breaking the lines into three and two. I want to point out here too that these lines are more prose than poetry. As I have suggested, he often writes a type of line that fits strictly in neither category and is, curiously, both. He continues and contrasts his parent's life with his own. They have been to a party, yet he has stayed home where,

A lead soldier guards my windowsill:  
Khaki rifle, uniform, and face.  
Somethin in me grows heavy, silvery, pliable.  
How intensely people used to feel!  
Like metal poured at the close of a proletarian  
novel,  
Refined and glowing from the crucible,  
I see those two hearts, I'm afraid,  
Still, Cool here in the graveyard of good and evil,  
They are even so to be honored and obeyed.

(p. 32)

As other poems have pointed out, Merrill was apparently often left in the care of someone else while his parents were away. He is left with a "lead soldier," a sculpture which is not even alive. It is at this point too that "Something in . . . [him] . . . grows heavy, silvery, pliable." Nevertheless, though these were painful times for him, his parents "are even so to be honored and obeyed." Continuing in the sixth sonnet, however, he modifies this injunction.

. . . Obeyed, at least, inversely. Thus  
I rarely buy a newspaper, or vote.  
To do so, I have learned, is to invite  
The tread of a stone guest within my house.

Shooting this rusted bolt, though against him,  
I trust I am no less time's child than some  
Who on the heath impersonate Poor Tom  
Or on the barricades risk life and limb.

Nor do I try to keep a garden, only  
An avocado in a glass of water--  
Root pallid, gemmed with air. And later

When the small gilt leaves have grown  
Fleshy and green, I let them die, yes, yes,  
And start another. I am earth's no less.

The "stone guest" whose presence he fears may be the memory of his father, or simply the past turned to stone inside him.

Still he questions his existence, his reality in the face of this past. Recalling earlier lines ("That you and I are as real / At least as the people upstairs.") he again broaches the dilemma of self.

I trust I am no less time's child than some  
Who on the heath impersonate Poor Tom  
Or on the barricades risk life and limb . . . .

In the final sonnet which he arranges into an octet and sestet he returns to the "broken home" and to the Irish setter. He gives us a haunting and lonely picture of a child and a dog who roam the corridors of the house in silence, perhaps in search of what never was.

A child, a red dog roam the corridors,  
Still, of the broken home. No sound. The brilliant  
Rag runners halt before wide-open doors.  
My old room! Its wallpaper--cream medallioned  
With pink and brown--brings back the first  
    nightmares,  
Long summer colds, and Emma, sepia-faced,  
Perspiring over broth carried upstairs  
Aswim with golden fats I could not taste.

Though he is now an adult, the child within him lives still to "roam the corridors" of the "broken home." Notice that even in his childhood memories of illness, his parents are absent and he is left in the care of others. There is no mother or father there to comfort him, to assuage the "nightmares," only a governess and a dog who is faithful still.

The real house became a boarding-school.  
Under the ballroom ceiling's allegory  
Someone at last may actually be allowed  
To learn something; or, from my window, cool  
With the unstiflement of the entire story,  
Watch a red setter stretch and sink in cloud.  
(p. 33)

Though the poem stops, it does not end. As if to draw the final and connecting line between the child and parents at the beginning of the poem and the child he is, he tells us that the "real house" of his story has since become a boarding-school, an appropriate transformation since it was originally little more than that when he lived there without parents and without love. At the close of the poem, he focuses not upon his parents, but upon his governess and at last upon the dog, his only friend, who becomes a metaphor for the setting sun--an end to the days of his childhood which, paradoxically, have not ended at all.

Returning now to the title, "The Broken Home," it is clear that Merrill means it in more than one way. The term "broken" refers not only to divorce and remarriage, but to an interior breaking as well--a breaking, a loss, which was never repaired or recovered, though in fact new homes were created with remarriage. And ultimately, that which was broken can never be whole again. Appropriately, therefore, the poem contains no resolution.

Nights and Days contains only two poems which deal directly with Merrill's childhood. Compared to the numbers of poems in the three volumes preceding it which treat this subject, and the two novels, this in itself is a statement about his feelings. He simply no longer writes about it as much, but about other things which concern him. When he does write about it in "Time" and "The Broken Home" he is not as



concerned with form as a means of achieving distance. Though "Time" is partially formal in the final section, and "The Broken Home" is a series of seven "broken" sonnets, Merrill is more willing to deal with the memories as memory, rather than as a living and powerful presence in the present. He uses form, but not in the same way that he has used it in his earlier work. Only one small section of "Time" is formal. And the strict sonnet form is fragmented in "The Broken Home," as if he were playing with form here as an exercise in skill, rather than as a necessary hedge against pain. Thus, one conclusion that I can suggest is that he is more comfortable with his past, though it will always remain a part of his present, and is able to write about it with more detachment and objectivity. The resolutions evident in The Seraglio, Water Street and The (Diblos) Notebook are reflected here in Nights and Days.

In Merrill's sixth volume, Braving the Elements (1972), he includes two long poems which deal with these themes.<sup>23</sup> Both are important and make clear statements about his feelings. One, the first, is a childhood fantasy entitled "Days of 1935." The second is actually two separate poems which have individual titles but are collectively called "Up and Down" (The two poems are called "Snow King Chair Lift," which is the "Up" and "The Emerald," which is the "Down.")

The first of these two, "Days of 1935" is a carefully structured and very lengthy formal poem arranged in seventy-six, four-line stanzas with a rhyme scheme of abab (pp. 11-22). In essence, it is a grim fantasy of kidnapping and terror. Prompted no doubt by the infamous kidnapping of the Lindberg baby, Merrill imagines himself kidnapped by a stereo-typical gunman and his moll, whome he names Floyd and Jean. From his child's vantage point, he explores the psychology of the situation, imagining himself in this predicament until he is eventually rescued. But as is often the case in Merrill's work, what he reveals of himself he reveals not so much in what he says, but rather in what he does not say. In this case, it is the poem's unspoken premise that gives him away.

By no stretch of the imagination could kidnapping be considered a pleasant experience. Yet out of his deepest need to be wanted and loved, a child could create an imaginary situation in which he demands, in effect, that his parents prove their love through sacrifice for him, through buying his life. His parents' response in this life and death dilemma would then establish the child's validity--his reality in their affection--and show him that he is loved and valued, even if that value and that love is economic. Economic value is better than none at all. Thus, he has created a fantasy in which his parents' feelings are tested. But the important point is that there is a need to begin

with that their love be proved, that their love, in fact, is in question at all. Quite obviously in the poem the child is part of a materially rich family who can afford to pay the two-hundred thousand dollar ransom demanded for the life of the child. Yet in all this prosperity there is something missing. It becomes obvious through the course of the poem that despite his home environment, the child feels neglected. The kidnapping, in fact, is made possible in the first place because the parents are not there and he has been left in the ineffective care of an aging, half-deaf governess. He is essentially alone then and he creates in his imagination all the desperately needed attention he desires.

He gets us into the poem very quickly. Though its premise as fantasy is clearly stated in the opening, this soon disappears as Merrill himself gets more and more involved with his story.

Ladder horned against moonlight,  
Window hoisted stealthily--  
That's what I'd steel myself at night  
To see, or sleep to see.

My parents were out partying,  
My nurse was old and deaf and slow.  
Way off in a servant's wing  
Cackled a radio.

On the Lindberg baby's small  
Cold features lay a spell, a swoon.  
It seemed entirely plausible  
For my turn to come soon . . . .

(p. 11)

The stage has been set; absent, wealthy parents, a deaf nurse and the imagination of a lonely and neglected child.

We quickly discover that the child desires to be kidnapped, to put his parents to the test. He describes the imagined getaway after the crime.

Then sheer imagination ride  
Off with us in its old jalopy,  
Trailing bedclothes like a bride  
Timorous but happy.

Then we are introduced to Jean and Floyd, both obviously stereotypical creations. Jean is,

A lady out of Silver Screen,  
Her careful rosebud chewing gum,  
Seems to expect us, lets us in,  
Nods her platinum

Spit curls deadpan (I will wait  
Days to learn what makes her smile)  
At a blue enamel plate  
of cold greens I can smell--

But swallow? Never. . . .  
(p. 12)

But it is Floyd in whom the child is most interested.

. . . The man's face  
Rivets me, a lightning bolt.  
Lean, sallow, lantern-jawed, he lays  
Pistol and cartridge belt

Between us on the oilskin (I  
Will relive some things he did  
Until I die, until I die)  
(p. 12)

It is perhaps an indication of his need for a father, or a father-figure. He is quite clear about the source of his fascination with both of them: their need for him, and their attention. The reason doesn't matter.

For good or bad  
I felt her watching from her chair  
As no one ever had.

(p. 13)

As the days pass, the nation's interest increases.

Each morning Floyd went for a ride  
To post another penciled note.  
Indignation nationwide  
Greeted what he wrote.

Each afternoon, brought papers back.  
One tabloid's whole front page spanned  
By the headline bold and black:  
Fiend asks 200 Grand.

(p. 13)

He then gives us the odd perspective of seeing his parent's picture in the paper--pictures he has invented to flesh out his fantasy. But the pictures, or more properly the way he pictures them, are telling.

Photographs too. My mother gloved,  
Hatted, bepearled, chin deep in fur.  
Dad glowering--was it true he loved  
Others beside her?

(p. 14)

Though he at last has all of the attention he needs, still his parents are center stage. She is cool, urbane, wealthy, while he "glowers." The child learns that "Life was fiction in disguise."

As the days wear on, the child grows more and more attached to Jean and Floyd, not because they love him, but because they are aware of him and take him into account in virtually all of their activities. Even in love making, they are aware of his presence.

Jean "The kid, he's still awake . . ."  
Floyd: "Time he learned . . . Oh baby . . . God . . . !  
Their prone tango, for my sake,  
Grew intense and proud.

(p. 15)

He relishes the attention; so much so, in fact, that when presented with an opportunity to escape, he refuses to take it. Floyd is gone, and Jean has fallen asleep.

. . . A chance to slip the net,  
Wriggle down the dry stream bed,  
Now or never! This child cannot.  
An irridescent thread

Binds him to her slumber deep  
Within a golden haze made plain  
Precisely where his fingertip  
Writes on the dusty pane

In spit his name, address, age nine  
--Which the newspaper and such  
Will shortly point to as a fine  
Realistic touch.

(pp. 16-17)

The simple fact of their awareness of him binds him to them with bonds stronger than those to his parents. When all has been arranged and he discovers that he'll "be home real soon," his confusion increases. He does not wish to be released or returned and ironically questions his own behavior with Floyd and Jean, supposing that they wished to get rid of him because he has failed in some way.

What was happening? Had my parents  
Paid? pulled strings? or maybe I  
Had failed in manners, or appearance?  
Must this be goodbye?

I'd hoped I was worth more than crime  
Itself, which never paid, could pay.  
Worth more than my own father's time  
Or mother's negligee

Undone where dim ends barely met.  
This being a Depression year. . .  
I'd hoped, I guess, that they would let  
Floyd and Jean keep me here.

(p. 18)

Despite his material comfort at home, despite the radical change in his circumstances, he still would rather stay with his kidnappers. Whatever mercenary reason was at the root of their caring, it nevertheless is more attractive to the child than the reality of his life at home.

The night before the exchange, with Jean sick, Floyd and the child sleep together on the floor. He mistakes Floyd's physical proximity for affection. His fascination is obvious. Floyd falls asleep, the child remains awake.

. . . Small fingers felt,  
Sore point of all that wiry meat,  
A nipple's tender fault.

Time stopped. His arm somenambulist  
Had circled me, warm, salt as blood.  
Mine was the future in his fist  
To get at if I could,

While his heart beat like a drum  
And "Oh baby" faint and hoarse  
Echoed from within his dream . . .  
(p. 19)

When all is finally over, the ransom paid and the criminals caught and brought to justice, the child changes his opinion. But this change is due to his sense of betrayal. His temporary, surrogate parents have betrayed him by giving him back. The crime, and the reasons for his stay with them are irrelevant. What is important to him is that they seemed to care, yet ultimately played him false. So in vengeance he imagines that he testifies against them.

. . . from the witness-box

I met their stupid, speechless gaze.  
How empty they appeared, how weak  
By contrast with my opening phrase  
As I began to speak:

"You I adored I now accuse. . ."  
Would imagination dare  
Follow that sentence like a fuse

Sizzling towards the Chair?

(p. 20)

He imagines their bodies "raw and swollen / Sagging in a  
skein of smoke."

But the vision is too real and suddenly Merrill  
brings us back to reality.

The floor was reeling where I'd fallen.  
Even my old nurse woke.

And took me in her arms. I presssd  
My guilty face against the void  
Warmed and scented by her breast  
Jean, I whispered, Floyd.

(p. 20)

At this point in the poem, Merrill begins the conclusion.  
He narrates the final eight stanzas as if he were outside  
the experience; that is, he is no longer the central char-  
acter, but shifts to the role of an observer. Nevertheless,  
this shift of perspective from "I" to "the child" does not  
mislead us. Rather it intensifies the reality behind the  
fantasy he has portrayed. Paradoxically, this distancing  
technique brings us even closer to his feelings.

A rainy day. The child is bored.  
While Emma bakes he sits, half-grown.  
. . . .



He watches icing sugar spin  
Its thread

Somewhere rings a bell.

Wet walks from the East porch lead  
Down levels manicured and rolled  
To a small grove where pets are laid  
In shallow emerald.

The den lights up. A Sezerac  
Helps his father face the Wall  
Street Journal. Jules the colored (black)  
Butler guards the hall.

Tel & Tel executives,  
Heads of Cellophane or Tin,  
With their animated wives  
Are due on the 6:10.

(pp. 20-21)

Again, as in several other poems which deal with  
this theme, Merrill gives us essentially the same chilling  
still life of his family. The father, reading the paper,  
having a drink; the child, bored, left with the cook or the  
nurse or the governess; wealth and material comfort, while,

Upstairs in miles of spangled blue  
His mother puts her make-up on.  
She kisses him sweet dreams, but who--  
Floyd and Jean are gone--

Who will be dream of? True to life  
He's played them false. A golden haze  
Past belief, past disbelief. . .  
Well, Those were the days.

(p. 21)

This house on Long Island, which is also the principal  
setting of The Seraglio, has little in it of a home for the  
child. It is full of people, yet empty of love, and in some  
real sense the "hovel in the treeless / Trembling middle of  
nowhere" (p. 11) where his fantasy kidnappers took him is

more appealing than all the opulence in which he lives. The poem juxtaposes the two dwellings in sharp contrast. The poorer is the richer in what he needs.

Returning now to the title and its unspoken premise, we can begin to see an additional level of meaning. The subject is negative, the treatment is positive. The "good ole days" or the "Days of 1935" both are and are not romantically conceived. The child in the man both longs and does not long for these days. That is, Merrill writes positively about a terribly grim fantasy. Yet, in his conclusion he writes negatively about a potentially positive situation (at home, safe with his parents). Thus there are several ironic reversals in the poem. These, then, create a tension which, far from being resolved, rather is ultimately backed away from with the ambiguous final line "Well. Those were the days." Were they good or bad? Perhaps both, or perhaps they simply were. Regardless of any retrospective value placed upon them, what is clear is that he found in his kidnappers what he never had from and in his parents. Good or bad, it is need that is at issue.

"Days of 1935" is about childhood. But the second of the two poems which treat this subject is about adulthood. In this juxtaposition, then, we have achieved the structure of this chapter and Merrill's dual vision of childhood. The poem is entitled "Up and Down" and has two parts: an "Up" part which is both a literal and figurative rising, and a

"Down" part that is a literal and figurative descent. The first poem, individually sub-titled "Snow King Chair Lift," is about a lover and companion, while the "Down" part, sub-titled "The Emerald," concerns a trip with his mother to the family vault at "Mutual Trust," figuratively the family tomb. Both parts of the whole function on several levels of "up and down."

The poem contains twenty-eight four line stanzas rhymed abba. Each separate poem consists of fourteen stanzas. In the first, he begins with the beginning of the ascent. We quickly learn that the poem is concerned with the past. The ascent is a figurative leaving behind of the past.

Prey swooped up, the iron love seat shudders  
Onward into its acrophilic trance.  
What folly has possessed us? Ambulance!  
Give me your hand, try thinking of those others

Unhurt return by two from June's immense  
Sunbeamed ark with such transfigured faces,  
We sought admission on the shaky basis  
That some good follows from experience

Of anything or leaving it behind  
As now, each urchin street and park sent sprawling  
By the mountain's foot--why, this is fun, appalling  
Bungaloes, goodbye! dark frames of mind,

Whatever's settled into, comfort, despair,  
Sun, expectation, apathy, the past, . . .

(p. 53)

The ascent, however, is also a figurative death in that Merrill makes several references to change, or a transfiguration of sorts, which is brought about as a result of the

experience. Notice that it is a "love seat" that takes them up. In his fear of heights (which ultimately is a fear of death) he calls for an ambulance. He must remind himself that others have come back "Unhurt" from the ascent, yet they have "transfigured faces." This veiled reference is biblical. In all accounts in The Bible of human beings called up into high places where they are confronted by Jehovah, they always emerge transfigured or changed physically by the experience.

He continues in the following stanzas to reinforce this subtle correlation between height and diety.

This afternoon I swear halfway to heaven  
None housed me--no, not style itself--in style.

Risen this far, your ex-materialist  
Signs an impetuous long lease on views  
Of several states and skies of several blues  
Promptly dismantled by the mover mist

--What's going on? Loud ceiling shaken, brute  
Maker of scenes in lightning spurt on spurt--  
How did those others, how shall we avert  
Illuminations that electrocute!

(p. 54)

In his fear, he swears "halfway to heaven" that none of the residences in which he has lived can equal what he is now experiencing. In the face of fear he denounces materialism, and refers to the mist as "the mover mist" and to the power of nature as the "brute / Maker of scenes . . ." Merrill wonders how others and how the two of them "shall . . . avert / Illuminations that electocute!" But this is also a reference to what they may learn and what freedom may be

gained in leaving the past behind; a freedom, as I have previously suggested, that is in some ways a terrible burden.

When they reach the top and "quit . . . [their] . . . throne" (p. 54), he regains some balance. But as in other poems which deal with the self confronting its own mortality or immortality, Merrill is moved not to words, but to silence.

You merely said you liked it in that chill  
Lighthearted atmosphere (a crow for witness)  
And I, that words profaned the drive whiteness  
Of a new leaf. The rest was all downhill.  
(p. 54)

At the close of this first poem, he returns to the flesh--to the "downhill" side of existence.

Before I led you to the next chair back  
  
And made my crude but educated guess  
At why the wind was laying hands on you  
(Something I no longer think to do)  
We gazed our little fills at boundlessness.  
(p. 55)

Thus the experience has been both physical and spiritual. He begins with reference to the physical presence of a lover. This gives way to the spiritual, brought about by the immensity and power of nature. And this spiritual insight gives way in turn to a return to this world and its physical realities.

It is fitting in several ways that immediately following this poem is the second called "The Emerald." It deals with his aging mother's life and approaching death

and is a "down" experience, both literally with the descent into the family vault and figuratively with the emotional descent into death.

Like the first, "The Emerald" is arranged in fourteen, four-line stanzas rhymed abba. The title refers to a ring given by his father to his mother upon the birth of the narrator. She, in turn, wishes now to give it to her son. "For when you marry. For your bride." The poem begins with references to life.

Hearing that on Sunday I would leave,  
My mother asked if we might drive downtown.  
Why certainly--off with my dressing gown!  
The weather had turned fair. We were alive

Only the gentle General she married  
Late, for both an old way out of harm's,  
Fought for breath, surrendered in her arms,  
With military honors now lay buried.

(p. 55)

Though the General "now lay buried" they at least "were alive." But the narrator's mother is also aware of her own mortality and wants her son to have certain of her possessions now. The narrator also has become aware of her approaching death and in an ironic juxtaposition comments that,

. . . Each spring we number  
The new dead. Above ground, who can remember  
Her as she once was? Even I forget,

Fail to attend her, seem impervious. . .

(p. 56)

The cycle of life is repeated endlessly in this juxtaposition of Spring and death. Yet, figuratively they now enter

the tomb together to find the ring, a symbol of the past and his father's love and devotion.

She holds the key

Whereby palatial bronze gates shut like jaws  
On our descent into this inmost vault.  
The keeper bends his baldness to consult,  
Brings a tin box painted mud-brown, withdraws.

She opens it. Security. Will. Deed.  
Rummages further. Rustle of tissue, a sprung  
Lid, Her face gone queerly lit, fair, young,  
Like faces of our dear ones who have died.

(p. 56)

Finding her past again has revitalized her. Yet her face is "fair" and "young / Like [the] faces of our dear ones who have died." Here in her figurative tomb she is young again, remembering perhaps a love long buried.

No rhinestone now, no dilute amethyst,  
But of the first water, linking star to pang,  
Teardrop to fire, my father's kisses hang  
In lipless concentration round her wrist.

(p. 56)

The "first water" is a reference to the beginning of the birth process whereby ". . . star [is linked] to pang," "Teardrop to fire." With the joy of birth and life comes also its "pang" and its "Teardrop."

Gray are these temple-drummers who once more  
Would rouse her, girl-bride jeweled in his grave

(p. 56)

When he dies, so too in some sense did she die to lie beside him forever in the tomb as a "girl-bride." Yet memories survive.

Instead, she next picks out a ring. "He gave Me this when you were born. Here, take it for--

For when you marry. For your bride. It's yours."  
 A den of greenest light, it grows, shrinks, glows,  
 Hermetic stanza bedded in the prose  
 Of the last thirty semiprecious years.

(pp. 56-57)

What Merrill cannot tell her, and instead tells us is that there will be no wife, or children. There will be no conventional marriage to continue the line to which to pass heirlooms, both physical and intangible.

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

(p. 57)

The "green room" is the world of the emerald and its psychological and emotional implications. It represents, for Merrill, the past, his father, and lost love. Still it lives, preserved in the gem, to haunt him as a figure for the loss of his father. To this reference he juxtaposes what has become his life, his bride and children: his poetry. The poems he writes are his offspring and they will continue the line and give him a kind of immortality. He returns the ring to his mother in silence. Again, ultimately he comes to silence as the only possible expression of his feelings.

But onto her worn knuckle slip the ring.  
 Wear it for me, I silently entreat,  
 Until--until the time comes. Our eyes meet,  
 The world beneath the world is brightening.

(p. 57)

The "world beneath the world" refers to the literal and figurative tomb in which they stand; there confronting the



past and the memory of the man who has had such an effect upon them both, even from beyond the grave. With this admission that there would "be no wife," Merrill successfully confronts the self and as a result some of the burden of the past is lifted. In confronting his mother's mortality and the memory of his father he also confronts himself. And this confrontation with the potential annihilation of the self is in some sense a freeing experience.

In viewing the two novels and all of the lyric poetry through Braving the Elements (1972) certain conclusions can be reached with regard to Merrill's views of his past, and his treatment of the theme of childhood. His early career, in fact, seems to fall into three parts, and each is represented by and reflected in his work. In his first two volumes, First Poems and The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace he is preoccupied with his childhood and its pain. He also tends to write very formal poetry, and that poetry tends also to be written from a child's point of view. There is a great deal of pain recorded in these numerous poems. I have suggested that form functions in these poems as a means of achieving distance. The form itself is a hedge against despair, and enables him to manage his feelings in the face of the formlessness of life. As he resolves these feelings, however, the number of formal poems decreases and he tends increasingly to write more informal

narratives in which he may embed a formal section, such as a sonnet. But the process of resolution is a slow one. It begins not with poetry, but rather with prose.

With his first novel, The Seraglio, Merrill begins the second phase of his career with regard to this childhood theme. He writes a conventional, formal novel that is at least partially autobiographical. Its central concern is children and the pain of their growing. The principal character castrates himself to resolve what he considers to be a problem with his sexuality. But the novel ends with the main character's realization that "the entire world was real." He comes to accept and understand reality, and in this acceptance begins resolution. The volume of poetry which follows The Seraglio verifies this suggestion.

Water Street, published in 1962, is centrally concerned with childhood. There are both formal and informal poems, and the volume contains some of Merrill's best poetry. It begins with "An Urban Convalescence," a loose, rambling narrative about his past that eventually becomes formal at the end. The last poem is entitled "A Tenancy" and is informally organized. Both the beginning poem and the poem which ends the volume are about residency and the past. Between them fall "Scenes of Childhood," "Childlessness," "The World and the Child," "The Midnight Snack," to name a few, and many more which deal with childhood. Some are formal and some informal, but there seems to be in

these poems less concern with form as a means of achieving distance. He is also remarkably candid in many of these poems, even dedicating the last to his male companion, David Jackson. It is in this final poem, also, that he indicates that much of the pain of his past has been resolved and that he has come to terms at least partially with his childhood to establish himself within his own history. The novel, his second, which follows Water Street again supports the contention.

In 1965, with The (Diblos) Notebook, Merrill writes an experimental novel which, like The Seraglio, is at least partially autobiographical. It is essentially formless, and thus it would seem that form as a distancing device is no longer necessary. Parts of the book, furthermore, are like an extremely intimate diary in which the narrator has recorded his inner self. Merrill even allows the reader to participate in the process of creating the book by exposing the literary alternatives in such matters as characterization, style, sentence structure and figures. But the point is that while the book is essentially and personally historical, Merrill is now willing to risk more not only of his talent (by exposing literary alternatives, etc.), but his self as well. Whereas The Seraglio stands at the beginning of the process, The (Diblos) Notebook represents the end of this middle phase. The two novels flank Water Street.

Following this second phase are three books of poetry, Nights and Days, The Fire Screen, and Braving the Elements. In all of the poems of these volumes only four are directly concerned with childhood. This small number is itself evidence that Merrill feels less compulsion to write about this part of his past. These poems, furthermore, as my discussion has indicated, tend less to be from a child's perspective and more from the adult's.

To follow the treatment of childhood in Merrill's six volumes of lyric poetry and two novels is to see the achievement of real growth. They stand as a record of his past and his ability to deal with it in a realistic way. From the pain and formal organization of his first two volumes, through the middle phase of Water Street and the two novels, to the final three volumes we can trace his feeling and his growth. In all, they provide an intimate view of both the private and professional life of one of America's major poets.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Merrill, "The World and the Child," Water Street (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> James Merrill, "The Book of Ephraim," Divine Comedies (New York: Atheneum, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Merrill, First Poems.

<sup>4</sup> James Merrill, The Seraglio (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957). The novel is dedicated to his "nieces and nephews."

<sup>5</sup> In the trilogy, Merrill discovers, much to his dismay, that much of what he thinks he has written (including the lyrics) comes to him unconsciously from the spirit world. That is, he is startled to learn that the trilogy as well as much of his earlier work has been "ghost written," and is thus divinely inspired.

<sup>6</sup> With regard to this point, X. J. Kennedy comments that Merrill is free from the "worst lapses of recent poets of the confessional school. Merrill never sprawls, never flails about, never strikes postures. Intuitively he knows that, as Yeats once pointed out, in poetry 'all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt.'" ("Translations from the American" The Atlantic Monthly, [March 1973], 102).

<sup>7</sup> This symbolic act can be likened to Merrill's "striking" his father in "Scenes of Childhood." See Chapter I.

<sup>8</sup> See "The Book of Ephraim" Divine Comedies (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Merrill, Seraglio.

<sup>10</sup> Merrill, Country.

<sup>11</sup> Merrill, Water Street.

<sup>12</sup> Merrill was born in New York City.

13 This tactic, one of his more common ones, is evidence of the direct influence of Henry James who often includes in his novels and short stories the character of the "confidant." In most cases, Merrill's "confidant" is the reader.

14 David Kalstone addresses this issue in Merrill's work by commenting that Merrill distrusts the "poetic image or metaphor, always aware of it betraying him, yet forced to use it." This basic distrust of language is echoed in several other important poems and in the sheer numbers of times Merrill ultimately comes to silence as the best communicator of meaning. ("Merrill," Partisan Review XXXIV, 1 [Winter 1967], 148).

15 Commenting on just this point, Mona Van Duyn remarks that "Love, shown in several hard-won final stanzas, is most heavily represented by its terrible vulnerabilities." See Chapter III for a full discussion of this aspect. ("Sunbursts, Garlands, Creatures, Men," Poetry CXXVI No. 6 [September 1975], 202).

16 James Merrill, Section 'D,' "The Book of Ephraim," Divine Comedies (New York: Atheneum, 1976), p. 87.

17 This tendency to set style and treatment at odds with content is a common one in Merrill's work. For a discussion of its effect see Robert von Hallberg's "James Merrill: Revealing by Obscuring" Contemporary Literature XXI No. 4 (Autumn 1980), 563.

18 For an enlightening discussion of this technique see Edmund White, "On James Merrill," The American Poetry Review, VIII No. 5 (Sept/Oct, 1979), 10.

19 James Merrill, The (Diblos) Notebook (New York: Atheneum, 1965).

20 Merrill, Nights and Days.

21 In this case, the line expresses a hope for meaning without the corresponding process of working through painful feelings.

22 Anthony Hecht comments that this "calculated uncertainty about pronouns" usually works in Merrill's favor, creating an interesting perspective in the poems in which it occurs. Hudson Review (Summer 1966), p. 331.

23 Merrill, Braving the Elements.

### CHAPTER III

#### LOVE

As numerous as the poems are which deal with the themes of childhood and parent-child relationships, they are equalled in number by those which deal with love. Merrill's love lyrics exhibit that same ironic stance found in the childhood poems. On the whole, they tend toward despair and pain, rarely speaking to the joys of love. There is, too, in many of the love lyrics a kind of resignation in which the lover or lovers must endure the small treacheries of love; the promises that go unkept; the losses which outnumber the gains; the vulnerabilities which open the lovers to enormous risks of the essential self. For all the space and time and energy Merrill devotes to the subject, however, his view is not traditionally romantic, though romance quite obviously plays a leading role in his life's scenario. Love, after all, or more to the point, its absence, is crucial to his childhood to his past as it has created the present. Its absence in his childhood, particularly with regard to his father, is translated in adulthood into a distrust of its reality; a distrust which paradoxically nevertheless admits its existence as necessary to the evolution of the

self. Confronting its absence, in fact, as has been shown, leads inevitably to confronting the self and the twin terrors of absolute annihilation and infinite possibility. Indeed, surviving love is surviving life, and is therefore crucial to life's ultimate purpose, growth. Because in love Merrill feels himself to be most vulnerable, it is here too that he is best protected. That is, typically in his love lyrics he seldom leaves himself open to the cutting edge of his own feelings without blunting it in some way. Generally, he does this by simply pulling back from the feeling, but not without indicating first the direction it will take. That is, it is obvious to the reader what the poet stops just short of saying. And ironically, in not saying it, he has said it and underscored it.

As I will illustrate in my discussion, Merrill's love poetry falls into two large categories; those poems which are about love and lovers in general, and those which deal with his love life in particular. In the former, his tone is more objective. In the latter he is painfully and obviously involved more intimately in the work. But even in the poems which recount his love experiences there is still an attempt at objectivity. This attempt in one sense is successful; he is objective. But in another more telling way, the attempt fails simply because it exists. His very attempt at objectivity with a subject that is by definition the antithesis of the objective dooms him to failure. To write objectively



about love, particularly one's own love, is a contradiction in terms. The attempt is only the thinnest of disguises for his need to be objective. And the need points to that which he is attempting to avoid in print, emotional pain. As in so much of his work, what he doesn't say is more revealing than what he does say.

I want to begin my discussion of Merrill's love poetry by looking closely at two poems. The first poem entitled "Laboratory Poem" is from his second volume The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace published in 1959.<sup>1</sup> Its simplicity is deceptive. The entire poem revolves about a contradiction, or at the very least a jarring juxtaposition of opposites which underpins the situation of the poem and creates a tension that is left unresolved at the end. The poem is about love and lovers, but Merrill is not in this case a participant in it. Since it is not about his love life, he achieves distance and an almost scientific objectivity. This objectivity, however, so fitting to the subject, is also itself part of the incongruity so obvious in the poem. There are, in fact, several levels of irony operating simultaneously.

The title of the poem is itself indicative of Merrill's paradoxical approach to this important theme. Its two words, "Laboratory" and "Poem," carry heavy and oppositional connotative meanings. "Laboratory" suggests empiricism; the scientific method; meticulous and

methodical investigation of a problem, leading to resolution. "Poem," on the other hand, is by definition figurative, emotional and subjective. The title, therefore, introduces a basic contradiction which the poem does nothing to resolve. This contradiction is then complicated by the theme love and lovers in the laboratory. That love, subjective and emotional, can exist at all in this atmosphere is itself a paradox.

The poem concerns lovers named Charles and Naomi who work in a laboratory. It is written from Charles' point of view. But in a reversal of traditional roles, it is Naomi who is the dominant member of the team and whose attitude is objective, almost heartless, and scientific. Charles, on the other hand, is softer and more romantic. He is both fascinated and repelled by Naomi's seeming indifference to the mutilation and study of living organisms. We are never told that Charles is a scientist, too, yet his continual presence in the laboratory would support this view.

In the first of three, six-line, unrhymed stanzas Merrill introduces both characters and gives us a brief sketch of their different personalities.

Charles used to watch Naomi, taking heart  
 And a steel saw, open up turtles, live.  
 While she swore they felt nothing, he would gag  
 At blood, at the blind twitching, even after  
 The murky dawn of entrails cleared, revealing  
 Contours he knew, egg-yellows like lamps paling.  
 (p. 43)

In part, for Charles, this experience is an enlightening one. It is essentially a lesson an introduction to a side of love not often seen. This is suggested by the clearing of the "murky dawn," which reveals "Contours he knew." This also suggests that he is familiar with the turtle's internal system as a scientist would be. Yet he still "gag[s] / at blood, at the blind twitching." The "dawn" image is supported in the final stanza when the poem becomes more philosophical.

Notice, also in the stanza that Merrill puns on the metaphor of the heart. Naomi takes "heart," that is, screws up her courage, and opens up the turtle. But she is also to work on the turtle's heart. This heart image can also be seen in another way. It implies that she takes her own heart in hand as the figurative location of love, suppresses her emotions, and begins her work. Merrill juxtaposes this heart image to that of the "steel saw." These images are wildly incongruous, and somewhat brutal; the cold steel of the saw against the soft, living tissue of the heart. But they are also figuratively appropriate, for the saw reflects Naomi's attitude about love, while the heart image more closely reflects Charles'.

In stanza two, he continues with these double entendres.

Well then. She carried off the beating heart  
 To the kymograph and rigged it there, a rag  
 In fitful wind, now made to strain, now stopped  
 By her solutions tonic or malign  
 Alternately in which it would be steeped.  
 What the heart bore, she noted on a chart.

(p. 43)

It is important to remember that the poem works on two levels simultaneously. It is literally about an experiment in the laboratory, but it is also about the relationship between Naomi and Charles. Since it is written from Charles' point of view, we also get his perspective on the entire situation. But Naomi's literal and physical action can be seen as a reflection of her attitude toward love itself and the love object, Charles. Thus in the lines above when she carries "off the beating heart," this literal action has a figurative level as well; the "beating heart" is both hers and Charles'.

It represents her approach to her own feelings and to his. In this sense, then, love is the "solutions tonic or malign" in which the heart is "steeped." But the final line of the stanza summarizes her extreme objectivity in matters of love. "What the heart bore, she noted on a chart." Her attitude, and indeed her "solutions" to the problem of understanding love and love relationships, is clinical, stripped of any personal involvement. While Charles is in turmoil, Naomi calmly and methodically examines both the literal and the figurative heart to determine what it can bear; what it can stand.

In the final stanza, Merrill closes the poem with chilling objectivity, understating to achieve emphasis.

For work did not stop only with the heart.  
 He thought of certain human hearts, their climb  
 Through violence into exquisite disciplines  
 Of which, as it now appeared, they all expired.  
 Soon she would fetch another and start over.  
 Easy in the presence of her lover.

(p. 43)

The suggestion in stanza one that the experience for Charles is an enlightening one is reinforced here by lines two through five. Watching Naomi causes him to think of "certain hearts" and their "climb / Through violence into exquisite disciplines." These "certain" hearts are both his and Naomi's and all others who approach love as a science. These lines also reflect the process of dissection through which Naomi goes--from violence to discipline.

Yet Merrill may be asking questions here, which of course typically he does not ask in print. Is love a "discipline"? Can it be dissected as Naomi dissects the heart of the turtle and figuratively her own heart and that of Charles' as well? Is love an objective experiment, or does it defy objectivity and clinical empiricism? Without answering in print, he nevertheless answers these questions. The very objectivity and impersonality of his final lines give us his answer.

Soon she would fetch another and start over.  
 Easy in the presence of her lover.

The experiment, for Naomi, is an ongoing process. But notice the flat, factual statements Merrill makes about

the process. Given the subject, and given the contrast in Charles' attitudes and Naomi's, these lines become heavily ironic. Naomi is "easy" in the presence of her lover. But Charles, the romantic, is far from easy with her approach to love. He is, in fact, repelled by it, realizing perhaps that love with a woman who holds these attitudes has little future. The conflict between them, and indeed between romance and science, is as unresolved at the end of the poem as it was at the beginning. As Merrill commented in the closing scene of The Seraglio when remarking on the games, we are left inside the irony and the tension created by this juxtaposition because it does not come to resolution. And ultimately the title "Laboratory Poem," remains a contradiction in terms. In not resolving this contradiction, Merrill answers the questions the poem asks. Love, as he perceives it, cannot exist in this clinical atmosphere. Though "certain human hearts climb" through violence into "exquisite disciplines," they "all expired." Love in all its infinite possibility, paradoxically, can also lead to annihilation.

Love, then for Merrill is not an objective experience. Nor is it necessarily a joyous one. But it is in one sense an experience which can be life-threatening, if not physically, then emotionally and psychologically. Ironically that which gives life can also take it. Though "Laboratory Poem," among the lyrics is an extreme example, other work supports this view. One of the more interesting and complex

poems to do this is found in the same volume; a poem entitled "About the Phoenix."

"About the Phoenix" is a lengthy poem which deals with love as endurance. Here Merrill uses the myth of the Phoenix as a figure for love in general, and his love relationship with another in particular. The poem is a long meditation upon the meaning of the myth as it relates to love. He uses the myth as a figurative base for discussing his relationship with a lover, so that much of the poem's word play revolves around images associated with this legend.

The title itself is worth some comment. It illustrates a tone that is characteristic of much of Merrill's poetry. It also contains that curious double perspective. Notice, for example, that the title can be taken in two ways. He is writing a poem which is "about" the Phoenix; therefore the title is entirely appropriate. But there is another meaning here as well. There is something of the worldly-wise sophisticate in these words, with an implicit condescension written into the expression. We can almost hear the sigh, as if the world weary narrator has been asked a question "about the phoenix" and despite his annoyance has agreed to comment in reply to it.<sup>2</sup> He does so in the opening line by promptly dismissing any expectation that his remarks are in any way going to be romantic and ethereal. Rather, he intends to explode immediately any hopes his

audience may have that would allow them to retain their abstract and romantic notions about the myth and love. But he does not dismiss these attitudes without first exposing them. The poem opens with a kind of irreverence for the sacred cow of myth. "But in the end one tires of the high-flown."

Implicit in this line is a rejection of a romantic interpretation put upon this particular myth. It is as if he has just heard a rather tedious and idealized explanation of it from some novice in romance and feels compelled to set the record straight. Love is not what it may appear to be to the uninitiated. He continues to explain why.

If it were simply a matter of life or death  
We should by now welcome the darkening room,  
Wrinkling of linen, window at last violet,  
The rosy body lax in a chair of words,  
And then the appearance of unsuspected lights,  
We should walk wondering into that other world  
With its read signs pulsing and long lit lanes.  
(p. 66)

The passage hinges upon the "If it were" expression. If the myth, if love, were "simply a matter of life or death" then this view of it would be valid. Notice how he understates this proposition. Ultimately what consideration goes beyond "life or death"? What else is there but that? Apparently enough to cause Merrill to consider other aspects. He then gives us what love is not; "the darkening room," the window "at last violet," the body "rosy" and "lax in a chair of words," and the "appearance of unsuspected lights." For all our romantic hopes and our romantic words (even his



own), love is not these things, nor is the myth as a figure for love.

But often at nightfall, ambiguous  
As the city itself, a giant jeweled bird  
Comes cawing to the sill, dispersing thought  
Like a bird-bath, and with such final barbarity  
As to wear thin at once terror and novelty.

The irony of this poem is in part that Merrill uses the myth as a figure for love, yet he does not use it. So far from the reality of love as he knows it is the romantic concept of love, that the "final barbarity" of its reality wears thin at once "terror and novelty." This reality "comes cawing to the sill," and is so different from its idealized existence that it scatters thought "Like a bird-bath."

So that a sumptuous monotony  
Sets in, a pendulum of amethysts  
In the shape of a bird, keyed up for ever fiercer  
Flights between ardor and ashes, back and forth;  
Caught in whose talons any proof of grace,  
Even your face, particularly your face  
Faces, featureless in flame, or wan, a fading  
Tintype of some cooling love, according  
To the creature's whim.

(p. 66)

If we are controlled by romantic ideas of love, indeed by myth itself, then love becomes a flight "between ardor and ashes" and we are constantly being either consumed by our own flames, or cooled "according / To the creature's whim."

And in the end, despite  
Its pyrotechnic curiosity, the process  
Palls.

(p. 66)

Returning to his initial world-weary, love-weary tone he explains why this view of love simply cannot be sustained; it wears us out.<sup>3</sup> And despite our desire to sustain it, ultimately the "process / Palls." It "palls" because it exhausts us emotionally, as well as being invalid.

Then Merrill addresses the lover directly.

One night  
Your body winces grayly from its chair,  
Embarks, a tearful child, to rest  
On the dark breast of the fulfilled past.

But there is no refuge from the realities of love; not the past, nor romantic conceptions of it, nor myth itself can protect us. If we could find comfort in the "reality" of myth, i.e., the past, then our "very blood" would "tick out / Voluptuous homilies."

Ah, how well one might,  
It is were less than a matter of life or death,  
Traffic in strong prescriptions, "live and die!"

That is, we would find solace in "Voluptuous homilies" about love and about the myths of love, if these myths were true. But love is not that simple because it is a matter of "life or death," and this alone means that it cannot be taken lightly.

He returns at the close of the poem to explain the "point about the phoenix."

But couldn't the point about the phoenix  
Be not agony or resurrection, rather  
A mortal lull that follows either,  
During which flames expired as they should  
And dawn, discovering ashes not yet stirred,  
Buidlings in rain, but set on rock,

Beggar and sparrow entertaining one another,  
 Showed me your face, for that moment neither  
 Alive nor dead, but turned in sleep  
 Away from what ever waited to be endured.

(pp. 67-68)

The meaning of love, that is, its reality, as with the phoenix, is not in its "agony or resurrection," is not in its pain or joy, but rather in its endurance. He debunks love's highs and lows, its emotional "Flights between ardor and ashes," and chooses rather to believe in its ability to endure these vacillations. The flames expire "as they should." But this does not mean that love has died, rather that in the "ashes not yet stirred" we can begin to see love's reality; the "Buildings in rain, but set on rock." Notice that Merrill has reduced the mythological Phoenix first to a "giant jewelled bird" that "Comes cawing to the sill" and that is as "ambiguous / as the city itself" then to a "sparrow" who entertains the "Beggar," i.e., lover.

True love he describes as a "mortal lull." It is not mythological or divine, but rather its reality is all too human. The real lover, and real love, furthermore, does not rest in a state of cosmic suspension, waiting to be resurrected from his own magical ashes, but rather he simply sleeps, "neither alive nor dead," but turned away from "what ever waited to be endured."

"About the Phoenix" then is a poem that attempts to strip away the romantic misconceptions about real love. Though it does not take us as far as "Laboratory Poem," it

does succeed in reducing love to its lowest common denominator, endurance. This anti-romantic bias reflects Merrill's consistent insistence that the experience of love is far removed from what the romantic would like to believe about it. Indeed even the "suffering artist" cannot be allowed to view love as an acting out of the myths which so often misrepresent what love really is. Nevertheless, there is still a paradox here.

Twice in the poem, Merrill states that love is a matter of "life or death." Yet he also insists that it is not. That is, the poem, taken as a whole, attempts to explode the conception of love as life-threatening; it is, rather, simply endurance, divorced from any cosmic (and romantic) implications. It is a "mortal lull": the phoenix is a "sparrow" and the lover, a "Beggar" who "sleeps" in an attempt to avoid "what ever waited to be endured." How, then, can these two divergent views be reconciled? Perhaps they can't. Perhaps, ultimately, Merrill recognizes the incongruity in these positions, just as he recognizes the impossible paradox in infinite possibility and absolute annihilation. And it is this unspoken recognition that gives his poetry its peculiar irony and tension and leaves the reader somehow inside the paradox which cannot be resolved.

As these two poems indicate, Merrill's approach to love is unusual. In fact, as I will illustrate in my

discussion, he rarely writes what might be considered a traditional love lyric. Focusing on love's pain is not in itself unique. Indeed, focusing only on love's rewards, would be unique for a love poet. So his pessimism does not qualify him for any special consideration. What does make his love poetry interesting, however, is that these poems usually contain some little twist or turn which is both startling and unusual.

Merrill's early love poetry tends to be of this type. He seldom allows his lyrics to be traditional, usually introducing some incongruous element. For example in his first four volumes he writes love poems which include incest, women as hothouse plants, autoeroticism, and partings which are never accomplished. Not until relatively late in his career does he write lyrics which deal with traditional lovers and their problems. And these latter poems tend to reflect the position he takes in "About the Phoenix"; love as endurance. Again, Merrill's sexuality plays a part in these poems. That is, not until his seventh volume, Divine Comedies (1976) does he deal openly in his work with his homosexuality. In almost all cases prior to this volume if he is writing about a lover and his personal relationship, the lover is an impersonal "you," and is seemingly without sex, although that "you" is assumed by an audience to be female. Thus, the love lyrics are particularly well-defensed and Merrill himself as the author is particularly well

protected. There are, of course, practical considerations for this protection with regard to his reading public. But there are also personal emotional considerations as well, as I have already suggested.<sup>4</sup>

Personal experience with love, principally parental love, or the absence of it, has made Merrill wary of any love, and extremely vulnerable to its potential pain. He is therefore unwilling to commit himself wholly to it. As he matures, both personally and in print, this wariness gradually disappears. Though love remains a paradox, by Divine Comedies it is at least a paradox he can live with, accepting perhaps that though love can wreck havoc on any life, it can be survived.

I would like to suggest that there is a direct link between Merrill's sexuality and his love poems. This link, I believe, is self-acceptance. As I have indicated previously, Merrill's maturation both personally and publically is manifested in his work. Thus his earlier work, both poetry and fiction, often reflects a pessimism and a somewhat distorted view of sex. That is, his own need to keep his sexuality secret in a heterosexual world where he is the odd-man-out, the one who is painfully different, translates into his work as distortion; giving birth to often strikingly unusual, sometimes bizarre images and love situations. Again and again, for example, the Oedipal triad turns up in his poetry. This he does, no doubt, partly for its effect,

for the Oedipal implications usually occur in otherwise deceptively harmless situations. But it should also be recalled that in The Seraglio in the crucial scene of Part I, he gives us a series of fleeting images of distorted sexuality (exhibitionists, male hustlers, prostitutes) shortly before the central character castrates himself. His second novel, The (Diblos) Notebook, also has its share of complex sexual-love undercurrents, relying as it does upon the Oresteia and Oedipus Rex. The point is that given Merrill's home environment, and the climate of America with regard to sexuality and traditional moral values during his youth and early manhood, he had little choice but to hide his sexuality and suppress its natural expression in print. Therefore, his work reflects a kind of uneasiness or discomfort with traditional love and sexual themes. This, coupled with his natural bent for the unusual perspective, produces love poetry and love themes in fiction which are permeated with the darker, perhaps more secretive and bizarre side of sexuality. But this, too, changes.

Merrill's later work reflects the change. The bizarre and the distorted disappears. I believe it disappears precisely because Merrill becomes more comfortable with himself and his sexuality as the sexual climate of America begins to loosen and as he comes to terms with his own past. His fifth volume of poetry, The Fire Screen (1969), for example, is dedicated to David Jackson, Merrill's long time

companion and romantic interest. Prior to 1969, only one other mention is made of Mr. Jackson. The final poem of Water Street (1962) called "A Tenancy" is also dedicated to him. And as I have previously suggested this particular poem is about residency within the self and the past.

Recalling the final stanza is telling.

And then, not asking why they come,  
 Invite the visitors to sit.  
 If I am host at last  
 It is of little more than my own past.  
 May others be at home in it.

(p. 53)

Thus, with Water Street the process of acceptance has begun, though not until Divine Comedies, is it complete. The twenty years which intervene produce changes.

I am suggesting that as Merrill's acceptance of himself increases and solidifies, which of course includes his sexuality and his views on love, and as he matures, his work changes. He no longer sees himself as abnormal or twisted and no longer feels the need to either hide or suppress what for him is the natural expression of love, expressed for what for him is its natural object. Thus in Divine Comedies, David Jackson is quite obviously the love interest (even mentioned by name) and we realize in retrospect that many of his love lyrics, addressed as they are to that anonymous "you," must in fact be for and about his relationship with Jackson.<sup>5</sup> And this openness is directly attributable to his growth and self-acceptance.



That is not to say, however, that Merrill ever completely trusts love. His later love poems, as I have suggested, tend to view love, even long-time enduring love, as uncertain. But there is also an obvious change in his tone. As I will illustrate, there is a stronger belief that despite its vacillations, its "Flights between ardor and ashes," love endures, and once felt, is somehow permanent.

I want to return now to a chronological discussion of Merrill's love lyrics to illustrate the points I have made, both about irony and its central position in his work, and the effect of his sexuality on that work. Both "Laboratory Poem" and "About the Phoenix" appear in Merrill's second volume, The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (1959). His first volume, First Poems (1951) also contains many love poems. In fact, the volume's total work is about equally divided between the childhood poems (which are love poems in one sense) and more adult love lyrics. Here, too, Merrill's early tendency toward pessimism and the unusual is evident.

For example, in a love poem entitled "Poem in Spring" (pp. 20-21), Merrill takes a traditional situation and twists it, introducing an incongruous psychic element. The poem is formally organized into four, eight-line stanzas, rhymed aabbccdd. It concerns a family outing in Spring, yet as we quickly discover this is no ordinary family, but one permeated by psycho-sexual undercurrents.

The narrator is the son and he addresses the poem to his sister. But their relationship falls somewhere in that nebulous area that is more than family and less than lovers. The poem is full of sexual innuendoes.

Being born of earth, we've come to sit  
 On fecund ground and fondle it--  
 A filial diversion this.  
 Then brother-sisterly we kiss  
 Who cannot tell one branch for buds  
 Nor see for trees, the April woods  
 Cloudy with green nor, amorous,  
 Think autumn looks askance at us.  
 (p. 20)

He opens the poem with an image of the "fecund" earth. This, in itself, is not unusual for a poet, though Merrill is decidedly not a nature poet. What is unusual is that the narrator and his sister "fondle it," engaging in a kind of foreplay with Mother Nature, which he calls a "filial diversion." Two things are worth noting here. Mother Nature, the Earth, is an "it," an "it" which nevertheless has the capacity to at least figuratively give birth. Secondly Merrill uses the word "diversion" which in the sexual context of the setting (i.e., Spring, the "fecund" earth) also carries some suggestion of infidelity. Yet the image is complicated by the narrator's response to the earth; he fondles it. If this sexless entity is also his figurative mother (no small feat since she is an it), then his sexual foreplay is incestuous.

He then introduces the two principles, he and his sister, who "kiss," but cannot see "for trees, the April

woods / Cloudy with green." He puns upon the "forest for the trees" metaphor, but then returns in the final line to a change of season. It is Spring, yet "autumn looks askance at us." He also uses the word "amorous" in describing his relationship both with his sister and with this neutered earth.

One point I want to make here is that Merrill's technical proficiency, as well as his control of images is not as great in his early work as it becomes in his later work. He sacrifices clarity of content to form.<sup>6</sup> The figures are so complex that they simply fail. The earth is both "fecund" and neuter. His relationship with her is incestuous. But it may be that in order to sustain the rhyme, he has to make Mother Nature an "it" (to rhyme with "sit". Furthermore, it is Spring, a fitting time for love and sex of whatever kind, and yet it is "autumn" that thinks their behavior is peculiar. In this case, then, the incongruities which so often work so well for him, fail because they are also inconsistent and confused. He does not stop, however, with these complications. Stanza two makes an already complex situation even more bizarre.

Our father by his hour-glass  
 Drowsing, approves the pretty pass;  
 Our mother dresses even now  
 In young girls' finery, as though  
 To tempt her sons to a Greek deed  
 In the green shade of her great need.  
 Come, with their prime example, love  
 Only those things we're parcel of . . . .

(p. 20)

Now we are introduced to the narrator's parents. His father sleeps, though he also "approves" of his son's "pretty pass" at his daughter, while his mother plays the perennial coquette, reflecting Spring's figurative rebirth and youth. Yet now, this aging Jocasta seems to have only "sons." There is no mention of a daughter. And these sons are tempted to a "Greek deed" in "the green shade of her great need." The Oedipal situation is recreated, with the exception that there is now more than one Oedipus. The father sleeps, while the mother plots sexual union with her "sons." This incestuous image is then reinforced with the last two lines which admonish that it is better to keep it in the family; to "love / only those things we're parcel of."

Though the sister has disappeared momentarily, she reappears in the third stanza. The narrator seems to suggest that the complications of this amazing family relationships are somehow preferable to the ordinary.

For innocence is useful, too,  
 In springtime. Sister, let us woo  
 Complications of limb and leaf  
 And our own limbs and their one life,  
 As all is wooed by earth and season.  
 The single beauty in such treason  
 --Apart from penance done too late--  
 Is that it is immediate.

(p. 20)

Again, Merrill has to stretch here to sustain both the form and the rhyme scheme (too-woo, leaf-life, late-immediate). Addressing his sister again, he suggests that

they should court "Complications of limb and leaf" just as the earth and the season courts "all." But this, he then immediately calls a "treason," but one nevertheless that has a "single beauty." And this single beauty is that satisfaction is "immediate." He seems to suggest here that lust is its own reward, though it also requires "penance" that is "done too late." These last lines also reinforce the Oedipal theme; the remorse which has somehow been worth it.

As confusing as the images are, however, he does make an attempt to tie them together in the last stanza, coming back to autumn and death. The season of love, apparently, has passed and now they must pay the price.

In good time time's enough there'll be  
No more, dear orphaned love, to see  
The trees for the sapped forest, or  
Dropped leaves for the brown forest floor:  
Gold they will fall, incestuous gold  
The personal, and soon be mould,  
Indictment of our days that in  
Such curious vividness begin.

(p. 21)

He also returns to the "forest for the trees" figure, but it is less clear here than when he first used it in stanza one. The trees are "sapped," and the leaves are dead and drop from the trees. But they are "incestuous gold" and are a personal "indictment" of their days. This strange love has now been "orphaned," both from Mother Earth and from his biological parents. So as the poem

begins in Spring, it ends with autumn. As the lovers seemed in the beginning to have more parents than they needed, now they have none. As their love was once directed in all directions, now it points only toward death. And the rather overworked moral seems to be, to loosely paraphrase the bible, the wages of violating taboos is death.

Generally the poem fails. The images in particular are confused and confusing. His characteristic incongruity with a view toward creating tension and irony is simply too great to leave the reader with any figurative consistency with which to construct a support for the poem. Nevertheless, the poem does illustrate Merrill's somewhat unorthodox approach to a conventional theme. And there is some fairly clear irony, though it is minor. The "Poem in Spring" seems rather to be dominated by autumn; life turns to death; love leads to annihilation. Beyond these, there seems little of either his characteristic skill or clarity.

He is somewhat more successful, though hardly less pessimistic, in another poem in First Poems entitled "The Broken Bowl" (pp. 4-5). Again he takes an unusual image and manipulates it into a figure for love. In this case, the image becomes a conceit.<sup>7</sup> The poem is formally organized into four, eight-line stanzas with irregular rhyme. The first two stanzas concentrate exclusively on the figure of a broken bowl. In the third, we discover that the broken bowl is like love. This then puts all that he says

in stanzas one and two into another light. In the fourth he completes the images by drawing a direct comparison. The poem is technically better than "Poem in Spring," though it has that same complex line construction that is, at times, difficult to follow. In fact, each stanza is actually a single sentence, so that in thirty-two lines there are only four complete sentences. This, as I have pointed out, is one of Merrill's favorite techniques.

The poem, however, tends to take the easy way out in terms of word choice. That is, one of the more consistent criticisms of Merrill's work has been that he often comes dangerously close to being "cute" in his choice of puns or word play, opting too often for the easy twist of a word choice or manipulation of a pun where a fresher image would have served better.<sup>8</sup> This is evident in "Poem in Spring" in such lines as "In the green shade of her great need," where the reversal of vowel sounds, "green shade" and "great need" (green-need, great-shade) is so clever that it distracts from the meaning. The same criticism can be applied to his puns. In this case I refer to the "forest for the trees" image ("Nor see, for trees, the April woods" and "to see / The trees for the sapped forest,") which is a little overworked, and ultimately detracts from the serious nature of his statement. "The Broken Bowl" exhibits this same tendency. As his skill increases, however, he resorts less and less to these techniques.

The poem begins with a characteristically complex statement which is put in the form of a periodic sentence.

To say it once held daisies and bluebells  
 Ignores, if nothing else,  
 Its diehard brilliance where, crashed on the floor,  
 The wide bowl lies that seemed to cup the sun,  
 Its green leaves curled, its constant blaze undone,  
 Spilled all its glass integrity everywhere;  
 Spectrums, released, will speak  
 Of colder flowerings where cold crystal broke.  
 (p. 4)

This fragmenting or fragmented image will remain consistent throughout the poem. Generally, it becomes a figure for love itself, much as Henry James uses the figure of the bowl in The Golden Bowl. The connection is suggested by the idea that love which is whole, like the unbroken bowl, is also love that is not free. Breaking it (both the bowl and love) is somehow freeing. This then corresponds to an ultimate statement that only through pain can we feel love.

In stanza two he continues to develop this image.

Glass fragments dropped from wholeness to hodgepodge  
 Yet fasten to each edge  
 The opal signature of imperfection  
 Whose rays, though disarrayed, will postulate  
 More than a network of cross-angled light  
 When through the dusk they point unbruised directions  
 And chart upon the room  
 Capacities of fire it must assume.

(p. 4)

Again in this first line the cleverness of an expression, "from wholeness to hodgepodge" threatens to overwhelm the statement. Notice also in line four the play on the word "ray." It is stated, then contradicted or



cancelled: the rays are disarrayed. But this, also a favorite technique, is more acceptable than expressions such as "wholeness to hodgepodge."

In stanza three he begins finally to point out the similarities between a broken bowl and love.

The splendid curvings of glass artifice  
 Informed its flawlessness  
 With lucid unities. Freed from these now,  
 Like love it triumphs through inconsequence  
 And builds its harmony from dissonance  
 And lies somehow within us, broken, as though  
 Time were a broken bowl  
 And our last joy knowing it shall not heal.  
 (p. 4)

Though the bowl was perfect and whole, it must be freed, paradoxically, from its own perfection. The "lucid unities" must be fragments, like love, to be free. And "like love it triumphs through inconsequence." "It" here is both the bowl and love. He suggests that love's very inconsequence is its greatest victory, just as the bowl fragmented into pieces is at last free of its very perfection. It would seem, then, that love must be both flawed and fragmented to be whole.

The fourth and last stanza brings the bowl and love together, but Merrill's final statement is not optimistic.

The splinters rainbowing ruin on the floor  
 Cut structures in the air,  
 Mark off, like eyes or compasses, a face  
 Of mathematic fixity, spotlight  
 Within whose circumscription we may set  
 All solitudes of love, room for love's face,  
 Love's projects green with leaves,  
 Love's monuments like tombstones on our lives.  
 (p. 5)

Merrill unifies the poem through the splintered glass image and the leaf image, both of which are first used in stanza one. The leaves etched into the glass become "Love's projects green with leaves." Notice that love's joy is conspicuously absent from this final stanza. Instead, he mentions the "solitudes of love" and "Love's monuments" which he likens to "tombstones on our lives." Thus the memory of love and loves he sees as loss rather than gain. The memories seem to be all of a kind, rather than a mixture of both joy and sorrow. Love builds monuments, yet paradoxically, these monuments are gravestones which mark the time and place of loss. The love experience of his life is measured in moments of loss which lay buried behind him. And even growth or knowledge seems to be absent.

Thus in "The Broken Bowl" love is counted as loss. But there is still in the poem an unresolved paradox. Though love's monuments are "tombstones on our lives," nevertheless love "triumphs through inconsequence" and "love's projects" are "green with leaves." Green, traditionally is the color of fertility and life. Thus he represents "love's projects" as fertile and potentially life-giving, while simultaneously love's "monuments" are seen as "tombstones." The paradox is precisely the paradox of infinite possibility and absolute annihilation, and therefore can

never be fully resolved except through acceptance of its ultimate duality.

First Poems contains several other poems which treat this theme in much the same way as "Poem in Spring" and "The Broken Bowl." They include "Kite Poem" (p. 34) which is a very formal look at promiscuity, "Four Little Poems" (pp. 35-38) where he concludes that "love dismembers hours," "Variations: The Air is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards" (pp. 27-31) which says ultimately that only love guarded by thorns (pain) is sweet, and "Figures in a Legendary Glade" (pp. 43-44) which claims that even the children of love are doomed. In all First Poems gives a discouraging view of love, holding that it is at best strange and powerful and threatening. His second volume, The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace does little to alter this pessimism.<sup>9</sup> I have already discussed two of the book's better poems on the subject, "Laboratory Poem" and "About the Phoenix," but others support this view.

In "The Greenhouse" (pp. 9-10), for example, Merrill pictures women as hot-house plants, their needs vaguely threatening the narrator. This poem, as well as others in the volume, are much better technically than those in First Poems, though their themes are no less pessimistic. The poem is one long stanza without a break. He begins by suggesting the women-as-plant images.

So many girls vague in the yielding orchard,  
None at my passing but has seemed therefore  
To grow a little, to have put forth a tentative  
Frond, touch my arm and, as we went,  
Trailingly inquire, but smilingly, of the  
greenhouse  
--One has heard so much, was it never to be seen?  
(p. 9

As he passes, he states that they seemed "To grow a little," alert, perhaps, to the male presence. And each puts forth a "tentative / Frond" to "touch . . . [his] . . . arm." He suggests that this need, and its manifestation of a reaching out to him, is vaguely threatening. There are, after all, "So many" who touch him as he passes. It goes without saying that to a homosexual female need, whether emotional or sexual, would be threatening.

He continues to describe the hot-house as "the least impressive room: and "hotter here than elsewhere."

And here the seedlings had been set to breeding  
Their small green tedium of need:  
Each plant alike, each plaintively devouring  
One form, meek sprout atremble in the glare  
Of the ideal condition. So many women  
Oval under overburdened limbs,  
And such vague needs, each witlessly becoming  
Desire . . .

(p. 9)

Feminine need now becomes more sinister, if not more tedious. Their needs are "seedlings" which have been "set to breeding" their "small green tedium of need." Each plant, each woman, is somehow "alike" and each "plaintively" devours "One form." He suggests in these lines that feminine metamorphosis is like that of a plant. But each

stage devours itself in the process. This "devouring" he then immediately juxtaposes to a "meek sprout atremble in the glare / of the ideal condition." The word "condition" refers both to the ideal conditions for growth in the greenhouse and to the romantic notions women in his perception often have about love. The total effect of these lines, however, is unflattering to women and their needs which Merrill suggests are overwhelming, capable of "devouring" men. In fact, the very word "need" seems to devour the poem. Notice in the first two lines, for example, the number of words which rhyme with need; "seedlings," "breeding," "green," and "tedium."

He continues to close the poem with further references to the sheer numbers of women who, like hot-house plants, have a continual need for attention and care.

--Tell me (I said)  
 Among these thousands which you are!  
 And I will lead you backwards where the wrench  
 Of rifling fingers snaps the branch,  
 And all loves less than the proud love  
     fastened on  
 Suffer themselves to be rotted clean out of  
     conscience  
 By human neglect, by the naked sun,  
 So none shall tempt, when she is gone.  
(pp. 9-10)

His response to these needs is, however, violent and sexual. He tells the women "among these thousands" that he will "lead [her] . . . backwards" where the "wrench / Of rifling fingers snaps the branch." But notice also his choice of

words for that single and special relationship. It is "the proud love fastened on." The word "fastened" suggests an almost forceful clinging to so that all but this love shall be "rotted clean out of conscience / By human neglect." This also suggests that woman, in her great need must obliterate all other women from man's mind, so that "none shall tempt, when she is gone."

It is significant that Merrill takes the image of woman-as-plant and endows it with an almost sinister growth. That is, the figure of woman-as-plant is entirely appropriate and has been often used to suggest the growth of young girls into beautiful women and figuratively blossoming plants. But these woman-as-plants "breed" a "small green tedium of need" and devour themselves and others in the process of maturation. They are therefore threatening both as plants and as people. And the narrator is threatened on both levels. The greenhouse, then, becomes a kind of female conspiracy in which the hapless male is trapped. This, as I have suggested, is a homosexual response to women in general and to their needs in particular, and paints a bleak picture of love.

Though "The Greenhouse" appears to reject the needs of women as too great, another poem entitled "Hotel de l'Universe et Portugal" paints an equally bleak picture of adult love. It is a strange poem that is permeated by

dream imagery. The poem is a meditation upon the lover's lives together and takes place entirely in bed in a kind of half-waking reverie. It speaks of aging and of their love which has grown threadbare as the years have passed. Though in the end they find some small temporary renewal, the poem remains a bleak reminder of what love as endurance can mean. The poem opens with an ironic reversal whereby the lovers are the bed's dream.

The strange bed, whose recurrent dream we are,  
 Basin, and shutters guarding with their latch  
 The hour of arrivals, the reputed untouched Square.  
 Bleakly with ever fewer belongings we watch  
 And have never, it each time seems so coldly before

Steeped the infant membrane of our clinging  
 In a strange city's clear grave acids;  
 Or thought how like a pledge the iron key-ring  
 Slid overboard, one weighty calm at Rhodes,  
 Down to the vats of its eventual rusting.

(p. 17)

The opening stanzas suggest that their relationship has reached a crisis. In the strange image of the "infant membrane of . . . [their] . . . clinging," he illustrates their enduring need for one another. Yet that need is somehow being put to the test in the "city's clear grave acids"; furthermore the "iron key-ring" which is likened to "a pledge" has been dropped into the "weighty calm at Rhodes" and there will rust; that is, the pledge will rust from lack of use.

He continues in stanzas three and four to suggest that aging together as lovers has somehow lessened their feeling for one another. The feeling, furthermore, annuls

itself as it is felt day after day. Their lives become more bleak.

And letters moulting out of memory, lost  
Seasons of the breast of a snowbird . . .  
One morning on the pillow shall at last  
Lie strands of age, and many a crease converge  
Where the ambitious dreaming head has tossed

The world away and turned, and taken dwelling  
Within the pillow's dense white dark, has heard  
The lovers' speech from cool walls peeling  
To the white bed, whose dream they were.  
Bare room, forever feeling and annulling,

(p. 17)

He captures something of their history together in the image of the "letters moulting out of memory, lost / Seasons of the breast of a snowbird . . . ." These letters are perhaps love letters, and the "Seasons" of their youth and youthful love are "lost," replaced by an image of age and a curious insecurity which compels them to bury themselves in the pillow's "dense white dark." This incongruous image is then followed by the suggestion that their words to one another, their "lovers' speech," peels from the "cool walls" of their "Bare room." The barrenness of the room then becomes a figure for their love which is also barren and bleak, forever being felt and annulled. This barren room image recalls the lines in the first stanza which suggest the bleakness of their life together, the "ever fewer belongings." The word "belongings" here has then two meanings; belongings in the sense of material possessions, and belongings in the sense of belonging to each other.



In the final two stanzas, Merrill brings all the bleakness of life and love together suggesting that ultimately even identity, that is, the self, is lost to nothing and perhaps nothingness.

Bare room, bleak problems set for space,  
Fold us ever and over in less identity  
Than six walls hold, the oval mirror face  
Showing us vacantly how to become only  
Bare room, mere air, no hour and no place,

Lodging of chance, and bleak as all beginnings.  
We had begun perhaps to lack a starlit square.  
But now our very poverties are dissolving,  
Are swallowed up, strong powders to ensure  
Sleep, by a strange bed in the dark of dreaming.  
(p. 18)

From their physical position in the room, in bed, they see only the bleakness of their surroundings, and this bleakness is a figure for their love. Even the "oval mirror face" reflects "only / Bare room, mere air" and this they take as a lesson, showing them only the bleakness and barrenness of their lives and loves which occupy "no hour and no place." Gradually, then they lose their identity, their "selves," and once gone they simply cease to exist figuratively.

The only hope in the entire poem comes in the final stanza when Merrill remarks that they had "begun perhaps to lack a starlit square"; that is, they have lost the romance of their life together, and that their "very poverties are dissolving." But the hope is short-lived, is "swallowed up," not by a renewal of their love, but rather by oblivion, represented in the final lines as sleep. Sleep is a

traditional poetic figure for death. Notice, however, that the sleep is "ensured" by "strong powders," i.e., drugs.

Thus, as in so many other poems, this one ends in a kind of figurative annihilation. Even love cannot spare them. Indeed, love itself contributes to the barrenness, the bleakness of life which they cannot somehow survive. Returning to the title, it is evident that the name of the hotel, their "Lodging of Chance," is in no way haphazard. It is the "Hotel de l'Univers et Portugal," suggesting figuratively that this little room, in all its bareness, is both their universe and their university, teaching them, ironically, the very pointlessness of existence which comes ultimately only to death.

Looking more closely at some of the lines reveals that same rhetorical irony that is so characteristic of Merrill's work. To begin with the lovers are the bed's "recurrent dream." It is the bed which dreams, and not the lovers. Though they are inside the room, still the "Basin, and Shutters" guard "with their latch" the "hour of arrivals," and the square upon which the hotel sits. Their need for one another he calls an "infant membrane" which is dipped in the strange city's "clear grave acids." Much like the verbal violence in "Laboratory Poem" here Merrill juxtaposes two very incongruous elements; a delicate membrane and grave acids. The results of this meeting are horrifying to consider. He then juxtaposes this fragile

membrane image to the durability of an "iron-key-ring" which is like a "pledge," but which nevertheless is capable of "eventual rusting." Their need for one another is fragile; their pledge to one another is durable, yet can rust.

Though the lovers are the bed's recurrent dream, this image is reversed in the third and fourth stanzas where "many a crease converge[s]"; the creases of the aging face and of the bed-clothes, and the "ambitious dreaming head has tossed / The world away." Paradoxically, familiarity with the loved one has not created security, but rather a kind of insecurity which causes the need to bury the head in a pillow, to shut out the world, the lover, and reality. The pillow, furthermore, is a "dense white dark." He then reverses the bed-dream image once again to make the lovers the bed's dream.

In the final line of stanza four, Merrill gives us that characteristic paradox. The "Bare room" is "forever feeling and annulling." Apparently, both actions are experiences simultaneously; yet they are contradictory, each being the antithesis of the other, and each, in its own way, is equally terrifying. I suggest that this is simply another form of the basic paradox of existence, here set in the context of love; infinite possibility and absolute annihilation. And the paradox as is usually the case, is not resolved, but creates rather a profound pessimism

illustrated by the image of the bare room and the bleak surroundings. And this image, in turn, is itself a figure for their love.

Again, in stanza five as well, Merrill extends these paradoxical images with the figure of the mirror. The mirror shows them "vacantly" how to become the "Bare room, mere air, no hour and no place." That is, the mirror reflects the barrenness of their life (room). To take this image one step further, as the line does, the mirror shows them how to become nothing--"no hour and no place." They simply do not exist in time and space as a reflection in the mirror. Yet, they do.

The images in the poem, then, are frequently contradictory. In this case, they are pessimistic and underscore the bleakness and barrenness of their enduring relationship. Figuratively, in fact, the poem--the experience of love as it is recounted in the poem--leads them to nothingness; to "no hour and no place"; to dreams and the darkness of annihilation. The tension created by these incongruities and contradictions is ultimately ironic.

As I have suggested previously, it is with Water Street that Merrill begins to exhibit some changes in his feelings about himself and his life. Both the childhood poems and the poems about love include this altered perspective. Although this process of change will take twenty years, it has at least been begun with this volume.

Technically the poems of Water Street are better.<sup>10</sup> There is also a kind of quiet, often understated confidence in these verses which is not there before. I have already discussed several of the poems in Water Street (see Chapter II). So I will deal with only one here which is representative of his position seen in many of the others in the volume. No where is the position more obvious than in a love lyric called "Poem of Summer's End" (pp. 9-11). It is formally organized into twelve, five-line stanzas, rhymed aabba. As in "Hotel de l'Univers et Portugal" the poem has lovers abroad as its central concern. This time they are in an inn, in Italy.<sup>11</sup> As the title indicates it is the end of the summer, and presumably of their travels. It is perhaps also figuratively the end of their struggles to understand love and one another. Merrill gives us a series of impressions, tiny events in themselves, but moments which represent all of life's experience. The poem then is in part about their life together, what it has been and what it has become. As in "Hotel de l'Univers et Portugal," Merrill creates images which reflect a kind of barrenness, a weathered love, but one that nevertheless endures. It is this endurance, and indeed their part in it, which is at last recognized and accepted at the poem's close. As in so many of his love lyrics, this one is addressed to the lover, the "you."

Within the first two stanzas Merrill introduces the lovers. It is a decidedly unromantic picture.

The morning of the equinox  
 Begins with brassy clouds and cocks.  
 All the inn's shutters clatter wide  
 Upon Fair Umbria. Twitching at my side  
 You burrow in sleep like a red fox.

Mostly, these weeks, we toss all night, we touch  
 By accident. The heat! The food!  
 Groggily aware of spots that itch  
 I curse the tiny creatures which  
 Have flecked our mended sheets with blood.

(p. 9)

Initially, he focuses upon the external--the place. Then quickly moves inside where it is immediately revealed that "Fair Umbria" is not so fair after all. Rather the lovers suffer from the heat, bad food, and body lice. The potentially and traditionally romantic Italian peninsula is negatively portrayed. But it, too, reflects the state of their relationship. Any romantic idealism once held gives way to the realities of two people simply surviving in a relationship which has become perhaps more habit than romance.

With quick shifts in time, he then moves us again out into the external world.

At noon in a high wind, to bell and song,  
 Upon the shoulders of the throng,  
 The gilt bronze image of St. So-and-So  
 Heaves precipitiously along.  
 Worship has worn away his toe.

Nevertheless the foot thrust forward, dips  
 Again, again, into its doom of lips  
 And tears, a vortex of black shawls,  
 Garlic, frankincense, Popery, festivals  
 Held at the moon's eclipse,

As in their trance the faithful pass  
 On to piazza and cafe.  
 We go deliberately the other way  
 Through the town gates, lie down in grass.  
 But the wind howls, the sky turns color-of-clay.  
 (p. 9)

The poem continually juxtaposes the two worlds in which they live; the external with its rituals, its events, its faith and its doubt, with the internal which somehow reflects it in small. The panorama of the human drama with its ecstasies and agonies, its blind faith and religious intensities is contrasted to the quiet, almost meditative life of lovers who retreat deeper into the securities of their endurance as a couple. Yet, they cannot deny the world, for they are part of it; part of "its doom of lips / And tears." Even nature seems to reflect that something has ended. We soon discover that it is not just the season.

The time for making love is done.  
 A far off, sulphur-pale facade  
 Gleams and goes out. It is as though by one  
 Flash of lightning all things made  
 Had glimpsed their maker's heart, read and obeyed.

With this stanza the process of acceptance has begun. Their relationship is one of the "things made" which the lightning has figuratively and momentarily illuminated. Fittingly at this point in the poem, Merrill returns to inner space.

Back on our bed of iron and lace  
 We listen to the loud rain fracture space,  
 And let at first each other's hair  
 Be lost in gloom, then lips, then the whole face.  
 If either speaks the other does not hear.  
 (p. 10)

He reinforces the connecting link between the external world of its "doom of lips / And tears" to their internal world where they are "lost in gloom." However, there is paradoxically a triple isolation. They are apart in their relationship from the world through which they move, yet they are also apart from one another, each lost in and to himself within this relationship. Figuratively he connects these worlds in the next stanza by repeating the image of the rain, but it is now given a new perspective.

For a decade love has rained down  
 On our two hearts, instructing them  
 In a strange bareness, that of weathered stone.  
 Thinking how bare our hearts have grown  
 I do not know if I feel pride or shame.

(p. 10)

Though their relationship is "stone," it is also "weathered." As they have used love through feeling it, love itself, as in the image of the Saint with the missing toe, has weathered them, wearing them down over a "decade." Thus Merrill juxtaposes the religious intensity of worship with what is perhaps a self-indulgent worship of one another and love itself. But the result is the same.

He also exhibits the characteristic paradox of existence within a relationship, and his typical (and typically human) ambivalence toward its inevitable changes. He doesn't know whether to feel "pride or shame" at how barren their love has become, and so feels both. This attitude recalls the progression of feeling in "About the Phoenix,"



and his paradoxical regret and relief that romance does not  
and indeed in his view, cannot survive in a relationship,  
though the relationship itself can.

Breaking this reverie, he returns in the next stanzas  
to the external world and their place in it.

The time has passed to go and eat.  
Had it? I do not know. A beam of light  
Reveals you calm but strangely white.  
A final drop of rain clicks in the street.  
Somewhere a clock strikes. It is not too late

To set out dazed, sit side by side  
In the one decent restaurant.  
The handsome boy who has already tried  
To interest you (and been half gratified)  
Helps us to think of what we want.

(p. 10)

The doubt expressed above is not just doubt about  
the time and food, but rather also and more importantly  
doubt about their time together, past, present and future.  
What has it meant and what does it mean? Still awareness of  
one another persists in the suggestion of jealousy over the  
handsome youth, who "Helps . . . [them] . . . to think of  
what . . . [they] . . . want." As we discover, however,  
the choice of dinner is also a choice of life.

I do not know--have I ever known?--  
Unless concealed in the next town,  
In the next image blind with use, a clue,  
A worn path, points the long way round back to  
The springs we started out from. Sun

Weaker each sunrise reddens that slow maze  
So freely entered. Now come days  
When lover and beloved know  
That love is what they are and where they go.

Each learns to read at length the other's gaze.

(p. 11)

Thus the search for meaning begins and ends with self. Going into the world to gain understanding of themselves and their relationship has lead ultimately back to inner space, and to love itself. They, in the end, define love by their participation in it. And the search, the process itself is ironically the product. They are love and love exists wherever they go simply because it is within them. The "worn path" leads them back to themselves. What they have learned, what their search has revealed, is only an understanding of this reality. In the final line, Merrill juxtaposes the very simplicity of this revelation to the complex tangle of emotions, of the rituals of love, he represents earlier in the poem through the Catholic worshippers. At base, love is simply learning "to read at length the other's gaze." And, in this, is love's meaning.

In Merrill's fourth volume, Nights and Days we can see this same quiet confidence.<sup>12</sup> Though there is still pain, still uncertainty, still fear, there is also more acceptance of these feelings as a normal and natural part of love. Much of the pessimism, also, seems to have disappeared. There is more hope that whatever the problems, love and the lovers can survive. We can see something of these feelings in a short, three stanza poem entitled "Between Us" (p. 21). It is set, once again, in bed. The narrator awakens with his lover beside him. But in the half-waking state, he sees a face between them on the

pillow. He sees it from his distorted perspective as a kind of shrunken head, and it frightens him.

A . . . face? There  
It lies on the pillow by  
Your turned lead's tangled graying hair:  
Another--like a shrunken head--too small!  
My eyes in dread  
Shut. Open. It is there.

(p. 21)

In this stanza, the "shrunken head" is used as a figure for his fear; a fear that anything human could come between them. But its distorted nature is also a fitting figure for the effect of fear in love relationships. Fear distorts his perception so that all he sees is distorted.

He continues in stanza two to examine the figure more closely.

Waxen, inhuman. Small  
The taut crease of the mouth shifts. It  
Seems to smile,  
Chin up in the wan light. Elsewhere  
I have known what it was, this thing, known  
The blind eye-slit,

(p. 21)

In another context, "Elsewhere," he has "known what it was." But fear has blocked his remembering. This "thing" has come between him and his beloved, and is therefore more sinister than it turns out in reality to be. In the final stanza we discover, with the narrator, that his fears are empty.

And knuckle-sharp cheekbone--  
Ah. And again do.  
Not a face. A hand, seen queerly. Mine  
Deliver me, I breathe  
Watching it unclench with a soft moan  
And reach for you.

(p. 21)

Suddenly he remembers where he has seen this thing, and what it is. It is his own hand. His insecurity, however, has taken its toll and distorted his perception, making of his hand a fearful spectre. Unnerved by this brush with his own fears and insecurities, he asks for deliverance. The deliverance, however, is not from anything or anyone who might come between them, but rather from his own fear which has figuratively driven a wedge between lover and beloved. It is this fear Merrill indicates which can destroy a relationship much more quickly than a third party. Paradoxically, the fear figuratively is self. The lover, therefore, fears his own feelings. And this is simply another way of saying that the lover fears his self. Thus, Merrill's characteristic ambivalence is again illustrated. Love comes out of self. Yet self is also to be feared, and is, in fact, fear itself. It would seem then that love places the lovers in the unenviable and proverbial position between the rock and the hard place. The lover's solution in this case is simply to reach for the beloved, insecurities dissolved, or at least allayed through physical contact.

In another poem in Nights and Days, however, Merrill gives a more balanced view of love. Entitled "Days of 1964," this seventy-four line poem is set in Athens, Greece. Once again it concerns the relationship between the narrator and his lover. Here, however, the lovers are set against a third person; a woman named Kleo who is Merrill's housekeeper

at his home in Athens. She appears in several of his poems. In some sense, Kleo is the central character in this poem and Merrill uses her as a figure for the dual nature of love. Kleo is both a housekeeper and a whore. The narrator runs into her outside of the home in Athens and is surprised to see her in her other role. The effect of this chance meeting causes him to contemplate love and our need for it, in whatever form it may take.

Stanza one simply sets the stage, mentioning sights close to his home; "steep hill"; a view of "city and sea"; "Cyclamen, autumn crocus." In stanza two he introduces Kleo, giving us one side of her nature.

I brought home flowers from my climbs.  
 Kyria Kleo who cleaned for us  
 Put them in water, sighing "Virgin, Virgin."  
 Her legs hurt. She wore brown, was fat, past fifty,  
 And looked like a Palmyra matron  
 Copied in lard and horsehair. How she loved  
 You, me, loved us all, the bird, the cat!  
 I think now she was love. She sighed and glistened  
 All day with it, or pain, or both.  
 (We did not notably communicate.)  
 She lived nearby with her pious mother  
 And wastrel son. She called me her real son.  
 (p. 45)

Paradoxically, the whore sighs "Virgin, Virgin." She is pictured in unattractive ways, yet Merrill says "I think now she was love." The "now" of this line, of course, must be taken in the present tense, after he has discovered (later in the poem) that Kleo has another occupation. This perhaps indicates that Merrill accepts this part of her personality without it having changed his opinion of her. In fact, it

may contribute to his feeling for her. There is a little virgin and a little whore in each of us. It is worth noting also that the "pious mother" and the "wastrel son" are each given space in other of his poems. The "pious mother" turns out to be senile and unbalanced. The "wastrel son" Merrill reveals in another poem is a homosexual.

In the next stanza, Merrill introduce the lovers.

I paid her generously, I dare say.  
Love makes one generous. Look at us. We'd known  
Each other so briefly that instead of sleeping  
We lay whole nights, open in the lamplight,  
And gazed, or traded stories.

(p. 45)

Here the lovers are "open" with and to one another.

In the next stanza the other side of Kleo and more of the lovers is revealed.

One hour comes back--you gasping in my arms  
With love, or laughter, or both,  
I having just remembered and told you  
What I'd looked up to see on my way downtown  
at noon:  
Poor old Kleo, her aching legs  
Trudging into the pines. I called,  
Called three times before she turned.  
Above a tight, skyblue sweater, her face  
Was painted. Yes. Her face was painted  
Clown-white, white of the moon by daylight,  
Lidded with pearl mouth a poinsettia leaf,  
"Eat me, pay me"--the erotic mask  
Worn the world over by illusion  
To weddings of itself and simple need.

(p. 46)

He juxtaposes the love and laughter of his relationship with his lover, with the erotic parody of Kleo, the whore. She is almost clown-like. Since Merrill has already commented that he pays Kleo "generously," there is

no indication that Kleo must work as a prostitute to survive. Ironically, Merrill has commented that "Love makes one generous" and that he pays Kleo generously out of love. This he puts up against the revelation that Kleo is "paid" for another kind of love.

His response to this chance meeting is given in the next stanza. Love itself is called into question.

Startled mute, we had stared--was love illusion?--  
And gone our ways. Next, I was crossing a square  
In which a moveable outdoor market's  
Vegetables, chickens, pottery kept materializing  
Through a dream-press of hagglers each at heart  
Leery lest he be taken, plucked,  
The bird, the flower of that November mildness,  
Self lost up soft paths, or found, foothold,  
Where the bud throbs awake.  
The better to be nipped, self on its knees in mud--  
Here I stopped cold, for both our sakes:

And calmer on my way home bought us fruit.

(p. 46)

Again Merrill juxtaposes situations which create irony. He questions the nature of love when confronted by one of its manifestations. Ultimately he is questioning his own feelings, his own relationship. Once again, the romantic view of love is contrasted to one reality of love-prostitution. As in so many of his love lyrics, romance is not allowed to stand unchallenged by how that idea is translated into living in the real world. Notice that immediately following his confrontation with Kleo he encounters a "moveable" outdoor market, where goods are sold and "hagglers" are "Leery" of being taken. Kleo is in some sense a "moveable" sexual market and price for services rendered is always an issue.

This juxtaposition is then followed by a sexual image, "Where the bud throbs awake." As in "The Greenhouse," Merrill uses the traditional women-as-flowers image. But here the flowers are associated with prostitution and the distortion of a romantic ideal into a sexual reality. Ultimately, Merrill is questioning his own love and perhaps asking indirectly if all love is simply a form of prostitution of the self. Twice in this stanza he mentions the self. First the self is "lost . . . or found." Then he pictures the "self on its knees in mud"; a posture of degradation in the "mud" of twisted sexuality. It is at this point, however, that he stops. "Here I stopped cold, for both our sakes." The "both" is a reference to him and his lover as well as Kleo, and as if his contemplating may lead to a reality too hard to bear, he simply backs away from the issue, in effect, changing the subject with "And calmer on my way home bought us fruit." Even here in this last line, however, the flower image is sustained. Plants flower before they bear fruit. And he "buys" the fruit of the flowering plant for his lover, just as Kleo, is bought by men.

In the last two stanzas he returns to his contemplation, making it more personal by revealing more of his own feelings. The experience has been a learning one, and to the love and laughter, he adds pain.



Forgive me if you read this (And may Kyria Kleo,  
Should someone ever put it into Greek  
And read it aloud to her, forgive me, too).  
I had gone so long without loving,  
I hardly knew what I was thinking.

Where I hid my face, your touch, quick, merciful,  
Blindfolded me, A god breathed from my lips.  
If that was illusion, I wanted it to last long;  
To dwell, for its daily pittance, with us there,  
Cleaning and watering, sighing with love or pain.  
I hoped it would climb when it needed to the heights  
Even of degradation, as I for one  
Seemed, those days, to be always climbing  
Into a world of wild  
Flowers, feasting, tears--or was I falling, legs  
Buckling, heights, depths,  
Into a pool of each night's rain?  
But you were everywhere beside me, masked,  
As who was not, in laughter, pain, and love.

(pp. 45-46)

He begins by asking his lover for forgiveness should  
the lover ever read this poem. That is followed by the same  
request of Kleo should she ever read it in translation.  
This is a favorite technique of Merrill's--coming so personally  
and dramatically into the poem--and underscores his  
credibility and the reality of the event he describes. Then,  
typically, and quite suddenly he reveals his feelings.

I had gone so long without loving,  
I hardly knew what I was thinking.

To resolve his paradoxical thinking about love, he  
retreats into the lover in the final stanza. The lover's  
touch is "quick, merciful" and helps to blindfold him to a  
reality he does not wish to face. It is interesting that  
he calls the lover's touch "merciful." Earlier in the poem  
he suggests that perhaps Kleo's prostitution is justified

by her need. Thus in his need, the lover is "merciful" and allows him to cling to illusion by protecting his figurative inner sight from harsh reality.

The "love-for-sale" theme of the poem is again suggested by his comments in this last stanza that he wants illusion always "To dwell, for its daily pittance, with us there." He also returns in this stanza to the hill metaphor introduced in stanza one, and recalls Kleo's duties as a housekeeper "Cleaning and watering, sighing with love or pain." Paradoxically, he hopes illusion "would climb when it needed to the heights / Even of degradation," as he seems

. . . to be always climbing  
Into a world of wild  
Flowers, feasting, tears . . .

He reinforces the central images of the poem by here transposing them into his own experience. Women-as-flowers, because of his new knowledge of Kleo has now become "wild / Flowers." The "Eat me, pay me" mask of eroticism she seems to wear when he encounters her becomes "feasting." And her "watering" is modified into "tears" because of the revelations the experience has provided.

The dilemma posed by the paradox of love, and by that of reality and illusion, is brought in the final two lines to perhaps the only resolution possible. And its resolution is one which Merrill has arrived at before. It is, however, both a resolution and a non-resolution. Just as there ultimately can be no resolution to the essential

paradox of possibility and annihilation, except in its acceptance, so with love its ambivalence can never be fully resolved. It may be that love's illusion is and is not its reality. He thus returns to the lover and the relationship to provide the only "foothold" for self.

But you were everywhere beside me, masked  
As who was not, in laughter, pain, and love.

These lines are significant in another way. Irony is essentially built upon "or." One way to resolve the "or" is through the use of the mask which then makes "and" possible. Thus the lovers are masked in "laughter, pain, and love." It is the acceptance of this paradox, then, that brings balance. The lover is "masked" just as Kleo was masked, just as we all are masked in hiding the essential self from the vulnerabilities and enormous risks we must take in loving. Kleo is in this instance an appropriate figure for the duality of love. She is both virgin and whore, virtuous and promiscuous. Love, whatever its form, has a price attached to it. And Merrill is asking of himself, of the lover and of love itself, what that price is. Is love obtained only at the sacrifice of self? Do we all sell love in one way or another to others, and is that selling a form of prostitution even though money may not change hands? Are we all "leary" hagglers in the marketplace of love?

Typically, he never answers these questions. Or more accurately, he answers them by not answering them simply because the paradox cannot be resolved. We are left

then only with acceptance of our need to mask that which we need, and to protect the self through love's illusions. It is interesting that Merrill chooses three words to describe his feelings in the poem; laughter, love and pain. But in all cases prior to the last line, he uses these words in either/or ways; it is laughter or love; it is love or pain. In the final line, however, he puts them into a new relationship; "laughter, pain, and love." That is, this line suggests a kind of acceptance that laughter and pain, joy and sorrow, are all part of love, and this acceptance is made possible by the mask. Accepting this paradox as the nature of love then brings with it a certain balance. Remember in "About the Phoenix" that Merrill suggests that as long as we hold our romantic and unrealistic views of love that we will always be caught between "Flights of ardor and ashes." Ironically, giving up romance then frees us to be romantic; that is, to love. Accepting the whore in Kleo is accepting the whore in himself and indeed in us all. And that ultimately is an acceptance of the paradoxical nature of love.

One other comment here, however, is necessary. It should be remembered that Merrill's sexuality, as I have contended, has been a principal stumbling block to self-acceptance. Presumably the "lover" in this poem is male. Homosexual relationships are clearly seen as invalid. They are seen as illicit, and deviate relationships which lack not only the sanctions of biology and of law, but of religion

as well. In this regard, the juxtaposition of Merrill's relationship with a male lover, with that of Kleo's illegal and illicit prostitution takes on a new appropriateness. Acceptance of her illicit sexual activities is then acceptance of his, as the world views it. Paradoxically, as he accepts Kleo and himself, he simultaneously rejects the world's condemnation of both prostitution and homosexuality. This rejection in turn then leads to acceptance of his own sexuality as it is manifested in its only legitimate outlet--a homosexual relationship. "Normalcy" is rendered absurd and meaningless. What is normal for him, or for Kleo, is normal. The point, then, is simply to love in whatever way our need dictates. The message of the poem put in simplistic terms is that we are who our need makes us. And because of our need for love we do what we must do to satisfy it. The sex of a lover is irrelevant, as is the means we use to get what we need. My point is that in accepting the paradox of the nature of love, he affirms his right to be who he is and to love as he loves. And this acceptance of his sexuality is crucial in the acceptance of self to which, in one sense, his entire literary career is devoted. This is evident, as I have suggested, in the childhood poems as well as the poems that deal with adult relationships. His life and his career, in fact, as it is revealed in poem after poem, is a search for self--a poetic attempt to answer the question "Who am I?" Here in "Days of 1964" he provides a partial answer.

Merrill's fifth volume, The Fire Screen (1969) contains several poems which deal with love.<sup>13</sup> None of them reflect the deadly pessimism nor the painful view of love seen in so many of the love lyrics published prior to Water Street (1962). Although these poems do have some pain, it seems to be less intense or life-threatening as some of his earlier work. On the whole, they are more balanced. It is also worth noting again that The Fire Screen is dedicated to David Jackson.

The first poem in the volume is one called "Lorelei" (p. 3). It is a beautiful and simple twelve-line love lyric that juxtaposes love and death. The effect, however, is not morbid, nor even romantic; but is simply appropriate.

The stones of kin and friend  
Stretch off into a trembling, sweatlike haze.

They may not after all be stepping stones  
But you have followed them. Each strands you, then

Does not. Not yet. Not here.  
Is it a crossing? Is there no way back?

Soft gleams lap the base of the one behind you  
On which a black girl sings and combs her hair.

It's she who some day (when your stone is in place)  
Will see that much further into the golden  
vagueness

Forever about to clear. Love with his chisel  
Deepens the lines begun upon your face.

(p. 3)

Here Merrill uses the tombstones as a figure for the past. But he comments that they "may not after all be stepping stones," they may not be crucial to the future.

Reversing what he implies in so many other poems (that the past is the foundation of the future), he nevertheless indicates that the past does have an effect upon us. Each tombstone "strands" him then "Does not."<sup>14</sup> The tombstones of his past (which would include that of his father) momentarily stop his progress.

But inevitably he continues, asking whether or not the past (i.e., memory) is a "crossing" into the future. The figure of the tomb gives way in the middle of the poem to the figure of the black girl who "sings and combs her hair." She is the future. As a representative of the next generation, she "Will see that much further into the golden vagueness / Forever about to clear."

In the final two lines Merrill connects death and love with the image of the chisel. Although it is a tenuous connection, it is nevertheless there. The chisel has been used to record the names of the dead on their tombstones. Here, it is "Love with his chisel" who "Deepens the lines begun upon your face." There is no direct suggestion that this is a necessarily painful process. It is simply an inevitable one. It is love that gives our faces character. It is love that is recorded on the tombstones and in our faces. It is love that is both the past and the future.

In another more complex poem, Merrill adopts the odd perspective of traveling into the interior of the "heart" of his beloved. It is entitled "Part of the Vigil" (pp. 24-25)

and is written from the point of view of the narrator's imagined journey into the emotional center of his lover. It makes a curious figurative statement. The heart, of course, is only a figure for our emotional natures. Therefore Merrill builds his metaphor on a strange mixture of physiological and imagined detail.

He begins the poem in the middle of a sentence.

. . . shrinking to enter, did. Your heart  
Was large--you'd often told me--large but light,  
Ant palace, tubercular coral sponge amazed  
With passages, quite weightless in your breast.  
(Or did my entrance weigh? You never said.)  
(p. 24)

From the beginning we must read the poem in two ways simultaneously. This creates a peculiar kind of irony. For example, the narrator says that the beloved's heart "Was large." Since most human hearts are physically about the same, then the statement must be figurative. Yet the narrator also means for the statement to be taken literally as well. Notice the play on the word "amazed." The passages of the heart are like a maze; yet the narrator is also "amazed" at the interior of the organ which is "large but light." The heart of the beloved, then is not weighted down with care. But it is also "light" as opposed to being dark.

In sunlit outer galleries I pondered  
Names, dates, political slogans, lyrics,  
Football scores, obscenities too, scrawled  
Everywhere dense as lace. How alike we were!  
(p. 24)



With a touch of humor, Merrill suggests that many of the things with which we are concerned are also impressed upon our "hearts." Here the heart becomes synonymous with memory. It is a kind of reservoir of experiences. Seeing what is in his beloved's heart leads him to explain "How alike we were!" Yet as he continues, the light and almost frivolous images become darker and more serious.

More than pleased, I penetrated further.  
 Strung haphazard now through the red gloom  
 Were little, doorless, crudely lighted chambers:  
 Four waxen giants, at supper; the late king;  
 A dust-furred dog; a whore mottled with cold,  
 Legs in air; your motorbike; a friend,  
 Glass raised despite the bandage round his head,  
 His eyes' false shine. What had happened to  
 them all?

(p. 24)

Now he introduces more personal memories and experiences which occupy space in the lover's heart. Without explaining why these images are there, he nevertheless asserts their relevance to the beloved by including them. It is well to remember that the volume is dedicated to David Jackson. It is not too far-fetched, then, to suggest that the lover is Jackson. If this is the case, then the poem represents a momentous moment in Merrill's career. The anonymous "you" of so many of his love poems prior to this one, has at last given way to the true object of his love, a male lover. Given the resolutions found in many of the poems in Water Street, particularly "A Tenancy," which precedes The Fire Screen, it is entirely possible that Merrill's need to protect his sexuality from a reading public is now

no longer as great. Although, not until Divine Comedies will he openly admit his love for Jackson, this is at least a start.

From this point in the poem, the narrator becomes more serious. The images correspondingly are darker and less frivolous.

Yet other cells appeared empty but lit,  
Or darkly, unimaginably tenanted.  
From one, a word sobbed over, "Waste . . . the  
waste . . ."  
Where was the terrace, the transparency  
So striking far away? In my fall I struck  
An iron surface. (so! your heart was heavy)  
Hot through clothing. Snatched myself erect.  
(p. 24)

These lines can also be seen to support the view that the lover is Jackson, or at least male. For the first time in the poem, the "heart" contains some bitterness; some raw emotion. The line "From one, a word sobbed over, 'Waste . . . the waste. . .'" could be interpreted in a variety of ways.

Feelings of "waste" or of something or someone being a "waste" are common to all human existence. Nevertheless, it is also a feeling common to women who discover that a man they love is homosexual, whether that man is a son, a brother, a husband, or a potential lover. The male then becomes a "waste" to the woman who wants him. No doubt, this discovery has caused many women to feel bitterness and

indeed to express it in precisely this way. And it of course would be part of the experience of many homosexuals.

In the next few lines, Merrill comes to the point of his journey; to discover if he is there in the heart of his beloved. He asks the questions that perhaps all lovers ask in one way or another of their beloved.

Beneath, great valves were gasping, wheezing. What  
If all you knew of me were down there, leaking  
Fluids at once abubble, pierced by fierce  
Impulsions of unfeeling, life, limb turning  
To burning cubes, to devis's dice, to ash--  
What if my effigy were down there? What,  
Dear god, if it were not!  
If it were nowhere in your heart!

(p. 24)

Here, Merrill asks the classic questions of all love relationships; where do I fit in your life? How do you feel about me? Am I important to you? These lines, express, too, the ambivalence of love and of Merrill's feelings. He is concerned that his "effigy" is in the beloved's heart, and also concerned that it is not.

He ends the poem simply by backing away from the problem without resolving it. But in the final lines there is also a balanced view.

Here I turned back. Of the rest I do not speak.  
Nor was your heart so cleverly constructed  
I needed more than time to get outside--  
Time, scorned as I scorned the waiting daylight.  
Before resuming my true size, there came  
A place in which one could have scratched one's  
name.  
But what rights had I? Didn't your image,  
Still unharmed, deep in my own saved skin  
Blaze on? You might yet see it, see by it.  
Nothing else mattered.

(p. 25)

We never really know what Merrill finds in the heart of his beloved. But what he does say indicates a more mature and balanced view of love. He refuses to "scratch" his name in the lover's heart, even when given the figurative opportunity. Furthermore, the poem's focus shifts in the final lines from a concern with the other to a concern with self. That is, realizing perhaps that love cannot be forced, he simply trusts himself and his own feelings. He cannot control his lover's feelings. He is responsible only for his own. The final lines suggest that Merrill has achieved some measure of self-confidence. He is able to clearly divide his responsibilities from those of his lover, and to accept the fact that he cannot either cause love in the lover, nor prevent it if it is there. Therefore, he can deal only with himself. With quiet confidence he asserts that "You might yet see it, see by it / Nothing else mattered." These lines, then put the responsibilities in love where they should be. Since it is his love poem, he can speak only for himself. There is also the suggestion in these last lines that all of the insecurities, jealousies and uncertainties of love have been put aside, at least momentarily, with the realization that "Nothing else mattered." Thus, though the poem does exhibit emotional concern with what he finds in the "heart" of his lover, it also illustrates more balance and maturity in his acceptance of love and of himself.

Although there are other love lyrics in The Fire Screen, they tend to repeat the view of love seen in these three examples. In "Flying from Byzantium" for example, he admits that love is painful.<sup>15</sup> But he also concludes that it can be survived, and we can grow from the experience. On the whole, the poems in this volume exhibit the same balance achieved in Water Street.

Merrill's sixth volume, Braving the Elements, contains several poems which mention love, but none which deal exclusively with it as in earlier books. Instead, the majority of these poems are occasional in nature. This is a significant change. Braving the Elements is the volume which immediately precedes the first book of trilogy. The trilogy in its entirety is first and last about love. But it is not private and personal love with which he is concerned in the trilogy. Rather, it is the principle of love as it functions in the evolution of mankind that is his focus. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the poems in this sixth volume represent a shift in Merrill's feelings about himself. He has come to terms with his past. He now has the confidence which resolution of his past has provided him. He can write occasional poetry simply because the problems of his past have been resolved, and he is free to deal with the present, and with aspects of his life and life in general which are not directly concerned with personal pain and revelation. The volume deals neither with childhood nor with love, but with occasional and relatively public events. And coming as

it does at the end of his lyric poetry, it therefore signals the beginnings of the second part of his career: the poet as visionary.

The poem from which he gets the title of the volume illustrates something of this concept. It is called "Dreams About Clothes," and is centrally concerned with change. The dominant image is that of a change of clothes, and this, I suggest, represents the change in Merrill's feelings and in his career. At the end of the poem, however, quite suddenly he addresses art itself.

Tell me something, Art.  
You know what it's like  
Awake in your dry hell  
Of volatile synthetic solvents.  
Won't you help us brave the elements

Once more, of terror, anger, love?  
Seeing there's no end to wear and tear  
Upon the lawless heart,  
Won't you as well forgive  
Whoever settles for the immaterial?  
Don't you care how we live?

(p. 62)

The allusions to clothing are evident in the "dry hell / of volatile synthetic solvents," and "wear and tear." And these allusions also suggest that art, like clothing, helps protect us from the elements of "terror, anger, love." But Merrill also asks "Art" if it won't "forgive / Whoever settles for the immaterial." And here, in these lines, he foreshadows the trilogy because its subject matter is essentially the "immaterial," the intangible abstractions of love and spirit. Yet here, also, is the fundamental irony he has addressed

before; how to communicate the immaterial except through the material. In the trilogy, he uses a material and tangible art to express the intangible and immaterial. How, then, can this dilemma, and this irony, be resolved?

I suggest that the trilogy itself and its visionary stance is his answer. Vision overcomes irony. Through his vision, through the knowledge which he is given concerning the absolute existence, organization and functioning of the spirit world, faith becomes possible, and this faith, as in Kierkegaard's assertion, negates irony. Thus Merrill comes at last to an acceptance of himself and to an acceptance of the "immaterial" as a permanent reality, governing the material and his significant place in it. As a poet of vision, a position arrived at through the exploration of self conducted in the lyrics, he can now speak no longer just of himself, but instead, of the universe..

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Merrill, Country.

<sup>2</sup> James Dickey comments on this tone by putting Merrill in a class of poets he calls the "elegants." He continues to remark "these are the leisurely European travelers: the rootless, well-mannered, multilingual young men: the sophisticated, talented, slightly world weary occasional poets . . . who have done everything perfectly according to quite acceptable standards, and have just as surely stopped short of real significance, real engagement.: (Babel to Byzantium [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1959], p. 99.) Though Dickey's assessment of the tone is correct, he either fails to understand or grossly underestimates the real substance of Merrill's work, and the seriousness of the issues in his poetry. Merrill is certainly not an occasional poet.

<sup>3</sup> Mona Van Duyn maintains that Merrill's most recurrent concern is with the difficult tension "between passion and restraint." Passion, she contends, "appears as fire that consumes form, form as a drug that deadens feeling." She continues to comment that there is no "achievement of a golden center," but "only excesses in one direction or another." ("Sunbursts, Garlands, Creatures, Men," Poetry CXXVI No. 6 [September 1975], 202).

<sup>4</sup> For some enlightening comments on homosexuality in Merrill's work, see Robert von Hallberg's essay entitled "James Merrill: Revealing by Obscuring," Contemporary Literature XXI No. 4 (Autumn 1980), 555. It is Hallberg's contention that because of his homosexuality, Merrill's style reflects a secrecy or deliberate obscurity that is necessary to maintain his privacy.

<sup>5</sup> See Sections 'D,H,A' of "The Book of Ephraim," Divine Comedies (New York: Atheneum, 1976).



<sup>6</sup> John Vernon is critical of Merrill's tendency to put too much into a line, maintaining that the work suffers when it is "overfull with ingenious, labored words and images." (Western Humanities Review [Winter 1973], 108). This criticism is especially relevant to Merrill's early work as "Poem in Spring" illustrates, as well as a number of other poems in First Poems.

<sup>7</sup> See Mona Van Duyn's article entitled "Sunbursts, Garlands, Creatures, Men," Poetry CXXVI No. 6 (September 1975), p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> John Vernon's criticism is again relevant with respect to language in Merrill's early work. He comments that for Merrill "language is tortured and muscular" and the words "seem to be struggling in a manner out of proportion to their content." (Western Humanities Review [Winter 1975], 109.) Although Vernon's criticism falls short of recognizing the power of much of Merrill's verse, with regard to these early poems, his comments have merit.

<sup>9</sup> Merrill, Country.

<sup>10</sup> Edmund White, in a very good critical review of Merrill's work remarks that Water Street is Merrill's first important book. ("On James Merrill," The American Poetry Review VIII No. 5 [Sept/Oct 1979], 9.)

<sup>11</sup> See James Dickey, "James Merrill," Babel to Byzantium (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1959), p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Merrill, Nights and Days.

<sup>13</sup> Merrill, The Fire Screen.

<sup>14</sup> Here we can begin to see the effects of the resolution of the pain of his past. This view, that the past may only momentarily strand him (while he confronts and resolves it), can be contrasted with the view in both First Poems and The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace. In the latter there seems to be far less hope of getting beyond the past.

<sup>15</sup> James Merrill, "Flying from Byzantium," The Fire Screen (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 36-39.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LYRICS OF THE TRILOGY

Although the trilogy is not within the scope of my discussion in more than a cursory way, it is necessary to deal briefly with Merrill's seventh volume in which the first book of the trilogy is contained. Before considering two of the volume's ten poems a few comments about the book would be beneficial. To begin with, the trilogy represents the pinnacle of Merrill's career to date. It is that work to which his entire career has pointed. Essentially it is composed of three long, epic poems which among many other things are concerned with the evolution of the self (both the self of the author, and the universal self of Man, or the human race). Necessarily, then, it also contains a discussion of the entire history of Man. In fact, Merrill goes back further than Man's history, to include the history of the entire universe. All of this information, staggering in its scope, comes to Merrill through his twenty-year use of a Ouija Board. During these years, Merrill claims that the information explaining both his own life and its events, and the history of Man has been dictated to him by a variety of "spirits." Chief among them is a kind of composite spirit

called "Ephraim." Therefore, these lengthy poems are for the most part the result of a kind of automatic writing. Long sections of the poems, in fact, Merrill represents as straight dictation. These passages he then intersperses with his own poetic comments which serve as connectives and explanations of the dictated passages.

There are, of course, many problems with this format. Central to them is the matter of credibility. That is, Merrill is dealing principally with the occult; with the world of the unseen which modern man's natural tendency is to disbelieve. Furthermore, much of the information, though grounded in actual historical fact (Merrill has certainly done his homework), gives another, often bizarre explanation or perspective of these events and people. His entire premise, moreover, is that man is reincarnated again and again. He embraces evolution, but even here his explanation of its process is often unusual. Furthermore, throughout the course of these three books Merrill claims to have spoken with everyone from the Archangels, to Christ and God himself, whom he calls "God B." The "B" stands for biology.

Not only, then, is the reader faced with a credibility problem, and with the enormous task of assimilating a bewildering amount of often bizarre information, but he is also faced with determining how much of what Merrill writes is simply Merrill's remarkable imagination in operation and how much is real. That is, many, many of

the dictated passages are disturbingly close in style and tone to Merrill's own (and admitted) work. For example, all the time he is claiming that what he is writing are the words of "spirits," these "spirits" also speak (write) very much like Merrill writes. The archangels, for instance, at one point become concerned with writing clever little poems and actually ask Merrill for his literary opinion of their efforts.<sup>1</sup> Apparently everyone in Paradise is extraordinarily poetic.

Regardless of this difficult and complex format, the trilogy is a successful effort. Merrill quite obviously aspires to become a Twentieth-Century Dante, assimilating and synthesizing enormous amounts of both secular and sacred information into one monumental work. Even though the trilogy is a public work in its scope, it nevertheless remains a personal and private experience for the poet. But there is one very important difference between Merrill's lyric poetry (the first six volumes) and the trilogy. In the trilogy Merrill is no longer as concerned with personal problems, including those of childhood, sexuality and adult love. The evidence suggests that he has come to terms with these aspects of his life as much as perhaps it is possible to do. These dominant themes in his lyrics remain the essential themes of the trilogy, but they have been altered. For example, it is not so much Merrill's sexuality with which he deals, but human sexuality and the position and

purpose of all homosexuals in the cosmic scheme of things. He is told through the Ouija Board, for instance, that homosexuals are created by God as special creatures. They apparently come into existence for two basic reasons; natural population control since they do not reproduce themselves, and because of their often unique talents in music and poetry. They exist, then, as homosexuals because of their enormous historical contribution to the arts, and as a way of curbing the dangerous population explosion. (The feminist movement, he claims, is also a population curb.)

He is equally concerned in the trilogy with childhood. But it is no longer the childhood of James Merrill which is at issue, but rather the childhood of the human race. Love, moreover, is still in the trilogy a central theme. But here it is not a personal love, but rather how love works in contributing to the historical evolution of Man. The point is that while the lyric poetry tends principally to be a therapeutic and highly personal experience for the poet, the trilogy is much more concerned with the history of Man and his future survival. Ultimately the trilogy is a warning. Merrill has become a visionary; the poet as high priest of his culture. And in this monumental work, he is very much concerned that his warning be heard. Man, in the late twentieth century, is at a crossroads, and with his potentially deadly new toy, nuclear power, he very well could destroy himself. This aspect of the trilogy is

in itself remarkable coming from a poet who has spent twenty-five years, and six volumes of poetry, writing principally about himself. What has made him so is precisely the lyrics I have been studying.

As I have indicated, Divine Comedies, the seventh volume of poetry, contains ten poems. The first nine are essentially lyrics. The tenth is the eighty-nine page "The Book of Ephraim" which is the first book of the trilogy. Basically the first nine poems are lyric preparations for the tenth. That is, Merrill prepares the reader for the trilogy through the nine poems which precede it, just as he has prepared himself. He bridges the gap between the lyrics and the trilogy through these poems. And these poems point in two directions, backward to his past, and forward to the future. The significance of these nine poems, however, is retrospective. That is, not until we reach "The Book of Ephraim" do we begin to realize the meaning of the preparatory poems. Only then do we begin to understand the dual nature of these nine lyrics. Their number, of course, also comes into focus. Just as Dante was concerned with numbers, so Merrill echoes this same concern. The nine lyric poems, in fact, correspond roughly to the nine circles of Dante's Inferno. In a larger sense, of course, the three parts of the trilogy also echo Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso.

I want to illustrate these points by looking closely at the first two lyric poems in the volume. They illustrate how Merrill has altered his concerns and the focus of his themes and how he begins to bridge the two halves of his career. The first poem is entitled "The Kimono" (Divine Comedies, 1976). It is essentially a love lyric. But close examination reveals that it is much more as well. The poem is organized into three, six-line stanzas rhymed ababab. If we modify our perception of this organization, then the poem can be seen as six tercets, echoing Dante's organization in the Comedia.

"The Kimono," however, also announces the theme of Divine Comedies: love. Though it appears to be a personal statement, a closer look reveals its public nature.

When I returned from lover's lane  
 My hair was white as snow.  
 Joy, incomprehension, pain  
 I'd seen like seasons come and go.  
 How I got home again  
 Frozen half dead, perhaps you know.

You hide a smile and quote a text:  
 Desires ungratified  
 Persist from one life to the next.  
 Hearths we strip ourselves beside  
 Long, long ago were X'd

Times out of mind, the bubble-gleam  
 To our charred level drew  
 April back. A sudden beam . . .  
 --Keep talking while I change into  
 The pattern of a stream  
 Bordered with rushes white on blue.

(p. 3)

The poem must be considered in two ways. It is in one sense a personal statement of Merrill's experience of love. But it is also a figurative introduction to the trilogy and is full of subtle allusions to Dante and his work. Significantly the poem begins with the expression "When I returned . . ." Merrill's work, like Dante's, is essentially memory and both are very much concerned with the central question of the purpose and position of the "I," the self, in the cosmic scheme of things. Remember that in the Comedia Dante is a dual personality. He is himself, Dante, the poet experiencing this vision. But he is also a representative of all Mankind who must endure the three-step process to salvation. The poet in "The Kimono" similarly represents both himself, and Man in his life experience of love. It is this theme, this common experience of love, which links Merrill to all Mankind just as it links Dante. Notice that in the twentieth-century vernacular, it is "lover's lane" from which he returns. Dante's contention, of course, in the Comedia is that love is the central experience of existence.

The experience of love, its "Joy, incomprehension, pain" has aged him. Correspondingly, any direct experience of the divine power which biblically is principally that of love, has a physical effect upon the man who is exposed to it. Moses, for example, was aged by his direct confrontation with God. The most consistent definition of the nature



of God given repeatedly in the New Testament is that "God is love." It is interesting, furthermore, that Merrill indicates the experience of love is three-fold. Notice that its first component is "Joy." "Incomprehension" is the bridge between joy and pain. Rarely, in the lyrics, has Merrill spoken of the joys of love. Love, then, is composed of a trinity of feelings, all of which exist simultaneously within it.

It is also significant that in this first stanza Merrill comments that he is uncertain how he "got home again." One of Dante's principal problems in the Comedia was not only how to get physically from one stage to another (and to make the reader understand the logistics of each move), but also how to return to the world of the living once he experienced such a remarkable journey. Furthermore, Merrill indicates he was "Frozen half dead." The connection between Dante's journey and Merrill's experience of "lover's lane" is made more clear with this phrase. The "dead" center of Dante's hell is of course a frozen lake, contradicting the more traditional biblical symbol of fire as the ultimate punishment. Because Satan exists totally removed from the light (warmth) of God, having rejected God's love, he then creates his own hell and is "frozen," i.e., committed in his sin. The frozen lake is created by his tears which are forever freezing as a result of his attempts to escape through fanning his great wings. The experience of

love then for Merrill has had a somewhat similar result, though he has survived its "joy, incomprehension, pain." He does, after all, return from lover's lane, as the first line indicates.

It is worth noting here also that this first poem in Divine Comedies concerns the experience of love. As we discover in stanza two, this includes sexual experiences. Dante's first circle in hell contains those souls who sinned through love as represented by the figures of Francesca and Paola; the lovers whose lust for one another caused them to deny the light and love of God. This sin nevertheless is punished by the lightest of all punishments in hell simply because it is considered the easiest to commit. That is, though sexual gratification is by definition selfish, it is never wholly selfish because the partner always receives some pleasure from the act, through that pleasure may be slight. Thus it is appropriate for Merrill's first poem in his version of the Comedia to be concerned with love and lust.

In stanza two he reinforces these allusions to Dante's work, and his own premise of reincarnation, by alluding to "Desires ungratified" which "Persist from one life to the next." Furthermore, the poem is apostrophized and the individual to whom it is addressed hides "a smile" and quotes "a text." We cannot be sure to whom the poem is addressed, though there are a variety of logical and

possible candidates. Among them certainly could be David Jackson, Dante, or simply a figure who represents all lovers. Dante, of course, throughout the Comedia continually renders a variety of "texts" into his own idiom. The extraordinarily dense nature of his poetry requires notes to explain it. The point is that Dante and any figure of a lover are the most likely objects of this address. And both are reinforced by this allusion to a "text."

The second tercet in stanza two also supports the poem's connection to Dante. He speaks of "Hearths we strip ourselves beside," indicating sexual contact, as well as a stripping away of the veneer or the masks lovers wear. This then reveals the lovers in their "consuming pride." Dante returns again and again to this sin of pride which was considered by Medieval theologians to be the most serious. It is also the central ingredient in the sin of carnal love; a turning inward upon oneself which violates God's commandments about the love of others. Pride, in its extreme form, as Dante illustrates, is a wholly selfish emotion, and therefore excludes such other vital feelings as compassion and altruism.

In the evolution of the self with which the trilogy is principally concerned, and which is a central theme in all of Merrill's work, the self rids itself of "consuming pride" only through returning again and again to life. Thus each lifetime in Merrill's view gives the self another

opportunity to evolve still higher in the cosmic scheme. Central to this evolution is learning how to love, both oneself and others. Pride is an obstacle to that evolution, and must be eliminated. Thus, ironically, to completely realize self, one must become selfless. This paradox is fundamental to Merrill's treatment of this great theme, and permeates his work. The allusion to the opportunity to evolve is contained in his lines which indicate that the "Hearths the lovers" strip "themselves beside were 'X'd' long, long ago'" on "blueprints of 'consuming pride.'" That is, the life-plans of each individual soul are permanent, and are determined long before that soul begins its journey through numerous lifetimes. It is assumed that once the self has become selfless through evolution, then "consuming pride" is no longer an issue, having been eliminated from the character of the individual.

In the final stanza, Merrill alludes to the season. Significantly it is April, the time of rebirth and rejuvenation. It is also the season of Easter and the time of Dante's journey through the three stages of the soul's progression toward salvation. Typically, however, at the moment of crisis and revelation, Merrill pulls back, abruptly changing the subject. Looking again at the stanza reveals its heavily figurative language.

Times out of mind, the bubble gleam  
 To our charred level drew  
 April back. A sudden beam . . .  
 --Keep talking while I change into

The pattern of a stream  
Bordered with rushes white on blue.

"Times out of mind" implies several meanings. Dante's "time" would be a time out of mind. It could also refer to the timeless nature of Dante's experience, as well as a reference to Merrill's past love experiences.

In lines two and three, he makes further allusions to Dante and his work. Though the center of hell is a frozen lake, according to Dante other levels use fire as punishment. Among them, both blasphemy and false counsel are punished in part by fire. This mention of a "charred level" is also reinforced by the more traditional view of a burning lake or sea as punishment for those who do not reject sin and embrace salvation. Here, too, there is a connection between the "charred level" and the "consuming pride" of stanza two. Pride which consumes the lovers would leave only ashes, or a "charred level." Furthermore, April is drawn back. It is recalled, in other words. This can be direct reference to Dante's April, but also more generally a reference to the season when love was new, or was seasonally rejuvenated and reborn. It is recalled both in the sense of memory, and in the sense of being brought back by the poet in preparation for his use of it as a figure to introduce the trilogy.

He ends line three with a fragment, "A sudden beam . . ." These three words are also heavily figurative and can

be seen in several ways. "A sudden beam . . ." can refer to a beam of light. This then leads to the figure of light as a metaphor of God's love. Light, of course, is used heavily in the Comedia in this way. It also, however, can refer to revelation; i.e., sudden understanding. Revelation, in turn, can suggest a variety of meanings. The trilogy for example is from first to last a series of revelations about the nature of the universe. The lyrics, as I have indicated, also contain endless revelations both for and about the poet. It could also refer to Merrill's own revelations about Dante and his work (which he makes later in the trilogy) as well as revelations about love and its position in the cosmic scheme. The line, then can refer both to what is to come and what has been. And this reference as well can be both for Dante and history and for Merrill and his history. The point is that the lines meaning can be all of these things. But characteristically Merrill does not finish it, suddenly pulling back from any revealing of the revelation.

In the poem's final tercet, Merrill abruptly changes the subject. These lines, of course, provide the poem with its title. But they are also figurative. He asks that the individual to whom the poem is addressed "Keep talking." Returning to the alternatives of identity already suggested, it becomes clear that any or all of them would work. Dante's work and his message are timeless, as valid today

as in his own time. In that sense, Dante continues to talk to us in the twentieth century. One of Merrill's warnings in the trilogy is that we continue to listen. Our survival both physically and spiritually may in fact depend upon the warnings history gives us. Furthermore, if the request is made of David Jackson, or of any representative lover, then it is still valid. Love is the subject being discussed and the more we discuss it, the more we learn of its nature and its importance. Notice, however, that the line continues to read "--Keep talking while I change." Change is the essence of evolution, both physical and spiritual. The line can be seen as a kind of figurative equation with a variety of subtle interpretations. For example, the poet is literally changing clothes; changing one material appearance for another. But this can indicate internal change as well. The bible is full of allusions to change. As understanding of divine principles occurs, it is accompanied by change. The Pauline doctrine, for instance, indicates again and again that with enlightenment, all things are made new. In one sense, the poem is an enlightenment; a revelation of sorts about the nature of love and our survival of its "Joy, incomprehension, pain." But the line can also be interpreted to mean "as you talk I will change." There is then a connection between the "talking" (what is being said) and change. Dante's experience, of course, involves change. He must, for example, recognize and

accept the operations of God's justice in hell as being right. This requires him to reject sin and the sinner. So too is there change in him in Purgatory and Paradise. The point is that this reference to change is crucial to the process being depicted in the poem, and a fitting end to the volume's first poem as an introduction to the trilogy.

Thus in "The Kimono" Merrill begins building the bridge between his six volumes of lyric poetry and the monumental epic work composed of three long poems. This poem points both to his past and its concerns and to his future and its concerns. It also illustrates the dense quality so characteristic of all of his work. It is a poem which deals with his personal past and his experience of love, as well as with that of all of Mankind. He has survived "lover's lane," and the "Joy, incomprehension . . . [and] pain" of the love experience. And now is perhaps ready to shift his focus to the larger and ultimately more important considerations of cosmic love.

The second poem I want to consider briefly is the second in the volume and is entitled "Lost in Translation." It is a lengthy narrative poem with irregular stanzas and rhyme. Its significance in terms of the present discussion is that it is about Merrill's childhood and a specific event which he recalls. Though the poem contains some painful memories, it also contains its own resolution of this pain and therefore represents a change in Merrill's feelings.



In the poem, he recalls one summer he spent without his parents and their emotional support. He was left in the care of a governess and one of the activities he engaged in to pass the time was to assemble a wooden picture puzzle, ordered from a puzzle shop in New York. The poem also contains that curious, shifting perspective so characteristic of his work. He writes about himself as if he were someone else, then suddenly shifts to first person.

He begins the poem in third person. This familiar device allows him to step outside of his own experience and view it in a somewhat more protected way, just as strict form does in some of the earlier lyrics. But by the middle of the poem the "he" gives way to "I." Moreover, the point of view is a very subtle blending of youth and age. That is, many of the poem's observations are given initially from the child's perspective, then pulled through Merrill's adult to reemerge philosophically as he weighs the effect of the experience. This principle illustrates that Merrill's childhood poems are essentially about learning what love is and how to deal with it. His adult poems, on the other hand, are more concerned with what love means. We can see this operating in the first stanza.

A card table in the library stands ready  
 To receive the puzzle which keeps never coming.  
 Daylight shines in or lamplight down  
 Upon the tense oasis of green felt.  
 Full of unfulfillment, life goes on,  
 Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands  
 Or fallen piecemeal into place:  
 German lesson, picnic, see-saw, walk

With the collie who "did everything but talk"--  
 Sour windfalls of the orchard back of us.  
 A summer without parents is the puzzle,  
 Or should be. But the boy, day after day,  
 Writes in his Line-a-Day No puzzle.

(p. 4)

The key lines, here, of course, are "A summer without parents is the puzzle / Or should be." This illustrates both points of view simultaneously. For the boy, his absent parents are puzzling, yet accepted, as he writes "No puzzle." But the "No puzzle" is also the adult Merrill who understands at last what this absence means and how it affected his life. From this point in the poem, the large central section focuses on his relationship to his governess and the assemblage of the puzzle which eventually arrives. Interspersed among its lines, however, are quick references to his situation without parents. In the middle of the poem, the impersonal third person is replaced by "I." This suggests that even though the event is painful, Merrill no longer needs distance (as also he has needed form) for protection.

Puzzle begun I write in the day's space,  
 Then, while she bathes, peek at Mademoiselle's  
 Page to the cure: ". . . cette innocente mere,  
 Ce pauvre enfant, qui deviendront-ils?"

(p. 7)

These lines suggest that even the governess is aware of how the innocent mother and the poor child are victimized by the situation; perhaps by Merrill's father--or by his absence. In a later four-line stanza Merrill comments,

Then Sky alone is left, a hundred blue  
 Fragments in revolution, with no clue  
 To where a Niche will open. Quite a task,  
 Putting together Heaven, yet we do.

(p. 8)

Here the search for a father which has appeared frequently in his earlier work, is broadened to allude to the trilogy and a Heavenly "father." In fact, the trilogy is defined precisely in this lyric. Merrill, in fact, does put together heaven in the trilogy by his lengthy and meticulous reporting of how it is organized. But he also broadens this puzzle theme to life itself. When the "puzzle" is returned,

To the puzzle shop in the mid-Sixties,  
 Something tells me that one piece contrived  
 To stay in the boy's pocket. How do I know?  
 I know because so many later puzzles  
 Had missing pieces---. . . .

(p. 9)

It is precisely these "missing pieces" that Merrill's lyrics attempt to find. And in large part, that attempt is unsuccessful. This is why the lyrics are necessary. He must find those missing pieces and place them in the puzzle of self. Once this has been done, then he is prepared for the trilogy and its visionary experience.

In the closing lines of the poem, he modulates this experience, as an adult, into a higher key and in so doing explains the title.

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation  
 And every bit of us is lost in it  
 (Or found--I wander through the ruin of S

Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)  
 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.

(p. 10)

In some respects, then, the loss of the poem has several meanings: lost childhood, lost parents, lost meaning, and lost pieces in the puzzle of self. Yet even these losses are resolved in the poem's quiet ending when the "waste," the loss, is turned to "shade and fiber, milk and memory." That is, what he has lost has provided him with the substance of his work. The "self-effacing tree" is the "color of context," the fiber of his expression, and therefore is, in fact, a gain.

But he also reveals that "nothin's lost." Or if something is lost, then it is lost in its own translation. And in this case, that translation of Merrill's loss into the words of his work. It is, then, loss itself which ironically has provided the gain in understanding and in resolution of life's irony. In losing self, he has gained selfhood.

"Lost in Translation" is a poem about Merrill's childhood, but it is different than his earlier childhood poems, just as "The Kimono" is different than his earlier love poems. Both exhibit a fundamental and important change in his attitude. In the former he has come to terms with that childhood and is able to put it in perspective, to use it, in fact, to his advantage in providing the substance of

his work, thereby turning loss to gain. In the latter, "The Kimono," he speaks of love, but it is more than temporal love and its experience, it is love as concept in the evolution of the self. And both poems foreshadow the trilogy and illustrate the changes his lyric work reflects.

Thus it is with love that the childhood poems and the adult lyrics are linked. Love permeates practically all of his work in one way or another. The numerous poems which treat his childhood are essentially love poems, or more properly poems which recount the devastating effects of the lack of love. His early love lyrics which paint such a joyless and bleak picture of love relationships are a direct result of his unhappy childhood. From the first poem in First Poems to the first poem in Divine Comedies we can see the importance of love in his life and work. The bewildered "blond boy" in "The Black Swan" who cries in anguish "I love the black swan" grows in thirty years of work to the mature adult in "The Kimono" who accepts love's "Joy, incomprehension, pain." But this growth, this process, is not an easy one, because it is first and last a process of accepting self. This acceptance spans the distorted, often bizarre, often sinister view of love and sexuality in such poems as "Poem in Spring" and "The Greenhouse" to the resignation to love as endurance in "Hotel de l'Univers et Portugal" and "Poem of Summer's End," to the balanced acceptance of the ambivalence of love in "Part of the Vigil" and "The Kimono."

We see the failure of love in the laboratory in "Laboratory Poem" and the failure of romantic idealism in "About the Phoenix." We see the potential devastation of a relationship through fear in "Between Us" and the quiet confidence through self-acceptance in "Days of 1964." Merrill guides us through his past and his present into his future. The self-indulgence of his early work gives way to a greater concern with others in his later work. Insecurity and self-hatred gradually grow into confidence and self-acceptance. And herein is the crucial point in understanding Merrill's work and the paradoxical nature of his message.

His early work can be seen as an attempt to articulate and resolve the essential dilemmas of human existence. Repeatedly in his verse, both in the childhood poems and in the love lyrics, he tries to resolve the fundamental paradoxes of life and love. He struggles with himself at the cost of enormous personal pain to come to some permanent resolution--to an either/or answer, and to arrive at some final understanding of why things both in his own life and in life in general are as they are. As I have suggested, however, beginning with Water Street, this struggle abates. It abates precisely because Merrill begins to realize that ultimately the paradox of existence cannot be resolved. Peace of mind, therefore, can only be achieved through acceptance of this paradox; an acceptance which begins with self. But such acceptance both affirms and annihilates self.

Accepting, for example, that the past and its emotional deprivation remains the past and can only hurt him in the present if he allows it to begin the process of resolving and disarming its power to affect him. Coming to terms with the loss-gain, joy-sorrow duality of love frees one to love. The loss of illusion brings a corresponding gain of reality. The loss of romantic innocence is a gain in the emotional health of seeing adult love relationships clearly for all they can and cannot be. The paradox that to realize completely all of the potential of self means that we must become selfless, frees the self to achieve its self. But that achievement turns again outward to converge in the trilogy, not to overwhelm the self, but to an achieved "selfless" vision. Ultimately, accepting the final paradox that each moment of life is a moment of choice between infinite possibility and absolute annihilation can somehow free us to experience life fully and bring with it a measure of peace. They are, in fact, brought together in vision. It is my contention that these realizations occurring over Merrill's long and distinguished literary career, give his work its fundamental irony. His irony is not so much a literary technique, as it is a world view which he translates, perhaps even unconsciously, into words in poem after poem. It is this, more than style or subject matter or theme, which gives his work its characteristic tone and its consistency. And it is this irony which makes his voice one of the more important of the twentieth century.

NOTE

<sup>1</sup> James Merrill, Scripts for the Pagaent (New York):  
Atheneum, 1980), p. 76.



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