

## JOHN GREENING

*Ouija: The poetry of James Merrill (1926–1995)*

IN 2001, THE NOVELIST ALISON LURIE published a memoir of her friendship with James Merrill and his partner, David Jackson, concentrating particularly on the genesis of the trilogy, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, the work by which Merrill is best known. In *Familiar Spirits* Lurie writes of her growing concerns about the way in which the sessions at the Ouija board gradually took over the lives of ‘DJ’ and ‘JM’ (as they are known in the poem), and her suspicions that this *folie à deux* was a ‘last-ditch effort on the part of one or both of my friends to save the marriage’—rather as Yeats’ wife, George, turned to her automatic writing. She reminds us that while ‘Jimmy’ was having his own doubts about the inflated nature of the work (almost as long as *Paradise Lost*!), David was regarding it all as a ‘chore’ and becoming increasingly conscious that although he had provided much of the material for the poem, his name would not be on the title page. Merrill later wondered whether he should perhaps have used both their names ‘or simply “by DJ, as told to JM”’.

*The Changing Light at Sandover* was a great success for Merrill, although critics have generally felt that the opening section, ‘The Book of Ephraim’ (which appeared as part of *Divine Comedies* (1976)) is by far the strongest. The kingmaker of the time, Harold Bloom, led the way with a review in *The New Republic*: ‘I don’t know that ‘The Book of Ephraim’, at least after some dozen readings, can be overpraised, as nothing since the greatest writers of our century equals it in daemonic force’. While the present author cannot claim to have read its ninety pages so many times, ‘Ephraim’ holds up well after more than three decades. ‘A long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry,’ wrote Keats in 1817, ‘as Fancy is the Sails and Imagination the Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces?’ One has the sense that Merrill was realising even as he made the opening acknowledgment of error (‘Admittedly I err by undertaking / This in its present form’) that he had found what Keats called a ‘Region to wander in’, a venue for his particular genius, where he could brag or preen or jest or ramble, tell a story, make an in-joke, indulge in cultured word-play (‘Suckled by Woolf not Mann’) or preach the creed of the Higher Whimsy, where he could stage-manage a pageant fit for the New Age.

The Stage was set for Ephraim...

Properties: A milk glass tabletop.  
A blue and white cup from the Five & Ten.  
Pencil, paper. Heavy cardboard sheet  
Over which the letters A to Z

Spread in an arc, our covenant  
 With whom it would concern; also  
 The Arabic numerals, and YES and NO.  
 What more could a familiar spirit want?

The answer to this question introduces a favourite Merrill device, and subject of one of his earliest anthology pieces: the mirror, propped 'in the facing chair. / Erect and gleaming, silver-hearted guest, / We saw each other in it. He saw us.'

James Merrill was a well established poet by the time he composed 'The Book of Ephraim'. As heir to the Merrill-Lynch fortune, he had always had the freedom to follow his own path; and although his father had been proud enough of his boy's talents to secretly have *Jim's Book* published when he was a teenager, the poet soon found himself reacting against the 'easygoing contempt rich people have for art and scholarship'. After studying literature at Amherst College (interrupted by the Second World War, when he served in the Army) he began travelling, writing and orientating his sexuality at a time when to be gay was to be misunderstood. *The Black Swan* (1946) was followed by *First Poems* (1951), *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959) and *Water Street* (1962). *Nights and Days* (1966) won a National Book Award and there was wider interest in his work, which had a confessional tinge, but was concerned with much more than himself: memory, the place of culture, the nature of relationships, ideas of home. 'Mirror' is characteristic: the dramatic monologue enables Merrill to eschew mere narcissism and establish something like a personal aesthetic as the mirror looking back at him says: 'You embrace a whole world without once caring / To set it in order'. There are passing shades of Snow White, Lewis Carroll, Dorian Gray, even Nathaniel Hawthorne, but the poem, shifting between the free and the formal, ultimately flies beyond such paraphernalia. Such moments are very special in Merrill's work, and are rather reminiscent of what happens in Tippett's orchestral music, when after some knotty, elaborate passage there is a sudden pure, mystical liberation of inspired melody:

Since then, as if a fish  
 Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,  
 I have lapses. I suspect  
 Looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes  
 Through the blind flaws of my mind. As days,  
 As decades lengthen, this vision  
 Spreads and blackens. I do not know whose it is,  
 But I think it watches for my last silver  
 To blister, flake, float leaf by life, each milling-  
 Downward dumb conceit, to a standstill  
 From which not even you strike any brilliant

Chord in me, and to a faceless will,  
Echo of mine, I am amenable.

In England, the Hogarth Press would bring out Merrill's next few books in the Phoenix Living Poets series: *The Fire Screen* (1969), *Two Poems* (1972) and *Braving the Elements* (1973), which often reflect Merrill's life in Athens with David Jackson and which show the influence of the Alexandrian poet Cavafy. Jackson had been Merrill's partner since the 1950s, and their first Ouija sessions date from August 1955. The poem 'Willowware Cup' from the 1973 book can be read retrospectively as an oblique meditation on these sessions. But in 'Voices from the Other World', which was written even earlier and long before *The Changing Light*, the poet is openly experimenting with the same material. Rather in the way that Merrill's late sequence 'The Ring Cycle' miniaturises Wagner's epic, so these nine stanzas encapsulate his own: 'once looked at lit / By the cold reflections of the dead / Risen extinct but irresistible, / Our lives have never seemed more full, more real, / Nor the full moon more quick to chill.'

The couple had installed themselves in a pink, octagonal 'tower room' in their grand, four-storey house in Stonington, Connecticut, sitting at the glass-topped table, and used the inverted willow-pattern teacup as a sliding pointer. As Merrill describes it, Jackson 'puts his right hand lightly on the cup, I put my left, leaving the right free to transcribe'. The cup would then move to the letters of the alphabet, the numbers 1-0, or to 'YES & NO'. These elements of the Ouija Board gave Merrill the formal structure for his epic: 'The Book of Ephraim' (1976) is in twenty-six sections from A-Z, 'Mirabell' (1978) in ten sections 0-9, 'Scripts for the Pageant' (1980) in three: 'Yes', '&' and 'No'. Even if his original intention was to compose no more than 'Ephraim', the formal obsessive in Merrill would have found those other elements very tempting. The complete 560-page volume *The Changing Light at Sandover* (Atheneum, 1982) includes a coda, 'The Higher Keys' (as well as photographs of the chief protagonists).

In an interview with J. D. McClatchy, Merrill recalls that his initial reaction to the Ouija material was that it couldn't be used, that it would be like 'cheating or plagiarizing' and McClatchy himself has written about the poet's 'uneasiness', even suggesting that his resistance 'shapes the poem' (*Verse*, July 1988). Some of the early jottings went into a novel, which Merrill somehow lost in a taxi ('But I went on. I didn't take the hint') and eventually 'prose began to dissolve into verse':

Our breathing stopped. The cup,  
Glazed zombie of itself, was on the prow  
Moving, but dully, incoherently,  
Possessed, as we should soon enough be told,  
By one or another of the myriads

Who hardly understand, through the compulsive  
Reliving of their deaths, that they have died...

Once the 'spirits' begin to come through, Merrill transcribes their speech in upper case. The list of celebrities at the party grows rapidly. By the last volume of the trilogy, which is, as its title suggests, a series of 'scripts' (Merrill had written plays and was passionate about opera) we have contributions from or glimpses of many of the West's cultural icons. Speakers include God and his Archangels, Akhnaton, Homer, Montezuma, Nefertiti, Plato, Jesus, Mohammed, with walk-on parts for others ranging from Richard Strauss to Gertrude Stein. Auden plays a considerable role, and Merrill clearly inherited the older poet's gift for masque and for the campily carnivalesque. *The Dog Beneath the Skin* can be heard whimpering in *Scripts for the Pageant*. There is no doubt that these final sections are laborious to read: the poet is too conscious now of what he is doing, too much is brought out of the shadows, and in making things explicit, they can sound merely sophomoric.

The complete trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* took up many years of Merrill's creative life; and although he produced other poems, some of them quite long, his *magnum opus* offered him a chance to shine at everything: to adopt voices, to try on genres and discard them, to lecture or sing, converse or debate, to create characters or to be confessional, to tell a story or to philosophise, to play games or to ask the big questions. It is at times difficult, madcap and maddening, but huge intellectual fun. Sometimes, in those Tippett moments, it even touches the sublime. Indeed, one can understand Harold Bloom's hyperbole: few poets since Milton have achieved anything readable that tackles so much. One element that is lacking in the poem, however, is any profound sense of the natural world. Other American poets in Bloom's famous 'Western Canon' have also been drawn to the 'Polar Star' of the long poem, but it has tended to be in poetry of the wilderness rather than the ouija board. By comparison with A. R. Ammons, say, or Gary Snyder or Robert Penn Warren, James Merrill does not get out much. There are brave attempts in late lyrics such as 'Cornwall', but although the poem opens bracingly, we have been hurried back indoors by the end of the line ('Wind clear and heavy as a paperweight, / Lead crystal in which flowerets are set...') and we feel the poet is more at home with a title such as *Self-Portrait in Tyvek Windbreaker* (this Dedalus Press volume from 1995 proved his last: his editor John F. Deane sent me the copy I had ordered along with the news of his death). Keep that weather off, he implies, and let me explore the design of my windbreaker 'white with a world map...' Merrill looks at cultural touchstones rather than actual stones. He requires the baggage that the free-verser discards. America loves its wild, bearded prophets—its Whitman, its Sandburg—but it has always needed those neat, formal, closeted mystics, too—its Dickinson, its Stevens. Is Merrill Emily Dickinson dressed as Whitman in *The Changing Light ...?* He is certainly as much Ariel as Prospero, and can be Trinculo too when diverted

by glittery ‘trash’ (‘Dreams about Clothes’ is interesting in this regard). According to Merrill’s creed, nothing can be said outside of human society—even in the after-life—and the adequate saying requires every conceivable formal device available. No solitary Wordsworthian hikes for JM, no talking mountains, pentecostal winds, but a cast of colourful characters, a suite of interiors, a fascinating ‘sci-fi’ script:

THE ATOM IT IS ADAM & LIFE & THE UNIVERSE  
LEAVE IT TO ITSELF & LET IT BREATHE THE  
STRUCTURES NEEDED  
FOR MAN TO GAIN PARADISE ARE MOLECULAR &  
CAN  
AT LAST BE USED TO BREAK THE CHAIN OF BLIND  
& WASTEFUL LIVES

By Dr Skinner? Don’t we draw the line  
At tampering? Remember Frankenstein ...

Merrill’s long poem has the glitz and wackiness of Broadway, the erudition of the *New York Times* Science Supplement, and the social sophistication of Henry James. Such drunken variousness has left critics reeling. Some will simply have no truck with its ideas—forgetting how willingly we suspend our disbelief of improbabilities in Homer, Dante, Milton, forgetting too how Auden, a central character in *Sandover*, rather admired Yeats’ silliness. Some do not know how to take it: are we supposed to believe all this? Can the man be serious? George Bradley is surely not alone when he writes: ‘Reading James Merrill is enough to make the rest of us suspect we’re not smart enough to write poetry’. Thom Gunn admires the ‘inclusiveness, the richness of Merrill’s heroic enterprise’. Others, like Amy Clampitt, know exactly what is going on and read it in the right ‘spirit’, poking gentle fun with her ‘caps’ in an article for a Merrill tribute (*Verse*, 1988) about his use of dogs and cats: ‘NO ACCIDENT, then, that a work whose central theme and premise is reincarnation should consider the proverbial nine lives...’ Helen Vendler, as always, provides the most lucid commentaries; and the various interviews Merrill gave as the books of the trilogy appeared, are very illuminating (see *Recitative*, 1986, North Point Press).

As we have noted, Merrill worried that the work was ‘getting bigger than I thought a life should be’ and ‘kept clinging to the idea of Elizabeth [Bishop] with her sanity and levelheadedness’. British readers may remember the Merrill poem included in P. J. Kavanagh and James Michie’s wonderful anthology *The Oxford Book of Short Poems*—a useful reminder of what this poet could do in eight lines when he allowed the wind to take him: ‘Having used every subterfuge / To shake you, lies, fatigue, or even that of passion, / Now I see no way but a clean break. / I add that I am willing to bear the guilt. // You nod assent. Autumn turns windy, huge, / A clear vase of dry leaves vibrating on and on. / We sit, watching. When I next speak

/ Love buries itself in me, up to the hilt.’ There is a miniaturist in Merrill longing to get out (another parallel with Ammons) and even *The Changing Light at Sandover* can be seen as a prodigious collection of crown jewels, studded with brilliant gems. The volumes of shorter poems that followed the trilogy—*Late Settings* (1985), *The Inner Room* (1988) and (posthumously) *A Scattering of Salts* (1995)—include several such. Rachel Hadas has used some of these (in *PN Review*, Vol 19, No.4: ‘The Ark of What Has Been’) to defend Merrill against accusations of not living ‘inside history’. ‘Little Fallacy’ opens the 1988 volume and it shows Merrill glancing at the wider world (admittedly while ‘charmed inside the glow’ of cherry blossom and via a radio), as we all do when we hear bad news. The delicacy of the *abcd dcba* rhyming is breathtaking; the mirroring of the peaceful scene with the one bombless day in Beirut perfectly suggested in the pattern, with its quiet homage to the haiku:

Chamber of blossom, not a petal spilled,  
 Yesterday’s Japanese cherry  
 —You and I charmed inside the glow—  
 By evening had borne fruit:

A whole day in Beirut  
 —According to the radio,  
 The first since January—  
 With no one killed.

During the early 1990s, Merrill became HIV-positive, and although this was not known at the time, it can now be seen to haunt several of the last poems. The ten lines of ‘b o d y’ are characteristically intricate. The poet invites us to stand back from the letters that make up the word, transforms them to characters and conjures a (rhymed and metred) drama from them: ‘so soon—/ how like a little kohl-rimmed moon / o plots her course from *b* to *d* // as *y*, unanswered, knocks at the stage door’. The poem is clinched brilliantly, carrying on both the moon and theatre metaphors, maintaining its quiet courtesy to the end:

...Ask, now that *body* shines  
 no longer, by what light you learn these lines  
 and what the *b* and *d* stood for.

(*Birth and Death*, presumably.)

Following his death in 1995, a *Selected Poems* was published by Carcanet (it includes the above poem), but Merrill has never quite had the following in the British Isles that Lowell enjoyed. He is a very Eurocentric writer, but perhaps too Proustian, too well mannered for British tastes, lacking Lowell’s earthy strain—you would not

find Merrill empathising with a skunk. Yet there are plenty of contemporary poets with reason to be grateful for James Merrill's influence. The late Michael Donaghy recalled receiving 'a letter from America in the middle of the night that had gone to my old address. I heard it come through my letterbox just as I was walking down the stairs in a blind panic about money. I opened it up and it was a cheque for, well, a small fortune from the Ingram Merrill Foundation.' Merrill would have loved this kind of synchronicity: his poems are full of them. Donaghy adds that 'it was almost the last thing that James Merrill did before he died, to send me a small fortune.' But stylistic legacies? It would be hard to name any heirs and he certainly would not be a recommended model for creative writing students. James Merrill made a point of breaking all the rules, of remaining recklessly formal when all about him were casting off their chains, of being incorrigibly discursive and elitist, shunning the rhythms of speech for something more refinedly musical, and unswerving in his determination to squeeze every last pun out of a line. Moreover, he chose as the subject of his major work one of the literary world's unremarked taboos: the occult. The *Collected Poems* is a mighty volume, a Gothic castle of a book, a Neuschwanstein whose every lavish chamber offers its own eccentric delights. *The Changing Light at Sandover* is, however, what I believe Merrill will be remembered by. It has been well summed up by the editors of *Twentieth Century American Poetry* (Gioia, Mason, Schoerke): 'a complicated and idiosyncratic cosmology that incorporates diverse topics such as nuclear fission, reincarnation, population control, and the purpose of art', tempered, they add, 'by including ordinary details about [Merrill's] daily life with Jackson'.

That 'daily life' and how it was affected by the composition of the poem is entertainingly explored in Alison Lurie's memoir, but also features in some of the later poems. 'Clearing the Title' (from *Late Settings*) is another in Merrill's lifelong series of poems about moving house. In it, David Jackson has rashly gone ahead and bought a rundown property in Florida and as Merrill arrives, rather grumpy about the whole business, they drive past the building 'in which 'our' title / Is being cleared'. But the other 'title' that is being cleared (a typical Merrill pun) is that of the trilogy he has just completed. As he slowly reconciles himself to the pleasures of residence in Florida, something crystallizes in his mind, and (are those balloons a conscious echo of his much-loved Elizabeth Bishop?) he concludes the poem with what will become the first three words of the trilogy's title:

... Sky puts on the face of the young clown  
As the balloons, mere hueless dots now, stars  
Or periods—although tonight we trust no real  
Conclusions will be reached—float higher yet,  
Juggled slowly by the changing light.