

# THE LIFE LIVED



D A N I E L H A L L

He was rich. And even though it irritated him that every review, every article about him began with that fact, why shouldn't I honor the tradition? Especially since Langdon Hammer does so at the very beginning of his magnificent biography, *James Merrill: Life and Art*, which opens with a quotation from its irritated subject, who, in response to a friend's snide complaint, "Some of us have to work for a living," replied, "*I merely live to work.*" Hammer examines the remark: "Typical of Merrill to turn a cliché on its head. Typical of him to pack a serious statement into a quip," at the same time demonstrating Merrill's method while proving that he'd learned much from his subject. A few pages along we get actual numbers, though they don't quite seem to add up: an annual income of three hundred thousand dollars derived from trusts worth \$20 million (figures from 1995, the year of his death).

It's amusing to hear of his annoyance because he himself drew attention to his life of privilege constantly, not just through references to his famous parents – the financier Charles Merrill and his

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James Merrill: Life and Art, by Langdon Hammer (Knopf, 944 pp., \$40)

second wife, Hellen Ingram – and his lavish upbringing, but in his manner, diction, and tone. Perhaps there wasn't much to be done about these last three, but if he wanted to move among us incognito, he might have mentioned simply that he'd had dinner, for example, rather than specifying jellied sole or steak au poivre. After a thief broke into his apartment – a story told in *The Book of Ephraim* – he reported with relief that nothing was missing: “We had no television, he no taste / For Siamese bronze or Greek embroidery,” delineating, with one well-placed line break, their immense difference in social status.

Poet of the people or not, by the mid-twentieth century James Merrill had established himself as one of America's finest lyric poets; by the time of his death, five years shy of the millennium, he had confirmed that reputation and extended it: he was also one of America's great epic poets, though by that time he may have been America's only epic poet. Seldom does a body of work divide itself so neatly: on one hand is the *Collected Poems*, running to some nine hundred pages; on the other, his Ouija Board epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, which is around six hundred. (He wrote in addition two novels, short stories, plays, and essays, but nothing, I'm guessing, that would be remembered if not for the poetry.) One irony, then, of the burden of his great wealth is that he worked harder than many who have no choice *but* to work, who struggle to keep a roof over their heads. It's also worth pointing out that through his easy generosity – to friends, fellow artists, even strangers – he made the burden of need significantly lighter, thus helping to keep roofs over the heads of others. Indeed, funds distributed through his Ingram-Merrill Foundation made it possible for many writers and artists to “merely live to work,” if only for a time.

In a way, the money was the least of it: once he was on his own, his living arrangements were fairly modest. Obviously, though, from the moment he was born he enjoyed material benefits and other advantages at every turn. For example, who among us in largely monoglot America would not like to have been raised by a trilingual governess? In an autobiographical essay, “Acoustical Chambers,” he recalls that “by the time I was eight I had learned from her enough French and German to understand that English was merely one of many ways to express things. A single everyday

object could be called *assiette* or *Teller* as well as *plate* – or were plates themselves subtly different in France or Germany?”

This was early training for his lifelong struggle with things and their words, words and their things. (The governess was his beloved “Mademoiselle,” a recurring figure in his work.) And the truism about money and happiness was to be played out cruelly in his case: his parents’ long-troubled marriage finally fell apart when he was thirteen. Unsurprisingly, the desire to reunite them runs from his first book to his last, but the theme runs through his life story as well, often in bizarre ways. For example, when he and his longtime companion, David Jackson, first met, Jackson, closer to the middle of the Kinsey Scale, was still married. Even more surprising, Merrill, Jackson, and Jackson’s wife became close friends – close enough that, during a vacation together in Mexico, they shared a bed, a kind of oedipal entanglement (a comedy this time around) so convoluted I’d have to work out the implications of it all on paper. His parents are brought together, at least textually, in poem after poem – especially in an early masterpiece, “The Broken Home” – but also in his prose. Again, from “Acoustical Chambers,” where he cringes at a boyish diary entry about a trip to Florida: “Silver Springs – heavenly colors and swell fish.” What is this, the adult wonders, “but an attempt to bring my parents together, to remarry on the page their characteristic inflections – the ladylike gush and regular-guy terseness?” “18 West 11th Street,” a difficult, mid-career poem about (to quote the headnote) “a house in Manhattan, our home until I was five, carelessly exploded by the ‘Weathermen’ – young, bomb-making activists – in 1970,” concludes

Forty-odd years gone by.

Toy blocks. Church bells. Original vacancy.

O deepening spring.

Childhood would remain for him an emptiness and, paradoxically, a source. In fact the poem ingeniously runs the story of the catastrophe in reverse, so that the poet rebuilds the bombed-out ruins – a nice metaphor for his entire project. This inability to let go of things does much to illuminate his obsession with Proust, as well as his mystical communications with the dead.

“The true poem is the poet’s mind; the true ship is the ship-

builder.” As so often with Emerson, this may be less a truth than an aspiration. However, it describes James Merrill’s best work to a T: what is most thrilling, most disturbing, is the sense of the mind itself pushing out against the world, and the various textures created by the contact. *Divine Comedies*, published in 1976, represents the highpoint of his achievement and reveals the poem-making mind at full throttle. It is no accident that the book brings together the two genres: the first part comprises fifty pages of lyric poems, including several of his finest (and what may be judged his absolute best, “Lost in Translation”); while the second is given over to *The Book of Ephraim*, conceived and written as an independent work, but ultimately demoted to the first part of his epic trilogy, the *Inferno* of his *Divine Comedy*.

*Divine Comedies* begins with “The Kimono,” an emblematic introductory poem whose opening lines – “When I returned from lover’s lane / My hair was white as snow” – lulls us into expecting something simple and straightforward. The stanza continues:

Joy, incomprehension, pain  
I’d seen like seasons come and go.  
How I got home again  
Frozen half dead, perhaps you know.

Hammer’s reading of these lines is characteristically skillful, at once generous, sympathetic, and astute: “The idea in the first stanza seems to be that love is a simple, repeated story, as patterned as the seasons and as invariable; what begins in joy will end in pain, leaving us out in the cold.” In the middle of the poem, which presents the greatest difficulties (many of Merrill’s poems seem difficult in inverse proportion to their length), a cryptic conversation taking place between the lovers – who seem to be lying naked in front of a fire – is abruptly cut off by the speaker:

– Keep talking while I change into  
The pattern of a stream  
Bordered with rushes white on blue.

Here Hammer the biographer goes to work, connecting the poem to Merrill’s lover at the time, the painter David McIntosh, and to McIntosh’s “sensibility, his asceticism, and his knowledge of Japanese culture”; a footnote also returns us to Merrill’s family history:

“The garment Merrill mentions in the poem carried time in another sense too: the blue pattern of the stream identifies it as one he bought in Japan at the time of his father’s death.” This kind of minor miracle happens throughout the biography, proving the aptness of its subtitle, “Life and Art.” Rather than offering a strictly literary interpretation, Hammer instead tells us, again and again, *Here is where he was; this is what he was doing.*

If the lyric poems in *Divine Comedies* represented a new level of accomplishment, at least they could be seen as a culmination of his six earlier collections. *The Book of Ephraim*, on the other hand, was something new under the sun, and even longtime admirers struggled to make sense of it. Merrill and Jackson had for years consulted a Ouija Board, first as a parlor game, but increasingly in earnest – especially once they’d made contact with Ephraim, their witty, affable “familiar spirit.” At some point Merrill began working the material into a novel, which ended in failure – it was in fact sabotaged by Ephraim himself. (It is a sign of the densely interwoven nature of *Divine Comedies* that this background story is told in one of the lyric poems of part 1, “The Will.”) This sprawling, one-hundred-page poem tells the larger story of their encounter with Ephraim, but more than that, it tells the story of their lives, separately and together. (As Thom Gunn would later say of the trilogy, “It is also, not incidentally, the most convincing description I know of a gay marriage.”) In the end, it might be easier to say what the poem *isn’t* about. One of the most extravagant passages, a sonnet at the end of P (there are twenty-six sections, one for each letter of the alphabet) brings together, of all historical figures, Montezuma and Mallarmé,

the one we pictured garlanded  
 With afterimages, fire-sheer  
 Solar plume on plume;  
  
 The other, with having said  
 The world was made to end (“pour aboutir”)  
 In a slim volume.

It was easy to believe that Merrill’s world was made “to end” in *Divine Comedies*.

If Elizabeth Bishop was “the eye” of American poetry, JM was

“the X-Ray eye,” the restless, priestly interpreter of his own life as it unfolded, who treated every detail and development as if it had cosmic significance – often it did, as it turns out. His ability to draw connections between seemingly unrelated things was uncanny, and was at the heart of his renowned sense of humor. But the poetry has to be placed far beyond “confessional,” as the term is usually understood, given the intense, at times inseparable, interpenetration of the life and the art that was its lifeblood, the art it produced. As Hammer puts it: “Merrill wanted to feel, and wanted us to feel, that not only his poetry, but his whole life, had led to this.” Rereading *The Book of Ephraim* with a clear head, on a clear day, you may find yourself wondering whether there is any end to the glittering web of connections, whether it is possible, finally, to exhaust the poem. In fact, if anything tempts me to believe in the entire loony enterprise, it is precisely this connect-edness, which at times doesn’t seem humanly possible. But it wasn’t the work of angels or extraterrestrials or God himself, but of one extraordinary earthling.

This interconnectedness was there from the beginning, as if by design. Consider an early poem, “A Tenancy.” It is dedicated to David Jackson, whom Merrill had recently met, and is the final poem in *Water Street*, the 1962 volume that says farewell to his life in New York and inaugurates his new one, with Jackson, in the seaside village of Stonington, Connecticut. In it he bargains with Time – “given a few years more / (Seven or ten, or what seemed vast, fifteen)” – as he would again in a 1985 poem, “Grass,” with four more decades and a diagnosis of AIDS behind him:

We light up between  
 Earth and Venus  
 On the courthouse lawn,  
  
 Kept by this cheerful  
 Inch of green  
 And ten more years – fifteen? –  
 From disappearing.

Another phrase from “A Tenancy” (“It was time to change the wallpaper!”) prefigures the opening conceit of *Mirabell’s Books of Number*, the second part of the Ouija Board trilogy, where he looks

back in studied casualness: “Oh, very well then. Let us broach the matter / Of the new wallpaper in Stonington.” Finally, the title of the completed epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (a choice so agonizing the story is told in its own poem, “Clearing the Title”), appears in “A Tenancy” as well, drawing attention to itself only decades later:

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.

Harold Bloom praised *Ephraim* extravagantly, referring to it as the book’s “apocalypse (a lesser word won’t do),” and speculating that the succeeding parts, “should they equal or go beyond *The Book of Ephraim*, will make him one of the strangest, most unnerving of all this country’s poets.” He needn’t have worried. Is it somehow built into the writing of (forgive me) religious verse that the writer must always go to the point of boredom, and beyond? I don’t know how many readers would have asked for a *Purgatorio* or a *Paradise Regained* – or the *Begats*, for that matter – but logic, or something like it, seems to have required them. Likewise in Merrill’s case. Having achieved something like perfection with *Ephraim*, he was perversely compelled to push on, into *Mirabell’s Books of Number* and *Scripts for the Pageant*. (Tellingly, each volume is exponentially longer than the previous.) Even after it’s all over, the project kept coming back to life, Dracula-like: first, a coda called *The Higher Keys*; a stage version called *Voices from Sandover*; years later, scraps that didn’t make it into the published poem were gathered up in “From the Cutting Room Floor”; worst of all, perhaps, Merrill and Jackson were invited by the *Paris Review* to interview *dead writers* by means of the Board (no doubt for the Writers at Rest Series). How often the heart sinks, as when, for example, in *Mirabell* we find them building a little cardboard pyramid in which to sharpen their razor blades. A few questions: Is no idea too silly to be included? Surely you could afford to buy new razor blades? And, above all, Where is Ephraim when you need him?

Speaking for myself, it was the thread of skepticism running through *Ephraim* that made it possible to read it in the first place.

Section I tells the hilarious story of Merrill's consultation with a shrink about a falling-out he's had with Ephraim – much more entertaining than it sounds – and concludes with a superb passage confronting “The question / Of who or what we took Ephraim to be”:

If he had blacked out reason (or vice versa)  
 On first sight, we instinctively avoided  
 Facing the eclipse with naked eye.  
 Early attempts to check what he let fall  
 Failed; E's grasp of dates and places being  
 Feeble as ours, his Latin like my own  
 Vestigial; even D knew better German.

It is, in fact, a master lesson on how to hold two views at once, and the balance achieved here is nothing short of breathtaking. Even as he teasingly inches the curtain open, he reminds us that it has two sides. This refusal to decide – “He didn't cavil. *He* was the revelation / (Or if we had created him, then we were)” – seemed not just a way to read this “apocalypse,” but its very lesson. But here Hammer shines a bright, if unwelcome, light on the subject. In fact, from the beginning, Merrill wanted, needed to believe in his Other World, and did so to the end. The last gasp, in print at least, was a poem called “Nine Lives,” in which a credulous JM and DJ show up at an appointed hour in Kolonoki Square in central Athens, where they are to meet Ephraim's “representative,” an Indian boy they call Pashy. As Hammer points out – sadly, I think – “This was the sort of nonsense Merrill and Jackson had always been too sensible or too proud to get involved in.” In the poem they are disappointed but philosophical; in life, as Hammer tells us, “JM and DJ kept their cool. But later, at home, Merrill burst into tears. ‘I hadn't realized how much I'd hoped [for] that link between the realms of fact + fiction.’ Their religion was not of that sort, however. They were ‘2 wise men at the empty manger.’ There would be no savior, no magical son.”

There was more sadness to come. Merrill certainly had brilliant and illustrious friends, but with few exceptions he tended to marry down; this was the case with David Jackson, whose life ended in an embarrassing heap of disappointment, particularly when viewed against his happy beginnings, his winning person-

ality, his (admittedly minor) talents. The story of his obsessive jealousy over a Greek lover, for example, which would have fueled unforgettably poignant poems from Merrill, amounted to nothing more than a tiresome obsession. The bourgeois in me, perhaps, wonders whether even a part-time job might not have given his life a little sustaining structure. That is, what worked so well for JM may have been DJ's ultimate undoing: while Merrill's life was a full-time job, one he was very good at, DJ's was a sinecure. His eventual fate was a thickening fog of TV and cigarettes; while he survived his beloved JM by six years, in reality he was gone much sooner.

Merrill's end was worse, and even sadder. He was diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, and died nine years later, a month shy of his seventieth birthday. This is merely the headline; Hammer tell us the full story, sparing us nothing, and while it is of course a necessary part of James Merrill's story, it makes for very painful reading. The book concludes as it began, with the subject of money: there are a few pages devoted to the contents of the will, which, face it, will interest everyone.

But the book doesn't quite end with the reading of the will: Hammer adds a couple more pages, ending instead with a beautiful reading of a late poem, "b o d y," which, as he points out, concerns "not the word but the letters":

Look closely at the letters. Can you see,  
 entering (stage right), then floating full,  
 then heading off – 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?  
 Looked at too long, words fail,  
 phase out. Ask, now that *body* shines  
 no longer, by what light you learn these lines  
 and what the *b* and *d* stood for.

Hammer connects this to his own art, and, in a Proustian touch, to the work he is about to conclude, and in doing so, attempts to answer that unanswered *why*:

At the end of the line, the quest for meaning (exemplified in a little poem like this, or in the grand designs of a life devoted to poetry) loses meaning. Words, like the body, “phase out.” They last only so long as the light that we need to read them. That truth leaves us with an enigma, with the question of “what the *b* and *d* stood for.” It’s a question we all need to ask, and the subject of every biography.

Merrill’s papers, housed at Washington University in St. Louis, reveal a graphomaniac at work. It’s not just the quantity of drafts, manuscripts, journals, and letters; even those pages are additionally covered in doodles, anagrams (Dylan Thomas: HOT LADYS MAN), lists of possible rhymes, and so on. A friend reported back to me after a visit to the archive: he’d opened a box of journals, begun reading, and then looked up at the box, and then at other boxes like it, and wondered, “Who is ever going to *read* all this?” The answer to his rhetorical question turned out to be Langdon Hammer, who deserves the gratitude of scholars, critics, and above all lovers of American poetry for the prodigious research alone. It wasn’t just the vast written record; Merrill’s wanderlust took him round the world compulsively, but he also lived for significant periods in far-flung places, and each of these ancillary lives had to be explored, friends and lovers interviewed, and, above all, connections to the work drawn. And if these labors weren’t enough, there is the writing itself to be grateful for. Here is Hammer on Merrill’s and Jackson’s new life in Stonington:

It was natural for Merrill to think of his poems as a kind of house, because his house was a kind of poem. In his father’s homes in Southampton and Palm Beach, Kimon’s rooms at Amherst and on Poros, Claude’s Pawlet farmhouse, Umberto’s Cortona estate, and Alice B. Toklas’s flat in Paris, he had seen how rooms could collect the story of a life, and how the inner life of daydream and memory might express itself in a home, as in a work of art. He liked that “stanza” was the Italian for “room”; “given arrangements,” whether of poetic form or interior design, were structures to be inhabited, where the self could be apprehended in a daily dialogue with spaces and objects. He pored over Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics*

*of Space*, which describes the house as a “shell” or “nest” for poetic reverie. As a student at Amherst, he’d gazed at the windows behind which Emily Dickinson wrote her poems, and brooded on his hero Proust, writing in his cork-lined room.

It’s not just the elegance of Hammer’s prose, or his mastery of the biographical materials; what is most impressive here is what eludes so many biographers: an imaginative inhabiting of the life to the extent that that is even possible. Given the richness of the existing record, it’s difficult to believe that another Merrill biography would ever be necessary. Beyond that, Hammer’s achievement in *Life and Art* makes it unlikely that anyone will ever write a better one.