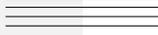


T H E B I O G R A P H I C A L
C O N T A I N E R



L A N G D O N H A M M E R

“I merely live to work.” That’s James Merrill replying to David Kalstone. Merrill had been needling him about how slow a writer he was, and Kalstone, a professor of literature, defended himself: “Some of us have to work for a living” – referring to how little time he had left over after teaching.

Typical of Merrill to turn a cliché on its head. Typical of him to pack a serious statement into a quip. As his friend pointed out, he had no need to work: the wealth he was born to ensured that. But rather than freeing him from work, his money allowed him to devote himself to the work he wanted to do. It was a kind of work – the writing of poetry – that drew on and shaped the rest of his life, giving meaning and design, a tone and a style, to everything he did. “Poetry made me who I am,” he commented on another occasion, slyly reversing the usual relation between maker and made.

Merrill sounds in these remarks like Oscar Wilde, the subversive master of antithesis, for whom the self was not a natural fact but material to be fashioned, like a work of art. He also sounds like his father, Charles Merrill [the financier

and cofounder of Merrill Lynch], who made his fortune working very hard on Wall Street. Indeed, strange to say, Merrill resembled both of these self-made men. He created a version of Wilde's aesthetic lifestyle, updating the artist-dandy's role for late-twentieth-century America, and he brought to the project an intensity of industry his father would have understood.

As you might guess or even recognize, if you've opened it in a bookstore or Looked Inside on Amazon, these are the first paragraphs of a biography I wrote, *James Merrill: Life and Art*. They establish the frame for the biography. They point out that Merrill lived a certain type of life – the life of a poet – and lived it in a certain way. In this essay I want to take a further step back, look at that frame, and draw another frame around it, to give some definition to the deceptively simple-seeming abstractions in the book's subtitle: "Life and Art."

This will involve asking what kind of book it is that I wrote. The answer may seem obvious enough: a biography. But surely it's a work of criticism too. So it's a critical biography, then (a familiar category). But what does that mean exactly? Is a critical biography a book in which a potentially interesting story is periodically interrupted by niggling literary analysis? Or is it a series of close readings arranged chronologically by order of composition and nested in a detailed, not to say (as one evidently overworked reviewer said of my book) "punishingly long" record of a poet's life? The challenge, of which Merrill was always acutely aware, comes in trying to say what a poet's life and work together add up to.

I take him fully at his word when he says, "Poetry made me who I am." This is a marvelously condensed statement. What does it mean? Compare it to a principle articulated by the fiction writer (an acquaintance of Merrill's) Italo Calvino: "The preliminary condition of any work of literature is that the person who is writing has to invent that first character, who is the author of the work." The example Calvino has in mind is Flaubert: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." Yes, but the Flaubert who wrote *Madame Bovary* is not the same "author-cum-character" who wrote *Salammbô* and Flaubert's other novels because, Calvino goes on, "Writing always presupposes the selection of a psychological attitude, a

rapport with the world, a tone of voice, a homogeneous set of linguistic tools, the data of experience and the phantoms of imagination – in a word, a *style*. The author is an author insofar as he enters into a role as an actor does.” To create an identity, through writing, is to create a character, a role, and to do that is to create a style.

Importantly, Calvino’s formula has to do with the novel – a literary genre founded on the distinction between author and character. For Merrill, the poet, the situation is perhaps simpler, but for the same reason more complicated, with more at stake in the way there is always more at stake in life than in art. Merrill doesn’t get to stand above or to one side of his work, like Calvino’s Flaubert. The point of view in his poetry is his point of view in life, and the way he lives that life is his subject. We’re not talking about an actor entering into a role, which he can walk away from at the end of a performance; we are talking about “a man choosing the words he lives by.” That’s Merrill’s memorable definition of the poet: “The poet isn’t always the hero of a movie who *does* this, *does* that. He is a man choosing the words he lives by.”

In this Merrill is hardly different from many other modern poets. What sets him apart from all but a few, while making him exemplary, is the extent to which he could indeed “live to work.” Living for his work was a risk he could afford, financially and psychologically, but it was still a great risk: everything was staked on it. Those two categories, life and work, fuse in “V-Work,” the name that the spirits in Merrill’s occult epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, give to all inspired making: it’s a compound meaning “lifework,” through a pun on the French *la vie*. For Merrill, poetics and ethics keep turning into each other. Or, considered within a system of oppositions whose putatively natural, genetic order Merrill’s poetry confounds (pairs like cause and effect, reality and projection, source and translation, sign and signified, Earth and Heaven), Life and Work are merely one more “half-stoned couple / Doing the Chicken-and-the-Egg till dawn.” (That’s another quotation from *Sandover*.)

How about biography and criticism: Is this another of those crazy couples? The two genres are joined at the root of modern literary scholarship in Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets*, and for a long time no one cared to tell them apart. In the twentieth

century, however, the higher order thinking called the New Criticism defined itself against biography: biography was what criticism was not. The issue had to do with the work of art's autonomy. For instance, is it a shortcoming that Merrill's poems require (or at least invite and answer to) a biographical reading? Is the poetry a lesser thing because biography makes it something more? I've been asked these questions more than once. The answer will depend on how you define aesthetic success. The question expresses the belief that works of art and literature should be evaluated independently from the contextual information in biography. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley put it memorably in their classic essay "The Intentional Fallacy": in a good poem, all that matters are the words on the page, because everything else has been excluded, "like lumps from pudding and 'bugs' from machinery."

Merrill's poetry is full of lumps and bugs (especially *Sandover*, the manic machine that records the "marvelous nightly pudding" of Merrill's séances at the Ouija board). That the way Merrill's poetry depends on biography can be seen as a defect shows that autonomy remains an active criterion of evaluation. But autonomy doctrine, along with so much else in the New Criticism, has been rejected by the modes of historicism that dominate criticism today and that emphasize, from one point of view or another, the socially embedded nature of art. This new paradigm for criticism, which has been orthodoxy in Humanities scholarship for so long (more than thirty years now) it is hardly new, sounds like it might be a good thing for biography. But that's not been the case. In fact literary biography might be even more suspect and outmoded today in the university than it was in the era of the New Criticism.

The issue has to do with the autonomy of the person, rather than the work. From the point of view of contemporary criticism, biography is compromised at its core by its focus on the individual. As a genre, it supports the retrograde view of culture as a parade of exemplary individuals (who happen to be overwhelmingly white and male – which is a related but separate issue). For many critics today, people are, like texts, a matter of context. It's a mistake to see them as free agents of their destiny, when social structures, transpersonal systems of relation of which they are hardly aware, condition or even determine what they do and say. Moreover, this

argument goes, we miss the important thing – the social whole – whenever we gaze for long at any one person.

“The self was once . . . a great, great / Glory,” JM declares, trying to sell that idea to his make-believe nephew, Wendell, early in *Sandover*. “Oh sure. But is it still?” the sulky teenager shoots back. Wendell is a budding artist in the vein of perhaps Francis Bacon. With the perfect confidence of the young, he argues that “The representable self, at any rate, / Ran screaming from the Post-Impressionist / Catastrophe.” And so on. His sketchbook portraits capture a vision of “mankind” as “Doomed, sick, selfish, dumb as shit” that coolly demystifies his uncle’s praise for the cultivated self, revealing it as simply the aesthetic ideology of social privilege. Wendell reasons:

They talk about how decent, how refined –
All it means is, they can afford somehow
To watch what’s happening, and not to mind.

Like the huge poem it comes from, that dialogue was motivated by Merrill’s need to respond to the sort of skepticism about personal autonomy I’ve been describing. In particular, he’d been deeply depressed, in 1973, after reading a review of his book *Braving the Elements* by Richard Pevear, who argued from a Marxist point of view that Merrill’s poetry expressed the worldview of a dying social class. Merrill reacted to this critique sharply; it was as if he were a sort of fraud who had been caught out. He wrote in his notebook: “Always quick to accept the ‘worst,’ I quickly fleshed out the skeleton’s accusing index finger. What I had scorned + avoided in the world – politics, money – or, more exactly, profited by with eyes averted, turned out to have shaped me to its own quite scrutable ends. I was of my time, a gram of the gross national product.”

The “worst” Merrill could imagine was to be revealed as “a gram of the gross national product.” This is a fear about being commodified and coopted, objectified, and precisely in the act of asserting one’s subjectivity and creative freedom. I’ll return to this fear shortly. In order to fill it out and place its force, I want to introduce a critic more formidable than either Wendell or Richard Pevear: the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu, if anyone, represents the historicist perspective I’ve been describing; no

one else has so rigorously demystified the claims to autonomy of modern authors and their works. Yet Bourdieu's work also establishes grounds on which we might return to and reconsider those claims, insofar as the pursuit of autonomy, in his account, is the essential story of modern art and literature, and the purpose of the modern writer's or artist's life.

Bourdieu describes autonomy as "a position to be made": it is a point of view that was not preordained in the social order and that therefore had to be created through the process of practical and symbolic struggle that established the "field of cultural production" as a distinct arena. Bourdieu calls it "The Economic World Reversed" because this social space is organized around a "systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit . . .), that of power (it condemns honors and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue)." The literary field is a subdivision of the "field of cultural production," but it is the key to Bourdieu's model of the aesthetic. It consists in "points" or "positions" that correspond to the stylistic choices of individuals and groups, and that are affected by the push and pull of institutions and other forces in and beyond the field. In the "inverted" logic that governs here, those positions that are the farthest removed from economic and political power have the highest prestige, the most symbolic capital, because they are the most disinterested, and thus the most dedicated to art itself.

Bourdieu's account of the genesis of the literary field centers on the emergence of aestheticism in nineteenth-century France, where he describes two signal inventions. The first is "that unprecedented social personage, the modern writer or artist, a full-time professional who is dedicated to one's work in a total and exclusive manner, indifferent to the exigencies of politics and to the injunctions of morality, and not recognizing any jurisdiction other than the norms specific to one's art." The second invention is the lifestyle of that writer or artist, an "art of living" defined by those who live by art and its dictates rather than those of society at large, and who form the "restricted market" in which their work is produced and received. Bohemia is the location of this new "society within society," whose standard-bearers, for Bourdieu, are

Baudelaire, the Parnassians, the symbolists (particularly Mallarmé), Flaubert in the novel, and ultimately Proust. Of course, the emergence of the modern writer and the aesthetic lifestyle are not merely parallel or coincidental developments; they create and sustain each other. As Bourdieu puts it in a circular formulation close to the one by Calvino we began with, “Proust the writer is what the narrator becomes in and through the work that produces the *Recherche*, and that produces him as a writer.” In effect, Bourdieu provides a social theory that explains Calvino’s literary theory.

How would Merrill react to Bourdieu? I imagine by rolling his eyes, raising an eyebrow, or simply falling asleep. He would have hated the sociologist’s style, in particular. But what of his ideas? I think he’d have to admit to understanding Bourdieu intimately, on the basis of his own biography. The Economic World was not a sociological abstraction; it was Daddy, Charles Merrill, one of the most prominent men of finance of his era. Merrill’s literary vocation set him apart from his father and the businessman’s way of life. That effect points to a motive: on one level, Merrill became a poet so as to distinguish himself from his famous father, to “make his own name,” and so to compete with him, but on grounds of his own choosing, not openly. The threat to the son’s autonomy posed by this dynastic father, with his business associates, lovers, and assorted hangers-on, was considerable. How easy it would have been for Jimmy never to have become more than one of the old man’s many investments, a line on the Merrill Lynch balance sheet, “a gram in the gross national product” – even if he also knew that the path to freedom and self-expression would require the money his father gave him. Bourdieu quotes the poet Théophile Gautier grumbling to the farceur Feydeau: “Flaubert was smarter than us . . . He had the wit to come into the world with money, something that is indispensable for anyone who wants to get anywhere in art.” How many of Merrill’s friends and enemies said something similar behind his back?

Meanwhile, Jimmy identified with Mama, Hellen Merrill, the Muse who copied and preserved his first poem, “Looking at Mummy.” The identification deepened with his parents’ divorce, in which he saw his mother – and justifiably so – as the injured party. Literature and art, in contrast to the masculine domains of business and politics, were marked as feminine for him, defining the field

farthest, Bourdieu reminds us, from power. Choosing them implied the rejection of masculine norms, which were tainted in the boy's eyes by the abuse of power, it being natural (he had concluded from watching his father's behavior) for power to reside with men, and for men to abuse it. Bourdieu refers to writers and artists, dryly, as "the dominated fraction of the dominant class." Perhaps Merrill saw his mother and by extension his younger self in similar terms. In any case, allegory of this kind isn't far from his mature poetic thought. In the poem about his parents' divorce, "The Broken Home," he speaks of his parents as "Father Time and Mother Earth / A marriage on the rocks." In an interview he commented: "You don't see . . . history except at the family dinner table."

Merrill would hardly be the artist he was, however, if his positioning of himself in the world came down to taking his mother's side against his father. Here "lifestyle" is the essential thing. Devoting himself to literature and art entailed for Merrill not only a specific structure of gender identification but a particular sexual disposition and, along with it, a code of conduct and styles of speech that defined a stigmatized minority. Poetry and homosexuality were in a sense the same choice, each implying the other for Merrill. His first sexual relationship grew out of a private poetry tutorial when he was an Amherst College junior in 1945. "I shall write, be brilliant, be great," he wrote in his diary the day he met Kimon Friar, a poet and an instructor. Then a month later: "We are in love, Kimon and I, tenderly, passionately, completely." But homosexuality, which set Merrill apart from his father much more than his poetry did, divided him also and more painfully and consequentially from his mother. No less essential to his being than poetry, it confirmed the depth of his dedication to art, and made his vocation a matter of his whole life.

As he quips in "The Broken Home," Merrill obeyed both his parents, but "inversely." The pun identifies him as at once an invert and a poet, and roots both of these identities in his ambivalent relation to his parents. "The Broken Home" creates a personal, autobiographical myth to explain the origins of that compound identity. In the sort of paradox that he trained himself to savor, Merrill's singularity as a person and an artist derived from his commitment to doubleness, which was expressed in his ability to see both sides of any issue, not to mention every possible pun.

This labile, mobile perspective was the basis for a philosophical and literary style; it is the achieved form of the autonomy that was thrust upon Jimmy as the child of the broken home, where he discovered himself as the third term, simultaneously in-between and neither-nor. The mirror that became his chosen emblem (and his answer to the family crests that his parents, nouveaux riches, concocted for themselves) showed the self as double and inverted. It is a fit symbol for the tautological program of “art for art’s sake” and for a life dedicated to literature in “The Economic World Reversed.”

Now let me position Merrill, very quickly, in the context of postwar American poetry. To begin with I should point out that although he worked in several genres, and in that sense tried on different authorial roles, he was always primarily a poet. He wasn’t exploring alternatives to poetry so much as testing how far poetry might be extended. His plays, inspired by the likes of Maeterlinck, and his novels, modeled respectively on late Henry James and the *nouveau roman*, never had a chance of commercial success; they were the works of a poet, and a rarefied poet at that. *The Immortal Husband* and *The Seraglio* came before the public, against his protests, with blurbs by Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote, celebrity writers (and not incidentally homosexuals) whom Merrill knew but didn’t like, being turned off by their showy personal styles, aimed at Broadway and Hollywood.

Curiously, because he was virtually alone in this among Americans of his generation, Merrill’s early, formative literary identifications were with decadent French writers and artists, including musicians and composers, who were leaders in what Bourdieu calls “the conquest of autonomy.” Merrill used those models (and writers like Wilde and Elinor Wylie, whom he read in their light) to create for himself a florid aestheticism that was alien and anachronistic in the context of his era. Postwar American poetry was a matter of self-consciously innovative and competing movements and schools: the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, Black Mountain, Confessional poetry, the New York School. Merrill pointedly belonged to none of these groups. He saw their ways of writing as rhetorical choices, and in that sense as ideologies, rather than being (as they claimed, or as others claimed for them) historical, political, aesthetic, or even, in the case of Allen Gins-

berg's "breath units," physiological imperatives. As Merrill put it in 1967, with aggressive languor, "Anybody starting to write today has at least ten kinds of poems, each different from the other, on which to pattern his own." His signature move, setting him above the fray and by himself, was to present his own style precisely and only as a style, validated by nothing more – or less – than his personality and preference.

By this means Merrill maintained his independence not only from postwar American poetry's various schools, but from the school itself, from the academy, where so many poets of his generation were now employed as teachers of literature or creative writing. It is hard to reflect on this basic development in literary culture – we are still so deep inside its unfolding consequences. The title of Mark McGurl's study of postwar American fiction, *The Program Era*, refers to the rise of MFA programs and their influence on the novel and short story. The label works even better for poetry, which, lacking fiction's potential access (however selective) to large markets and real money, has long been more dependent than fiction on sponsorship by foundations, privately funded small publishers, and colleges and universities. Even before the MFA in poetry spread throughout the country as a vocational credential with no future, the poet-critic was an important new role in the academy, with effects on the study of literature as much as on creative writing. The mid-twentieth-century English Department in America was the final stage in the development of nineteenth-century aestheticism: it was an institution devoted to "poetry as poetry," as the New Critics, many of whom were poets, liked to say.

But the academy accommodated poetry only on the condition of professionalization: the "art of living," which had evolved, as Bourdieu describes, outside existing institutions and in opposition to them, now submitted to the standardized forms of a bureaucratic appointment, involving CVs, interviews, fellowships, productivity, promotion, and deans. It's in this context that Merrill's sometimes defiant dilettantism takes on its meaning. To be sure, Merrill's poetic sensibility was a product of the classroom – Amherst's – and he himself taught in colleges (Bard, Amherst, Wisconsin, Yale), but these were temporary, entirely optional, in a sense *experimental* situations, from which, like his love affairs, his money ensured

that he could pull back and go elsewhere. He cultivated academic friends, and they served his poetry very well, but he was a guest in their world, and he was surprisingly uncomfortable when called upon to behave as they did.

As, for instance, when writing critical prose. He published only one book of it, titled *Recitative* – referring to the spoken interludes in an opera – to make it clear he wasn't singing. J. D. McClatchy, who edited the volume for North Point, a small press, comments: "He was fine about having his essays collected and published, so long as someone else did it for him, and he didn't want it to be published by Knopf, like the rest of his books. It was outside the canon of his work." On the copy given to his lover Peter Hooten, Merrill wrote, "We amateurs, as Peter knows, / Have very little use for prose." Prose was for the pros, poetry for amateurs. The pose of the amateur, however, was just that, a pose. Merrill used it in poetry's own program era to reclaim the heroic role of the modern writer, as defined by Bourdieu. In Merrill's dilettantism, the "full-time professional . . . dedicated to his work in a total and exclusive manner" is rescued from the professionalism of the American academy by an unlikely, self-deprecating hero: the amateur.

I mentioned that Bourdieu speaks of writers occupying specific "points" in the literary field. The "point" Merrill occupied can be specified quite precisely by a particular address: 107 Water Street, Stonington, Connecticut. That was the poet's primary residence from 1954 until his death. The spot was sufficiently far from other centers of influence that he could create his own miniature society there. But note: this isn't the same thing as the "society within society" called Bohemia or Greenwich Village, where other writers and artists live. On the third floor of a stiff, unlovely commercial building, hidden by its sheer ordinariness, Merrill and his lifelong partner, David Jackson, set up a queer McCarthy-era lair. I could go on – in my book I do go on – describing the place. What I want to emphasize here is that the Water Street apartment is the materialization of Merrill's autonomy. A whole aesthetic, its internal literary properties and its external social relationships, can be read out of the house. Merrill's life and work co-mingle there, each creating – and created in the image of – the other. In the 25th Reunion guide to the Lawrenceville class of 1943, Merrill listed his home and work addresses as "the same." In a list of lawyers and

Wall Street executives, he is the only one for whom work and home are the same, for whom that fundamental, everyday schism does not obtain.

But Merrill didn't simply "work at home," as telecommuters do today. Again the Water Street apartment illustrates the complication. Merrill's study is disguised by a bookshelf on the door to it, which swings open to a room inside the apartment's other rooms, an "inner room," to invoke the title of his next-to-last book. Like other spaces Merrill worked in, in Athens and in Key West, this is a very small, semi-secret place designed for private meditation; an anchorite's cell, it removes the writer from the world (the world of the house and then the world beyond that) of which the room remains a part, as a kind of interior annex. There is only one window to look out of, if the desk weren't turned away from it. Books fill the shelves, and rise in stacks from the floor. Words, words, words. This is the space, scaled to one person, like a coffin or a closet, in which, hidden from us, dwells the "full-time professional . . . devoted to his work in a total and exclusive manner," or in Merrill's phrase, "a man choosing the words he lives by."

The life of the poet as Merrill lived it is ultimately the story of what happened at his desk. The principle of autonomy involved for Merrill a discipline of reflexivity, of self-scrutiny more than self-expression, which was enacted through a compositional practice of painstaking revision. His desk, his notebook – these were his mirrors. Critics call "An Urban Convalescence" a pivotal poem in Merrill's career. The poem, placed first in *Water Street* (Merrill's third book, from 1962), ends with the resolution "to make some kind of house / Out of the life lived, out of the love spent." Notice that "life" and "love" are parallel nouns, and love is something that can be "spent," like cash. In these terms, teasingly literal and figurative at once, the poem lays out the future plan for Merrill's life and work, which will have so much to do with his home.

The pivot in this pivotal poem comes in the middle of it. Outside on a city street, still weak from an unspecified illness, Merrill pretends that his tears come from the cold day; then he stops and scolds himself: "With cold? / Alright then. With self-knowledge." Next, he moves indoors to his desk, while pushing toward the resonant conclusion. The pivot is the question: "With cold?" In his

drafts of the poem – he saved forty-six worksheets – that question appears in pen as a marginal note beside the phrase “eyes astream with cold,” where he had been stuck for some time. This is a case of Merrill integrating self-interrogation into his poem in the process of revision and finding in that move the impetus to continue. Inspecting the worksheet on which it first appears does not establish whether “With cold?” was a skeptical question Merrill put to himself while going over the draft, and thus a “real” question, or whether it was a simulation of a real question – an imitation of “a man choosing the words . . .” But we don’t need to settle that issue. At his desk he was dissolving the difference between those alternatives.

“From a Notebook,” a beautiful lyric about the experience of writing in a notebook, directly follows “An Urban Convalescence” in *Water Street*. As a gloss on the much longer and self-consciously important, almost polemical poem, the shorter one says that Merrill will make “some kind of house” out of his life by using his notebook – that, in short, the project comes down to the work of composition, which begins with the breaking of new ground (clean pages, “fresh snow”) and then the daily activity of going over it again, in revision. The poem puns (as Stevens liked to) on the Latin root of “candor,” meaning both honesty and the whiteness of the paper that invites it. From this point forward in his career, all of Merrill’s poetry might bear the caption “From a Notebook.” His writing would foreground the process that produced it by means of such reliable predigital implements as paper, pen, and ink.

Merrill was well prepared, then, to receive a letter from the poet Mona Van Duyn, in 1964, inviting him to view Washington University Library, Special Collections, as “home base” for his papers. The importance of the library’s invitation can’t be exaggerated. It satisfied Merrill’s wish to waste nothing and to turn his life to account. The existence of the archive, by reinforcing his interest in his writing process and affirming its value, shaped how he thought of his writing as well as how he wrote. It meant that he was not only producing writing for publication, but producing a record of that process, contextualized by notebooks, guest books, calendars, a vast correspondence, and other documents, not to mention clippings, photos, and random *realia*, from his bronzed

baby shoes to his death mask. (Incidentally, neither the baby shoes nor the death mask was his idea; the first was his mother's, the second Peter Hooten's.) The whole is what matters here, insofar as the inevitably fragmentary record constituted by a personal archive can represent a whole.

The Merrill Papers at Washington University are the product of a specific moment in cultural history. First, there had to be in place the belief that a contemporary writer's papers could be of value and interest to an institution. The history of private collectors is long, but the establishment of rare book rooms in universities was a relatively new thing. No university was busy collecting Pound or Eliot in the 1920s. We return to Bourdieu's "full-time professional . . . devoted to his work in a total and exclusive manner": it is this personage, new to the world, who creates the materials libraries want to collect. And obviously there must be libraries, like Special Collections at Washington University, with both sufficient funds and enough unsatisfied institutional ambition to go out and recruit – to place a bet on – the work of a writer like Merrill or Robert Creeley, who, each being only in his mid-thirties at the time he was approached by the library, couldn't yet have done much more than establish his promise. The condition for that bet is the rise of the modern English Department and the university study of literature, which confirmed the value of authors and their archives, even if hosting research scholars and their classes was not the first business of an archivist, and the New Criticism was busy insisting that biography, and for that matter worksheets and notebooks, were mostly beside the point.

Finally, there had to be paper and ink. Bourdieu's "full-time professional," Merrill's "man choosing the words he lives by," and the Washington University Collection of Modern Literature – all of these would be unthinkable in the form in which I've been describing them without the way paper records the act of choosing particular words, sensitizes writers and readers both to the materiality of the verbal medium, preserves original, singular documents as a record of so many individual choices, and establishes a symbolic equivalence between authors and their works (building on the longstanding trope of the book as person: think of the function of the engraving or photograph of the author as frontispiece, or the way we speak of "Homer" or "Dante" when we

mean their works). That equivalence is based in the physical presence of the person and the book as they are attached from the first moment of composition, when the hand puts pen to paper and makes a distinctive personal mark. All of this is thrown into relief by the advent of digital literary culture. As Merrill realized near the end of his career, he had lived the life of the poet in the radiant twilight of the era of the Book.

Merrill created an image of that life in its heroic form in another poem from *Water Street*, “For Proust.” Merrill’s Proust goes out into the social world, then returns home, up the “strait” stair, where, in a “dim room without contour,” the space of Proust’s achieved creative autonomy, “what happened is becoming literature.” The progressive present tense evokes an ongoing process, in which the passive voice disguises the agent. In the end, as Merrill puts it in the poem’s last line, “The world will have put on a thin gold mask.” There’s much to say about that sentence; let me make just two points. First, if we read it not simply as a reference to sunrise but as a statement about what results when “what happened” has become literature, then the end of writing, its goal, is to change how the world looks by setting it in – quite literally – a new light.

Second, writing accomplishes this by means of magic, of which we can and should be skeptical. There is a reason writing takes place in private, behind a curtain, or hidden, as in this case, by the passive voice. The emblem and result of this magical transformation is “a thin gold mask”: Merrill may be referring to a funerary treasure like the death mask of Agamemnon, excavated at Mycenae. But as a way of talking about the effect of the sunrise, that mask is no more substantial or permanent than an effect of the light, due to change again in a moment. The world has been transformed. Yet it hasn’t, or only in a way. The claim is simultaneously very grand and very fragile.

In this it’s typical of Merrill. So is the mention of gold. There are references to gold throughout Merrill’s writing, as there are to alchemy, which is the model for literature’s magic in “For Proust.” In “Farewell Performance,” a later poem, alchemy is Merrill’s metaphor for aesthetic transformation generally: “Limber alem-bics,” he says, comparing the bodies of ballet dancers to the laboratory tools of an alchemist, “once more / make of the common / lot

a pure, brief gold.” Note again the brevity, the sad fragility of the effect. (Gold that is “brief” isn’t gold at all; it just looks like it.) That poem is followed in *The Inner Room* by “Processional.” Here the topic is specifically the transformative powers of language and by implication poetry. Merrill, a passionate lover of games, and word games in particular, wins here when, he reports at the end of the poem, “in three lucky strokes of word golf LEAD / Once again turns (LOAD, GOAD) to GOLD.”

Merrill wrote “Processional,” his notebooks show us, when he had just completed *The Changing Light at Sandover* and had not yet settled on its title. The little poem – “Processional” is a sonnet – is a radically condensed version of the long one. It is an example of Merrill playing with words as he did on the Ouija board and in his notebooks. What he is looking for in a game of word golf (a pastime he found in Nabokov) is the same thing he went to the Ouija board for: that moment when letters would align in a new shape and reveal, as if of their own intention, an unsuspected but hoped-for message. New meaning: where before there had been only raw linguistic material, or the dead fact, the heavy lead, of the already said. That was the gold Merrill played for.

Alchemy: the metaphor obsessed him because it was a way to understand his relationship to his father and (behind them both) the relationship between aesthetics and “The Economic World.” Merrill never renounced his father’s money. He understood very well that, while it compromised his autonomy, his autonomy was based on it. (In this respect, his case is a miniature model of the relation between art and money generally.) The trick therefore – and it could only be a trick – would be to transform, rather than renounce, his father’s gold. Until he made it something else, it was merely lead. The gold of literature redeemed, like a dividend, the gold that was required to produce it. At the same time, the gold that Merrill himself made had to be figurative: it could only be a trick of the light. It was, like his style, dependent for its value on his faith in it, and thus on his willingness, like Keats or Stevens, to suspend disbelief, dwell in illusion, and believe in a fiction.

Bourdieu concludes his summary essay on aesthetic autonomy, “The Field of Cultural Production,” by quoting Mallarmé. The

passage, which is exceptionally convoluted, even for Mallarmé, comes from his lecture *La Musique et les lettres*: “We know, captives of an absolute formula, that indeed there is only that which is” – that is, there is only the real, and not the higher order of experience that art would have us believe in. “Forthwith to dismiss the cheat, however, on a pretext, would indict our inconsequence, denying the pleasure we want to take: for that beyond is its agent, and the engine I might say were I not loath to perform, in public, the impious dismantling of the fiction and consequently of the literary mechanism, to display the principal part or nothing. I venerate how, by a trick, we project to a height forfended – and with thunder! – the conscious lack in us of what shines up there. What is it for? A game.” The difficulty of the passage reflects, as Bourdieu notes, Mallarmé’s ambivalence about revealing trade secrets as a poet. But the idea that the pursuit of beauty is a game in which the writer is himself the source of the ideal he serves, projecting it on high in another world above him, is a simple one, and it would have been familiar to Merrill. Thus was it with the Ouija board. But the aesthetic game is no less dignified or dangerous, that is, *no less real*, once it is recognized as a game. For the one who plays, a life is at stake.

My book is the story of how Merrill played that game. “Adventure” or “experiment”: those words capture the subject without the ambiguous, possibly discrediting connotations of a “game.” But the uncertain status of a game is essential to this story: as in the case of the Ouija board, Merrill wanted, in art, to elevate play – to elevate make-believe – to the level of the very highest seriousness; and that was necessarily a perilous project. Indeed, in his continual, daily drive to write, to wrest meaning from his experience using language, we can feel the pressure of his constant, usually tacit fear of disillusionment. There was always a threat, which his pose as an amateur courted, that he would be exposed as a fraud, a mountebank or alchemist, who in the end is only playing with words.

The title of this essay comes from *A Different Person*, a memoir Merrill wrote near the end of his life. At one point he describes visiting his elderly mother in Atlanta, and going with her to one of the city’s “most genteel” funeral parlors in order to settle her final

arrangements. After she has heard the options, she decides to request a “green,” biodegradable casket, but ends up saying: “Did I make it clear that I want to be buried in a biographical container?”

When I presented this essay as a lecture, it was advertised online as “The Biological Container.” That was funny because it was exactly wrong. “The Biographical Container” is, as Merrill adapted his mother’s malapropism, precisely not biological but rather the verbal, paper record of a life transformed by writing. It’s what all of Merrill’s writing amounts to, displayed on a shelf. It’s what the Merrill Papers in Special Collections at Washington University are.

And of course it’s what my biography of Merrill is. Let me return to the question about the relation between criticism and biography. Merrill gives us a life that must be “read” as we read a poem, because this is what he did to his life by writing about it as he did. Conversely, his poems, emerging from his life and reflecting on it, are events in that life, essential features of its story, and what, as he told David Kalstone, he lived for. In this case criticism and biography are the same thing.