

The Biographical Container

"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 by referring to how little time he had left over after teaching: "Some of us have to work for a living."

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 insured 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, 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 life style, 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, even if you've only opened it in a bookstore or Looked Inside on Amazon, these are the first paragraphs of my biography of James Merrill. Don't worry: I won't keep reading; we'd be here until Monday; it would be like one of those Senate filibusters, when a Pro-life congressman reads the Dallas phone book. No, I put those paragraphs before us because they establish the frame for the biography. They point out not only that Merrill lived the life of a poet, but that he lived it in a particular way.

Today I want to take a further step back, look at that frame, and draw another frame around it. In the process I'll be trying to give definition to the deceptively simple-seeming abstractions in the book's subtitle: Life and Art. That will involve, in a sense, asking what kind of book I've written. The answer may seem obvious: a biography. But surely it's a work of criticism too. So it's a critical biography, then. But what does that mean? 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 of poems nested in an unusually detailed, not to say "punishingly long," record of a poet's life? The challenge, of which Merrill was always and acutely aware, comes in trying to say what a poet's life and work together add up to.

I take him entirely at his word when he says, "Poetry made me who I am." This is a marvelously condensed statement. What does it mean exactly? It may be helpful to compare it to a principle articulated by 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 to say, “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 [...].” Note that to create an identity, through writing, is to create a style.

Now, Calvino’s formula has to do with the novel---a genre founded on the distinction between author and character. For Merrill, the poet, the situation is somewhat simpler, but for that reason I think rather more complicated, with more at stake, in the way that 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, but about “a man choosing the words he lives by.” That’s Merrill’s phrase, in a comment on Wallace Stevens.

In this Merrill is not so different from other modern poets, including the impersonal, seemingly non-autobiographical Stevens. What sets him apart while making him exemplary is the extent to which he could indeed “live to work.” Living to or for his work was a risk he could afford, financially and psychologically, but still a great risk: everything was staked on it. Those two categories, life and work, fuse in “V-Work,” the name that the Ouija board spirits give to all inspired making: a compound meaning “lifework,” through a pun on *la vie* that’s typical of this Frenchified poet. For Merrill, poetics and ethics keep turning into each other. Or, we could say that, considered in a system of oppositions whose putatively natural, genetic order Merrill’s poetry worries and confounds (pairs like cause and effect, reality and projection, source and translation, sign and signified), Life and Work are---to take another trope from *The Changing Light at Sandover*---just one more “half-stoned couple” “Doing the Chicken-and-the-Egg till dawn.”

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 Dr. 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 exactly 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 that. The answer depends on how you define aesthetic success. The question expresses the belief that works of art and literature should be evaluated independently of the contextual information in biography. Wimsatt and Beardsley put it memorably in their 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, above all the "marvelous nightly pudding," the manic machine of *Sandover*. That this impurity can be seen as a problem shows that autonomy remains an active criterion of evaluation today. But of course autonomy doctrine, along with so much else in the New Criticism, has been rejected by the currently dominant historicism that emphasizes, from one perspective or another, the socially embedded nature of all art. This new paradigm for criticism, which has been orthodoxy in scholarship for so long---more than thirty years now---it isn't very new, sounds like it might be good for biography. But not necessarily so. In fact literary biography may be even more suspect and outmoded today 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 are overwhelmingly white and male, but that's another issue). People are, like texts, a matter of context. It's a mistake to see them as the 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, we miss the important thing---the social whole---when 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 invented nephew, Wendell, early on 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 the ideology of 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 *Braving the Elements* by Richard Pevear, who argued that Merrill's poetry expressed the worldview of a dying social class. He reacted to this critique as if he were a kind of fraud who'd finally been found 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, precisely in the act

of asserting one's subjectivity and creative freedom. We'll return to this fear shortly. In order to understand its force, I want to introduce a critic more formidable than either Wendell or Richard Pevear; I mean the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu, if anyone, is representative of the historicism I've just described. His work seems from one angle to demystify the autonomy claimed for modern authors and their works, but I think he is doing something else. He urges us to recognize autonomy as, in a sense, real but not a given. Rather, he calls it "a position to be made": it represents a point of view that was not always part of the social order, but had to be created in the course of establishing the "the field of cultural production." Bourdieu calls that special social space "The Economic World Reversed" because it is characterized by "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 field consists in "points" or "positions" that correspond to the aesthetic choices of individuals and groups, affected by the push and pull of institutions and other agencies. In the "inverted" logic that governs here, those positions that are the farthest removed from economic and political power have the highest prestige, because they are the most disinterested and therefore the most dedicated to art or literature 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 fiction, and then 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 formulation close to the one by Calvino I 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."

How would Merrill react to Bourdieu? I bet by rolling his eyes, raising an eyebrow, or simply falling asleep. He would have hated the sociologist's style, in particular. But his ideas? I think he'd have to admit to understanding them intimately, on the basis of his own biography. The Economic World was not a sociological abstraction; it was Daddy. Merrill's literary vocation would set him apart from his father and the businessman's whole way of life. That effect points to a motive: on one level, Merrill became a poet specifically to distinguish himself from his famous father, to "make his own name," and in that way compete with him, but on grounds of his choosing, not openly. The threat to the son's autonomy posed by his dynastic father, with

Charlie Merrill's entourage of lovers and hangers-on, was considerable. How easy it would have been for Merrill never to become something more than one of the old man's possessions, a line on the balance sheet or "a gram in the gross national product"---even if Merrill could see that his path to freedom and self-expression required the money his father gave him. Bourdieu quotes Gautier grumbling to 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 the same thing behind his back?

Meanwhile, Merrill had always identified with Mama, Hellen Merrill, the Muse who copied and preserved the boy's first poem, "Looking at Mummy." The identification deepened with his parents' divorce, in which he saw his mother as the injured party. Literature and art, in contrast to the masculine domains of business and politics, were already marked as feminine. Choosing them implied a rejection of masculine norms, which were tainted in his eyes by the abuse of power, it being natural (he had concluded from his father's behavior) for power to be abused. Bourdieu refers to writers and artists, somewhat wryly, as "the dominated fraction of the dominant class." Perhaps Jimmy saw his mother, and by extension his young self, in similar terms. In any case, some sort of allegory isn't far away from Merrill's mature poetic thought. Commenting on the poem about his parents' divorce, "The Broken Home," where at one point his parents turn into Father Time and Mother Earth, he said once, "You don't see eternity *except* in the grain of sand, or 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's. Here the issue of lifestyle is crucial. Choosing literature and art as a way of life entailed for Merrill not only a structure of gender identification but a particular sexual disposition. In a way, poetry and homosexuality were, for him, the same choice. Think of Merrill's first sexual relationship, which grew out of a private poetry tutorial. "I shall write, be brilliant, be great," he wrote in his diary the day that he met Kimon Friar. Then a month later: "We are in love, Kimon and I, tenderly, passionately, completely." But homosexuality, which set Merrill apart from his father even more than his poetry did, divided him also and more painfully from his mother. No less essential to his being than poetry was, 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, in other words, 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 perspective was the basis for a philosophical stance and a 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 (his answer to the

family crests his parents concocted)---the mirror showed the self as double and inverted. It is a fit symbol for the tautological program of “art for art’s sake,” and thus for a life dedicated to literature in “The Economic World Reversed.”

I’ll try to position Merrill now, 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 several authorial roles, he was always primarily a poet. In this sense he wasn’t exploring alternatives to poetry, but testing how 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; and to that extent, they were evidently 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 particularly like, turned off by their showy personal styles, aimed at Broadway and Hollywood. He was a snob in relation to their snobbery.

Curiously, because he was almost alone in this among Americans of his generation, Merrill’s early, formative literary identifications were with decadent, “pre-modernist” French writers and artists, including musicians and composers, who were key figures in (Bourdieu’s phrase) “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, Black Mountain, Confessional poetry, the New York School, and so on. Merrill pointedly belonged to none of these groups. He saw their ways of writing as rhetorical choices, and in that sense ideologies, rather than what they claimed to be: historical, political, aesthetic, or even (in the case of Allen Ginsberg’s “breath units”) biological imperatives. As he put it in 1967, with almost 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.” Merrill’s move, setting him above the fray and by himself, was to present his own style precisely as a style, validated by nothing more (*or less*) than his preference. (Here Wallace Stevens is the central model: “We like poetry because we do.”)

By this means Merrill maintained his independence not only from postwar poetry’s various schools, but from the school itself, the academy, where so many poets of his generation would from now on be employed as teachers of literature and/or creative writing. It is hard to reflect on or even register this development in literary culture---we are still so deep inside its consequences. Mark McGurl’s name for the postwar period in American fiction, *The Program Era*, refers to the rise of MFA programs and their effect on the novel and short story. The label works even better for poetry, which, lacking fiction’s potential access (however selective) to a large market and real money, was from early on more dependent on sponsorship by colleges and universities. The mid-century American English Department is, in one sense, the final stage of the elaboration of aestheticism: it was an institution devoted to “poetry as poetry,” as the New Critics, many of them 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, now submitted to the standardized expectations of a bureaucratic appointment. It’s in this context that Merrill’s determined, sometimes defiant dilettantism takes on its full 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, entitled *Recitative* to make it clear that he wasn’t singing. Sandy McClatchy, who edited the volume for a small press, explained to me: “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 a copy inscribed for Peter Hooten, Merrill wrote: “We amateurs, as Peter knows, / Have very little use for prose.” Prose was for pros, poetry for amateurs. The pose of the amateur, however, was just that, a pose. Merrill used it in the midst of poetry’s own program era to reclaim the heroic role of the modern writer or artist as defined by Bourdieu. In Merrill’s calculated dilettantism, the “full-time professional [...] dedicated to his work in a total and exclusive manner” is rescued by the amateur from the professionalism of the academy.

As I’ve said, Bourdieu speaks of writers occupying specific “points” in the literary field. The “point” Merrill occupied can be specified by an address: 107 Water Street, Stonington, Connecticut, the poet’s primary residence from 1954 until his death. The spot was sufficiently far from other centers of influence that Merrill 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 sheer ordinariness, Merrill and David Jackson set up their queer McCarthy-era lair. I could go on---in my book I do go on---for pages describing the place. What I want to emphasize is that the Water Street apartment is the materialization of Merrill’s autonomy. A whole aesthetic, its internal literary properties and external social relationships, can be read out of it. Here Merrill’s life and work co-mingle, each created in the image of the other. In the 25th Reunion guide to the Lawrenceville class of 1943, Merrill lists his home and work addresses as “the same.” In a book full of lawyers and Wall Street executives, he is the one for whom work and home are one, for whom that fundamental, everyday schism does not obtain.

But Merrill doesn’t simply “work at home,” as we telecommuters say 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 one of his next-to-last book. Like other spaces Merrill worked in, in Athens and Key West, this is a 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 still remains part. There is just one window one might 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 we must imagine the activity of the "full-time professional [...] devoted to his work in a total and exclusive manner," or in Merrill's own language, "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." (I'm just now seeing that, grammatically, "life" and "love" are parallel nouns, and that love is something "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 go on to have (both his life and work) so much to do with his home.

The pivot in this pivotal poem comes right 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." Then he goes on, moving indoors to his desk (and from free verse into rhymed quatrains), while pushing toward the resonant conclusion I quoted. The pivot is the question: "With cold?" In his drafts of the poem---he saved 46 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, arrived at in the process of revision, within the poem itself, and finding, in this, the impetus to continue. It would be hard to say definitively whether "With cold?" was a skeptical question Merrill put to himself while going over the draft, and in that sense a "real" question, or whether it was the simulation of one---an imitation of "a man choosing words." But we don't need to settle that for the point to hold. At his desk he was dissolving the difference between reality and performance.

"From a Notebook," a gorgeous lyric about the experience of writing in a notebook, directly follows "An Urban Convalescence" in *Water Street*, Merrill's third poetry collection. As a gloss on the longer, self-consciously important and programmatic poem, the shorter one says that Merrill will make "some kind of house" out of his life using his notebook---that 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 white paper that invites it. From this point forward in his career, all of Merrill's poetry might as well bear the caption "From a Notebook." His writing would increasingly foreground the process that produced it, understood as the conversion of life into art, by means of such reliable pre-digital implements paper, pen, and ink.

Merrill was well prepared, then, to receive a letter from Mona Van Duyn, in 1964, inviting him to think of Washington University as “home base” for his papers. (Incidentally, in my book I say this letter doesn’t survive. Nonsense: you’ll see it tomorrow when you visit Joel Minor’s exhibit of items in the Merrill Papers.) I don’t think we can exaggerate the importance of the library’s invitation and Merrill’s apparently immediate decision to accept it. It satisfied his wish to waste nothing and relatedly, as I say in the book, “to turn his whole life to account.” There is no question that the existence of the archive, by reinforcing his interest in his writing process and affirming its value, shaped how Merrill thought of his writing as well as how he wrote. It meant he was not only producing writing for publication, but producing a record of that process, contextualized by notebooks, guest books, letters, and other documents, not to mention clippings, photos, and more or less random *realia*. The whole is what matters here, insofar as the inevitably fragmentary record constituted by a personal archive can represent a whole. In a sense, the place where we find Merrill’s life and work most deeply embedded in each other---the place to look for what I’m calling his autonomy---isn’t his apartment in Stonington, but Special Collections in St. Louis.

The Merrill Papers are the product of a quite specific moment in cultural history. First, there had to be in place the belief that a modern writer’s papers could be of permanent value and interest. No library was busy collecting Pound or Eliot even thirty years before Van Duyn wrote to Merrill. Here let’s go back to Bourdieu’s notion of the modern writer as “a full-time professional [...] devoted to his work in a total and exclusive manner”: it’s this personage, still new to the world, who creates the materials libraries want to collect. And obviously there must be libraries, like Olin, with sufficient funds and unsatisfied institutional ambition to go out and recruit---to bet on---the work of a writer like Merrill or Robert Creeley who, each being only in their mid-30s at the time they were approached by the library, couldn’t yet have done more than establish their promise. The condition for that bet is, again, the rise of the modern English Department and the university study of literature, which confirmed the value of authors and their archives, even if getting research scholars and their classes into Special Collections was not the first thing an archivist was trained to do, and---paradoxically?---the New Criticism was insisting that biography and for that matter the worksheets and notebooks were beside the point.

Finally, there had to be paper. Bourdieu’s “full-time professional,” Merrill’s “man choosing the words he lives by,” and for that matter 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 that paper records literary process, sensitizes writers and readers to the materiality of words, and establishes a symbolic equivalence between authors and their works. That equivalence is rooted in the simple physical presence of both 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 personal mark. 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; I’ll make just two points. First, if we read it not simply as a reference to sunrise, but as a statement about what’s left when “what happened” has become literature, then the end of writing, the goal of it, is only to change how the world looks, by setting it in a new light. Second, writing accomplishes this by magic, of which we have to be skeptical. There is a reason writing takes place in private, or behind a curtain. The emblem of the transformation is “a thin gold mask”: Merrill may be referring to a funerary treasure like the death mask of Agamemnon, excavated at Mycenae, as Stephen Yenser persuasively suggests. But as an image of a sunrise, that mask is nothing more substantial or permanent than an effect of the light, due to change again in a moment. The world has been transformed, and yet not, 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 much later poem, Merrill chooses alchemy as a metaphor for aesthetic transformation generally: “Limber alembics,” meaning the bodies of the dancers on the stage of the New York City Ballet, “once more / make of the common / lot a pure, brief gold.” Note again the brevity, the sad fragility of the effect. That poem is followed in *The Inner Room* by the last poem in the book, “Processional,” where the topic is specifically the transformative powers of language and by implication poetry. Merrill, the dedicated lover of games and word games in particular, wins here when “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 spirits for: the moment when letters would re-align in a new shape and words might reveal, as if of their own intention, an unsuspected but hoped-for message. Meaning: where before there had been only raw linguistic material, or the dead fact of the already said. That was the gold Merrill played for.

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 of course never renounced his father’s money. He understood very well that, even as it compromised his autonomy, his autonomy was based on it. 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 required to produce it. At the same time, the gold Merrill made was figurative, an effect of the

light. It was, like Merrill's style, dependent for its value on Merrill's faith in it, and therefore on his willingness, like Keats or Stevens, to suspend disbelief, and believe in a fiction.

Bourdieu ends "The Field of Cultural Production," his key essay on the concept of the "literary field," by quoting Mallarmé: ". . . I venerate how, by a trick, we project to a forbidden height---and with thunder!---the conscious lack in us of what shines up there. What is it for? A game." The idea that the pursuit of beauty is a game in which the writer is himself the source of the ideal he seeks, projecting it on high in another world above him, would be very familiar to Merrill. Thus it was with the Ouija board, and thus with the men he loved. But the aesthetic game is no less dignified or dangerous once it is recognized as one. For the one who plays, a life is at stake.

I understand my book as the story of the way Merrill played that game. Adventure, experiment: those words capture the subject, without some of the ambiguous connotations of "game." But the uncertain status of a game is important here: as with the Ouija board itself, Merrill was interested in the possibility of elevating play to the level of the highest seriousness, and, in his continual drive to write, to wrest meaning from language and experience, we can feel the pressure of his fear of disillusionment, of being exposed as a fraud, a mountebank or alchemist, who is only playing with words.

All of you who are familiar with Merrill's work will have recognized the source of my title, "The Biographical Container." It comes from *A Different Person*, when Hellen Plummer is making final arrangements for herself, means to request a biodegradable burial, and ends up saying something else. At one point I saw this lecture advertised as "The Biological Container." That's funny because it's exactly wrong. "The Biographical Container" is, as Merrill adapted his mother's malapropism, 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, in a sense, the Merrill Papers in Special Collections are.

And of course it's what my biography of Merrill is. Let me wind up by returning to the question I raised about the relation between criticism and biography. Merrill gives us a life that can---I would say must---be "read" as we read a poem, because this is what he himself did to his life by writing about it in the way that 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 was living for. In this case I think criticism and biography are the same thing.