***A Letter on James Merrill***

***and His Adventures***

***with the Ouija Board***

***Arthur Chapin***

I.

*Dear Lewis,*

1.

Why should my words wear metrical apparel?

You asked me for a letter, not a Sonnet

Sequence. What can I say? I didn’t plan it;

I caught this strange disease from reading Merrill.

Finished “Ephraim” and slogged through “Mirabell;”

“Scripts for the Pageant” waits, and only granite

Resolve will see me through. My thoughts upon it?

Unsure. The critic ventures at his peril.

One thing’s beyond dispute: It’s long, Lord, long…

Five-hundred pages, twice as long as Milton

‘s crowning work, and all based on a Ouija

Board’s Milton & Bradley oracle. No strong

Foundation for an epic to be built on,

True. But are others stronger? (Apple, e.g.)

2.

The thing’s received no lack of praise, of course,

From critics. “May well be,” writes Berger, smitten,

“The most astonishing poem ever written

By an American.” (Do I hear a curse

Wafting up from beneath the leaves of grass?)

Pettingell doesn’t shrink from placing it in

*The Waste Land*’s company. Bloom’s just a bit in-

Clined to worship its “daemonic force.”

Judging from what she has to say of Merrill

In general, I assume that Vendler’s also

A devotee. So goes the humanist carol.

(While I confess uneasiness: it’s all so

Cozy, this business of canonization

In the High Church of the Imagination.)

3.

We mustn’t judge this pudding hastily;

It’s no light snack. Time’s needed to digest

Its monstrous calorie count of myth and jest.

The gravity of his project’s easily

Overlooked; his tone’s persistently

Nonplussed, embarrassed, almost, at the vast

Riches of the sublime his supple wrist

Keeps tracing on the page, transcribing the

Dictation of…the ghost, the god, the muse

The Unconscious? (His? Collective? Who knows whose?)

Hence much surprise: Fear after glibness, wit in

The midst of pain. “Without some undertone

Of the comic, genuine verse cannot be written

Today,” writes Auden. (More on him anon.)

4.

Whence Poetry’s blend of flippancy and doom?

To paraphrase our own John Guillory:

We still demand divine authority

(Or something like it; what, though?) from a poem.

In a world split to the point of entropy

Between what heart hopes, and what mind can see

(Where Reason and Imagination damn

Each other to a Hell that neither one

Can help but view, at best, with skepticism)

*Quaerit*, What are we left with? The Great Schism

Without the Pope(s?) The question, if not idle,

Is vain, thought Nietzsche. Poets must egg us on

Past Metaphysics’ gross, redundant idol.

5.

Easier said than done—or done than said:

The poem requires extraordinary saying

To be heard above, beyond, despite the braying

Of high-paid mules of commerce whose brain-dead

Word-magic turns manna to Wonderbread

(Feeding the mind language-sandwiches weighing

Less than the wind that signals more decaying)

At the drop of a buck. Such crumbs unmake the mind’s bed

And lie in it. What cures poets promote,

On the other hand, what diet they recommend

To the starved soul, better be more than anguish

Sandwiches. Eyor-gloom’s no antidote

To Tigger-foolishness. Prophets must blend

Grim truth with jokes, lest frail attention languish.

6.

There’s pathos in the need that drives this poet

To the cosmic parlor tricks of a Gurdjieff

(Which led a greater poet into grief):

He knows this well, says so with force and wit…

But though a disclaimer may be brilliant, it

Can’t make bad pudding better. Pudding’s self

Must be its refutation or its proof.

Still, he deserves the benefit of the doubt,

*N’est-ce pas*? I mentioned pathos. Isn’t this

The point, the power if not the proof of his

Quite arduous and sincere essay, to breath-

Takingly raise, upon a frail foundation,

An ivory monument, if not to Faith

(Ivory’s false), then to holy Imagination?

7.

*It is required you do awake your faith*,

Paulina warns—she of miraculous

Works in times already half-incredulous,

Rising to, thrown back on Art as God’s breath

Rasps with cold, prelude to the râle of death.

Pygmalion’s hand must do the work that was

Once God’s art, His alone. Anomalous

To be both creature and Creator. Saith

The preacher: Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.

(Thought of God’s in this pleonastic trinity.)

Saith James: So be it; on this void, though rife

With absence, I will breathe the breath of life

Quasi-divine. This waste and parched inanity

Shall brim with and for LANGUAGE, Aaron’s staff.

8.

Now hold on here: there must be some mistake.

Merrill, arch-aesthete, fey and sometimes twee

Salon poet (some sneer) aspires to be

The scion of Ezekiel and Blake?

Bullish Hebraism, or just bull? His stock

Was pegged to lower, smoother trends. Can he

Have stumbled on some market anomaly

At Mt. Parnassus S & E? Our shock

Is great, but couldn’t be much greater than

The poet’s own when told of his new calling

As mighty *vates* and austere Isaiah,

Called on to stabilize and raise the falling

Spiritual index of the West. *Someone*

Deserves the credit for this bold idea.

9.

He writes in sonnets, but that’s far from all

“She wrote.” There’s more than one quicksilver string

On his mercurial lyre. Astonishing

To watch the brightly shining nuggets fall

Out of the bag: ode, hymn, and villanelle…

Default mode, though, are lines half-blank, half-rhyming,

Iambically pentamered, that bring

To this mélange a narrative protocol.

When suddenly they’re off on what might seem a

Somewhat arbitrary jaunt into

The austere domains of Dantean *terza rima*.

Such imitative fallacy is true,

In its very truancy, to the devious

Flow of the “plot,” full of *a hah!* and *boo!*

10.

Designed—if that’s the right word—to nonplus,

Delight, scare, even throw into ecstasies,

By twisting turns now flip, now earnest, us

Half-doubting, half-persuaded Thomases:

Devil-atom-peacocks… One has to have read it!

Seeing’s (dis)believing. Surprise, surprise,

Bloom calls this trope (“the trope of power”), with credit

To Emerson. (No great surprise there.)—Jesus,

Where am I?—Once more at a loss to edit

My *aperçus* into a cogent thesis…

Oh yes: James rides the terza rima car

Through ancient Italy—praising, through mimesis,

The exalted love that drove the Tuscan star.

11.

(This last is my diminutive oblation

To this most sinuous of forms: the Terza

Rima Sonnet, thirteeen lines, which parrots a

Whole Dantean canto in a bite-sized ration

And cruelly dumps the burden of summation

On the last, lone line; the poor thing inherits a

Little Apocalypse!)—His theme has merits: “a

God’s incarnation and withdrawal” (Citation:

Merrill quoting Northrop Frye). The plot

Depends on who inspires with ghostly know-how

That Manitou of Letters, Mr. Ouija

(A cardboard makeshift, actually, and not

A brand name). A mirror augments this weird pow-wow,

Cleared by the spirits’ transcendental squee-gee

12.

To let them view their quizzical earthly host.

Little that’s circumstantial *re* what motive

Drives our Merrill to become so votive

Informs the narrative. He can only trust

That many of his readers share his lust

For miracle (otherwise the quest’s abortive),

As, in fact, many of them do—well, sort of…

(For some consider ghost lore in bad taste.)

At any rate, it’s wiser to dispense

With psychological pomp and circumstance:

Psychology would but dilute the mystic

Shock-value; only dim the light, fantastic

Aura… Simply appears one night, with rhyme

But no clear reason, the bright wraith, Ephraim.

13.

Appears, of course, in the mute form of spelled-

Out letters traced via the medium

Of hand on cup, which trembles with the warm

Impulse of divination. The blank, cold

Wall that sunders life from death is felled,

Or breached at least, and through it slowly come

Cryptic words that add up to what wild

Surmise might slowly tame into sentences.

Out of this weird grammatical disorder

Glimmers the figure of a Greek Jew, oddly

At home, not ghostly, certainly not godly,

A slave on monstrous old Tiberius’s

Pleasure island.—No mere common fodder,

14.

Though, but the Emperor’s favorite. Urbane,

Arch, witty, and of course quite gay (the mirror-

Image of Merrill, it could not be clearer),

He flatters him enough to make him vain

About his poems, and matters more profane

(Jim is a looker and not just a seer). Or

Shall I more tersely call this holy terror

Not holy, not a terror, but a sane

And worldly (if unearthly) fellow who

Just happens to be dead (or worse, *if* worse,

A mere illusion)? Merrill’s growing relation-

Ship with him helps see the action through;

When Ephraim makes himself (or is made) scarce,

The plot, like Merrill, is mostly on vacation.

15.

His Higher Truth comes packed in UPPER CASE

(The Ouija’s words are always capital,

If not its insights: raw material

The spirits give rough shape to. Verbal grace

Is value-added by their scribe; in place

Of Delphic leaf a fiat dollar bill

Floats in or out of currency, a windfall

Profit the reader’s free to take at face

Value or trade in for more down-to-earth

Coinage, the old-gold standards of Bob Frost,

For instance). What, precisely, is this Truth?

That we’re immortal souls whose task’s to earn,

Through our devotion, rest from this storm-tossed

Earth in the Paradise for which we yearn;

16.

That spirits like Ephraim observe our strife

And hint the way to Good with tender care

(Though it’s forbidden them to interfere);

That they themselves move up the ladder if

Their earthly protégés advance.—You laugh?

It’s true, this truth’s strangely familiar—

Theosophy outworn, some might just sneer;

A high-brow take on *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

A mixture of wit, charm and good spirits acts

As antidote to the grim tedium

Of spirit too much spirit-speak inflicts.

Ephraim’s “smiling Hellenistic lightness” is

A gift that almost bribes skeptical witnesses

To join in this strange modernist Te Deum.

17.

Welcome to Santayana’s “skeptic faith,”

A sort-of-credo (*quia-absurdum-est*),

The modern way to have a Eucharistic

Cake you needn’t fully swallow, a bath

In forms and rituals of what once was Truth,

That rock on which the entire world was based,

Blessedly, deadly serious epist-

Emology, flesh, blood and marrow’s pith.

Merrill blends in, with homeopathic skill,

Large grains of salt to coat this sugar pill

That’s otherwise so indigestible

To modern minds: I mean sheer Miracle.

(Yet…shall we wake our power to believe

Only to feed the wretch a sedative?)

18.

He states that Doubt is his great nemesis,

E.g., forestalling thus the reader’s own:

Patience is less taxed if the medicine man

Himself’s the doubtingest of Thomases.

He makes no claims; he never promises

Rose gardens, only leads us gently down

Strange paths, wherever they might beckon: on

Toward the eternal play of Paradise

Or just a pair of dice (the Ouija’s random

Spirit-static). Or: He’s hard-pressed to say,

On several occasions, whether the whole thing

Is not a vast projection’s mirroring.

The spirits let drop, on the other hand, am-

Biguous hints that James himself is a

19.

Projection (and not just a project) of

The spirits’ own sublime imagination.

Everything’s one, all creatures in Creation

CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER DEAD OR ALIVE

To quote Ephraim. (Phew!—Don’t be such a slave

To your tough muse, Arthur: Let bald quotation

Do some of the bloody work of explication!—

At least the spirits rely on his vast trove

Of language to endow their thoughts with grace,

Bright metaphor and moving eloquence.

Ah, language… After all this folderol

We’ve reached the essential. Maybe I’ll dispense

(For now) with frivolous plot paraphrase

To broach the serious matter of the style.

20.

The style: that means the phrase itself, the thing

On which one cannot superpose a “para:”

Language, that airy nothing, is Jim’s *terra*

*Firma*, or (phrase of Jim’s own fashioning)

His (the world’s!) “life-raft,” calm ark piloting

Our noisome flood of verbiage to bear a

Blight olive branch of hope into a beara-

Ble world, on metaphor’s true, trusty wing.

This reverence for the power of language stands

Behind his wit, and what at times may seem

His glib taste for the pun. He makes demands,

Extraordinary demands upon this power

And on himself (it is interior):

*Expand to fill the largeness that I dream.*

21.

Quotation’s box yields up this sample jewel:

“The world was everything that is the case?

Open the case. Lift out the fabulous

Necklace, in form a spiral molecule

Whose sparklings outmaneuver time…” One cool,

Pale pun opens into a luminous

Metaphor for poem and world; its space

Grows till it swallows interpretation whole.

O made-fresh daily pun, wed word and world,

Strike kindling match from tenderbox of kind,

Cull creatures from the cracks where they’ve been hurled,

Ark them in the covenant of mind,

O pun a ground on which the mind can stand,

O pen a passage to that understanding land!

II.

22.

The layman knows or feels that words are more

Than arbitrary and yet less than fully

Connected to the world of things. It’s folly

To think rocks can be raised by puffs of air,

Or that the word for rock is somehow there

*In* the rock, waiting for a man to bully

It out with verbal pick and hammer. Silly,

Yet the Orpheus in us, in whom we share

Each time we make a pointed pun, or learn

With great delight that the word “radical”

Is rooted in the Latin word for root,

Implying thus a turning back as well

As progress, and see further how our turn

Of thought has traced these very meanings out.

23.

The poet in us, for whom believing’s seeing,

For whom the primal alchemy of a phrase

Brings forth a daily *fiat lux*, he knows

Words have the power to *be* the very being

Of things, the power to make things speak, treeing

The tree, mounting the mountain, raising the rose

In fragrant praise up to the listening skies.

Who’s said this with such stinging, such soul-freeing

Simplicity and force than Rilke? Compared

With him Merrill indeed seems a bit mannered

(One might say too well-mannered), too enamored

Of words themselves and not the Being whose heart

They have the power to bare. At worst, his art

Displays an artiness not to be desired.

24.

But the comparison, perhaps, is too

Harsh. Few if any modern poets can

Meet *that* high standard. He possessed a plan,

A quest to bring the injured world into

The healing space inside his words. With true

Germanic efficiency this lonely man,

Self-exiled to the lofty castle of wan

Solitude, seized his work, and saw it through.

(This poet, too, commits aesthetic torts.

What humor he has inclines to the demonic,

It has a *Schwere*, a pomposity

That grates—flip-side of the intensity

That makes him great. He preaches, he exhorts;

He mourns and moons; in short, he is Teutonic.)

25.

Among the ghosts the Board invokes is one

Bloom has so thoroughly theorized: old Auden,

A *covering cherub* whose Muse walked abroad in

Such varied finery, shone with such urbane

Glamour of technical legerdemain

(Too much, at times) she made of him the modern

Horace; whose wit’s mixed with ah almost…sodden

Falstaff-earthiness that adds plain fun

To his complex and subtle personality.

He’s there… At least our Merrill thinks he’s there,

Or thinks he thinks so, or would have us think.

(Full of such epistemic double-dare,

Wavers or stands between doubtful Reality

And dubious Beyond, their mything link.)

26.

“Unwashed, unshat, / He was whisked from the plane

To a luncheon in his honor.” Now *that’s* vintage

Wystan! It might have been to Jim’s advantage

Had Nature wrapped the bark of Caliban

Around his pithy Ariel: He tunes in

Only ethereal airs. (Gentility’s bondage.)

Perhaps he saw one day, to his chagrin,

That he could never equal Auden in

His métier, lyric wit (with its shrewd topical

Nose for epigram, its earthy élan).

What better way to carve his own niche than

To answer something Auden shunned: the epic call?

27.

(What’s a psychologist to make of *this*:

He has poor Auden shed his gross, endearing

Traits one by one up there in Heaven (his leering

Eye, for example , for a handsome piece

Of tail), which smacks of the old humdrum Chris-

tian vengeance on—the anti-sensual sneering

At—poor old horny mortal flesh, unqueering

Our souls to meet the sexless Beatrice.)

And other phantoms… Stevens (eaves)drops in

(It’s quite a busy psychic party line:

His role—so far—alas, is rather thin.

Let’s see now: He suggests at one point that

Jim take praise with a grain of salt, and at

Another, asks abruptly for his hat.

28.

The mere conjunction of such presences

Speaks volumes more than what they actually

Say: Merrill’s aiming for a syzygy

Of varied poetical antitheses:

Stevens’ depths, Auden’s jocosities,

Blake’s vision, Pope’s formal felicity

(His couplets riddle Merrill’s poetry,

As he himself laments). Now, put all these

Brilliant but strange and fractious stars

Together and the result (this is his dream,

And who says prophets can’t be elegant?)

Is an unheard-of synergy, a giant

Nova mixed of potent avatars—

A solar system in the living room.

29.

This trumps the little planet on a table.

The question, though, of just how big a bang

The reader can derive from this must hang,

For now, in air. Has he found fusionable

Material or just gone fission? Noble

Gases will not be mixed. A scattering

Of force could issue from this gathering.

(Why this payload of scientific quibble?

Beginning with the Book of Mirabell

Merrill, unluckily, feels called upon

To venture rashly forth into the pseudo-

Scientific, mixing chemical Play-do

With the neo-platonic Ideal. Well!

This topic I’ll quite happily postpone.

30.

Merrill’s obsessed with mating fire and air.

(A typical, archetypal antithesis

Is, say, wood’s Phoenix-like anabiosis

Refined into a more-than-metaphor

For soul’s flight into Purgatory or

Heaven.) The ancestral tar pit from which flows his

Phlogiston? Heraclitus, the bright basis

Of whose cosmology, of course, is fire.

His poem, *The Log*(os), shows this in a flash:

*Then when the flame forked like a sudden path*

[He writes] *I gasped and stumbled, and was less.*

*Density pulsing upward, gauze of ash,*

*Dear light along the way to nothingness,*

*What could be made of you but light, and this?*

31.

(A marvel of a lyric which I’ll let

Stand as an all-consuming parable

And motto for his big works, “Mirabell,”

“Ephraim,” “Pageant,” all *The Changing Light*

*At Sandover*…) But now that I have lit

Upon the subject of combustible

Souls, pertinent matters theological

Must be attended to, ere I forget.

The spirits aren’t quite free of contradiction.

They speak of the earthly “greenhouse” bliss we can

Attain through selfless and enlightened action—

And yet at other times one has the sense

They’re quite indifferent to our mortal pain;

All’s grist for their great lab experiments.

32.

From their sublime perspective, flesh and soul

Are so much anagogic silly putty:

The gruesome tragedy known as the suttee,

The anguish of the suicide whose whole

Life’s work reduces to a smoking hole,

The poor, the starving, earn no special pity,

The latter being low-grade souls (quite nutty,

Don’t you agree?) well-suited to their role

As faceless, suffering statistics; while

The suicide is good material,

Primed by *his* sorrows for the ethereal

Taskmasters up there. Oddly inhumane,

At times, the humanistic spirit… Pain

Is not a trope; the idea’s barely sane.

33.

Dissecting corpses was pronounced malpractice

By the medieval Church… The principle?

Cutting into dead meat with lack of skill

Might hurt immortal souls. The angelic doctors,

In the same breath, could send poor malefactors

To the stake to scour sinful flesh from soul

In a cauterizing scream. The Spiritual

Has made some strides since then, one hopes. The fact is,

Though, you see traces of such ancient, grim

Neurosis even in this bright poem by

So kind a mind. I quote (from “F”) the sounds

Of souls reborn in their unending rounds,

“Which, heard there, would do much to clarify

Another year’s abortion talks in Rome.”

34.

Somehow one knew the Spirits would be “pro-life.”

Unless I miss the joke, all this is very

(I dredge the dreaded word) reactionary.

Their hierarchies are elitist, if

Not worse. (Oh dear, I feel a fever of

Isms coming on.) Each voice is wary

Of being called on the carpet by summary

Court-marshal of superiors further off

Somewhere, stern ghost-police. These Presences,

So punitive, fatherly and venerable,

Seem almost racial memories, and recall

What Nietzsche says of the first promises:

Kept only when to break them was to die,

They made *us.* (“I remember” members the I.)

35.

The Unconscious, though, is the great *GOD B*’s hive,

(“B” for Biology): they are one thing,

Somehow, says Merrill, sort-of quoting Jung

(“U”). One, yet double, *at* one, yet they strive

Against each other (much like Stevens’ give-

And-take of Mind and Real).—It’s somehow wrong,

This god-talk. Surely we can get along

Without such stuff? Who says we *must believe*?

Dear James, I care not for this Way of Faith;

I’d settle for a decent line of credit.

That’s cynical; I wish I hadn’t said it

So flippantly. Still, doesn’t it come to this?

We should, we can, we *shall* kick Higher Truth

Downstairs. (Call this a faith in lower case.)

36.

“Consign it to the flames, then, for it can

Contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”

(Hume.) But steering past the convolution

Of Merrill’s theophistry toward the man

Redeems what sometimes may seem void or vain

(At least explains it): Much of his confusion

Is shock at coming after the implosion

Of poetry’s princely, opulent domain.

Because its public, sacral role’s in tatters

Shall it but lounge about in slacks? His strength

Is to what great (in more than one sense) length

He’ll go to prove the poet’s mind still matters

Whose crucial mandate is to humanize

The gods, teach Man the folkways of the skies.

37.

The up-to-date elite-anachronistic

Cultish-mythic anthro-theo-philo-

Sophical creaking of the ancient high-low

Hell-Heaven God-Devil light-darkness Gnostic-mystic

Black-white Beelzebub-to-Beatrice-tic

Axis of this new, no-need-to-swallow

Neo, neo *neo­-*Platonistic

Logo-eccentricity gets old, *but*

(Adversatively) something grand remains,

The sense of the devotion, the sheer pains

Merrill invested in this opus, hours,

Weeks, years spent patiently transcribing scores

Of note pads’ worth of tortuous, cryptic…*what*?

38.

Who cares? What speaks (and this there’s no denying)

Is how he longs to save the art that saves

Us (must we be saved, though?); what risks he braves

Of silliness and error; how hard he’s trying

To let us hope there’s more to death than dying

(But need there be?); his courage to enter caves

Of the Unknown—where untold madness raves,

Perhaps—exploring faults and chasms lying

So far beyond where most of us would dare

(Who has the courage, the consuming care?)…

Devotion to spend all those years maintaining,

In Auden’s phrase, “a lane to the land of the dead,”

Keeping a faith where Faith is past attaining,

All to give the world a little godhead.

39.

In some essential way (all caviling

Be laid to rest) I must believe, with Merrill,

That without poetry the world is sterile.

Trivial stakes make trivial games; to wring

Blood from the stony modern Muse, something

Crucial must goad us on, a sense of peril;

Without it poetry sinks into the puerile;

It is a paltry rose that cannot sting.

The generosity of Merrill’s poem

Inspired me to write this halting hymn

(A hymn, indeed, as much as a critique).

Sweeter it is to praise than to negate;

If we could not say *Yes,* how could we speak?

Even *No* should be the opening of a gate.

40.

Whom the gods single out rejoice and laugh

As other mortals can’t. Yet inspiration’s

Possession comes with certain obligations:

What I have to say is what I *have*

To say. A cow, though holy, must still calf.

What’s given is given (in the poem’s oblations)

Back. Oceans must return the sky’s donations

Or shrink into a dry and thankless gulf.

Blessed gods (if gods exist, if they be blessed):

I offer humble thanks for this strange power

(If power it is), praiseworthy power to praise

(If anyone’s listening)… Truth does not tower

(But what is truth?), it bends to soothe desire’s

Disease. (Disease, desire: *these* exist.)

41.

This is great sport, but time has come to call

“Time.” I’ll end here this over-long epistle.

I’d love to go on, but must heed the whistle

Of that imperious ref, the temporal,

Who recognizes the perpetual

But not the eternal. Eyes, rest from the dazzle

Of words that mate the fiery lion’s muscle

(“Locked in stone”) with the grace of air’s gazelle.

Thought suitably Visined might clarify

A thousand points I leave (time’s really up),

For now, quite in the dark: The how and why,

E.g., of the strange role of David Jackson,

Jim’s love, the fleshly pilot of the cup…

Angels, devils—whatever—keep your fax on…