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James Merrill's Use of Performance Imagery and AIDS in his Last Three Collections

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Abstract

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This thesis offers a particular analysis of the new concerns, structures and themes of James Merrill's last three collections: Late Settings (1985), The Inner Room (1988), and A Scattering of Salts. What I argue is that, prior to Late Settings, Merrill was concerned with static imagery and frozen formalism. With Late Settings, however, the static imagery gives way progressively to animated imagery--a move which also marks the poet's increasing concern with social issues. The Inner Room follows the poetical orientation undertaken in Late Settings in that performance and social change are represented more concretely through drag performativity and AIDS. In his last collection, A Scattering of Salts, Merrill refutes the social turn of his two previous collections. The poet's drag performance is used this time not to challenge society, but to express a desire to cut himself off from the world.

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Introduction

Most critical work on the American poet, James Merrill, either gives too general an overview of his collections--what we find, for example, in Stephen Yenser's The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill--or deals with the forms, imagery, and themes of his earlier poetry only. Judith Moffett's view of Merrill's poetry as fixed and inanimate and Leslie Brisman's analysis of Merrill's lack of social engagement are illuminating when directed at such early collections as The Fire Screen (1969), Braving the Elements (1972), and even, to some extent, The Changing Light at Sandover (1982). But when such criticism is focussed on his last collections, which rely heavily on performance imagery and deal more openly with social issues, it seems irrelevant or even beside the point.

Merrill's early poetry, which often represents static works of art, has often been perceived as frigidly formal. In her analysis of Merrill's first collection, First Poems (1951), Moffett describes the poet's fixation with static objects:

> First Poems especially is full of writing as visually focussed as many Imagist poems, but with this difference: that while the Imagists may cherish the natural, physical thing-in-itself-...Merrill petrifies or freezes it and looks past it fixedly. (5)

Even though Moffett later claims that the stiffness of First Poems disappears in his next collection, The Country of A

Thousand Years of Peace (1959), Merrill's representation of a static work of art is also found in The Fire Screen and Braving the Elements. Richard Saez, who analyses the use of fire in these collections, shares Moffett's initial argument about Merrill's fondness for static works of art: "creativity is represented in precious gems, crystal prisms, geological rock, and metals cooled into luminosity" (40). A poem from Braving the Elements, "Under Libra: Weights and Measures," particularly illustrates Saez's observation: "Where certain curious formations/Dwindle in the red wind like ice in tea,/These stones, these poor scarred loaves/Lichen-crusted mould-gray or burnt orange/Stop doors and rest on manuscripts" (267). Along with the frozen work of art, the artist himself is represented as static in Merrill's early collections.

The image of the poet, sitting at his desk reminiscing about a past experience, is a favorite one for Merrill. The Fire Screen, a collection which deals mostly with Merrill's life in Greece, is told from the perspective of a poet who has returned from his exile and who is now ready to "freeze" his past experiences on paper. In "Flying from Byzantium," he alludes more specifically to the poet's task: "Far off a young scribe turned a fresh/page, hesitated, dipped his pen" (194). In fact, the reference to Yeats reinforces even more the idea of a frozen moment because it gestures to a retreat, a "hesitation," from both Yeats's creative moment

and the younger poet's rearticulation of it. This impression reaches a height in The Changing Light at Sandover, when the poet's function is to sit with his friend DJ around a milk table and converse with spirits via the Ouija board. The image of the poet who sits at his desk is often transposed to the theater, where Merrill's early persona becomes primarily a spectator.

Merrill's use of the stage as a metaphor in his early collections allows him to deal with past personal experiences from a spectator's point of view. In From the Fire Screen, for instance, "Matinees," involves reminiscences about the poet's first experience of the Grand Opera as a young spectator:

> What havoc certain Saturday afternoons
> Wrought upon a bright young person's morals
> I now leave to the public to condemn.
> The point thereafter was to arrange for one's
> Own chills and fever, passions and betrayals,
> Chiefly in order to make song of them (206-207).

The poet's attitude towards performance in "Matinees" recalls the persona's poetical treatment of his reminiscences in "Flying from Byzantium." Both poems deal with the persona's distance from his past--a distance which, when highlighted so profoundly, contributes to the cold and disengaged aspect of Merrill's early poetry. A similar theatrical distance is found in The Changing Light at

Sandover; the third part of this trilogy, "Scripts for the Pageant," is structured for the most part as a play. Comfortably seated, the poet reencounters via the Ouija board, a succession of actors who played important roles in his life. The surrealist aspect of these characters, who are all dead, contributes to the distance between the poet and the "performance" of his life. The poet's emphasis on his personal and extravagant experiences has often been taken as a sign of his absence of interest in the problems prevailing in the real world.

What clearly stands out from early criticism on Merrill is the unanimous claim that he produces an apolitical poetry. Saez's challenge of this common assumption is the only notable exception:

> When Braving the Elements won the Bollingen Poetry Prize for James Merrill, The New York Times published an ill-informed editorial criticizing the foundation for making the award in troubled times to a genteel and private poet. It is true Merrill has avoided confessional poetry and topical or fashionable subjects. But for readers who understand Merrill's highly-informed language, the poems of Braving the Elements deal more memorably and more incisively with liberation, radical violence, kidnapping, space travel, the assassination of political leaders, and the effect of mass-media on the

> English language than any poetry written in America today. (55)

Saez's counter observation refutes not only the editorial from the New York Times, but also the numerous Merrill critics who have always perceived his poetry as exclusively personal. Leslie Brisman's analysis of a poem from Braving the Elements, "Willowware Cup," is a typical example of the critical attitude towards Merrill's "social" stance:

> The opening two words ["mass hysteria"] of the poem are already a little poem in themselves, one in which a fine turn of language not only reflects but constitutes the poem's attitude to a social problem--or rather, to a poetry of social concern. The words "mass hysteria" represent a snobbish social attitude (contempt of immigrants) mocked by the poem's own literalism, the fact that it is talking about chinaware, not Chinese. (192)

I think that Brisman's analysis of Merrill's earlier poetry is more accurate than Saez's attempt to convince readers of Merrill's genuine interest in "radical violence" and "kidnapping," because these issues were much removed from the poet's personal life, an almost aristocratic lifestyle that prevented him from being infected with the political and social ills of the common world. In fact, the only reason for the poet's flirtation with social and political themes in one of the poems that Saez is alluding to, "18

West 11th Street," is that the house that was the scene of Weathermen violence in 1971 happened to be, through an extraordinary coincidence, the poet's childhood home.

Merrill's use of static imagery and persona in earlier collections could be explained by a repressive social context which restrained his speaker from fully expressing himself. Merrill's lack of interest in the main political and social issues of the '60s--issues, such as space travel and the assassination of political leaders, which have dominated media attention--does not necessarily mean that the poet was oblivious to whatever happened outside his ivory tower. In fact, the social issue which could have been of personal interest for the poet at the time--namely, the recognition and acceptance of homosexuality, which was just starting to catch the attention of the general public with the Stonewall incidents of 1969--was still considered too controversial to be dealt with openly. Edmund White points out that direct references to homosexuality in Merrill's work only start with the publication of The Changing Light at Sandover in 1982:

> In earlier books Merrill usually sidestepped any explicit reference to homosexuality; even lovers were ambiguously addressed in direct discourse (the famous "you" strategy). In the trilogy, by contrast, Merrill has felt free to present the homosexual artist as a privileged being. (52)

Merrill's representation of the "homosexual artist as a privileged being" in his trilogy is, I would suggest, the direct consequence of a more favorable social context--a context which allows him at last to express himself.

During the 1970s and the first half of the '80s, the recognition of gay culture and the acceptance of homosexuality were major issues in America. However, with the appearance of AIDS--made public by the death of Hollywood cultural icon, Rock Hudson, in 1985--came a backlash against the gay community that has become more concrete and hysterical with each passing year. It was in the context of this emergent AIDS paranoia that Merrill started to publish his most socially engaged works. The poet represented the social challenge of homophobia and AIDS through a deliberate deployment of performance imagery in his last collections. On some level, this translation of AIDS into art seems to participate in the sort of improvement of the art world that Douglas Crimp observes as having taken place in the '80s:

> In an article for Horizon entitled "AIDS: the Creative Response," David Kaufman...rehearses the clichés about art's "expressing feelings that are not easily articulated," "shar[ing] experiences and values through catharsis and metaphor," "demonstrating the indomitability of the human spirit," "consciousness raising." Art is what survives, endures, transcends;

> art constitutes our legacy. In this regard, AIDS is even seen to have a positive value: Kaufman quotes Michael Denneny of St.Martin's Press as saying, "We're on the verge of getting a literature out of this that will be a renaissance." (3-4)

AIDS could be seen as having had a "positive" influence on Merrill's poetry in two ways. While the metaphors that infused the discourse around the epidemic allowed him to experiment with new forms and imagery, AIDS also contributed to his increasing interest in social issues.

My contribution to the critical work on Merrill will consist of a particular analysis of this new form of expression in his last three collections, Late Settings (1985), The Inner Room (1988), and A Scattering of Salts (1995). These collections, which deserve to be considered apart from his previous works because of their explicit engagement with a specific social context, mark a shift in the poet's career. At a time when AIDS and gay rights were starting to make themselves known to the mainstream, Merrill's performance imagery, which has always been used as a way to maintain the distance between the present artistic moment and the strictly personal past it was supposed to evoke, begins to reflect a fundamental change in the poet's perception of art. The artistic treatment of AIDS, which Merrill could not have ignored since the disease had such an impact on his life, has often (if not always) a social

connotation. Plays about AIDS such as Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart and Tony Kushner's Angels in America are good examples of an art form, performance, which has a social purpose. Merrill's use of performance imagery in his last three collections in many respects reflects poetically the idea of performance as a mode of social critique, as a means to garner a larger awareness of AIDS. Even though the poet still attempts to maintain the distance between the present and the past, the lines between actor and spectator become highly blurred, once he begins to deal with social issues in which he is implicated. This ambiguity manifests itself especially in a poem from The Inner Room, "A Room at the Heart of Things"--a poem where actor and spectator are participants in both the play and the spectatorship. In fact, the more active role of the persona in late collections indicates a shift in the imagery from conventional performances to queer performativity.

Merrill's recourse to queer performativity marks a radical change in his poetry, because it activates a social visibility that allows the speaker to challenge social and gender assumptions. Ironically, it is through the representation of an "acceptable" form of homosexuality, drag, that the poet offers a critique of a homophobic society--a society which ultimately decides what "kind" of homosexuality it wants to see. Drag queens are a very good example of what the "general public" considers as an

acceptable type of homosexual, because they allow this public to distinguish between a supposedly normative heterosexual and an exaggeratedly feminized homosexual. This distinction is very restrictive, reducing homosexuality to a single type. Through his use of performance and, what I choose to call, drag animation imagery--a term that emphasizes the poetical image's move from stasis to animation through drag transformation--in his last three collections, Merrill not only challenges the perception of a fixed homosexual identity, but also suggests the multi-facetted nature of his own persona's creativity.

Contemporary theorists of drag and queer performativity such as Judith Butler and Moe Meyer provide a way to understand better the change in Merrill's late poetry. When Butler talks about gender as an unstable identity which is instituted through a repetition of acts, she offers an interesting way to look at Merrill's "new" persona:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

(140)

Unlike the personae of his earlier collections, who are depicted as fixed in time and whose collective identity does not seem to change over the years, Merrill's late personae display an unstable identity. This unstable identity is expressed through performative gestures, through acts which lead the persona to embrace various artistic roles, without having to confine himself to one particular creative function. This absence of stability also applies to the poet's queer identity. Meyer expands Butler's definition of gender and performance to the construction of a queer identity:

> Because gender identity is instituted by repetitive acts, then queer performance is not expressive of the social identity but is, rather, the reverse--the identity is self-reflexively constituted by the performances themselves. Whether one subscribes to an essentialist or constructionist theory of gay and lesbian identity, it comes down to the fact that, at some time, the actor must do something in order to produce the social visibility by which the identity is manifested. Postures, gestures, costume and dress, and speech acts become the elements that constitute both the identity and the identity performance. (4)

Merrill's late persona, who is often in drag, seems to enact the relationship between a performative gesture and the

construction of a queer identity--an identity which cannot be fixed in time, but which has to be performed over and over again. Even though Merrill presents his persona as both an artist and an activist, the line between the two roles so often gets blurred that the interests of the artist seem at times to be more important than those of the activist.

Published in 1985, Late Settings marks a shift in Merrill's poetical career. Even though the collection as a whole does not radically stand out from Merrill's earlier poetry, two poems, "Revivals of Tristan" and "Bronze," reflect a transition in the poet's perception of his art--a move from static to animated imagery. In the first half of "Revivals of Tristan," Merrill describes a static performance with dead characters and passive spectators. Those characters and spectators, however, come alive in the second part of the poem. What this shift represents, I would argue, is Merrill's own departure from a poetry which has often been characterized as inanimate and cold--a poetry that recalls the feeling of stillness surrounding the white porcelain bowl in Wallace Stevens' "The Poems of our Climate"--and his embrace of a "livelier" poetry which focuses on the present. "Bronze" alludes more specifically to a change in Merrill's representation of his persona--a move from the articulation of a passive poet who is reliant on past personal experiences to a more socially engaged artist. This move is reflected through the sudden animation

of the poet's bust in the last section of the poem.

Apart from the poetical transition revealed through the imagery, the social allusions found in "Bronze" also indicate that Merrill's poetry has taken on a more social turn with the publication of Late Settings. In this collection, the poet's overt social concern has to do with natural or ecological disasters. Lee Zimmerman, who describes the difference between how Merrill approached political and social issues before and after The Changing Light at Sandover, brings up the poet's new concern for nature: "The urgent issues are more circuitously broached before the trilogy, while in Late Settings the subjects become more explicitly political and there is a pervading sense of imminent nuclear and ecological disaster" (373). Although direct allusions to AIDS do not appear in Late Settings, I see Merrill's treatment of such social issues as the threat of nuclear war and the occurence of ecological disasters as anticipating his treatment of AIDS in his next collections. Apart from the very superficial parallel which could be made between the menace of a nuclear disaster and the threat of a virus in terms of population loss, what really links nuclear disasters to AIDS in Merrill's last collections is the poet's obvious discomfort with radical activism. The poet's unhappy reaction to the animation of his bust in "Bronze," an animation which foresees a persona who will become more of an activist in later collections,

suggests that his increasing social interest comes more from a sense of duty than from any real sense of the "cause." This becomes even more obvious in the poet's next collection, The Inner Room.

The Inner Room follows the poetical orientation undertaken in Late Settings. The poet's role, performance and social change--issues which are starting to take shape in Late Settings--become fully developed in The Inner Room. The passive and nostalgic speaker of his earlier collections is replaced in this collection by a performer who is concerned with the present. What the present means for the poet is the condition of friends who are dying of AIDS, and his intention to challenge preconceived ideas about AIDS and homosexuality. This activism, however, remains subtle as it is represented through the persona's "performance": in other words, he sends messages through a performative act rather than through his own poetical words. To illustrate this new orientation in Merrill's poetry, I want to focus on the fourth section, "Prose of Departure," as well as on the last three poems of the collection: "Investiture at Cecconi's," "Farewell Performance," and "Processional." Merrill's use of drag imagery in these poems not only reflects the poet's new role as an activist but also illustrates the new animated nature of a poetry formerly criticized for its frigid aesthetic disengagement. When Merrill's persona is in drag, he avoids the notion of a fixed identity. The wearing of a

robe, for instance, allows the persona to play various artistic roles without having to confine himself to one in particular. In fact, the emphasis on the poet's multiple creative abilities somewhat undermines the potential effect of his activism.

The Inner Room is as much a collection of poems about the creative process as it is about AIDS. However, a close reading of the relationship between AIDS and art suggests that AIDS is often used as a faire-valoir for the poet's experimentation with new imagery and forms. Even though the "Prose of Departure" section deals with the impact of AIDS on the poet's life as well as with his subtle challenge of society's perception of this disease, the fact that the structure and content of this section rely on Japanese drama and poetry has the effect of drawing the reader's attention away from the disease. Thus, "Prose of Departure" is remarkable, first, I would argue, for its original blend of Noh theater and haiku poetry, and then for its poetic response to AIDS. In emphasizing creativity and performance at the expense of AIDS, Merrill seems to imply that he is more concerned with translating AIDS into art than in using art as a way to contemplate his own response to AIDS and death. The alchemical and spiritual aspect of the last three poems of the collection, "Investiture at Cecconi's," "Farewell Performance," and "Processional" contribute particularly to Merrill's surrealist treatment of AIDS in

The Inner Room. Merrill's inability to cope with the fact that he is losing friends to a terrible disease gives way in his last collection, A Scattering of Salts, to an even more tragic situation: his refusal to accept his own pending death through AIDS pushes the poet to withdraw from society and, as a result, exposes his inability to maintain the social interest found in Late Settings and The Inner Room.

With the publication of A Scattering of Salts in 1995, Merrill completes the poetical cycle begun ten years before with Late Settings. Even though Merrill's last collection relies for the most part on performance and drag imagery, the "enforced" social interest found in Late Settings and The Inner Room becomes less important in A Scattering of Salts. Each of the three sections of the collection illustrates the slow refutation of the poet's social turn--a refutation that coincides appropriately with his approaching death. The first section announces the poet's farewell to an art form which has some kind of social purpose. For instance, in "The Ring Cycle," a long poem about opera, the poet's cynical description of the relationship between art and corporate money suggests that art cannot gain from a rapprochement with the common world. The second section shows how society transforms an individual into a freakish performer, when the poet explores how science and the media contribute to the spectacle of the AIDS body--the poet's body which is being displayed throughout the section. The

last section features the covering of the poet's AIDS-infected body in "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek (TM) Windbreaker." This covering of the AIDS body is, as I will argue, the poet's ultimate drag performance. However, more than just a gesture of mourning or transgression of gender boundaries, the performance becomes finally a solitary and almost selfish act that cuts the poet off from the world. Merrill's cynical depiction of society in his last collection marks a return to the personal preoccupations of earlier collections.

Chapter One

Late Settings: The Awakening to New Social Realities

As I have suggested, Late Settings marks a major turning-point in Merrill's career. It is a collection that announces the poet's rejection of the imagery and themes which have contributed to his success--such as the static art of a persona, who is obsessed with personal experiences from the past--and a bold attempt to adapt his poetry to new social realities through a coherent use of performance imagery. The two poems that best illustrate this transition are "Revivals of Tristan" and "Bronze." While "Revivals of Tristan" indicates the awakening of Merrill's poetry to social issues through a shift from static to animated imagery, "Bronze" alludes more specifically to the transformation of Merrill's persona--a transformation of the passive poet, reliant on past personal experiences, into the socially engaged artist.

Even though the social turn of "Revivals of Tristan" and "Bronze" anticipates an even greater reliance on social issues in later collections, these poems also reveal at the same time Merrill's own discomfort with activism. In fact, the emphasis is more on "how" the social message is going to be poetically rendered than on "what" it is about. In "Revivals of Tristan," for instance, there is an obvious rejection of a specific personal theme, thwarted love affairs, but the social theme which replaces it, war, does not seem to cover any particular period. What first strikes the reader, I would argue, is not the move from the personal

to the social, but the shift in the imagery--a spectacular shift which brings to life Merrill's poetry for the first time. A similar situation is also found in "Bronze" as the nature of the persona's new activism is overshadowed by the more spectacular animation of his bust.

In the first stanza of "Revivals of Tristan," Merrill describes a tragic situation that invokes the story of Romeo and Juliet. Images of dead couples are presented in a performative context which emphasizes the spectacular nature of thwarted love affairs:

> The loving cup was poisoned.
> How is it that I knew?
> Its drinkers before long--
> Flagstad and Melchior
> Or Fremstad and whoever,
> Couple after couple
> Drawn by the horseshoe magnet--
> Lay quenched on the stage floor.
> Small hands ached from applauding
> A residue of song,
> Highly pearly C's not wholly
> Dissolved in that strong brew. (21)

With his itemizing of dead lovers, Merrill not only offers the idea that such lovers are all interchangeable but also suggests an ironic reflection on his own heroic subject matter in his poems. Even though the metaphor is one of

tired theater first, the play is also a self-reflexive metaphor for an overused poetic subject matter. In fact, the play and the poem are interchangeable, because the relationship between the dead characters and the response of the spectators whose "Small hands ached from applauding" illustrates both the redundancy of a poetry which always deals with the same themes and the reader's predictable response to that poetry. Merrill, who had always known success as a private poet, could be tempted to follow the same poetical line, but the reaction of the spectators whose "small hands" show sign of an imminent tiredness ("ached"), suggests that Merrill is self-consciously commenting on his own poetical practice.

The description of the theater in the second stanza reproduces a static and cold atmosphere, another typical aspect of Merrill's poetry:

> An old print: La Fenice
> (The house burnt and rebuilt)
> From center stage appears
> Almost a bird--stalls each a
> Copperplated feather;
> Aisle a proud neck; the boxes
> Blazing with glass and gilt
> An outspread tail in tiers. (21)

With its rigid, military attributes, the theater, seen "from center stage" and likened to a bird--a "stuffed" phoenix in

"the house burnt and rebuilt"--appears as dead as the characters of the first stanza. The form and content of Merrill's poetry, which are reproduced in the first half of "Revivals of Tristan," go through a change in the second part of the poem. In fact, Merrill's poetry could be seen as reproducing metaphorically the death of the phoenix which is reborn to an immortal life.

The last four lines of the second stanza, which should be read and analyzed in conjunction with the next stanza that they run into, mark a shift in the imagery from static to animated and announce a thematic transition from poetic art, which expresses past personal experiences, to performance art, which focuses more on social realities, in Merrill's poetry:

> No "gods", no mortals--only
> Those bright blank quizzing tracers
> Anticipation aims
> At the rekindled pair
>
> For whom aigrette and shako
> Climb tonight's torchlight stair,
> To fan whose flames the posters
> Torn off like Tristan's bandage
> In his delirium
> Are pasted with fresh names.
> Soon throughout Western Europe
> Until the first World War

In every garrett room

A highly motivated

Young would-be Isolde

Takes up the fatal score. (21)

In focusing on the social background of the story of Tristan and Isolde rather than on the story itself, Merrill suggests a new interpretation of this medieval legend. Even though love is the main theme of the original story, war is a coherent subtheme that has often been overlooked. In fact, Tristan does not die of love sickness but of a war injury. This move from a personal theme, love, to a social issue, war, is represented through an imagery that becomes animated. For instance, the rigid military attributes of the theater give way to the action of a war that is reproduced through "those bright blank quizzing tracers" going all over the place.

The shift from Tristan's bandage and delirium at the beginning of the third stanza to "In every garrett room/A highly motivated/Young would-be Isolde/Takes up the fatal score" at the end of the same stanza features Merrill's characteristic twist on colloquialisms. As David Kalstone points out in his analysis of Merrill's earlier poetry:

> Like Lowell, Merrill has absorbed into verse many of the resources of daily conversation and prose...When Merrill uses an idiom, he turns it over curiously, as if prospecting for ore. So, for example, the dead

> metaphor "on the rocks" springs unexpectedly to life in this section from "The Broken Home," a poem which anticipates the family strains of "Days of 1935"...Behind the gossip columnist's phrase ("on the rocks": shipwreck dismissed as if it were a cocktail) lies a buried colloquial truth about the tensions eternally repeated in a worldly marriage. (79-80)

Like "on the rocks" in "The Broken Home," the metaphor "takes up the fatal score" in "Revivals of Tristan" also suggests two interpretations. On the one hand, "the fatal score" could relate to the war, in which the hero who kills the enemy contributes to an overall victory. On the other hand, "the fatal score" has also a musical connotation which refers more specifically to Wagner's opera about Tristan and Isolde. This blend of opera and war reflects the nature of Merrill's poetical shift--a shift characterized by social issues rendered through performance imagery.

The poet's use of "How is it that I knew?" in the first stanza and "What did I want?" in the last stanza are quite revelatory in showing the transition from the poet's musing on past personal experiences to his concern for the social and natural ills of his own time. While the speaker's question in the first stanza suggests the passive attitude of someone's fixation with the past, the question brought up in the last stanza expresses the poet's desire for change. Instead of desiring the loving and deadly cup of the first

stanza, the poet wants an empty cup, a grail, in the last stanza:

> What did I want? A golder,
> Emptier cup, a grail
> Quite plain within. Whoever
> Lifted it would quail;
> The fires of that iris
> Focus and draw him down.
> He now becomes its pupil,
> Thirsty for the moment
> When the parched gold abyss
> Upheld amid the din
> Swallows the human image
> And huge wings clap in bliss. (22)

The allusion to the grail becomes meaningful here, for, as Northrop Frye has argued, the search for the grail is a metaphor for the quest to find a cure to social ills. And the poet's wish for a grail is clearly a wish for a cure. However, when the poet specifies that he wants an empty grail to cure the social ills of his time, he half concedes the utopian nature of such a quest. The eye imagery that follows reinforces the idea of a utopian belief in a radical transformation of society's attitude towards calamities.

The roles of the spectators and the tragic characters in the first stanza are reversed in the last stanza of "Revivals of Tristan." Even though the eye imagery of the

final stanza fits in with the whole performative strain of the first stanza, the graphic description of the eye in the last stanza suggests a transformation of the passive spectator into an active participant--a symbolic bridging of the distance between the spectator of calamities and the victim of those calamities. Merrill who has challenged the usual dehumanizing aspect of a tragic victim through his use of "him" and "he," while describing the spectator through "that" and "its," makes the victim a part of the spectator as he "becomes its pupil." The pun on "pupil" suggests that, by owning the image of the victim, the spectator can no longer remain passive and indifferent. In an interview that Merrill gave to J-D McClatchy in 1982, a few years before the publication of Late Settings, the poet's reflection on the relationship between the reader and new kinds of heroes could apply to his perception of the relationship between the spectator and the tragic characters in "Revivals of Tristan":

> Trouble is, our heroes more and more turn up as artists or invalids or both--the sort that won't be accepted as heroic except by fellow artists (or fellow sufferers)...Must this leave the healthy, uncreative reader at a loss, not being sick or special enough to identify? Does he need to, after all? It's not as though only people in superb physical shape were thrilled by the conquest of Everest...We don't see

> life as an adventure. We know that our lives are in our hands; and far from freeing us, this knowledge has become a paralyzing weight. (McClatchy, 311)

Most of what Merrill says here--about the hero as invalid, about the common reader's inability to identify with this new kind of hero, about the paralyzing weight of having our lives in our hands--fits perfectly into his attempt to provoke a change in society. Not only is there hope for a change in the individual--who is, symbolically, the spectator--but so is there a more collective transformation through the animation of the crowd. For example, the second stanza's static theater, the rigid phoenix, comes alive in the last stanza; the death or destruction caused by fire--"When the parched gold abyss/Upheld amid the din/Swallows the human image/And huge wings clap in bliss"(22)--evokes the rebirth, the "revival" of a passive or static crowd. This transformation reflects, I would suggest, Merrill's hope for a change in the attitude of society towards critical issues. In fact, the sudden animation of the crowd at the conclusion of "Revivals of Tristan" enacts a similar "revival" of the poet's bust of himself in a later poem of the collection, "Bronze." The animation of the poet's bust marks a change of attitude in Merrill's persona--a transition from a formerly passive poet relying on past and personal experiences to a more socially engaged one.

Like "Revivals of Tristan," "Bronze" deals with the

coming back into vogue of old events or situations. As a backdrop for his poem, Merrill uses the real story of two bronze figures ("Greek originals") which were found off Riace, on the Calabrian coast in August 1972. We are told in a prelude to the poem that their "restoration, in Florence, would take nine years" (48), which takes us to the time of the poem when the speaker and his companion are travelling through Italy and are quarelling over whether to go to Florence or not. Like Merrill's adaptation of an old story to a modern context in "Revivals of Tristan," his transposition of these Greek figures to the contemporary world is central to "Bronze." Moreover, these sculptures become animated in the fourth section of the poem; they speak, offering a severe criticism of those who dwell on objects of art from the past:

> ...Dissolving
> The clay at our core, sonar probe and
> Restorative poultice have brought
> The high finish in which we began
> Back to light. Your nostalgia completes the
> Illusion with flickering tripods,
> Where feasters, fastidious stucco
> Pilasters, and vistas of shimmering
> Water red roses rope off
> Make us objects of art. We dislike it
> As women in your day dislike

Consulted. (53)

These figures end up as oracles who call for both a return to the present and some action: "...Quit/Dreaming of change. It is happening/Whether you like it or not,/So get on with your lives. We have done" (54). The animated aspect of these two figures and their rejection of a nostalgic fixation with the past find an echo in the last section of the poem with the poet's description of a bust of himself as a child.

Merrill's detachment from his earlier poetry in Late Settings is best reflected through his perception of a bronze of himself as a child in the first stanza of the last section of "Bronze":

...
I too exist in bronze.
We were up on the deck, drinking
With summer friends, when Fred
Asked who the bust was of.
Year-round sentinel
On the domestic ramparts,
Acquiring pointlessness
As things we live with do,
It gave me a look back:
The famous, cold, unblinking
Me at six, I said--
Then drifted from his side
To stand by it. Ah yes. (57)

This description of the "year-round sentinel," the "cold," "unblinking" bust, echoes the cold, militaristic description of the theater in the second stanza of "Revivals of Tristan." This bust also reflects, I would suggest, the poet's fixation with his unhappy childhood, which is a recurring theme in his earlier collections. Yet, here the poet seems to actively detach himself from the bust that does not commemorate but "acquir[es] pointlessness." In effect, Merrill offhandedly dismisses precisely what has preoccupied him in his earlier poetry, distancing his poetry in Late Settings from past and personal experiences. Unlike the Greek figures which have been restored, the poet's bronze has been neglected, and he is indifferent to its possible restoration, merely charting its irreversible disintegration:

> Slowly the patina
> Coarsened, paled--no perch
> For owl or nightingale.
> The local braggart gull
> Flaps off and up, its shriek
> Leaving a forelock white. (57)

Lazlo, the poet's sculptor, failed in his attempt to freeze time through his static work of art: "the maker's/Hypnotic fingertips/.../Were helpless to forestall/The molten, grown up scenes" (58). The description of the sculptor's work reminds us of Merrill's own poetical experience. The poet,

notable for years for his aesthetic and frozen formalism, recognizes that he could not have foreseen a time when the "grown up scenes" of social issues and cultural concerns would emerge in his last collections.

The last stanza of "Bronze" announces a more specific shift in the persona's attitude towards poetry. The move from the personal to the social is reflected in the sudden actions of the hitherto inanimate bust:

> Here Augie, seeing me absent,
> Ambled up to rest
> Tanned forearms easily
> On my unruffled hair.
> A tilted beer, a streak
> Staining bluegreen my cheek--
> Bless him, he couldn't care
> Less for the Work of Art!
> The stubborn child-face pressed,
> Lips parted, to the heart
> Under his torn T-shirt
> Telling the world Clean Air
> Or Else, was help and hurt
> As much as I could bear. (58)

Stephen Yenser argues that Merrill attempts to combine art and activism in this last stanza:

> The poem's burden, however, is less the opposition between aesthetic detachment and affective bonds, or

> between the contemplative and the active lives, than the desirability of combining the two...True, the poem superficially discounts the value of art: a seagull fouls Merrill's portrait bust, and a friend spills beer on it...Time and again the poem stresses the primacy of "close connections"--of the "social fabric" and the ecological network, rather than "the Work of Art." Yet all these details belong to the poem, which is an elaborate version of a friend's T-shirt, emblazoned with the motto "Clean Air/Or Else." (324-325)

More than just the poet's attempt to combine art and activism, "Bronze" is also, I would argue, a reflection of the transitional process from the personal to the social which starts to manifest itself in Late Settings. In other words, the poet begins to let go of his obsession with an apersonal "art" and a historically disengaged concern with the pristine aesthetic still-point, both of which are realized in the static bust in "Bronze." Even though it is possible to see, as Yenser does, Merrill's attempt at combining art and activism as a kind of compromise, I would like to go back to the last six verses of the final stanza. Rather than presenting a perfect merging of art and activism, the imagery suggests that the social (symbolized through the activist, Augie) crushes in its embrace the personal but frozen art object. This is an extremely painful process for the poet, whose "child-face pressed\Lips parted,

to the heart" of the activist suggests that he "swallows" activism by force, that his increasing social interest comes more from a sense of duty than from any real feeling of the "cause." After all, the poet's reaction to this transition is not a very happy one. The lips that sucked the social energy out of Augie's heart belong to someone who turns out to be "hurt\As much as I could bear." This thematic move from the personal to the social, from the pure art object to the animated bust, anticipates and enacts a complementary formal and imagistic move from static to performance imagery in Merrill's last collections.

In Late Settings, Merrill's overt social concern has to do with nature and ecological disasters, and features figures like Augie in "Bronze," who is an activist, an "ecosaint"--a term that Merrill uses later in his last collection, A Scattering of Salts, to describe zealous defenders of the planet's wealth. Even though AIDS is not directly mentioned in Late Settings, Merrill's attitude towards social issues such as ecological disasters in "Bronze" and war in "Revivals of Tristan" anticipates his treatment of AIDS in later collections. In "Bronze," for instance, the emphasis on the poet's unhappy reaction to his embrace of activism rather than on his new role as an activist, is found again in next collections which deal more openly with AIDS. Because it is the animation of the bust and not the social theme that first strikes the reader's

attention in "Bronze," Merrill suggests that structure and form are, despite a socially-engaged content in the last collections, still foremost in his poetic constructions.

"Revivals of Tristan" is also more noticeable for its structure and imagery than for its social implication. Although the reference to "posters" and "fresh names" in the third stanza takes on a particular meaning in the social and cultural context of Late Settings, these elements express mostly, I would argue, the new structural orientation of the collection. Merrill could not have ignored Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, a play which deals with the AIDS epidemic and was first performed in 1985, the same year that Late Settings was published. Kramer's use of signposting and numbers in a performative context resonates as similar to Merrill's description of "posters" and "fresh names" in his "performative" poem. Cindy J. Kistenberg describes Kramer's setting:

> ...perhaps the best information about AIDS is the collection of facts, statistics, dates, and names that are painted on the set and the walls of the performance space-a theatrical strategy similar to the Brechtian technique of signposting, Kramer explains that in the production at the Public Theater, "Everywhere possible, on this set and upon the theater walls too, facts and figures and names were painted in black, simple lettering." One item included in this production was

> the number of persons with AIDS throughout the United States. These figures, obtained from the Center for Disease Control, were continuously updated, crossing out the old number and replacing it with the new. The set also included the names of persons who died...Each of these elements appears to function as a means of connecting the fictional, theatrical world to the real world. (58)

However, it is in the form and structure, not the content, that Merrill's poem suggests a rapprochement with Kramer's play. With "Revivals of Tristan," Merrill sets up a poetical stragegy that will allow him in his next collections to deal more openly with AIDS. I see the posters "pasted with fresh names" as symbolizing Merrill's "crossing out the old" themes and structure of his pre-Late Settings period and "replacing it with the new" structure, imagery and theme of his last collections.

Chapter Two

The Inner Room: The Ambivalent Role of Drag and Performance

The Inner Room follows the poetical orientation undertaken by James Merrill in Late Settings. It is a collection that reflects Merrill's intention to challenge some preconceived ideas about AIDS and homosexuality through a coherent use of performance and drag animation imagery. The passive and nostalgic speaker of his earlier collections is replaced in The Inner Room by a traveller or a performer who is concerned with the present. To illustrate this new orientation in Merrill's poetry, I want to focus on the fourth section, "Prose of Departure," as well as on the last three poems of the collection: "Investiture at Cecconi's," "Farewell Performance," and "Processional." What makes these particular poems and the "Prose of Departure" section stand out from the rest of The Inner Room is that they deal specifically with the poet's response to a friend who is dying of AIDS. While "Prose of Departure" deals with the poet's trip to Japan (and his indulgence in Japanese drama) as a way to avoid the imminent death of his friend, Paul, the last three poems of the collection have to do with a symbolic ceremony performed by the poet for another departed friend, David Kalstone. Even though Merrill challenges the restricting frame of compulsory heterosexuality and religious intolerance about AIDS and homosexuality through his use of drag and performance imagery, these issues are somewhat undermined by his emphasis on the poet's various roles throughout The Inner Room.

"A Room at the Heart of Things," the most important poem of the first section of The Inner Room, gives the tone to Merrill's new orientation in this collection. The passive poet of earlier works, who "stages" past personal experiences in order to enact the distance between spectator and actor, is replaced in "A Room at the Heart of Things" by a poet who also "stages" his personal accounts in order to enact the same sort of distance, except that the lines between actor and spectator become blurred, once he begins to deal with social issues in which he is implicated: "Life gave the palm.../For 'living biographically' amid/Famines, uprisings, blood baths, hand to heart,/Saved by a weakness for performance art (...) Out there the You/And I, diffracted by the moiré grid/Have yet to meet" (19,21). Merrill's increased use of performance imagery and social themes in The Inner Room suggests a more profound interest in the poetic rejection of nostalgia and embrace of the present moment.

Merrill's deployment of theatrical modes and metaphors contributes to this sense of immediacy. As Peggy Phelan argues, performance is a live medium where emotions or feelings cannot be filtered:

> Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility--in a maniacally charged present--and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and

control. Performance resists the balanced circulations of finance. It saves nothing; it only spends. (148)

Of course, The Inner Room is not a play in five acts but a collection of poems divided into five sections. The performances alluded to in the collection can be seen as framed or saved (just like tableaux). However, what I think Merrill has done through his use of performance imagery in The Inner Room, and most particularly in the section "Prose of Departure," is to give the impression, through his constant use of the present tense, that the events described are happening as the reader turns the pages. The use of the present tense in "A Room at the Heart of Things"--"Of fate upon the palm slapped to his brow,/Of verse the instant they are written (now)"(18)--announces a collection based on the "now" rather than on the "what has been." For instance, "Prose of Departure," a section which covers the poet's entire trip to Japan, is told by the poet in the present tense. In having structured "Prose of Departure" as both a Noh play (characterized by static and past images) and a travel journal, which concerns itself with present actions, Merrill transcends successfully his earlier fixation with static imagery and past experiences, because the Noh play, which I see as symbolizing Merrill's former poetry, moves in the context of "Prose of Departure" to the rhythm of a travel journal.

A Noh play is usually divided into three parts. The

initial part, Jo, includes a travel-song and a protagonist who is often a character in disguise. The middle part, Ha, always has a comic interlude, Kyogen, meant to remove the emotional stress of the Noh, and the final part, Kyu, is the most dramatic section of the play--the point at which the protagonist reappears this time in his true colours as a ghost or demon. Even though not all of these aspects are found in the structure of "Prose of Departure," there are enough to suggest that Merrill intended to construct this section as a Noh play. For instance, "Prose of Departure" is divided into three sections and each part borrows some elements from the Jo, the Ha, and the Kyu. The first part of "Prose of Departure" (from "Imagining It" to "Dozen") borrows from the Jo the idea of a travel-song because it is the section that announces the poet's arrival in Tokyo as a perfect tourist. The "departure" to Japan is also an attempt to escape the death of a friend:

> Paul phones to say goodbye. He's back in New York two days early, but we are tied to our trip--departure this evening--and he, for his part, doesn't ask us over. (Can a single week have changed him? Surely not.) Our dear one sounded strong, unconcerned, above all glad to have left the clinic. ("Imagining It," 53)

The second part, "Kyogen Interlude: At the Bank," rearticulates the comic interlude of the Ha. The incident between Donald and the bank clerk allows a bit of comic

relief from the spectre of death which casts its shadow throughout "Prose of Departure." The last part, from "Sanctum" to "In the Shop," imitates the Kyu in that it is the most dramatic section. It is the section of "the dying Paul" in "Geiger Counter," and of the poet's turn to the spiritual and artistic world as a way to help him cope with the loss of his friend. Although the structure of "Prose of Departure" reminds us of a Noh play, the plot and characters of this section differ from the Noh in that everything takes place in the present.

In Japanese Theater, Faubion Bowers describes the Noh play as a form of Japanese drama in which the action is generally recollected and the plot is hinged on an event that has already taken place. Instead of being acted realistically before one's eyes, the dramatic situation is poetically recalled by the characters, and their movements become dreamlike glosses to the idea carried by the words. This description is echoed by Merrill's poet, who witnesses a Noh play in the first part of "Prose of Departure":

> At present the stage picture is static, a problem in chess...Blindfolded by their masks, oriented, if at all, by the peripheral pine tree or stage pillar, they need whatever help they can get...Feet in white socks explore the stage like palms of a blind man. When they stamp it is apt to be without impact...Hands are held relaxed but gravely furled. Middle knuckles aligned

with thumb unbent compose half a right angle.

("Afternoons at the Noh," 60-61)

In "Prose of Departure" the action is not recollected by static characters. Rather it is experienced directly by two travellers (the poet and his companion) who are always "on the go." What these travellers experience is the imminent death of a friend--something they attempt to transcend (without success). In fact, the progress of their friend's disease is closely related to the progress of their trip, which is rendered through the travel journal: "from one text,--one test, rather--to the next" ("Imagining It," 53). There is no way to stop the progression of Paul's disease just as there is no way to stop the progression of the poet's trip. The poet would like to stop time, to "freeze" it, but he is unable to do so:

> Well, now he knows, as do we; and the date line, like a great plateglass revolving door, or the next six-foot wave in an epic poem, comes flashing up to face the music. I need a form of conscious evasion, that at best permits odd moments when the subject
>
> looking elsewhere strays
>
> into a local muse's
>
> number-benumbed gaze
>
> --fixed there ticking off syllables, until she blinks and the wave breaks. ("Strategies," 57)

The "conscious evasion," which would allow the poet to stray

"into a local muse's number-benumbed gaze," reminds us of Merrill's earlier poetry which relied on static images. However, this poetry of recollection is irrelevant to the context of "Prose of Departure." The "ticking-off syllables" cannot be stopped. Apart from the reference to a clock, which marks the time left before the "date line," the "ticking-off syllables" could also refer to the sixteen syllables of the haiku, a bomb or a heart; a few lines down the poet mentions his "own red boîte." "Prose of Departure" moves to the beat of a friend's approaching death. Thus, it is no surprise that the section ends with the death of the friend. The emphasis on performance and the present in "Prose of Departure" suggests that Merrill has begun to dramatize--even through the highly formulaic stages of the Noh play--the encroachment of the historical and social on the purely artistic.

As an event which takes place in the present, performance is often associated with the desire for change. Victor Turner talks about the potential effect that performances could have on the audience:

> [Performances] are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture...but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting "designs for living." (24)

I think that this definition could apply partly to Merrill's use of performance and drag animation imagery in The Inner Room as a way to challenge certain cultural and social restrictions. For instance, the poet's emphasis on the sexual ambiguity of the Japanese male performers in "Prose of Departure" as well as on his own "drag" performance in the last part of the collection exposes the restricting frame of compulsory heterosexuality. The poet also challenges religious intolerance about AIDS and homosexuality when he performs a ceremony that elevates his departed friend to the spiritual world. These challenges, however, are extremely subtle. And, AIDS is, after all, never mentioned directly, and the poet's wearing of a "robe" is ambiguously couched as either drag or religious ceremony. It is only through a close observation of all the poetical details pertaining to the poet's personal life in The Inner Room and a consideration of the social context in which this collection was published that it becomes possible to conclude that Merrill intended to challenge preconceived ideas about AIDS and homosexuality.

The poet's taste for Japanese drama in "Prose of Departure" could be explained in part by the drag performances of male actors who are playing female characters. In any case, the poet always emphasizes the sexual ambiguity of the performers in his elaborate descriptions of the Noh and Bunraku theater. The poet

describes, for instance, a protagonist who is able to transcend gender restrictions through reincarnation in "Afternoons at the Noh":

> Masked as each of these in turn, the protagonist has the wattles and frame of
>
> a middle aged man-
>
> but time, gender, self are laws
>
> waived by his gold fan. (60)

Also, in "Bunraku"--a form of Japanese theater like the Noh except that the characters are puppets--the reciter Joruri, who does the voices for all the puppets, is given a transgressive role:

> Upon taking his place the joruri performs an obeisance, lifting the text reverently to his brow. It is a specialized art--what art is not?--and he glories in it. He has mastered Koganosuke's noble accents, the heroine's mewing, and the evil warlord's belly laugh which goes on for minutes and brings down the house. To function properly each puppet requires three manipulators. These, with the joruri, are the flesh and blood of this National Theater, and come to stand for--stand in for--the overruling passions, the social or genetic imperatives, that propel a given character. (67)

In the context of The Inner Room "genetic" and "social" are key words because they bring up the tireless debate about

the development of the sexual identification of an individual: Is it natural? Is it social? What the poet seems to admire in these Japanese plays is that the element of drag allows the characters to transcend genetic and social restrictions. In fact, Merrill's speaker imitates the sexual transgression of the protagonist in "Afternoons at the Noh" and the reciter of "Bunraku," when he is in drag in the last part of The Inner Room.

The speaker of The Inner Room often shows an interest in non-traditional clothes. The costume of the androgynous protagonist of "Afternoons at the Noh" does not go unnoticed: "Masked, longhaired and lacquer-bonneted, over his coral robe and white trousers he wears a coat of stiff apple-green gauze threaded with golden mazes" (60). The flashiness of the protagonist's costume and the length of his hair, both of which are traditionally associated with Western womanhood, are nicely juxtaposed with the plain trousers. But what really seems to fascinate Merrill's speaker is the traditional Japanese costume, the kimono, often worn as a woman's dressing-gown. The opening lines of "In the Shop," the last poem of "Prose of Departure," reveal this fascination: "Out came the most fabulous kimono of all: dark, dark purple traversed by a winding, starry path" (72). There seems to be a magical feel to this kimono, but there is also a drag element which must have particularly appealed to the poet.

To better understand Merrill's attitude to drag, it might be useful to go back to one of his earlier collections, Braving the Elements (1972), and more specifically, to the poem "Up and Down." Here, social and gender restrictions clearly hinder Merrill's speaker from claiming and owning a ring that his mother wishes for his bride: "I do not tell her, it would sound theatrical,/Indeed, this greenroom's mine, my very life./We are each other's; there will be no wife" (279). Those restrictions seem to be finally transgressed in The Changing Light at Sandover when the poet melts down his mother's ring to have one made for David Jackson--to confirm their marital relationship: "JM from DJ entering/our 25th year--/often distant, ever dear./ (Diamonds not from Pharaoh's barge/but MFJ's engagement ring--...)" (352-53). In The Inner Room, the poet explores another facet of the transgression of a traditional marital relationship when he goes to a Venetian tailor in "Investiture at Cecconi's." Wanting evening clothes for the new year, the poet ends up with a gift, a robe, from another dying friend:

> Caro, that dream (after the diagnosis)
> found me losing patience outside the door of
> "our" Venetian tailor. I wanted evening
> clothes for the new year.
>
> Then a bulb went on. The old woman, she who

stitches dawn to dusk in his back room, opened one suspicious inch, all the while exclaiming over the late hour--

Fabrics? patterns? those the proprietor must show by day, but now--till a lightening insight cracks her face wide: Ma! the Signore's here to try on his new robe!

Robe? she nods me onward. The mirror triptych summons three bent crones she diffracted into back from no known space. They converge by magic, arms full of moonlight.

Up my own arms glistening sleeves are drawn. Cool silk in grave, white folds--Oriental mourning--sheathes me, throat to ankles. I turn to face her, uncomprehending.

Thank your friend, she cackles, the Professore! Wonderstruck I sway, like a tree of tears. You--miles away, sick, fearful--have yet arranged this heartstopping present. (92)

Apart from having the obvious connections to a funeral, the robe could also symbolize the poet's personification of a bride. Jeff Nunokawa thinks that the use of clothes in this

poem reflects a typical perception of AIDS as a fatality that covers the gay community:

> As his encounter with this figure suggests, the speaker of the poem, as well as the subject he mourns, is involved in the predictions of fate: the robe that he wears, the dream that he entertains, and the words that he speaks are fabrics and forces that enfold him without his consent...Merrill's elegy not only records the content of a dream: in the station it assigns its speaker, the poem also recapitulates the place or plight of the dreamer, a figure drawn forth by a script which someone else has written, rather than the author of the action. (317)

Even though Nunokawa's argument is essentially sound, the fact that he does not consider the meaning of drag and clothes in the other poems of the collection prevents him from seeing the multiple facets of Merrill's persona's role. When Merrill's speaker in "Investiture at Cecconi's" is in drag, which I see as a performative act because the reader witnesses the transformation of the persona, not only does he transgress what Judith Butler calls the restricting frame of compulsory heterosexuality, but he also asserts some kind of power as the "robe" leads him to take on various roles.

The transgressive nature of camp, cross-dressing and the whole drag queen phenomenon is found in the last part of The Inner Room through Merrill's subtle use of drag imagery.

When transposed to a performative context, the powerlessness traditionally associated with effeminate men turns into control--control of their audience, their image, and their representation, among other things. In his essay on effeminacy, Daniel R. Harris talks about what he considers to be the new assertive nature of camp:

> The verbal form "to camp" implies that effeminacy has become a specific kind of activity that one can choose to do, like "to sing" or "to dance" or "to laugh"--that it is not, in other words, an all-embracing style over which the effeminate have no control but rather that it is an action that one can will oneself to perform and likewise not to perform. To be effeminate is no longer something one is but something one does. What was once a largely unconscious attitude toward the self, an obliviousness or immunity to the erect carriage and poker face of The Real Man, has now become a willed form of behavior, a social mask or party drag of which the effeminate man is not the victim but the impresario, the emcee. (77-78)

For his part, Moe Meyer asserts that camp challenges the dominant order. Camp as specifically queer parody, becomes

> the process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchised advance their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification.

> Without the process of parody, the marginalized agent has no access to representation, the apparatus of which is controlled by the dominant order. Camp,...becomes, then, the only process by which the queer is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility. (11)

When Merrill's speaker puts on a robe in "Investiture at Cecconi's," his gesture is powerfully symbolic in two ways. On the one hand, the French meaning of "robe" as a woman's garment seems to apply to the context of The Inner Room, in which homosexuality and drag are intertwined, because the robe becomes a way for the speaker to assert visibly his sexual difference as well as a means to destabilize gender categories. The robe is also an appropriation of the wedding-gown--it is, after all, white and covers the poet from throat to ankles--which becomes very transgressive because it questions the validity of a heterosexual institution. As Butler suggests: "The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" (142). On the other hand, the robe also has a much more conservative function. Indeed, the robe is officially worn by men in legal and clerical situations. Here again, this connotation could apply to the context of the last three poems of The Inner Room, because "Investiture at Cecconi's" precedes two poems which have to do with the

funeral of the friend who (appropriately enough) gave the robe to the poet. Thus, the idea of the poet, robed as a priest, who performs a ceremony for his departed friend does make sense in such a context. In giving a religious meaning to the performative acts described in "Farewell Performance" and "Processional," Merrill elevates the status of an AIDS victim to the spiritual world.

When the poet performs a kind of ceremony for his departed friend in "Farewell Performance," he contributes to the respectful treatment an AIDS victim is entitled to. Isolation is well represented in this poem when the poet finds himself alone with his companion, Peter, at the private and special ceremony for DK: "this is what we paddled a neighbor's dinghy/Out to scatter--Peter who grasped the buoy,/I who held the box underwater, freeing/all it contained" (93). The poet, who takes upon himself the responsibility of presiding over the act of scattering the ashes into the water, also expresses his fear of being forgotten when his turn comes:

> ...We in
> turn have risen. Pity and terror done with,
> programs furled, lips parted, we jostle forward
> eager to hail them,
>
> more, to join the troupe--will a friend enroll us
> one fine day? Strange, though. For up close their magic

self-destructs. Pale, dripping, with downcast eyes they've seen where it led you. (94)

This surrealist ceremony has been criticized by Richard Howard, who in his own elegiac poem dedicated to David Kalstone, "For David Kalstone, 1932-1986," deplores Merrill's attitude towards the death of their common friend --an unrealistic attitude often found in members of the gay community when confronted to the AIDS-related death of one of their peers. Howard's poem is preceded by this quote from Merrill:

> What became of him after the cremation?...Below David's windows, Maxine took a small vial from her purse and emptied it into the Grand Canal....Into the tidal river just east of Stonington I emptied the white gravel of our friend....A last teaspoonful had been saved to mix with earth. (78)

With his poem, Howard scorns Merrill's symbolic ceremony: "Which deeps have now been further dimmed/by a vial of surreptitious cinders/poured from a gondola by prudent friends/to join the Dreck of Ages; more recent swill/discolors the ashes off Stonington" (80). Howard's criticism of the vain and spiritual aspects of Merrill's ceremony is also reinforced by the artistic value of the poet's role in this farewell performance--a performance which allows him to personify two kinds of powerful figures: a conductor and an alchemist.

The first two stanzas of "Farewell Performance" present a Maestro who is in total control of his art:

> Art. It cures affliction. As lights go down and
> Maestro lifts his wand, the unfailing sea change
> starts within us. Limber alembics once more
> make of the common
>
> lot a pure, brief gold. At the end our bravos
> call them back, sweat-soldered and leotarded,
> back, again back--anything not to face the
> fact that it's over. (93)

"Maestro" takes on a particular meaning in the context of the poem which is dedicated to DK (David Kalstone). In From the Fire Screen (1969), there is an earlier dedication to David Kalstone in a poem which has to do with composers, "Matinees." Typical of Merrill's earlier poetry, "Matinees" is a poem which reminisces about his first visit to the Grand Opera. However, there is a passage towards the end of the poem that includes a more modern reference to the "real life" opera that takes place between the poet and his friend, David:

> You and I, caro, seldom
> Risk the real thing any more.
> It's all too silly or too solemn.
> Enough to know the score

From records or transcription
For our four hands. Old beauties, some
In advanced stages of decomposition,

Float up through the sustaining
Pedal's black and fluid medium.
Days like today
Even recur (wind whistling themes
From Lulu, and sun shining
On the rough Sound) when it seems
Kinder to remember than to play. (207)

Their relationship is described in musical terms that emphasize routine, passivity and lack of creativity. The poet's attitude towards this relationship and art changes in the last poem of The Inner Room. The poet is no longer the lazy composer who thought it was "Enough to know the score/From records or transcriptions." With "Processional," the poet is able to assert his creative power in two ways. On the one hand, his willingness to glorify the memory of a friend is shown when he turns his friend's ashes into gold. On the other hand, the poet also reveals that he can play the role of an "alchemist" of letters when he turns common words into poetry. In this latter case, the "process" of writing a poem is emphasized rather than the final product.

Merrill's use of the metaphor of turning lead into gold in "Processional" is not exceptional in an AIDS context.

Indeed, spiritual alchemy is often used as a metaphor in artistic works about AIDS. For instance, commenting on Tony Kushner's play about AIDS, Angels in America (1993), Rob Baker talks about Kushner's use of alchemy and AIDS in his play:

> Most commentators tended to take the angelic announcement as kind of a vague metaphor for Prior's struggle with AIDS. Virtually no mention has been made, in the press or elsewhere, of one rather obvious interpretation of the reference: in medieval alchemy, the Great Work...is the "alchemical marriage," the making of pure gold from base lead. This alchemy symbolizes the transformation of the inner soul of the alchemist from his (or her) basic instinctual self into--a wrestling with an angel...It is a difficult, prolonged battle that is, among other things, a trial by fire leading to purification, clarification, and rebirth...AIDS itself, in all its horror, ironically may be the very philosopher's stone that the characters "possess" in order to achieve the necessary transformation, be it political or spiritual. (214-215)

The idea of AIDS as leading to a spiritual or political transformation fits in perfectly with Merrill's references to alchemy in "Farewell Performance" and "Processional." The friend who dies of AIDS, becomes in the context of these two poems a martyr, a saint, someone who must be respected for

the ordeal he had to go through while on earth. In "Processional," religious condemnation of AIDS as God's punishment of homosexuals is overturned when the poet's friend goes through some kind of purifying rebirth:

> To that same tune whereby immensely old
> Slabs of dogma and opprobrium,
> Exchanging ions under pressure, bred
> A spar of burnt-black anchorite,
>
> Or in three lucky strokes of word gold LEAD
> Once again turns (LOAD, GOAD) to GOLD. (95)

Alchemy, however, also has an effect on the alchemist, as Baker points out in his analysis. The transformation of the inner soul of the poet from a common artist to a "Maestro" of letters is also found alongside his friend's spiritual transformation in "Processional."

The great emphasis on the transformation of words (from the ordinary to the more refined) in "Processional" brings up the importance of the poet's role in The Inner Room: "Think what the demotic droplet felt,/Translated by a polar wand to keen/Six-pointed Mandarin..." (95). The transformation of an informal language into a formal one--the "demotic," a simplified form of writing used in Ancient Egypt, becomes the "six-pointed Mandarin," a form of Chinese language spoken by educated persons--through a polar wand, a celestial pen, suggests a great improvement in the poet's

mastery of his craft. In fact, he has reached such a control that he is able to turn the attention of the reader away from the static image of a completed poem by emphasizing the actual process of writing a poem. This reflects Merrill's new poetical orientation which, as I pointed out earlier, relies more on animation and on verses which are written "now." By ending his collection with a poem which deals as much with the art of writing as with the "process of dying," Merrill seems to imply that he is more concerned with translating AIDS into art than in using art as a way to contemplate his response to AIDS and death.

Even though Merrill challenges certain social assumptions about AIDS in The Inner Room, his way of challenging these assumptions is very subtle. It seems strange at first that Merrill should have ended his collection with "Processional" rather than with "Farewell Performance." However, The Inner Room is as much a collection of poems about creative process as it is about death. As a result, it seems only logical for Merrill to end his collection with a poem that evokes so clearly the transformation of letters into words almost at the expense of the imagery of turning his friend's ashes into gold. In fact, a close reading of the relationship between AIDS and art reinforces the impression that AIDS is often undermined by the importance of creativity and performance in The Inner Room.

It is, I would suggest, the poet's dead friends (Paul, David Kalstone) who are his muses, because they are the ones who inspired him to write a collection of poems in which he experiments with new imagery and forms. Thus, his friend's deaths--and by extension AIDS as its cause--could be seen as having (ironically) a beneficial influence on the poet's art. Although AIDS obliquely allows Merrill to write an original collection of poems (something that was not to be expected after the publication of The Changing Light at Sandover which was considered by many to be Merrill's most original work), a question remains: Does Merrill's persona really acknowledge the impact of AIDS on his personal life or does he try to use art to escape the reality of it? I think that the poet's trip to Japan, while Paul is dying in New York, as well as his gift from the sick David, who is "miles away" from him, make the answer perfectly clear: He is unable to face the fact that he is losing friends to a terrible disease. As a result, he translates this inability to cope with the impact of AIDS on his personal life into an artistic evasion. Even the ceremony performed by the poet for David Kalstone in the last two poems of the collection has an unreal aspect to it because of all the alchemical and spiritual references. Indeed, he does his best in "Farewell Performance" to remind the reader that he cannot deal with death and AIDS in a realistic way: "anything not to face the fact that it's over" (93). This inability to face reality

could explain why the poet is never himself--why, in other words, he takes on different roles that allow him to become variously a bride, a priest, an alchemist, a Maestro. He is never presented as a simple mourner.

Chapter Three

A Scattering of Salts: The Poet's Performative Farewell to Art, Society and Life

Merrill's last collection, A Scattering of Salts, can be seen as the epilogue of the performance and performative cycle begun with Late Settings. A Scattering of Salts also marks the poet's final acte de présence as a performer and as a human being. Accordingly, the collection is structured in a way that reflects the poet's farewell to art, society, and life. Even though each of the three section of the collection still relies heavily on performance and performative imagery, they are used this time to illustrate the poet's response to his AIDS condition--to illustrate a progressive isolation rather than an earlier challenge to society's attitude towards the disease. In fact, the poet reveals throughout the collection that he has no longer any faith in society.

In the first section, two poems announce a rejection of socially engaged performances, "Nine Lives" and "The Ring Cycle," and reflect the poet's disillusionment with society. While the structure and content of "Nine Lives" reproduce the lightness and triviality of comedies, the ambiguous line between fiction and reality in "The Ring Cycle"--an ambiguity proper to the opera genre refered to--brings up the evil impact of society on the art world. The second section further explores the evil aspect of society, demonstrating how science and the media transform an individual infected with AIDS into a freakish performer. The last section reveals the poet's total rejection of society

as he isolates himself from the rest of the world before his death. Within the context of "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek (TM) Windbreaker," isolation takes on a more specific AIDS connotation through the covering of the poet's infected body--a covering that marks the poet's ultimate drag performance in a shroud of Dupont plastic.

The third poem in section one, "Nine Lives," is structured as a comedy in ten acts--a potential mirroring of Merrill's ten collections of poems (excluding anthologies) up until A Scattering of Salts. In fact, this last collection could be seen as the epilogue of Merrill's poetical career; he has exceeded his nine "poetical lives" and must therefore bid his farewell to ambitious poetical undertakings. The ten acts could also refer more specifically to the completion of the poetical cycle begun ten years before with Late Settings. The opening lines of "Nine Lives," which describe the poet's final tour de piste, are still evoking, however, the performative context found in Late Settings and The Inner Room:

> The ancient comic theater had it right:
> A shuttered house, a street or square, a tree
> Collect, life after life, the energy
> To flood what happens in their shade with light.
> A house in Athens does the trick for me--
> Thrilling to find oneself again on stage,
> In character, at this untender age. (5)

With its emphasis on the restoration of order through the guise of a marriage at the end, comedy seems to be an appropriate genre to illustrate the poet's farewell to unconventional poetical forms. But the restoration of order also signifies, I would argue, Merrill's rejection of socially engaged performances--performances which aim to challenge a well-established order. The fact that "Nine Lives" takes up the themes and characters of his 1982 collection, The Changing Light at Sandover, suggests not only that Merrill has reached a kind of artistic dead-end, but also that he refuses to tackle again the social issues which prevailed in the "performance" poems of The Inner Room. In fact, the poet seems tired of the "social": "What are those headlines/Whose upper-case demotic holds the floor--/GET THE U.S. BASES OUT OF GREECE/--That old refrain, where's their imagination?" (5). However, the poet's return to the Changing Light at Sandover also represents an old refrain--an inability to come up with any original idea. The poem picks up one of the old refrains of the trilogy: that Maria Mitsotáki would be reborn as a future (male) Nobel prize chemist in India. The outcome of this sequel will determine the poet's artistic future:

> Well, it will be the proof we've never had
> Or asked for. And if nothing happens, Ephraim?
> If no hat sails our way? If D and I
> Just wait like idiots? THE WIND WILL DIE ("Nine

Lives," [8])

The waiting period is characterized by the poet's absorption with a neighbouring family of cats--another illustration of his oblique perception of the "real" world. Guilty of having separated a kitten from his mother, the poet cannot think about anything else. When DJ reminds him of the crucial deadline that will determine his future, "Tomorrow's the big day" (10), JM can only think about his kitten. DJ, who confronts JM, becomes the poet's social alter ego:

DJ: At least he has eight lives to go!
Remember when the Nestlé company
Shipped its formula to Ghana, free?
The babies thrived on it. Then one fine morning,
End of shipments. No thought for all the mothers
Who weaned their babies on the formula
And had no milk left. There in a nutshell's
American policy.

JM: Say no more.
Leave every little skeleton in peace.
I never should have opened that back door. (10-11)

What transpires from this dialogue is the burden of the poet's social conscience--a burden which leads the poet, I would suggest, to regret and renounce the social inclination of his last collections.

When the poet refuses to recognize the importance of "the big day," he half concedes the anticipated doom of his

artistic future. On the expected day, DJ and JM do wait like idiots, and are confronted to the fact that the wind has died: "We slowly get up. Eyes front. Dignified./Two old ex-waiters. For the wind has died" (13). The poet's need for a proof to validate the success of his socially-engaged performance poems--proof that they have provoked a societal change, "Proof that you act in our theater/Not for once purely in a manner of speaking,/No: word made flesh" (15)--is thwarted. The proof finally escapes him:

> Like Wise Men we'd been primed to kneel in awe
> At journey's end before that child whose nature
> Proved Earth at one with Heaven, and past with future.
> Instead, the perfect fools we still are saw
> A manger full of emptiness, dust, straw... (15)

Artistic creativity, which is often symbolized through procreation imagery, becomes within the context of "Nine Lives," a poetical miscarriage.

The last section of "Nine Lives," the final act of a comedy, marks the return of an established order: "There is a moment comedies beget/When escapade and hubbub die away,/Vows are renewed, masks dropped,..." (16). This return also signals that the poet will no longer attempt to challenge the established order through his "performance" poems: "These aren't the 'risks' a poem's meant to take" (16). Even though a comedy always has a happy ending, and here that ending is the renewal of vows--not marriage vows

but "vows/To letters"--the end of the poem anticipates a dark literary prison:

> To all, sweet dreams. The teacup-stirring eddy
> Is spent. We've dropped our masks, renewed our vows
> To letters, to the lives that letters house,
> Houses they shutter, streets they shade. Already
> Empty and dark, this street is. (17)

The celebration of marriage and fertility which usually closes the comedy becomes ironic in the context of "Nine Lives," because what this poem "celebrates" is the poet's creative sterility, his rejection of new forms of production and his renewal of vows to create a more conservative form of poetry. Indeed, there is no light, no brilliant originality, to be expected from poetry anymore; there is only a repetition of long-exhausted themes.

With its emphasis on completion, the other "performance" poem of the first section, "The Ring Cycle," takes up this theme of the artistic dead-end. The recurring event of the "Ring" in the poet's life seems to illustrate once again (after the unsuccessful sequel to The Changing Light at Sandover in "Nine Lives") his inability to come up with any original idea: "They're doing a Ring cycle at the Met,/Four operas in one week, for the first time/Since 1939. I went to that one" (27). However, the choice of opera in the context of the poet's farewell to life and to art also suggests an ultimate attempt to transcend gender and social

restrictions. In "The Queen's Throat: (Homo)sexuality and the Art of Singing," Wayne Koestenbaum talks about the interaction between the "opera queen" and the diva--an interaction which allows us to understand better the impact of opera on the persona of "The Ring Cycle":

> The opera queen--the gay consumer of opera--has an inactive, silent throat while he listens to the diva; the singer's throat is queen. But agency, in opera is blurred: the queen's throat resides in a vocal body intangibly suspended between persons, and between the separate acts of production and reception. (207)

Koestenbaum's description of the effect of the diva's voice on the gay male spectator could apply to "The Ring Cycle" because the line between life and death as well as between art and society becomes blurred for the poet when he hears the voices of the singers.

The poet appears to be in a very ambivalent position in "The Ring Cycle." Throughout the poem there is a back and forth movement between his present life and his after life. On the one hand, he seems to have a foot on earth: "We have long evenings to absorb together/Before the world ends" (27). On the other hand, he projects himself as a dead person who returns to earth with other dead acquaintances:

> Young love, moon-flooded hut, and the act ends.
> House lights. The matron on my left exclaims.
> We gasp and kiss. Our mothers were best friends.

Now, old as mothers, here we sit. Too weird.
That man across the aisle, with lambswool beard,
Was once my classmate, or a year behind me.
Alone, in black, in front of him, Maxine...
It's like the Our Town cemetery scene! (27)

In this "cemetery scene" the agency of time, generation, and gender is blurred. For instance, not only does the poet become as old as his mother's best friend, but he also presents himself as a replacement for a mother: "old as mothers, here we sit." Besides the line between time and gender, the line between fiction and reality is also blurred for the poet when he hears the voices of the singers. The ambiguous line between fiction and reality symbolized through the ambivalent role of performance in The Inner Room--is the persona a spectator or a performer?--is thus found again in "The Ring Cycle."

In the third section of "The Ring Cycle," the poet makes a parallel between the performance he is witnessing, the story of Nibelungenlied, and the real life story of what goes on behind the production:

Fricka looks pleased with her new hairdresser.
Brunnhilde (Behrens) has abandoned hers.
Russet-maned, eager for battle, she butts her father
Like a playful pony. They've all grown these powers,
So young, so human. So exploitable.
The very industries whose "major funding"

Underwrote the production continue to plunder

The planet's wealth. (28)

There is a shift from the once powerful characters to the powerful industries and governmental institutions which are now controlling the art world. In fact, the murderess Brunnhilde is quite innocent compared to the government and industries, ("--Right, Mr President? Right, Texaco?--" [28]), which are able to fund the art world by polluting the real world. As the poet watches the performance, reality and fiction become intertwined when the once powerful characters of Brunnhilde and Siegfried are also confounded with the singers who play these parts in the fourth section. The "story" of these two youngsters who became singers (their middleclass background, their lessons and rehearsals) is emphasized by the poet as much as the power of their performance: "Two world-class egos, painted, overweight,/Who'll joke at supper side by side, now hate/So plausibly that one old stagehand cries" (28). The poet's emphasis on the industries which control the art world betrays, I would argue, his cynicism and disillusionment with a socially engaged art form. Instead of depicting art as serving society, "The Ring Cycle" reveals the evil influence of society on the art world.

The opening lines of the fifth section of "The Ring Cycle" resonate with oblique allusions to Tolkien, as the poet presents himself as a modern version of "the Lord of

the Rings": "I've worn my rings--all three of them/At once for the first time--to the Ring" (29). Merrill's use of the metaphor of the ring and ghostly images recalls the invisibility of the bearer of the ring in Tolkien's story. This invisibility gives some kind of assertive power to the poet--an assertive power reinforced through the poet's role in the construction of the theater:

> Back when the old house was being leveled
> And this one built, I made a contribution.
> Accordingly, a seat that bears my name
> Year after year between its thin, squared shoulders
> (Where Hagen is about to aim his spear)
> Bides its time in instrumental gloom.
> These evenings we're safe. Our seats belong
> To Walter J. and Ortrud Fogelsong
> --Whoever they are, or were. (29)

As a millionaire who financially supports the art world, the poet distances himself from other rich men, from those who own industries which plunder the planet's wealth. In fact, the only type of millionaire who could be perceived as a legitimate contributor is a rich person like the poet whose wealth is inherited. The seat, which, like the legacied tombstone, bears his name, represents the poet's artistic testimony to the art world: "The plaque/Gives off that phosphorescent sheen of Earth's/Address book. Stranger yet, as I sink back,/The youth behind me, daybreak in his eyes--

/A son till now undreamed of--makes to rise" (29). The poet, who envisions a visit to his tombstone as a spirit, seems convinced that his oeuvre, like the commemorative plaque, will keep on living after his death.

What is emphasized in "The Ring Cycle" is the spiritual, intellectual part of the poet. The other part, the body, is practically erased from the poet's artistic experience. One possible explanation for this absence could be that the body symbolizes for Merrill the material realities of the art world--realities perpetuated by a material society. However, because homosexuality often transcends the body, as Koestenbaum remarks, the poet's homosexual body

> whether silent or vocal, occupies a crossroads where anatomies and institutions collide. Like voice, homosexuality appears to be taking place inside a body, when really it occurs in a sort of outerspace (call it "discourse") where interiorities converge; (207)

The homosexual body, as occupying "a crossroads where anatomies and institutions collide" and as occuring "in a sort of outerspace," emerges as particularly relevant in the context of the second section of A Scattering of Salts, a section which focuses on the poet's body.

In the second part of the collection, the poet's homosexual body becomes AIDS. Cindy Patton talks about this metaphor in Inventing AIDS:

> In AIDS medical science, the body becomes a screen or agar plate on which disease, is in play...Because the immune system, understood metaphorically, transcends the place of the body, the abstraction "AIDS" folds back to correspond exactly to the space of the body. The virus is lost and, metaphorically speaking, the homosexual/prostitute/African/injecting-drug-user/ hemophiliac body becomes AIDS. (55)

The homosexual/AIDS body could also be seen in performative terms because it is exposed to the scrutiny of a mainstream audience. Thus,

> The love that dare not speak its name is now asked endlessly to repeat that name in public in order to inscribe and reinscribe the ineluctable sexual difference that reassures a shifting "general public" that it is not subject to AIDS. (Patton, 55)

Merrill explores the use of his AIDS body as a "spectacle" in the second section of the collection.

The first poem of the second section, "The Instilling," features a body invaded by a mysterious light. The opening lines of the poem emphasize that this light comes from high within the skull (the "Dome of a Pantheon") and shines into the body. That the poet sees his skull as the roof of a temple dedicated to all the gods does not represent much of a surprise for those who have followed the evolution of Merrill's persona; he becomes, after all, the "Maestro" in

The Inner Room. Even though the instilling of the poet's body with light from the skull overtly refers to the mind's instilling of ideas or feelings on the body, it equally suggests the instilling of medication. In fact, what the light ultimately reveals is the "dreamless gulf between two shoulder blades." In other words, what used to be the "Dome of a Pantheon" is now a deep hollow, a chasm--the abysmal state of a poet who is losing the light of his creative spirit. The light that emanates from the skull also points to spotlights, and thus the body becomes a sort of performative venue where AIDS and science are fighting over the leading role.

The light takes on another meaning in the third section of the next poem, "Novelettes," when it is associated with the comic opera, The Magic Flute, which celebrates the victory of light over darkness. Allegorically Merrill gestures to the poet's battle for life over death, for courage over despair. But what stands out from such conventional allegories is the way the poet is selected and brought onto the stage:

> The house has filled and darkened. The Magic Flute
> Begins in silence. A gang of urchins
> Racked like pool balls as the curtain parts
> Break through the audience, spraying the faces
> Of a startled few with luminous paint. A chill
> Quick-drying coat transfigures mine. Thus chosen,

We're herded--old suscribers left behind

Blinking about in confusion--onto the stage. (42)

This passage reflects Patton's description of gay men who, prior to the advent of AIDS, were ignored by the "general public," but are now considered to be worthy of interest because of the whole spectacle of AIDS. Moreover, the luminous paint that covers the poet's face clearly differentiates him from the "general public" and thus reassures this public "that it is not subject to AIDS." The poet's "chosen" status also suggests that he has become a "sample" in the hands of science. With "Press Release" and "Vol. XLIV, No.3," the poet shows how science and the media contribute to the spectacle of the AIDS body.

The discovery of a new synthetic substance in "Press Release" recalls the glorification of science by the media. As Patton points out, "rarely do we question the ability of science to know. For the most part, science serves as the master discourse that administers all other discourses about AIDS" (53). The poet's description of the AIDS body as a piece of fabric pierced through by the needle of scientific knowledge suggests that his body becomes a prop in the hands of science:

Seems as though Chemistry, allegorical figure
In robes the color of thought, had looked up, knowing
That the sampler she is here depicted as working
Called for a new molecular stitch. Where it takes

Root in her field--for the sampler, too, is a figure--
Buff canvas foothills, happy to be worked,
Turn green and gold, each morning's taller figures
Put forth leaves. (55)

What takes place inside the poet's body as a result of the needle, which works through his skin as through a piece of fabric, is transposed to the outside in "Vol. XLIV, No.3." In this poem, science and the media converge to transform the AIDS body into a spectacle. That body is reproduced graphically through the pages of a scientific magazine:

Room set at infrared,
Mind at ultraviolet,
Organisms ever stranger,
Hallucinated on the slide, fluoresce:

Chains of gold tinsel, baubles of green fire
For the arterial branches--
Here at Microcosmics Illustrated, why,
Christmas goes on all year! (58)

The diseased body is thus turned into a christmas tree, a showy trinket. The exploitation of the poet's body by science and the media does not, however, guarantee a cure: "Defenceless, the patrician cells await/Invasion by barbaric viruses,/Another sack of Rome" (58). The allusions to classical Rome sets up the scene for the next poem, "Tony: Ending the Life," the first poem of the collection which deals openly with the poet's response to his disease.

With "Tony: Ending the Life," the poet gives a human touch to the Science vs. AIDS battle by showing what is behind the spectacle of AIDS. This is the first time in the collection that the poet reveals what he thinks about his disease--reveals his lack of faith in the medical establishment, and his difficulty with an acceptance of his own death. Up until "Tony: Ending the Life," the poems dealing with AIDS and the poet's body are cold and almost lifeless. It is as if the poet were indifferent to the use of his AIDS body as a scientific experiment and as a public spectacle, as if perhaps the poet had some faith in science. Thus, as long as there was hope of a cure, the poet could have seen the exposure of his AIDS body as a necessary evil. However, with the realization that science is impotent, the offhandedly optimistic tone of the collection undergoes quite a shift, a shift articulated half-way through "Tony: Ending the Life."

In the first section of "Tony: Ending the Life," the poet reflects on his idyllic past as a kind of Alexandria besieged by AIDS. The poet evokes the homosexual paradise of his past without any kind of particular emotion:

> But then years, too, would pass. And in the glow
> Of what came next, the Alexandria
> You brought to life would up and go:
> Bars, beaches, British troops (so slim--yum yum!),
> The parties above all. Contagious laughter,

Sparkle and hum and flow,...
Age, astonished, saw those heavy things
Lifted by tricky prisms into light,
Lifted like holy offerings,
Gemlike, disinterested,... (59)

Then, Merrill points to what destroyed this paradise; AIDS is brought up obliquely in the next section:

Unfair! The boys were talkative and fun;
Far cleaner than my mind, after a bath.
Such episodes, when all was said and done,
Sweetened their reflective aftermath:
The denizens discovered in a dive
Relieved us (if not long or overmuch). (60)

The allusions to a promiscuous lifestyle have already been dealt with by Merrill in his memoir, A Different Person, which was published two years before A Scattering of Salts. John Simon, who reviewed this memoir for The New Criterion, relates Merrill's emphasis on his own promiscuity, the threesomes and foursomes that Merrill and his lover, David Jackson, were seeking throughout the bathhouses of Italy, Greece and New York. Merrill remarks:

> For me those hours were the adolescence I'd been too shy or repressed to put into action at the time. Their polymorphous abundance spilling over into our lives kept us primed and sexually alert towards each other. (quoted in Simon, 79)

Simon points out, however, that this enthusiasm is often checked by a sense of guilt: "The author wants to have it both ways, extolling the polymorphous decades, yet wagging his finger at them; endorsing the sober ways of the post-AIDS Nineties while flouting them" (79). The poet's ambiguous attitude towards his promiscuous past in "Tony: Ending the Life" reflects Merrill's own ambivalence towards his sexuality in his memoir. What starts as an idyllic resort, Alexandria, where "the boys were talkative and fun" turns into a nightmarish boot camp towards the end of the poem.

The third and last section of the poem features the poet's breakdown as a result of his rejection of science. The section starts with a description of the moon as an old scientific woman: "like Madame Curie/Above her vats of pitchblende/Stirred dawn to dusk religiously/Out in the freezing garden shed" (61). The light which has sustained the illusion of hope and recovery throughout the second section turns out to be fake. The poet is led to a Holocaust-like boot camp where he recognizes the false hope given by the false light of scientific supremacy:

> It is a boot camp large and stark
> To which you will be going.
> Wave upon wave of you. The halls are crowded,
> Unlit, the ceiling fixtures shrouded.
> Advancing through the crush, the matriarch

Holds something up, mysteriously glowing. (61)

This passage connects to the third section of "Novelettes" in which the poet was chosen and led with others onto the stage. At this point, there was hope of being saved from the virus:

...I'm lost
Beneath the surface, among these milkily glinting
Minors, these time-colored motes, precipitate
Of music from which I must be saved. I hear him
Piping, trying to reach me. And wake unafraid. He will. (42)

Towards the end of "Tony: Ending the Life," however, this optimism is gone. What the light ultimately reveals is not hope or victory, but the fatal reality:

Light that confutes the noonday blaze.
A cool uncanny blue streams from her vial,
Bathing the disappearers
Who asked no better than to gaze and gaze...
Too soon your own turn came. Denial
No longer fogged the mirrors.

You stumbled forth into the glare--
Blood-red ribbon where you'd struck your face. (62)

AIDS has clearly won against science. Unprepared for this reality, the poet attempts suicide (he does not want to die "everybody's death") by mixing pills with ouzo. From then on, the poems reflect the bitterness and cynicism of a man

who is having a hard time accepting his own mortality.

With "body" closing the second section of A Scattering of Salts, the poem reaches, so to speak, the other shoulder blade--the one opposite to the one represented in the first poem of the section, "The Instilling." What lies in between these two poems is the dreamless gulf of the AIDS body. In fact, Merrill uses the letters of the word "body" in a way that reflects the structure of the whole section:

> Look closely at the letters. Can you see,
> entering (stage right), then floating full,
> then heading off--so soon--
> how like a little kohl-rimmed moon
> o plots her course from b to d
>
> --as y, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?
> Looked at too long, words fail,
> phase out. Ask, now that body shines
> no longer, by what light you learn these lines
> and what the b and d stood for. (64)

The letters of the word "body" are rearranged to fit a performative context in which the AIDS body is presented as a spectacle. While the letters "b" and "d" stand, I would suggest, for the poet's shoulder blades which can in turn be perceived as the boundaries of a performative venue, the letters "o" and "y" stand respectively for the dreamless gulf (the poet's disease which occupies center stage) and the inability to understand "why" this is the case. Just as

words looked at too long phase out, so does the AIDS body--constantly gazed at by the general public, it becomes meaningless, déjà vu. The "phasing out" of the AIDS body is marked by the turning off of the spotlights that were turned on in "The Instilling." Thus, the end of the AIDS body as spectacle coincides with its upcoming death. After having exposed his body to the scrutiny of the general public in the second section, the poet covers it from head to toe in the last section of the collection.

The last section of A Scattering of Salts is the most realistic because there is no longer any hope of a possible recovery. This section illustrates quite literally the poet's "terminal" phase--a phase that leaves him bitter and cynical. The poet deals with his "terminal" phase in "Cosmo" and "Family Week at Oracle Ranch," two poems that explore the impact of his upcoming death on his family--his lover, his mother, his dog...--and more specifically on the relationship he has with his lover, and his fear of dying without his lover beside him. This fear appears to be justified because in the last long poem of the collection, "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek (TM) Windbreaker," the poet reveals his total isolation before announcing his departure from the world.

What contributes to the poet's isolation is that he insulates himself from the rest of the world by wearing his DuPont windbreaker. In an AIDS context, this insulation

could be seen as a protection from viruses that could destroy the patient's fragile immune system. When the poet wears his windbreaker, he seems to have an extra layer of skin:

> The windbreaker is white with a world map.
> DuPont contributed the seeming-frail,
> Unrippable stuff first used for Priority Mail.
> Weightless as shores reflected in deep water,
> The countries are violet, orange, yellow, green;
> Names of the principal towns and rivers, black.
> A zipper's hiss, and the Atlantic Ocean closes
> Over my blood-red T-shirt from the Gap. (91)

The poet, who carries literally the world on his shoulders, is also at the same time buried underneath it. This ambivalence could reflect the poet's attitude towards the social turn of his last collections. What started as an increasing interest in social issues in Late Settings and The Inner Room, in which he could not remain obsessed with personal themes from the past in an AIDS context, becomes in A Scattering of Salts--where the personal and the social converge through the poet's AIDS body--too much of a burden. In any case, the poet seems to admit the uselessness of his concern for the state of nature and the world because, anyway, people do not care:

> Like first-graders we "love" our mother Earth,
> Know she's been sick, and mean to care for her

When we grow up. Seeing my windbreaker,

People hail me with nostalgic awe. (93)

This passage could also be read as the passive reaction of the "general public" to a virus that is destroying his gay community. A "general public" which also applauds in the name of Human Rights "Gay Studies," but at the same time does not feel concerned for gay bashing or the murders of gay men:

Some social highlights: Dead white males in malls.
Prayer breakfasts. Pay-phone sex. "Ring up as meat."
Oprah. The GNP. The contour sheet.
The painless death of history. The stick
Figures on Capitol Hill. Their rhetoric,
Gladly--no, rapturously (on Prozac) suffered!
Gay studies. Right to Lifers. The laugh track.

And clothes. (93)

The poet's obsession with clothes and fabric in The Inner Room is once again brought up in "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek (TM) Windbreaker." Like his windbreaker, the poet's other apparel betrays the ambivalence of his attitude towards society.

What the poet wears when he goes to the gym reflects a man who is both the same and different from everybody else:

Sweat-panted and Reeboked, I wear it to the gym [his DuPont windbreaker]

My terry-cloth headband is green as laurel.

A yellow plastic Walkman

Sends shiny yellow tendrils to either ear. (91)

While his running-shoes, windbreaker, and walkman link the poet to the masses, his headband is no common green. It is the green of poetic excellence ("laurel"). Thus, the description of his "everyman" look is undermined by the emphasis on details which elevate him above the crowd. In fact, the poet is not thrilled to be recognized as an "everyman": "Everyman, c'est moi, the whole world's pal!/The pity is how soon such feelings sour" (93). What seems to motivate the poet to wear "regular" clothes is his halfhearted belief that "While all humans aren't/Countable as equals, we must behave/As if they were, or the spirit dies (Pascal)" (93). This quote sums up perfectly the motivation behind Merrill's social turn in Late Settings and The Inner Room and might provide an explanation for his failure to maintain this social interest in A Scattering of Salts.

The poet's windbreaker goes through a change in "Self-Portrait in a Tyvek (TM) Windbreaker." While it starts as white with a world map in the first stanza, it becomes "black, with starry longitudes" in the last stanza. This change brings up obliquely the temporary nature of the poet's social interest in Late Settings and The Inner Room--an interest seemingly undertaken out of a sense of duty to

dying friends. I see the white windbreaker with a world map as representing the poet's attempt to be "the whole world's pal" in the last decade of his life and his black windbreaker with starry longitudes as a bitter refutation of this attempt. The black windbreaker clothes "an earphoned archangel of Space,/Who hasn't read Pascal, and doesn't wave" (95). The equality that he feigned belief in during his lifetime gives way when he dies to a hierarchical structure headed by himself. By emphasizing that he is not just a common angel but an archangel, the poet seems to suggest that he is going to lead, in the after life, the angels mentioned in The Inner Room: Paul and David Kalstone. This claim for superiority should not be seen exclusively as an excessive dose of vanity, for it might also represent the poet's attempt to make up for the lack of control over his life by anticipating a world that he would transcend easily. As an archangel has no specific gender, the poet's blending of drag and mourning manifests itself once again for the last time.

Afterword

Even though Merrill's last moments are described in a cynical way, his testimony to poetic art betrays some kind of hopeful belief that his works could influence and guide future poets. His return to the angelic and spiritual world of The Changing Light at Sandover--a world introduced to the poet by his muse, Auden--marks in The Inner Room and A Scattering of Salts the poet's claim to be a muse of his own. The emphasis on the immortality of Art as a way to compensate for the deterioration of the AIDS body throughout A Scattering of Salts seems to confirm the poet's aspiration to become an artistic monument rather than a provocateur, an instigator of social change. However, the fact that Merrill charts the effect of AIDS on both poetry and the poet makes his poetry a form of social engagement, whether he wants to acknowledge this engagement or not. Despite his explicit rejection of society, in other words, Merrill nevertheless participates in a social history precisely because the subject of AIDS and the AIDS body cannot ultimately be separated from the social.

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