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Johanna Hoorenman

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JOHANNA HOORENMAN

"The central hollowness": James Merrill and the Annihilation of the Self

> The central hollowness is that pure winter
> That does not change but is
> Always brilliant ice and air.
>
> —James Merrill, "The Black Swan"

James Merrill's strange—and at times inaccessible—trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* is very different in conception from his lyrical poetry. Merrill displays a distinct concern with appearances and aesthetics in his lyrical poetry, whereas the *Sandover* trilogy is much more political and spiritual in nature, focusing on content—largely transcribed from Ouija board sessions—over form. Merrill repeatedly expresses discomfort with his own predilection for form over content in poems that feature key themes of appearances, impressions, metaphor, and poetic form. This concern with the question of form versus content appears in "The Black Swan," "Transfigured Bird," "The Octopus," and "To a Butterfly." The conflict between form and content is only partly resolved in these poems, however, through an evocation of the sublime as a poetic gesture to that which cannot be expressed.

This function of the sublime is most clearly explained by Mary Arensberg in her introduction to *The American Sublime*. Here, Arensberg identifies the search for the sublime as "a way of knowing beyond the human threshold." "*Limen*," she points out, "boundary or threshold from the Latin, is both the etymological and philosophical root of the sublime. Poems get written, then, because that threshold has never been crossed or articulated; for to transgress that boundary, to speak with the tongue of a god would be to achieve the sublime *and*

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also silence" (Arensberg 1, emphasis added). It is no coincidence that the poems mentioned above all take animals as their subject matter. Though Merrill is not overtly an "animal poet" or "nature poet," he repeatedly employs animals as emblems for the enigmatic or unknowable. Such animal emblems offer "a way of knowing beyond the human threshold," emphasizing the role of the sublime in expressing (or functioning as a metaphor for) the unknowable. These poems also depict the sublime in the Kantian sense of the fear of the annihilation of the self. It is this Kantian sublime that reappears in the *Sandover* trilogy, most notably in the form of the nuclear sublime and the existence of black matter in the books *Mirabell* and *Scripts for the Pageant*. Although Merrill has created an epic of supernatural proportions in *Sandover* that seems to stand in contrast to his lyrical poetry, the poems themselves use very similar imagery to express allied concerns about the annihilation of the ego—concerns that underlie both his aesthetic lyrical poetry and his more politically oriented epic.

Merrill's work has been often criticized as aesthetic, trivial and empty, lacking feeling or emotional weight. James Dickey, for instance, described Merrill as the most accomplished of "the elegants": "poets who have done everything perfectly according to quite acceptable standards, and have just as surely stopped short of real significance, real engagement," writing poems that "drive you mad over the needless artificiality, prim finickiness, and determined inconsequence of it all" (97). This charge of artificiality may be partly ascribed to Merrill's enthusiasm for form at a time in which other poets were veering towards free verse, experimentation and more explicit or so-called "confessional modes" of writing. Helen Vendler describes Merrill's language as "full of arabesques, fancifulness, play of wit, and oblique metaphor" ("Divine Comedies" 134). Indeed, wordplay and metaphor are crucial elements of Merrill's poetry, largely due to his self-confessed propensity for "seeing double": seeing and speaking of things in other terms, perceiving the world in multi-faceted ways, and demonstrating a keen awareness of the limitations of observing and representing reality. A poetic Impressionist, Merrill demonstrates far more faith in the relevance of the appearance of an object—the impression that it makes on a subjective mind—than on any supposed Truth behind the observation. Poems such as "The Cosmological Eye" and "The Green Eye" address impressionism directly, as does the much-quoted stanza from "To A Butterfly":

> Goodness, how tired one grows
> Just looking through a prism:
> Allegory, symbolism.
> I've tried, Lord knows,
> To keep from seeing double
> (*CP* 161)

This "seeing double" may allude to Merrill's "uncanny" alertness to "reversals and doublings" observed by Stephen Yenser in the introduction to his study (Yenser 4). Merrill's attention to appearances and "seeing" evokes another kind of "double": the opposition of Beauty and Truth; Helen Vendler notes Merrill's devotion to the absolute of Beauty rather than of Truth ("Divine Comedies" 140). Such devotion to Beauty is understandable from a mind that seriously doubts and often even fears Truth. Merrill's poem "Transfigured Bird" illuminates this dynamic between fear of Truth and devotion to Beauty.

"Transfigured Bird" comprises what Moffett describes as "a set of four variations on a theme designated by yolks or birds in delicate eggshells—a much more communicative metaphor for what appearances conceal" (25). The egg metaphors in "Transfigured Bird" are "much more communicative" than the purposefully convoluted figurations in the other bird poems in the collection: "The Black Swan," "The Parrot," "The Pelican," and "The Peacock." While "Transfigured Bird" is written in a highly regular *terza rima*, its formal structure does not dominate the poem as much as form dominates the preceding poems in the volume. The first section opens with the image of a young boy finding the empty shell of a bird's egg:

> That day the eggshell of appearance split
> And weak of its own translucence lay in the dew
> A child fond of natural things discovered it.
> (*CP* 33)

The delicate, translucent beauty of the shell, "very blue" on the outside and "pearly within," makes it an excellent addition to the boy's collection of natural treasures, kept carefully "lest / The world be part forgotten if part unseen." The child is full of innocent wonder in his admiration of the small beauties of his natural environment.

This youthful innocence is lost when, in section four, the child chances on another potential treasure only to find that this egg is not

empty but, having fallen out of the nest, it contains a little dead bird.[1] A sharp distinction is made between the eggs that the child "blow[s] clean" with "a pin and a puff," the "spread" moths and the "once green" bullfrog, and this traumatic encounter with a death that seems infinitely more sinister and haunting to the child. These two discoveries—each featuring a "child fond of natural things" and a blue egg—mirror each other, forming a frame for the two inner sections of the poem. In these, section two obliquely explores the metaphorical relationship between the transformation of a fertile yolk into a living bird and the Transfiguration of Christ, as the speaker relates:

> As one who watches two days in some hope
> A fertile yolk, until there throbs at last
> The point of blood beneath his microscope
>
> Then rises rinsed with the thought of what has passed,
> I watched the big yolk of remembrance swallowed
> By the throbbing legend there, that broke its fast,
>
> Grew into shape, now to be hatched and hallowed
> Whether a bugling bird or cockatrice;
> And when the wild wings rose, on foot I followed
>
> And much was legend long days after this.
> I mean that much was read and read aright.
> Where the bird went gold plumes fell, which were his.
> (*CP* 33–34)

The image of the pulsing egg echoes a passage from *A Different Person*, in which Merrill relates being educated by his friend and love interest Hans Lodeizen: "In the biology lab he showed me the scarlet pulse of a fertilized egg" (497). This experience was clearly meaningful and memorable, as the images of yolks, eggs, shells and birds appear frequently in Merrill's poems. The transformation of yolk into bird, of remembrance into legend, echoes the Transfiguration of Christ from an ordinary man into the Son of God.[2] The scene as described in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke takes place on a mountain where Jesus has gone to pray, accompanied by Peter, James and John. These accompanying disciples suddenly see Jesus bathed in a strong white light, witness the

appearance of Elijah and Moses, and hear the voice of God from a cloud declare "This is my son, whom I love, listen to him."

The image of the Transfiguration of Christ, suggested by the poem's title, "Transfigured Bird," invokes the moment in which an ordinary event is transformed into a legend. The central metaphor of "Transfigured Bird," as in the other bird poems, contains many layers that interact in the suggestion of meaning. The egg yolk turning into a bird is compared to the transformation of event into narrative, "remembrance" into "legend." The bird may turn out to be either "a bugling bird or cockatrice," suggesting that the outcome of the transformation may be either a prophet or a dangerous, mythical creature. This myth reverberates in Merrill's continued play on eggs, yolks, (in)fertility and empty shells throughout the poem. Merrill's reference to the "gold plumes" that fell "where the bird went" also carries echoes of the mythical phoenix, and foreshadows the "yellow bird" and the gold Fabergé egg of the third section of the poem.

This theme of the Transfiguration of Christ, and more generally of transformation of memory into legend, speaks to Merrill's fascination with the capacities of art to transform experience and memory into poetry. The mediation of the artistic form transfigures experience in a way that Merrill's poetry closely associates with allegories of Christ. In "Transfigured Bird," the poem transforms both pleasant and disturbing childhood experiences—such as the discovery of the beautiful empty shell, and the subsequent sight of the haunting broken egg holding a dead bird—into a cohesive work of art on the theme of eggs and yolks, birds and shells, emptiness and substance.

The third section of the poem engages in similar play of memory, metaphor and allegory in a scene depicting a young woman, Philippa, in her room at night, in which she combs her hair, dreams about the characters from Aesop's fables and nursery rhymes ("Reynard, Cock Robin, Bruin and Chanticleer"), demonstrates her marvelous collection of Fabergé eggs, and listens to birdsong outside her window. The speaker of the poem, describing this scene to the reader, first listens to the birdsong while the girl sleeps, then comes to inhabit the bird singing, then transforms into the boy who blows a bird's egg clean, puffing away the entire scene as if it were a miniature from a Fabergé egg.[3] The final stanza of the section shows the empty egg in all its sterile glory, "void of all but pearl-on-pearl / Reflections and

their gay meanderings," ending with an image of the shattered shell's whirling fragments.

The destruction of the Philippa scene, blown away as egg-yolk and shattered as a shell, suggests the boredom of a spoiled child who, having played so indulgently at his narrative, tires of the game and throws away the toys. Timothy Materer observes that

> "Transfigured Bird" suggests that the discovery of death in the aborted egg is also the necessary condition of the persona's artistic power. [. . .] *First Poems* belongs to what Merrill once referred to as his "aesthetic" phase. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Merrill's persona wants to believe that the artist can control the world's horrors through artifice. Yet "Transfigured Bird" ends with a vision of an aborted rather than a transfigured bird, and its tone already darkens in section three. (22–23)

Although the theme of transfiguration in the poem points to the transformative powers of art as redemption for sad or painful life experiences, such transfiguration operates on multiple levels in the poem, not all of them so uplifting.

In this third section of the poem, change seems to be everywhere. There is an air of uncertainty about these changes that might momentarily be controlled by the collection of natural treasures, but is ultimately inescapable. This section already contains an element of dread when, as the God of this little universe, the little boy blows "the thing within":

> Away, before it waste, or hatching fly
> Out of his reach in noisy solitude
> Or kill him with the oracle in its eye;
> (*CP* 35)

The phrase "the thing within" carries eerie undertones of the unknown, as its indistinctness starkly contrasts the detailed and dreamlike scene just portrayed; the stanza following (quoted above) seems to suggest a threat of either abandonment or rejection. This potential threat in the contents of the egg also echoes the myth of the monstrous cockatrice, hatched from a misshapen, yolkless egg, mentioned in section two. The barrenness of the emptied egg with its pearl-on-pearl sheen prepares the

reader for the final section, in which the child's curiosity for small natural wonders brings him the tainted treasure of the "cold shell" with "the claw of the dead bird, clutching air" sticking out. The poem seems to suggest that live, fertile yolks and eggs contain the possibility of abandonment or rejection that comes from changeability; the child learns to prefer clean and barren objects with their translucent sheen, void of such potential disappointments. In this poem's four sections—each a variation on the motifs of birds, eggs, yolks and shells—the text moves through the realm of metaphorical and allegorical possibility as through a labyrinth, evoking a reflection on life and death, memory and narrative, innocence and experience that both considers and exerts the transforming powers of poetry.

The child's habit of blowing the eggs clean, his preference for pearly, empty shells and the connection that is made to the meanderings of the intellectual or spiritual life also suggest Merrill's later poetic engagements with the topic of childlessness in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. This is specifically evident in *Mirabell: Books of Number,* in which JM and DJ's spirit guide Mirabell tells them to

> KEEP IN MIND THE CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE THIS TURNS US
> OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES

This remark appears merely a few lines after Mirabell makes an offhand reference to the little dead bird's claw and the "CHILL BLUE SHELL" from "Transfigured Bird" (*Sandover* 216).[4] Mirabell makes this remark as part of a claim that homosexual love is a development "encouraging mind values" such as "poetry & music," rather than celebrating the body. Although Mirabell is taken to task for these views in the poem, Vendler observes that "the claim, however whimsical, has been made, and the whole of Merrill's trilogy can be seen as a substitution of the virtues of mind and heart—culminating in music and poetry—for the civic and familial and martial virtues usually espoused by the epic" ("James Merrill" 85). This opposition of emptiness and chaos—of the clean void versus the fertile possibility of death, and of mind versus body—creates the central tension of Merrill's dialectic. This image of the void resurfaces in various guises throughout Merrill's oeuvre, in each instance remaining a source for excitement and dread, a place of a Truth so unattainable as to contain a serious threat to the self. This

Truth, always given the shape of the sublime, is first sensed in the early masterpiece “The Black Swan,” and seen again in “Periwinkles” and “The Octopus.”

A meditation on time and aging, “Periwinkles” focuses on the “archaic periwinkle” as an emblem of the passing of time. Set at the seashore, the poem invokes an image of bright light among the rocks at low tide, when “everything around you sparkles, or / is made to when you think of what went before.” This sparkling comes not only from the reflection of bright sunlight on the water of the sea, but also, the poet argues:

> Much of this blaze, that’s mental, seems to come
> From a pool among the creviced rocks, a slum
> For the archaic periwinkle. Some
>
> Are twisting, some are sleeping there, and all
> (For sun is pulse, and shade historical)
> Cling in blotched spirals to the shadiest wall.
> (*CP* 48)

The contrast between the brightness of the sun and the darkness of the slum-like crevices not only heightens the sense of vision affected by bright sunlight and its reflections, but also accentuates the distinction between the “blotched” periwinkles and the impression they create in the speaker’s mind. Much of the image here is a consequence of the mental impression; this impression, based on a contemplation of “what went before,” endows the tiny, brownish periwinkle with an unexpected magnitude. The next stanza underlines the importance of the periwinkle with a reference to the periwinkle’s “cousins” who “shingled by the finding tide, / Purpled the cloths of kings.” The heavy internal rhyme draws attention to these lines, which align the periwinkle with the spiny dye-murex, a mollusk whose shell was used to create Tyrian purple dye, once restricted for coloring silks for use only by the Byzantine imperial court.

The periwinkle is uplifted from its shady status as it is picked up and held in the speaker’s hand. He describes its “crazy trustfulness” as it feels around, decides it is safe to turn over, and settles on the human hand. “You shiver,” the speaker tells us,

> Touched by the fecund past, a creature curled
> In a flaky cone which inside is all pearled
> With nourishment sucked out from the pulsing world
> (*CP* 48)

The "fecund past" presents the reader with a paradox; shell and inhabitant are one, but seem to represent opposite concepts, as the periwinkle becomes an emblem of aging: living towards death. Merrill's description of the "pearled" shell echoes the pearly shell in "Transfigured Bird"; here, too, a distinction is made between the shiver-inducing fertile content and its pleasing shiny enclosure. This distinction is emphasized through repetition of the word "pulse," first in parentheses "(for sun is pulse, and shade is historical)," and again in the "pulsing world." This pulse echoes the throbbing yolk of the egg in "Transfigured Bird" and the fertilized egg in *A Different Person,* presenting an image of life that is routinely problematized or contrasted against a shiny void. The poem questions which is more threatening: the perishable life within the shell, or the pulsing life outside it.

Merrill invokes the sublime through this continued mediation of the value of substance versus emptiness, life versus sterility, chaos versus constancy. These meditations on the sublime often appear in motifs of shells or eggs and their empty or living interior. Such representations of the sublime are always accompanied by an enclosure or boundary: one that separates the speaker from the Truth—rendering it unknowable and tantalizingly out of reach—and that, at the same time, functions as a safety screen from the chaos this Truth entails. In Merrill's lyrical poetry, this form of representing the sublime can be seen clearly in "Transfigured Bird," "Periwinkle," "The Octopus" and "The Black Swan." In the *Sandover* trilogy, it reveals itself in the recurring images of the threats of nuclear annihilation and black holes, the negative side of the atom, the blinding pulse of white light, and the emptiness that each of those entails. In *Sandover*, like in the lyrical poems, these representations of the sublime are accompanied by the question of what separates the void from the rest: a sheet of ice; a shining crust; a thin, thin paste; and the whole frail eggshell. The surface of the lake on which the black swan glides functions as a similar kind of demarcation, covering "the central hollowness" that contains "brilliant ice and air."

Merrill's invocation of the sublime here echoes the ideas of Edmund Burke. Burke describes the sublime as located in the impression external reality makes on the mind; as such, his theory of the sublime is very close to Merrill's theory of literary metaphor. Burke includes extensive lists and categories of objects in his essay, but emphasizes that although these objects may be a source of the sublime, the sublime itself is subjective, taking place inside rather than outside the mind. In Burke's explanation, he uses human impressions of various animals as an example:

> Let us look at another strong animal, in the two distinct lights in which we may consider him. The horse in the light of an useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft; in every social useful light, the horse has nothing sublime; but it is thus that we are affected with him, *whose neck is clothed with thunder, the glory of whose nostrils is terrible, who swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage, neither believeth that it is the sound of the trumpet?* In this description, the useful character of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and sublime blaze out together. (Burke 65–66)

The conditions of Burke's sublime are multifaceted but clear: there must be an element of great strength or power which is potentially dangerous for the observer. This power may be enhanced by obscurity (like in a "gloomy forest") or by the unfamiliar cries of angry animals (like in the "howling wilderness").[5] Most importantly, the sublime lies not in the object itself, but in the impression it makes on the mind. Burke's examination of the horse as a source of the sublime is particularly notable in this respect. The horse in itself is not sublime; it may be a plain subservient plough horse. However, once it is perceived in the context of a particularly poetic (biblical) depiction of a powerful, dangerous, terrible horse that might pose a potential threat to the observer, the horse becomes a source for the sublime (Job 39:19–24).

Merrill's "The Octopus"—a meditation on an octopus observed by a dreamy child through the glass of an aquarium tank—provides ideal circumstances for representing the sublime: a "monster" restrained by (and observed through) "a glassen surface," which moves in impenetrable ways (*CP* 58). This creature, physically translucent yet mentally

obscure, is far removed from any human likeness save that of the Hindu god Shiva (he of the four arms, associated with destruction and transformation). The octopus is clearly the object of the sublime here, described in exquisite terms of translucence, jewels and diamonds, as well with language that indicates terror and danger: “monsters,” “sinister,” “gloom,” and “wrath”; “unloose” carries undertones of ‘unleash’; and a “fragile reeling” that could not be “quell[ed]” by “a hundred blows of a boot-heel.” The sudden violence of this last phrase in the midst of the dreamy, if chilling, description of this strange creature emphasizes the looming threat that the entrancing scene might suddenly pose.

If the octopus is represented as an object of the sublime, who, then, is the subject of this experience? The experience of the sublime occurs in the mind of the spectator; here, the spectator in the poem is the “fair” child, “dreaming near the glass.” The child certainly seems entranced: seen as a “dreamer” when the poem opens, at the close proximity and movements of the octopus the child is “chilled,” then “wakes and hungers.” The child is simultaneously astonished, attracted and repelled by the octopus. The sense of the sublime that this poem expresses may easily be described in Burkean terms: the sublime of “The Octopus” features terror and (potential) pain as well as overwhelming pleasure; obscurity of vision, enhanced by the play of light-reflections of translucence, diamonds and glass; divinity, astonishment, attraction and repulsion.

Above all, however, this poem depicts ignorance of the true nature of the animal. This ignorance is not merely a result of visual obscurity but also of mental inaccessibility, as the octopus is depicted as something otherworldly. “Conventional / gestures” are made “clumsily” with arms that are “fleshlike” but not flesh; the only entity to which this animal can possibly be compared is an exotically presented Hindu god in feverish motion. “Animal” hardly seems the right word here—indeed, it is not used in the poem—the octopus is instead categorized as a “monster.” The animal presence in this poem, then, is an absence—an abyss—something for which there are no images save that of the sublime. The octopus’ external appearance may be describable, but the sublime terror comes from the unknown and unknowable force behind its volutions. This construction of the sublime is closer to Kant’s conception of that which overwhelms and threatens the self:

> The mind feels itself moved in the representation of the sublime in nature. . . . This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object. What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself. (Kant 141)

In "The Octopus," imagination is overwhelmed by its failure to comprehend, and there is no faculty of reason present in the poem to intervene. The sublime effect in this poem functions as a conceptual tool that stands in place of that for which there are no metaphors. "The Octopus" makes use of the same motifs as "Transfigured Bird" and "Periwinkles:" the unknowable Truth, the abyss of unknowability, the threat of life in the form of a living but terrifying animal, and an innocent mind fascinated by but protected from this threat by a shiny demarcation—be it the glass of the fish tank or the shiny eggshell or seashell.

One of Merrill's most famous poems, "The Black Swan," is celebrated for its formal brilliance and originality, yet it is also criticized for its purposeful obscurity; critics allege the poem's obscurity serves to mask a lack of depth. Kimon Friar provides an anecdote that reveals the conception of the poem:

> I have never before or since worked with a poet with so much excitement and profound satisfaction. I would ask Merrill, for instance, to write a poem about the swan, using the imagery of the lake, in a seven-line stanza form intermingling pentameters, tetrameters, and trimesters, using approximate rhyme. He brought me "The Black Swan." (Friar 17–18)

According to this account, "The Black Swan" was initially conceived as an exercise in pure poetic form. Describing the encounter between a blond child and a mysterious, surreal creature that invokes strong and ambivalent feelings, "The Black Swan" has much in common with "The Octopus"'s "fair" child and "sinister" octopus. The enigmatic swan—already a mythologized animal and a universal image of power, beauty, love and death—is an even stronger figure in its rare black form. Combining rarity with the darkness that Burke associates with the sublime, the black swan immediately confuses the child "with white

ideas of swans." Burke notes that "in nature, dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate," although both extreme light and darkness are similar in their effects on the eyes, momentarily obliterating vision (Burke 58). The swan, already a powerful image of pure whiteness, is here inverted into an even more evocative figure of rare and mysterious blackness. The swan's power is also enhanced by the syntax of the poem. Stephen Yenser points out that the first sentence follows the swan's movement like a shadow: "Black on flat water past the jonquil lawns / Riding, the black swan draws / A private chaos warbling in its wake" (*CP* 3). The swan is everywhere "implicit and imperious" (Yenser 36–37).

Adding to this syntactical effect, descriptions of the swan also evoke mystery and ambivalence: the swan is depicted as a question-mark on the lake" and "outlaw[ing] all possible questioning." The swan is enticing and enchanting but however alluring it may be, it remains unavailable to the child. Although drawn to the animal, the child is trapped on the shore of the lake and cannot reach the swan either physically or mentally. It is in this unavailability that the swan becomes an object of the sublime. Both physically and metaphorically, the Black Swan is a rare bird; this extraordinary creature comes to represent the secret of life itself or at least something that has "learned to enter / Sorrow's lost secret center" where "The central hollowness is that pure winter / That does not change but is / Always brilliant ice and air" (*CP* 3). The swan is thus the "tall emblem" of the frozen and unchanging center of life. This mysterious "central hollowness" seems to be a place where the laws of time and change do not apply—where nothing *is*, thus can never be lost or tainted.

At the close of the encounter, when the swan turns and glides away across the lake ("To the opposite side, always.") the child is left in emotional turmoil, "hands full of difficult marvels" (*CP* 3). Having glimpsed an answer to universal questions—or at least to an end to the questioning—the child is nevertheless confronted with only "the huge silence of the swan." The child "stays / Forever to cry aloud / In anguish: I love the black swan" and thus becomes a metaphor for the mind's desire for and inability to comprehend these elusive secrets of life, or loss, or sorrow.[6]

The sublime in "The Black Swan," like that in "The Octopus," is the sublime of the animal abyss: the confrontation between a human mind

and the animal presence that it must always fail to comprehend. Like Kant's explanation of the sublime, this sublimity revolves not around a combination of pain and pleasure or delight and terror, but around the inability of the imagination to comprehend what it sees for lack of comparison or metaphor. Though not a mathematical sublime in the sense of vastness or infinity, this animal sublime similarly functions by attraction and repulsion, frustration of the imagination, and the threat of the annihilation of the self in the face of incomprehension. Unlike Kant's sublime, however, the sublime in these poems does not offer a redeeming intervention of the faculty of reason to provide relief to the mind and assert the supersensibility of the self in its capacity for pure reason. The sublime experience in these poems remains limited to the overwhelming mix of desire and repulsion, bliss and doubt, without the relief of reason.

The sublime in Merrill's animal poems becomes simply a metaphor for that which cannot be explained or expressed. The absence of the intervention of reason in "The Black Swan" may be derived in part from Merrill's use of a child as the subject of the sublime experience. As a young person of undisclosed age, the child may simply not have the mental faculties to understand the power of pure reason. In the absence of this capacity for reason, the child's experience of the sublime is stunted. "The Octopus" shows a similar absence of intervening reason and an experience of the sublime that does not fully follow Kant's tripartite movement. With these poems, Merrill uses the perspective of a child to emphasize the overwhelming experience of the failure of the imagination. The child's perspective symbolizes a poetic self that is threatened with disintegration of the mind or annihilation of the ego by its inability to penetrate the depths of Truth; as a result, this poetic self remains hostile to the existence of Truth.

This pattern of the threat of and subsequent hostility to Truth has much in common with the image in "Transfigured Bird", where the contents of the egg is blown "clean away" by the child, "Till the egg is void of all but pearl-on-pearl / Reflections and their gay meanderings; shall, tiring, burst the shell, let the fragments whirl." This notion of a pure center, emptied of the changeability that is life recurs throughout Merrill's poetry—both lyric and epic—as something desired and coveted. The lost secret and resulting ignorance seems to be preferable to the chaotic, living Truth that is blown away.

In the *Sandover* trilogy, however, the blowing away and the void are imagined on a much grander scale; suddenly, this image becomes a threat in itself, and it is no longer the imagined "abyss" of unknowable Truth that functions as a source for the sublime. In *Sandover,* the overwhelming *size* of the abyss becomes the terrifying force. In an inversion of the central image of the lyric poems, the void in *Sandover* is an emptiness that is to be feared rather than preferred, a black hole rather than a secret. The sparkling blaze of life seen in "Periwinkles" is here a blaze of death. The inversion of this metaphor is accompanied by a keen awareness of the poet-scribe JM that, on a poetic level, metaphor itself functions as a sheet of ice covering an abyss, as an emptied egg covered by a shiny shell of appearance:

> . . . . PUT SIMPLY THE ATOM IS L SIDED
> ITS POSITIVE SIDE GOOD   ITS NEGATIVE AH WHAT TO SAY
> A DISAPPEARANCE   AN ABSOLUTE VOID   ASTRONOMERS
> HAVE AT LAST SEEN OUR BENIGHTED WORK   THE BLACK HOLES   THEY
> GROW
> You caused them, the black holes, when you—
> THERE IS AN EVIL WE RELEASD   WE DID NOT CREATE IT
> CALL IT THE VOID   CALL IT IN MAN   A WILL TO NOTHINGNESS
> Go on.
> WE SAW THE POWER & WITH IT BUILT A GREAT GREAT GLORY
> A WORLD YOU CD NOT IMAGINE   GOD WAS PLEASD   IT WAS A
> SHINING CRUST OVER THE LAND & SEA
> (*Sandover* 120–121)

This section from *Mirabell*: Book I reveals the atom as the building block not of the universe but of poetry: its positive side "GOOD" though undefined, its negative side a void: a shining crust of metaphor over the material reality of "LAND & SEA." Though the crust has the potential for glory, it also contains within its powers a "WILL TO NOTHINGNESS" ("IN MAN"). This passage from *Mirabell* can be read as an elaborate but effective metaphor for Merrill's central concerns about poetry: that metaphor is the building block of poetry as the atom is that of the world, that poetry holds the potential of great glory or beauty, but also the "evil" potential for emptiness. It is crucial in this sense that "in man," this evil is not "nothingness" per se, but "a will to nothingness." In an epic

that repeatedly invokes and questions the concept of free will, the "will to nothingness" designates the 'void' as an evil inner impulse, rather than an outside threat. *Sandover's* concern with atomic power, black holes, and the potential destruction of the earth calls to mind Merrill's famous statement from 1968 that "We all have our limits. I draw the line at politics or hippies" (*Collected Prose* 58). And Merrill's early poetry has indeed been read as detached and apolitical. In the interviews included in the Collected Prose, each interviewer at some point addresses Merrill's apparent detachment from political concerns. In the article "Against Apocalypse: Politics and James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*" Lee Zimmerman points out that Merrill's early work certainly does contain traces of political engagement but that they are only "most circuitously broached" (273) in order to avoid—in Merrill's own words—"sounding grumpy or dated" (*Collected Prose* 114). In "The Broken Home," Merrill declares himself "time's child" and "earth's," thus asserting his implication in history ("Father Time") and nature ("Mother Earth"). "The Broken Home" connects the divorce of Merrill's parents to the "divorce" of Father Time and Mother Earth, and in an interview with J.D. McClatchy, Merrill explains that this is not meant as a joke: "History in our time . . . *has* broken faith with Nature" (*Collected Prose* 112). In the interview, Merrill connects these concerns to information obtained from the spirits about "the various chemical or technological atrocities" which strike him as "truly immoral" and which he "take[s] personally" (*Collected Prose* 111). Zimmerman demonstrates that Merrill obliquely expresses a concern with the potential destruction of the earth through environmental and nuclear damage in his early poetry. Such political content is therefore not new to the *Sandover* trilogy, but was only broached in indirect ways. Zimmerman provides a compelling reading of the political concerns of the *Sandover* trilogy, but Merrill's "circuitous" approach to political engagement in his earlier work originates from a deep distrust of any particular political stance or argument. This distrust is not absent from the trilogy but merely suspended.

The first lines of the *Book of Ephraim* reveal that Merrill was working on a novel at the time, and struggled with questions of form and "mannerism":

> My downfall was "word-painting." Exquisite
> Peek-a-boo plumage, limbs aflush from sheer
> Bombast unfurling through the troposphere

. . . .
The more I struggled to be plain, the more
Mannerism hobbled me.
(*Sandover* 4)

"Hobbled" by "Mannerism" and "word-painting," Merrill shifts forms to write an epic based on communications with spirits. The voices from the "Otherworld" in *Sandover* allow Merrill to explore and express his political views without commitment. These views may or may not be his, depending on how one 'reads' the voices: as truly otherworldly beings or as expressions of JM and DJ's subconscious minds. Either way, the responsibility for these voices is never fully Merrill's: even if the voices in *Sandover* are to be ascribed to JM and DJ, such authorship is shared with David Jackson. *Sandover* also plays with authorial identity in that the name Mirabell has clear echoes of the name Merrill; Mirabell's identification as a bat may be perceived as a darker incarnation of Merrill's poetic identification with birds, as well as the origin of his surname, which can be traced back to *merle*, French for blackbird. Such allusions, though perhaps coincidental, nevertheless suggest ambiguous authorial responsibility for the ideas expressed in *Sandover*.

In his earlier lyrical writing, Merrill eschews overt political engagement but frequently returns to the tension between chaos and void, time and timelessness. These poems express both a desire for and an overwhelming fear of the chaos which threatens to annihilate his poetic sense of self; this duality of desire and fear becomes a source for the sublime. The lyrical poems' reflection on and rejection of the chaos of substance is eventually inverted in the *Sandover* trilogy, as the void comes to mean both black matter and nuclear annihilation, and substance/chaos becomes something to be cherished and protected from this terrifying void and its potential for annihilation.

This sublime opposition of the void versus substance appears again in Book 3, where Mirabell pits images of mortality and stillness, white and black against each other:

. . . . IMAGINE
A WORLD WITHOUT LIGHT   A LEWIS CARROLL WORLD THAT KEEPS PACE
WITH OURS   A WORLD WHERE WHITE IS BLACK OF STILLNESS IN THE
PLACE
OF SUCKING WINDS   MORTALITY? DESIRE? WE FIND NO TRACE

> DJ: you *find*? You sound as if you'd been there.
> JM: Where Mind is Matter, and Time Space . . .
> (*Sandover* 150)

Here DJ questions Mirabell's depiction, while JM recognizes it and complements the description of this "LEWIS CARROLL WORLD" with a fusion of Mind, Matter, Time and Space. The images in the poem become more overtly related to imagination and metaphor as the epic progresses. In *Scripts for the Pageant,* this connection is made by the voice of Gabriel:

> WHO LENT BRAIN-MATTER ITS PROVERBIAL GRAY?
> AND PRESSES NOW AGAINST THE WHITE OF MIND
> UNLIMITED   UNREPULSED LIGHT   THE BLINDING
> REVEILLE: IMAGINATION   METAPHOR
> SHATTERED BY WHITE REASON! IS THE BLACK
> HOLE A REFUGE?
> (*Sandover* 447)

The black hole here serves as refuge for the blaze of white reason and "UNREPULSED LIGHT"—note the echo of 'pulse' here—recalling the paradox of the safe interior of the periwinkle shell versus the blazing sun outside, where the fecund interior becomes a desired emptiness and the chaotic exterior a fearful pulse.

Merrill's poetry offers alternating answers to his recurring question of what is to be desired and what is to be feared: Is the interior filled with substance that is to be feared and blown clean, or is the void left behind even more threatening? Is the external a "mental blaze" from which one wants to be shielded? Is metaphor always the shield the mind uses to protect itself from the abyss of unknowability? And on which side of the metaphor—emptiness or content, mind or matter, appearance or substance—should one choose to reside? Zimmerman's analysis emphasizes the circularity in the trilogy, and contends that Merrill's interdependent web of dark and light forces of man, of the imagination, of creation and destruction is perhaps the work's most political statement of all, as it undermines the dangerous opposition between Self and Other which allows for such events as the arms race (381–382). Neither the lyrical poems nor the epic work resolves these questions, which continue to be asked:

THUS MAKING SOURCES OF 1) NATURAL POWER
& 2) UNNATURAL. POWER TO SUCK THE EARTH
EGG TO AN O But Matter *holds*. ITS BIRTH,
RESISTANCE DON'T FORGET THAT FIRST THIN THIN
PASTE The Greenhouse from the start had been
An act of resistance? JIMMY YES A PLUS!
OR DISOBEDIENCE GOD AS PROMETHEUS?
NOW THAT MAN TAPS THIS 2ND POWER, ONE WELL
TOO MANY & PUFF! Puff? THE WHOLE FRAIL EGGSHELL
SIMPLY IMPLODING AS THE MONITOR'S
BLACK FILLS THE VACUUM MOTHER N ABHORS.

It all fits. But the ins and outs deplete us.
(*Sandover* 453)

The recurrence of the motif of the puffed-empty eggshell evokes essential elements of Merrill's poetics: the importance of metaphor to interpret reality; the preference for appearance over content; the fear that this elusive content might be emptiness; the fear of the void or the abyss; and the relation of these fears to less poetic and more political realities of nuclear annihilation. All these elements relate to the sublime, which, for Kant, lies in the encounter between the self and that which has the capacity to annihilate it completely.

In Merrill's early work, the sublime takes the shape of the poetic substance, while he seemed unwilling or unable to commit to social engagement in his aesthetic, formal work. In Merrill's later work, as the post-WWII world takes shape, his sublime takes on new, more overtly political forms in the shape of nuclear threat, black holes, atomic power and antimatter, and the white sparkling cloud of annihilation.

Utrecht University.

NOTES

1. Moffett points out that "this robin's egg-anecdote occurs in Frederick Buechner's autobiographical novel of childhood, *The Season's Difference*, dedicated to Merrill as *First Poems* is dedicated to Buechner. The two had been friends at Lawrenceville School, and Merrill appears in Buechner's novel as a fat boy named Rufus, who tells of finding the awful egg" (25–26).

2. As recounted in the three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36).

3. Moffett, among other critics, notes that the rooster may be modeled on the bird "of hammered gold and gold enamelling / To keep a drowsy Emperor awake; / Or set upon a golden bough to sing," from Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," which Merrill had been reading while in the army (26).

4. Helen Vendler's essay on *Mirabell* provides a valuable discussion of issues of childlessness and homosexuality in *Mirabell*. In *Familiar Spirits*, Alison Lurie also comments on a connection between Merrill and Jackson's childlessness and their joint Ouija-board project.

5. See also Burke, "Obscurity" 58–59, and "The Cries of Animals" 84–85.

6. In a revised edition of this poem in *Selected Poems, 1946—1985* the swan does not outlaw "all possible questioning" but merely "all easy questioning", and instead of "a thing in itself, like love, like submarine / Disaster" it is described as "A thing in itself, equivocal, foreknown, / Like pain." These revised lines suggest a tone that is less dramatic (pain for disaster, for instance) but indicative of smaller, more subtle ambivalences. Similarly, the closing lines of the poem change from "The child upon / The bank . . . stays / Forever to cry aloud / In anguish: I love the black swan" to "The blond child on / The bank . . . stays / Now in bliss, now in doubt. / His lips move: I love the black swan" (3). Here, too, the combination of bliss and doubt remain similarly indicative of the sublime experience to the combination of anguish and love.

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