

CANON

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
Chapter	
1. JAMES MERRILL'S QUEER MUSE	1
Works Cited.....	33
2. CANON	35
VITA.....	103

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ABSTRACT

The Critical Introduction, titled “James Merrill’s Queer Muse,” uses Queer Theory to analyze Merrill’s creative process when writing *The Changing Light at Sandover*. It argues that Merrill queers the heteronormative orientation of the eroticized relationship between poet and muse. This heteronormative dynamic is exemplified by the twentieth-century’s most famous poet to draw on occult inspiration, W.B. Yeats. Merrill is both explicit and implicit in rejecting Yeats’ assertive, decidedly masculine approach to his presumed female muse, emphasizing the poet’s passivity toward and equality with the muse in the creative process.

The second part is a collection of poems titled “Canon.” Each of the collection’s sixty-six poems is written in conversation with a book of the Protestant Bible, and each poem uses only the words found in its corresponding book.

JAMES MERRILL'S QUEER MUSE

I. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century saw a number of celebrated poets turn to popular spiritualism for creative inspiration, a trend that continues into the present. Elizabeth Anderson describes H.D.'s use of spiritualist practices as foundational to her "visionary Hermeticism," which drew on "strange psychic phenomena" that H.D. described as "jellyfish experiences," "a state of transcendental imagination," and "writing on the wall," among other phrases (Anderson 2-3). Timothy Materer has written on the occult as "source and symptom" of the work of Sylvia Plath, and a number of scholars have followed in tracking the influence of the occult over Plath's work (*Modernist Alchemy*). Helen Sword's *Ghostwriting Modernism* (2002) examines the influence of spiritualism on the work of writers as varied as Rainer Maria Rilke, T.S. Eliot, Robert Duncan, and Ted Hughes. She argues that:

Like modernist literature, popular spiritualism sought to embrace both authority and iconoclasm, both tradition and innovation, both continuity and fragmentation, both the elitist mystique of high culture and the messy vitality of popular culture. In particular, the figure of the spirit medium—with her multiple perspectives, fragmented discourse, and simultaneous claims of authority and passivity—offered a fertile model for the kinds of cultural and linguistic subversions that many authors were seeking to accomplish through their own poetics (x).

While these writers had different ideas about the nature of spiritualism and its relationship to literature, they all engaged in spiritualist practices with the explicit intention of gathering new material for their creative work. Interestingly, with two

notable exceptions, none of these writers explicitly call attention to their spiritualist techniques, concealing their creative machinery from the final text. The exceptions, W.B. Yeats and James Merrill, are the focus of my study. After examining how Yeats used popular spiritualism to gather material and then incorporate that material into his occult text *A Vision*, I will contrast his approach with Merrill's when writing his Ouija-board-inspired trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Against the backdrop of a critical tradition that has often framed poetic inspiration in erotic terms, the purpose of this study is to explore what might be called Merrill's erotics of influence.

Yeats is perhaps the most famous figure to incorporate occult messages into his writing. While his poems from the 1920s onward are clearly inflected with the discoveries of his divinatory sessions, none of them mention the sessions explicitly. However, in 1925 Yeats published *A Vision*, an occult document proposing a theory of history involving gyres, phases of the moon, and other elaborate, if not entirely coherent, metaphysical systems communicated to Yeats through divinatory sessions with his wife George serving as medium. In *A Vision*, Yeats doesn't conceal the machinery of its divination, preferring instead to explain in the introduction (which did not appear in the initial edition) the mysterious process by which the book came to be. For this reason Yeats became a model for later poets who sought to incorporate divinatory material into their work, regardless of whether or not they welcomed his lead.

When Frederick Buechner gave the young James Merrill his first Ouija board in 1953, neither of them could have known that Merrill would use the kitschy parlor game as the generative source of his greatest work, one of the most ambitious endeavors in twentieth-century poetry: the 560-page epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover*

(1982, henceforth referred to as “Sandover”) (Hammer 169). Like Yeats, Merrill chooses not to conceal his divinatory method; however, unlike Yeats, Merrill places that method at the center of the work. While Yeats used divinatory techniques to acquire knowledge with which he aimed to build a metaphysical system, Merrill’s poem is fundamentally concerned with the process of divination itself as both a generative source of and metaphor for poetry, and any metaphysics that might arise from that divination are almost incidental to the poem’s central drama of its own transmission. According to Sword, “Spiritualism is not the same as occultism, with which it is often confused; whereas the latter promises ancient, esoteric knowledge to a select group of initiates, the former is accessible to anyone who can construct a homemade Ouija board or hire a storefront medium” (xi). It is here that the fundamental distinction between the aims of *A Vision* and *Sandover* most clearly comes into focus: while the former is an occult text primarily concerned with the transmission of knowledge, the latter is an epic poem that simultaneously performs and apologizes for the traits that make it epic, the most obvious of which is its descent into increasingly audacious, camp spiritualism. Furthermore, as *Sandover*’s approach to divination privileges performance over content, it queers the defining elitism of apocalyptic literature, a genre in which both Yeats’s and Merrill’s works participate (see *James Merrill’s Apocalypse*; Hammer 595-6). While *A Vision* locates its privilege in the content of its knowledge, the quality of its mediums, and the occult tradition itself, *Sandover*’s “elitism is a matter of style more than of doctrine,” according to Hammer. It is “the compensatory elitism of the poet and the cultured intellectual in a society which values neither one very highly. It’s also the snobbery of a

gay man trying to convert a style of life commonly seen as sinful, self-centered, or simply alien, into a sign of his spiritual superiority” (Hammer 596).

Sandover's obsession with the process of its making is an extended meditation on the nature of poetic inspiration. Hammer writes:

The writing machine that was the Ouija board had revived for Merrill the archaic ceremony of inspiration ... Like the unidentified authority who spoke in a dream to Caedmon ... the powers commanded JM to sing of creation ... He grasps language in a primitive state, raising song from a potential prior to words. He is both passive and active, taking letters down as dictation and taking them up as raw material to be fashioned. As he does, he collaborates not only with David Jackson, but with faceless forces “beyond the alphabet” or deep within language itself, “between the letters” (572).

Critics have long sought to understand the mysterious relationship between poets and their sources of inspiration. What makes this task so difficult is the fact that the origins of inspiration are generally concealed within a given poem. Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) makes an implicit distinction between inspiration and influence, acknowledging the centrality of the former in pursuit of a critical theory to measure the latter. While inspiration is the initial, mysterious encounter between poet and raw subject matter (traditionally associated with the Muse), influence is a set of aesthetic criteria the poet has adopted (consciously or not) from other poets and with which they shape that raw material into poetry. Bloom's paradigm, however potentially useful in determining the elements of influence in a poem, is incapable of offering a window into raw inspiration, because that inspiration has been shaped so thoroughly by the design of the

poet in the process of writing the poem. Put differently: in Bloom's formulation, a poem's influence obscures its inspiration. Divinatory texts like *A Vision* and *Sandover*, however, are unique in that they offer access (or at least the illusion of access) to their original sources of inspiration, thereby granting the critic a uniquely intimate view of the poet's process. By examining Merrill's approach to divination against the backdrops of the traditions of lyric poetry and popular spiritualism, I hope to demonstrate that *Sandover* presents an erotics of inspiration that queers the heteronormative assumptions of these traditions. Queer inspiration in *Sandover* is centered on childlessness, simultaneously active and passive, thoroughly ambivalent, campy, collaborative, and non-monogamous. All of these characteristics are worthy of consideration, but I will only explore the first two in this article. I will begin by examining the erotic connotations of both lyric poetry and popular spiritualism, where the receptive capacity of the poet/medium has been traditionally understood as empty, weak, and "feminine," and therefore implicitly subordinate to the "masculine," assertive response to said divination. I will examine the gendered dynamics of the Yeats's divinatory process and then contrast it with the approach of Merrill and his partner and collaborator David Jackson.

II. THE EROTICS OF INSPIRATION

Bloom describes "Poetic Influence" as dialectic.

The poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*. The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of *being found by* poems—great poems—*outside* him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever (26).

For Bloom, the anxiety of influence is the result of competing forces within the poet: on the one hand, the primal creative energy that exists before the composition of the poem; and on the other, the historical-linguistic context in which the poet must contend with previous poets' responses to that shared primal source. Bloom's dialectic can thus be understood as the tension between "inspiration" and "influence." He writes, "As first used, to be influenced meant to receive an ethereal fluid flowing in upon one from the stars, a fluid that affected one's character and destiny, and that altered all sublunary things. A power—divine and moral—later simply a secret power—exercised itself, in defiance of all that had seemed voluntary in one" (26-7). This "ethereal fluid flowing in upon one from the stars" can be understood as classical inspiration, a concept that has been challenged by modern skepticism. This leads Bloom to state: "Poetic Influence is thus a disease of self-consciousness" (29). The modern poet finds themselves in relationship to both the muse and to other poets.

According to Sarah Parker, the relationship between poet and muse has been eroticized along heteronormative lines, placing a unique burden on queer lyric poets. She writes, "The traditional female muse, invoked in male-authored poetry throughout centuries of Western literature, has a long, complex history" (7). In her monograph *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889-1930* (2013), Parker provides a brief overview of that history beginning with Hesiod's *Theogony* and extending to modern psychoanalysis (7-20). She argues that "as ancient Greek mythology shifted first into Roman and then Christian culture, the concept of a divine, inspiring feminine power lived on, but became corporealized and connected to an actual, living woman. In courtly tradition, the 'divine' and 'erotic' aspects of the female muse are collapsed together; the muse becomes an

unattainable mistress whom the poet worships” (8). The focus of Parker’s study is on the unique challenges faced by queer women poets in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries as they sought to navigate the gendered politics that imbue the tradition of lyric poetry. After briefly acknowledging the challenges genre theorists have faced when attempting to define lyric poetry, Parker writes:

However we define it, lyric is ‘fundamentally concerned with the conditions and nature of address.’ The muse/poet dynamic therefore plays a crucial shaping role in the genre of lyric poetry, since lyric poetry relies on the speaking ‘I’ and a receptive ‘you’. This ‘you’ has been consistently gendered feminine throughout literary tradition ... Therefore, even when the ‘I’ and ‘you’ of lyric are not explicitly *assigned* genders, the act of establishing identity through speaking to, or for, another has gendered associations—associations that originate from the literary convention of the muse (4).

Parker’s study explores how, for the poets about whom she writes, “living, contemporary muse figures both depart from and work alongside ... historical muse figures” (25). Her aim is to “trace an alternative ‘tradition’ of the muse” (25). Parker persuasively demonstrates how a number of queer women poets reconfigured the heteronormative orientation of classical inspiration so as to occupy the traditionally “masculine” position of poet, the result of which is a transformation of these gendered designations.

During the late-nineteenth century, popular spiritualism had its own gendered distinctions that simultaneously reflected and challenged the dominant gender norms of the Victorian era (Owen 1-17). R. Laurence Moore’s “The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America” details the rise of spiritualism in the

United States as a viable profession for women who were otherwise excluded from the workforce, as well as the social implications of this professionalization (200-21). He writes “The females who took advantage of [career opportunities as mediums] did nothing to discourage the notion that successful mediumship grew from the cultivation of specific traits that in the nineteenth century defined femininity” (202). He goes on to describe these traits:

Mediums were weak in the masculine qualities of will and reason and strong in the female qualities of intuition and nervousness. They were impressionable ... and extremely sensitive. Above all they were passive. After all, it was queried, what spirit could manifest anything through a medium whose own personality was strongly assertive? The success of spirit communication depended on the ability of mediums to give up their own identity to become the instruments of others (202-3).

Many associated the rise of spiritualism with the progressive response to the Woman Question. It was common for critics of early feminism to depict the nonconforming woman as sexually promiscuous, and this too found its way into criticisms of female spiritualists. Moore writes,

In his novel *The Bostonians*, Henry James linked feminism to the cause of spiritualism and damned them both. It was a common attitude. Spiritualism, it was charged time and again, inevitably led to free love. By approving of women who operated independently of men, spiritualism was ipso facto a free love movement (212).

Like lyric poetry in Parker's formulation, spiritualism was understood to have an inherently erotic orientation because of its transgression of the boundaries that traditionally defined one's self in relation to others. The strong medium was understood to be capable of emptying herself with the explicit intention of being filled with a host of others.

One revealing consequence of the gendered connotations of mediumship is that many of the men who were considered successful mediums were accused of being effeminate. According to Moore, "Newspapers hostile to the vogue of spiritualism ... characterized male mediums as 'addle-headed feminine men.'" (202). It should not be surprising that these "perverse and bizarre" traits would be construed by some critics as evidence of homosexuality. Alex Owen writes "There were persistent rumours...about the supposed effeminacy of Daniel Dunglas Home, a leading male medium. Although these probably originated with his enemies, and seemed to centre on nothing more than his long hair, sensitive hands, and personal vanity, it was enough to cast doubt on his moral integrity (10). Owen's monograph, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (2004), explores the complicated and thoroughly gendered power dynamics involved in the Victorian séance. She writes: "the Victorian séance room became a battle ground across which the tensions implicit in the acquisition of gendered subjectivity and the assumption of female spiritual power were played out" (11). She writes that "séance behavior itself signified a transgression and transposition of normative femininity. For, whilst speaking directly to the feminine ideal, mediumship succeeded in effectively undermining it" (11).

In light of what Moore and Owen observe about the ways that nineteenth-century women found in spiritualism the space for their own transgressions of gendered restrictions, and Parker's persuasive argument for the heteronormative orientation of the tradition of lyric poetry, Merrill's Ouija board method provides a model of poetic inspiration that is self-consciously queer. Against the heteronormative backdrop of these traditions, *Sandover* both implicitly and explicitly celebrates the "passive" role of the medium as the vehicle for divine/poetic revelation, thereby queering the conventional power structures of these traditions.

Two critics use Bloom's theory of influence to examine Merrill's work in relation to major twentieth-century poets: Piotr K. Gwiazda in *James Merrill and W.H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence* (2007) and Mark Bauer in *This Composite Voice: The Role of W.B. Yeats in James Merrill's Poetry* (2003). As Gwiazda points out, "When Merrill began publishing the successive installments of his Ouija board trilogy in the mid-1970s, there was no other figure than Auden who better exemplified the idea of a great poet who also happened to be a gay poet" (29). As such, he is perhaps the perfect figure against which Merrill's own emerging identity as a gay male lyric poet can be observed. And while there were a handful of successful, gay male poets against whom Merrill could compare his own project during his lifetime, W.B. Yeats was the only major poet who had endeavored to tackle the occult as brazenly as Merrill did. Gwiazda frames the relationship between Merrill and Auden in terms of the "erotics of influence" (21). As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to explore what might be called Merrill's erotics of inspiration. Just as Gwiazda finds in Auden the exemplar of the gay male poet, we will find in Yeats the exemplar of the celebrated lyric poet who turns to the

occult. It is against Yeats's example that the queer nature of Merrill's muse comes into focus.

III. A MODEL OF SPIRITUAL COLLABORATION

While recent scholarship has demonstrated a significant interest in the occult by a number of midcentury American poets, during Merrill's lifetime W.B. Yeats was the only major poet he could look to as a model for what a contemporary collaboration between poet and medium might look like. In fact, just two weeks after his first Ouija session with David Jackson in 1955, still years before committing to the project that culminates in *Sandover*, Merrill turned to Yeats' *A Vision* to see how the Irish master approached occult transmission (Bauer 51). Yeats provides Merrill the example for which he was looking. However, it is important to note that Merrill's interpretation of Yeats's approach to occult transmission is not nearly as nuanced as Yeats's approach actually was. It is important to distinguish the two, even as the former is of more interest to this study than the latter.

Merrill studied Yeats under the direction of his mentor Kimon Friar while still a teenager at Amherst College in 1945 (Different 18). Bauer argues that Yeats' influence on Merrill was immediate, imposing, gendered, and demonstrably blurred with the influence of Friar himself (15-24). Upon returning to Amherst after a year of military service, Merrill developed with Friar a personal and literary relationship that would have an effect on Merrill for the rest of his life. Bauer writes:

Merrill had very likely already begun his ambivalent fascination with the strength of Yeats's poetic personality: his assertiveness and austere sensuality; his heroic and visionary claims; his strategies of vacillation, technical range and mastery; and the range of worlds he brings into his poetry. But the evidence of memoirs

and poems all point to the catalyzing and enduring effect of his friendship with Friar in making Yeats Merrill's most problematic poetic father (16).

Bauer goes on to describe Friar as "Merrill's mentor, lover, and surrogate father" (16). In his memoir *A Different Person* (1993), Merrill himself testifies to this paternal dynamic and even brings Yeats into it. Describing a dinner he and Friar attended at the house of their mutual friend Mina Diamantopoulos, he writes "I'd landed in a benign revision of my own family romance: a father who read Yeats, a mother without prejudice" (23). So deeply intertwined and central to *Sandover* are Friar and Yeats that Merrill would write years later, after having completed the project:

Kimon believed that myth was indispensable to poetry. [He] planned to write a long poem based on Yeats's system: spiritualism, the phases of the moon, the gyres of history. Longer than Dante, dottier than Pound, and full of spirits more talkative than Yeats himself might have wished, the *Sandover* project held me captive. It was Kimon's dream, only I was realizing it in his stead (Different 27).

Friar had written his Master's thesis on *A Vision*, and the power dynamic between Friar and Merrill was far from equal (Bauer 18). Friar, a man fourteen years his senior, was Merrill's first lover. Merrill wrote in a diary entry on November 12, 1945 "I have been taught to love and it is a thing so incredible and so moving that I can say nothing, even to myself, except 'I love you'" (Hammer 89). Their romantic relationship would continue for years before ending in bitterness, and it is not difficult to imagine why this relationship would leave such a lasting impact on the trajectory of Merrill's life. By Merrill's own account, it was Friar who taught him to love. Given that poetry and homosexuality were two of the most formative components of Merrill's mature identity,

it would be difficult to deny the influence Friar had over at least the initial phases of that maturation. But what kind of teacher was Friar, and what kind of student did he expect Merrill to be? Friar describes his approach, at least to the poetry, in his essay “Amherst Days.” The following is part of what he claims to have said to his most talented student.

‘If you would like to work with me, you must place yourself completely under my direction in a crash course. I shall give you private lessons every day in technique and aesthetics, and commission poems from you as though you were a cabinet maker and I was ordering furniture. I shall set you the theme of each poem, the meter..., the stanza form, the rhyme scheme..., the symbols, the imagery, the orchestration in family groups of vowels and consonants. I intend to drive you hard. What do you say?’ ‘Try me!’ Merrill answered.

Friar’s approach is imposingly hierarchical and provides a fascinating relief to the divinatory “lessons” that come to dominate the second and third volumes of the *Sandover* trilogy. Friar’s traditional dynamic places all of the power in the hands of the older, more mature poet, beneath whom the younger poet must place and then shape himself and his work. While Friar is writing here strictly about literary education, it is reasonable to assume that a similar dynamic would have been in place in their love life.

Bauer argues persuasively that, for Merrill, the work of Yeats (and especially *A Vision*) could never be cleanly separated from these initial, erotically charged encounters mediated by Friar (16). This is supported by Merrill’s admission that his completion of *Sandover* was the realization not of his own, but of “Kimon’s dream” (Different 27). Bauer also argues that the Friar-Yeats composite fits into the Bloomian model of Oedipal influence, associatively linking Friar-Yeats to Merrill’s father Charles (16). Charles

Merrill, cofounder of Merrill Lynch investment firm, was a wildly successful businessman and known philanderer. In one of his greatest poems, “The Broken Home,” Merrill writes about his father’s “soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex / And business.” He goes on: “Each thirteenth year he married. When he died / There were already several chilled wives / In sable orbit—rings, cars, permanent waves. / We’d felt him warming up for a green bride.” Perhaps the most revealing glimpse of his parents’ marriage (and his father’s views on gender roles) is captured in what follows: “What had he done? Oh, made history. / Her business (he had implied) was giving birth, / Tending the house, mending the socks. // Always that same old story— / Father Time and Mother Earth, / A marriage on the rocks” (Collected Poems 197-8).

Yeats, as a father figure, represents for Merrill the kind of masculine, hypersexual swagger he associated with his own father. Given the erotic connotations of both lyric poetry and popular spiritualism, Yeats then comes to embody for Merrill a decidedly masculine approach to occult transmission—an approach he criticizes, parodies, and presents as a foil for his own throughout *Sandover*. Namely, Merrill casts Yeats’s desire to systematize the mythic fragments of his revelation as a decidedly butch impulse. The first mention of Yeats in *Mirabell*, the second book of the *Sandover* trilogy, makes this criticism explicit. David Jackson (DJ) says to his partner (JM):

What part, I’d like to ask Them, does sex play
In this whole set-up? Why did They choose *us*?
Are we more usable than Yeats or Hugo,
Doters on women, who then went ahead
To doctor everything their voices said?

We haven't done that. JM: No indeed.

Erection of theories, dissemination

Of thought—the intellectual's machismo.

We're more the docile takers-in of seed.

No matter what tall tale our friends emit,

Lately—you've noticed?—we just swallow it (Sandover 154).

According to Bauer, "Merrill's indictment ... is this: Yeats's *A Vision* was devoured by the chimera of number and succumbed to the rhetoric of charts, a kind of seeming certainty, where it should have been governed by the uncertainty, the inner quarrel that in Yeats's own account yields true poetry" (139). In this passage, as well as others to be examined later, homosexuality is portrayed not as coincidental with Merrill's spiritualist project but central to it. It is not simply Merrill's willingness to play the receptive role in sex that qualifies him for otherworldly transmission, but his preference for it seems to make him even more qualified than his heterosexual precursors.

Bauer explores the ambivalence at the heart of Yeats's presence in *Sandover*. On the one hand, Yeats is the archetype of the great poet in the throes of otherworldly inspiration after whom Merrill at least implicitly (and not without complaining) models himself; on the other, the very qualities that were so widely admired in Yeats the poet (his assertiveness, austerity, and technical mastery, for example) were also the qualities that got in the way of his potential mediumship. Interestingly, this critique is consistent with the prevailing gendered trope of popular spiritualism, which, as stated above, identifies mediumship with the feminine precisely because of the supposedly passive nature of women. Moore writes, paraphrasing the popular reasoning: "What spirit could

manifest anything through a medium whose own personality was strongly assertive? The success of spirit communication depended on the ability of mediums to give up their own identity to become the instruments of others” (202). What Merrill demonstrates in *Sandover* is a relationship to inspiration that queers these heteronormative assumptions by celebrating the passive role of mediumship by rejecting the assumption that no strong poet could “give up their own identity to become the instrument[] of others.”

However useful this depiction of the hyper-masculine Yeats may have been for Merrill in *Sandover*, it is important to take a few moments to demonstrate how radically oversimplified Merrill’s portrait of the Yeatses’ divinatory project truly was. Margaret Mills Harper’s *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W.B. Yeats* (2006) provides an extraordinary account of the process by which both editions of *A Vision* came to be. WBY (the abbreviation adopted in documents related to *A Vision*, which will be used henceforth along with GY for his wife and collaborator George Yeats) had an abiding interest in occult spirituality throughout his life, although the extent of his involvement with esoteric groups like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn would not be known until after his death. He had met the young George Hyde-Lees through the Golden Dawn, and she had demonstrated an exceptional talent for spiritualist study (Harper 3-4). What came to be popularly known about GY’s talent was her ability to transmit messages via divinatory techniques such as automatic writing and channeling voices when talking in her sleep. This reputation was the result of the introduction WBY wrote for *A Vision*, which he titled “A Packet for Ezra Pound,” and which underwent a number of iterations between its initial printing in 1929 and the final form published in 1937. What remains constant throughout is a portrait of the Yeatses’ project that depicts

WBV, the great poet, as the author of *A Vision*, and GY as simply the medium through whom the voices spoke. However useful this simple portrait may be for the understandably confused readers of *A Vision*, and however well this narrative suits WBV's reputation as a great writer, Harper demonstrates that it is oversimplified at the least, and perhaps even dishonest.

While it was convenient to portray the young GY as an empty vessel through whom greater powers could work, GY was hardly the naïve, impressionable girl of popular accounts. Long before meeting her future husband, George Hyde-Lees had studied Medieval Latin, hermeticism, and ritual magic. It was through the underground scene of London occultism that she first met WBV, and they had been friendly through the Order of the Golden Dawn for years before they married (Saddlemeyer 43-62). Harper writes:

[GY] was anything but a passive medium during the proceedings, a supposedly empty vessel whose hand was guided across the page by 'controls' from the other world. Their practice was at least as informed by notions of joint adeptship, including the idea of an occult marriage. The Yeatses' sense that they were chosen to accomplish profound spiritual work together is echoed in a number of variants in occult tradition on the idea of superhuman agents working with a couple or group of human recipients, whose power would thus be greater than that of someone working alone. In other words, the system is both personal and collaborative, the necessary product of what GY called in a notebook entry the 'Wisdom of Two' (11-3).

Harper details how George's perceived spiritual gifts endeared her to WBY, and how their shared spiritual mission became inseparable from (and perhaps salvific of) their marital project. GY's role in the formation of *A Vision* was at least as important as WBY's, and by no means restricted to mediumship. The *Vision* papers "reveal her making of the system, the hybrid of psychological, astrological, geometric, historical, and spiritual theory that lies behind *A Vision*" (Harper 11). Thus, ironically, while Merrill blames WBY for "erect[ing] theories" as a demonstration of "the intellectual's machismo," GY appears to have had at least an equal hand in the matter as her late husband (Sandover 154).

This cooperative endeavor, which has more similarities with what Merrill undertakes with his partner David Jackson than Merrill seems to acknowledge, is itself a disruption of the gendered norms of popular spiritualism. Harper portrays GY as a woman willing to transgress those norms. "As both magician and medium, [GY] aligned herself with both the conqueror and the vanquished, the dominant masculinized position and the subordinate feminized one" (121). Harper even suggests that this transgression may have troubled WBY.

Despite WBY's decades of participation in the Order of the Golden Dawn and his long experience in collaborative enterprises with strong women such as Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne, this [equal] distribution of power seems to have been somewhat problematic for him. Perhaps the expectations of marriage, for husband and possibly wife as well, jarred with the masculinity or multiple gendering of the role GY played in the couple's nightly experiments. Nevertheless, WBY, who had for many years been as fascinated by adventures in losing spiritual, political, or

sexual power as in attaining it, was enthusiastically drawn to his and his wife's variants of automatism. At any rate, both he and she promulgated various dissonances between his public versions and the experience itself. The documents suggest a very different dynamic from the ones familiar to readers of WB's published material (139).

In light of Harper's claims, it is possible that the Yeatses' spiritual collaboration might also be considered an example of queer inspiration, albeit of a different variety from what is presented in *Sandover*. In fact, as a discourse that eschews traditionally accepted sources of knowledge, spiritualism can itself be viewed as a kind of queer approach to science and religion. As such, it should not come as a surprise to discover that couples who practice spiritualism, or who enter into an "occult marriage," do not fit neatly into the traditional roles of heteronormative coupling.

While the gendered dimensions of the Yeatses' divinatory process are far too complex to discuss in any further detail here, it is clear that the historical reality of that process is substantially different from how Merrill portrays it in *Sandover*. The "Yeats" against whom Merrill positions himself is less the historical Yeats than Merrill's mythic composite of Yeats-Friar-Father as described by Bauer. This figure is decidedly masculine and dominant, and accordingly represents an approach to inspiration against which Merrill seeks to contrast his own, which queers the traditional power dynamics of lyric poetry, popular spiritualism, and the heteronormative erotics found therein.

IV. JAMES MERRILL'S QUEER MUSE

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

The opening of *Sandover* tells of multiple attempts by Merrill to write the text in question. The poem begins: “Admittedly I err by undertaking / This in its present form. The baldest prose / Reportage was called for, that would reach / The widest public in the shortest time” (3). Merrill goes on to explain how he first tried to tell the story of his Ouija experiences in the form of a novel, complete with characters, plot, setting, and a theme he describes as “an old, exalted one: / The incarnation and withdrawal of / A god” (3). He confesses: “My downfall was ‘word-painting.’ Exquisite / Peek-a-boo plumage, limbs aflush from sheer / Bombast unfurling through the troposphere” (4). He finally states his problem and its solution, which can be understood as a statement not only of Merrill’s aesthetic persuasion but also his queer identity: “The more I struggled to be plain, the more / Mannerism hobbled me. What for? / Since it had never truly fit, why wear / The shoe of prose? In verse the feet went bare” (4). Merrill’s opening argument echoes Emily Dickinson, who wrote “They shut me up in Prose—” a poem Mary E. Galvin says “is clearly drawing an analogy between the socialization process of women and the strictures of ‘proper’ language use, and is defiant toward both. Thus, in overstepping the bounds of genre, Dickinson is simultaneously overstepping the boundaries of gender” (13). As with Dickinson, Merrill’s generic orientation is an extension of his gender identity: it is not simply that he refuses to use the “proper” medium to reach “The widest public in the shortest time,” it is that he is “hobbled” and therefore, in certain regards, incapable. Like Dickinson, Merrill is only mockingly apologetic of what hobbles him, the implication of which is a proud, if thinly veiled, declaration of poetics and queer identity.

Merrill locates the theme of his work in Northrop Frye's phrase "The incarnation and withdrawal of / A god" (*Sandover* 3). This subtly connects Merrill's ambitions to the visionary work of William Blake, out of which Frye's critical theory was at least initially developed. But perhaps more revealingly, in light of the erotic connotations of inspiration in both lyric poetry and popular spiritualism, *Sandover* opens with the foundational metaphor of the poet (or poem) being penetrated by the divine. This foregrounding of gay sex establishes *Sandover's* unique presentation of its "old, exalted" theme: while Blake and others have engaged in visionary poetics, Merrill's vision is the result of a very different, and decidedly queer, model of divine encounter. According to the poem, it is Merrill's queer identity that makes his poetic divination possible, and to attempt divine connection on "straight" terms is something Merrill is either incapable of or simply has no interest in. But what does queer inspiration look like in *Sandover*? While it may be tempting to list the poem's many gay themes, this study is fundamentally concerned with Merrill's approach to occult inspiration, and therefore my focus will be restricted to the strategies he adopts when consulting the Ouija board for the material he shapes into *Sandover*. Still, Merrill Cole's statement of his objectives in "The Other Orpheus: A Poetics of Modern Homosexuality" can also be applied here.

At issue is the extent to which homoerotic affect influences formal innovation, what unconventional sexualities have to do with new poetic practices. Much as the concept of homosexuality challenges the normative regime of Western sexuality and human relations, so the poetry here under consideration rewrites the dominant representational economy of Western poetry (9).

In Robert Duncan's 1944 proto-Gay Liberation manifesto "The Homosexual in Society," he writes: "There are poets whose nostalgic picture of special worth in suffering, sensitivity, and magical quality is no other than [a] 'sixth sense' ... The law has declared homosexuality secret, inhuman, unnatural (and why not then supernatural?)" (42-3) Duncan here subverts the rhetoric of heteronormativity. Rather than combat the thinking that deems homosexuality morally wrong because of its violation of the apparent natural order by stating that it is in fact natural, Duncan demotes the "natural" to a position of secondary importance after the "supernatural," which he implies is only accessible to those outside the bounds of normalcy. Sandover's discussion of childlessness follows a similar structure, suggesting that the inability of queer people to bear children is not a reflection of their inability to advance the cause of humanity, but is in fact an asset to individuals called to produce artistic progeny and engage in what the poem calls "V work," or "WORK GUIDED BY HIGHER COLLABORATION" (162). The poem's central four member divinatory "family," as the Ouija sessions become ritualized, involves JM and DJ as well as two recently deceased (at least at the time of their initial appearances in the sessions) friends who join from the other side: Maria Mitsotaki (MM) and W.H. Auden (WHA). While Auden was gay and Mitsotaki was not, neither of them had children. According to the spirits in *Sandover*, this is the foundational bond of the poem's generative family, and the spiritual energy needed to conduct the sessions is enhanced by these four members' childlessness. When WHA asks "Why the four of us?" the board responds "KEEP IN MIND THE CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE THIS TURNS US / OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES" (216).

Childlessness is so central to Sandover's mythology that Catherine A. Davies calls *Sandover* "James Merrill's Epic of Childlessness" (126-57). She writes:

One of the central tenets of *Sandover's* cosmology is the revelation that the 'childless' possess privileged access to the 'spiritual' life... While painters and sculptors are said to be excluded from this 'LIFE OF / THE MIND as they are tied to what is implied to be a heterosexual compulsion to 'PRODUCE AT LAST / BODIES,' the homosexual is predisposed to 'SUCH MIND VALUES AS PRODUCE THE BLOSSOMS / OF POETRY & MUSIC' (149).

The subject is raised relatively early in the trilogy, when JM tells his therapist about the strange, occult territory he and DJ had wandered into. The therapist's response is unsurprisingly Freudian. He asks JM:

"What underlies these odd
Inseminations by psycho-roulette?"
I stared, then saw the light:
"Somewhere a Father Figure shakes his rod //
At sons who have not sired a child?
Through our own spirit we can both proclaim
And shuffle off the blame
For how we live—that good enough?" (30).

Versed in the broad strokes of Freudian analysis, JM anticipates his therapist's answer by locating the source of his creative drive in reproductive anxiety, and even manages to relay that anxiety with phallic imagery and a mention of his father. But it is the final "that good enough?"

that complicates the tone of what precedes it with characteristically Merrillian ambivalence. Merrill does not deny this drive, but instead transforms it within the mythic structure of *Sandover* into what Davies calls a “generative complex.”

The trilogy develops a sustained meditation on the problems of both an artistic and a genetic legacy for the homosexual artist, with its apocalyptic preoccupations resulting, in part, from this sense of mortal finality. My focus... will be on the ways in which ‘childlessness’ can be read as one of the ‘generative complex[es]’ behind the poem, and will suggest that *Sandover* can be read as a ‘surrogate child’ or textual substitute for procreative fulfillment (127).

For Davies, generative anthropology provides a framework with which she can interpret *Sandover* that acknowledges its genesis in reproductive anxiety without resorting to Freudian theory.

Bauer too seeks an interpretive paradigm that avoids the reductive dynamic of oedipal struggle. The final section of his monograph raises the question of whether or not Bloomian criticism can adequately evaluate the presence of poets in *Sandover* not named Yeats.

With regard to Merrill’s relationship with Yeats, Bloom’s account of the young poet’s ongoing struggle to master the disturbing priority of an imposing poetic father is both helpful and illuminating. But whether Bloom’s agonistic approach will prove equally fruitful in parsing the influence of Proust or Dante, Valery or Rilke, Pound or Cavafy, Auden or Bishop is far less certain. With these figures, a relationship much more like Merrill’s amenable ‘good student’ may pertain (181-2).

Bauer correctly identifies that, even if Bloomian theory provides a useful lens through which Yeats's influence can be studied, it fails to account for Merrill's relationship with a host of other figures who were enormously influential over his life and work. What Bauer offers here is an alternate model of influence, which he identifies as the "good student" paradigm. It is in this paradigm that we begin to see what queer inspiration looks like beyond the confines of strictly Freudian theory.

Queer inspiration is less the result of Oedipal competition than consensual collaboration, and its results provide the artist a greater degree of power than what is available in Freudian theory. While it is true that Merrill inherits, against his will, a number of literary "parents," his queer identity complicates this lineage. According to Bauer, "His parents' divorce and his own homosexuality establish in Merrill a profound ambivalence for all things imaginatively identified with his father" (15). J.D. McClatchy identifies in Merrill's work a "split personality" and describes this split in gendered terms. "As much his father's son as his mother's boy, [Merrill] had a temperament that by turns revealed what we may as well call paternal and maternal sides. And, from the beginning, his ambition as a poet was...to harmonize those two sides of his life" (Braving 50). As Davies argues, *Sandover* can be understood as the offspring of the harmony of those sides (127). Bauer describes the two approaches to poetic influence present in Merrill's poetry, the first as "more or less maternal and gay-inflected," and the second as "characterized by Oedipal rivalry with the father" (4). The latter model is the Bloomian paradigm at the heart of Bauer's study. The former, though, is arguably every bit as formative as the latter. This "good student" model allows the poet to select his parents and aesthetic family. In so doing, the poet is empowered to distance himself from a

potentially “toxic” inherited parentage, a family that has either metaphorically disowned him or from which he elects to leave out of his own sense of non-belonging. In place of this family the poet is then allowed to embrace the family of his own creation. This paradigm is described by Eve Sedgwick in her book *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), which clearly shows Merrill’s influence, even down to the speaking voice in small caps. She writes:

THE MODEL OF A TRUE AND REVELATORY RELATIONSHIP IS THE GRATITUDE AND TENDERNESS BETWEEN MOTHER AND CHILD/TEACHER AND STUDENT—THE UNIQUE IDEA THAT YOU CAN TELL IF IT’S TRUE BY THE FEELINGS OF TENDERNESS AND GRATITUDE (NOT OEDIPAL-STYLE ENVY, LACK, VIOLENCE)—THAT THIS IS ALSO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOU AND THE UNIVERSAL LUMINOSITY WHICH IS (ALSO) YOU (215).

While Sedgwick’s rather straightforward voice might never be confused for Merrill’s in *Sandover*, this summary of congenial love is decidedly Merrillian and presents a model of inspiration that allows queer influence to be accounted for without resorting to the Freudian paradigm that can only locate queer desire by stating what it is not.

The “family” unit of *Sandover* is as colorful and queer as a family could possibly be. It involves the living and the dead; humans, angels, and beings with undetermined ontological identities, many of whom perform and express fluid gender identities and sexualities. The family is established and sustained by the lifelong partnership of JM and DJ, but this partnership is decidedly non-exclusive. It comes to involve what Helen Vendler calls “a ghostly father and ghostly mother” in WHA and MM and numerous human guests who keep the poem’s divinatory sessions close to the project’s origin as a

parlor game (Collected Prose 87). Most notably, the culmination of the epic is “The Ballroom at Sandover,” an epilogue that begins with the subtly erotic “Empty perfection, as I take you in / My heart pounds.” (556) The “Ballroom” is an imagined room (based on the “music room” of The Orchard from Merrill’s youth) in which the poem’s chosen family assembles to hear the reading of the poem in its final form. This family notably includes famous, dead writers: Rilke, Goethe, Eliot, Rimbaud, Proust, Mallarme, and Yeats, among others. Thus, while “straight” reproduction involves very little choice on the part of the parents and the child, queer reproduction not only allows the parents to choose and shape their progeny, but it also allows the progeny to play a determining role in the construction of parentage.

Both of Bauer’s models of influence—the congenial and the oedipal—are queered in *Sandover*, and the means by which Merrill queers them can be observed by identifying the ways these approaches navigate the relationship between the active and passive faculties of the poet. The congenial approach to inspiration reflects the heteronormative assumptions of the lyric tradition by emphasizing the passivity of the poet, but for Merrill to actively shape both the material he receives and the literary coterie to whom it is written is to trouble this passivity. Furthermore, for a celebrated, male, lyric poet to affably adopt the maternal stance is a transgression of the gendered expectations of the lyric tradition, and Merrill embraces this approach with singular gusto. On the other hand, it is precisely because the oedipal model assumes a patriarchal structure that it can be so aggressively undermined by queer poetics. By celebrating the passive role in intercourse, Merrill undermines the traditional power dynamics that very clearly place the passive role in a subordinate position. What is most radical about Merrill’s erotics is not merely that

he celebrates the passive, but rather that by actively embracing the passive, he is blurring the lines between active and passive altogether. By doing so, Merrill seeks to alleviate the imbalance of power necessitated by heteronormativity by reframing the erotic relationship in such a way that all involved parties share power insofar as they collaborate in the performance of sex (and by metaphorical extension, poetry), regardless of which role they may occupy at any given moment.

Leo Bersani's influential essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) argues that rather than merely "phallicize the ego," sex can productively shatter the self.

Phallocentrism is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and women. I don't mean the value of gentleness, or non-aggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self. For there is finally ... a transgressing of that very polarity which ... may be the profound sense of both certain mystical experiences and of human sexuality ..." (24)

For Bersani, this "disintegration and humiliation of the self" is paradoxically empowering because the self is a false construct. This is especially true when that sense of self is formed in a society in which gender codes are violently imposed and a man who prefers to play the receptive position in sex is either not acknowledged at all or deemed a perversion to the natural order. Bersani's celebration of the mystical potential of the "bottom" is already implicit in the divinatory structure of *Sandover*, as the mediums allow themselves to be penetrated by otherworldly spirits, but JM and DJ would have been especially drawn to such an argument because of the specific trajectory of their

sexual relationship. The roles of “top” and “bottom” are generally definitive in gay male sex, and for two men to prefer the same position would result in sexual incompatibility at the most basic level (Hammer 298). Early in their relationship, JM played the role of bottom while DJ played the role of top, but these roles became complicated in the late 1950s at least in part as a result of their “cruising” in Greece. Merrill writes in *A Different Person*, “It was a truth universally acknowledged in those innocent decades from 1950 to 1980 that a stable homosexual couple would safely welcome the occasional extramarital fling” (189-90). During those decades, the couple would spend about half the year living in their apartment in Athens, and their love of Greece cannot be separated from the refreshing openness with which Greek culture allowed them to pursue gay sex.

According to Hammer, their friend Charlie Shoup

introduced them to the protocols and possibilities of homosexuality in Greece. It was a world in which male beauty and gay desire were for once not forbidden subjects. Gay sex was a game played by the international “team” on one side and young Greek men on the other. For the Greeks, it was easier and safer to pursue same-sex relations with foreigners than with fellow Greeks... The Greeks were straight, or so they presented themselves. They maintained that self-image by taking the penetrating role when they had sex with the internationals, who offered them, as Merrill liked to joke, the back door, “*l’entrée des artistes.*” (270)

It was in this context that DJ’s sexual preference and queer identity began to shift.

Hammer writes that “David ... had always been the straight man in the couple. In Greece ... he became one of ‘the sisters,’ like Jimmy, who wanted to be penetrated. For David, this amounted to a gain in power and status from one angle and a loss of those things

from another one.” (298) As a result of this evolution, JM and DJ stopped sleeping together in the late 1950s, even taking separate bedrooms. They would remain romantically coupled for the rest of their lives, though their sexual relationship ceased to exist except by the increasingly conjugal union made manifest in their Ouija sessions.

While their compatibility had initially been established at least in part by their complementary preferences in sexual roles, JM and DJ had to adjust their relationship to accommodate their shifting sexualities and the power dynamics present therein. This was no simple matter. As the poem progresses, *Sandover* becomes increasingly interested in celebrating the receptive role of the mediums. DJ, a writer who never received anything close to the critical acclaim his partner enjoyed, had long been bothered by the implicit rivalry between them (Hammer 199). While in life their sexual roles became incompatible, in the poem their roles became clearly defined. DJ and JM are termed “Hand” and “Scribe” respectively. This speaks to their positioning at the board: Jackson would sit on the left; Merrill on the right. Jackson would place his right hand on the planchette and smoke cigarettes with his left, while Merrill would place his left hand on the planchette and record dictation with his right. It was common for guests to join in or else watch from the sidelines. Regarding the power dynamics of these roles, Hammer writes:

“Jimmy was like a boy leading another boy in a game,” recalls Donald Richie, who watched them at the board in the 1950s. “He was very much in charge,” Richie emphasizes, adding, “but then he was always in charge.” In later years, Merrill credited Jackson as the medium to whom the spirits were drawn. In any case, because Merrill was “in charge” does not mean that Jackson was passive.

When she did the board with him, Eleanor Perényi was clear about what she thought was happening: “David *pushed!*” (201)

Hammer here implies that the divinatory roles of Hand and Scribe provide an interesting relief to the top and bottom roles in gay male sex. Both Hand and Scribe are mediums through whom the spirits speak, which places them both, side-by-side, as bottoms to otherworldly tops. However, as Hand, DJ’s role is decidedly more passive than JM’s, whose role as Scribe allows him to actively shape the dictation as it is transmitted. The recognition of this fact seems to motivate JM’s insistence that DJ was the being to whom the spirits were drawn. Interestingly, this logic reflects the traditional gender roles of popular spiritualism, which would celebrate the feminine orientation of DJ in the same manner that George Yeats was celebrated as the vehicle through whom transmission was made possible. As was the case with WBY, it is the celebrated poet JM who then takes this material and later shapes it in the privacy of his study into the verse forms we find in *Sandover*. It is this role as redactor that justifies Merrill’s position as the “author” of the text and thereby places him in a position of authority over the poem, an authority which DJ does not share. And yet, what clearly distinguishes the divinatory method of *Sandover* from *A Vision* is JM’s insistence on his own passivity. *Sandover*’s collaboration is unique in that neither JM nor DJ is considered too “strong” a personality for divination. On the contrary, the poem tells us many times that their queer identities (and their preference for the receptive role in sex) are what enable them both to be valuable mediums for otherworldly transmission. What is radical about this divinatory process is that it does not simply invert the traditional power structure, which would involve placing the receptive role in the dominant position, but that it embodies an erotics in which roles are

understood as just that: roles that people perform in service of a larger aesthetic endeavor. These roles are therefore not static and determined from without—an essentializing—but instead determined by the free choice of the willing participants. This queering of roles demonstrates what Bergman describes in *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (1991).

Homosexuality differs from other intramale sexual relations and heterosexual relations by the equality of its relations. By equality I do not mean that in individual relationships the partners are equal...but rather that the institution of homosexuality does not assign specific roles to specific individuals. Indeed, homosexuality has developed a remarkable fluidity of roles and role-playing that cuts across racial, social, and cultural boundaries. No doubt, hierarchical forces come to play their part in homosexual relations—homosexuality exists only within the patriarchy—but homosexuality is more notable in the way it resists hierarchies than in the way it bends to them.” (31)

In the erotics of *Sandover*, hierarchical forces do not cease to exist, and the power roles played by DJ and JM as Hand and Scribe are not equal: the poem reflects JM’s anxiety regarding this fact. And yet, what makes *Sandover*’s divinatory erotics decidedly queer is its resistance to these hierarchies and its attempts to alleviate the pressures that necessarily arise from them.

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CANON

Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

GENESIS

Send rain the formless lights in awesome flocks
across the water. Send again through skin the dream
of the moon behind the mountain singing
dead men into meaning. To meet me in the field
between the inner leaves and daybreak, weep
with me a while like we are trees in love
with changing. Hands clean to hold my heart
wide open. When you take her from me
will you let me keep who she makes me
when we go to gather wood?

I do not know how to carry the fire
across such a distance.

When I run I run toward not away from.

I send out my eyes with a sky burial.

I raise my hand to build an altar.

EXODUS

Go back. To the mouth of the daughter
of the unfailing river, to every living forehead
of morning on fire. Go back beneath swarms
of handbreadth blossoms, the diadem priesthood
of unyielding stars. This is the book
of return. The breaking of distance.
Spread gores on your doorframes,
oil for light, wood into soot flakes.
Water is what the Lord says.
The hand cups, gathers so little.
Walk away from your life with nothing
but a cloud to guide not even thunder.
A sea of beasts. No graves just ruthlessly days.
Bright blue the flames around the seam the sky
fell through. Flowerlike ashes. Heart in a basket.
Go back to the land you don't know.

LEVITICUS

Every tree eaten in twilight speak.

Crumble and leaf it ceremonially.

Release in the field any kind of raw kite,
a screech owl, a hoopoe, a torn winged creature
spreading its leather, yarn from the altar
poured in a sheaf beneath evening.

My hands fell facedown your jubilee
breasts, the scar there you told me to keep.

Who any way sleeps but the pastureland skink,
chameleon girl, the sorcery bear carved down
on all fours, the disfigured cities, the deep?

NUMBERS

There are heights to consider, he said aloud,
having slept in clean clothes under the mortar light
of the moon. Are there trees or not in the habit
of mountains? When an animal is on a journey,
at morning its light is set to exactly the pattern
the lamps set at twilight. Crushed coals
in fields. My face is not a form. I live
between dreams. Wailing melons.
Land of eyes of mother doves, the hand
a bone highway and mine to the sea.

DEUTERONOMY

Doom rushes up the dust of mind.

Trees siege evening in waterless ships.

A swarm of dreamer bees slip heart long the sky.

Honey wrath down holy slopes, high places

gore nations, a plateau of sound with no voice.

Put your hand here. On my wooden chest.

Here. Inscribed by your finger, ground me

to powder. Scatter me thirsty in wine.

JOSHUA

Silver died in the hill when you buried

its love. City wall said to said hill

a thousand spies will not find it,

your heart like your waters:

at the end of the rope. Javelin smoke

toward the stopped itself sun.

Kings fled the cave for the mounds

of the slain, hanging from trees,

the ambush of evening, cracked heads

of sunset and all the gods burn.

JUDGES

Bees swarm honey scooped thumbs,

the eater sweet to death herself.

We ride on white donkeys.

We linger by ships.

We tie foxes tail to tail in the festival shadows,

torches set loose, tambourines dancing

the prophetess down. One blow on two eyes

pitched tent peg through temple,

her galloping heart threshing dew

from the clouds. Broken crowd

threw him by limb into ten

thousand parts like sound.

RUTH

I went away but then beginning
brought me back again. This is the method.

I am near morning working the field
with you. You pick up my eyes
and notice me standing empty-handed
in someone else's life.

You come to live with me.

You are kindness to me, who loves you,
who you kissed when he was younger,
when you were still thirsty,
before you returned home,
put on your best clothes
and wept, then lay down at the gate
of what you wanted.

1 SAMUEL

Brother your sword made women childless.

And your dreams, are they hanging like heads
without lips? Saliva down beard, madman.

Death pines away, oozing with princes.

But brother the boy will live. The boy
and his ten thousand arrows. Shut your eyes
to make it right. Now cut them out.

2 SAMUEL

As waters break stone, so the lion is crippled
in the beautiful about her. Skin distance to drink,
drink slow and then spilled, I will wait at the fords
in my fortress of string. Would you take your balsam
love and would you build for me a song?
Bring low the lamp. The heights have fallen.
My daughters slept mountains.
Wailing cosmetic the sistrums of brightness.
No one is like you my brightness.
No one sledges the dark of its salt.

1 KINGS

Let us attend to our carved open flowers.

Let us bury the boy with an ivory chisel
so his sister can scatter her innermost stones.

Warm birds were spoken. Let us prepare
the light. West on all sides. Float it
in rafts to whatever sea you specify.

Let us look to attend to our intimate
horses, to build in this blood a fleet
to the queen. Sky black with clouds.

Heavy the sea where sand drank
numerous seashore kingdoms.

Wind tore the lilies. Worthy hair fell.

2 KINGS

The lamp army slaughtered the sun.

Everything stripped from the blood underlings

burned at the border in envoys like blindness

in the hands of the hosts, leprosy clothes,

flour pot people whose tomb painted eyes

scattered and tethered and entered constellations

like wick trimmers headlong to cut the days right.

And horses are people ground into power.

And the harpist found in his skull the mauled book.

And the boy's face is a ripped open morning.

And the boy's face is written to us.

1 CHRONICLES

Atarah Korah Uzzi. Shomer Ahi Hod

Gomer. Devoted things were people.

Pathrusites were sixth city Ludites, whose
river were the chiefs of wicked children.

The father of Nimrod Magog, the father
of birth bless you sister, pain free
outskirts, to Pispah, to Bukki.

Deported the Lord into Eliphelet,
father of the buried city.

Music in the house, the father of
potters. Numerous linen, Shepho
Zaavan. Timna Ir his son Hepher,
his son Ahuzzam, father of Rekem
Sheber, his son Ara son

of Bakbakkar, son of the pasturelands.

His able-bodied clans of Bokeru pillars.

Quiet valley dwellings, over to refuge.

Flesh shepherd mountains of snowy

lion mind to watchtowers, cedar.

Wicked city father of Dodai, Dodo

son of Beno, the seventh temple

half-tribe fasted. Bones of Zaza.

Son of settlements. Son of trouble.

Nevertheless the terraces rest.

Valiant down villages, son of

balsam endures the sounding son

of beards, the wood site, surrounding.

2 CHRONICLES

Beneath The Sea of twelve bulls,
in the Pass of Ziz, in the Tekoa Desert,
I walked through the Corner Gate, the Horse
Gate, through Azekah and Zorah, the City
of Palms outside Jericho and Gimzo and
Ophir to En Gedi, my voice a crimson yarn
to the altar in the moons engraving.
Floral thickness of negligent gladness,
basins south of the East Gate, the Fish Gate,
below the hill of Ophel in the Valley of Salt, I gave this rain
my cut out heart, spread my flesh like a rinsed wick,
afflicted in my chest an empty blossom,
a lily without much to master.

EZRA

We could write down our names in your presence,
and throwing this whole voice up under oath
we could rubble your house in the good wrath
of language, rainy with elders and since
I pulled hair from everyone, and because
we cannot stand outside the season, I told
all my horsemen to pillage the moment
for remnants of structure. And I told them
whole towns have been lifted this evening,
written in freely. And you may be let down.
And may the moon everlasting leave us alone.

NEHEMIAH

I questioned them about the exile of heaven.

I sat down my eyes in a quiet house.

I was called to remember all my letters to the moon.

From the depths of the sea sang the rubble of stars,

the horizon swollen where the city said

enough already with all of this light.

Women who did not speak the language

pulled back their hair. Olive trees at daybreak.

I said what are we going to do about the sky.

ESTHER

The king is drinking again in the garden
having learned of the plot. It turned out
to be true. Those taken captive refused
to look at their hands, each one afraid
of the other. This gives me no satisfaction.

When you go alone into the city to find out
what no one is allowed to find out, gather night
as you go. Have a gallows built.

Have morning hanged on it.

JOB

I am what I am. Have mercy on me.

What kind of monster breaks a man to prove a point?

I am thinking of hands beneath a broom tree
as birds rumor spring. Dusk breaks into pieces.

Night breaks into houses when I lay down my life
in deep breath, in snow swollen dark, the sea
will not keep silent. The stars are pure eyes.

Death is gone naked again in the water.

Ruin has no reason. Rebel light rises.

At least there is a tree in the ground.

At least mountain goats still whisper clouds
from high mountains. The Lord found
me lion scattered, waiting on the rain,
and left me like a dream when morning came.

PSALMS

High as light to you, I take the train
from the temple to meet you
in my inmost bones which the rain
has revealed to be nothing but strings
in mouths of birds where
you are alone and awake
at the limits of the city
we built to remember
what we swore to one another
(melted wax in our mouths)
the way rivers remember
ramparts of snow.
I kiss you and my teeth break
like pottery. A tree meditates
on water. The house fills with clouds.
Do you listen to the words
or just the singing?

PROVERBS

There was a man sleeping on the high seas.
From the top of the rigging he saw a lion
roaming the beginning streets, before the first lamp
laid hands on the city and spread its net over
the world as we know it. Before anything muddied
the face of the deep, and before there was a deep,
there was a man shooting arrows straight into the sky
and lying on his side to make the horizon.

ECCLESIASTES

What I came to say is something my hands
learned to say when they toiled in living
on a mind of dark wine, but my hands wanted to see
where the house leaks light, so rather than offer
to keep in my heart all the things the wind stirred
in the street when you left: a severed cloud,
bad rafters, a handful of almonds, the roving
siegeworks of city birds, a dog with one eye
on the bread at all times, a never full enough
sea, songs afraid of heights, the war dead
on horseback, one ax in two logs, broken
blossoms, these years I release from high windows.

SONG OF SONGS

I looked all night for your mouth in the bloom
the moon upholstered to the purple interior
spread in my room where I was awake
and opening the gate with my ribbon lips
to the ruddy field rains necklace between hills
in which you took me by the hair and where I found it.

ISAIAH

I remove the cloaks from the mirrors,
well-dressed in the spirit, where hunger opens
its constant mouth and rouses wild trees
into singing. The sound climbs out
barefoot. I shave my legs in the snow.
I hear the single train whirring along
the river of bees, channels of mediums
who whisper. If your heart is open,
let us walk our superstitions down
to where the swimmer spreads his hands
and listen. Why not if they speak light?

JEREMIAH

My moon and stars turned away from me
so I returned in the dark with a scarecrow heart
I could not walk beyond the melon patch.
After the divorce, I woke and looked around
the house for the hard truth, running here
and there, sniffing the wind you had planted
yourself in the valley years before.
Has there ever been anything like this?
I hear highway trees stretching out their hands.
No light. I hear my feet on rocks,
horses in the valley like a river.

LAMENTATIONS

Am I living each day better in a brighter
city away from where the snow is downcast
every morning, or have I again fled
great love because my bird like heart
is a bear mangled thing? Great jackals
killed themselves in the winepress and laughed
all morning at the purple teeth of night
or the high cheek bones of the pagan
queen. She weeps because the river
swallowed her daughter. What darkness turns
up may yet bury light. I get these visions
where you dust off the ash and expose
your desolate neck to Mount Zion.

EZEKIEL

I dug through the rubble of evening.

I listened to metal records

like a monster all fall, cast the cargo

of my long gone heart into the sea

of noisy songs. I had nothing left

to scatter at dusk on the wind

but the purple birds I had let settle

on my coastlands, so I opened

my hands. What we understand

of ships is the moan of the mast

from beneath the silent deck,

the wild violence of the living

fabric with moon light written

on both sides.

DANIEL

Here is my dream when I am lying
in the earth under a tree: human hands put back
from pieces what the wind swept in, leaves
that touched the sky, cut it down
and scattered it with all the brittle pieces
of the spirit of the thinking beast:
troubled by little things, wild as live
animals driven down deep
and drenched in heaven.

HOSEA

The Lord was in love with a prostitute.

He was not proud of this love, but he had no power

to not love, because he was a maniac

when it came to what the sky would say

to him in winter mist in footprints in between

her breasts and most of all he said

because I love you I will devour these wild

beasts I will break into houses

stalk the wind swallow fire

to show you my thirst.

JOEL

When I drive them down the valley
from a day in the mountains
and the sky is a garden
of sea clouds, they gallop
through houses and dreams pour out.

AMOS

For two years my crush led my mouth

says the Lord to the edge of the sea

and when she staggered away

I sent her my thirst in strong winds

because this is what you do for love:

you walk together in the thicket

toward the river noise.

You lie down your garments

and go in naked.

You break yourself down.

You give away everything.

OBADIAH

Set mountains on fire

says the Lord from the stubble

field of cut down stars.

JONAH

What is a country? What is a people?

You can have what is left of the land

I am running from. There is a storm raging

inside me how can you sleep said the Lord

with your head down? Get up and say

to the sailors where you are from.

Tell them who sent the breakers

from his deep heart, and why

this has to get violent. You tell them

I said. Throw me into the sea.

MICAH

Mountain melt is a train of fire.

Valleys split apart like wax.

Chop your eyes from a cluster

of olives, from the grapes

in the vineyard that gathers

up summer. I have time

says the Lord. I wait with a net.

NAHUM

The sun appears to slumber one day
so I stumble through the open gates
in clouds of doves, rushing the streets
with blossoms no one turns to gather.

HABAKKUK

The ruthless moon a glint on the spear
that split the earth with rivers. I stand
at my watch on the ramparts. How is it that
an image speaks? Bones in naked legs
say something amazed. A silent house
against the wind makes known its beams.

ZEPHANIAH

Do not let hands hang from your heart.

The desert owl will stretch the shore north
every evening. The city wolves will not
turn back. My lips call out rivers and plant lamps
along the ruins. I sweep everything away.

HAGGAI

Or else that time I put on warm clothes
said the Lord and went up into the mountains
to bring down some timber to build my house
but there was nothing left.

ZECHARIAH

There are white horses coming to the north
country. There are red horses, dappled horses,
a whole world of symbolic horses
with a handsome rider standing over them.

He may have scattered the four winds for all I know
says the Lord but you are my city
without walls, that I myself might be
the wall around you.

MALACHI

I am useless to the sun.

I have nothing left but light.

MATTHEW

The meek the earth will inherit
is a kingdom of roadside weeping
where the babbling river is baptized
in honey. He breaks the storm
with bread, seizes the temple
from stone split lips. Scarlet prince,
disfigure darkness. Raise up
your cold ashes. Paralytic
fisherman standing in his body woke.
Wineskins stretch restored. Fever seized
crown of wolves. Winter healed
the sleeping boat, a demon dream concealed
in snow. The girl is not dead but asleep.

MARK

I send a voice wrapped in clothing
to who cut himself with stones. Holy one
my name is Legion. I am chained in the tomb
of a people, trembling for a drink to drown.
The girl danced bleeding twelve years, then waves
broke transfigured and she cast a small net
at the foams of the mouth. Salty daughter,
stretch out your hand it is written in the vineyard
I know who you are. Pours wine through her garment
straining the ghost. Glory torn open make straight paths
an oath, spirit cry out we are many.

LUKE

Living in tombs, lifted up to the sanctuary
skies wet with fire, the Queen of the South
bent over low fields and their flocks of dry
lilies all broken to shadow, in her heart the coming
wrath all nonsense and sparrows, exhausted.

JOHN

Life the light of men, everlasting
wheat fall. Sons of water, strips of linen
scattered children, driven out into glory
the place I am going—I shall raise up the fields
sudden flow from within, dawn flocks
the mountainside stoning, wrapped
at the waist, I who speak to you
am you only thirsty. Before me the thieves
of my healing. Watchman speak now
what you know. Made mud with saliva,
that nothing be wasted, a man born blind
spit doves into lanterns. From his side
with a spear fell a garden.

ACTS

Brought the sick out into the streets.

Raised together their voices fell headlong.

His body because it was evening burst open

from tree the Field Blood, spilled out

into moon, to the river. Scattered

throughout Judea, brought sacrifices to sea

and everything by hand. Built the gate

called Beautiful, her mouth—good-by

gentle viper asleep between soldiers—and

who are you eating my heart?

ROMANS

My loved one living by the sea, Zion
released—I revealed myself
in your mouth, held out my hands
to carry your branches to the temple
of tree fall where you could be raised—
where we, humble prophets of the body,
sincere in our orgies of heart and hymn,
grace our feet the open grave.

1 CORINTHIANS

I am not the hand—beating at air, another
winter cloud swallowed down in the sea,
drunk milk treading freely, my body,
running to hear your earth lips sing.

I am not the sound. You are not the wheat
speaking tongues in the harvest, fallen
sacrificial for the sake of a crown.

2 CORINTHIANS

I was stoned. With outbursts of ink overflowing
my face, bandits of light scattered captive
in sleep, out of my body beaten with rods
I opened a door to this field. The fragrance
of death engraved in my flesh, I unveiled
the inward darkness, severely beaten
children. Slipped through my hands
their lashes of hearts. I am nothing
but afraid of this night
we are shipwrecked within.

GALATIANS

Things will live. Because you come
grace into each. Childbirth spoken
through you, astonished at your witchcraft,
you watch yourself revealed in months
and seasons, clothed in letters torn
from the book of fallen seeds.

EPHESIANS

Aliens in ligament chains. Kingdom of air
waves, tossed by wind hymns. Wake up
sleeper, let open shine on you my wine filled
arrows, drunk on blood music, washing
the dead. We are captives on a flaming train,
the sun with a sword through its head.

PHILIPPIANS

As always my love, I feel about you
fearlessly, supposing I can stir this crooked
universe to somehow take in
your straining. You are the earth
without fault. You are depraved pure
lovely exalted in body. You do not believe
but you belong.

COLOSSIANS

For all of spring we hold out the shadow
of hands. The growing fruit blemish
of blood on the shed. Moon sinews
wrestling in you, when for you the door
is to live through the dead.

1 THESSALONIANS

I just want to lead a quiet life,
but instead I become churches. After that
I get pains in pregnant clouds.
You were so dear to speak spring
into everything, therefore
do not say anything.

2 THESSALONIANS

Whether by mouth or by letter,

I tell you things you know.

Day let you in, growing more

and more revealed in breath, in mind

blazing being. All will be revealed

as Spirit keep away. From you

of all people, constantly holding.

1 TIMOTHY

Contrary to what the good saints

taught, authority is godless.

You neglect the shipwrecked angels

keeping iron light within you,

seared as with friction, mind

and matters braided up the pillar

holding ruin ransom and night

as though a violent widow.

2 TIMOTHY

The promise out from lion's mouth
is poured into the cloak of scrolls,
parchments of sound spread out
against winter. Like gangrene the season
an itching departure, the last mark of lovers
recalling the flame its rash of hard pleasure.
Crops raised from word only ruins,
form denying power, deserted house
of silver light I constantly remember.

TITUS

Nothing is enslaved to fact. Every town warped
to its own genealogies. I left that you
might charge the train of reason, your
drunkenness your mercy, washing out
the ought of doctrine.

PHILEMON

Dear and dearer, both and brother do
what you do you soldier of always.

I hear hearts without consent. Old man
fellow son, with my own hand I owe it
to bold the heart home.

HEBREWS

As spoken by the universe, my rest
is called today, an aging sanctuary
cleansed into world. Here I am
in the scroll, bitter root burning,
the tabernacle lampstand dead
eyes of heaven over bare bodies still
in hardened rebellion. Scarlet wool
and sprinkled hyssop, blood branches
bones into hands. Washings of shadow.
Drowned mountain animals drift without sky.

JAMES

Heat withers its blossom.

Beauty falls the same way.

Within you want the sea to speak
and harvest what it says. Or death
ships driven by restless winds to harbor
songs of praise. You are a mist
for a while. You are the forest on fire
in mouths of dead horses.

1 PETER

Children scattered from blood heart,
you have been born flowers
enduring like darkness the field fall.
Elder bear lording the deeply world
down from his grass braided house
in the tree. Sprinkling milk over body
wounds healed. Babies devour the king.

2 PETER

The truth of this tent body filthy with ashes

washed over cities the vomit of angels.

These things fall blackest, laid bare heresies

spoken without speech, entangled in the sacred

madness of keeping. We are, precious beasts, slaves

of knowing. Driven by storm roar to morning.

1 JOHN

The world speaks through its seed.

In us the world comes blood.

2 JOHN

I ask that we walk one another
in and out this paper house, because
the world lives new in us. If it runs ahead
do not send want—we will, in walking,
bring it face to face.

3 JOHN

They told you the truth is a well.

Well the truth is, they, well they
gave it to the men who love nothing.

The truth of the well is that it is
welcome to strangers.

JUDE

The urge to bound bodies against
what you do not understand.

REVELATION

Quake split cities in the stomach of the bear.
Prophets of breath spit wood birds thirsty,
smoke locusts sickle in peals. I am
the lion face man. Inside I weep clusters
of hailstones, a pale scarlet mountain
flowing out the press. I saw a leopard give birth
to the mouth of the dead. The sky prophesying
to sackcloth trees. In midair water
I held the sound of glass against
prostitute teeth. Rocks fall as snow
on a furnace, ablaze in a sea of black flour.
Dead man your sting died.
This book is all wrong.
You can break these things open any time.
This death the crown of life.
Wear it naked in bed burning angels,
the slain tribe of language like a torch
around your singing.

VITA

Bradley Harrison Smith was born in Des Moines, Iowa. He is a graduate of Truman State University, the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas, and the University of Missouri-Columbia.