

**Emblems of Queer Experience:  
Reading the Poetry of James Merrill through Gay Sensibility**

Christopher Nathan Corl

Defense Committee:

Prof. Julie Carr, Advisor, English

Prof. Jeremy Green, English

Prof. Paul Gordon, Humanities

University of Colorado, Boulder

April 9, 2012

## Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Table of Contents	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Emblems of Queer Experience	
1. Introduction	5
2. Gay Lingo — or “The World Through Rainbow-Colored Glasses”	12
3. Light Fare: Gay Lingo and Gay Eroticism	22
4. “Mirror”: Rendering the Experience of the Closet	25
5. “Prism”: The Invisible Walls of Gay Life	30
6. “The Emerald”: Jewel of a Life	34
7. Geode: Love from Fantastic Pressures	38
8. <i>A Scattering of Salts</i> : “The Pyroxenes” and “Pearl”	42
9. Conclusion: Of Love and Loss	54
Bibliography	57
Appendices	
A. The Candid Decorator	61
B. Between Us	63
C. Mirror	64
D. Prism	65
E. The Emerald	66
F. From: “In Nine Sleep Valley”	68
G. The Pyroxenes	69
H. Pearl	70

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible if it were not for the generous and gracious assistance of my advisor, Julie Carr, whose patient guidance and support was instrumental in bringing this project from a tangle of disparate ideas into a single coherent body of work.

I would also like to thank Charles and Sean for being at my side supporting me every step of the way. Without your encouragement, your assistance, and most of all your faith in me I'd never have been able to finish this, and probably would have never started in the first place. Thank you for always singing my dreams and aspirations back to me when I forget or lose sight of them.

Lastly, I offer my sincere gratitude to all those who assisted me in the completion of this project.

## Abstract

In the poetry of James Merrill, and in his later work in particular, the poet clearly, sometimes even ostentatiously, utilizes a particular blend of gay sensibility and camp aesthetic to frame and enhance the meanings of his poems. Yet, critics and scholars often misread or disregard these poetic gestures and the poet's sexuality in general, resulting in a diminished understanding of Merrill's work. This study examines a line of Merrill's poetry in which geologic and crystalline imagery are posed as emblems of queer experience in an effort to show the necessity of reading Merrill from a queer perspective. The emblems Merrill uses in these poems are firmly rooted in his personal experience and sexual development. Nevertheless they offer nuanced insight to any reader willing to engage them on their own terms, that is, with consideration for the poet's personal, queer (read gay male of a certain era) context.

## Emblems of Queer Experience:

### Reading the Poetry of James Merrill through Gay Sensibility

The particular heroism of modern poets since Wordsworth lies in the courage of their self-scrutiny, and in their boldness in expressing what they have learned. To this end, what Leavis called “heuristic poetry” uses form in a destructive-creative way, breaking down conventional or received modes of expression in order to build up new, more accurate modes. Merrill is not a poet of discovery, in this sense.

– Adam Kirsch, “All That Glitters”

It’s hard *not* to think of Merrill as some kind of superior alien being who deigned to walk among us for a while, absorbing the totality of experience on our planet – time, eros, death, friendships, animals, plants, America, Europe, Asia, sex, minerals, X-rays, families, houses, opera, discos, lovers, art – and reporting it all from every conceivable point of view (that of a goldfish, for example) and in every known register of our language. (Merrill’s the kind of poet who can put “plink!” and “Villiers de l’Isle Adam” in the same poem – and get away with it.)

– Daniel Mendelsohn, “A Poet of Love and Loss”

It might seem surprising that two such highly regarded critics and scholars of poetry as Daniel Mendelsohn and Adam Kirsch could come to such divergent evaluations of the style and substance of the poetry of James Merrill; yet in the field of Merrill scholarship and criticism such polarization has not been unusual. There are those who hail Merrill as one of the great poets of our time – of the century even – and then there are those who find his poetry too concerned with surfaces, too ornate, and/or lacking substance. What makes this polarization particularly interesting and arresting is that commentators so often arrive at contradictory evaluations of the very same formal or stylistic impulses in Merrill’s work. As can be seen in the excerpts above, for Mendelsohn, Merrill’s oscillating tone and perspective, his shifting, iridescent observations and references, establish Merrill as an

authentically great poet,<sup>1</sup> whereas Kirsch views those same elements as mere superficial or “decorative” gestures.

Although acknowledging that there was “no American poet more artistically serious than Merrill” and that he was “one of the finest American poets of the last half-century,” Kirsch, nevertheless dismisses his work as “decadent” and “superficial ... profoundly concerned with surfaces.” Fellow critic Caroline Fraser objects to Kirsch’s characterization, however, arguing it is homophobic at base. “Those sensitive to language should recognize words such as ‘elegant,’ ‘decadent’ and ‘aesthete’” for what they are: barely disguised code defaming Merrill's homosexuality.” Indeed, Fraser goes on to note that Merrill was the target of persistent homophobic “criticism,” complaining that “more unwarranted ad hominem nonsense has been written about [Merrill] than about any other American Poet” (n.p.).

Stephen Burt, another more admiring Merrill scholar, similarly observes that “[some] readers have found [Merrill’s] poems overelaborate, or else complain that the poems’ range of reference excludes them. Such objections can reveal the objectors’ resentment (or their homophobia)” (n.p.).

Critic, scholar, and poet Paul Breslin, makes quite clear what is required in order to “love” Merrill poetry:

Well then: having tried to fight through the thickets as Merrill hoped “the right reader” would do, can I offer the love that he wasn’t sure he could accept? Finally, no, and perhaps I can’t because, despite all their reticence, his

---

<sup>1</sup> Mendelsohn specifically admires the way that Merrill’s verse (as he feels all truly great poetry does) transfigures “the world itself ... flipping the world upside down for you, making you wonder ... about just where you stand in relation to everything and anything.”

poems finally demand, no less than Walt Whitman's, that I enter into an imaginary erotic relation with their maker. (352)

Breslin is no homophobe. He counts among the poetry he cherishes most that of eminent queer poets, and willingly "suspends heterosexuality" to engage them. And throughout his critical analysis of Merrill's poetry, he knows he must do so to accurately and deeply comprehend it. He is willing to experience this poet's work on its own terms.

To be fair then (Fraser's accusation notwithstanding) let us allow that Kirsch need not be a homophobe in order not to "love" Merrill.<sup>2</sup> His literary critical attention to Merrill's work is meticulous and fine-tuned; yet, he repeatedly does not (or is unwilling to) experience this poet's work through the lenses deriving from the poet's life and experience, which include that of a gay man.<sup>3</sup> Kirsch, one might surmise, misreads Merrill's poetry with "hetero" eyes – through the lenses of heterocentrism.<sup>4</sup>

And this is the argument of this paper. That in order to engage Merrill's poetry with the greatest possibility of fishing its depths and hauling in its beauties, one must read it with a "queer eye."

---

<sup>2</sup> Though, others similarly fault Kirsch for hostility toward gay material. Zachary Leader, the author of *The Movement Reconsidered: Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie and their Contemporaries*, describes in his book Kirsch's published disgust at Larkin's pseudonymous lesbian erotic writing as "a frigid blast of homophobia" (82).

<sup>3</sup> For example, where Breslin recognizes in Merrill's reticence the psychic scar tissue of the closet, and recognizes in Merrill's focus on masks and surfaces the genius of a survivor of the closet coming to artistic terms with the exigencies in concealment, Kirsch sees only "snobbery" and a "decadent" focus. Kirsch entirely misses the existential reality of a gay man when he objects: "When the valuable is identified with the rare and the precious, rather than with the common and the profound, it makes sense that the poet will see himself as addressing a select audience ... in his poetry he has an exaggerated sense of his own particularity, his separation from the rest of the world, which can border on snobbery." (43) Breslin, on the other hand, takes no issue with Merrill's focus on the "rare and precious" nor that he experiences himself as "separate[ed] from the rest of the world." He recognizes the gay poet as having experienced himself as profoundly separated – and that queerness identifies with what is rare.

<sup>4</sup> Terms which the consensus of critical opinion consider those of virtuosic excellence. That Merrill is a poet of singular craft, depth, and one of originality, has been extensively established by many important critics (e.g., Harold Bloom (who refers to Merrill as "the Mozart of American Poetry"), X. J. Kennedy, Stephen Yenser, Helen Vendler, Ernie Hilbert, David Yezzi, J. D. McClatchy, W. S. Merwin, inter alia). After all, Merrill had, by the time of his death, won nearly every major literary award in the United States.

As J. D. McClatchy, a poet, author, editor, critic, close friend, and executor of Merrill's estate, observed: "Merrill's sexuality is like a drop of dye let fall into a glass of water: it is subdued but suffuses everything" (237). Merrill's poetry was saturated by his experience as a gay man; it was, as far as McClatchy was concerned, unavoidable. And yet, a great many critical examinations of his poetry avoid it entirely.

To be sure, at first, Merrill was a closet queer poet. But his sexuality, always present, became increasingly more prominent over the course of his career. He likely would have enjoyed the metaphor of his sexuality taking different roles in the stage performance of his verse. In his earlier work his sexuality directed the play of his poems from the wings or, perhaps, from the prompter's box, while from the 1970s on, Merrill's gay voice stepped onto stage as a performer in its own right – and not just performer. Star.

Edmund White observed:

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

That critics ignore or disregard the queerness and the value of the queerness of Merrill's poetic content despite its clear presence comes as little surprise to queer theorists. Some of them have been arguing since the 1990s against the conspiracies of homophobic silence and for the necessity of reading the queer text through a queer lens.

Queer theorist pioneer Byrne R. S. Fone argues that understanding "homosexual textuality" was essential to understanding the poetry of a gay man – and took on Walt



Whitman's poetry as a case in point. In fact, as the editor of his book describes "[Fone] identifies the definitive signs, symbols, metaphors, and structures unique to homosexual texts as he examines the ways in which the social, emotional, spiritual, aesthetic and sexual facts of homosexuality shape and define the text" (ii).

The early queer theorist Thomas Yingling picked up the banner of homosexual textuality by insisting on a "homosexually centered reading" of gay poets; Hart Crane served as his example. For Crane (as it was for Merrill), homosexuality was his life's "central experience" and "one of the central issues in his work." Since art is "the expression of personality, ... Crane's homosexuality permeates his texts overtly, through encoding or by omission" (611). As Yingling continues:

In a tradition that claims Walt Whitman as one of its central figures, and that lists among its important names Hart Crane, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Merrill, Robert Duncan, and others ... the absence of male homosexuality as a central topic of investigation in American literary criticism ... seems not merely politically suspect but intellectually dishonest. (Mazzaro 611)

As Fone did, Yingling points to what is distinctive in what he calls "gay poetry." For example, a queer poet's use of mimesis, he argued, is fundamentally different from that usually encountered in non-gay poets. As Mazzaro summarizes Yingling: "In meditative poetry what is evoked is vividly, fully, and honestly detailed, and the details establish a 'text' that mediates between the poet's vision, life, and the reader's understanding" (612). In gay poetry,

... evocation occurs by a shifting combination of synecdoche, symbol, and photographic detail ... places and events are evoked by parts ... These evocations may also engage differing senses, so that the usual consistency and sustained perspective reinforcing a poem's unfolding and comprehension do not occur. (612)

To be clear, it is not that these poetic gestures are necessarily gay in themselves, nor is it the case that straight poets couldn't also utilize similar poetic techniques. Rather, Yingling points to these markers as characteristic prosodic strategies of some gay poets – specifically those for whom their own sexuality is a central defining feature of their writing – and that these strategies produce a fundamentally different reading experience than those strategies utilized by other poets.

Yingling, on behalf of the gay male poet, is waging a full frontal assault on what Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick referred to as “the assertive, brutalizing silence that surrounds his presence in the world as a homosexual,” someone who must learn “the lesson of silence, the mendacious, intensely performative silence whose history is that of the closet” (79).<sup>5</sup> Such queer theorists continue to identify prevalent and predominant modes by which compulsory heterosexuality are enforced through silences.

An example of this reigning silence among critics in Merrill's case might be useful. As White noted, Merrill's epic trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* presents the queer artist “as a privileged being” in the mostly satirical cosmological hierarchy established in the book. Or, as Nadine Hubbs summarizes, “Merrill's famous epic posits a cosmological scheme (revealed to him by divine messengers) in which homosexuals occupy an exalted

---

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Larry Kramer famously addressed the graduating class at Yale with a speech addressing Yale's homophobia as a “conspiracy of silence.”

place in the advancement of humanity thanks to their singular contributions to intellectual and artistic culture” (116). Yet, at a 1994 symposium assessing James Merrill’s achievement in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, the panelists (Helen Vendler, Richard Kenney, Rachel Hadas, and Stephen Yenser – eminent critics all) reference “homosexual” only once in their 11,200-word conversation (“James”).<sup>6</sup> Again, the silence.

The salient point that this paper wishes to argue – one that Fone, Yingling, and others have been arguing for gay poets for twenty years – is that to read this great poet well, one needs to embrace the gay lived experience being reflected as essential content of the poetry.<sup>7</sup> That this poetry deeply impresses critics who in fact do read him through hetero-centric perspectives speaks much of Merrill.<sup>8</sup> But there are deeper worlds of meaning in these poems available to the diligent reader if she or he will open to the creative and experiential context of the poet’s sexuality.

Merrill’s poetry, his treatment of the universal human experience of “love and loss,” is articulated through the particularity of his experience as a gay man. And while it is deeply meaningful for any astute reader, it is more so for the astute reader with a queer lens available to her or him. To illuminate this, the poems we will examine here are some of his most direct and personal meditations on sexuality and identity. These poems hold together as a coherent body, as if in direct discussion, bound by related themes and associated imagery. Interestingly, all of them present the image or metaphor of rare gems

---

<sup>6</sup> To her credit, Vendler is the only one to mention “homosexual,” and she did so complaining that Merrill had de-eroticized his cosmogony, not even providing a homosexual one. Some of the panelists admitted it had never occurred to them to consider the absence of the [homo]erotic as problematic.

<sup>7</sup> To be clear: *that* Merrill’s poetic content reflects a life of gay experience does not in itself constitute added value to the poetry. Such content might, for instance, weaken or “ghetto-ize” a poem to the degree it could limit or strain universal human themes.

<sup>8</sup> For example, one can read the poetry of John Donne without prior knowledge of Elizabethan metaphysics or theology and be deeply impressed. But how much more Donne comes to mean to the reader who engages him on his own terms.

and the geologic forces of their generation as emblematic of the gay male experience. Each poem thus represents the formation of queer sexual identity through metaphors bound to the intensities and grandiose scale of geologic forces. And each invokes emblems of Merrill's particular queer life experience. Throughout this analysis we will observe the development and maturation of Merrill's confidence in using his own sexuality as essential poetic content.

Our analysis will begin with a brief examination of two lighter poems, or "studies," if you will – "A Candid Decorator" from *The Yellow Pages* (1974) and "Between Us" from *Nights and Days* (1966) – to review some overt gay themes in Merrill's work. Then we will trace a line of six of his more sophisticated poems that make use of geological imagery and metaphor in differing ways: "Mirror" from *A Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), "Prism" from *Water Street* (1962), "The Emerald" and "In Nine Sleep Valley" (#8) from *Braving the Elements* (1972), and "The Pyroxenes" and "Pearl" from *A Scattering of Salts* (1995).

These examinations will neither be exhaustive nor definitive. Merrill's poetry is too densely compact and multivalent to attempt that here.<sup>9</sup> Rather, we will seek to identify the often neglected or disregarded queer content to illustrate how including consideration of this essential content adds layers of meaning which would otherwise be missed.

### **Gay Lingo — or "The World through Rainbow-Colored Glasses"**

Key to engaging the poems, however, is a brief exploration of what can be understood in Merrill's case to be a gay sensibility. What should one look for if seeking to

---

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the literary analyses of any one of these poems published in poetry journals have run to more than twenty pages single-spaced.

read his poems with a “queer eye,” as referenced above. Or, said differently, what is Merrill’s context for gay male content?

One of Merrill’s most frequently quoted references to his emergence as an openly gay man comes from his 1993 memoir, *A Different Person*, where he wryly relates how, “...as in the classic account of Sarah Bernhardt descending a spiral staircase – she stood still and *it* revolved around her – my good fortune was to stay in one place while the closet simply disintegrated” (192). The line is classic Merrill: to make light of the difficult, to shrug off the traumatic. And all this inevitably shot through with irony and wit. Although he portrays himself as having little agency in the apparently inevitable “disintegration” of his closet, clearly his tongue is firmly in his cheek. After all, this line comes after nearly 200 pages of Merrill describing (with characteristic reserve and understatement) how challenging and traumatizing his coming out had actually been.<sup>10</sup> While this gesture is characteristic of Merrill, it also is characteristic of and appeals to a particular gay sensibility, one that can touch on the deeply serious, painful – even traumatic – lightly, effortlessly, gracefully, (sometimes with a flourish of the wrist) as though to say, *Non, c’est rien*. In this instance, the way he styles himself as gay – everything from referencing this account by gay cult favorite Jules Renard,<sup>11</sup> to superimposing his experience with the poise of the famously graceful silent screen star (and, of course, we can’t help but imagine him superimposed in drag), down to the stressed emphases in italics mimicking camp inflection – reframes the real emotional struggle involved in coming out of the closet in terms of diva-

---

<sup>10</sup> His memoir focuses on the years of emotional turmoil he went through in an attempt to come to terms with his gay identity – various difficult episodes with his parents, fraught love affairs, as well as his experience with psychotherapy and the often homophobic and shame-inducing methods of his therapist.

<sup>11</sup> As Renard described the moment at a hotel in Marseilles: *Quand elle descend l’escalier en escargot de l’hôtel, il semble qu’elle reste immobile et que l’escalier tourne autour d’elle* (Baring 122).

like wit and self-deprecating comedy. Lines like this – bubbling over with a particular charm and gay bonhomie as Merrill performs his gayness, presenting an identity – are those that lovers of Merrill’s work look forward to in his poetry.

What shall we mean by a “gay sensibility” when it comes to poetry? For our purposes, let us use Meyer’s consideration of performativity as a departure point and consider this sensibility to be a shared body of taste based on a sensitivity to elements of composition, design, and, indeed, performance.

In particular, Merrill wrote for those readers deeply invested in high culture – including opera, literature, architecture, painting, dance, western and East Asian art, and *objets d’art*, to name a very few examples – subjects which, treated in a particular way, have tended to (among American males at least) appeal to a certain class of gay men and their female allies. For example, Merrill wrote an entire poem on the willowware pattern on a Chinese teacup. He wrote more seriously and more frequently about opera than possibly any poet previous or since. He wrote of the intensities and pleasures of theatre. He wrote about needing to redecorate his apartment.

In Robert Martin’s extensive study of the “Homosexual Tradition in American Literature,” the critic suggests that when people talk about a gay male sensibility they usually mean, “a particular elegance, a sensitivity to the surfaces of things, a taste for order, and an ironic distance between the self and the world” (203).<sup>12</sup> The description is apt in the case of Merrill. The lapidary elegance and nuanced attention to surfaces of his lines permeate his poetry and require no special example. His taste for order is unquestioned: over decades during which the dominant acceptable “form” of poetry – free verse – was

---

<sup>12</sup> Again, we’ll recall Kirsch damned that distance as “snobbery” while Breslin recognized it as, essentially true – the inheritance of the closet.

studiously formless and usually non-metrical, he remained committed almost subversively to a *sprezzatura* mastery of the intricacies of metrical formalism, as well as *metrical* free verse. And certainly scholars have noted a kind of *otherness* or other-worldliness about his poetry.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly the lived experience of gay men and lesbians in the US even now is one of necessary distance maintained between oneself and a suffocatingly heteronormative society. At first, we adopt this as a survival strategy. Even when we are told we are welcome, we are aware we do not fit. The irony comes over time from the recognition among queers that, actually, none of the straight people in the room fit, either. They just don't seem to know they don't fit. The reigning illusion of "being normal" and the security from stigma afforded by conformity to "normal" (as argued so well by queer theorist Michael Warner in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*) necessitates a room full of gender performance and sexuality performance by heterosexuals *who believe they're acting naturally*. But, as the philosopher Crispin Sartwell wryly observes, "Straight or gay, we're all just acting." From a queer perspective it is easy to see this as comic – even while we keep a wary and ironic distance.

What the reader sensitive to the gay reading of a Merrill poem will perceive is a characteristically gay "knowing glance" he will share with them at times in his poems. The knowing glance is a pebble tossed into the waters of the poem's still reflection, which, in turn, sends ripples out troubling and refracting the reflections in startling ways. When Merrill does this, through his "gay sensibility," he is not toying with a surface, per se. He is

---

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom of all people commented on this quality in Merrill's verse, claiming that "What is most original and valuable in Merrill's poetry comes out of [his] otherness, out of a quality that transcends even a sensibility from the highest camp" (5-6).

playfully complicating the cultural presumption that what we see is how things are. Later, we will explore this gesture further.

The comic irony that pervades Merrill's work is a natural offshoot of this keen awareness of artifice and the performativity of identities; it is also a prominent feature of a gay sensibility.<sup>14</sup> This mode of expression seeks to invert expectations through overstatement or understatement. We see this pervasively in Merrill's writing: when he is not making light of something serious, he is inevitably working to overturn expectations, upend clichés, or somehow subvert what otherwise might be earnest perspectives and insights that either he or the culture proposes. Merrill frequently pitches the tone of his poems to allow for a certain lavishness or playfulness – a campy dead-pan wink from across the rim of a Baccarat champagne flute – eschewing pretentious solemnity or supercilious didacticism at all costs. McClatchy emphasizes this tone when he describes Merrill's "uncanny, almost anarchic habit of turning everything upside down," his "instinctive habit of reversing a truth or upending the mawkish" (232).

Camp, taken in its broadest sense, is surely a useful term to define one of Merrill's "gay" ways of utilizing comic irony. Camp is, of course, a signature stylistic device and gesture employed in gay performance. Generally speaking, camp is a means of upsetting expectations and complicating and often compressing meaning through an extravagant expression or portrayal. As Susan Sontag points out in her landmark essay "Notes on Camp" (itself a mainstay of gay culture):

---

<sup>14</sup> Comic irony is, it could well be argued, a prominent feature in the subcultures of many minorities in the US (and elsewhere). But each had its peculiar inflection. For example, particular inflections distinguished the comic irony of New York Jews from that of New York Irish-Americans of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And the distinguishing inflections were maintained, in part, to serve as tribal recognition in a hostile space, as socializing glue, and coping mechanism, and as a signaling device. The comic irony of queers, likewise, has its particular inflections.



The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, antiserious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious.” One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious. (Cleto 62)

In some sense then, camp is an aesthetic perspective that perceives that whatever may be serious does not have to be solemn; one can laugh in the face of what is terrible or terribly important. As Sontag notes, “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (Cleto 51). The lynchpin is the sense of extravagance. As Sontag points out, “The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers” (Cleto 59).

Merrill frequently subverted camp to his ends by employing extravagant *understatement* to make a campy point. He provides an illustration of this when in his memoir he jests about the misconception in the psychoanalysis and academia of his time, that “the nastier the insight, the truer it was” (69). From the point of view of a more mature man reflecting on his own experience of psychotherapy, he clearly objects to this understanding of authenticity of insight, and the intense focus on the dark, brutish, and shameful “truths” of an individual’s psyche. And in true camp form he punningly characterizes mid-century psychoanalysis as following the rubric that “High spirits must be

downplayed,” because, after all, “the fanged uglies of the ocean floor [are] more fundamental than the dolphins and flying fish” (69).<sup>15</sup>

Puns abound in Merrill. He defied the commonplace high-culture unspoken principle that puns were “unseemly” “in adult company.” He himself wrote that while Wallace Stevens believed “There is no wing like meaning,” and he agreed, he added (in defense of puns) “Two [meanings] are needed to get off the ground” (*Object Lessons*, 112). But even this was in the service of serious engagement with life and art. As McClatchy reflects: “[Merrill] was interested in the paradoxical nature of experience. It was his stylistic habit to try and see everything and its opposite together. That’s the nature of metaphor itself. It could be anything, from a butterfly to a bomb.” Recognizing the paradoxical nature of experience is not essential to gay poets – and punning is not the only (or even primary) way of identifying paradoxical ontologies – but in Merrill’s case paradox and pun were essential components of his poetic exploration of his own sexuality. Said another way, punning was one of Merrill’s lexically playful ways of highlighting and eroticizing the paradoxes he explored (even as he merely loved the play of words).

But to return to Merrill’s observations of psychotherapy, we should not think he veered away from examining the type of darkness or seriousness implied by the image of the “fanged uglies.” On the contrary, his poetry is full of sobering realizations, emotional trauma, and considerable grief and loss. However, Merrill sought beyond all else (as he references in “An Upset”), “Uprightness, lightness, poise” in expressing even the most devastating grief (line 28). As Burt noted, Merrill’s poems “hope to make life, thought,

---

<sup>15</sup> Impressively (or deplorably, depending on your bent) he manages a five-level pun on “fundamental” when he’s referring to the uglies of the ocean depths: “fundamental” as being of greatest importance, of being at “greatest depth,” of being “at the root or base,” of being “foundational,” and (as the music aesthete he was) when you strike a “fundamental” chord it rises from the bass (implied pun: base), the lowest frequency.

feeling, at their worst, seem lighter and more bearable, by placing technique, form, jokes (in-jokes, even) on the other end of the scales" (*The Boston Review*). For Merrill camp and comic irony serve this gesture, providing us the fundamental flying fish and dolphins.

The consequence of a sensibility that includes camp, or perhaps a further function of its employment, is a highly nuanced perception of the various layers of artifice of the world we live in. Camp is, in fact, an aesthetic sense that sees the artificial and the authentic as inseparable and in some ways indistinguishable. As Sontag insightfully notes, "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp:" not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater (Cleto 56)."

Merrill understood all too well – and particularly as a gay man – that we perform the self, that we "appear" in all sorts of roles (including those of gender, relationship, sexuality), and that, based on the extent to which we believe our performance, we claim "being" and identity. And regardless of whether we believe our own performance to be "natural" or "real," if the community or society does, that performance becomes our perceived identity. "Being" and "seeming" are inevitable, and essential to each other. Merrill frequently references the theatricality of the universal human practice of posing a self in order to create contingent selves. As Burt observes of Merrill's sense of what authenticity consists of, "he who would find himself must lose himself first in other performances, amid the flexible rules of social life, or the rules of art" (*The Boston Review*).

This insight from camp sensibility both enhances the sense of ironic distance from the world at the same time that it fosters the perception that identity/sexuality is a construct, however inevitable. Merrill explores this through various emblems (themselves

constructs) to evoke the means by which we construct our own identities – or by which these have been constructed. This he explores through metaphors that intentionally highlight artifice. But for Merrill, the artificer, his apprenticeship was carried out in the dark recesses of the closet – an experience formative for him and universal to gay men.

And it is this he emblematically renders again and again in his poetry: the signal experience of the closet; the experience of feeling forced by stigma to hide one's identity, the experience of a psychic and performative space constructed in order to prevent an aspect of one's stigmatized self from being discovered. In many ways the closet exemplifies the very role-playing sense of camp Sontag identifies above. At a basic level, of course, the closet is the experience of putting on a mask or a costume, the activity of performing an artificial identity as defense and diversion.

Indeed, Breslin considers the experience of the closet as central to Merrill's poetics, the characteristic reticence as Merrill's need to "outwit his own despair."

In *A Different Person*, [Merrill] maintains that "a poem too easy to read was without value"; his "difficult surfaces were rather a kind of ... mask, an invitation ... to the right reader who would have fought through to the poem's emotional core. Could I accept love from such a reader? I wasn't at all sure that I could." But what does the patient reader find in that emotional core? ... I begin to suspect that ... what drove Merrill's art was the need to outwit his own despair ... an aching lack at the heart of things seems everywhere implied. He was the ... the gay son of a prominent family... . Raised by parents bent on keeping up appearances, he grew up with a closet

mentality not just in sexual matters, but in other areas of personal emotion as well. (Breslin 344)

Yet, for Merrill the metaphor of the closet went beyond those of defense and diversion, to a space where a different personal reality could be explored. As he explains in his memoir, “To the artist a closet is quite as useful as it once was to the homosexual: what [the poet] John Hollander calls, in the lingo of spy thrillers, a cover life, allowing us to get on with our true work as secret agents for the mother tongue” (230). The sense of the cover life granted by the closet is a versatile metaphor to speak to issues of identity construction in general. As Peter Nickowitz argues in *Rhetoric and Sexuality*, responding to Merrill:

The trope of the closet presents the artist with a preexisting and sustaining metaphor for gender and sexual identity—one that can be utilized freely by anyone willing to claim it. In this way, the elasticity of the closet, its ability to encompass and represent persons across boundaries of race, class, or gender, functions like catachresis to speak for and to represent individuals for whom there are no other forms of representation. The closet can be “quite useful” precisely in the way that it provides the artist with a preexisting metaphor into which he or she can construct his or her own web of images. The closet is a starting point, the lack of which can lead to purely mundane, material revelations. (145-146)

This unique web of images is precisely what Merrill develops through his presentation of the closet and sexuality in his poetry. In several poems he creates a metaphor or symbol of the closet as a means of speaking to and about the various layers of artifice and deception

involved in self-discovery, and identity formation. Through these metaphors he establishes a vocabulary to speak to gay experience, sexuality, and, universality of love and loss.

### **Light Fare: Gay Lingo and Gay Eroticism**

Merrill utilized a considerable range of registers to express himself. We shall look at two examples of his more overt gay campiness.

The tone of gay male performative inflection is especially clear in the small book of poems *The Yellow Pages* (1974), one he characterized as “a little light verse.” Admittedly these are not his best, but they are illustrative of the gay underpinnings of style and technique we intend to focus on in our later analysis of some of his more important poems. One prime example is a short poem titled “A Candid Decorator.”

In this “sassy” narrative (one with flamboyant attitude), the speaker wishes to redecorate his apartment and interviews an equally flamboyant interior decorator. Here we are clearly in “let’s have fun with gay tropes” territory. Nevertheless, the poem is dealing seriously with an unspecified loss (of a lover?) or decline that the speaker is grieving. Yet, the speaker wishes to move on from the “scars and stains” (line 3) and “Panels” (4) that plague his habitation by changing everything “I thought I would do over / All of it.” (1-2).

At the level of syntax and diction the language that Merrill uses is distinctly “gay” in the performative ways proper to an old “queen” suffused with a flighty sociability. Such lines as “such / A nice young man appeared” (9-10) and “But to be frank, my dear” (29) invokes this image. The speaker is not alone in flamboyance; the “nice young” decorator

throws up his hands and exclaims, “Extravagance!” when he catches on to the speaker’s envisioned redecoration (25).

Here, camp extravagance is Merrill’s ironic remedy to the ravages of grief. Of course, as paradox and irony would have it, the camp gesture is insufficient to the task, as we see the speaker buckle theatrically by his Grand Rapids chair “And wept until I laughed / And laughed until I wept.” (45-46).

Another important way Merrill expresses specifically gay male sexuality through his poetry is through homoerotic references and imagery. This manifests as innuendo, disguised allusions to the naked (usually male) body, its several parts, and specific sex acts. We will look briefly at one example of this style: an early poem from the book *Nights and Days* (1966) called “Between Us.”

This poem plays with distinctly homoerotic imagery, but Merrill presents the homoeroticism through association, implication, and indirection. It is an early poem – published during Merrill’s “closeted” poetic period. Yet, the homoeroticism would certainly have been clear from the outset to a gay male reader of the time (and his knowing allies). To any current reader of Merrill, who is cognizant of gay experience reflected in his poetry, the poem would also be clear. But to the reader unfamiliar with the poet’s life or insensitive to the homoerotic, the poem may seem either completely indecipherable or merely superficial: a playful poem about a hand.

“A . . . face? There

It lies on the pillow by

Your turned head’s tangled graying hair:

Another – like a shrunken head, too small!

My eyes in dread

Shut. Open. It is there, (lines 1-6)

The narrative starts with the speaker having just groggily awakened to look at his lover beside him in bed only to see another face on the pillow between them. This disoriented question mark frames the poem. What is this "It"?

At the end of the poem the speaker realizes what he is seeing: "A hand, seen queerly. Mine." (15). However, before we (along with the speaker) can recognize the object as the speaker's own hand, we have seen it through other imagery that suggests this queer hand might actually be a penis. "Waxen, inhuman. Small. / The taut crease of the mouth shifts. It / Seems to smile." (7-9). It is described "like a shrunken head, too small!" (4) and again later Merrill muses "Elsewhere / I have known what it was, this thing, known / the blind eye-slit" (10-12).

Hand or penis? But of course it is both. The uncertainty surrounding the subject of the poem allows the imagery to accrue without restrictive associations determining a single reading. The effect is a compression of homoerotic imagery bound to the bed of our gay speaker. The impressions accrue and compound for the reader: a hand here, a penis there, a tangle of hair, perhaps manual stimulation, or at one point a possible oral sex scene – "The taut crease of the mouth shifts. It / Seems to smile, / Chin up in the wan light." (8-10) – and what might be dreamy post-coital tristesse, all punctuated with a "soft moan" (17).



But it is 1966, after all, and explicit homoerotic verse was liable to police action or a lawsuit.<sup>16</sup> So we end up with a hand on a pillow – and the speaker reaching for the other in bed with him (whether male or female, as ever, left unclear).<sup>17</sup> But the speaker reaches only after a poem full of evocative homoerotic imagery.

In “Between Us” and “A Candid Decorator” we see foregrounded references to gay male experience. And the imagery is not complicated. The color scheme is rather straightforward, as it were. In his more important poems, however, he utilizes a pallet of colors far more diverse, nuanced, tints and shades. And with the varying layers of complexity the gay style and tone that he makes use of begins to transform into something wonderfully intelligent and idiosyncratic even as it opens up universal insights within the personal and the homosexual.

### **“Mirror”: Rendering the Experience of the Closet**

The poem “Mirror” (1959) presents a rich example of how Merrill renders the paradoxical experience of the closet. The closet is not – as ever with Merrill – the only subject of the poem. In fact, on the surface this poem might not appear to have any reference to Merrill’s life experience at all. And with no overt gay cultural or linguistic references, the poem’s tone is predominantly meditative rather than sparkling with that naughty wit or flamboyant sociability we have seen elsewhere. Yet “Mirror” is an extensive

---

<sup>16</sup> It was only just in the year of this poem’s publication, with the case *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, 383 U.S. 413 that the US Supreme Court raised the bar high enough in defining “prurient interest” and “pornography” that banning explicit sexual content in poems and prose became more difficult to legally enforce. However, this poem was being written when the court battles were still going on, and the police seizure of homoerotic magazines, poetry, and fiction still made headlines.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the use of the coy “indeterminate pronoun” (one not clearly indicating gender) in referring to lover or object of romance is a universal experience of closeted queer folk. We recognize it a mile off.

symbolic investigation of the closet – specifically what it means to hide by not letting people see “through” you, by maintaining an ordered image of yourself through reflecting the projections of others. Merrill’s reflections (as it were) on the subject yield both insight and inquiry not only into the nature of the closet as instrumental for his identity formation (as someone compelled to have much to hide), but more significantly into the meaning of authentic identity itself.

Indeed, the mirror is an example of what Jacob Stockinger identified as a “homotextuality” – a textual feature that is commonplace in “homosexual literary expression” – and in particular this “closed withdrawn space that is transformed from stigmatizing space into redeeming space” i.e., the closet (135). (Indeed, as we will see below, in Merrill’s presentation of “The Mirror,” we see both the strictures of the mirror/closet, and the ironic loss of redemption in the loss of the closet/mirror’s reflectivity.

As Piotr Gwiazda perceptively identifies:

Merrill [repeatedly] makes use of the trope of the mirror as a symbol of self-interrogation ... A gay writer’s treatment of surroundings points to [this] example of homotextuality ... Merrill’s poems often project such enclosed spaces ... which function as useful metaphors for the homosexual experience in the post-World War II decades (42).

The reader sensitive to Merrill’s “culture” as a gay man may well recognize the confines of the mirror/“closet” – its constriction – and constructed not just by a homophobic culture from without, but by the internalized homophobia that results in relentless self-interrogation.

From the very first lines we get the sense that the speaker is weary of being closely watched and scrutinized by self and by others: “I grow old under an intensity / Of questioning looks” (lines 1-2). The reader soon recognizes the speaker identifies with the mirror and speaks from the mirror’s perspective. The expressed reticent anxiety of the mirror implies the speaker has something to hide (from others, and possibly from self), and that if looked at too closely this might be revealed.<sup>18</sup> The anxiety comes to a head when one of the children, musing on the “tall transparence” (29) of the window across the parlor, declares gnomically “*How superficial / Appearances are!*” (31-32). The sentence is a superficial tautology: each half of the statement mirrors itself.

The irony aside, perhaps this is what the mirror, what the person with a secret, what the closeted gay man (and, of course, anyone hiding behind an essential mask), fears hearing and even secretly agrees with. Here we find the first indication in the poem that the speaker might be seen through, seen for what he is. If the “children” know to look “behind” the appearance, the mirror knows he will be seen through. Thus, the fears of exposure “blister” in the mirror’s consciousness (40). He knows he has “lapses” (34) that his façade is not without “flaws” (36):

... Since then, as if a fish  
 Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,  
 I have lapses. I suspect  
 Looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes

---

<sup>18</sup> In Merrill’s memoir, he discovers at one point in a session with his therapist that he has fashioned a relationship with a young man who is creating himself in Merrill’s image. Merrill responds that if someone made *him* into a mirror he’d feel “misunderstood, ignored” (174). Carrying on a relationship with a mirror, he concludes, “is a one-sided transaction” (174). The only one who gets anything from it is the one standing before the reflective surface. This is particularly resonant for those of us who carried on relationships while closeted – but its revelation is applicable beyond the queer.

Through the blind flaws of my mind. (32-36)

What destroys the reflectiveness of the mirror, and with it the closet, is left open to interpretation. Perhaps the experience of the middle-aged speaker enduring “questioning looks” (2) over decades (with the ever-present possibility he himself is one of the interrogative gazers) and the fear of being seen through wear away at him. Perhaps a “will” (43) – self-interrogation over time – acts as rippling “vision” (37) (as it is later described), observing the disintegration of the silvery reflective closet. This vision,

Spreads and blackens. I do not know whose it is,

But I think it watches for my last silver

To blister, flake, float leaf by leaf, each milling-

Downward dumb conceit (38-41)

Here we see the silver backing of the mirror peeling away. The speaker sounds resigned to this. As the mirror back begins to peel away, and the metaphorical closet disintegrates with the dissolving reflectivity, so too must the very poetic device used to bundle and present them. The illusion of the poetic conceit is ultimately related to the cover lie of the closet. Thus the speaker’s concern over the flaking mirror back illuminates the paradoxical sense of authenticity conditioned by the closet. Specifically, the dilemma of the speaker suggests both that authenticity can only be reflected – that reflective surfaces may be the only source of learning or teaching – and the opposite, that authenticity comes from the kind of transparency and openness the speaker so envies in the window.

The mirror’s envious address of the parlor window opposite is rich with this very allusion; that is, the one whose life is instructive by its artifice envies the one whose life is effortless and “natural.” After all, the mirror and the window are both made of the same

stuff (“of everything I am” (12)) – the only difference being that the mirror has the thinnest reflective coating painted on its back. Yet in the same stroke Merrill also suggests the opposite must/may be true. That in contrast to the impenetrable “silver” of the mirror’s “reflectiveness” the parlor window is “Wide open, sunny, of everything I am / *Not*” (emphasis added) (12-13). The enjambment here suggests both that the window and mirror are the same and that they are vastly different. Thus, Merrill seems to suggest that the mere mirror backing, the superficial reflectivity, the impenetrable appearance of the mirror referring to the inauthenticities of the covert life the closet allows, both designates a tremendous difference in experience while simultaneously exposing the basic similarity of the two. And again, we see in this juxtaposition and paradoxical relation “appearance” being contrasted with “being.”

Some, scholars of “Mirror” have missed the “closet” reading, or avoid it.<sup>19</sup> But others have not. Again, for the homosexual, the homotextual is self-evident. What is added for the non-queer reader by recognizing potential gay/closet context? To recognize the speaker is a gay man living hidden in a hostile society (with internalized hostility “reflected” in his keeping hidden) helps the non-queer reader experience the existential stakes for the speaker. The reader can experience the speaker/mirror as safe so long as the mirror remains a closed space (the mirror remains authentic so long as it can remain reflective). Is

---

<sup>19</sup> The critic Stephen Burt, an admirer of Merrill’s poetry, fully includes considerations of the poet’s sexuality in his literary criticism, and reads the “Mirror” as a mask for Merrill, yearning to be able to touch the wider world. For Burt, the poem “combines in its reflective protagonist a playful artifice, a tacit sadness, and a desire to be more outgoing and less artful” (n.p.). Anatole Broyard, writing for *The New York Times*, does not acknowledge Merrill’s sexuality, and sees nothing in “Mirror” but the poet looking at himself as reflected in his poetry. Jefferson Humphries in an extensive 21-page literary analysis of mirror imagery in James Merrill references the poet’s life at length, without once referring to his sexuality or love. He finds no closet in the mirror; he finds, instead a Lacanian “other” (174). In these three examples, the homotextuality of the mirror as closet is apparently missed by the two critics “avoiding” the sexuality of the poet, and yet recognized by Burt who universalizes the closet.

it in any way about a non-queer reader's experience? Yes. A life constructed with reflective diversions or meanings, one-way relationships that do not permit vulnerability, contingent constructed safe identities that could peel away under a determined gaze by self and/or others – these are not alien ground for most people. Alert to the tropes, they would recognize resonance for their own experiences.

### **“Prism”: The Invisible Walls of Gay Life**

In several subsequent poems Merrill represents gay experience in progressively more open, fresh and (as ever) complicating ways. The poem “Prism” from *Water Street*, Merrill's third book of poems published in 1962, picks up where his meditation in “Mirror” left off. It begins:

Having lately taken up residence  
 In a suite of chambers  
 Windless, compact and sunny, ideal  
 Lodging for the pituitary gland of Euclid  
 If not for a “single gentleman (references),” (lines 1-5)

Here Merrill further explores translucence – the complex relationship of clarity with authenticity, as well as the implied loss of a type of selfhood defined by the reflective “artifice” of the mirror. Let us imagine Merrill has grown in his personal sense of confidence and agency, so instead of living as a mirror he has come to live in a prism. This is a different “windless, compact” enclosure (again, Stockinger's homotextuality of a “closed, confined space”), a different constriction that represents the difficult step(s) out of the closet. The prevailing themes of this poem are separateness, life as the other, the

constraints on and disorientation of gay life in a heteronormative world, and fascination with paradox.

As in “Mirror,” the speaker in “Prism” speaks from a dual perspective: he speaks both from the point of view of the object itself and from that of the subjective voice of a lyrical “I.” More precisely, the object can be understood to be the *function* of the prism: a translator of light.<sup>20</sup> As Yenser argues, “The chief subject of “Prism” is its own enmeshing process ...” (74). In contrast to “Mirror” where the speaker is self-reflective, here the speaker articulates the self-refractive (refraction being the action of distorting an image by viewing it through a medium; the deflecting of light from a straight path).

The prism is, in this poem, a crystal paperweight – a clear, translucent body open to light. And is this not something like what the speaker in “Mirror” ambivalently longed to become, if not envied? In “Prism,” in acknowledging these open and radiant properties of the prism, Merrill accentuates a sense of light-translating enclosure different from that of the mirror. In “Mirror,” the speaker presented only two ways to engage the light of the outside world: either as mirror reflecting it, or window letting it through. Now, we have a third option: a prism warping images and light.

This “windless” (3) “suite of chambers” (2) describes the prism itself, the physical habitation of the human speaker, and, by metaphorical extension, the conditions of the speaker’s day-to-day life. Of course the gay and homophobic subtext of these daily conditions is immediately identifiable to the perceptive reader: ““single gentleman (references)”. We recognize here Sontag’s “quotation marks” of camp sensibility. The

---

<sup>20</sup> In “Mirror” we had the speaker, whose function was to reflect light. The speaker envied and addressed the parlor windows, whose function was to let light pass unchanged through it. That, too, was the mirror’s fate. In “Prism,” the function of the object is to distort light as it passes through – to unfold the unified stream into plurality.

homophobia is present in the parenthetical "... (references)," since, after all, a man with a wife is morally legitimate and needs no references. The "single gentleman" (which also implies a man of a certain age – and therefore, why *not* married?) is of dubious character.

Thus the speaker has moved from one type of enclosure to another. We see this in the lines that immediately follow:

You have grown used to the playful inconveniences.  
 The floors that slide from under you helter-skelter,  
 Invisible walls put up in mid-  
 Stride, leaving you warped for the rest of the day,  
 A spoon in water; (6-10)

Merrill understates the disorienting daily barriers and trapdoors of heterosexism and homophobia when he characterizes them as "playful inconveniences." With these constraints comes the sense of disorientation and otherness that maps so poignantly onto the magnification and distortion of the symbolic prism. Rather than reflecting and ordering the image others perceive, as in "Mirror," the prism points to a distorted image (of self, among other things) that the prism imposes (a prism/prison of "invisible walls" he daily lives in and lives as).

As the images of warping accrue, so does the speaker's "agitation" (37). The image of the speaker "warped for the rest of the day, / A spoon in water" evokes the spliced visual refraction of selfhood: the spoon is both here and there as we look into the glass. The paradox is that the spoon is true in and of itself, bifurcated image notwithstanding.

Yenser aptly characterizes the pronounced shift at this point in the poem when he writes, "As Merrill amplifies on the 'playful inconveniences,' however, they become graver;



the speaker seems not so much enprised as imprisoned; the syntax and the metaphor grow ominously vagarious and involved" (72).

The reader cannot help but be swept up in the hermetic interior monologue that then refracts into an uncertain dialogue midway through the poem. "Look: (Heretofore / One could have said where one was looking, / In or out. But now it almost --) Look:" (16-18). At the level of form and syntax these lines embody the confusion, ambiguity and paradox indicated in the poem by the metaphorical function of refraction. The command "Look" appears twice, indicating what seems at first the command of an outward gaze. Yet, paradoxically, these exterior imperatives actually work to bind the confused narrow enclosure of the rest of the phrase. The "Look[s]" enclose a pair of parentheses, which in turn enclose two "one[s]" at a loss for action. The sense of paradox and disorientation prevails as the line pulls against itself, suggesting both an inward and outward gaze simultaneously, and identification or orientation both here and there (or "Heretofore" and "now") simultaneously (Yenser 73). The voice and perspective of the speaker refracts, multiplying asymmetrically "like a spoon in water," and the doublings of voice parallel the paradoxes piling up in the poem. The "single gentleman" has been doubled to give voice to contrasting and contradictory experience gazing fixedly through the insoluble warping of the prism. And the paradoxical outlook of this "single gentleman" is absolutely conditioned (so far as the poem is concerned) by the speaker's sexuality – or at least his queer perspective.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Merrill's focus on unwaveringly gazing through the prism of paradox can be described another way: "queering." As Benjamin Grimwood argues, the essence of "queering" perspectives is paradox. "One could say that studying "visual queerness" necessitates a "looking awry," Slavoj Zizek's concept for "discern[ing] features that escape a 'straightforward' ... look" that would otherwise go unnoticed (vii:3). By dissuading oneself from looking straightforward at a "queer" space, one acknowledges, through the construct of dominant language what could be said to connote its "queerness" (38).

The speaker has paid the price for leaving the reflectivity of “Mirror.” And having apparently either rejected or despairing of the transparency of the parlor windows, he finds himself incapable of not seeing double, not seeing paradox, incapable of not deflecting straight lines of light. And to what end, besides the disorienting “warped” “inconveniences” described? By the end of the poem, the speaker makes it through the grueling night accompanied by stars he watches, whose light has made it through light years of space (“vacancy” (36)) only to be deflected/refracted from the speaker’s eyes. How hopeless, it seems; even the gem-like stars – even the speaker himself – are endangered or lost in a way by this queer or “queering” perspective of paradox.

### **“The Emerald”: Jewel of a Life**

In the poem “The Emerald,”<sup>22</sup> from his fourth book *Braving the Elements* (1972) Merrill reflects from out of the dynamics of being enclosed within a heterosexist family mentality, as we see in his relationship with his mother. Though the poet is in his 40s by this point, his mother remains unwilling to even speak of his homosexuality; here we see how Merrill handles the implications this has for their relationship. In some ways it is the most explicit of his poems in this group in how he directly (and narratively) confronts homophobia. His mother’s denial of Merrill’s sexuality combined with her (possibly insincerely) stated expectation that Merrill will one day get married and have children clearly calls attention to queer “otherness.”

The poem recounts Merrill’s visit to his septuagenarian mother after the death of her second husband in 1969. She asks him to escort her to the bank; “Hearing that on

---

<sup>22</sup> Poem 2 of the diptych “Up and Down.”

Sunday I would leave, / My mother asked if we might drive downtown” (lines 1-2). They soon arrive in the ostentatiously symbolic confines of “Mutual Trust” (24) bank. The edifice is a clear symbol of their chilly, bank vault intimacy and the degree to which they are bound to one another, for better or worse. Indeed the bank itself is depicted in various ways as an imprisoning enclosure: – tellers “Darting from cages” (27) to greet them, and as they descend into the vault, barred gates “shut like jaws” (29) behind them (Smith 107).

In the “inmost vault” (30) of the bank (i.e., of their relationship) the mother rummages through her safe deposit box to find a special gift for her son. As her face goes “queerly lit” (35) she picks out a shining emerald ring that Merrill's father had given her on the day the poet was born. “Here, take it” she entreats “for– / For when you marry. For your bride. It's yours” (44-45). The mother's pretense of some future nuptials for her son, her perennial refusal to acknowledge her son's homosexuality, is affecting.<sup>23</sup> After nearly thirty years of knowing that her son is gay, she still averts her eyes from what she considers indelible stigma.

But this gesture as Merrill treats it is, as ever, many layered, deriving from complex motives and history, with elements of paradox. It reflects the “sparkling appearances” of the poem’s epigram. The reader could see this as a grand gesture of affection and of

---

<sup>23</sup> It is even more so given their shared history. In his memoir Merrill writes about a major rupture in their relationship that happened in his early twenties as Merrill was finishing his studies at Amherst and beginning to explore his sexuality. His mother discovered a series of love letters from Kimon Friar, Merrill’s first lover, and on impulse she burned them. After this traumatic episode, and upon his graduation from Amherst, he decided to take a year and travel in Europe, explaining the move as a way of putting an ocean between his mother and him:

She and I had each done things the other could not forgive. Since then, despite the rare hour when the old unconditional intimacy shone forth, each had felt a once adored and all-comforting presence slipping gradually, helplessly away.... With hurt aplenty on either side and no quick or painless remedy forthcoming, it had begun to seem like mere human kindness on my part to speed up the process and distance myself from her. (4)

Yet Merrill never “divorces” entirely from his mother; in fact their relationship continues on in fits and starts, with years between encounters.

generosity. And, to be fair, let us note that it was typical of Merrill's mother's generation and class to use euphemism in referencing non-traditional relationships of any sort; she does not embarrass or lay bare the privacy of her son by speaking of his intimate and sexual relationships (of course, neither does she condone them). The only socially decent way to speak of such things – however she might feel – was within the context of a marriage. But, of course, she was handing her son a woman's emerald ring – not traditionally suitable for Merrill or his partner. Euphemism or not, she was treating Merrill's sexuality as unspeakable.

Whatever motivations guided her rhetoric in the context of this poem Merrill seems to perceive the situation as a kind of invitation – his reaction seems to follow the suggestion of the epigram to the poem (by John H. Finley, Jr.): *"The heart that leaps to the invitation / of sparkling appearances is the heart / that would itself perform as handsomely."* In other words, Merrill's response takes a similarly complex and similarly impertinent form. First, however we see his "theatrical" (49) mental reaction to his mother's offering.

I do not tell her, it would sound theatrical,

*Indeed this green room's mine, my very life.*

*We are each other's; there will be no wife;*

*The little feet that patter here are metrical. (49-54)*

Here we see his own sense of confidence and agency as a gay man. Merrill/The speaker makes quite clear he lives a gay life and that his poems are as close to grandchildren as his mother shall ever get. Yet, eschewing *saying* the theatrical, he nevertheless does the dramatic, by a gesture full of "sparkling appearance" and quite as complex in its motivations and resonances as his mother's.

But onto her worn knuckle slip the ring.

Wear it for me, I silently entreat,

Until—until the time comes. Our eyes meet.

The world beneath the world is brightening. (53-56)

A formal element here worth noting: only two interruptions by dashes in the poem occur: one as his mother speaks, and one as he silently replies. Both dashes break the syntax, and signal an emotional catch in the throat for what is unspeakable. Merrill's mother cannot speak of his life ("take it for- / For when you marry"), and Merrill cannot speak of his mother's death<sup>24</sup> ("Wear it for me, I silently entreat, / Until - until the time comes"). In a sense, Merrill repays one "unspeakable" with another. He, like his father, puts the ring on her finger - putting on her hand the sparkling gem that signified his birth, his very life. She must wear the queer son on her hand. He rebuffs his mother's double-edged gesture with one of his own: slipping the ring onto her finger as a gesture of love, and also of independence from her wishes. At the same time, this tinges the poem with oedipal overtones. No woman will ever replace his mother in his heart - for good or ill.<sup>25</sup> *"We are each others. There will be no wife."*<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> As it happened, Merrill's mother outlived him, dying at the age of 102, five years after he did.

<sup>25</sup> Merrill expands on this complicated relationship as he relates aspects of the same visit in shades of a similar episode in his memoir *A Different Person*. Here the encounter is also directly dealing with their "Mutual Trust" that is their complicated relationship of intense love and equally intense trauma:

Last year in Atlanta I was helping to pack her latest boxful of clippings about me (reviews, interviews, magazine appearances, and the like) for mailing to the university library that collects my papers....

Peering into that open grave of paper and newsprint between us, I thought of the letters she had destroyed so long ago—my letters from Kimon and Claude, from Freddy and Tony, destroyed not to punish me but lest their evidence harm me in the eyes of the world—and for a sad, startled minute saw these already yellowing heaps of "favorable publicity" saved over the years since her rash act as a kind of penance, like a conscientious little girl's smudged apology for a blunder that had better be tenderly forgiven, once and for all: any day now it will be too late. (168-169)

<sup>26</sup> Much critical commentary has been published about oedipal themes in Merrill's work - especially conspicuous in his books *Water Street* and *Nights and Days*. Moffett, Bloom, and Sáez examine this with great

Again here a type of crystal, a precious gemstone, is the metaphor for Merrill's "very life" as he says, and in a roundabout way the relationship between mother and son. The emerald characterizes a life produced through immense force into rare hard clarity. In an interview from around the time of writing this poem Merrill spoke to the particular power and poetic felicity of this kind of crystalline imagery. He told the interviewer, "I think what moves me about these things is the sense of compression and the tremendous forces that have made something as small and *purged* as a crystal is. Purity and symmetry" (Neubauer). As it turns out, the symbol of the emerald – indeed the entire family of crystalline and later, more grandly geologic poetic tropes – works particularly well to characterize his lived gay experience.

### **Geode: Love from Fantastic Pressures**

In *Braving the Elements* (1972), the eighth in a nine-poem sequence called "In Nine Sleep Valley" is particularly evocative and similarly makes use of crystalline imagery in relation to gay love. As in "Emerald," where Merrill says the emerald is "his very life" followed by "there will be no wife" – thus meaning the emerald *is his gay life* – here the geode is his gay love (as the fourteen line sonnet form signals).

Geode, the troll's melon

Rind of crystals velvet smoke meat blue

Formed far away under fantastic

Pressures, then cloven in two

By the taciturn rock shop man, twins now forever (lines 1-5)

---

insight. However compelling, intriguing and, indeed, essential for understanding Merrill poetry oedipal imagery is, the subject is too large for the purposes of this paper.

On the surface, the poem presents the geode as an emblem of one love two persons share. It develops through “fantastic / Pressures” into a single ball of crystals. From the “molten start” (10) of a passionate courtship and romance, through the “glacial sleep” (10) of the lovers’ companionship (clearly less hot), to a division (not between people, but in the love itself). The geode’s geological development (and rock-shop alteration) tracks the arc of a queer romantic relationship. The power of the geode as an emblem of this love is not merely articulated in its wholeness; equally powerful is the shattering loss implied by the division of it into two halves – two loves, each for the other, no longer one love shared.

Like Plato’s round people in the *Symposium*, an original human wholeness is “cloven in two” by an outside force (the “taciturn rock shop man” in the role of Zeus). Plato, of course, used this “rational myth” to explain the longing people feel for their “other half.” However, this implied reference to the male-loving Plato is not a neutral one in terms of western culture, and queer folk are particularly sensitive to this. The placing the love of men for men, and of women for women, on equal footing with the longing of women for men and vice versa is of singular importance to queer folk of a certain generation. This 2300-year-old metaphor categorically and ontologically rejects heterosexual privilege.

Merrill begins the poem with the image of the whole, round geode, and in doing so points to both the origin of the round people and the reason they were split in two. According to Plato’s metaphor, the natural primordial state humans enjoyed was that of unity, without regard to sex/gender. Zeus feared the felicity and power of unified humans, and thus we were “cloven in two.” By way of this reference, Merrill points to the fate of great love when we experience it: that of division. The universe, Merrill seems to suggest, cannot bear us whole.

Still face to face in halfmoonlight

Sparkling comes easy to the Gemini.

Centimeters deep yawns the abyss. (12-14)

Then is this a poem available to a non-gay audience tone deaf to gay sensibility? As a poem of love and its division, can it not apply to anyone? Well, yes and no. The queer reading is superior in its resonance and implication. One homotextuality in this poem is the reference to the two halves of the single love as being “twins” and “sparkling” “Gemini.” Two men in bed or two women in bed in love will evoke the Gemini, the halves of love, more clearly than will a male/female duo. In this metaphor, as Gemini, love relationships derive from a single cell that divides, *not* from two individuals who bring their needs and wants together. A common enough trope in gay art and dyadic relationships is the image of the couples so intimately alike that the two men or two women actually look alike, groom themselves alike, etc.<sup>27</sup> This Gemini homotextuality subtly subverts the heteronormative: the two halves of a geode do not reflect what is perennially trumpeted as the “natural” “complements” of hetero relating: the male + female as “naturally” fitting. Rather, this poem identifies the unity of love as the stuff of identical twins: a single cell that has been divided, the DNA the same, the sex the same.

Does it hurt the reader to not apprehend its gay content? Yes, in that the “hetero” love reading would miss the central driving metaphor of the essential unity of love, and of lovers. Two complements do not become a unity here. A unity becomes two. Does this reading exclude heterosexual love? Merrill flips heterocentrism on its back and provides us with a homocentric metaphor. Similar to how heterocentrism presumes its own experience

---

<sup>27</sup> In gay male parlance, male couples who groom and dress themselves, etc. to look alike are called “clones.” In queer erotic art – to say nothing of pornography – the twin motif is ubiquitous.



to be normative and the only version of normal, and heterocentric literature speaks to straights (but allows for anyone else to identify as best they can), Merrill's homocentric poem presents an evocation of gay love, unified and divided (and others may certainly also identify as they can).<sup>28</sup>

An additional element pointing to queer understanding of love through the geode metaphor is the reference to immense force and scale associated with forming the queer love relationship. The stakes were so high, the difficulties so incalculable, the consequences of failure *or success* so severe, gay love (when successful) was a product of force and scale. A queer reading recognizes the homotextuality of the difficulty of development implied by the geologic scale of both force and time. In fact, Merrill takes the tropes and raises the metaphoric stakes to dizzying heights. This proportionality oscillates or shifts from a human level ("twins" "parting kiss" (11)) to a geologic scale ("fantastic / Pressures" "the molten start and glacial sleep") to the orbital ("in halfmoonlight") and then celestial register of constellations ("sparkling comes easy to the Gemini") only to finally return (in a John Donne gesture of the microcosm as the macrocosm) to a blurred synesthetic line ("Centimeters deep yawns the abyss") that is emblematic of all these scales and levels of love/identity/relationship/loss/isolation, etc. This calls us back at once to the handheld geode with a specific reference to a scale of "centimeters" indicating ambiguously the celestial expanse of the abyss of space, the inverted "abyss" of darkness separating the broken geode, as well as the abyss separating two lovers. Surely the gesture is dramatic to the point of theatricality, but in the same stroke it is devastatingly real and heartfelt.

---

<sup>28</sup> In fact, the translation of the homocentric reading into a hetero-identified reading may be one of the more rewarding aspects of the queer metaphor for straight readers.

### ***A Scattering of Salts: “The Pyroxenes” and “Pearl”***

The nuanced overlay we see in “In Nine Sleep Valley” of the personal, the relational, and the social is an indication of the direction of the final movement we will examine in Merrill’s poetry of this type. His last book, *A Scattering of Salts*, represents the culmination of his poetic talents and reach at the same time as it effects a profound shift in tone from his previous work.

Even the title, *Scattering of Salts*, evokes crystal structures, as Helen Vendler reviewed it:

In such a phrase there are overtones of tears, savors, and fragrances, yet with a clear implication, too, that these astringent crystals are scattered at intervals in the diffuse and oceanic medium of life ... and from the very beginning of his long career, the poems he published combined, in sparkling ways, suffering and joy. (46)

This final book was written in his last years as his health was in steady decline after having been diagnosed with HIV. The inevitability of his own death and the trauma that AIDS had wreaked and was continuing to wreak on the gay community are directly reflected in these poems. While much of his style remained consistent with what he had developed over time, the tone of his reflections here became more direct, darker or at least starker in his unflinching gaze into illness and his own eventual death. As James Materer observes,

The emotional power of many of Merrill’s late poems comes from abandoning the poetic “look askance” and gazing directly on what he calls the “stripping process,” which is the term Merrill coins in *The Changing Light* to

describe growing old. His last poems anticipate no special knowledge at the moment of death or ... prospect of rebirth but instead a stripping of everything we hold dear. (136)

These final poems do not brood, they do not dread; they observe the fact that he will not escape death. Yet, he retains his characteristic reserve, remaining for the most part non-confessional in these poems. As his friend McClatchy later remembered:

What interested me was that the man who was so articulate about everything that happened to him could not speak about [his having AIDS]. It could have been a generational thing, a class thing, or an effort not to have his life dominated by his illness. (qtd. in Gussow)

Each poem in *A Scattering of Salts* traces a particular line of thought or imagery all the way to its vanishing point. The effect is striking; especially given the way Merrill's wit and irony lighten the weight of his observations of mortality's implacability. The resulting tone – far from oppressive – is of unencumbered intellectual clarity and emotional composure. Indeed, as fellow poet W. S. Merwin assessed it in his book review in the *New York Times*:

The new book seemed to be telling me that the extraordinary cumulative wealth of this corpus was arriving at a final form; the image that recurs throughout his work, but flashes with piercing insistence in these late poems, is that of crystallization. (n.p.)

Among the many fine poems in this collection are two, "The Pyroxenes" and "Pearl," that complete the line we have been investigating. Appearing on facing pages of the book, they provide haunting meditations on the summation of experience, on fate and destiny,

through the lens of a gay man in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. While they read as quite different from one another, they nonetheless strongly inform one other.

One striking element of the images he uses in these two poems is that he has turned away from the kind of purity and purgation of the emerald and geode metaphors to the stuff of earth. In “The Pyroxenes” he engages the volcanic minerals that compose earth’s mantle, and in “Pearl,” the layered “organic” calcium carbonate nacre that is the mantle of a pearl.

We shall begin with “The Pyroxenes.” As *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains:

Pyroxenes are the most significant and abundant group of rock-forming ferromagnesian silicates. They are found in almost every variety of igneous rock and also occur in rocks of widely different compositions ... The name pyroxene is derived from the Greek (πυρ), meaning “fire,” and (ξένος), meaning “stranger,” and was given by [geologist] Haüy to the greenish crystals found in many lavas which he considered to have been accidentally included there. (“Pyroxene”)

In fact, these are early-forming minerals that crystallized before the lava erupts from a volcano, due to their high melting point. Unless the magma is superheated, pyroxenes will retain their solid crystalline structure rather than mix into solution to become volcanic glass after eruption. Thus in one sense, pyroxenes actually are “strangers to fire” (line 28) as their etymology and the final line of the poem both suggest. They form separately, yet they derive from the same molten minerals forming the glass.

The curiously contrary nature of the origin of pyroxenes is the metaphorical heart of the poem. “The Pyroxenes” strikes a contemplative tone in which, as before, the speaker

identifies with the thematic conceit of the poem, an object consisting of these minerals: “Translucent spinach plates” (12) of volcanic glass with pyroxene crystals embedded throughout.

Through various associations and overlaying imagery, the poem explores the origin of these minerals as a metaphor of the development of identity formation. “As it becomes a self!” (664). This sense is complicated by the question of just what comprises the self and what is invasive to the self. As a natural extension of this reflection, the poem orbits issues of fate both in terms of the individual and the group or “people.”

This focus on self-development and the inevitable influence of life on us (whether by invasion, corruption of innocence, or destined action) begins the poem. The speaker discloses:

Well, life has touched me, too.  
 No longer infant jade,  
 What is the soul not made  
 To drink in, to go through

As it becomes a self! (1-5)

This trope of instructive difficulties is, by now, a familiar theme. The reader will be reminded of the “fantastic / Pressures” of the geode, etc. Here the soul, it is implied, is “made / To drink in” (both in the sense of forced to drink in, and created in order to drink in) the whole spectrum of human experience. This process, life, will inevitably alter the “infant jade” (itself a solid chunk of pyroxene minerals – before being melted) into something different, yet composed of the same stuff. (Here, once again, Merrill is gazing

through the prism of paradox to examine how the authentic is constructed by artifice – geologic artifice, in this case).

Admire this forest scene,

Dendritic, evergreen,

On Leto's back-lit shelf— (6-8)

The volcanic glass with pyroxene embedded in the translucent matrix and crystallized in a treelike web pattern in one sense stands for the general impurities or difficulties the self is “made / To drink in.” But those sensitive to poems written in the plague years of AIDS realize this dendritic image is quite specifically evocative of a microscope's slide image of the HIV virus itself, or of the virus having infected a dendritic (immune) cell.<sup>29</sup> The invasive pyroxenes are associated with the virus on “back-lit”, “Morbidly thin” (13) translucent plates. With this realization, the sense in the poem of what the stakes are in being “touched” by “life” and what one is “made / To drink in” changes considerably. The HIV virus is paradoxically identified as “life” – which, technically, it is. Now the sensitive reader understands the plight of the speaker who somehow must come to a new understanding of what it means that he himself has been changed at a fundamental cellular, and by implication, spiritual level. (The gay-deaf reader, one imagines, would be baffled).

The emotional stakes of the poem escalate with this realization. The poem becomes one of the poet's reflections about coming to terms with his disease, and how he has hitherto understood his sexuality/identity and the stresses of his life that have resulted in

---

<sup>29</sup> The virus is evoked throughout *Salts* in various ways, for example as a decorated Christmas tree in “Vol. XLIV, No. 3” in which once again the microscopic plate imagery is alluded to (the title of the poem standing for an actual slide number). The poem “A Christmas Tree,” published in the year of his death, figures Merrill as a tree brought into a warm home and decorated in jewels – a tree who knows he won't survive long past the holidays. Merrill, then, has become the virus – which he foreshadows metaphorically in “The Pyroxenes.”

the self he imagines. This hinges on the sense of these minerals, these pyroxenes, being (as their etymology identifies) “strangers to fire.” In one sense Merrill means precisely this: that he has contracted this disease, this invasive “impurity,” from outside himself. But as he looks closer he realizes that actually, just as the pyroxene was always present in the lava, this particular virus of “fury, bereavement, grief” (17) was always there “at Creation’s core” (18) before it made its way “Among us city folk” (22).

You’d think poorhouse and wake,  
 Fury, bereavement, grief  
 Dwelt at Creation’s core,  
 Maternal protoplast,  
 Millions of years before  
 Coming to high relief  
 Among us city folk. (16-22)

Merrill, with the perspective of paradox, sees the virus and/or mortality now as normal and integrated with life as the pyroxenes are in their volcanic matrix. Certainly the virus has entered his own cellular structure – as it had those of many friends. So both at the geologic scale of the metaphor and the microscopic scale the virus is imbedded into his self.

The word protoplast here highlights the HIV reading of the poem (though again, the reader having made it through *A Scattering of Salts*, has already learned to train their gaze on this). The protoplast is a cell’s nucleus and surrounding genetic material – all that is essential and determinative to an organism. This is emblematic of what the HIV virus invades with its own genetic material, thus altering the cell and eventually the entire

organism. Merrill's personhood – his heretofore pure and purged crystalline structure – is embedded with pyroxenes.

This paradoxical sense of, on the one hand, transformation by way of infection, and on the other innate predestination, extends beyond Merrill or the speaker himself to the "city folk" or the urban gay male community at large, which had been ravaged by AIDS.<sup>30</sup> The "we" Merrill invokes in the final lines of the poem then references a spiritual resurrection that returns "his people" from the crucible of the disease (including any lingering sense of contamination) to a kind of innocence that echoes his earlier imagery:

On the Third Day we woke  
From cradles deep in mire  
At white heat: elements-  
To-be of hard, scarred sense,  
Strangers to fire. (24-28)

But this highly associative poem is resistant to any single reading here. Given the "fantastic / Pressures" of queer experience that we have already seen, these last lines perhaps reflect a deeply ironic observation. It was certainly a terrible irony for men of Merrill's generation that no sooner had mainstream social attitudes begun to shift toward greater acceptance, and gay men began to emerge from the closet and live more openly together in greater numbers and celebrate sexuality more freely, that the HIV virus struck with "white heat" "us city folk. / Out of [the] woods at last" (22-23).<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Clearly, a multitude of different demographics and communities were effected by the AIDs epidemic, but it seems likely that the "city folk" being referenced in the poem exclusively reference the urban gay male community.

<sup>31</sup> It may also be the case that the "us" and "we" that Merrill speaks of is more expansive than merely the gay community, though. That in fact Merrill is insinuating that we are all in a sense fated to drink in the whole of experience, like it or not. That the infant jade of the human soul necessarily endures the volcanic white heat of



This dark ironic vision is also front and center in “Pearl.” Merrill’s primary struggle of having to come to terms with his own sexuality, blended with the irony that his “triumph” in this struggle is ultimately what kills him is the central thematic focus in the poem. Throughout, Merrill compresses and subtly references his larger story (which we have traced) and sets it in the context of his impending death from AIDS.

In a more general sense, one could say that the poem is structured around the metaphor of life and death figured as the development of a pearl in an oyster – experience accruing in layers like nacre around a “mote / Of grit” (lines 15-16), building upon itself organically over time into something beautiful and precious, only to have the oyster killed and the pearl removed. And like the “shucked, outsmarted meat” (18) of the oyster, the speaker’s body will be sloughed aside.<sup>32</sup> In another sense Merrill provides a dash of characteristic whimsy in the arrangement of the poem on the page – the lines are organized so as to imitate the shape of an open oyster with the pearl at its center. This visual structure – part of a long tradition of shaped poetry – will remind the reader of two earlier poems, “Hourglass” and “Hourglass II.” Like these, “Pearl” is preoccupied with the inevitable passage of time and the loss that characterize human life. Here, Merrill replaces the imagery of flowing sands in the hourglass poems with a single grain and its eventual transformation into a pearl. The treasure of a human life embedded in the inevitable flow and impermanence of time is the focus of the imagery of “Pearl.”

---

life and that we all end up hard and scarred in the end. We are each forged out of the intensive white heat of the world and set on a difficult path, one that ends in the same place for everyone: “fury, bereavement, grief.” Death is woven into the matrix for us all. In the face of his own impending death Merrill undoubtedly saw this.  
<sup>32</sup> What we are to make of the pearl – the product of a lifetime’s response to an invasive irritation, the poem itself, poems themselves, or perhaps the human soul, the “prize” that we track down in life, only to lose at its end – is more difficult to say. However, this description could only be said to be a very basic characterization of the general movement of the poem. Throughout, Merrill weaves threads of his most personal themes (his relationship with his mother, his sexuality and the process of coming to terms with it of claiming ownership of it) and references to his own work.

The grit and the pearl that forms around it come to evoke how a human life's response to invasion can create a precious "Gem" (27).<sup>33</sup> Superimposed on this general structure of the poem and the speaker's address to the reader, are several thematic or imagistic overlays, overhead transparencies that shift the perspective of the poem in meaningful ways.<sup>34</sup> Two are of particular importance for this analysis. The first is a background eroticism – a tone of prominent but never explicit, sexual feeling. The second, as we have already briefly discussed, is a pervasive, unspoken awareness of HIV and AIDS. Again, if the reader knows that the poet is a gay man – and if the reader is aware of the context of AIDS in the gay community (and how personally devastating the disease was for Merrill)<sup>35</sup> – they will comprehend the movement of the poem more clearly, and grasp what is essentially at stake here.

The sexual and erotic under- and overtones are apparent from the start. The speaker confesses:

Well, I admit  
 A small boy's eyes grew rounder and lips moister  
 To find it invisibly chained, at home in the hollow  
 Of his mother's throat: the real, deepwater thing. (1-4)

In one of Merrill's very first poems, "Variations: The Air is Sweetest that a Thistle Guards," he provides us with insight into how to understand the pearl (a recurring theme in his poetry): "... Love, great pearl / Swelling around a small unlovely need" (lines 105-06).

---

<sup>33</sup> In Merrill's entire oeuvre there are few poems so tightly composed, or with meanings and associations so tightly compressed as "Pearl." It is a masterpiece: each word rebounds and ricochets across a multivalent field of meaning and reference. Most lines do not "mean" or "associate" one or two different ways but across many different registers of experience, memory, culture, not to mention psychology and spirituality.

<sup>34</sup> They are themselves like layers of nacre crystallizing around the poem and growing its meaning.

<sup>35</sup> Merrill not only suffered and ultimately died at the hands of HIV/AIDS, but before his own death the disease also claimed several dear and lifelong friends.

In "Pearl," Merrill depicts his mother as the first place he saw love – "the real deepwater thing". Of course, a boy's first love will often be his mother, and hers is usually the real thing. But he plays with the subconscious associations by referencing desire in his boyhood response to the pearl "in the hollow / Of his mother's throat" – the "small boy's eyes grew rounder and lips moister". The sense of perhaps embarrassment at this desire appears evident too, in that the speaker confesses something he might otherwise be reluctant to acknowledge ("Well, I admit") – to say nothing of the boy's moist lips evoking both the physicality of his desire and the image of the oyster itself. So the appetite for love is born in the small boy. His love is "invisibly chained, at home" with mother. Here is the paradoxical experience for a child of that generation (and perhaps a gay child even more prominently): mother is love and she wears you chained. Certainly the child in the poem feels he has no way of attaining or acting on that desire – it is withheld, chained even.

The sexual line of imagery continues to be evoked in how the speaker references the pearl. The speaker invokes the process of layering nacre around the "mote / Of grit" as the accumulation of experience in layers over time, but the slant of this is also clearly erotic: "Time to mediate, / Skin upon skin, so cunningly they accrete" (13-14). Indeed, if love is a great pearl, "swelling around a small unlovely need" then the need must be sex. But the boy saw the love, not sex. Merrill assures us the desire of the six-year-old was not, in fact, sexual – at least not consciously sexual: "Far from the mind at six to plumb / X-raywise those glimmering lamplit / Asymmetries to self-immolating mite" (5-7). Only much later in life does the boy's hand ("Mottled with survival" (10)) "[grasp] it" (12) – understand and hold it – the pearl, love, and sex, we presume.

The sexual allusions keep appearing in the poem until it becomes evident near the end that the physicality and sexuality of these allusions serve to draw out the precious that is to be lost. The speaker ends the poem by identifying “One layer, so to speak, of calcium carbonate” (19) of the pearl that “formed in [him] is the last shot” (20) – and then interrupts his syntax with an interjection. What was his last shot? The speaker references Sacha Guitry’s film *Perles de la Couronne*, where “The hero has tracked down / His prize” (24-25).

Here knowledge of Merrill’s biography helps. Merrill’s last sexual relationship (his “last shot”) was with a young actor named Peter Hooten, 24 years his junior. And Merrill considered him quite a prize.

The speaker identifies that that one layer “so to speak” of the stuff of love formed in him as “the last shot” of the film (“shot” a triple pun: last shot of the film (his life), last shot at love, and last shot in sex). The film’s star, “all suavity and wit” (26) (how Merrill was described by friends and foes his entire life), has grasped his pearl prize. He’s standing

At the ship’s rail, all suavity and wit,

Gem swaying like a pendulum

From his fing—oops! (26-28)

The pearl drops from his finger into the sea. The pearl of the necklace is a compression of many lines of interpretation by this point, but one is clearly a figure of ejaculate dangling like a pearl (nacre is, after all, the color of semen). The characteristic tone of puckish mischief should clue the reader in (“fing—oops!”).

But Merrill here gives us both love and loss. Lost love. His last shot. Like a drip of pearl falling into the sea and getting swallowed up into the “yawning oyster” of the

“unconscious world” (30). His seeming levity lets us know we are dealing with serious matters. He will not have *pain* without leavening.<sup>36</sup> So loss and the ironic naughty wink compress and combine. The speaker’s “last shot” at love and sex has slipped from him, his “last shot” of the film, of his “very life” would come to an end.

Then the scene and poem close with a descent into darkness, following the pearl into the depths of the sea to the metaphorical death. The irony of this last turn shuts the poem with powerful finality – in part because the ironic realization that death, not a conceptual death, but the real death of the speaker and poet is imminent, the world will no longer be his oyster. The prosody of the poem assists the intensity of this sense of finality. The rhyme scheme has built up from the initial childhood portion of the poem [A, B, C, D, E, A, F, etc.] all the way to adulthood at the center of the poem (where “grit” – rhyme A – nestles in the center of the oyster). The rhyme scheme then unravels down the second half of life [ ... F, A, E, D, C, B, A]. So that, rhyme A, the sound and source or the beginning of a life returns as the sonic echo of life’s culmination, only to resound once more as the last closing intonation of life’s end. Due to this aural patterning one reads the final line as the culmination and completion of all formal expectation. And the echoes reverberate in the reader’s ear and eye – “Well, I admit ... Of grit” and then – “Shuts on it.” (31). Done. That’s a life.

But the pearl is much more than the representation of any one lover (and it must be admitted that a poem that relies on autobiographical knowledge not generally available to the reader would be fundamentally flawed, however brilliant. This is not the case here.).

---

<sup>36</sup> Lest the poetic bread go flat.

The pearl is love, and its beauty an accretion of a lifetime's gracious response to pain, suffering, and loss. But in the end, we lose it, too.

And again, like the pyroxene, or the tree, the "self-immolating mite" – the figure of desire and appetite – is also a figure of the virus under the microscope. And yes, the mite is the grain of sand at the center of the pearl. And yes, the grit is also the "small unlovely need" of sex (same-sex sex). So, once again, as in "The Pyroxenes" the virus is figured as latent but always integrated into the thread of the story of life.

### **Conclusion: Of Love and Loss**

This entire line of poems, and these final poems especially, are illustrative of the necessity of reading Merrill within the context of the emotional, psychological, and his sexual life of the poet. Merrill's poetry is difficult even for the most sensitive reader – adhering as he did at times to Stevens' dictum in his poem "Man Carrying Thing" that "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (lines 1-2) – but they are not impossible. As Merrill states explicitly above, he intended his poetry to be difficult. With diligence and careful engagement, the reader experiences a poetry that opens to unexpected insights – not isolated to gay experience – but relevant to and redolent with life (as Helen Vendler terms it, "news of yourself" (5)). Yet, Merrill's goal was never to gain a mass audience. He scorned what that would take:

Think what one has to *do* to get a mass audience. I'd rather have one perfect reader. Why dynamite the pond in order to catch that single silver carp?  
Better to find a bait that only the carp will take. One still has plenty of

choices. The carp at Fontainebleau were thought to swallow small children, whole. (*Collected Prose* 83)

A member of the “elite” who suffered stigma, Merrill wrote for a kind of elite – a very select group, at least – who would understand his poetry. And those who had suffered stigma themselves, or at least understood stigma, engaged the poetry better. It should be clear by now that Merrill’s sexuality suffused his work in elements of content and style; it is an essential lens in the interpretation of his work.

The idiosyncratic geological and crystalline line of imagery he develops in the family of poems we have examined seems especially apt for this endeavor. They speak to the various ways he engaged his life and inevitably his sexuality. As his poetry matured he became less concerned with maintaining the “purity” of these images, and more with demonstrating that what is precious has been hard won, and always starts with “flaws” and imperfection (the pearl forms in layers of precious nacre around a mite of invading grit, the geode takes form around the edges of flaws and fissures in the earth, the pyroxene appear the separate invaders in a glass that has been violently ejected from the fiery mantle below, etc.). Finally the scope of tremendous traumatizing force seems to be the central element of character development and the growth of anything of value in Merrill’s world. What is so beautiful in this line of poems is the way that he engages the larger human condition through the carefully articulated evocation of his own life experience – one endlessly and ironically layered and complex. This is being true to life and art.

But ultimately, for the reader unable or disinclined to engage these poems with the queer personhood of Merrill’s genius closely in view, depths of meaning, resonance, and valuation remain elusive. Indeed, so estimable are the poems of Merrill, that scholars such

as Vendler and Bloom (who recognize but rarely comment on the poet's queerness) regard his poetry as among the greatest written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet these same poems, if read with a sensitivity for queer experience, yield up even richer, *and* more universal reflections on the value of human love and loss.



## Bibliography

Adams, Don. *James Merrill's Poetic Quest*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. Print.

Baring, Maurice. *Sarah Bernhardt*. New York, London: D. Appleton-Century, 1934. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *James Merrill*. New York: Chelsea House, 1985. Print.

Breslin, Paul. "Closet Necessities: James Merrill's Poetics of Reticence." *Poetry* 179.6 (2002): 343-352. Web. 7 Jan. 2012.

Broyard, Anatole. "The Mirror of Poetry." *New York Times*. New York Times, 29 Jan. 1983. Web. 12 Dec. 2011.

Burt, Stephen. "Becoming Literature." *Boston Review*. Boston Review, Summer 2001. Web. 26 Sept. 2011.

Cleto, Fabio. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. Print.

Fone, Byrne R. S. *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text*. Southern Illinois University, 1992. Print.

Fraser, Caroline. "Writing His Way Out of His Father's Shadow." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 10 Nov. 2002. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Grimwood, Benjamin. "'To Be [Queer] or Not to Be-[Queer]': The Paradox of 'Constant Revision' and the 'Paraphilia' as Case Study." *Transverse Journal* 11(2008): 38-47. Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

Gussow, Mel. "Reconnecting with the Spirit of a Departed Poet." *New York Times*. New York Times, 14 Mar. 2001. Web. 26 Sept. 2011.

- Gwiazda, Piotr K. *James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- Hubbs, Nadine. "On the Uses of Shame and Gifts of a Bloodmobile: Musings from a Musical Queer Apprenticeship." *Gay Shame*. Eds. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 111-16. Print.
- Humphries, Jefferson. "The Voice Within the Mirror: the Haunted Poetry of James Merrill." *Boundary 2* 15/16.1 (1988): 173-194. Web. 20 Nov. 2011.
- "James Merrill: A Life in Writing." A Symposium at Washington University, St. Louis, Panel Discussion. Participants: Helen Vendler, Richard Kenney, Rachel Hadas, Stephen Yenser. 19 Nov. 1994. <<http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/manuscripts/mlc/merrill/panel.html>>
- Kirsch, Adam. "All That Glitters." *The New Republic* 224.19 (2001): 40-44. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 26 Sept. 2011.
- Legault, Marie-Claude. "James Merrill's Use of Performance Imagery and AIDS in his Last Three Collections." Diss. Concordia U of Montréal, 1998. Print.
- Lehman, David, and Charles Berger. *James Merrill: Essays in Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. Print.
- Lundquist, Sara. "An Aesthetics of Enclosure: James Merrill's Inner Rooms." *English Studies in Canada* 31.1 (2005): 27-49. Print.
- Lurie, Alison. *Familiar Spirits: A Memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson*. New York: Viking, 2001. Print.
- Martin, Robert K. *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998. Print

- Materer, Timothy. "James Merrill's Late Poetry: AIDS and the 'Stripping Process'." *Arizona Quarterly* (2008): 123-147. Print.
- . "James Merrill's Polyphonic Muse." *Contemporary Literature* 47.2 (2006): 207-235. Print.
- Mazzaro, Jerome. "In and Out of Whitman's Shadow." *The Sewanee Review* 99.4 (1991): 608-617. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Feb. 2012.
- McCourt, James. *Queer Street: Rise and Fall of an American Culture, 1947-1985: Excursions in the Mind of the Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004. Print.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. "A Poet of Love and Loss." *New York Times Book Review* 4 Mar. 2001 2001: 16. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 20 Sept. 2011.
- Merrill, James. *A Different Person: A Memoir*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Print.
- . *The Collected Poems of James Merrill*. New York: Knopf, 2001. Print.
- . *Collected Prose*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. Print.
- Merrill, James, and J. D. McClatchy. *Recitative: Prose*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986. Print.
- Merwin, W. S. "The End of More Than A Book." *New York Times*. 26 Mar 1995. Print.
- Meyer, Moe. (Ed.) "Introduction." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. NY: Routledge, 1994. 1-22. Print.
- Moffett, Judith. *James Merrill, an Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Print.
- Neubauer, Alexander. (Ed). *Poetry in Person: Twenty-five Years of Conversation with America's Poets*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.

- Nickowitz, Peter. *Rhetoric and Sexuality: The Poetry of Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill*. 1st ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- "Pyroxene." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
- Rotella, Guy L. *Critical Essays on James Merrill*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1996. Print.
- Sartwell, Crispin. "Straight or Gay, We're All Just Acting." *Baltimore Sun*. Baltimore Sun, 1 Feb. 2002. Web. 2 Mar. 2012.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosovsky. *Tendencies*. Duke University Press, 1994. Print.
- Smith, Evans Lansing. *James Merrill: Postmodern Magus: Myth and Poetics*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008. Print.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*, New York: Library of America, 1997 (Kermode, F., & Richardson, J., eds.), p. 306.
- Stockinger, Jacob. "Homotextuality: A Proposal." *The Gay Academic*. Ed. Louie Crew. Palm Springs: ETC Publications, 1978. Print.
- Yenser, Stephen. *The Consuming Myth: The Work of James Merrill*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. "Braving the Elements by James Merrill." *New York Times Book Review*. New York Times, 24 Sep. 1972. 5-18. Web. 26 Sept. 2011.
- Vendler, Helen. "Chronicles of Love and Loss." *New York Review of Books*. New York Review of Books, 11 May 1995. Web. 26 Sept. 2011.
- White, Edmund. "The Inverted Type: Homosexuality as a Theme in James Merrill's Prophetic Books." *Literary Visions of Homosexuality*. Ed. Stuart Kellog. NY: Haworth, 1983. 47-52. Print.

## Appendix A

## The Candid Decorator

I thought I would do over  
All of it. I was tired  
Of scars and stains, of bleared  
Panes, tinge of the liver.  
The fuchsia in the center  
Looked positively weird.  
I felt it—dry as paper.  
I called a decorator.  
In next to no time such  
A nice young man appeared.  
What had I in mind?  
Oh, lots and lots of things—  
Fresh colors, pinks and whites  
That one would want to touch;  
The windows redesigned;  
The plant thrown out in favor,  
Say, of a small tree,  
An orange or a pear . . .  
He listened dreamily.  
Combing his golden hair  
He measured with one glance  
The distance I had come  
To reach this point. And then  
He put away his comb  
He said: “Extravagance!  
Suppose it could be done.  
You’d have to give me carte  
Blanche and an untold sum.  
But to be frank, my dear,  
Living here quite alone  
(Oh, I have seen it, true,  
But me you needn’t fear)  
You’ve one thing to the good:  
While not exactly smart,  
Your wee place, on the whole  
It couldn’t be more ‘you.’  
Still, if you like—” I could  
Not speak. He had seen my soul,  
Had said what I dreaded to hear.  
Ending the interview  
I rose, blindly. I swept  
To show him to the door,  
And knelt, when he had left,  
By my Grand Rapids chair,

And wept until I laughed  
And laughed until I wept.

## Appendix B

## Between Us

A . . . face? There  
It lies on the pillow by  
Your turned head's tangled graying hair:  
Another—like a shrunken head, too small!  
My eyes in dread  
Shut. Open. It is there,

Waxen, inhuman. Small.  
The taut crease of the mouth shifts. It  
Seems to smile,  
Chin up in the wan light. Elsewhere  
I have known what it was, this thing, known  
The blind eye-slit

And knuckle-sharp cheekbone—  
Ah. And again do.  
Not a face. A hand, seen queerly. Mine.  
Deliver me, I breathe  
Watching it unclench with a soft moan  
And reach for you.

## Appendix C

## Mirror

I grow old under an intensity  
 Of questioning looks. *Nonsense,*  
 I try to say, *I cannot teach you children*  
*How to live.—If not you, who will?*  
 Cries one of them aloud, grasping my gilded  
 Frame till the world sways. *If not you, who will?*  
 Between their visits the table, its arrangement  
 Of Bible, fern and Paisley, all past change,  
 Does very nicely. If ever I feel curious  
 As to what others endure,  
 Across the parlor *you* provide examples,  
 Wide open, sunny, of everything I am  
 Not. You embrace a whole world without once caring  
 To set it in order. That takes thought. Out there  
 Something is being picked. The red-and-white bandannas  
 Go to my heart. A fine young man  
 Rides by on horseback. Now the door shuts. Hester  
 Confides in me her first unhappiness.  
 This much, you see, would never have been fitted  
 Together, but for me. Why then is it  
 They more and more neglect me? Late one sleepless  
 Midsummer night I strained to keep  
 Five tapers from your breathing. *No,* the widowed  
 Cousin said, *let them go out.* I did.  
 The room brimmed with gray sound, all the instreaming  
 Muslin of your dream . . .  
 Years later now, two of the grown grandchildren  
 Sit with novels face-down on the sill,  
 Content to muse upon your tall transparence,  
 Your clouds, brown fields, persimmon far  
 And cypress near. One speaks. *How superficial*  
*Appearances are!* Since then, as if a fish  
 Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,  
 I have lapses. I suspect  
 Looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes  
 Through the blind flaws of my mind. As days,  
 As decades lengthen, this vision  
 Spreads and blackens. I do not know whose it is,  
 But I think it watches for my last silver  
 To blister, flake, float leaf by life, each milling-  
 Downward dumb conceit, to a standstill  
 From which not even you strike any brilliant  
 Chord in me, and to a faceless will,  
 Echo of mine, I am amenable.



## Appendix D

## Prism

*a paperweight*

Having lately taken up residence  
 In a suite of chambers  
 Windless, compact and sunny, ideal  
 Lodging for the pituitary gland of Euclid  
 If not for a "single gentleman (references),"  
 You have grown used to the playful inconveniences,  
 The floors that slide from under you helter-skelter,  
 Invisible walls put up in mid-  
 Stride, leaving you warped for the rest of the day,  
 A spoon in water; also that pounce  
 Of wild color from corner to page  
 Straightway consuming the latter  
 Down to your very signature,  
 After which there is nothing to do but retire,  
 Licking the burn, into—into—  
 Look: (Heretofore  
 One could have said where one was looking,  
 In or out. But now it almost—) Look:  
 You dreamed of this:  
 To fuse in borrowed fires, to drown  
 In depths that were not there. You meant  
 To rest your bones in a maroon plush box,  
 Doze the old vaudeville out, of mind and object,  
 Little foreseeing their effect on you,  
 Those dagger-eyed insatiate performers  
 Who from the first false insight  
 To the most recent betrayal of outlook,  
 Crystal, hypnotic atom,  
 Have held you rapt, the proof, the child  
 Wanted by neither. Now and then  
 It is given to see clearly. There  
 Is what remains of you, a body  
 Unshaven, flung on the sofa. Stains of egg  
 Harden about the mouth, smoke still  
 Rises between fingers or from nostrils.  
 The eyes deflect the stars through years of vacancy.  
 Your agitation at such moments  
 Is all too human. You and the stars  
 Seem both endangered, each  
 At the other's utter mercy. Yet the gem  
 Revolves in space, the vision shuttles off.  
 A toneless waltz glints through the pea-sized funhouse.  
 The day is breaking someone else's heart.

## Appendix E

## The Emerald

Hearing that on Sunday I would leave,  
 My mother asked if we might drive downtown.  
 Why certainly—off with my dressing gown!  
 The weather had turned fair. *We* were alive.

Only the gentle General she married  
 Late, for both an old way out of harm's,  
 Fought for breath, surrendered in her arms,  
 With military honors now lay buried.

That week the arcana of his medicine chest  
 Had been disposed of, and his clothes. Gold belt  
 Buckle and the letter from President Roosevelt  
 Went to an unknown grandchild in the West.

Downtown, his widow raised her parasol  
 Against the Lenten sun's not yet detectable  
 Malignant atomies which an electric needle  
 Unfreckles from her soft white skin each fall.

Hence too her chiffon scarf, pale violet,  
 And spangle-paste dark glasses. Each spring we number  
 The new dead. Above ground, who can remember  
 Her as she once was? Even I forget,

Fail to attend her, seem impervious . . .  
 Meanwhile we have made through a dense shimmy  
 Of parked cars burnished by the midday chamois  
 For Mutual Trust. Here cool gloom welcomes us,

And all, director, guard, quite palpably  
 Adore her. Spinster tellers one by one  
 Darting from cages, sniffing to meet her son  
 Think of her having a son—! She holds the key

Whereby palatial bronze gates shut like jaws  
 On our descent into this inmost vault.  
 The keeper bends his baldness to consult,  
 Brings a tin box painted mud-brown, withdraws.

She opens it. Security. Will. Deed.  
 Rummages further. Rustle of tissue, a sprung  
 Lid. Her face gone queerly lit, fair, young,  
 Like faces of our dear ones who have died.

No rhinestone now, no dilute amethyst,  
But of the first water, linking star to pang,  
Teardrop to fire, my father's kisses hang  
In lipless concentration round her wrist.

Gray are these temple-drummers who once more  
Would rouse her, girl-bride jeweled in his grave.  
Instead, she next picks out a ring. "He gave  
Me this when you were born. Here, take it for—

For when you marry. For your bride. It's yours."  
A den of greenest light, it grows, shrinks, glows,  
Hermetic stanza bedded in the prose  
Of the last thirty semiprecious years.

I do not tell her, it would sound theatrical,  
*Indeed this green room's mine, my very life.*  
*We are each other's; there will be no wife;*  
*The little feet that patter here are metrical.*

But onto her worn knuckle slip the ring.  
Wear it for me, I silently entreat,  
Until—until the time comes. Our eyes meet.  
The world beneath the world is brightening.

Appendix F

From: "In Nine Sleep Valley"

Geode, the troll's melon  
Rind of crystals velvet smoke meat blue  
Formed far away under fantastic  
Pressures, then cloven in two  
By the taciturn rock shop man, twins now forever

Will they hunger for each other  
When one goes north and one goes east?

I expect minerals never do.  
Enough for them was a feast  
Of flaws, the molten start and glacial sleep,  
The parting kiss.

Still face to face in halfmoonlight  
Sparkling comes easy to the Gemini.

Centimeters deep yawns the abyss.

## Appendix G

## The Pyroxenes

Well, life has touched me, too.  
No longer infant jade,  
What is the soul not made  
To drink in, to go through

As it becomes a self!  
Admire this forest scene,  
Dendritic, evergreen,  
On Leto's back-lit shelf—

"Forest" that long predates  
The kingdom of the trees.  
Move on a step to these  
Translucent spinach plates

Morbidly thin, which flake  
On flake corundum-red  
As weeping eyes embed.  
You'd think poorhouse and wake,

Fury, bereavement, grief  
Dwelt at Creation's core,  
Maternal protoplast,  
Millions of years before

Coming to high relief  
Among us city folk.  
Out of her woods at last,  
On the Third Day we woke

From cradles deep in mire  
At white heat: elements-  
To-be of hard, scarred sense,  
Strangers to fire.

## Appendix H

Pearl

Well, I admit  
 A small boy's eyes grew rounder and lips moister  
 To find it invisibly chained, at home in the hollow  
 Of his mother's throat: the real, deepwater thing.  
 Far from the mind at six to plumb  
 X-raywise those glimmering lamplit  
 Asymmetries to self-immolating mite  
 Or angry grain of sand  
 Not yet proverbial. Yet his would be the hand  
 Mottled with survival—  
 She having slipped (how? when?) past reach—  
 That one day grasped it. Sign of what  
 But wisdom's trophy. Time to mediate,  
 Skin upon skin, so cunningly they accrete,  
 The input. For its early mote  
 Of grit  
 Reborn as orient moon to gloat  
 In verdict over the shucked, outsmarted meat . . .  
 One layer, so to speak, of calcium carbonate  
 That formed in me is the last shot  
 —I took the seminar I teach  
 In loss to a revival—  
 Of Sasha Guitry's classic *Perles de la Couronne*.  
 The hero has tracked down  
 His prize. He's holding forth, that summer night,  
 At the ship's rail, all suavity and wit,  
 Gem swaying like a pendulum  
 From his fing—oops! To soft bubble-blurred harpstring  
 Arpeggios regaining depths (man the camera, follow)  
 Where an unconscious world, my yawning oyster,  
 Shuts on it.