

How Travel Informed the Artistry of James Merrill's Early- and Middle-Period Poetry

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Letters of the University of the South
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

August 2019

Sewanee, Tennessee

Abstract

From a very young age, James Merrill sought out and decided on a path in his personal and professional life that was purely individualistic. Beginning with his strained relationship with his father, Charles E. Merrill, the founder of Merrill Lynch, and his mother, Hellen Ingram Merrill, whom Charles divorced when Merrill was an adolescent, as well as his estrangement from both of his parents because of his unorthodox living arrangements due to the above, Merrill was forced to create his own identity. At about the same time that his parents divorced, he left to attend prep school at Lawrenceville. Thus, his *raison d'être*, instead of being formed by a traditional, close-knit family background, came about due to his formation of close friendships with fellow students in prep school and then at Amherst College. Instead of delving into team sports, as a child he liked to wander in the woods and at the beach, swim, go to the theater, and create his own puppet shows. His escapes from a privileged though unhappy childhood living in different homes during different parts of the year as a child were reading and writing, which were to become the formation of his métier.

After excelling in the arts and in English at both boarding school and then college, Merrill chose the path that made the most sense for a burgeoning writer to gain exposure in the world of literature while continuing to write; he accepted a position teaching English to undergraduates at Bard College.

Though he only spent a year teaching at Bard, he gained new contacts in the literary field while there, including literary critics, editors, and some who were involved in the publishing field in New York. Perhaps restless or eager to leave the confines and upward climb of a career track as a professor, and bolstered by sufficient family wealth to become a free agent, Merrill set out on his own to make his name as a poet, and never looked back.

The central theme of this thesis argues that Merrill made a decision early in his career to live and work in a culture and country apart from his own for part of each year, a lifestyle he followed every year in the summer months, beginning with travel in Europe in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s,

until and his partner David Jackson bought a house in Athens in 1964, which would become their permanent second home.

Living in a country such as Greece where ancient history and classical architecture blended with scenic city- and seascapes and where he met scores of new and interesting friends—both foreigners and expatriate—gave Merrill the sense of individual freedom he felt was crucial in order to experience creative inspiration for his work. He sought a lifestyle and milieu with more libertarian social mores in which to thrive. The different people, landscapes, art, and architecture he found while living and traveling in Europe fulfilled this need for him and provided him with a greater impetus to create.

A second and very important corollary to the theme of travel as an integral influence on Merrill's facility and success as a poet was the aspect of duality in his life. The two different worlds in which he existed—living at his house in Athens and traveling in Europe in the summers, and then moving back to his house on Water Street in Stonington, Connecticut the rest of the year—nuanced and colored his poems accordingly, as a great deal of them were written in and about life in Greece and Europe; others were set in America.

Merrill's home in Stonington and in Athens were opposites in geographic and cultural terms, but, perhaps because of Merrill's affinity for duality, he thrived in terms of both productivity and enjoying life in equal terms in both places. The harbor and proximity to the water around Stonington, the architecture, milieu in which he shared his home with friends and other writers and artists, the sense of living in a rural community within an urban town—all reminded him of Athens. Imagery relating to this theme is a hallmark of several of Merrill's poems, though perhaps especially evident in "From the Cupola" (see pp. 49 of this work).

Though Merrill did not follow his father into finance and business, and though he loathed having to deal with money, he depended on it to have the freedom he enjoyed traveling and living as a financially independent (at least in his early career) writer. He also gave significant amounts of it away as

gifts to friends as well as to philanthropic causes, such as the Ingram Merrill Foundation. He cherished his relationships with his friends and love interests, but at times clashed with both, personally and artistically; he loved his time and libertine existence in Greece, but equally loved his home on in Stonington.

Though his relationship with his mother throughout his life was strained, he also felt an affinity with her, and loved her deeply.

What Merrill found as an expatriate was the ability to thrive in European cultures such as Rome and Athens where sexual mores are more libertine than in the West, and as such would befit his life as a gay man who enjoyed the company of others with the same orientation, and allow him the peace of mind to create the art of his poetry without having to be preoccupied with hiding his personal lifestyle from the public eye. In the 1950s and 1960s, being gay was nowhere near becoming accepted by the American public as an acceptable sexual orientation, and it wasn't until perhaps the mid-1970s—by which time Merrill was in his 50s—that the gay rights movement began to gather momentum.

This lifestyle also allowed Merrill to mingle with people he met in Europe and fully delve into their cultures by becoming part of intimate rituals such as dancing and drinking ouzo late into the night at tavernas, imagery of which is most evident in poems treated in this work such as "Ouzo for Robin;" fishing with locals, as seen in "16.x.65;" enjoying café life, having long discussions and sharing ideas on literature and art with intellectuals, as seen in "Words for Maria;" resonant and colorful images of (Greek) landscapes, as seen in "Olive Grove;" and more land- and seascape, art, and architecture imagery in "After Greece," to name a few.

Thus, it is this reader's contention that although Merrill traveled widely throughout Europe, as well as South America, Africa and Asia, Greece best provided for him a personal refuge in which his creativity as a poet flourished, and it is for this reason that many of his best early- and middle-period work (~1959-1969) was written in and about Greece.