JAMES MERRILL'S UNIQUE SEARCH FOR NEW MYTHS

Paradise or disintegration

MICHAEL HARRINGTON

IT IS POSSIBLE that James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (Atheneum, $25, $12.95 paper, 560 pp.) is one of the significant works of the second half of this century.

It would, of course, be foolish to try to be more precise. It is simply too early even to hazard the semblance of a definitive judgment. Time must participate in a decision which can only be made looking backward at a distance; the book, like the shades of the dead whom Merrill summons back to life, must be seen in a rear-view mirror. But to say that the future might well regard *The Changing Light* as major is to make a very large present claim for a powerful and unique poem.

Before supporting that claim, however, I should admit to at least three reasons why I might be overly enthusiastic. First, Merrill is culturally (and chronologically) of my generation. His points of reference—Blake, Eliot, Auden, Stevens—are my own and there is even a passing reference to the Village bar in which I gloriously misspent most of my twenties and early thirties. Secondly, I read, and re-read, *The Changing Light* during a five-month stay in Europe, i.e., in a time when I was deprived of the boring reassurance of everyday life and perhaps became hypersensitive as a result. Not so incidentally, I visited two cities—Athens and Venice—which figure in the poem and even went sightseeing with its images in my mind. And thirdly, I came upon the book shortly after finishing my own analysis of what is one of Merrill's central themes, the effective decline of religious belief in Western society. The poem therefore had—has—a relevance for me which could be personal and exceptional.

Even so, I am convinced that *The Changing Light at Sandover* is an event of importance in our culture and not just in my own life. Why?

The book is "about" a series of revelations from heaven and the dead, communicated to a ouija board whose "Hand" is "DJ" and whose interpreter is "JM" (David Jackson and James Merrill, but both are characters in a fiction and I will call them DJ and JM when they appear in that guise). The setting is the religious social crisis of the contemporary world which, with its menaces of atomic and population explosions, must face the question of whether reality is ultimately benign or whether it is tending back toward the chaos from which it emerged. These issues are posed in terms of new myths—the old faiths, Merrill thinks, are unbelievable. Will God B (for biology) and Mother Nature triumph over anti-matter and disintegration? Will the spiritual forces accumulated over the generations produce "a great glory or a great puddle"?

More simply put: modern men and women have lost that basic, essentially religious, trust in the ultimate goodness of existence at the very moment at which they themselves have acquired the power to destroy, if not the cosmos, then a good part of our small corner of it. Two previous worlds, we are told, did self-destruct, either through a nuclear blast or by a Malthusian conflict between a race of centaurs and their bat-like helpers. Ours is the third and last world.

My summary and prose brutalization of the poem should not be taken to suggest that it is a compound of cobwebs and Weltschmerz. On the contrary, *The Changing Light* is intricately architectonic and intellectually serious. Like *Finnegans Wake* it comes full circle: it concludes as JM begins reading all that has gone before to a heavenly audience and intones its first word as its last word. This preposterous notion, and many others, is so totally and convincingly imagined that, when JM and DJ finally break off contact with three of the dead, there is a poignant sense of present loss. Indeed, if all of its parts failed, which is in no way the case, *The Changing Light* would still be a triumph as an incredibly realized whole.

The poem is divided into three main sections and a brief coda. The first book, *Ephraim*, consists of twenty-six separate poems beginning with the successive letters of the alphabet. It establishes the basic dramatic premise about the ouija board and introduces some of the central themes: the decline of the old myths, presented in a lovely elegy telling how "Venice, her least stone/Pure menace at the start, at length became/A

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window fiery-mild, whose walked-through frame/Everything else, at sunset, hinged upon—''; a debate between JM and his artist nephew over realism (science, facts, this world) and faith-art (the otherworldly); the fearfulness of power as JM learns that the bomb at Hiroshima destroyed souls as well as bodies; and, with an allusion to Wallace Stevens, the idea of God as that which (who) conserves an unstable universe whose black holes are scientific intuitions of an unthinkable and metaphysical possibility.

Ephraim also contains a poetic fragment of a lost novel which is confusing and wisely forgotten, and many more personal references than the rest of *The Changing Light*, references which are sometimes excessive and obscure. The whole project, one suspects, did not become clear to Merrill until he began to work on the next book, *Mirabel*; and thus *Ephraim* is marred by some loose threads. It is in *Mirabel* (twice as long as *Ephraim*, followed by *Scripts for the Pageant*, which is even longer) that the dramatic fascination of a marvelously articulated fictional (symbolic of the real) world becomes quite dominant.

''Mirabel'' is a bat-like creature, the survivor of one of those self-destructed worlds, who becomes a peacock as he talks to JM and DJ. Indeed he turns a scientific account of the genesis of reality into a poetic myth so that his own transformation from bat to peacock is a refraction of his subject matter. This section is divided into ten sections, numbered from zero through nine, which, not so incidentally, is the number of heavens in Dante's *Paradiso*, one of the many ghosts which haunt this poem. In *Mirabel* the shades of three dead people—W. H. Auden; Maria Demertzi Mitsotaki, an Athenian friend of JM and DJ and the daughter of a former Greek prime minister; and Robert Morse, a neighbor and friend from Stonington, Connecticut—become central. And a basic theme is fully defined: that there must be ''POEMS OF SCIENCE'' (the supernatural characters speak upper case, a convention which, strange to say, is not at all bothersome). At first, JM is appalled at the notion (''To squint through those steel-rimmed/Glasses of the congenitally slug-/Pale boy at school, with his precipitates,/His fruit flies and his slide rule?'').

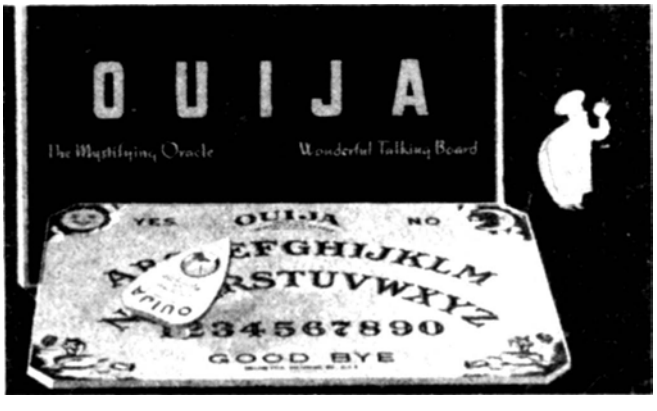
> Not for nothing had the Impressionists
> Put subject-matter in its place, a mere
> Pretext for iridescent atmosphere.
> Why couldn't Science, in the long run, serve
> As well as one's uncleared lunch-table or
> *Mme X en Culotte de Matador?*

Mirabel ends with a serene meditation by JM, to which I will return, and the appearance of the Archangel Michael, one of the key figures of the next book, *Scripts for the Pageant*. *Scripts* is divided, typically, into three subsections, ''Yes,'' ''&,'' ''No.'' In this poem everything is dialectical, from matter (which is white and black, order and chaos), through images (which, like photographs, are positives of a negative and vice versa), to Michael (who is good, but perhaps a sentimental liberal) and his sometimes antagonist, the angel Gabriel (who destroys, but perhaps as a necessary work for the sustaining of life).

In *Scripts*, another shade joins the group: George Cotzias, a Greek scientist. Buddha, Ahknaton, Jesus, Homer, Montezuma, Plato, and a false Mohammed also put in significant appearances. (Plato is, for reasons which will not be explained here, major.) This is the book in which the chaos-order antagonism is explored and it ends as JM and DJ break a mirror—and thereby their relationship with Auden, Maria, and George. The coda (*The Higher Keys*) ties up various loose ends but also focuses upon the rebirth of Robert Morse who, in his new guise (which includes a clubfoot, one more sign of the unity of this imperfect world and its ethereal interpretation), will be a great composer. As JM prepares to read *The Changing Light* to twenty-six spirits, including Dante, Jane Austen, and Proust ''. . . a star trembles in the full carafe/As the desk light comes on, illuminating/The page I open to.'' The lectern lamp—the ordinary—becomes a star. As bats turn into peacocks and science into poetry, the poet goes back to the beginning and ends with the first word, ''Admittedly. . . .''

BEFORE MOVING to some of the most important particulars within this extraordinary structure, I should acknowledge some problems. Merrill is possessed, he himself understands, of an ''unrelenting fluency,'' a talent to turn everything into ''slant, weightless gold.'' But does one, then, confuse a craftsman's formal genius with deep meanings, knowing with Merrill that ''affection's/Poorest object, set in perfect light/By happenstance, grows irreplaceable''? Bob Adelman, a photographer friend and collaborator, once said to me that you should not cover a war with color film since the carnage will come out vividly beautiful.

That is a problem with Merrill; it is also a glory. For instance, in *Scripts* he describes a changing of the light in a supernatural schoolroom: ''not/The lights we've seen according to thus far/—Spectral gems, first waters of a star—/But Light like bread, quotidian, severe,/Wiped of the sugar sprinkles of Vermeer; . . .'' And there is ubiquitous wit in this poem, sometimes as frivolous as a pun, sometimes more ingenious as when Jane Austen addresses the newly dead Robert Morse ''As *Mr. Robert*—a shrewd estimate./ He's after all not Heir to the Estate,/Its goods and duties, but a Younger Son/Free to be ornamental and have fun.'' My greatest difficulty is not, however, aesthetic but political. *The Changing Light* has, as we will see, a very explicit political



content: anti-nuclear, environmental, and sometimes a kind of upper-class, elitist Malthusianism. It is that last attitude, I will suggest, that creates problems.

WITH THESE qualifications, let me return to the poem and a very basic question: what is it "about"? One answer is, the changing light at Sandover. The name, Sandover, we are told, is a corruption of the French, Saintefleur, or the Italian Santofior, "An English branch of that distinguished tree/ Through whose high leaves light pulses and whose roots/Rove beyond memory." It is, as "WHA" (the shade of Auden) suggests, the community of art and spirit which lies beyond doing your own thing, the "ROSEBRICK MANOR" of language and culture whose family includes Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson. "IT WAS," WHA says, "THE GREATEST PRIVILEGE TO HAVE HAD/A BARE LOWCEILINGED MAID'S ROOM AT THE TOP." "Sandover" is also the ouija board and, I suspect, the heavenly flower at the end of the *Paradiso*. But, for my present purpose, its most significant meaning is the heritage of culture, and that relates to one of the central myths of *Mirabel* and to one of the basic theories of the age.

It was, Mirabel tells JM and DJ, language, culture, which marked the beginning of the transition "OF THE TWO BASIC APECHILDREN" toward humanity. Emile Durkheim, and Friederich Nietzsche, both of whom thought grammar a key to God, would agree; so would Wittgenstein and, in our day, Jurgen Habermas. So signal gave way to sign and then sign became symbol and symbol music and the "REASONED INDIRECTION" of the garden of human culture was on the way. But now, the old symbols lose their power and we move from symbols back toward signs: the clock face, Henri Lefebvre remarks, at least imitated the revolutions of the day; the digital watch is pure information. But if, to go back to Merrill, "IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD" and now the word is no longer what is was, how are we to face our crises as the light changes in our culture?

Without the sustaining myths, Mirabel tells JM, "MAN IS AMOK & CHAOS SLIPS IN (UPON/COLLAPSE, IN INTELLIGENT MEN, OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF)." That is hardly an original thought, and a theologian like Bultmann is more radical than Merrill in his demythologizing. But what Merrill makes of this commonplace—both as poetry and poetic meaning—is anything but a cliché. The past two or three hundred years, JM comments, "have seen a superhuman/All-shaping Father dwindle (as in Newman)/To ghostly, disputable Essence or/ Some shaggy-browed, morality play bore/(As in the Prologue to Faust)." And then there comes a key intuition (it is, I will suggest later, central to the entire poem):

> Why should God speak? How humdrum what he says
> Next to His word: out of a black sleeve, lo!
> Sun, Earth and Stars in eloquent dumb show.
> Our human words are weakest, I would urge,
> When He resorts to them."

But if God is in crisis, so is literature. The old vocabulary becomes stale, "translucent, half-effaced," but science creates a new language: ". . . through Wave, Ring, Bond, through Spectral Lines/And Resonances blows a breath of life,/Lifting the pleated garment." Since JM, openly acknowledging his debt to Matthew Arnold thinks the scribe must replace the priest, it is therefore incumbent on the poet to marry science and poetry (and music), matter and man, nature and spirit, to reconcile all the dialectical contraries. It is necessary, WHA argues, to bring "WM CARLOS WM'S THOUGHT THINGS /& THE COLD VIRGIN VERB OF MALLARME/ TOGETHER. . . ." One must, JM puts it, "tell round what brass tacks the old silk frays."

In confronting this challenge, JM presents three new God(s). First there is the God who holds back the chaos: a distant figure, not at all as human and compelling as Mother Nature in her best mood (Nature, for JM as for the Greeks, is a trinity). The second God reminds me of the divinity defined by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*: an imminent transcendence which develops historically, not simply in nature (which would be a rather simple pantheism) but in the evolution of nature and man. As WHA puts it ". . . GOD B IS NOT/ONLY HISTORY BUT EARTH ITSELF. HE IS THE GREENHOUSE." JM is, I think, even more daring: God B

> (Who, lacking human volubility,
> *Has* no word for His own power and grace;
> Who, left alone, falls back on flimflam
> Tautologies like *I am that I am*
> Or *The world is everything that is the case*);

That is remarkable: to equate the God of Abraham and the empirical reality of Wittgenstein. But then I suspect Wittgenstein might have agreed even though he insisted that this was a matter upon which one must keep silent.

This second, "Hegelian" God is described more prosaically—more scientifically—by the Archangel Michael at the close of *Mirabel*. The genius of life is, he says, its responsiveness to the sun "AND SO AS YOU FACE THE SETTING SUN YOU FACE YOUR ANCESTOR." Cells accumulated energy through the suncycles and "THIS ACCUMULATED ENERGY BECOMES THROUGH EONS AN ANCIENT AND IMMORTAL INTELLIGENCE . . . AND AT LAST AFTER EXPERIMENT THIS INTELLIGENCE FORMED MAN./THIS IS GOD'S NAME." And yet, for all of the demythologizing, *The Changing Light* is a religious poem. In a commentary on Michael's cosmology, Maria says:

> FOR MICHAEL/SUN
> READ GENERATIVE FORCE. FOR GENERATIVE FORCE
> READ: RADIATION TO THE BILLIONTH POWER
> OF EXPLODING ATOMS. FOR EMMANUEL,
> H2O. FOR SEEDS, THAT COSMIC DUST
> LADEN WITH PARTICLES OF INERT MATTER.
> FOR GOD READ: GOD.

Ultimately, all the scientific myths—and for that matter, the scientific non-myths—encounter the mystery of the beginning. Kant was, and is, right (and on this count, Hegel agreed with him): you cannot deduce the infinite from the finite. But JM—and Wittgenstein—are right, too: one can imagine in silence or in poetry, a godly source of that beginning. *The Changing Light* does more than that. It projects a supernatural effort to help humans toward an earthly paradise, in part

through biology—the "no accident clause" of DNA, time standing still in the clockwork of genes—and in part through an otherworldly research lab, making use of the reborn, reapportioned souls of the great dead.

There was, I thought, more than a little poetic license in all of this. Wasn't the transmigration of souls merely a way of saying that Shakespeare and Buddha still live in us? But then I happened to read the comments of a French scientist, Claude Allegre, in an article in *Le Monde:* "To know that the stars are immense nuclear laboratories whose activities continually change the chemical composition of our galaxy . . . to discover that the physical laws which rule liquid crystals, a plate of spaghetti, a pile of sand are finally the same . . . these are some of the elements which today infuse the most profound human thought."

SCIENCE, THEN, is becoming science fiction and *The Changing Light* with its "R" (for Research) Lab where new types are cloned is not so otherworldly. But it is here, in the domain of the science God, that the elitist neo-Malthusianism emerges. Of course, the bomb and nuclear power are a threat to human existence; of course, the sense of the holiness of the environment is perhaps the most genuine and spontaneous religious emotion of these times; and of course there must be a limit to population. But to blame and despise the mass of the "breeders" is another thing. Mirabel makes the essentially aristocratic point: "A MERE TWO MILLION CLONED SOULS LISTEN TO EACH OTHER WHILE/OUTSIDE THEY HOWL AND PRANCE SO RECENTLY OUT OF THE TREES." At the time when Malthus wrote, attacking decency toward the poor as an incentive to excess population, most enlightened Britons thought my Irish forebears—and James Joyce's, more to the point—a race of savages.

There were even those—Nassau Senior, for instance—who thought that the Irish did not die in sufficient numbers during the Potato Famine to restore the proper economic equilibrium between food supply and the "demand" for life. WHA, in welcoming the coming of the "alphas" (from *Brave New World*) asks, "WHAT OF THE OMEGAS?/3 BILLION OF EM UP IN SMOKE POOR BEGGARS?" And JM interjects: "Wystan, how *can* you?" The reply comes: "COURAGE: GABRIEL/KNOWS WHAT HE'S UP TO & (LIKE TIME) WILL TELL." When humans thus play God they take on too great a responsibility, to put it mildly. In fairness, JM has his doubts—and I presume James Merrill does, too—and the worst statements are made by assorted angels and shades.

I don't want to be priggish. Some of the poem's perceptions of the problems of mass society are insightful enough. Finishing this essay in Venice, tramping as a member of the democratic mass through the aristocratic precincts of the Doge's Palace, I would be a hypocrite to deny that an occasional snobbish thought occurred to me. But then the thought was dismissed as both unworthy and untrue, for the point is to expand the human potential of the billions—just as we have already in fact expanded the potential of the millions, including me.

All of this raises the truly vexed question of the relation between art and politics. How does one deal with Ezra Pound's beautiful evocation of the corruption of art by money in the *Cantos* when one knows that it is quite likely inspired by fascist nonsense about the Jewish bankers? Or with the poignance in Brecht's Stalinist play—an agitprop play at that—on the Chinese Revolution? I do not want to equate Merrill's ambivalent and liberal elitism with fascism or Stalinism, yet the problem it poses is similar to the one raised by Pound and Brecht.

Of course one doesn't judge a work of art by political standards. Marx well understood that Balzac, the reactionary, was a greater novelist than Zola, the socialist. And there can be a sort of "willing suspension of disbelief"—I think. But then Balzac's monarchism does not threaten me while neo-Malthusianism does. Whatever the high theoretical solution to the problem, I must confess that I was aesthetically put off by the suggestion—and it is not made by JM himself—that a famine in Africa may be part of a benign plan for the future.

I REGRET THIS CRITICISM for the objectionable material arises precisely because Merrill is becoming more socially concerned. The transition from *Ephraim* to *Mirabel* is, in part, a shift from the more personal to the more public and it marks a gain in power—it is one of the reasons why this strange poem may be truly great. If in one aspect of that excellent transition Merrill nods as politician and utopian more than as poet, that is to be noted and regretted; it should not be a reason for turning against *The Changing Light*.

In this spirit, I conclude, then, with one of the finest passages in the poem, a key to Merrill's third God and his basic meaning. I cite but a few lines of this magnificent meditation, first about DNA:

> The world was everything that was the case?
> Open the case. Lift out the fabulous
> Necklace, in form a spiral molecule
> Whose sparklings outmaneuver time, space, us.

Then JM explains that Hell in German means bright

> —So that my father's cheerful, 'Go to Hell',
> Long unheard, and Vaughan's unbeatable
> 'They are all gone into a world of light'
> Come, even now at times, to the same thing—

But how will Hell—in that double meaning—render what it owes? That is, JM thinks, a "quaint idiom," perhaps "from the parchment of some old scribe of the apocalypse." So then one must

> . . . render *it* as long rendering to
> Light of this very light stored by our cells
> These past five million years, these past five minutes
> Here by the window, taking in through panes
> Still bleary from the hurricane a gull's
> Ascending aureole of decibels,
> As numberless four-pointed brilliancies
> Upon the Sound's mild silver grid come, go?
> The message hardly needs decoding, so
> Sheer the text, so innocent and fleet

These overlapping pandemonia:
Birdlife, leafplay, rockface, waterglow
Lending us their being, till the given
Moment comes to render what we owe.

In Paris at the Beaubourg earlier in the summer, I saw a series of Kandinsky paintings assembled to show his progression (which I am not sure was a progression in this case) from representational to non-representational art. The first painting was of a woods, and the light makes a marvelous pattern upon the dark ground. That, it struck me, was what all Kandinsky's work was about: the light in the woods was the *donnée*, all else was implicit in it. So with Merrill. His third God is reality, the world that is the case, but enchanted, sheer, innocent, and fleet with its overlapping pandemonia. A page earlier, the same insight in different language:

Things look out at us from a spell
They themselves have woven.

That is, I think, Merrill's perception of God, and it pervades—it illuminates—every page of one of the most extraordinary poems of our times, a theology for the godless and godly.

Screen

TOO FAR GONE

ROBERT BRESSON & ALAIN TANNER

TWO NEW FILMS by old masters at the New York Film Festival seemed to me to suffer the same fate. Neither was able to go the distance, or rather, each went too great a distance. Both should have been over sooner than they were. A protracted ending diminished the effect of what had come before. One was Robert Bresson's *L'Argent*, which begins in a very promising way. Drawing its theme from a Tolstoy story entitled "*Faux Billet*," the movie at first follows the migrations of some forged money as it is passed from two teenagers to a shop owner and then from him to his oil delivery man. Into this story are drawn a number of other people—a shop assistant, the teenagers' parents, the delivery man's wife—who are all either corrupted or ruined by their contact with the fake currency.

The premise of this plot is very like a wonderful Expressionist movie of the late 1920s called *Überfall*, about a coin that passes from hand to hand among the low life of a German city. It is a premise strikingly appropriate to Bresson's style as a filmmaker. The characteristic Bresson frame is an empty one, a medium shot in which the camera lingers on the scene for a few moments after the actors have departed. Bresson's movies are about absence; they are about the life of the spirit that pervades the world only beyond or between or after physical presences. And in *L'Argent*, he begins with a story that also has at its center a kind of void. It is a story that revolves not around a single character or momentous event, but only around a handful of forged bills, a mere prop, an inert detail of the type on which his camera might rest after the actors had walked from the frame. The plot therefore has a certain integrity like that of Bresson's style. Style and content complement each other. It is an auspicious beginning.

But then the film begins eliminating characters, concentrating more and more on just one figure, the delivery man, Yvon (Christian Patey). It is he who gets caught with the bills, and the consequences so utterly transform his life that Bresson wants us to see him as a totally different, debased character at the end . To get this across, Bresson begins to make a whole new movie in the last quarter of *L'Argent*. He introduces a new character who lives outside the tainted universe in which we have been so far. The film leaves behind several unfinished stories of characters about whom we would like to have known more. It creates in their stead a completely innocent old woman whose only purpose in life, or at least in this film, is to be Yvon's victim. Thus does Bresson sacrifice—indeed, throw away—that integrity of plot, character, and style that seemed so fine at the beginning. I'm saddened to say that this is the pattern this great director's whole career has been taking in his last couple of films.

THE OTHER FILM doesn't end as badly as Bresson's does; and yet it, too, might better have ended sooner. It is Alain Tanner's *In the White City*. The film is about a ship's engineer named Paul (Bruno Ganz) who has a port of call in Lisbon, "the white city." He checks into a pension on the harbor. He goes drinking and chats with some whores. He gets into a scuffle in a bar. He chats up a chamber maid and begins sleeping with her. He rides the tram and walks the streets, not really touring, just wandering around. He lets his ship sail without him.

It's apparent from fairly early in the film that Paul is cracking up. The dissolution of his mind is slow, unspectacular, almost imperceptible at times. There are moments of action, as when he's followed from a snooker parlor and mugged because he's left his wallet sticking out, almost as if he were inviting such a catastrophe. But most of the time, nothing ostensible is happening. Paul sits on the little balcony of his room and plays his harmonica. He goest out to dinner with the chambermaid, Rosa (Teresa Madruga), and her friends, all of whom babble in Portuguese, a language he doesn't understand. Drunk and alone, he falls out of bed in the middle of the night, then stumbles to his feet and smashes whisky bottles against the wall. Or he just stares out at the harbor.

The room in which he lives is big and bare and rather empty. The harbor outside is the same, which is why Tanner is attracted to it as a background. In Tanner's films, the physical place, the geographical location, means as much as the action. The place is part of the action, as the title of his best earlier color film, *Le Milieu du Monde*, suggests. (It's about a town that is topographically central and spiritually on the periphery, almost off the map.) Both the harbor and the city of Lisbon are "white" in this film; they are a blank, a void, and therefore a