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# Wallace Stevens, James Merrill, and the way of the dandy

Fuller, Janice Moore, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1989

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# WALLACE STEVENS, JAMES MERRILL, AND THE WAY OF THE DANDY

by

Janice Moore Fuller

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1989

Approved by

Dissertation Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

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19 October 1989

Date of Acceptance by Committee

19 October 1989

Date of Final Oral Examination

FULLER, JANICE MOORE, Ph.D. Wallace Stevens, James Merrill, and the Way of the Dandy. (1989) Directed by Dr. Keith Cushman. 280 pp.

Wallace Stevens and James Merrill seem to embody in their lives and poems the qualities of the dandy--not the fin de siècle dandyism of mere stylized dress, social hauteur, and public theatrics but the complete philosophy of life described by Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly and Baudelaire, who recognize in the dandy's mannerisms a spiritual significance and heroic mission--escaping the triviality, conformity, and tastelessness of modern existence.

In his meticulous dress, scornful aloofness, haughty wit, and cosmopolitan tastes, Stevens cultivates a dandyism that guards against the poverty of life threatened by his "burgher" existence as an insurance lawyer. Merrill uses his dandyism (his refined dress, emotional displacement, political privatization, and witty circle of friends) to transcend the mechanical life of his parents' privileged world and live the purer life of Baudelaire's dandy.

Dandy personae and characters appear as masks for Stevens in his early poetry and as thinly-veiled versions of Merrill throughout his career. Furthermore, Stevens's and Merrill's poems display dandiacal traits designed to exclude the bourgeoisie and cultivate an elite readership: an

apolitical stance, deliberate obscurity (including foreign phrases, allusions, riddles, complex word-play), dix-huitième taste, concern for decorum (including periphrasis), and half-scornful, half-ironic wit.

Stevens's and Merrill's frequent use of the theme-and-variation form is roughly analogous to the dandy's use of form and artifice to shield himself from painful emotions. Stevens's and Merrill's successful borrowing of the musical form allows them to distance themselves from their subjects, suggest a changing world, represent improvisational acts of the mind, and cultivate the dandy's love of virtuosity.

The dandy's self-consciousness is evident in Stevens's and Merrill's examination of perception and the interaction between the imagination and reality and their attempt to transcend the dualism of art and reality through a variety of metapoetic techniques: self-reflexive commentary, oxymoronic images, hypostatization, plural gerunds, and the blending of concrete and abstract diction. By embracing artifice throughout his career (while Stevens begins to fear its distortions and isolation), Merrill proves the purer poetic dandy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank James Merrill for his kindness and generosity in allowing me to use his papers at Washington University and granting me an interview. I also thank Holly Hall, head of Special Collections at John M. Olin Library, Washington University, for her enthusiasm and expert guidance.

My committee members made significant contributions to this project. Mary Ellis Gibson, Mark Smith-Soto, and Walter Beale provided encouragement and intelligent suggestions as this work took shape. Charles Davis gave me a love of Wallace Stevens and nurtured me as a scholar throughout my doctoral career. Keith Cushman's wit, sensitivity to contemporary poetry, and scholarly example inspired and guided me at every stage of this project.

I thank my friends Catherine, Linda, Bruce, and Lou Ann for the technical assistance, concern, and constancy that have sustained me through this project's every crisis.

I especially thank my parents Floyd and Doris Wilson Moore. Just as their selflessness made my early educational achievements possible, so their support has never failed me

during this final academic challenge.

Above all, I thank my daughters Megan and Alison for the seven years of patience, excitement, and pride that have made my degree possible. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

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# INTRODUCTION

This dissertation began as an attempt to explore Wallace Stevens's influence on the poetry of James Merrill. In particular, I had planned to show that Stevens's influence on Merrill more closely resembles the pattern of influence discovered by Lynn Keller in pairs of modernist and contemporary poets in Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition--that is, "an early absorption and imitation followed by increasing divergence"--than does Auden's influence on Merrill, in which "the polarized impulses toward continuity and discontinuity are more simultaneously and continuously balanced" (187). I had also planned to show that, despite Merrill's apparent divergence from Stevens, Stevens's influence persisted in Merrill's later poems in subtler but more important ways.

Merrill's poetry as well as his own comments seemed to encourage a study of Stevens's influence upon him as well as of the intertextuality between his poetry and Stevens's. Certainly, Merrill is comfortable with the notion of influence. J. Hillis Miller, in The Linguistic Moment: From

Wordsworth to Stevens, observes that

> Each poet's precursors are present, whether or not he knows it or wishes it, in the intimate texture of his material, in the words he must use to speak or write at all, there in language like tiny fossils in the builder's stone. (57-58)

Merrill, for one, is aware of these "tiny fossils" and apparently has none of the nineteenth-century poet's anxiety about his literary precursors, as his comments in a 1982 interview with J.D. McClatchy indicate:

> There's always a lurking air of pastiche that, consciously or unconsciously, gets into your diction. That doesn't much bother me, does it you? No voice is as individual as the poet would like to think. In the long run I'd rather have what I write remind people of Pope or Yeats or Byron than of the other students in that year's workshop. (80)

Merrill's "anti-Romantic allegiance to his literary forebears," as Keller terms it (220), is perhaps most apparent in his trilogy The Changing Light at Sandover. The trilogy presents, as WHA (or Auden) announces in Mirabell's Books of Number, a "COURSE IN HOW TO SEE PAST LONE / AUTONOMY TO POWERS BEHIND THE THRONE" (CLS 282). In studying Merrill's poetry, I came to realize that I could make a strong case for Stevens as one of those "POWERS" behind Merrill's "THRONE."

Merrill first encountered Stevens's poetry during the early 1940s--his sophomore and junior years at Amherst under the guidance of Kimon Friar--when Stevens was "the one who

appealed to me most" among the modern poets he read ("James Merrill at Home" 23). Friar remembers his tutelage of Merrill in "Amherst Days," included in the privately printed For James Merrill: A Birthday Tribute:

> I sought to be sensitive to his own inclinations that he might more fully mine his own proclivities. I saw similarities in style and temperament to Wallace Stevens, and introduced him more fully to that poet's work.

Certainly, it is in his early poetry written soon after this first exposure--poems from The Black Swan (1946), First Poems (1951), and The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace (1959) with their "decorative elegance," as Judith Moffett calls it (James Merrill 22)--that the influence of the tone, diction, imagery, and form of Stevens's poetry is most evident. In these early poems, Merrill proves himself the notable exception to Joseph Riddel's claim that "younger poets" found Stevens's Harmonium "inimitable" (Clairvoyant Eye 9). Throughout the early poems, Merrill uses language that seems influenced by the vocabulary of the poems of Harmonium--their "glorious sound effects" and mixture of "the very gaudiest words with the grandest philosophical terms as if they were on a par with each other" ("Interview with Ashley Brown" 42; "James Merrill at Home" 23): Merrill's "fragile reeling" ("Octopus"), "glittering neutrality" ("The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace"),

"noon deflecting summary" ("The Blue Eye"), "slumbering green" ("Olive Grove") and "poignant thistles" ("Variations" The Air Is Sweetest that a Thistle Guards") match Stevens's bizarre language--"green barbarian," "gesticulating lightning," "Sonorous nutshells," and "fecund minimum" ("The Comedian as the Letter C"). Merrill's early poems also break out in "a pox of plural gerunds" (Moffett, James Merrill 27)--"water's claspings," "flitterings from within," "to loosen gleamings," "our wakenings"--characteristic of Stevens's poetry ("voluble delugings," "silken weavings," "meaningless plungings," "gawky flitterings").

In his early poems, Merrill also uses as emblems many of the images Stevens finds effective in dealing with perception, artifice, and the imagination--gem-like images (jewels, emeralds, colored-glass eyes, shards of glass), exotic birds (parrots, peacocks, cockatoos, phoenixes, swans), and even periwinkles. Formally, many of Merrill's early poems--"Variations: The Air Is Sweetest that a Thistle Guards," "Transfigured Bird," "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear," "Stones"--resemble the Stevens poems structured as variations on a theme--"Thirteen ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Six Significant Landscapes," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," "Variations on a Summer Day." And, despite Merrill's claim that in his early exposure to Stevens's

poetry he was struck by the poet's vocabulary and ability "without at the time getting very much of the thought behind the poems" ("James Merrill at Home" 23), Merrill's early poems share some of the philosophical concerns that dominate Stevens's work: the relativity of perception, the imagination's struggle to order a chaotic world through art, and the merging of subject and object.

Since the early Merrill shares some of Stevens's aesthetic concerns and since his early poetry most closely resembles the coolly formal and abstract style of Stevens's poetry, it is not surprising that critics such as Samuel Schulman, Moffett, and McClatchy have focused primarily on Stevens's influence on Merrill's poetry of the 1940s and 1950s. As the poem written in 1972 to introduce revised poems from First Poems indicates, the mature Merrill was ready to move beyond poems that, in retrospect, seemed to express "Feelings genuine but dead / With language quick but counterfeit." He was ready to write poetry using more relaxed, colloquial language in order to explore more volatile, personal subjects. Yet, in the poems from Water Street onward, Stevens remains an important if less obtrusive influence.

Stevensesque diction, including plural gerunds ("tricklings," "water's shapings," "flamelike ripplings,"

"fruitful grapplings"), continues to appear in Merrill's later poetry: "voluminous pistachio" in "Childlessness"; "squawking dust" in "The Friend of the Fourth Decade"; "teenage plankton luminously twitch" in "Watching the Dance"; "whistling till I wince" from "Days of 1971" (recalling "Wink most when widows wince" in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"); "an inchling innocently branching palm" (echoing "an inchling bristling in these pines" from "Bantams in Pine-Woods"); and "Goods, bads, kaló-kakó, cockatoo-raucous" in "To My Greek" (mimicking the nonsensical sounds of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "Depression before Spring," "Bantams in Pine-Woods," and "Ploughing on Sunday"). In fact, a number of relatively uncommon words from a single Stevens poem "The Comedian as the Letter C"--"polyphony," "ruse," "gemmy," and "anabasis" --occur in poems spanning Merrill's mature career. Also, some of Stevens's characteristic images--prisms, parrots, angels, and palms--reappear, and Merrill rediscovers the theme-and-variation form in poems such as "In Nine Sleep Valley," "Losing the Marbles," and "Alabaster."

More importantly, however, Merrill's poems after The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace consider for the first time a number of aesthetic concerns central to Stevens's poetry. For one thing, with "An Urban Convalescence,"

Merrill, like Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C," begins to search for a "soil," a "climate," or a "landscape" that will prove fertile for the imagination, that will allow him to mine the memories of a troubled past. According to David Kalstone, the mature Merrill attempts to discover the conditions of setting "under which the past becomes truly available and nourishing"--to discover, in other words, which "landscapes, what objects will, in Wallace Stevens's word, 'suffice'" (Five Temperaments 86). Also, in his poetry of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Merrill begins to address a theme that is constant in the poetry of Stevens--the provisional nature of art or myth--that is, Stevens's central dictum in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" that "It [even a supreme fiction] must change" (CP 389). The poet in "The Broken Home" must let each artificial product of his imagination--each "avocado in a glass of water-- / Roots pallid, gemmed with air"--die and "start another" (ND 29). And, in "Up and Down," the poet, rising in the chair lift, leaves behind his ordered but provisional mental structures:

> Bungalows . . . dark frames of mind,
>
> Whatever's settled into, comfort, despair,
> Sin, expectation, apathy, the past,
> Rigid interiors that will not outlast
> Their decorator or their millionaire. (BE 53)

Merrill himself certainly seems conscious that Stevens

is among what Rachel Jacoff calls the "tutelary figures of his own poetic development" (154). Throughout his interviews, Merrill notes his apprenticeship in Stevens's style, commenting on at least five occasions on Stevens's bizarre style--his use of "strange colors along with big abstract words" ("An Interview with Ashley Brown" 41-42), his "odd glamorizing of philosophical terms" ("An Interview with J.D. McClatchy" 78), and his cultivation of a "vocabulary by turns irresistibly gaudy and irresistibly abstract" ("On Wallace Stevens' Centenary" 117). Despite the apparent influence of Harmonium upon Merrill's early poems, Merrill, when citing the Stevens work that has influenced him the most, consistently names the first Stevens work he read--"the lovely Cummington Press edition of Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" ("On Wallace Stevens' Centenary" 117)--the poem he "teethed on" (Brown 42). Even as recently as my October 1988 interview with him, Merrill observes that he "would still choose 'Notes'" as his "touchstone stanzas" from Stevens:

> What appealed to me long ago--and still does--is the mix of verbal, even painterly, hedonism (the various reds of that lasting visage, the Lobster Bombay) and high philosophical concerns, as if thought were voluptuous and sensuality a form of thinking. Translated very broadly, the lesson of such passages might be: Write (and think) in whatever ways please you most.

Merrill also discusses two other ways that Stevens's poetry has influenced his poetry--Stevens's commitment to non-political poetry and his use of metapoetry. In his interview with Ashley Brown, Merrill observes that Stevens "seems much more of a poet, that is to say, a nonhistorian," adding "I'm an enemy of history, by the way" (26). In "On Wallace Stevens' Centenary," in which he acknowledges Stevens as the one who "pointed and still points higher than anyone in our century," Merrill recalls his early discovery of "how naturally Stevens handled his references to art and poetry, the aesthetic performance, the 'theatre of trope'" (119-20).

Merrill's consciousness of his debt to Stevens is also evident in those poems that are self-consciously intertextual, that is, those poems in which Merrill seems most conscious of joining and modifying Eliot's "ideal order" of "existing monuments" as his poems take their places beside Stevens's poems in the circle of all the existing works of the past. In these poems, Merrill attempts to engage in a conversation or, at times, a debate with those works by Stevens ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," "The Nobel Rider and the Sound of Words") that have most shaped his own poetics.

Nowhere is this potential for "conversation" between Merrill's and Stevens's poems more realized than in his trilogy, The Changing Light at Sandover. In the trilogy, the Ouija board provides a natural vehicle for dramatizing this intertextuality, as Stevens (along with other literary benefactors) not only speaks to JM from another world but also appears in person to take an active role in certain scenes. Stevens is one of the otherworldly visitors in The Book of Ephraim: he reacts to the dining room at Stonington (scene of the evening encounters at the Ouija board) "with that dislocated / Perspective of the newly dead" (CLS 5). JM in section U of Ephraim reacts to Pope's praise of the developing trilogy with a request to "hear / Mr. Stevens on the subject--mere / Bric-a-brac? mere Emersonian 'herbs / And apples'?" (CLS 72) Stevens responds with an insinuation that the trilogy is partially "ghostwritten"--

> TAKE WITH A GRAIN OF SALT JM SUCH PRAISE
> A SCRIBE SITS BY YOU CONSTANTLY THESE DAYS
> DOING WHAT HE MUST TO INTERWEAVE
> YOUR LINES WITH MEANINGS YOU CANNOT CONCEIVE.

When JM becomes offended at his reply, Stevens takes a final "GLIMPSE OF LOVELY MAYA" before making a quick exit, asking "WHERES MY HAT?" (CLS 73) Listed as a cast member for Scripts for the Pageant and one of the guests invited in Coda: The Higher Key to hear JM's reading of the completed

trilogy, Stevens receives his most significant notice from Merrill in section S of Ephraim:

> Stevens imagined the imagination
> And God as one: the imagination, also,
> As that which presses back, in parlous times,
> Against "the pressure of reality." (CLS 66)

While such passages seem to invite a study of direct influence and the intertextuality of individual poems, as I prepared to examine these major points of influence, my enterprise began to seem merely pedantic. Not much seemed to be gained critically from simply considering Stevens's influence upon Merrill's poetry. Furthermore, I gradually came to realize that those poetic elements shared by Stevens and Merrill--a love of exotic and artificial images, the use of bizarre language, a fastidious attention to style or dress, a love of form, and a self-conscious awareness of the art of poetry--were part of a single tradition: the tradition of the dandy, not the fin de siècle dandy but the philosophical dandy described by Baudelaire and Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly. Ultimately, the attempt to place the two poets within this common tradition began to seem richer and more illuminating than my original purpose.

Merrill is certainly comfortable with the broader notion of tradition. "I've yet to see a poem," he remarks to Ashley Brown, "that I can't relate to something at least

fifty years old if not two hundred" (48). And, in Mirabell, WHA instructs JM to

> THINK WHAT A MINOR
> PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART
> COMPARED TO THOSE GREAT GIVENS THE ROSEBRICK MANOR
> ALL TOPIARY FORMS & METRICAL
> MOAT ARIPPLE! FROM ANTHOLOGIZED
> PERENNIALS TO HERB GARDEN OF CLICHES
> FROM LATIN-LABELED HYBRIDS TO THE FAWN
> 4 LETTER FUNGI THAT ENRICH THE LAWN,
> IS NOT ARCADIA TO DWELL AMONG
> GREENWOOD PERSPECTIVES OF THE MOTHER TONGUE
> ROOTSYSTEMS UNDERFOOT (CLS 262)

As Keller points out, "the very fact that communication with the dead forms the foundation of the entire trilogy" proves the importance Merrill places upon the "ROOTSYSTEMS" of his art (220). As he tells Garret Condon in 1986, "I don't set very much value on individualism. I'm happy with a feeling that each of us is a variety on a handful of stock characters in the human comedy" (19).

Thus, it has become my primary purpose to claim that Merrill and Stevens are varieties of a single stock character--the dandy. In this study, I will attempt to rehabilitate the tradition of the dandy and to suggest that the dandy has a heroic purpose. While I will attempt to show that both Stevens and Merrill fall within this rehabilitated tradition (by virtue of their concerns and techniques), I will suggest that Merrill, in his life and his poetry, is the purer dandy, while Stevens's life and

works are in this context more problematic.

My secondary purpose is to point out, when possible (primarily in Chapters III and IV), which of Merrill's dandiacal traits are the result of Stevens's direct influence (as opposed to Auden's, as Keller claims, in some cases). I do not wish, however, to overstate this influence. Certainly, Merrill might well have been a Baudelairean dandy without any knowledge of Stevens.

My other subordinate purpose is to explore (primarily in Chapter IV), in poems such as "Prism," "Angel," and "Lost in Translation," occasions of intertextuality that reveal how Merrill senses that he and Stevens are part of a common tradition and either revises or affirms Stevens's contributions to that tradition.

In Chapter I, I examine the decline in the notion of the dandy during the fin de siècle and reintroduce the concept of an "intellectual dandyism" as outlined in Baudelaire's Le Peintre de la vie moderne and Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly's Du Dandysme et de Georges Brummel. I then attempt to demonstrate how Merrill has committed himself completely to the life of the dandy, as defined by these two works, while Stevens lived a divided life, using the dandy's existence to counter the potentially deadening effects of the "burgher" life he had chosen as an insurance executive.

In Chapter II, I explore those common elements in the poetry of Stevens and Merrill that are analogous to the traits of Baudelaire's and D'Aurevilly's dandies. After examining those dandies--those characters and personae--who serve as masks for Stevens or thinly veiled versions of Merrill in the poems, I consider the features of their poems that work either to exclude the average reader of poetry or to cultivate an elite readership of "silver carps," as Merrill calls them.

Chapter III focuses on one dandiacal feature of Merrill's and Stevens's poetry--their use throughout their careers of the form analogous to musical theme and variations. I attempt to demonstrate that Merrill and Stevens are among the few poets who successfully borrow the form from music. I also suggest that the form well serves their tastes and purposes as dandies--specifically, the dandy's self-conscious attention to virtuosity and artifice and the dandy's love of form for its own sake and as a means of distancing himself from his subject.

In Chapter IV, I examine Stevens's and Merrill's metapoetry as a feature of their poetry analogous to the dandy's self-consciousness. I point out the common elements (many of which Merrill seems to have learned from Stevens) that the two poets use in self-consciously exploring their

own art and developing their poetics. I introduce several instances of intertextuality, including an extended reading of Merrill's "Lost in Translation" as an exemplum of such intertextuality. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of Stevens's and Merrill's self-reflexive comments on artifice as a litmus test for their dandyism--a test that leads me to conclude that Merrill is the pure dandy while Stevens insists, in his own metapoetic statements as well as the actions of his poems, on a doubleness as a means of tempering his own dandyism.

In the text, I use the following abbreviations as parenthetic citations:

CP Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1954.

OP Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous. Ed. Samuel French Morse. 1957. New York: Vintage-Random, 1982.

NA Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination. New York: Random, 1942.

L Wallace Stevens, Letters of Wallace Stevens. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966.

SP Holly Stevens, Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1977.

BS James Merrill, The Black Swan and Other Poems. Athens: Icaros, 1946.

FP James Merrill, First Poems. New York: Knopf, 1951.

CTYP James Merrill, The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

WS James Merrill, Water Street. New York: Atheneum, 1962.

ND James Merrill, Nights and Days. New York: Atheneum, 1984.

FS James Merrill, The Fire Screen. New York: Atheneum, 1980.

BE James Merrill, Braving the Elements. New York: Atheneum, 1979.

YP James Merrill, The Yellow Pages. Cambridge: Temple Bar Bookshop, 1974.

DC James Merrill, Divine Comedies. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

CLS James Merrill, The Changing Light at Sandover. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

LS James Merrill, Late Settings. New York: Atheneum, 1985.

IR James Merrill, The Inner Room. New York: Atheneum, 1988.

# CHAPTER I

## THE DANDY TRADITION

*Dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence.*[1]

*Baudelaire, Le Peintre de la vie moderne*

*Yet the quotidian saps philosophers*
*And men like Crispin like them in intent,*
*If not in will, to track the knaves of*
*thought.*

*Stevens, "The Comedian as the Letter C"*

*Think of the Western writer or even the Western couturier--doesn't everything he turns out imply some bold stand taken against Chaos, conformity, tastelessness, the sluggish drift of a public whose ideas, if any, are at odds with his own and one another's?*

*Merrill, "The Beaten Path"*

An American dandy, according to Daniel Fuchs, "in our time, is a contradiction in terms" (4). "What kind of dandy is it who would come to terms with gray flannel suits, sincere neckties, and insurance litigation?" asks Fuchs. "What dandy could exist in this energetic world of organized, common affairs?" The answer is a pair of anomalous American dandies--James Merrill and, in a more

ambivalent way, Wallace Stevens--two poets whose dandyism cannot be reduced to the fin de siècle stylized dress, social hauteur, and public theatrics that Fuchs and most twentieth-century critics have in mind when using the term. Instead their dandyism consists of the intellectual, quasi-religious stance described by Baudelaire and Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly.

When Louis Untermeyer in his 1942 review "Departure from Dandyism" laments Wallace Stevens's continued dalliance in the "cultivated verbal dandyism . . . insulated by its preoccupation with esthetics" that had characterized his early poetry, it signals a completion of the decline in the concept of the dandy from its philosophical status as articulated by Baudelaire. Untermeyer's comments on Stevens's poetry, beginning with his reviews in 1919 and 1924 of Stevens's early poetry, reflect the dandy's fall from critical grace: the "intellectual dandyism of Baudelaire, with its appeal to the critical temper," as Ellen Moers calls it (328), and Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly's dandyism--not just a "matter of clothes and exterior elegance" but "also a complete theory of life" (31)--have been reduced to fin de siècle decadence and emphasis upon surface and style.

In his 1919 "resolute and prejudiced" reply to a review

by Conrad Aiken, Untermeyer attacks "the mere verbal legerdemain of the Pound-Stevens-Arensberg-Others" for its decadent "over-emphasis on the surface rather than the soul of an art" and for its "technically adroit, fastidious, often sensitive but more often precious and, in the best sense, artificial" poetry ("The Ivory Tower--II" 60-61). Untermeyer's equating Stevens's reputed dandyism with a preoccupation "with language as color or contrasting sound-values" to the neglect of responsible communication also dominates his 1924 review of Harmonium ("Five American Poets" 159). According to Untermeyer, the poetry of Harmonium "achieves little beyond an amusing preciosity. . . . It has much for the eye, something for the ear, but nothing for that central hunger which is at the heart of all the senses" (160). Untermeyer persists in charging Stevens with irresponsibility and lack of content in his 1942 review: "More than a few of Stevens's ultra-fastidious pages concern themselves with writing which is elaborately virtuoso, with a maximum of form and a minimum of content, with the art of being an artist" ("Departure" 11). Untermeyer claims that even in the poetry of Parts of a World Stevens "still loves to toy with repetitive syllables" and "wayward nonsense," the verb toy and the adjective wayward suggesting the frivolity and decadence Untermeyer

associates with the literary dandy (11).

For the most part, Untermeyer's definition of the dandy and his application of it to Stevens and his poetry are not anomalous. According to Melita Schaum, early critical estimates of the New York publication Roque and its poets (including Stevens) center upon "a somewhat dandyish aestheticism, a love for chinoiserie and languid elegance, an echo of Wilde and the decadents which later earned them the epithet of 'Exquisites'" (12). In particular, Stevens and Roque artist Donald Evans are saddled by early critics with the "'easy tag' of dandy, aesthete, and 'gloved and monocled' spectator" (Schaum 13). Even one of Stevens's few early champions Gorham Munson, who applauds Stevens's mastery of the "correctness and elegance" and "impeccability of the dandy" (41), reduces his poetry to technique and surface play:

> American readers may well rejoice in this artist who is so gifted in depicting sea-surfaces full of clouds. No American poet excels him in the sensory delights that a spick-and-span craft can stimulate: none is more skillful in arranging his music, his figures, and his design. None else, monocled and gloved, can cut so faultless a figure standing in his box at the circus of life. (45)

And in analyzing Stevens's "well-fed and well-booted dandyism of contentment," Munson confuses the dandy's detachment with "comfortable tranquility," failing to detect

the philosophical and moral unrest that Baudelaire discovers in the dandy's attention to surface and style (44).

It is not surprising that the early critics of Stevens fail to see beyond the surface of his "verbal dandyism," for two decades of fin de siècle decadence and artificiality separate them from Baudelaire's "philosophy of dandyism" (Moers 276). The moral decline of dandyism during the fin de siècle movement in England is framed by two infamous trials--James McNeill Whistler's 1878 charge of libel against John Ruskin for accusing Whistler of "'ill-educated conceit', 'willful importance', 'cockney impudence' and the effrontery of a 'coxcomb'" and Oscar Wilde's 1895 action against the Marquess of Queensberry (Moers 287). Moers diagnoses the result of this decline: "dandies and corruption, dandies and sin, dandies and les fleurs du mal would in the 'nineties become partners in cliché" (283). At the hands of fin de siècle dandies like Wilde, the concept of the literary dandy becomes associated not only with decadence but also with style for style's sake, dress, and "a handful of mannerisms retrieved from the past" (Moers 314). The "aestheticism" of fin de siècle dandies like Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and Max Beerbohm is no more than "artificiality, the decorous surface, the mannered rituals" (Moers 300). Wilde speaks for his generation of dandies in

asserting that "It is style that makes us believe in a thing--nothing but style" (Moers 300).

The decadence and superficiality that arose in the final decades of the nineteenth century and that early Stevens critics associate with dandyism can be traced to the overt commercialism of fin de siècle dandies like Wilde, the self-styled "Professor of Aestheticism," who operated as a publicist and showman. As Moers points out, it was primarily through Wilde that the dandy's clothing, style, and manners were marketed as "theatrical costume":

> These clothes, and the accompanying mannerisms, were neither mask nor embellishment to Wilde's individuality, and they had nothing to say about his social superiority or his 'gentlemanliness'. They were an expression of his willingness to sell his privacy and to let himself be laughed at for the achievement of (as Alfred Douglas put it) notoriety before fame. (298)

Wilde's commercialism is epitomized in his cabled response to the D'Oyly Carte interests' invitation to travel in America publicizing the New York production of Patience: "Yes, if offer good" (Moers 297).

With the late nineteenth-century vulgarization of dandyism for a mass audience as a historical context, it is not surprising that critics of Stevens's poetry have been unable to look beyond fin de siècle decadence and materialism to Stevens's true literary ancestor, the philosophical dandy of Baudelaire and his predecessor

D'Aurevilly. It is in this rehabilitated sense, however--with the moral, philosophical, and aesthetic ramifications explored by Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly--that the term dandy is an apt description not only of Stevens's poetry (particularly the early poetry) but also the poetry of James Merrill, another poet who, because of his greater attachment "to the Beautiful than to the Scientific, the Philosophical, the Ethical, or the Ideological," as Helen Vendler puts it, is also "susceptible to charges of frivolity, at least from readers with a taste only for the solemn" ("James Merrill" 217).

In selecting details from the life of Beau Brummel for his 1845 work Du Dandysme et de Georges Brummel, Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly attempts to create "the statuette of a man who does not deserve to be represented otherwise than by a statuette" and "to describe, to fathom [Brummel's] influence, and to show that it was not merely superficial" (Letter to Monsieur César Daly 19 Sept. 1844 13-14). In developing his portrait of Brummel, who for D'Aurevilly "was Dandyism itself," D'Aurevilly hopes to widen the concept of the dandy beyond the figure deplored by Carlyle in Sartor Resartus:

> Dandyism is almost as difficult a thing to describe as it is to define. Those who see things only from a narrow point of view have imagined it to be especially

> the art of dress, a bold and felicitous dictatorship in the matter of clothes and exterior elegance. That it most certainly is, but much more besides. Dandyism is a complete theory of life and its material is not its only side. It is a way of existing, made up entirely of shades. . . . (30-31)

In focusing upon Brummel's intellectual and spiritual achievement and in making "dandyism available as an intellectual pose . . . the archetype of all artists" (Moers 263), D'Aurevilly makes it possible for Baudelaire to expand dandyism to include the literary dandy as well as the society figure. In his solitary treatment of dandyism, Le Peintre de la vie moderne, published in 1863, Baudelaire builds upon D'Aurevilly's work in depicting dandyism as a uniquely demanding philosophy and aesthetic stance:

> Le dandysme, qui est une institution en dehors des lois, a des lois rigoureuses auxquelles sont strictement soumis tous ses sujets, quelle que soient d'ailleurs la fougue et l'indépendence de leur caractère. (709)
>
> Dandyism, an institution beyond the laws, itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey, whatever their natural impetuosity and independence of character. (26)

It is true that, in defining the dandy tradition into which both Stevens and Merrill fall, D'Aurevilly and Baudelaire, like the fin de siècle dandies, emphasize gestures, details of clothing, and meticulous attention to toilet. The dandy, according to D'Aurevilly, "may spend ten hours a day dressing, if he likes, but once dressed he

thinks no more about it. It is for others to notice that he is well dressed" (53). And, for Baudelaire, as Moers reminds us, the "profoundest convictions--on life, on art, on the role of the poet--were always intimately related to the sum of petty habits and superficial gestures with which he lived: black clothes, white hands, clean boots" (274). Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly, however, diverge from the later fin de siècle dandies in their recognition of what Baudelaire calls "la haute spiritualité de la toilette" (716). Baudelaire in Le Peintre de la vie moderne explains the loftier significance of clothing through his notion of a spiritual/material correspondence:

> La corrélation perpétuelle de ce qu'on appelle l'âme avec ce qu'on appelle le corps explique très bien comment tout ce qui est matériel ou effluve du spirituel répresente et répresentera toujours le spirituel d'où il dérive. (696)
>
> The perpetual correlation between what is called the 'soul' and what is called the 'body' explains quite clearly how everything that is 'material', or in other words an emanation of the 'spiritual', mirrors and will always mirror, the spiritual reality from which it derives. (14)

D'Aurevilly, who, in fact, minimizes the role of clothing, finds it significant as an "effluve" or "emanation" of the dandy's social influence and intellectual powers:

> But Carlyle has drawn a fashion-plate with the pencil of drunken Hogarth and has said, 'That is Dandyism!' It is not even a caricature, for a caricature exaggerates everything and suppresses nothing.

> Caricature is the exasperated exaggeration of reality and Dandyism is social, human and intellectual. It is not a suit of clothes walking about by itself! On the contrary, it is the particular way of wearing these clothes which constitutes Dandyism. One may be a dandy in creased clothes. (31)

The significance of dress for Baudelaire is moral, a recurring word (referring to the transitory or ephemeral), which, as Moers points out, "has both theological and aesthetic implications" (280). D'Aurevilly, however, would agree with Baudelaire's recognition of the correlation between the dandy's toilet and his spiritual refinement: "Je suis ainsi conduit à regarder la parture comme un des signes de la noblesses primitive de l'âme humaine" (716) ("I am thus led to regard finery as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul" [32]).

It is the cultivation of an aristocracy of sensibilities in which this primitive nobility might reign that both D'Aurevilly and Baudelaire perceive to be the dandy's mission, a mission pursued by both Stevens and Merrill. In D'Aurevilly's mind, Brummel's goal was not merely to be admired but also "to amuse and . . . by example to create a more refined and a more tasteful world" (Crisp 8). Baudelaire is even more careful to explore the dandy's desire to establish

> une espèce nouvelle d'aristocratie, d'autant plus difficile à rompre qu'elle sera basée sur les facultés

> les plus précieuses, les plus indestructibles, et sur les dons célestes que le travail et l'argent ne peuvent conférer. (711)
>
> a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to shatter as it will be based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties, and on the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow. (28)

It is the cultivation of these "facultés précieuses," these "dons célestes," that Stevens and Merrill share as personal and aesthetic goals. In a journal entry of 14 May 1909, Stevens quotes Paul Elmer More in proposing an aristocracy of sensibility: "Again. Art is--the desire of select spirits to ennoble and make beautiful their lives" (SP 221). In a number of interviews, Merrill reveals his interest in a similar aesthetic aristocracy. For example, in response to Garret Condon's questions about the "aristocratic structure of the cosmos in Sandover, in which two million souls are the best and the brightest," Merrill responds, "I believe that every soul is precious--to God, if you like--as a potential atom of energy. I don't believe people are equally bright" (18). Furthermore, Merrill leaves unchallenged Donald Sheehan's claim that Merrill's works "project in toto a particular sort of social milieu" based upon "taste, intelligence, and manners rather than class or family" ("An Interview with Donald Sheehan" 32). In an interview with David Kalstone, Merrill indicates that he

doesn't want a larger audience for his poetry "When I search my heart,"

> So why invite it, even supposing that I could? 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. ("On Yánnina" 22)[2]

Thus, Merrill joins his compatriot dandy Stevens in what A. Walton Litz calls Stevens's "search for a native American sublime," a sublime that, in transcending the commercialism and materialism exploited by Wilde and his contemporaries, will catch the silver carp (Wallace Stevens: Man Made out of Words).

Baudelaire's literary dandy, then, rather than sustaining fin de siècle decadence as Untermeyer claims of Stevens, instead provides "the last spark of heroism amid decadence" (28). Baudelaire suggests that these "incroyables, beaux, lions ou dandys" are all "representatives of what is finest in human pride, of that compelling need, alas only too rare today, of combatting and destroying triviality" (28). The dandyism described by Baudelaire and represented in American letters by Stevens and Merrill is not based upon the tranquility and complacency Gorham Munson mistakenly identifies in Stevens's

poetry. It instead relentlessly uses its art to carry out a "scornful, silent, unsuccessful rebellion against the mediocre materialism of a democratic era" (Moers 283). For Stevens, certainly, poetry functions as relief or redemption from the poverty of a materialistic and cultureless world:

> Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
> The gaiety of language is our seigneur
>
> ("Esthétique du Mal," CP 322)

As William Carlos Williams suggests in his eulogy for Stevens, this redemptive mission takes on an almost religious character for Stevens, lending "a cryptic quality to his verses that was never resolved, a ritualistic quality as though he were following a secret litany that he revealed to no man" (235). In describing his response to "a society where literacy just keeps on backsliding," Merrill explains his mission:

> I'm afraid that often, when I'm taken to task for elitism or writing over the heads of most readers, my critics are really asking me to contribute to this general decline. Well, that's just what I don't want to do, even if it leaves me with no readers at all. (Condon 19)

Merrill, in an interview with Fred Bonhauser, speaks of poetry as a "civilizing force, a kind of compost."[3] By the time he composed Mirabell's Books of Number (the second book in his trilogy, The Changing Light at Sandover), Merrill had

come to recognize that this civilizing purpose of the poet can supplant the reproductive function of humans and must replace any theological mission for poetry, as Helen Vendler suggests:

> Once biological purpose of life is even theoretically put aside as a justification of living, we must (theological justification having been abandoned long since) advocate something like Merrill's civilizing 'V work.' ("James Merrill" 231)[4]

In this sense, Merrill seems to share the heroic aim that Irving Howe discovers in Stevens's idea of poetry as "a synecdoche for every creative potential of consciousness, as if poetry were that which can help liberate us from the tyranny of mechanized life and slow dying"--a concept and mission worthy of Baudelaire's dandy (18).

Despite D'Aurevilly's claim that dandyism is as difficult to describe as it is to define, Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly detect certain qualities in the social and artistic dandies they admire. Among these are the traits that Fuchs enumerates in discussing the dandyism shared by Baudelaire and Stevens:

> deflationary assault, disillusion, icy elegance, oddity, uniqueness, self-conscious absorption, the desire to astonish, and a new, complex, and in some sense bizarre means of expression. (6)

These qualities--along with a scorn for the bourgeoisie, an emphasis on manners and propriety, a self-conscious

detachment, and a meticulous attention to dress and toilet--constitute a catalogue of the features observed by Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly, features that dominate the lives and poetry of Stevens and Merrill.

In Stevens's life, at least, the role of Baudelaire's dandy was not given full reign; it was rather held in check by the businessman side of him. Or so the legend of Stevens's "divided life" would have it, the legend of Stevens's life as the struggle between "the more dangerous intoxications of decadence" and "durable Yankee pragmatism" --"a struggle vividly and ironically manifest in that capstone of Harmonium 'The Comedian as the Letter C'" (Riddel, "Blue Voyager" 63). For Joseph Riddel, the notion of the "split life" that Stevens led

> clarifies somewhat the dandyism which he certainly affected, but almost always dismissed in the next gesture. The cultivation of small pleasures that was so much a part of Stevens' life--marked throughout the letters by a collector's fussiness with objets d' art, rare exotic foods, and moments of delight in the commonplace--goes hand in hand with a pragmatic idealism, the sense that pleasure is a reward for something dutifully earned. ("Blue Voyager" 64)

In an early version of "Comedian," Stevens describes the pragmatic, conventional facet of his personality as "the burgher":

> let the burgher say
> If he is burgher by his will. Burgher,
> He is, by will, but not his own. He dwells

> A part of wilful dwellings that impose
> Alike his morning and his evening prayer.
> His town exhales its mother breath for him
> And this he breathes, a candid bellows-boy,
> According to his canon. (quoted in Bates 83)

The burgher self seems to be a defense against the dandy element Stevens feared and at least partially rejected in himself, as evidenced by a letter of 1922 quoted by Milton J. Bates:

> I live like a turtle under a bush, and when I get away from town, believe me, I don't stay sober any longer than I must. The amount of talking that I have done about things of this sort [i.e., literary gossip] during the last year would probably boil down to a few syllables. I pride myself on being a member of the Long Key Fishing Club of Atlanta and of the Brown Derby Club of East Hartford, and I take damned little stock in conversation of philosophy, aesthetics, poetry, art, or blondes. Of course, I hanker for all those things as a fly hankers for fly paper. But experience has taught me that fly paper is one devil of a thing to get mixed up in. (89)

That Stevens from an early age was aware of the tension between these two elements--the burgher, who compromised with careers first in journalism and then in law, and the dandy, who bound himself to poetry--is apparent in his journal entry of 2 June 1900:

> I am going to New York, I think, to try my hand at journalism. If that does not pan out well, I am resolved to knock about the country--the world. Of course I am perfectly willing to do this--anxious, in fact. It seems to me to be the only way, directed as I am more or less strongly by the hopes and desires of my parents and myself, of realizing to the last degree any of the ambitions I have formed. I should be content to dream along to the end of my life--and opposing

> moralists be hanged. At the same time I should be quite as content to work and be practical--but I hate conflict whether it "avails" or not. I want my powers to be put to their fullest use--to be exhausted when I am done with them. On the other hand I do not want to have to make a petty struggle for existence--physical or literary. I must try not to be a dilettante--half dream, half deed. I must be all dream or all deed. (L 34)[5]

Despite Stevens's awareness of and desire to eliminate what he apparently saw as a divided focus, Bates sees the "divided life" legend as an oversimplification of Stevens's life. For him, the "facile dichotomy between the businessman and the poet" perpetuated in Stevens's legend cannot "survive a moment's introspection." In Bates's view, Stevens "was simultaneously one and many, whether onstage or off" (85).

Even if Bates's debunking of the legend of Stevens's split life is accepted, the question still remains as to whether the dandy was one of the masks Stevens assumed off stage--that is, in his personal life. Fuchs, for one, tends to minimize, if not dismiss entirely, the dandiacal element in Stevens's life. While he acknowledges the dandyism of Stevens's poetry, Fuchs insists that in real life Stevens is "far from being an exhibitionistic, exotic flower in the quotidian desert" (4-5). For one thing, Fuchs believes that Stevens could not "summon up the hypercivilized manners of an aristocracy. . . manners in the sense of deliberate

social hauteur" (4). Paul Rosenfeld, however, paints quite an opposing portrait of Stevens in depicting him as Pierrot:

> sophisticated, worldly, lettered, read in philosophical authors Greek and Germanic. He is excessively correct, partly from natural elegance and partly in protest against romantic dishevelment; and functions suavely as reader to an empress, teller of a London bank, or lawyer in Hartford, Connecticut. (156-57)

Riddel claims that Stevens's dandiacal tastes in philosophy and aesthetics can be traced to his education at Harvard:

> It is easy enough to recognize the impact of fin de siècle Harvard: the dandy's mannered decadence, the fashionable irony, the preoccupation with skepticism, the enduring influence of Santayana's and James' reactions to the skeptic's dilemma. And, as Robert Buttel has very recently shown, his college Parnassianism led him along both fashionable and independent paths to the French Symbolists and the New York avant-garde. ("Blue Voyager" 64)

Despite Fuchs's reservations about Stevens's personal dandyism, Stevens's letters and the comments of his business associates and fellow poets provide strong evidence of those qualities Baudelaire posits in the literary dandy.

If nothing else, Stevens's meticulous attention to dress, which Carl Zigrosser, editor of Modern School, labelled dandiacal, seems to place him in the tradition described by D'Aurevilly and Baudelaire (Morse 71). William Carlos Williams notes this fussiness about dress (as well as something of the manners that Fuchs finds lacking in Stevens): "He was always the well dressed one, diffident

about letting down his hair. Precise when we were sloppy. Drank little" (quoted in William Van O'Connor 15). The dandy, according to Baudelaire, maintains "an impeccable toilet every hour of the day and the night" (28). This tradition of the impeccable toilet was apparently not lost on Stevens, as the recollections of John O'Loughlin (his assistant in Hartford's bond-claims department) suggest:

> He was very meticulous about his dress. All his clothes, he had made, over in East Orange, New Jersey, by a Norwegian. All his shirts and underwear and socks he had in Newell's on Park Avenue. Even his denture powder he had from a special pharmacy on Park Avenue. (Brazeau 72)

Leslie Tucker, a bookkeeper at Hartford, recalls that Stevens was "neat as a pin himself. He was always dressed beautifully. . . . He always wore a crew cut, short hair" (Brazeau 32). Baudelaire's claim that for the dandy "the perfection of his toilet will consist in absolute simplicity" is substantiated by his own practice of ordering a dozen copies of a new suit that pleased him (27). John Rogers, manservant to Hartford officers, describes similar habits on Stevens's part: "He had a tailor. All his clothes were cut to one pattern, and all his suits were one color. Apart from his tuxedo, he always wore steel gray, invariably dark gray" (Brazeau 21). And just as Baudelaire accented his all-black costume with a splash of color in an

attempt "to be original within the limits of conventions" (Crisp 8), so Stevens usually set off his gray suit with a red tie or, on the occasion of the Harvard-Yale game, a "red feather stuck in his hat" (Brazeau 21). Stevens's attention to his toilet was sufficient to cause Williams, in eulogizing him, not only to focus on Stevens's clothing but also, in taking his cue from Baudelaire, to recognize the aesthetic significance of Stevens's dress: "He was a dandy at heart. You never saw Stevens in sloppy clothes. His poems are the result" (236).

Even more of Stevens's associates at Hartford comment upon a detachment on Stevens's part that seems akin to what Baudelaire diagnoses as "the dandy's imperious aloofness" (Moers 279). Colleague Coy Johnston remarks that in his business dealings with Stevens he found the poet "very cold, very distant. He seemed extremely detached" as if he were "just suffering the affair" (Brazeau 16). Johnston's recollection almost seems to echo Baudelaire's comment upon the dandy's "air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved" (29). Other associates characterize Stevens variously as "not what I call a hail-fellow-well-met person" (Brazeau 29), "always somewhat of a stranger" (14), and someone who was not "too much of a social creature" except at Christmas (20). Stevens's

journal entry of 9 April 1906 suggests that the poet's isolation was purposefully self-imposed:

> Took my customary ramble yesterday--with three, for company. I detest "company" and do not fear any protest of selfishness for saying so. People say one is selfish for not sharing one's good things--a naively selfish thing in them. (SP 163)

Hale Anderson, Jr., a business acquaintance, remarks that Stevens continued to hold people "at arm's length," but, upon consideration, Anderson qualifies his definition of the people who were subject to Stevens's coldness: "He was always, to most people who didn't understand him, formidably busy" (Brazeau 22). Thus, Stevens's aloofness seems to have been based upon "cette attitude hautaine de caste" (712)--that "haughty exclusiveness" (28)--that Baudelaire associates with the dandy. Fuchs equates Stevens's "attitude hautaine de caste" with the American dandy's "scorn for the general American lack of refinement" (7)--a scorn that, surprisingly, the democratic Williams claims he shared with Stevens:

> Both of us could be sticking our thumbs to our noses at the world with about the same gusto. . . . It is at the contempt of the world for that [the difficult art of the poem], that we would really be thumbing our noses." (234)

Stevens's chauffeur Naaman Corn describes this anti-bourgeois exclusiveness, remembering Stevens's "irritation with beer drinkers" and concluding that it was "like he

couldn't get along with other people's way of life" (Brazeau 55).[6] Stevens's contempt, like Williams's, seems to have been directed especially toward those associates who either didn't appreciate poetry or who were incapable of comprehending Stevens's brand of poetry, as an episode recounted by one of his colleagues suggests:

> I do recall a long walk with him one evening after work, out Farmington Avenue, when I told him that I had gotten my hands on some of his poetry and I was absolutely lost. Could or would he give me any clue or key that would enable me to understand his writing? We walked several paces, and then, with a combination chuckle and snort, he said, "Oh, forget it. You're much too literal-minded!" And the subject never came up again. (Brazeau 23-24)

Stevens apparently chose to thumb his nose at the world through the use of the dandy's haughty wit--a strategy that most of his associates seem to have found either incomprehensible or insulting:

> His sense of humor was one that a lot of people did not understand. What he would think would be funny when he said it would be taken by the person who heard it as an insult. I can vividly recall that one or two of his subordinates in the office, whom I'm sure he did not mean to insult, felt that he had insulted them on occasion. (Brazeau 29)

While a junior colleague records the "surprised reactions" of the audience to Stevens's "facetious" comments upon receiving an honorary degree at Mt. Holyoke, another associate remembers a specific instance of Stevens's misunderstood sarcasm in business affairs:

> I wanted to get a copy of a paper that was given by the vice-president of the Aetna [insurance company] at the American Bar Association. Mr. Stevens attempted to get this paper by telephoning Mr. Braxton Dew, the author. The conversation went something like this. "Mr. Braxton Dew, please." "Mr. Dew is not in." "When do you expect him?" "I haven't the faintest idea." "Well, will he be in tomorrow?" "I haven't the faintest idea. Who's calling, please?" Mr. Stevens replied, "I haven't the faintest idea." (Brazeau 46)

Stevens's wit, however, seems to have been turned as frequently upon himself as it was upon the colleagues who were unable to fathom his poetry, thus seeming to validate Bates's historical claim that "the dandy's vaunted wit sprang in the first place from an awareness of his own absurd pretensions" (115). More specifically, Stevens's letters are filled with what Fuchs terms the American dandy's "self-ironic uneasiness at being that somewhat superfluous contemporary figure, the poet" (7). In a letter of 6 August 1911, Stevens, while admitting "that it's a great pleasure to be so poetical," apologizes to his wife that his "trifling poesies are like the trifling designs one sees on fans," and adds, "Well, to be sure, a painter of fans is a very unimportant person by the side of the Gainsboroughs" (L 171). In a letter two years later, he implores Elsie to "Keep all this a great secret. There is something absurd about all this writing of verses" (L 180). Stevens echoes these sentiments in a letter to William

Carlos Williams in April 1918: "I spare you the whole-souled burblings in the park, the leaves, lilacs, tulips and so on. . . . a fellow must pooh-pooh something, even if it happens to be something he rather fancies, you know" (quoted in Bates 87). Thus, in his letters and conversations, Stevens uses half-scornful, half-ironic wit to distance himself from his culturally deprived colleagues as well as to shield himself from his own poetic inclinations.

In his life, Stevens also distances himself from the unrefined masses by cultivating another quality of Baudelaire's dandy--the love of artifice and an appreciation for high culture grounded in Baudelaire's assertion that "Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. . . . good is always the product of some art" (32). Through mingling in the Arensberg circle when he lived in New York from 1900 to 1916, Stevens began learning about modern painters, including the Cubists and Dadaists, and their commonality with modern poetry (Brazeau 9-10). Helen Vendler points out that Stevens knew the works of Paul Klée and Cézanne and that his poetry is influenced by them, especially by Klée's riddles and humor (Wallace Stevens: Man Made Out of Words). In his remarks upon Stevens's death, Delmore Schwartz claims that "Stevens, studying Picasso and Matisse, made the art of poetry visual in a way it had never

been before" (21).

Stevens's letters also reveal his aristocratic tastes in belles-lettres. His letter to Elsie of 7 April 1907 reveals his disdain for pedestrian bookstores:

> The book-stores in New-York are a distress to me: they are so un-bookish. I like to drop into a dusty-looking shop and find odd volumes of the old English poets or of the old French ones, for all that. I'd like to find a volume of [Clément] Marot or Villon, but the books one does find are the most trashy things under the sun. . . . (SP 176).

Another letter, written to Elsie two days later, describes Stevens's scholarly luxuriating in the high culture of Matthew Arnold's "Note-Books":

> The quotations [jotted down by Arnold] are in a half-dozen different languages. (It gives me a sort of learned delight to guess at the Latin ones; and last night I hunted all through Dante for translations of several Italian ones.) (SP 176)

Perhaps Stevens's appreciation for the arts is most evident in his love of music. His assistant, Manning Heard, recalls that Stevens "was very fond of symphonies, very fond of them. I remember going [to the Bushnell Memorial Hall, Hartford's main concert hall] with him one time" (Brazeau 69). In his journals, Stevens describes how during less than a month in late 1905 and early 1906 he attended the "rococo entertainment" of Humperdinck's Haensel und Gretel, a Tchaikovsky concert at Carnegie Hall, "another concert of Good Mozartian polyphony and Rimsky-Korsakoffish blurs," and

an amateur concert at Christ Church (SP 157-58). Furthermore, Stevens's somewhat technical comments about music reveal him to be Baird's "musician's poet" (xxiii), as an example from a 1906 journal entry indicates:

> Went to a concert of the Russian Symphony Orchestra last night. . . . Josef Lhevinne of Moscow played a number of solos among them Scriabin's Nocturne (for the left hand only). Konyus' suite "From Child-life" was played entire. Part II (Vivo e leggiero: Playing Horses) and part IIII (Capricciosamente: Being Naughty, Scherzino) were delightful impressions. Part III (Andante ma non troppo: With the Doll) was very clever--very; and part VI (Tempo di valse: The Little Music Box) was clever, too-- & enchanting in an Austin Dobsonish way. There was a roaring polonaise while people were putting their coats on. (SP 160-61)[7]

The dandy, according to Baudelaire, is "a great traveller and a cosmopolitan" (6). In depicting his prototypical dandy, the artist Constantin Guy or "Monsieur G," Baudelaire insists that "His interest is the whole world; he wants to know, understand and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe" (7). While, as Riddel points out, Stevens never travelled to Europe and "the most vivid of his journeyings were made at home, in his room, stimulated by letters from friends or gifts from distant places," his appreciation of culture was not restricted to the United States or even the West ("Blue Voyager" 61). Stevens's mailboy, Richard Sunbury, describes his purchase in 1933 of a white leather-bound book of Chinese poetry for two hundred dollars (Brazeau 37).

According to Peter Brazeau, his agent in France during the 1930's, the bookstore owner Anatole Vidal, "was indefatigable in satisfying Stevens's wants from bonbons to books to an occasional painting" (27). His secretary Marguerite Flynn comments upon Stevens's cosmopolitan interests:

> He corresponded with many people about the world; bought books in England, paintings in France, tea in Ceylon. Instead of traveling to all of these countries, he got his knowledge of them from reading and correspondence. Besides having an unusual knowledge of the French language, he spoke and read both German and French. (Brazeau 33-34)

Even a fragment from Stevens's journal entry of 14 May 1909, in which he lists "a batch of notes that I am tired of keeping" (SP 219), suggests the breadth of Stevens's cultural interests:

> Landscape-Gardening--another art of Chinese origin aimed at a definite influence on the beholder's mind.
>
> Art of flower-arrangement--concerned above all with the interpretation of life and growth of the flower, not with harmonious color effects
>
> red camellia blossoms, or pale blue convolvus samisen--quail
>
> Ukiyoyé is the Japanese equivalent of genre.
>
> "Pictures of the fleeting world"--it means--colored with the Buddhist reproach of all that appeals to the senses and belongs to the transitoriness of miserable mortality. It came to mean a recognized style.

> Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, Indian thought
>
> the glory of the Täng emperors or the refinement of Sung society. (SP 221)

Stevens's letters and the comments of his office mates also reveal a collector of the esoteric driven by what Baudelaire calls the dandy's "faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial" (7). As George Lensing remarks, Stevens

> characteristically preferred the foreign to the domestic, the old to the recent, an unseen French painting from Paris to one from a New York gallery, a small package of "Kee-moon" tea from China, an annual order of fresh fruit from California, a carved Buddha from Ceylon. (67)

Apparently, Stevens, like Baudelaire's dandy, was "in love with distinction above all things" (27), as John O'Loughlin's reminiscences indicate:

> He used to get his cigars out of Tampa. He was a great one for ordering fruit from California, dried fruit. And he was always looking for the unusual. When he would go to New York, there was a place up on Madison Avenue, a fruit store. He'd go up there and order fruit; they'd put it on the train coming [to Hartford]. Maybe he'd call me up and say, "I've got some fruit down here [at the Hartford station]. Would you drive down? . . . When he had me transferred to New York, he used to send me down the catalogue of the Parke-Bernet Galleries: he'd want a painting or he'd want a book, or something else. (Brazeau 72)

Stevens's chauffeur describes spending half an evening in Pomfret with Stevens the horticulturalist, "walking around this greenhouse looking for oddball flowers, something that

no one didn't have in the gardens some other place" (Brazeau 54). An associate remembers riding a "good half-hour" with Stevens at lunch just to sample the "wonderful cheese" at an old New England inn (Brazeau 46). William Carlos Williams recalls a phase when Stevens's penchant for the esoteric took a French direction,

> the stage when Stevens was fascinated to receive from a friend a box of joujous fresh from Paris! Help yourself. Candied violet petals! (234)

In describing to Elsie a visit to the American Art Galleries in January 1911, Stevens explains that the pleasure he gets from collecting his exotic objects is primarily aesthetic:

> they are showing some Chinese and Japanese jades and porcelains. The sole object of interest for me in such things is their beauty. Cucumber-green, camellia-leaf-green, apple-green etc moonlight, blue etc ox-blood, chicken-blood, cherry, peach-blow etc etc Oh! and mirror-black: that is so black and with such a glaze that you can see yourself in it. . . . When connoisseurs return from the pits of antiquity with their rarities, they make honest, everyday life look like a seamstress by the side of Titian's daughter. (SP 251)

Despite Stevens's deference to "honest, everyday life," his retreat to Beau Brummel's "more refined and . . . tasteful world" represents the dandy's heroic or quasi-spiritual struggle against the quotidian. As Fuchs concludes, Stevens is among that group of American writers--including Cabell and Mencken--"who sought the antidote of taste for the malady of the land of George F. Babbitt" (15).

Stevens, however, breaks with Mencken and Cabell, who "tried to vivify the American cultural scene by establishing the reality of a native culture which was on a par with the European" (Fuchs 15). Stevens instead seeks to combat triviality and mediocrity with foreign and rare experiences and high culture. In his "reliance on culture as the panacea for the disappearance of God," Stevens exhibits the quasi-religious commitment Baudelaire discovers in the dandy (Riddel, "Blue Voyager" 64). According to Baudelaire,

> dandyism borders upon the spiritual and the stoical. . . . in truth I was not altogether wrong to consider dandyism as a kind of religion. The strictest monastic rule, the inexorable order of the Assassins according to which the penalty for drunkenness was enforced suicide, were no more despotic, and no more obeyed, than this doctrine of elegance and originality. (28)

Stevens's personal adherence to a code of elegant dress, deliberate and witty aloofness, and cosmopolitan, esoteric taste seems to associate him with the spirituality and monasticism Baudelaire discerns in the dandy. As Williams observes, "He was in the midst of a life crowded with business affairs a veritable monk" (235). Given the economic orientation of twentieth-century America, it is not surprising that the dandy side of Stevens was forced by pressure from his parents and his own pragmatism to compromise by allowing the burgher or businessman to emerge. What is surprising, given Stevens's degree of success as an

insurance lawyer, is that the dandy was allowed to survive in his personal life at all, an anomaly not lost on James Baird: "That this man was intent upon defying a poverty of life in the midst of success is an idea strange to American judgments" (318).

Another American poet whose judgment has led him to choose the strange life of the dandy as a means of "defying a poverty of life" is James Merrill. While the business success in Merrill's case has been his father's rather than his own, the "poverty of life" produced by that success has apparently been no less threatening. In a 1982 interview with J. D. McClatchy, Merrill recalls his childhood desire for meaning and intensity in the midst of his parents' numbing world of the trivial, the obligatory, the routine:

> I found it difficult to <u>believe</u> in the way my parents lived. They seemed so utterly taken up with engagements, obligations, ceremonies. . . . The excitement, the emotional quickening <u>I</u> felt in those years came usually through animals or nature, or through the servants in the house--Colette knew all about that--whose lives seemed by contrast to make such perfect <u>sense</u>. The gardeners had their hands in the earth. The cook was dredging things with flour, making pies. My father was merely making money, while my mother wrote names on place-cards, planned menus, and did her needlepoint. (72-73)

Merrill's response to this impoverished life, he recalls, was the ennui of the dandy, who, as Baudelaire notes, "is blasé, or pretends to be so, for reasons of policy and

caste" (9):

> It's true, sometimes I must have been extremely bored, though never inactive. My mother remembers asking me, when I was five or six, what I wanted to do when I was grown up. Didn't I want, she asked, to go downtown and work in Daddy's office? "Oh no," I said, "I'll be too tired by then." Because, you see, everything was arranged: to so-and-so's house to play, the beach for lunch, a tennis lesson. As we know, the life of leisure doesn't give us a moment's rest. I didn't care for the games or the playmates. I don't recall there being anyone I really liked, my own age, until I went away to school. ("An Interview with J.D. McClatchy" 73)[8]

Merrill's only sanctuary from Howe's "mechanized life of slow dying," of course, was art--through the stories his governess read to him and the poems and stories he began to compose himself by the age of seven or eight. Merrill came to recognize that, unfortunately, in his parents' world, art was valued not as a transcendence of life's trivialities but rather as an embellishment:

> At the same time as I was being given a good education I could feel, not so much from parents, but from the world they moved in, that kind of easy going contempt rich people have for art and scholarship--"these things are all right <u>in their place</u>, and their place is to ornament a life rather than to nourish or to shape it." ("An Interview with J.D. McClatchy" 80)

So it was left for Merrill, as he remembers in the autobiographical poem "The Broken Home," "to invest his life / In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife." In attempting to transcend the trivial and mechanical, Merrill, like Stevens, cultivated those qualities D'Aurevilly and

Baudelaire admire in the dandy.

Merrill, like Baudelaire, is concerned with the "perpetual correlation between what is called the 'soul' and what is called the 'body'" and devotes at least one essay--his "Class Day Talk" delivered at Amherst in 1980--to exploring the role of dress in that perpetual correlation. Like Baudelaire, Merrill insists upon the moral significance of dress: "So: what goes onto expresses what comes out of the head" (160). And, not surprisingly, he quotes from a poem by Stevens--"Six Significant Landscapes"--to make this point":

> If they tried rhomboids,
> Cones, waving lines, ellipses--
> As for example, the ellipse of the half moon--
> Rationalists would wear sombreros.[9]

Because dress is so telling a "symbol of the dandy's spiritual refinement," Merrill lives in a circle of friends who are meticulous in their attention to appropriate dress. As the dandy, according to D'Aurevilly, "may spend ten hours a day dressing, if he likes" (53), so Merrill's friend described in his "Class Day Talk" devotes weeks to conferences and fittings in having evening slippers made. And yet in his own dress Merrill affects the careless ease of D'Aurevilly's dandy, who wears his clothes "without concern" "as though they weighed nothing" (53). Thus,

Condon, upon interviewing the poet, notes that

> with a tan set off by a loose-fitting white shirt (it would be hard to find a shirt that fit tightly around Merrill's willowy frame) and khaki pants, Merrill looks at home in the backyard garden patio of David Jackson's place. (10-11)

For Merrill, like Baudelaire, clothes represent the dandy's "wish to be original within the limits of convention" (Crisp 8).[10] Described as "debonair" by Jordon Pecile, Merrill shares the dandy's interest in originality in toilet ("James Merrill on Poetry" 4). In anticipating the "identical mortarboards" Amherst students will wear on commencement day, Merrill notes in his "Class Day Talk" that the head pieces "will be too square, too colorless, too obviously exchangeable" (165). Like Baudelaire with his splash of color set off against his black garb and Stevens with his red tie contrasting with his consistent gray suit, Merrill often accents a tastefully subdued suit with the smallest dash of color (as with the emerald tie he donned for his reading of "Prufrock" on 1 October 1988 at the Eliot Centennial at Washington University in St. Louis) or original design (as with the boldly flowered tie and checkered foulard worn for his picture accompanying an interview with Jordon Pecile). This need for originality in style and dress within the bounds of convention again is based upon the impulse to use dress not as Wilde's

"theatrical costume" but as a correlative of the spiritual. Merrill reiterates this concept perhaps most forcefully in his liberal paraphrase (almost a dandy's credo) of Roger Vivier's statement about his purpose as a shoemaker:

> True, dear lady, I may appear to give myself wholly, to take my stand if you like, upon pedestrian matters. But within my imaginative grasp is also a living body of knowledge, free and passionate and brilliantly disguisable. While above that we have the whole vast sphere of the human head and the question of how its changing contents are to be both protected and dramatized by the intellectual milliner at work within it. ("A Class Day Talk" 160)

Merrill not only uses dress to dramatize what Baudelaire calls the "primitive nobility" of his soul; he also uses another dandiacal trait--"imperious aloofness"--to protect the "changing contents" of "the whole vast sphere" of his intellect from the onslaught of the uncultured masses surrounding him. If contemporary American life (as well as the wallpaper of his Stonington parlor described in Mirabell) is a test of "One's tolerance for those quotidian toads," then Merrill fails (CLS 98). In writing "The Beaten Path"--consisting of travel letters from the Orient--Merrill directs us to

> Think of the Western writer or even the Western couturier--doesn't everything he turns out imply some bold stand taken against Chaos, conformity, tastelessness, the sluggish drift of a public whose ideas, if any, are at odds with his own and one another's? (145)

Merrill's "bold stance"--his "heroism amid decadence"--involves a break with the "quotidian toads" in favor of Baudelaire's "new kind of aristocracy . . . based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties." Toward the end of The Book of Ephraim, Ephraim, a supernatural guide, exults with Merrill and his companion David Jackson over their noble, precocious achievements:

> U ARE SO QUICK MES CHER I FEEL WE HAVE
> SKIPPING THE DULL CLASSROOM DONE IT ALL
> AT THE SALON LEVEL (CLS 72)

In selecting a life of the salon over the dull classroom, Merrill chooses his company carefully, preferring the "quick company of the 'regulars'" (real and imagined) he describes in The Book of Ephraim: "How have we done, how can we do without / Our 'regulars'--their charm, their levity!" (CLS 72). In valuing this charm and levity in his company of regulars, Merrill reveals his appreciation of the dandy's vaunted wit. In The Book of Ephraim, Ephraim quotes Tiberius in praising "NO GOLD SO LIGHT / AS PURE AMUSEMENT" (CLS 72). Garret Condon, in "James Merrill in Key West," reconstructs the witty exchange of Merrill's Key West literary friends, including poets Richard Wilbur and John Malcolm Brinnin:

> It becomes clear that some weighty talk is coming when lunch arrives: ultralight chicken salad on greens, washed down with white wine and Perrier, followed by a

> flaky patisserie.
>
> Wilbur can't resist a little shop talk. He mentions a young poet who recently published a book. Wilbur thinks he has promise.
>
> Merrill is cool. "He's very much on the make," he says, adding that he received a letter from the young writer. "He writes these very friendly letters, but there is no friendship there, you see." In addition to bad manners, the novice is guilty of inexactitude. Merrill says the poet has misused the word "malinger" in one of his poems. Wilbur agrees. Not that misuse, if clearly intended, is out of bounds, Merrill adds.
>
> "False etymology is a resource for the poet," Merrill observes. Eliot misused "malinger," he adds. Does Wilbur remember where? "'Prufrock?'" Yes, "Prufrock." Merrill wonders aloud if Eliot misused it correctly, and ambles into the house to see if he can find a copy. He returns with Modern Poetry: American and British, co-edited by Brinnin, who suddenly has a stake in this discussion. But Modern Poetry doesn't include "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," to everyone's amusement. "John knew that every schoolboy had already written an essay on 'Prufrock,' and there was no point in putting it in his book," Wilbur quips. No one accuses Brinnin of malingering. (10)

In Mirabell's Books of Number, Merrill cites the "STYLISH HIJINKS" that won't entertain the reader "FACEDOWN OVER A COMIC BOOK" but that serve as a bond among his circle of friends, including Mirabell (CLS 147). In poem after poem in Occasions & Inscriptions, a privately printed collection of such "STYLISH HIJINKS," Merrill turns the dandy's wit upon his close friends and family members as well as himself. Thus, Merrill directs his wit toward his childhood friend in "To Frederick Buechner on his 50th birthday":

> O little Roman Number, tell!
> Has Freddy finally gone to L!

Similarly, in "To Alfred Corn, with the gift of a sweater," Merrill quips,

> Wearing these threads,
> Dear fashion plate,
> Accept your fate
> And turn all heads.

In some of the private verses of Occasions & Inscriptions, Merrill's wit takes the form of self-irony, as in his comments on his earliest poems in "To David Kalstone, with the gift of Jim's Book, printed when the author was sixteen":

> An interest in "early work"
> Promptly reveals its author as a jerk
> And ripens cataracts if read
> Even by flashlight, caro, in your bed.

In "Letter to an editor, after his holiday in Athens," Merrill uses his punning, self-ironic wit to defend his (as well as the editor's) sexual preference:

> Sir: Your poker face, we understand,
> Comes from having held, throughout a Greek
> Summerlong winning streak,
> Hand after powerful hand.
> Now if in retrospect some scenes
> Produce a flush that's anything but straight,
> Tough titty. My rules clearly state
> Nothing beats a pair of Queens.

Thus, in directing his wit toward himself as well as his witty circle of friends, Merrill, like Baudelaire's dandy, uses his wit to protect himself against painful emotions, smiling "like the Spartan boy under the fox's tooth" (28).

When forced to "do without" this witty circle of friends, Merrill prefers isolation to the company of the bourgeois reader "FACEDOWN OVER A COMIC BOOK." In fact, as Merrill identifies with the nonconforming Western couturier, "what engages him is more often than not," as McClatchy notes, "the outsider--writers to one side, modest or strange in their demands on us" (introduction to Recitative x). Merrill does not find such isolation and detachment disturbing, however, captured as he is by Corot's "solitary romance, the sense, however obscure, that our moments of uncomprehending loneliness are the most true" ("Notes on Corot" 155). Furthermore, Merrill seems to need such detachment as a fire screen (as he entitles one monograph of poetry) or protection from pain. In times of intensity, he seems to possess what Baudelaire identifies as the "distinguishing characteristic of the dandy's beauty": "an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved; you might call it a latent fire which hints at itself, and which could, but chooses not to burst into flames" (29). In "Japan: Prose of Departure," for example, Merrill describes his use of this aloofness when wrestling with the emotional impact of the impending death of his friend "Paul" (presumably the critic David Kalstone) during his trip to Japan:

> If every trip is an incarnation in miniature, let this be the one in which to arrange myself like flowers. Aim at composure like the target a Zen archer sees through shut eyes. Close my borders to foreign devils. Take for model a cone of snow with fire in its bowels. (IR 57)

Merrill chooses the role of outsider not only in his emotional aloofness but also in his detached nonpolitical stance. Since 1956, Merrill has spent at least half of each year in Stonington, Connecticut, which he characterizes as a "point of withdrawal" from "the great American world of business, technology, and political machines" ("James Merrill at Home" 20-21). An exchange between Merrill and J.D. McClatchy in 1982 suggests Merrill's resolute albeit sardonic commitment to an apolitical stance:

> MERRILL:. . . . Of course I can't conceive of anyone choosing public life, unless from some unspeakable hidden motive.
>
> McCLATCHY: What newspapers do you read?
>
> MERRILL: In Europe the Paris Herald--I get very American over there, and it's so concise. Here, I never learned how to read a paper. My first year away at school, I watched my classmates, some of them littler than I was, frowning over the war news or the financial page. They already knew how! I realized then and there I couldn't hope to catch up. I told this to Marianne Moore before introducing her at her Amherst reading in 1956. She looked rather taken aback, as I did myself, a half hour later, when in the middle of a poem she was reading--a poem I thought I knew--I heard my name. "Now Mr. Merrill," she was saying, "tells me he doesn't read a newspaper. That's hard for me to understand. The things one would miss! Why, only last week I read that our U.S. Customs Bureau was collecting all the egret and bird-of-paradise feathers we'd confiscated during the twenties and thirties--collecting them and sending them off to

> Nepal, where they're needed. . . ." And then she went right on with her poem.
>
> McCLATCHY: I'll have to interrupt. Why were those feathers needed in Nepal?
>
> MERRILL: Oh, headdresses, regalia. . .you must remember--the papers were full of it! (71-72)

Merrill has also sustained the dandy's role as outsider through his extensive travels. Until 1979, Merrill spent part of each year in Greece, which Ross Labrie calls Merrill's Jamesian "counterworld for America" ("James Merrill at Home" 21). In addition to the mental travels he shares with Stevens (In "Peru: The Landscape Game," Merrill imagines a trip to Peru before actually journeying there), Merrill also has visited and written about remote places around the world, including the Orient and South America. In his travels, Merrill seems to cultivate the anonymity, displacement, and detachment of the expatriate. Like Baudelaire's Monsieur G., Merrill the traveler is able "to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet remain hidden from the world" (9). For Merrill, living in Athens provided "an escape from the narrowness of a well-to-do background":

> I think one of the great pleasures of being in Greece was that one had a kind of anonymity whereas here in America from simply the way I talk I sound like somebody very leisured and privileged. That's something that could not be inferred from the way I spoke Greek, because an accent that would be a class accent, if you like, in America would simply be an American accent in Greek; so in a way I could talk much

> more easily to all kinds of people in Greece than I have been able to do through a lot of my life here. ("James Merrill at Home" 20)

In the same way in Merrill's poem "The Friend of the Fourth Decade," a friend's travels to distant lands (as described in a postcard) allow him to shed his identity as well as his nationality:

> Finally a dung-and-emerald oasis,
> No place I knew of. "Here," he wrote on the back,
>
> "Individual and type are one.
> Do as I please, I <u>am</u> the simpleton
>
> Whose last exploit is to have been exploited
> Neck and crop. In the usual bazaar,
>
> Darker, more crisscrossed than a beggar's palm,
> Smell of money draws them after me,
>
> I answer to whatever name they call,
> Drink the sweet black condescending dregs,
>
> Try on their hungers like a shirt of flame
> (Well, a sports shirt of flame) whereby I've been
>
> Picked clean, reborn each day increasingly
> Conspicuous, increasingly unseen."
> (<u>FS</u> 7-8)

Through his travels abroad, Merrill has gained what a biographical note to his prose collection <u>Recitative</u> calls "the displacements and discoveries of his travels" (201). In describing Japan in "The Beaten Path," Merrill recalls the negative side of these self-imposed displacements--the concomitant alienation:

> We exchanged another glance, and yet--It <u>is</u> very lonely

> here, with no way of sharing in anything. The language barrier is severe; that of manners, monstrous. One can endure just so long the hours spent drinking tea, or trying to get a straight answer, or holding some inscrutable ornament to the light in one's great clumsy fingers. (144)

Thus, through his travels, Merrill becomes Baudelaire's ideal dandy--"this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert" (12).

But a benefit of Merrill's apolitical stance and the sometimes lonely displacements of travel is the "tactful disinvolvement," as the friend of the "Fourth Decade" calls it--that is, the willful but discrete detachment from the conventional and the trivial that a shared culture brings:[11]

> After dinner he said, "I'm tired of understanding
> The light in people's eyes, the smells, the food.
>
> (By the way, those veal birds were delicious.
> They're out of Fannie Farmer? I thought so.)
>
> Tired of understanding what I hear,
> The tones, the overtones, of knowing
>
> Just what clammy twitchings thrive
> Under such cold flat stones
>
> As We-are-profoundly-honored-to-have-with-us
> Or This-street-has-been-torn-up-for-your-convenience.
>
> As for what I catch myself saying,
> Don't believe me! I <u>despise</u> Thoreau.
>
> I mean to learn, in the language of where I am going,
> Barely enough to ask for food and love.
> (<u>FS</u> 4-5)

As Merrill suggests in "To My Greek" (a poem that deals simultaneously with the speaker's relationship with a Greek lover and with the Greek language), travel and immersion in another language provide a retreat from both sources of a mechanical, banal existence--his parents' privileged world and conventional America:

> Let past and future
> Perish upon our lips, ocean inherit
> Those paper millions. Let there be no word
> For justice, grief, convention. (FS 19)

Merrill envisions for himself as traveller, as well as "The Friend of the Fourth Decade," an unravelling of the cultural and psychological "swaddlings" that paralyze the sensibilities:

> Behind a door marked DANGER
> (This is a dream I have about my friend)
>
> Swaddlings of his whole civilization,
> Prayers, accounts, long priceless scroll,
>
> Whip, hawk, prow, queen, down to some last
> Lost comedy, all that fine writing
>
> Rigid with rains and suns,
> Are being gingerly unwound.
>
> There. Now the mirror. Feel the patient's heart
> Pounding--oh please, this one--
>
> Till nothing moves but to a drum.
> See his eyes darken in bewilderment--
>
> No, in joy--and his lips part
> To greet the perfect stranger.
> (FS 8-9)

Perhaps most importantly, through his travels Merrill proves himself to be Baudelaire's cosmopolitan dandy whose "interest is the whole world."[12] As the speaker suggests in the dramatic monologue "Kostas Tympchianakis," each new culture widens Merrill's understanding and expands his consciousness: "Take me with you when you sail next week, / You'll see a different cosmos through the eyes of a Greek" (FS 17).

Nowhere is the dandy's desire to see the cosmos through many different sets of eyes more apparent than in Merrill's taste in art and culture, which, like Stevens's, tends toward the foreign rather than the domestic. Merrill, like Stevens, knows many European languages, including modern German, and he has translated works by Eugenio Montale, Hans Lodeizen, Cecilia Meireles, Vassili Vasilikos, and C.P. Cavafy. For Merrill, as with Stevens, this international taste began at an early age with an exposure to other languages, as Merrill recalls in his essay "Acoustical Chambers":

> Foreign languages entered my life early in the person of my governess. Although we called her Mademoiselle she was not a spinster but a widow. Neither was she French, or even, as she led us to believe, Belgian, but part English and part, to her undying shame, Prussian. . . .
>
> By the time I was eight I had learned from her enough French and German to understand that English was merely one of many ways to express things. (3)

In an interview with Ashley Brown, Merrill describes his first attempts at poems at Lawrenceville School: "sonnets, which I wrote as much with French models as with English--the melodic, empty-headed fin de siècle sort of thing" (40). Furthermore, Merrill notes to Donald Sheehan that at one time in his career "I began caring more about French poetry than I did about English" ("An Interview with Donald Sheehan" 27). This interest in foreign languages and cultures appears in Merrill's earliest poems, where his knowledge of foreign culture makes allusions possible. In "Variations: The Air Is Sweetest that a Thistle Guards," for example, Merrill uses the theory of crystallization (an explanation of crystal formation on branches in salt mines) developed by Stendhal in his relatively obscure pseudo-scientific treatise on love, De l'Amour, to create a subtle, complex allusion in the final section of the poem:

> Friday. Clear. Cool. This is your day. Stendhal
> At breakfast-time. The metaphors of love.
> Lucky perhaps, big Beyle, for whom love was
> So frankly the highest good, to be garlanded
> Accordingly, without oblivion, without cure.
> . . . . . .
> Love merely as the best
> There is, and one would make the best of that
> By saying how it grows and in what climates,
> By trying to tell the crystals from the branch,
> Stretching that wand then toward the sparkling wave.
> (FN 17)[13]

While Merrill continues to develop a dense network of

foreign allusions in The Changing Light at Sandover, as J.D. McClatchy notes in his introduction to Recitative (Merrill's collection of prose pieces), we have only to scan the essays in the collection to discover that Merrill's cosmopolitan interests have persisted into the present and to be impressed by "the range of his enthusiasms, aversions, and affiliations" (viii). In this collection, he reviews two books by Francis Ponge, Allen Mandelbaum's translation of Dante's Inferno, and Robert Liddell's biography of Cavafy; provides program notes for the Zogheb's puppet theatre opera Le Sorelle Brontë; and, in just the first three pages devoted to Ponge, displays a sophisticated understanding of Mallarmé, Valéry, Gautier, Michaux, and Braque.

Merrill also demonstrates the dandy's interest in the "whole world" through his technical awareness of a range of arts beyond literature. This critical awareness is most obvious in his interest in music, a devotion that perhaps stems from the belief (expressed by Mirabell in the trilogy) that "THE BLOSSOMS OF POETRY & MUSIC" are the "2 PRINCIPAL LIGHTS OF GOD BIOLOGY." By way of explanation, Mirabell adds,

> LESSER ARTS NEEDED NO EXEGETES:
> ARCHITECTURE SCULPTURE THE MOSAICS & PAINTINGS THAT FLOWERD IN GREECE & PERSIA CELEBRATED THE BODY.
> POETRY MUSIC SONG INDWELL & CELEBRATE THE MIND. . .
> HEART IF U WILL (CLS 156)

Merrill remarks to Sheehan that "certainly I cared about music long before I cared about literature" (29) and recollects to Labrie that opera "was the first art that came my way" ("James Merrill at Home" 24). After first attending opera at eleven (an experience described in "Matinees"), the "next step," Merrill tells Sheehan, "was listening to French art songs" by Debussy, Fauré, and Duparc, and, later, lieder by Schubert and Schumann (30). While Labrie suggests that the love of opera is "one of the things . . . [Merrill], Auden, and Kallman have in common" ("James Merrill at Home" 24), JM discovers in Mirabell that "MUSIC MORE ABSTRACT / THAN METAPHOR MUST BE THE BOND THAT LINKS" the opera-loving WHA (Auden), MM (Maria Mitsotáki, whose "IST LOVE WAS MUSIC"), DJ (who "attacked / That thing by Grieg; took Composition with / Big-timers like Schoenberg and Hindemith / While still in college"), and himself (who limps "through my Satie or a Bach gavotte") (CLS 206). Despite Merrill's modesty in describing his own musical abilities, he often reveals an advanced technical knowledge of music, having MM notice that "3 COINCIDENTAL SOUNDS / A WIND BELL IN THE GARDEN A DOOR CHIME / & THE HIGH CRY OF A SEAGULL MADE ONE FLEETING / TONIC CHORD" (CLS 206) and describing the tropical sounds of Peru as a Berlioz symphony: "A gala by

Berlioz is under way. Having whipped the pit to a shimmering spate, he now introduces daring new effects (tropical birds, chug of that toy locomotive) among the strings and reeds, the gongs and cymbals" ("Peru: The Landscape Game" 198).[14]

Merrill's technical knowledge of the arts extends beyond music. In his catalogue notes for an Art Institute of Chicago exhibit of Corot's paintings and graphics, he convincingly discusses Corot's development as an artist, despite his disclaimer that

> The writer will always envy the painter. Even those who write well about painting, he will envy for having learned to pay close attention to appearances. . . .
>
> He stands before a painting by Corot. As he is not himself a painter, or even, if he is--painters are forever talking nowadays--he will suffer a brief, defensive spell of verbal dizziness. Phrases to be distinguished by their incoherence--linear values, tonal purity, classical heritage--will explode between himself and the canvas. ("Notes on Corot" 152)

For his diverse aesthetic interests, Merrill was also asked to write the introduction to a catalogue of Barbara Kassel's "paintings of walls--the interior walls of a house--on which an itinerant artist has painted landscapes." Merrill's remarkable range of cultural knowledge is also evident in his description of the temples of Bangkok, using the analogy of not only other architectural constructs but also literary and musical works:

> They are akin to the works of Congreve, of Couperin, to the buildings of Borromini and Gaudí, through that air of being a trifle too chic and therefore, out of somebody's sheer ennui, wrought in dangerous, perishable mediums, ornaments which the underlying structures may or may not support--mightn't the fun lie in the uncertainty? ("The Beaten Path" 149)

Perhaps as much in this single quotation, as in any other, we can see the personal traits of Baudelaire's dandy that Merrill shares with Stevens--the love of style and surface (we recall the "mirror black" gloss Stevens so admires in Oriental porcelains), the interest in self-conscious artifice and ornamentation, and Baudelaire's belief that "all good comes from art."

Merrill's admiration of the "Chekhovian surfaces . . . trivia and funny surprises" that he sees as constituting Elizabeth Bishop's "talent for life" ("An Interview with J.D. McClatchy" 79) causes him to pursue an interest in the esoteric--that is, the dandy's love of "distinction above all things" (Baudelaire 27). Like Stevens, Merrill in "Japan: Prose of Departure" shows a horticulturalist's interest in various types of flora: "Narrow streets, lined with pots: corstaria, clematis, bamboo. (Can that be syringa - with <u>red</u> blossoms?)" (<u>IR</u> 55) Whether carefully selecting as images for his poems what Judith Moffett calls the "small, artificial products of highly developed cultures"--"Van Eyck angel, etched tumblers, Willowware cup, little

glass horse, bells from Isfahan" (James Merrill 11) or choosing the details with which to decorate his Stonington house, Merrill shows himself to possess a quality he tells Sheehan he learned from Proust: the dandy's "treatment of every phenomenon (whether the way someone pronounces a word, or the article of clothing worn, or the color of a flower) as having ultimate importance" (33).

Merrill's consistent preference for the remote and the exotic--mirroring Stevens's preferring "the foreign to the domestic, the old to the recent, an unseen French painting from Paris to one from a New York gallery"--is exemplified in his forward to the puppet theatre opera Le Sorelle Brontë, a libretto "known to few readers":

> Although over ten years old, it has never been performed for more than a handful of its Alexandria-born poet's friends. As editor I venture to hope that its beauties will attract a larger public.
>
> It is designed for that small red theatre in the soul where alone the games of childhood are still applauded. ("Foreward to Le Sorelle Brontë" 166)

In attempting to create that "small red theatre" in which he and his close associates can relive childhood games, enjoy "STYLISH HIJINKS," and escape from "the tyranny of mechanized life and slow dying," Merrill attempts to live the life Baudelaire applauds--the world of the dandy to which Stevens retreats from his life as an insurance executive.

While many of the qualities that Merrill and Stevens share in their personal lives--the outsider's detachment, the collector's penchant for the esoteric, a self-conscious wit, cosmopolitan tastes, and a love of artifice--seem to place them within the tradition of Baudelaire's dandy, it is worth noting that another explanation of the common qualities of the two is possible. The traits that I have identified as evidence of Stevens's and Merrill's philosophical dandyism Robert K. Martin interprets as signs of another strain of American letters--the homosexual tradition--that is, a "gay sensibility" consisting primarily of "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).

In fact, Martin argues directly for this alternative reading of the case of Merrill. While conceding that in Merrill's early poems, the "sense of shared readership was created by a body of taste rather than by any presumed sexual preference," Martin claims that the later Merrill "wrote for those who cared about opera, porcelain, Oriental art--subjects which have, among American men at least, tended to have a homosexual audience" (203). The aptness of Martin's generalization about the audience for such subjects, at least in the perceptions of the American

people, is corroborated by Stevens's fears about his own interest in the subjects Martin lists. "Despite his efforts to ennoble the poet's role," Bates reminds us, Stevens "could not quite rid himself of the feeling that writing poetry was a slightly absurd and possibly effeminate activity" (87). This feeling is evident in Stevens's letter of August 1913 to his wife:

> Keep all this a great secret. There is something absurd about all this writing of verses; but the truth is, it elates and satisfies me to do it. It is an all-around exercise quite superior to ordinary reading. So that you see, my habits are positively lady-like. (L 180)

Actually, as Ellen Moers points out, the two explanations of Stevens's and Merrill's shared qualities--the dandy tradition and the tradition of male writers with apparently "effeminate" tastes--do not have to be seen as separate explanations. As Moers points out, by the time of the fin de siècle dandies, the two traditions had merged. Beginning in Second Empire France, dandyism had come to be associated with a "blurring of the sexes . . . [and a] seemingly triumphant fusion of the masculine and feminine principles" (Moers 309). Thus, D'Aurevilly claims that "a Dandy is a woman on certain sides" (70) and writes of the dandy as having "natures doubles et multiples, d'une sexe intellectuel indécis" (quoted in Moers 309). Thus, by the

time of the fin de siècle, dandyism (aided by the redefinition of the role of women) provided relief from the harsh sexual divisions that plagued homosexuals and other men with traditionally feminine tastes (Moers 308-09).[15]

It is understandable, however, that Stevens had difficulty accepting the sexual implications of his dandyism. Delmore Schwartz, reflecting upon Stevens at his death in 1955, recalls the sexual stereotypes that still existed when Stevens began writing poetry:

> it is easy to forget that when Stevens was a young man, the adult male who read a great deal was regarded as, at best, anti-social and probably addicted to secret vices: and the adult male unless he was a foreigner, a gigolo, or a sissy was supposed to suffer nausea or become comatose when forced by his wife to go to the opera. (21)

Recognizing in 1913 that his writing habits might be considered "lady-like," Stevens by 1918 apparently could still not rid himself of fears about the sexual implications of his esoteric, dandiacal tastes even when writing to his fellow poet, William Carlos Williams:

> I spare you the whole-souled burblings in the park, the leaves, lilacs, tulips and so on. Such things are unmanly and non-Prussian and, of course, a fellow must pooh-pooh something, even if it happens to be something he rather fancies, you know. (quoted in Bates 87)

Anxiety about his poetic sensibility apparently persisted for much of his life, as the heterosexual Stevens continued to fear what might be perceived by others as a "gay

sensibility." In fact, Schwartz in his 1955 eulogy recalls Stevens's remarking at a 1936 reading at Harvard that he had written poetry for years as a "secret vice" (21).

The fact, however, that Schwartz prefaces his 1955 comments about the sexual stereotypes that Stevens encountered with "it is easy to forget" suggests the beginnings of a change in attitude toward the dandy, his sensibilities, and his presumed sexual preferences. This change, based upon the blurring of sexes described by Moers, allowed Merrill gradually to accept his sexual identity as well as his role as a dandy. That is not to say that Merrill in his early years did not experience the sexual biases that Schwartz describes. In fact, his reflections on an early diary account of a ride in a glass-bottomed boat at Silver Springs, Florida, suggest the sexual conflict Merrill must have endured in the 1940's:

> There would be much to say about "unconscious depths," about my zodiacal creature the Fish, above all about the heavy pane of glass that, like a kind of intelligence, protected me and my mother from that sunken world while revealing its secrets in magical detail. But in 1940 the artless diarist records only this: "Silver Springs--heavenly colors and swell fish."
>
> Two banalities, each by itself bad enough, and hopelessly so in conjunction. Yet in their simple awfulness they broach the issue most crucial to this boy not quite fourteen. Two years earlier my parents have been divorced and Mademoiselle amicably sent packing: I am thought to need "a man's influence." We hear how children suffer under these circumstances. I am no exception; my grades plummet, I grow fat gorging

> sweets. "Heavenly colors and swell fish." What is that phrase but an attempt to bring my parents together, to remarry on the page their characteristic inflections--the ladylike gush and the regular-guy terseness?" ("Acoustical Chambers" 7)

And, it might be added, an attempt to remarry on the page the two conflicting forces the young Merrill must have felt: the pressure (also felt by Stevens) to respond with a "regular guy" pooh-poohing of "whole-souled burblings" as opposed to the desire to succumb to the dandy's appreciation of the colorful and esoteric (a tendency both poets label "ladylike").

But, as Merrill recounts in a 1986 interview, the gradual acceptance of homosexuality during the 1960's and 1970's made it possible for him to admit the sexual identity that had already been associated with his dandiacal tastes as a person and a poet: "I stood still and the closet disintegrated" (Condon 16). Thus, the mature Merrill begins to acknowledge his homosexuality openly, use it as the subject of his poems, and even joke about it. In Mirabell's Books of Number, WHA (Auden) quips, "FORSTER HAD THIS TOUCHING THEORY / THAT GOD WANTS HIGHCLASS QUEERS / TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE & TO HAVE ONE MADE" (205). And in Mirabell, Merrill attempts to provide a rationale for homosexuality. Mirabell's theory concerning the creative/generative power of the otherwise unproductive homosexual passion reflects

Merrill's ease with his own sexuality:

> LOVE OF ONE MAN FOR ANOTHER OR LOVE BETWEEN WOMEN
> IS A NEW DEVELOPMENT OF THE PAST 4000 YEARS
> ENCOURAGING SUCH MIND VALUES AS PRODUCE THE BLOSSOMS
> OF POETRY & MUSIC, THOSE 2 PRINCIPAL LIGHTS OF
> GOD BIOLOGY. . . .
> . . . . . .
>
> NOW MIND IN ITS PURE FORM IS A NONSEXUAL PASSION
> OR A UNISEXUAL ONE PRODUCING ONLY LIGHT.
> FEW PAINTERS OR SCULPTORS CAN ENTER THIS LIFE OF THE
> MIND. [t/o]
> THEY (LIKE ALL SO-CALLD NORMAL LOVERS) MUST PRODUCE AT
> LAST [t/o]
> BODIES THEY DO NOT EXIST FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSE
> (CLS 156)[16]

Once it became possible for Merrill to accept his sexuality and exalt in its "OTHER PURPOSE," his inherited wealth allowed him to embrace the life of Baudelaire's professional dandy. According to Baudelaire, the perfect dandy is "the man who is rich and idle, and who, even if blasé, has no other occupation than the perpetual pursuit of happiness; the man who has been brought up amid luxury. . . whose solitary profession is elegance" (26). Unlike most contemporary poets, Merrill resorts to teaching writing "only once in a great while" ("An Interview with Ashley Brown" 41) and offers a reason for not choosing teaching as a way of life:

> Teaching literature, though, or worse, running a poetry workshop, left me unable to face the English language in any form by the end of the day. So I've done very little teaching. Fortunately, I didn't have to earn a living. ("James Merrill on Poetry" 5)

According to Baudelaire, dandies must devote themselves full-time to contemplation and refinement without the distraction of another profession:

> These beings have no other calling but to cultivate the idea of beauty in their persons, to satisfy their passions, to feel and to think. They thus possess a vast abundance both of time and money, without which fantasy, reduced to a state of passing reverie, can hardly be translated into action. (27)

In an exchange with McClatchy, Merrill explains why he finds it necessary to give complete reign to fantasy and his passions as a full-time poet and dandy:

> McCLATCHY: You'd disagree, then, with Auden, who said he was a poet only when actually writing a poem.
> MERRILL: Lucky him. What was he the rest of the time?
> McCLATCHY: A citizen, I believe he said.
> MERRILL: Oh. Well, that citizen must have heard a lot of funny sounds from the poet pigeonhole next door. I certainly do. Whether you're at your desk or not when a poem's underway, isn't there that constant eddy in your mind? If it's strong enough all sorts of random flotsam gets drawn into it, how selectively it's hopeless to decide at the time. I try to break off, get away from the page, into the kitchen for a spell of mixing and marinating, which gives the words a chance to sort themselves out behind my back. But there's really no escape, except perhaps the third drink. On "ordinary" days, days when you've nothing on the burner, it might be safe to say that you're not a poet at all: more like a doctor at a dinner party, just another guest until his hostess slumps to the floor or his little beeper goes off. Most of those signals are false alarms--only they're not. Language is your medium. You can be talking or writing a letter, and out comes an observation, a "sentence-sound" you rather like. It needn't be your own. And it's not going to make a poem, or even fit into one. But the twinge it gives you--and it's this, I daresay, that distinguishes

> you from the "citizen"--reminds you you've got to be careful, that you've got a condition that needs watching. . . . (82-83)

Stevens, on the other hand, seriously worried that he had "a condition that needs watching"--that is, the dandy's sensibility and taste and possibly his suspect sexual tendencies. Thus, he was never able to become Baudelaire's ideal dandy "whose solitary profession is elegance." Instead, Stevens compromised in choosing a life in which his burgher self developed a career as a Hartford attorney, not only as a practical concession to reality and his father but also as a defense against the feared absurdity and effeminacy of the dandy's amateurism.[17] It was left for Stevens to attempt to achieve the dandy's heroic stance against decadence primarily through his poetry. And it is in the dandiacal elements of his poetry--particularly in the poetry of Harmonium and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"--that Stevens influences Merrill the most.

## NOTES

[1] "Le dandysme est le dernier éclat d'héroïsme dans les décadence" (Baudelaire 711).

[2] In an interview with Ashley Brown, Merrill also comments upon "an elite of sufferers" as the audience for works such as Rilke's Duino Elegies (43).

[3] Merrill reveals his own notion of poetry as a quasi-religious force in his comments on Elizabeth Bishop in "The Transparent Eye": "'The ancients said poetry is a staircase to God,' wrote Montale. Bishop shows this can still be so in a world relieved of theological apparatus" (129).

[4] In discussing Mirabell, Vendler also notes that Merrill is concerned with "the work of art and science refining life in public as the bonds of affection refine life in private." She also detects in Mirabell Merrill's "personal aim of" discovering what "can replace self-reproduction in childbearing" ("James Merrill" 231).

[5] Riddel sees the continued compromises between Stevens's dandiacal and pragmatic tendencies as a heritage from his father and traces Garrett Stevens's own ambivalence toward "devotion to reality," on the one hand, and "the

urgency of imagination," on the other, through a number of letters to his son dating from 1897 to 1899 ("Blue Voyager" 64-65).

[6] Stevens's letter of 12 January 1940 to Hi Simons concerning "The Comedian as the Letter C" indicates, that, at least occasionally, Stevens saw the limitations of his self-imposed isolation:

> about the time when I, personally, began to feel round for a new romanticism, I might naturally have been expected to start on a new cycle. Instead of doing so, I began to feel that I was on the edge: that I wanted to get to the center: that I was isolated, and that I wanted to share the common life. . . . People say that I live in a world of my own: that sort of thing. Instead of seeking therefore for a "relentless contact", I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central. So stated, this puts the thing out of all proportion in respect to its relation to the context of life. Of course, I don't agree with those people who say that I live in a world of my own; I think that I am perfectly normal, but I see that there is a center. For instance, a photograph of a lot of fat men and women in the woods, drinking beer and singing Hi-li Hi-lo convinces me that there is a normal that I ought to try to achieve. (L 352)

[7] As one of many examples of Stevens's specialized references to music in his poetry, Walton Litz suggests that the term "fictive music" in Stevens's title "To One of Fictive Music" may refer to the medieval term musica ficta used to indicate "accidentals that lie outside the harmonic system" (118).

[8] In a 1982 interview with Ross Labrie, Merrill

remembers his early reaction to his parents' world:

> I always understood without having any confirmation of it that I didn't very much care for the world as seen through their eyes. I didn't like the kind of lives they led. I'm not saying that I didn't like them; I just thought that their world wasn't for me. . . . (19-20)

And Merrill maintains the dandy's pretense of ennui even in descriptions of his later life, such as his account of his and DJ's life during the days of their Ouija-board conversations with their spiritual guide Ephraim:

> Life like the periodical not yet
> Defunct kept hitting the stands. We seldom failed
> To leaf through each issue--war, election,
> Starlet; write, scratch out; eat steak au poivre
> Chat with Ephraim. (CLS 40)

[9] Significantly, Merrill has Stevens take his leave in The Book of Ephraim by asking "WHERES MY HAT" (CLS 73).

[10] To suggest the tension the dandy experiences between the conventional and the original, Merrill recounts Elizabeth Bishop's remarks upon reading the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard in 1972, at which time she announced her purchase of a commencement gown "that more or less fits this time" yet remembers her jealousy of an actress who dared to wear a "mini-gown" on a similar occasion ("A Class Day Talk" 165).

[11] In an interview with Jordon Pecile, Merrill gives the following advice to the serious would-be poet: "Travel

if you can, cultivate 'alienations' if you like. There's no need to wallow in the assumptions of your time and place, since your work will reflect them, whatever you do" (22).

[12] Both Stevens and Merrill tend to downplay their worldliness. Stevens, for example, asks halfway facetiously in a 1906 journal entry, "May it be that I am only a New Jersey Epicurean?" (SP 159) Merrill comments to Ross Labrie, "Well, I don't feel particularly cultured and international" (22).

[13] In the two volumes of De l'Amour, Stendhal explores the inner and outer workings of love, attempting, as Merrill accurately claims in "The Air Is Sweetest," to "make the best of that [love] / By saying how it grows and in what climates." Thus, in the first volume, Stendhal explains how love arises and develops, while in the second he considers how external factors--government, nationality, gender, education, and marriage--affect love.

In his line "By trying to tell the crystals from the branch," Merrill alludes to Stendhal's theory of crystallization. In De l'Amour, Stendhal develops the metaphor of crystal formation in a salt mine to explain the process by which the imagination and memory of the lover transfigure and perfect the beloved as well as the experience of l'amour passion (the sexual love that Stendhal

considers the supreme kind of love) itself:

> This is what you will find if you let a lover turn things over in his mind for twenty-four hours.
>
> In the salt mines of Salzburg a bough stripped of its leaves by winter is thrown into the depths of the disused workings; two or three months later it is pulled out again, covered with brilliant crystals: even the tiniest twigs, no bigger than a tomtit's claw, are spangled with a vast number of shimmering, glittering diamonds, so that the original bough is no longer recognizable.
>
> I call crystallization that process of the mind which discovers fresh perfections in its beloved at every turn of events. (On Love 5-6)

[14] While, as Keller points out, Merrill and Auden share an affinity "for that most unashamedly theatrical of the arts, opera" (225), certainly the completeness of Merrill's knowledge of music seems to emulate and even surpass that of Stevens.

[15] Moers reflects on the effects today of the blending of the homosexual and dandy traditions: "Speculations follow: how much of the mannerisms of to-day's overt homosexual, including his dandyism, can be traced back to the fin de siècle, and how much of that can be credited simply to Wilde's legend?" (304)

[16] Given Merrill's rationale for homosexuality in Mirabell--leaving the artist free to produce something other than "BODIES," it is hard not to remember the apparently autobiographical remarks of Crispin about the inhibiting effect of offspring upon poetic production:

> The chits came for his jigging, bluet-eyed,
> Hands without touch yet touching poignantly,
> Leaving no room upon his cloudy knee,
> Prophetic joint, for its diviner young. (CP 43)

[17] Thus, Stevens's life challenges Baudelaire's claim that any other profession would destroy the dandy's "natural occupation" of contemplating love:

> It is sad but only too true that without the money and the leisure, love is incapable of rising above a grocer's orgy or the accomplishment of a conjugal duty. Instead of being a passionate or poetical caprice, it becomes repulsive utility. (27)

# CHAPTER II

## DANDYISM AND THE POETRY OF STEVENS AND MERRILL

*Whether these men are nicknamed exquisites, incroyables, beaux, lions, or dandies . . . they all partake of the same characteristic quality of opposition and revolt; they are all representatives of what is finest in human pride, of that compelling need, alas only too rare today, of combating and destroying triviality.*

*Baudelaire, Le Peintre de la vie moderne*

*Again. Art--the desire of select spirits to ennoble and make beautiful their lives.*

*Stevens, quoting Paul Elmer More in Souvenirs and Prophecies*

*The poet isn't always the hero of a movie who does this, does that. He is a man choosing the words he lives by.*

*Merrill, interview with David Kalstone*

Daniel Fuchs notes that "Stevens is a dandy of the imagination as Brummel was of society." Stevens and Brummel, Fuchs adds, "share a climate of hypercivility, eccentricity, overbreeding, haughty wit, apparent dispassionateness--but Stevens' dandyism lies essentially in poems, Brummel's in gestures" (12). Stevens cultivates

these qualities in his poems--as does Merrill, especially in his early poems, which sometimes imitate Stevens--in pursuing what Moers calls "Baudelaire's vision of the dandy as the last representative of human pride drowning in a rising sea of democracy" (283). Both poets realize that art and culture are threatened by middle-class mediocrity and routine, as described by Stevens in "The Comedian as the Letter C":

> Yet the quotidian saps philosophers
> And men like Crispin like them in intent,
> If not will, to track the knaves of thought.
> . . . . . .
> the quotidian
> Like this, saps like the sun, true fortuner. (CP 42-43)

Both Stevens and Merrill write poems that attempt to use dandyism as a shield against this threat, with Stevens's "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" (a would-be dandy) considering what he might do to resist "The malady of the quotidian" and JM finding himself compelled to remove "those quotidian toads" from the walls of his house.

Dandyism is most evident in the poetry of Stevens and Merrill in the characters who are dandiacal; or who at least inhabit an elitist world in an attempt to escape the "malady of the quotidian." In Stevens's poetry, one such dandy is the speaker in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," who, like Baudelaire recognizes the importance of toilet--especially

coiffure--in reflecting spiritual nobility (as Merrill claims, "what goes onto expresses what comes out of the head") and in protecting the aristocratic intellect from the unrefined masses:

> You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
> The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
> You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
> Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
> That not one curl in nature has survived? (CP 14)

In addition, Mon Oncle uses the wit of his verse to ridicule himself as well as his companion:

> "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
> O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon,
> There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
> And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
> Or was it that I mocked myself alone? (CP 13)

Attentive to "fluttering things," Mon Oncle, "like a rose rabbi," possesses the dandy's curiosity--"the mainspring of his genius" (Baudelaire 7)--about the "outward show of life" (Baudelaire 24), including its colors and horticultural details:

> Last night, we sat beside a pool of pink,
> Clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes,
> Keen to the point of starlight. . . (CP 17)

Another Stevens dandy, "The Doctor of Geneva," in paying fastidious attention to dress, "Patted his stove-pipe hat and tugged his shawl" and, with a dandy's "air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not

to moved" (Baudelaire 29), "did not quail" in the face of the Pacific's "long-rolling opulent cataracts" (CP 24). Even when the "voluble delugings" of the sea "set his simmering mind / Spinning and hissing with oracular / Notations of the wild, the ruinous waste" and caused him to imagine "an unburgherly apocalypse" in which "the steeples of his city clanked and sprang," the doctor responded with the dandy's characteristic "imperious aloofness" and ennui: "The doctor used his handkerchief and sighed" (CP 24).

In Stevens's "Ordinary Women," the women, for most of the poem, attempt to escape from a drab, ordinary existence into the dandy's world of art and refinement:

> Then from their poverty they rose,
> From dry catarrhs, and to guitars
> They flitted
> Through the palace walls. (CP 10)

Although they ultimately elect to return to the realm of the ordinary and real, for nine of the poem's ten stanzas the "nonchalant" women inhabit moonlit "nocturnal halls," decorated with "lacquered loges" and "girandoles," where they don cold and "tranquil" dresses and other finery:

> How explicit the coiffures became,
> The diamond point, the sapphire point,
> The sequins
> Of the civil fans! (CP 11)

These female dandies also cultivate an interest in the esoteric, leaning to look

From the window-sills at the alphabets,
At beta b and gamma g,
To study
The canting curlicues

Of heaven and of the heavenly script. (CP 11)

In "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad," Stevens presents a failed would-be dandy, who suffers from the "malady of the quotidian"--the dandy's ennui:

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.
I am too dumbly in my being pent. (CP 96)

Stevens's speaker recognizes that he could transcend his life of mechanical monotony through the beauty of poetry:

One might in turn become less diffident,
Out of such mildew plucking neater mould
And spouting new orations of the cold.

But, unlike Baudelaire's heroic dandy, he is unable to act on his knowledge. The tentative repetitions of his closing line--"One might. One might. But time will not relent"--are reminiscent of the words of Prufrock, another failed dandy who cannot dare.

Even in the world of "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," peopled by only "an old sailor, / Drunk and asleep in his boots," the speaker bemoans the lack of exotically dressed dandies in love with distinction:

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,

> Or purple with green rings,
> Or green with yellow rings,
> Or yellow with blue rings.
> None of them are strange,
> With socks of lace
> And beaded ceintures.
> People are not going
> To dream of baboons and periwinkles. (CP 66)

Of course, a number of critics, like Fuchs, insist that the dandy in Stevens's poetry is a character or mask quite distinct from Stevens the man, a point that Stevens himself makes in a letter to Elsie:

> There is a perfect rout of characters in every man--and every man is like an actor's trunk, full of strange creatures, new & old. But an actor and his trunk are two different things. (SP 116)[1]

Milton Bates, however, is quick to counter Stevens's claim, by continuing the analogy of the actor and introducing a notion somewhat comparable to Yeats's concept of the poet's anti-mask:

> One might argue that an actor cannot efface himself completely in his roles, try as he may. Even the strangest of those "strange creatures" dramatizes some aspect of himself--an aspect the more characteristic and revealing perhaps, to the extent it appears "different." (84-85)

And, as we have seen in examining Stevens's life, Bates's point is especially true in regard to the mask of the dandy, dramatizing, as it does, an aspect of the poet so apparently different from the burgher insurance lawyer. But, as Fuchs indicates in noting that the dandy is only "the first of

several comic masks" that Stevens "uses as facades to hide profound yet sometimes playful feelings" (4), the mask of the dandy only appears regularly in the poems of Harmonium and an even earlier group of poems called "Pecksniffiana," which originally appeared in Poetry in 1919.

By contrast, the dandy--as character and persona--makes appearances in poems throughout Merrill's career and, in most cases, not so much as a mask but as a thinly veiled version of Merrill himself or one of his close companions. One of Merrill's earliest dandies, however, comes, not in the form of a man, but as a bird--"The Peacock." Merrill's peacock ("So vain, so beautiful!") trails behind him the dandy's finery, "a long brocade," and, to avoid "drowning in a rising sea of democracy." occasionally lifts "this burden up in pride." Armed with the dandy's ennui ("Celestially bored") and amateurism ("Tense with idlesse"), the peacock, in his determination to remain unmoved, maintains a "profile that no cry alarms" (FP 54).

The "you" addressed in "Periwinkles" (another work in First Poems) is also a dandy or at least a would-be dandy, who with a collector's curious eye sees "at low tide on the rocky shore / How everything around you sparkles" and, discovering that "the archaic periwinkle" clings "in blotched spirals to shadiest wall," places "one upside- /

Down on your palm." Unable to remain unmoved, "You shiver," envying the dandy periwinkle ("Whose cousins, shingled by the finding tide, / Purpled the cloth of kings") his detachment and anonymity:

> the live oblivion
> Of having crept within, where there was none
> To feel it but yourself, squinting in sun. (FN 31)

In "A Narrow Escape," the dandy speaker surrounds himself at his dinner party with Paul Elmer More's "select spirits"--members of "our particular circle" who share his cultural interests and tastes. He compares the vampire's tone when she confesses "herself a symbol of the inner / Adventure" to "that of an 1830 pianoforte," uses the French "oubliette" to indicate the vampire's "bland face," and describes his companion Charles as "peering over / The rests of venison" (CTYP 28-29). The speaker, according to Lynn Keller, employs the "conversational manner of 'our particular circle,' cultivating his own lightly ironic, witty speech as if addressing his equally urbane acquaintances" (194). Even his refusal to reveal the vampire's response to Charles's question about what "a vampire / Means by the inner adventure" (ending the poem with simply "Her retort / Is now a classic in our particular circle") is an attempt to maintain his elite world, as Stephen Yenser suggests:

> Since being bitten by a vampire, even metaphorically, might make one a vampire oneself, the little "circle" would be a "particular" one indeed. Perhaps we should also consider that the insider who speaks in this poem could not disclose the vampire's retort without thereby making the circle less "particular" in another sense. (60)

A dandy who clearly resembles Merrill in sensibility as well as lifestyle is the speaker in "Childlessness" from Water Street. In the poem (especially the revised version in From the First Nine), the speaker comments on his childless state, with the dandy's self-ironic wit (using puns on "suns" and "seeded"):

> transplantation for the common good
> Of certain rare growths yielding guaranteed
> Golden pollen, gender of suns, large, hardy,
> Enviable blooms? But in my garden
> Nothing's been seeded. (FN 97)

In contrast to his distaste for "a world / Clad only in rags, threadbare" (FN 98), he imagines the sunset upholstering the world with decorator colors that, in dream, become the dandy's clothing:

> at sunset
> When the enchantress, masked as friend, unfurls
> Entire bolts of voluminous pistachios,
> Saffron, and rose.
> These, as I fall back to sleep,
> And other slow colors, clothe me, glide
> To rest, then burst along my limbs like buds. (FN 97)

In "Words for Maria," from The Fire Screen (1969), two dandies--the speaker (presumably Merrill) and his friend Maria Mitsotáki (who returns as MM in the trilogy The

Changing Light at Sandover)--interact. The fastidious speaker evaluates Maria's clothing, noting that "Unjeweled in black as ever comedienne / Of mourning if not silent star of chic, / You drift" and "In smarter weeds than Eve's (Chanel, last year's) / You kneel to beds of color and young vines" (FS 12-13). Maria, meanwhile, demonstrates the dandy's cosmopolitan tastes and detachment, ordering "a black / Espresso and my ouzo in that Greek / Reserved for waiters," dining in the snack bar on "Fried squid; alone," and purchasing an Empire Mirror that "Tall, gleaming . . . could sit for years, I guess, / Drinking the cool black teas of your appearances" (FS 12-13). (Note again the dandy's punning wit and eye for fashion in the speaker's use of "teas" [tease] and "appearances.") Maria also possesses the dandy's reticence and desire for anonymity:

> About what went before
> Or lies beneath, how little can one glean.
> Girlhood, marriage, the war . . . (FS 13)

And, in response, to the speaker's plea to hear more about her past, she manages to "paint a smiling mouth to answer" with the dandy's haughty self-ironic wit, "'Since when does L'Enfant care for archaeology?'" (FS 13)

Even when the poems of Stevens and Merrill do not include dandies (or at least upper-class, cultured individuals surrounded by an elite circle of friends) as

characters, their poems still reflect an attempt to escape from "the rising sea of democracy" through what Merrill in Mirabell calls "THE ARK" or "LIFE RAFT LANGUAGE" (119). In creating their poetry, both poets design a "LIFE RAFT" possessing qualities analogous to the dandy's traits--qualities designed as much to exclude the bourgeoisie as to cultivate an elite readership. As for Stevens, William Carlos Williams's comment on "his indifference to the public and the poems themselves dealing not at all with the man in the streets" (235) seems an accurate assessment, given the difficulty of Stevens's poetry and his impatience with readers who are unable to fathom his poems ("Oh, forget it! You're much too literal-minded!") In designing his poetry, Merrill generally seems to follow his spiritual guide Mirabell's imperative: "MANS TERMITE PALACE BEEHIVE ANTHILL PYRAMID JM / IS LANGUAGE USE IT STIR THE THINKERS & DETER THE REST" (118).

One way that both Stevens and Merrill attempt to "DETER THE REST" is by refusing to conform to the general reading public's expectation that poetry be pragmatic--specifically that it have a political function or reflect its historical context. They both insist that the poet remain detached from the political, focusing solely upon the creation of poetry. In anticipating the criticisms of Williams and

Untermeyer, Stevens outlines the unique claims of poetry: "Poetry is neither politics nor philosophy. Poetry is poetry, and one's objective as a poet is to achieve poetry, precisely as one's object in music is to achieve music" (quoted in Untermeyer 11). In a journal entry of 28 March 1899, the young Stevens attacks the pragmatic theory of art held by the reading public:

> A work of art is inactive . . . and constitutes a stimulus, which we enjoy for its own sake, since it entails no reading beyond the enjoyment of the sensation it provokes. Thus the basis of the aesthetic emotion is the aesthetic attitude; contemplation without any idea of making use of the object of contemplation. (SP 38)[2]

In "Mandolin and Liqueurs," an early Stevens poem published in Poetry as part of the "Pecksniffiana" group, a dandy comments on the insignificance of contemporary events in contrast to the higher aesthetic matters with which he is concerned--rearranging and tinting a cat, awnings, and celestial bodies:

> I love to sit and read the Telegraph,
> That vast confect of telegrams,
> And to find how much that really matters
> Does not really matter
> At all.

These lines by Stevens, of course, resemble Merrill's exchange with Marianne Moore concerning newspapers and egret and bird-of-paradise feathers. Indeed, in interview after interview, Merrill sees himself as the heir apparent to

Stevens as the champion of poetry against the onslaught of political purpose. In a 1967 interview with Donald Sheehan, he notes that

> We all have our limits. I draw the line at politics or hippies. I'd rather present the world through, say, a character's intelligence or lack of it than through any sort of sociological prism. It's perhaps why I side with Stevens over Eliot. (32)

In the same interview, Merrill suggests that "Stevens seems much more a poet [than Eliot], that is to say, a nonhistorian" and adds, "I'm an enemy of history, by the way" (26). In the 1982 interview with J.D. McClatchy, Merrill records his reaction to the political poetry of poets like Yeats, Auden, and Lowell: "The lobbies? The candidates' rhetoric--our 'commitments abroad'? The Shah as Helen of Troy launching a thousand missile carriers? One whiff of all that, and I turn purple and start kicking my cradle" (71).

Not only does Merrill unequivocally distinguish the poet or "eater of time" in an A.D. Hope poem from the "anus of mind, the historian" ("An Interview with Donald Sheehan" 26), he also goes so far as to claim that political verse cannot be considered true poetry: "These immensely real concerns do not produce <u>poetry</u>" ("An Interview with John Boatwright" 38). In one interview he argues that political poems too soon sound "grumpy or dated" ("An Interview with

J.D. McClatchy" 72), while in another he claims that when political writing's "tide of feeling goes out, the language begins to stink" ("An Interview with John Boatwright" 38).[3] As Helen Vendler observes, it is this anti-political stand, among other things, that causes Merrill's poetry (and Stevens's, as well) to disappoint and alienate the reader who expects a "message" in poetry:

> Like Proust and Nabokov, two other sensibilities more attached to the Beautiful than to the Scientific, the Philosophical, the Ethical, or the Ideological, Merrill avoids being polemical or committed, in the ordinary sense of those words. By taking conversation--from lovers' exchanges of vows to friends' sentences in intimacy--as the highest form of human expression (in contrast to the rhapsode's hymns, the orator's harangues, or the initiate's hermetic colloquies with the divine) Merrill becomes susceptible to charges of frivolity, at least from readers with a taste only for the solemn. ("James Merrill" 217)

And, she might have added, readers with a taste only for the utilitarian.

In addition to preferring the practical, the American reader, even the "serious" one, as Judith Moffett points, out, expects a poem to make sense: "A surface level of meaning at least should be accessible to the serious reader. . . . The desire for connection, the wish to understand what one is reading, is simply human" ("Sound Without Sense" 305-06). It is in the more-or-less consistent failure to satisfy this desire that the two dandies Stevens and Merrill

"DETER" all but a few elite readers. In his Adaqia, Stevens asserts that "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (OP 177). And in "Man Carrying Thing," Stevens makes his famous claim (often quoted by Merrill) that "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (CP 350). In one of many interviews dealing with the subject of obscurity, Merrill recalls his excitement over Hart Crane's

> slightly provincial version of the things I was already liking in French poetry--I mean the deliberate obscurity of someone like Mallarmé--though I think I preferred Mallarmé to Crane. They're miles apart, of course, but I like that clotted poetry and I occasionally still work in trying to produce a poem that resists the intelligence almost successfully, as Stevens said. ("James Merrill at Home" 23)

Furthermore, to Mirabell's command to "STIR THE THINKERS & DETER THE REST," JM responds,

> Oh. Then you mean language
> Of such depth, shimmer and force that, granted
> I could sustain it, it would be above
> Everybody's--even the thinker's head. (CLS 118)

Both Stevens and Merrill deliberately obscure the meaning of their poems through the use of foreign phrases and allusions. Stevens regularly uses foreign expressions in his poems, often with the effect of creating a formidable barrier for the prospective reader. Certainly, poem titles consisting entirely of foreign words--"Homunculus et La Belle Étoile," "Celle Qui Fût Héaulmiette," "Puella

Parvula," "Lebensweisheitspielerei," and "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges" (which by its sheer length promises and then denies so much meaning to the reader not fluent in French)--will discourage the reader in search of meaning. In the same way, the reader expecting "a surface level of meaning at least" but lacking fluency in Latin or French will most likely turn away from poems like "Study of Two Pears" (which begins with "Opusculum paedagogum:") or "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" upon noticing the recurrent, seemingly oracular French phrases--"C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme," "C'était mon frère du ciel, ma vie, mon or," "Oh! C'était mon extase et mon amour," "C'était ma foi, la nonchalance divine," and "C'était mon esprit bâtard, l"ignominie" (CP 99-102).

Merrill's more sparing use of foreign phrases consists of only a few titles ("Fleche d'Or," for example, and "RIGOR VITAE" as the title of a section of "The Thousand and Second Night") and a number of French and Greek epigrams. In fact, in "A Fever," Merrill seems to parody what might have been an inclination he resists in his poetry: to impress or intimidate by using a foreign language. In the poem, the speaker responds to his painted female companion's lament--"I cannot vouch for others here on earth. / Le coeur n'est point, Seigneur, un don qui se redonne"--with the sarcastic

"Ah, so we know French? I congratulate" (FS 38).

While allusion seems to figure strongly in the potential obscuring of meaning by both poets, Merrill seems to rely more heavily upon it than Stevens, for whom the frequency of allusion seems minor, given his extensive cultural knowledge. While Merrill's earliest poems include only a sprinkling of brief references to artists (Stendhal, Handel, Schumann), his poems beginning with Water Street (1962) more frequently include allusions, often multiple ones within a single poem. By the time he alludes to Eliot's "The Hollow Men," Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," Valéry, Scheherazade, and Stephen Spender in "The Thousand and Second Night" in Nights and Days (1967), it is evident that Merrill, as he remarks of Richard Kenney, "is not out to disguise the liveliness of his mind or the breadth of his learning." In fact, in his foreword to Kenney's Evolution of the Flightless Bird (1984), he defends the use of opaque allusion:

> Why is our poetry so wary of things "the reader" might not know? Surely such delicacy is an earmark of discourse between strangers. Among intimates--as reader and poet, however reluctantly, are--the opaque allusion is forgivable and besides, can always be looked up sooner or later. Of course we cringe when yesterday's household word needs a footnote. (The Esso cans in Elizabeth Bishop's "Filling Station" would be a case in point.) But does it solve the problem to forgo, just because they fade, those goblin gifts of circumstance, and sing purely of tree and stone, body

and breath? (ix)

In the same way, Merrill admits in a 1983 interview that he gets "rather fed up with that diet of nuts and wheat germ" provided by most contemporary poems written with no expectation of learning on the part of its reader ("An Interview with John Bornhauser" 56). Admittedly, most of Merrill's allusions do not directly obscure the poem's meaning. Instead, they help develop the poet's or speaker's ethos--that is, his status as a member of Baudelaire's "new kind of aristocracy . . . based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties." At the same time, these allusions reward the select reader who is able to "get" the allusion to Puccini's "One Fine Day" or to Edgar impersonating "Poor Tom" in King Lear while excluding (if not completely confusing) those readers who are left scratching their heads at the name Satie.[4]

Stevens, on the other hand, seems to display the same self-conscious irony (associated with the dandy) in his use of allusion that Merrill displays in his playful use of foreign phrases. Stevens, for the most part, sprinkles an isolated reference to a literary or historical figure (Aquinas, John Constable, Penelope, Ariel) in his poetry. More complex allusions--the central use of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Apochryphal treatment of

Susanna and the elders in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and the string of allusions in "Description Without Place" ("Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne / Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon, / To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake")--are the exception for Stevens.[5] As a matter of fact, for every serious allusion he includes, Stevens introduces an apparent mock-allusion. For these mock-allusions, he alludes either to invented figures (normally with esoteric-sounding names) as apparent allusions (many of whom serve as masks for Stevens himself) or to real figures so obscure that almost no one would recognize them--José Rodríguez-Feo, Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, John Zeller, Nanzia Nunzio, Professor Eucalyptus, and Madame La Fleurie--in order to parody the kind of remote allusions he uses to impress and intimidate the average reader.

While Merrill and Stevens are sometimes ironic in their uses of foreign phrases and allusions as methods for intimidating readers looking for direct literal meaning, both poets consistently and deliberately create mysteries or riddles to obscure the meaning of their poems. They create these mysteries by withholding meaning and by developing complex word-play.

In many of his poems, as Mervyn Nicholson observes, Stevens proves himself "a compulsive riddle-maker, riddle-

thinker" (15). In these poems, Stevens provides a series of visual images as "clues" to solving the unstated riddle: "What is the subject of the poem?" or "What has the following qualities?" In "Someone Puts Together a Pineapple," Stevens actually presents these clues as a numbered list:

> 1. The hut stands by itself beneath the palms.
> 2. Out of their bottle the green genii come.
> 3. A vine has climbed the other side of the wall. (NA 86)

While Stevens presents the answer to the "riddle" of "Someone Puts Together a Pineapple" in the title itself, in most of these poems, Stevens leaves the solution of the riddle to the elite reader--that astute, persevering reader, for whom "'getting' the riddle (like 'getting' a joke) is equivalent to passing a test of appreciation" (Nicholson 15). And, as Nicholson notes, in most of Stevens's riddle poems--such as "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons," "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," "Gubbinal," "Of Mere Being," and "Oak Leaves Are Hands"--"difficulty seems to be an essential ingredient" (15). In fact, when Stevens provides the answer to a riddle as he does in the final line--"It is the moon" (SP 260)--of "From a Junk" (a poem Stevens himself did not find successful enough to include in his Collected Poems), his typical, elite reader almost feels offended that

anyone bothering to read the poem is able to penetrate its mystery.

As Judith Moffett points out, Merrill cultivated "willful obscurity" as he developed as a poet, moving from the ornate "impregnable surfaces" of his first two volumes and the more accessible poems of Water Street (1962) and Nights and Days (1967) to the deliberate concealment of meaning in The Fire Screen (1969) and Braving the Elements (1972), in which a portion of the poems are characterized by "dim labyrinthine interiors which appear to lead nowhere and within which one cannot hope to meet the Minotaur" ("Sound Without Sense" 295).[6] While Moffett concedes that some of the poems in these two volumes reflect an "unprecedented openness" and that most sections of the Trilogy consist of "plain speaking," Mary McCarthy's reaction to certain poems in Late Settings (1985) suggests that Merrill persists in a willful obscuring of meaning "so extreme as to reveal an apparent indifference to all but the perfect reader" (Moffett, "Sound Without Sense" 301). In her letter to Merrill published in For James Merrill: A Birthday Tribute on the occasion of the poet's sixtieth birthday, McCarthy complains that some of the late poems include "puzzles, vast mysteries"; become "opaque, maddeningly so"; and blind "me from time to time as happens during a migraine, when I see

great holes in things." McCarthy playfully concludes, "So I'd be grateful for an assist once in a while--a friendly Seeing Eye Dog to lead me!"

Obviously, such deliberate refusals by Stevens and Merrill to provide meaning serve to alienate the general American reading public--a reaction that Baird, in reference to Stevens, attempts to explain: "Poetry [in America] must be an instrument of immediate communication in the national life. The inference is that the poet of the ambiguous has denied his humanity" (321). Of course, Merrill's denying of his humanity (disavowing any values shared with the "sea of democracy") goes beyond Stevens's to the point of sometimes being "above / Everybody's--even the thinker's head." "Merrill's snubs" cause him "to break faith with the reader"--not just the general reader but even the loyal reader such as Moffett, who begins to "feel abandoned" (304-06). As Merrill indicates to McClatchy, his obscurity is a conscious attempt not only to exclude the majority of readers but also to challenge even his smallest circle of readers out of their complacency:

> Nine times out of ten, of course, I use those misgivings [in friends' reactions to his work] to confirm what I've done. So-and-so thinks a passage is obscure? Good--it stays obscure: that'll teach him! No wonder the most loyal reader gets lost along the way--feels disappointed by a turn you've taken, and simply gives up. (77)

It is toward that singular reader who refuses to give up--that "single silver carp"--that the poetry of Stevens and especially Merrill is aimed. As Merrill explains to McClatchy, "Oh, over the years I've collected a little anthology of ideal readers. . . . Living, dead, imaginary. Is this diction crisp enough for Herbert? Is this stanza's tessitura too high for Maggie Teyte?" (77)

In directing their poetry toward those ideal readers, both Stevens and Merrill reveal the dandy's refined taste for surface elegance, color, and formality--his unique approach to "beautiful things": "he will hold them, as it were in the palm of his hand, and by so doing, add to them a peculiar lustre, an elegance all his own" (D'Aurevilly 18-19). Stevens and especially Merrill in their early poems--like D'Aurevilly's dandy and Merrill's traveller in Japan "holding some inscrutable ornament to the light"--hold their subjects in the palms of their hands with a fastidious eye toward their luster, color, elegance, and form.

Stevens's "Pecksniffiana" and Harmonium poems and Merrill's poems from First Poems and The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace are informed by Baudelaire's dandy's fascination with "landscape, gilding, colours, shimmering stuffs . . . the magic of physical beauty assisted by the

cosmetic art" (8)--that is

> the ardour of a man in love with space, with perspective, with light lying in pools or exploding in bursts, drops or diamonds of it sticking to the rough surfaces of uniforms and court toilettes. (22)

These early poems are filled with the dandy's beautiful things, lacquered and gem-like (emeralds, colored-glass eyes, shards of glass, mirrors), all with "Stevens's occasionally crystal-pure surface," as Riddel calls it ("Contours" 249). In his "Pecksniffiana" poems, Stevens develops a number of crystalline images: "these shining forms like the duskiest glass re- / flecting the piebald of roses" (OP 21), "a room full of lustres," "water-like lacquer" (OP 22), and "This bottle of indigo glass in the grass" (OP 22). The equally opulent images of Harmonium--alabasters (CP 23), "red and gold brocade" (CP 21), "lilies scudding the bright chromes" (CP 17), "gemmy marionette" (CP 36), and "the diamond point, the sapphire points, / The sequins / Of the civil fans" (CP 11)--culminate in the relentless gloss and lacquer of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds." In "Sea Surface," the surface of the sea, undergoing a series of transformations as it reflects clouds ("crystalline pendentives" and "silver petals of white blooms"), is described as imitating "gilt umbrellas" or possessing "sham-like green" on its "malevolent sheen" or

resembling "porcelain chocolate" shaded with "An uncertain green, / Piano polished" and "a sapphire blue" (CP 98-102).

As Moffett points out, Stevens is "the most salient source of the decorative elegance" of Merrill's first volumes of poetry (James Merrill 27). Merrill's early poems, like Stevens's, include what Moffett terms "ubiquitous jewel metaphors, hard surfaces, coolness" (James Merrill 27) and what Keller labels "fountain statuary, elegant gardens, gilt and crystal objects" (190). In "Transfigured Bird," at least one character prefers enameled "Fabergé Easter eggs" to natural, pearl-lined robins' eggs (FN 20). In "The Octopus," Merrill depicts a sea creature "coaxed out by lusters / Extraordinary" and unloosing its diamond-studded tentacles "Till on glass rigid with his own seizure / At length the sucking jewels freeze" (CTYP 3). Tourists on "The Cruise" "fondle" (or hold to the light like D'Aurevilly's dandy) a gift shop's "Monsters in crystal, tame and small, fawning / On lengths of ocean-green brocade" (CTYP 47). Perhaps the opening stanza of Merrill's "In the Hall of Mirrors" epitomizes the dandy's taste for reflection, surface, and "light lying in pools":

> The parquet barely gleams, a lake.
> The windows weaken the dark trees.
> The mirrors to their bosoms take
> Far glints of water, which they freeze
> And wear like necklaces. (CTYP 80)

Through these crystalline, gilded images, Stevens and Merrill communicate, as Keller observes, a "distinctly upper-class sensibility . . . of the wealthy, cultured cosmopolitan"--that is, the sensibility of the dandy (194). But, perhaps more importantly, the cool, hard surfaces of Merrill's and Stevens's early poems (poems in which formality reigns over expressivism) imitate the dandy's determined aloofness or refusal to be moved. Thus, in "Homunculus et la Belle Étoile," Stevens speaks of "Tranquillizing with this jewel / The torments of confusion" (CP 27), and Merrill's "one small rock" in "Stones" "understands / That blind necessity / Neither to suffer, grow nor die" (CTYP 76).

In "On Wallace Stevens' Centenary," Merrill recalls that, in reading "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (the Stevens poem that influenced him most), he first noticed "a world of painterly particulars--interiors, necklaces, elephants in Ceylon" (117)--particulars that reappear in Merrill's use of "cool, vividly colored, exotic" images in his first volumes of poetry (Moffett, James Merrill 22). In preferring these brilliant and artificial objects, Stevens and Merrill reveal what Baudelaire identifies as the dandy's conscious concern for the ideal, a concern that

unconsciously exists in even the most primitive of creatures:

> In their naif adoration of what is brilliant--many-coloured feathers, iridescent fabrics, the incomparable majesty of artificial forms--the baby and the savage bear witness to their disgust of the real, and thus give proof, without knowing it, of the immateriality of their soul. (32)

Among those brilliant painterly particulars in Stevens's and Merrill's poems are what Moffett calls "'artifact' birds (cockatoo, peacock, parrot) made of jewels and feathers" (James Merrill 22). The "artifact" birds in Harmonium, generally described in exotic detail and with the dandy's eye for color--swans "bequeathing . . . white feathers to the moon" (CP 14); peacocks "red in this milky blue" (CP 58); the cockatoo with "bright, green wings" (CP 67); and the "green toucan" and "raspberry tangers" (CP 30) --reappear as the "static emblematic subjects" of Merrill's bird poems in his earliest volumes--"The Black Swan," "The Peacock," "The Pelican," and "The Parrot" (Keller 190).[7] Notably, the "artifact" birds of Stevens's early poems are generally made not of jewels but of Baudelaire's "many-coloured feathers," which they fan for the observer: in "Domination of Black," the colors of the peacock's tail "Were like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind" (CP 8); the "universal cock" in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" spreads

his "blazing tail" (CP 75); and in "Ploughing on Sunday,"

> The white-cock's tail
> Tosses in the wind.
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Glitters in the sun. (CP 20)

Even the most glittering and metallic of Stevens's birds--"The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," which dwells in "gold ether, golden alguazil" with "panache upon panache" and "never ceases, perfect cock, / To flare" (CP 82)--cannot match the artifice of Merrill's birds, bedecked as often in jewels as feathers. In "About the Phoenix," Merrill's "artifact" bird takes the form of "a giant jeweled bird":

> a pendulum of amethysts
> In the shape of a bird, keyed us up for ever fiercer
> Flights between ardor and ashes, back and forth."
> (CTYP 66)

Merrill's most artificial bird makes its appearance in "Transfigured Bird" as his version of Yeats's enamelled nightingale "set upon a golden bough to sing":

> Then from a gold yolk with sharp ruby spurs
> A little rooster flaps gold wings and crows
> --Inside of it a thumbnail engine whirs." (FP 47)

In presenting a world of artifice in which birds have "coppery, keen claws" and "sharp ruby spurs," both Stevens and Merrill, in their early poetry at least, seem to share the belief held by Baudelaire's dandy that "Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. . . . Good is always the product of some art" (32).

Moreover, Fuchs identifies such love of artifice, form, and "gilding, colours, shimmering stuffs," in Stevens's case, with a "longing for dix-huitième elegance . . . a taste probably acquired from Verlaine" (7). This taste is especially evident in the 1923 poem by Stevens, "Mandolin and Liqueurs," in which the speaker demonstrates, according to Milton Bates, a "fastidious sense of composition" (as well as the dandy's characteristic ennui and eye for color) (101):

> La-la! The cat is in the violets
> And the awnings are let down.
> The cat should not be where she is
> And the awnings are too brown,
> Emphatically so.
>
> If awnings were celeste and gay,
> Iris and orange, crimson and green
> Blue and vermilion, purple and white,
> And not this tinsmith's galaxy,
> Things would be different.
>
> The sun is gold, the moon is silver.
> There must be a planet that is copper
> And in whose light the roses
> Would have a most singular appearance,
> Or nearly so. (OP 28-29)

This acute, discriminating taste regarding details is akin to the "eagle eye" for "impeccable toilet" that Baudelaire attributes to Monsieur G:

> If a fashion or the cut of a garment has been slightly modified, if bows and curls have been supplanted by cockades, if bavolets have been enlarged and chignons have dropped a fraction towards the nape of the neck, if waists have been raised and skirts have become

> fuller, be very sure that his eagle eye will already have spotted it from however great a distance. (11)

Another Stevens poem in which the speaker displays a "fastidious sense of composition" (and a concern for any lapse in decorum in the "dress" of the table) is "Floral Decorations for Bananas"--a poem in which, according to Fuchs, "Again, a fanciful dandiacal figure projects an identity between taste and the dix-huitième" (9):

> Well, nuncle, this plainly won't do.
> These insolent, linear peels
> And sullen, hurricane shapes
> Won't do with your eglantine.
> They require something serpentine.
> Blunt yellow in such a room!
>
> You should have had plums tonight,
> In an eighteenth-century dish,
> For the women of primrose and purl,
> Each one in her decent curl.
> Good God! What a precious light!
>
> But bananas hacked and hunched . .
> The table was set by an ogre,
> His eye on an outdoor gloom
> And a stiff and noxious place. (CP 53-54)

While the Merrill of the early poems is not as concerned with breaches of decorum as Stevens's dandiacal speakers, a number of his poems (especially in First Poems) reflect an eighteenth-century concern for composition and form. The speaker of "Conservatory," for example, though primarily concerned with the need to express the mutability of shelters, roses, and bulls' capes, cannot resist giving

advice about the "aesthetics" of arranging the roses for destruction:

> But, back to roses, if anything will save them,
> Pleading rosefever, keep them in a wide bowl
> Where wind through the wide window may unleaf them.
> (FP 24)

In "Figures in a Legendary Glade," the speaker, in noting the glade's recomposing itself after "the picnic-basket lovers" have disrupted its form ("Then for three hours each weed and tendril sprang / With a tingling back to its proper bend in the sun"), reveals himself to be Baudelaire's dandy "in love with space, with perspective, with light lying in pools or exploding in burst, drops or diamonds":

> Where the grapes' wet skeleton fell, swift points of light [t/o]
> Clustered like maggots or the remembrance of green fruit [t/o]
> Darklier ribbed now where no sun may ripen. (FP 43)

Merrill's early "fastidious sense of composition" also surfaces in "Four Little Poems," when he describes a young man "waiting in the middle / Of many things for his painter" and composing his own dix-huitième portrait:

> One arm perhaps on the sideboard where would be shown
> A lute, cold meats, a snifter somewhat full
> Like a crystal ball predicting what's unknown;
> Ingots of nougat, thumb-sized cumquats sodden
> With juice not quite their own.
>
> The other arm akimbo; eyes askance
> Follow the crook of his elbow pointing out
> The window, where might be a bird, for instance,
> A blue tree, or a woman picking her way

Through what he sees as distance. (FP 36)

Having begun "as a Fabergé among the post-Modern American poets," as Yenser calls him (39), Merrill eventually comes to realize that he must move beyond the crystalline surfaces, exotic emblems, and dix-huitième formality of his early poems, just as Stevens seems to do by the time he writes the poems of Parts of a World (1942). In Stevens's "Anything Is Beautiful If You Say It Is," the elegant world admired by his early dandies does not seem so appealing:

> The bee may have all sweet
> For his honey-hive-o,
> From the eglantine-o.
>
> And the chandeliers are neat . . .
> But their mignon, marblish glare!
> We are cold, the parrots cried,
> In a place so debonair. (CP 211)

And Stevens's Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, who finally "approached the real," announces, "I fear that elegance / Must struggle like the rest" (CP 248-49).

Similarly, certain poems in The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace suggest that Merrill has decided, as Yenser claims, that "the surface needs to be broken, it appears, the eloquence called into question" (62). Thus, Merrill admits in "About the Phoenix," "But in the end one tires of the high-flown" (CTYP 66). And in "Mirror," Merrill's

mirror with "gilded / Frame"--which "evokes the kind of poetry Merrill has sometimes been charged with writing" (Yenser 63)--complains that

> as if a fish
> Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,
> I have lapses. (CTYP 36-37)

Just as "in the solitary hall / The lobes crystal gather dust" (CTYP 82), so Merrill abandons the crystalline world of his first poems in favor of the more accessible and relaxed poems of Water Street.

While Merrill and Stevens grow beyond the gilded mirrors, the exotic birds with colored feathers, and the dix-huitième taste, they do not lose the dandy's desire for detachment and composure. The guide hisses in the tourists' ears in Merrill's hall of mirrors,

> 'Your seeresses of sheer space
> In argent colloquy despise
> Anything personal or commonplace.' (CTYP 80)

And, like the seeress mirrors, Merrill and Stevens need protection from the personal and the commonplace even when they forsake mirror-like images. Driven by a dandyism that Michael Benamou defines as a "gesture of self-protection" ("Wallace Stevens" 106), the two poets, like the mirrors, when "Looked at . . . close their eyes." When they leave behind their "universe of colors and shapes as imaginative safe-guards," as Benamou calls it ("Wallace Stevens" 106),

they must for self-protection resort to manners and a sense of propriety--a feature of Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly's dandy that exists in even the early poems of Stevens and Merrill.

According to D'Aurevilly, "Brummel was a prince of his time" (37) by virtue of his manners. Baudelaire insists that in creating his "personal originality" the dandy be "bounded only by the limits of propriety" (27). Stevens endows the characters who inhabit the poems of Harmonium with a heightened concern for courtesy or civility. Thus, "The Ordinary Women" are adorned with "The diamond point, the sapphire point, / The sequins / Of the civil fan" (CP 11); and the first girl in "The Plot Against the Giant" plans to "check" the giant who rudely "comes maundering, / Whetting his hacker" with "the civilest odors / Out of geraniums and unsmelled flowers" (CP 6). Likewise, "The Weeping Burgher" begins his polite entreaty with "Permit that" and is appalled at "ill humors" masquerading as "white girls" (CP 61). In the same way, in "Last Looks at the Lilacs," the mannerly speaker is shocked when a suitor, in contrast to the well-booted Orion, scratches his buttocks and uses "scurrilous words" (CP 48-49).

Even as early as the poems of Harmonium, however, Stevens celebrates rather than condemns bawdiness and lapses

in decorum. In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," for example, the bawdiness of the unconverted is not only tolerated but even celebrated:

> Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
> Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
> Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
> Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
> May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
> A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres. (CP 59)

In "Life Is Motion," "Bonnie and Josie, / Dressed in calico," disregard prescribed wedding manners, crying, "Ohoyaho, / Ohoo" (CP 83), while the speaker in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" urges that funeral decorum be violated by decreeing that "the wenches dawdle" and the dead woman's "horny feet protrude" (CP 64).

Merrill, however, (again proving the truer dandy) does not in the course of his career abandon manners, which for him "are the touch of nature, an artifice in the very bloodstream" ("An Interview with Donald Sheehan" 33), a fact that he attributes to his upbringing:

> No matter how hard you try to transcend something like that [class origins], if you were taught that it's not polite to raise your voice, it's very hard to write like Whitman. These manners have turned into aesthetics for many writers. (Condon 17)

In "The Cruise," Merrill begins to articulate his own aesthetic based on manners by explaining the function of art in "civilizing into cunning shapes" "our hungers" ("our

monsters wrapped in silk") (CP 47). When Merrill notes, in describing "The Pelican," that

> Always the postures foolish yet severe
> Of Empire furniture
> Assist him in a courtesy nowadays
> Only among artists fashionable, (FP 52)

he echoes D'Aurevilly's description of the dandies who "live impaled upon the idea of dignity, which slightly interferes with the ease of their movements and makes them hold themselves too stiffly, however supple they may be" (56).

For Merrill, the manners of his poems often provide a "dazzling surface," as Robert von Hallberg suggests, below which "lies the alternative to civilized manners: violence" (96). Often, as Yenser points out in the case of "A Narrow Escape," an opposition develops "between a suave surface and dark impulses" (59). Just as the speaker in "After the Fire" concludes about the past that "Some of those embers can't be handled yet," so the exchange of cordialities and French affectations between the speaker and the Greek Panayioti serve as a fire screen against the heat of violence only hinted at by the speaker's memory of "thumb-sized garnet / Bruises he [Panayioti] clasped round Aleko's throat" (BE 6). In "Dream (Escape from the Sculpture Museum) and Waking," the speaker dreams of escaping marble courtesy into violence only to have his sense of propriety

return:

> look, gesture, flowing raiment
> Done in porphyry or jasper whence
> One white arm, for a long moment
> Raised to strike, relents
> (Not to spoil one's enjoyment)
> Back into stone. (CTYP 72)

Stevens's and Merrill's use of what Keller calls "mannerly restraint" extends beyond individual characters' courtesy to each writer's poetics--in particular, their unwillingness to reveal personal moods and emotions in their poetry.[8] Merrill's pre-Water Street poetry resembles Stevens's poetry in its self-effacement. However, even though Merrill's sense of decorum prevents his ever becoming confessional in his poetry, he is finally more personal, more autobiographical than Stevens. In fact, part of Merrill's appeal lies in his treatment of thinly veiled scenes and relationships from his own life, while Stevens consistently conceals his life behind the series of masks that he develops in his poems.

While Stevens does not go as far as the dandy Constantin Guy, who refused to sign his name to his drawings and insisted that Baudelaire discuss his works "as if they were those of an anonymous artist" (5), he does write in his journal after leaving Harvard for New York, "Personality must be kept secret before the world" (SP 82).

Furthermore, he proclaims in his Adagia that "Poetry is not personal" (OP 159) and observes in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" that, in performing its function, art "a fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396).[9] Thus, in "O Florida, Venereal Soil," the speaker implores the "scholar of darkness" that comes "tormenting, / Insatiable" to efface itself into art:

> Donna, donna, dark,
> Stooping in indigo gown
> And cloudy constellations,
> Conceal yourself or disclose
> Fewest things to the lover--
> A hand that bears a thick-leaved fruit,
> A pungent bloom against your shade. (CP 48)

And, just as he uses his "actor's trunk" of characters to efface himself in his poems, so Stevens notes in "Romance for a Demoiselle Lying in the Grass" that

> The monotony
> Is like your port which conceals
> All your characters
> And their desires. (OP 23)

Even in "The Comedian as the Letter C," Stevens's apparently most autobiographical poem, the speaker (after asking "what can all this matter") ends abruptly with the advice "So may the relation of each man be clipped" (CP 46)--that is, may self-revelation in poetry be cut short (or avoided entirely) out of a sense of futility as well as courtesy to the reader.

In his early poems, Merrill is also conscious of ensuring that his personality be "effaced by gemlike moods" (ND 6) although, as Moffett suggests, this reticence may be as much the result of his being "handicapped by fear of emotional expressiveness" as it is the result of his concern for an aesthetic based upon an awareness that "it's not polite to raise your voice" (James Merrill 35).[10] Like his pelican caught snatching bait from fishermen, Merrill in his early poems seems "Hurt and embarrassed" to be found "A creature of desire / As crude as theirs" (FP 53). Beginning with the poems of Water Street, however, Merrill begins to feel the need to move away from the almost total self-effacement of his earlier poems, a phenomenon described by Keller:

> Because of his dissatisfaction with his poems in which figures are frozen and elegant gestures replace feelings, Merrill as he matured through the next few volumes strove for an art less evasive about its autobiographical emotional roots, less cool in manner and matter. (191)[11]

Thus, in "The Thousand and Second Night," when the speaker describes a treatment for his half-paralyzed face, he seems to present Merrill's retrospective look at the impersonal (and bejeweling) tendency of his first poetry:

> After the hour of damp heat
> One is addressed in gibberish, shown
> Into a marble cell and thrown
> On marble, there to be scrubbed clean,

> Is wrapped in towels and a sheet
> And led upstairs to this lean tomb
> Made all of panes (red, amber, green)
> With a glass star hung in the gloom,
>
> Here sits effaced by gemlike moods,
> Tastes neither coffee nor loudoum,
> And to the attendant who intrudes
>
> (Or archeologist or thief)
> Gravely uptilts one's mask of platinum
> Still dripping, in a sign of life. (ND 5-6)

"I want my face back," pleads the speaker, as both he and the poet find the stained-glass tomb and platinum mask unacceptable and deathlike (Note the punning use of "gravely"). Even when Merrill moves to the more autobiographical poetry of his middle volumes, he does not abandon his concern for manners. D'Aurevilly claims that "Every Dandy dares, but he dares with tact, and stops in time at the famous point of intersection of Pascal, between originality and eccentricity" (51). Thus, when Merrill dares to approach sensitive autobiographical subjects in his poetry, he is able to maintain the dandy's sense of propriety by using what James Axley calls "calculated periphrasis":

> What he reveals, he often reveals more by silence than by statement. A favorite technique he uses is to simply stop short of complete revelation while changing the subject. (vii)

In "Days of 1964," for example, Merrill interrupts himself

when surrealistic images prompted by an outdoor market begin to become images of homoerotic self-loathing:

> Vegetables, chickens, pottery kept materializing
> Through a dream-press of hagglers each at heart
> Leery lest he be taken, plucked,
> The bird, the flower of that November mildness,
> Self lost up soft clay paths, or found, foothold,
> Where the bud throbs awake
> The better to be nipped, self on its knees in mud--
> Here I stopped cold, for both our sakes. (ND 55)

Similarly, in "Part of the Vigil," Merrill ends his account of the speaker's voyage into a lover's heart in search of his inscribed likeness with a polite reticence:

> Beneath, great valves were gasping, wheezing. What
> If all you knew of me were down there, leaking
> Fluids at once abubble, pierced by fierce
> Impulsions of unfeeling, life, limb turning
> To burning cubes, to devil's dice, to ash--
> What if my effigy were down there? What,
> Dear god, if it were not!
> If it were nowhere in your heart!
> Here I turned back. Of the rest I do not speak. (FS 24)

Another example of Merrill's use of calculated periphrasis, though this time regarding metaphysical as well as personal matters, occurs in The Book of Ephraim when JM wonders whether reputations (concerning power and sexuality) can be deflated as well as raised in the "higher stages" after death: "I wonder here, but Ephraim changed the subject / As it was in his tactful power to do" (CLS 54). As von Hallberg claims, "Quiet evasions like Ephraim's, like Merrill's, testify to a delicate system of human meaning

whose categories, felt by people of understanding, might be compromised by express formulation" (95). In remaining committed to the dandy's insistence upon propriety, Merrill creates these evasions with confidence that he is writing for a reader whose "own experience would remind him that some things can go without saying" ("On 'Yáninna'" 23), a reader belonging to that "class of people for whom," according to von Hallberg, "silence is a badge of discretion and a measure of controlled power, the power to ignore" (95).

Finally, in addition to using the dandy's elegant taste and sense of propriety, Stevens and Merrill develop the dandy's haughty wit as a means of cultivating a select circle of readers for their poetry. While the dandy, for Baudelaire, is characterized by his interest in love and wit ("le même amour et le même esprit") (25), D'Aurevilly suggests that Prince de Kaunitz qualifies as a dandy on the basis of (among other things) "his majestic frivolity" (32). This frivolity seems inescapable for Stevens whose earliest poems are found by critics to have already the hallmarks of the dandy's "witty conceits" and "exaggerated playfulness" (Litz 86; Fuchs 11). Merrill, after leaving behind "the utter humorlessness of youth taking itself seriously" in his First Poems (Moffett, James Merrill 27), creates poems

characterized by what McClatchy calls an "enharmonic wit" (introduction Recitative xi) and Vendler dubs an "ironic and wayward humor" ("James Merrill" 205). For both Stevens and Merrill, the dandy's wit (like their polite reticence about biographical matters) works to protect the poet and his readers from the pain of personal experience, a point Merrill makes in his early "The Pelican":

> Like great men he already is in part
> A myth or work of art
> Sparing the watcher as it spares itself
> By an apt gaiety, gay ineptitude. (FP 52)

And for both poets, this protective gaiety, even when exaggerated, is sophisticated enough to elude all but the most elite of readers.

Stevens and Merrill appeal to their sophisticated circles of readers by developing what Litz calls (in the case of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle") the "dandy's witty conceits" (86). In an early Stevens poem "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab," the poet's description of "Victoria Clementina, negress" (who "Took seven white dogs / To ride in a cab" when she might have been "Thridding the squawkiest jungle / In a golden sedan"), is, according to Fuchs, "informed by a tone of exaggerated playfulness not unlike that of the nineteenth-century French dandy who walked a lobster on a leash" (11). In a similar way, in Stevens's

early "Stanzas for 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," "alliteration is used for comic, dandified effect" with phrases such as "green bosoms and black legs, beguile" and "Poets of pimpernal, unlucky pimps / Of pomp" (OP 19) creating "a perpetual spirit of holiday" (Fuchs 15).

Even as early as his First Poems, generally characterized by "utter humorlessness," Merrill finds occasion for the dandy's "witty conceits," perfecting, for example, what Yenser calls the "playful chiasmus" of "The Pelican" (38)--"By an apt gaiety, gay ineptitude" (FP 52)--a "STYLISH HIJINK" that Merrill returns to in a much later poem "Yánnina":

> Weeks later, in their study gone opague,
> They are relit. See through me. See me through. (DC 29)

In the poem "After the Fire," Merrill, in describing Panayioti's affected speech, playfully creates a zeugma (based on a pun), noting that the Greek "rolls his eyes and r's" (BE 6).

Most of Stevens's and Merrill's witty conceits involve word play, and, in fact, it is in their use of puns that the wit of Stevens and Merrill has marked similarities. Both Stevens and Merrill seem to have encountered puns and the richness of language early in their poetic lives. As a Harvard student, Stevens could scarcely avoid noticing his

father's word play in a letter of 21 May 1899, in which his father (as Merrill says of Ponge) "dines upon the etymological root, seasoning it with fantastic gaiety and invention" ("Object Lesson" 112):

> Dear Wallace-- Just what the election to the Signet signifies I have no sign. It is significant that your letter is a signal to sign another check that you may sigh no more. I suppose you thus win the privilege to wear a seal ring or a badge with a picture of a Cygnet on it to distinguish you from commoner geese, or it may be you can consign all studies designed to cause resignation, to some assigned port where they will trouble you no more.
>
> You will know more about it when you have ridden the goat of initiation, and kneaded the dough enclosed. (L 26, emphases in original)

Merrill remembers that at the same time that he was first exploring foreign languages as alternative ways of saying things, he also "was discovering how the everyday sounds of English could mislead you by having more than one meaning" ("Acoustical Chambers" 4). Of course, as Merrill later points out in "Object Lessons" (a 1972 review of Ponge's poetry), despite the "no little transactional power" of the pun in overcoming "the holy poverty of some secondhand diction," it is generally considered "a most suspect device" and "the lowest form of humor" comparable to "slipping a hand up the hostess's dress" (111-12).

Despite the pun's lowly status, both Stevens and Merrill choose to "dine upon the etymological root" and

persist in seeing (as Stevens suggests of major man in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction") "every latent double in the word" (CP 387). The two poets cannot resist what Keller calls language's "dual power of literal and figurative . . . the pull of metaphor and symbol" (228)--a power that Merrill describes (and succumbs to in his concluding pun on "cheek") in "To a Butterfly":

> Goodness, how tired one grows
> Just looking through a prism:
> Allegory, symbolism.
> I've tried, Lord knows,
>
> To keep from seeing double,
> Blushed for whenever I did,
> Prayed like a boy my cheek be hid
> By manly stubble. (WS 43)

Stevens's use of the "dandy's usual wit and word play," as Litz calls it (86), is evident throughout poems such as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," which is filled with puns: "a man of fortune greeting heirs," "An apple serves as well as any skull / To be the book in which to read a round," "I quiz all sounds . . . For the music and manner of the paladins / To make oblation fit," and "That fluttering things have so distinct a shade" (my emphases) (CP 13-18). Stevens develops a typically festive play on words based on the subtle repetition of sound--"The conch / Of loyal conjuration trumped" (CP 102)--as the imagination triumphs in the final section of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," a poem

Fuchs terms "a dandy's tour de force" in which even the jokes "should be understood as an indispensable part of the dandy's holiday" (14). Similarly, Merrill, in ending "Syrinx," displays the dandy's wit and word play by creating, as Vendler suggests, "punning names and formation of these yearning, despairing winds" that "Herbert would recognize" ("James Merrill" 210):

> Or stop the four winds racing overhead
>
> Nought
> Waste East
> Sought
>
> (BE 73).

Not only are Merrill's puns more pervasive than Stevens's (with three of four puns frequently appearing in a single line), but often his extended use of puns throughout entire poems--for example, "To My Greek" (in which "Greek," "foot," and "mouth" refer simultaneously to language and lover) and "Losing the Marbles" (in which "marbles" refers to a child's toy, the Elgin marbles, and the mind)--approximates a metaphysical conceit. In such poems, as Yenser notes of "Lost in Translation," each line "tugs in Merrillean fashion in two directions" (15).

Brummel, according to D'Aurevilly, used his celebrated wit as "a shield with a javelin in the centre, that turned defence into aggression" (55). In the same way, Stevens and

Merrill use word play and other witty conceits for two purposes: for ridicule or satire and for self-irony. As the speaker in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" explains,

> ". . . . There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
> Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
> And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
> Or was it that I mocked myself alone? (CP 13)

This double-edged function of "the clashed edges of two words that kill"--the dandy's wit--may be attributed to the ambivalent role of the poet in America: "The checkered career of the imagination in America," according to Fuchs, "has forced Stevens into half-ironic, half-scornful guises like the dandy" (16). In Stevens's case, the dandy's tendency toward scorn (as well as Stevens's "propensity for the exquisite") results in "some of the gaudiest insults on record" (Fuchs 10). "This yokel comes maundering, / Whetting his hacker," the first girl ridicules, in "The Plot Against the Giant" (CP 6). Mon Oncle scornfully addresses his companion as "Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds, / O Sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon" (CP 13). In "O Florida, Venereal Soil," the speaker--like Beau Brummel whose "witticisms crucified" even the Prince of Wales (D'Aurevilly 56)--scorns "the dreadful sundry of this world,":

> The Cuban, Polodowsky,
> The Mexican women,

> The negro undertaker
> Killing the time between corpses
> Fishing for crayfish . . .
> Virgin of boorish births. (CP 47)

In "Floral Decorations for Bananas," the speaker ridicules a world in which the table is set by a tasteless ogre:

> Pile the bananas on planks.
> The women will be all shanks
> And bangles and slatted eyes. (CP 54)

In the same way, Merrill comically deflates a number of characters in his poems. In "The Dunes," for example, his line "A flowered compact, lying too deep for tears" (CTYP 34)--an ironic allusion to "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" ("To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears")--directs scorn equally toward Wordsworth and the owner of the compact. Similarly, Merrill in "Up and Down" creates the "social comedy of the obsequious bank attendant" (Vendler, "James Merrill" 208), who "bends his baldness to consult, / Brings a tin box painted mud-brown, withdraws" (BE 56). In "To My Greek," Merrill treats his lover Strato with "tenderness and ridicule" (Vendler, "James Merrill" 208):

> Since daybreak you've been whistling till I wince.
> Take the wheel. You're still a fair chauffeur.
> . . . . . .
> Evenings, you'd wake
>
> And stagger forth to find us talking. Not
> Still about poetry! Alas . . . (BE 65)

Perhaps Merrill's greatest scorn in Braving the Elements (possibly his wittiest volume) is reserved for Panayioti of "After the Fire" (the son of Kleo from "Days of 1964"), who in early years "cruised the Naval Hospital, / Slim then, with teased hair," and now greets the speaker with "anaconda arms":

> Huge, powerful, bland, he rolls his eyes and r's.
> Glints of copper wreathe his porcelain brow
> Like the old-time fuses here, that blow so readily.
> I seem to know that crimson robe,
> And on his big fat feet - my slippers, ruined.
> Still, not to complicate affairs,
> Remembering also the gift of thumb-sized garnet
> Bruises he clasped round Aleko's throat,
> I beam with gratitude. (BE 6)

Yet, while Merrill develops a deliberate, mock-heroic scorn for Panayioti, a few key similarities between Merrill and Panayioti (beyond just the shared robe and slippers) turn these passages into self-irony as well. As Moffett, indicates,

> To the extent that Merrill has projected onto Panayioti (like himself, a middle-aged homosexual son) qualities of "queer" style he himself finds unappealing, Panayioti can be taken partly as an alter ego. (James Merrill 111)

Thus, Merrill's treatment of Panayioti seems to consist of what he punningly calls in "The Pelican" both "apt gaiety" and "gay ineptitude."

For Stevens, as well as Merrill, as much of the poetry's wit consists of the "gay ineptitude" of self-irony

--what D'Aurevilly calls Brummel's "genius for irony" (55)--as it does scorn or ridicule. The speaker in "The Weeping Burgher," for example, uses the dandy's self-mockery--"I distort the world" and "I come as belle design / Of foppish line"--even as he recognizes the usefulness of his dandiacal irony and excesses as protection against pain:

> The sorry verities!
> Yet in excess, continual,
> There is cure of sorrow. (CP 61)

And, as Bates points out (86), Stevens turns to ironic deflation in "Depression Before Spring" as he undercuts the "metaphoric flight" of dazzling blonde hair and "the spittle of cows / Threading the wind" with a "derisive" "Ho! Ho!" (CP 63). Similarly, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is filled with the dandy's self-conscious deflation of his own excesses. The speaker ridicules his own "trivial trope"--"It [love] comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies." Likewise, his commentary "The fops of fancy in their poems leave / Memorabilia of the mystic spouts" seems an ironic commentary on his preceding lines:

> I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
> For the music and manner of the paladins
> To make oblation fit. Where shall I find
> Bravura adequate to this great hymn? (CP 16)

As Bates suggests, Stevens even employs the dandy's irony in creating some of his "self deprecating titles," such as

"Jasmine's Beautiful Thoughts Underneath the Willow" and "Discourse in a Cantina at Havana" (later renamed "Academic Discourse at Havana") (115).

In his early poem "Mirror," Merrill parodies his early poetry with its elegant surfaces and cold aloofness in describing the gilded mirror, which reflects "the table, its arrangement / Of Bible, fern and Paisley, all past change" while perceiving life outside the window as an artifice of unrelated images:

> You [the window] embrace a whole world without
> once caring [t/o]
> 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. (CTYP 36)

As von Hallberg suggests, this witty portrait becomes an ironic description of Merrill's now-abandoned poetic: "For the mirror, as for a poetic of artfully disposed imagery, slaves are 'red-and-white bandannas,' and a failed romance is a man on horseback and a shut door" (96). In the same way, Merrill, in the first section of The Book of Ephraim, engages in an ironic deflation of the "word painting" of his early poetry:

> Exquisite
> Peek-a-boo plumage, limbs aflush from sheer
> Bombast unfurling through the troposphere

> Whose earthward denizens' implosion startles
> Silly quite a little crowd of mortals
> --My readers, I presumed from where I sat
> In the angelic secretariat. (CLS 4)

In "The Thousand and Second Night," Merrill turns his self-ridicule toward his use of the dandy's detachment and pride:

> I have kept somewhere a page
> Written at sixteen to myself at twice that age,
> Whom I accuse of having become the vain
>
> Flippant unfeeling monster I now am--
> To hear them talk-- (ND 9)

Thus, just as Stevens's characters who are "vain Flippant unfeeling" dandies--Mon Oncle and the esthete of "Floral Decorations for Bananas"--use wit as a javelin as well as a shield against themselves, so Merrill himself (who can present himself as a dandy in his poems when Stevens cannot) ironically deflates the dandiacal characteristics he discovers in himself.

While Merrill demonstrates (and has occasion to satirize) more of these dandiacal characteristics in his manner of living than does Stevens, both poets reveal an unmistakable dandyism in their poems. In developing (although not always to the same degree) a set of shared features in their poems--a repertoire of dandies as characters and personae, the lack of political or historical reference, the abundance of allusions and foreign phrases, the willful obscuring of meaning, and the cultivation of

civility and refined tastes--Stevens and Merrill persist in the dandy's attempt to "STIR THE THINKERS & DETER THE REST."

This desire, as representatives "of human pride drowning in a rising sea of democracy," to escape the "malady of the quotidian" seems even more pronounced in two other features shared by Stevens's and Merrill's poetry--their adaptation of the theme and variation form and their use of metapoetry. Their use of the theme and variation form is roughly analogous to the dandy's love of and dependence on form and artifice to shield himself against painful emotions. Similarly, their metapoetry is related to the dandy's "self-conscious absorption."

## NOTES

[1] In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," however, Stevens seems to make the opposite claim:

> Nothing must stand
>
> Between you and the shape you take
> When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

[2] Stevens's beliefs about the function of art seem to be fluctuating and even contradictory during this time, as another set of comments written in his journal the same day reveals:

> but the real use of their [the stars'] beauty (which is not their excuse) is that it is a service, a food. Beauty is strength. But art--art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, not to perpetuate inspiration or thought, art that is mere art--seems to me to be the most arrant as it is the most inexcusable rubbish. (SP 38)

[3] Merrill (and Stevens) also object to political poetry because, according to Merrill, "Good politics . . . encourage death in one form or another" ("An Interview with J.D. McClatchy" 72) and, as Merrill's poem "Page from the Koran" suggests, political language can become the instrument of that bloodshed:

> By noon, fire from the same blue heavens
> Had half erased Beirut.
> Allah be praised, it said on crude handbills,

> For guns and Nazarenes to shoot.
> "How gladly with proper words," said Wallace Stevens,
> "The soldier dies." Or kills. (LS 26)

[4] In his essay "On Literary Tradition," Merrill confesses a certain amount of embarrassment over the use of overt allusions to other writers and claims that his most successful allusions have been unconscious ones that he has discovered after having written the poem (10).

[5] Stevens's use of a string of allusions in the case of "Description Without Place" seems to be an instance of the use of "fleshed out abstractions with detailed lists of examples"--a stylistic device that Keller discovers in Merrill and claims he borrowed from Auden.

[6] Not surprisingly, then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Merrill remained resolutely impervious to political activism's pressure for more meaning from a poet and for egalitarian inclusion of a larger audience for poetry, in fact, publishing his most obscure poetry.

[7] Colors are not as consistently important in Merrill's poems as they are in Stevens's, with the possible exception of Merrill's poems focusing on glass images in The Black Swan--"From Morning into Morning," "Accumulations of the Sea," "The Green Eye," and "The Cosmological Eye" (later published as "The Blue Eye"). (Also, Merrill seems to have chosen subtle, exotic colors in "dressing" a number of his

poetry volumes: a chocolate and eggplant cover for The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace, cornflower and chartreuse for Water Street, and azure and fuchsia for Braving the Elements.) Stevens's sensitive eye for color apparently developed early, as excerpts from his journal entry of 17 July 1899 reveal:

> This evening walked to turnpike and back. Standing on the bridge saw a fine rainbow: green, blue, yellow and pink: four distinct layers of pink. The sky cleared and was limpid and pure crossed by all the usual light white clouds and larger, more sombre, purple masses fringed with crimson edges. Smoked a pipe on step of mill, then went through garden with Sally in a half enchantment over the flowers. . . . Larkspur is various . . . generally purple, or mixed purple and pink etc. . . . Poppies are exquisite. The one I held in my hand was the color of a princess' cheek; although they are generally a fiercer red or scarlet. . . . Besides these there were day lilies; blue and white; flame-lilies, a very old lily, differing from the tiger lily in not having spots, but being pure orange bursts. . . (L 28)

Stevens's fine eye for "those brightly coloured impressions" that are the province of the dandy, according to Baudelaire (8), is evident throughout his poetry, but especially in the poems of Harmonium, such as "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores," which includes the following passage:

> Then it was that that monstered moth
> Which had lain folded against the blue
> And the colored purple of the lazy sea,
>
> And which had drowsed along the bony shores,
> Shut to the blather that the water made,
> Rose up besprent and sought the flaming red

Dabbled with yellow pollen--red as red (CP 22-23),

Similarly, the following passage from "The Comedian as the Letter C" reflects his apprenticeship in observing the colors of gardens:

> So thick with sides and jagged lops of green,
> So intertwined with serpent-kin encoiled
> Among the purple tufts, the scarlet crowns,
> Scenting the jungle in their refuges,
> So streaked with yellow, blue and green and red
> In beak and bud and fruity gobbet-skins,
> That earth was like a jostling festival
> Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,
> Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth. (CP 32)

[8] Keller attributes Merrill's "sense of decorum" and "mannerly restraint" to the influence of Auden's "good manners and good breeding" (198). While Keller claims (in what first seems to be a paradox) that Merrill's later tendency to make his homosexuality public comes from Auden, she also notes that Merrill's "sense of decorum, like Auden's, prohibits unmediated confession" (198).

[9] Litz argues that Stevens's process of self-effacement goes beyond the composition of individual poems to their arrangement for publication. According to him, Stevens arranged Ideas of Order in much the same way that Yeats arranged The Tower: "poems that reflected his own complex personality at the time were sacrificed in favor of a unified 'personality' for the volume" (178).

[10] Bates explores how Stevens "transcended biography"

by adopting a series of poetic masks (ix). Moffett in James Merrill: An Introduction to the Poetry traces the evolution of Merrill's use of literal and figurative masks to conceal his feelings.

[11] A number of critics insist that Merrill's turning toward a more confessional poetry in Water Street is neither complete nor final. Moffett points out that in Merrill's middle books the poet's voice is "divided thereafter for a time both into unprecedented openness and into an obscurity so extreme as to reveal an apparent indifference to all but the perfect reader" before he returns to a plainness in the Trilogy ("Sound Without Sense" 301). Yenser describes Merrill's rejection of confessional poetry after Water Street, pointing to Merrill's symbolic return to the "lamp of fiction" in "From the Cupola" (140).

# CHAPTER III

## THEME AND VARIATIONS

*Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs form and colour.*[1]

*Baudelaire, Le Peintre de la vie moderne*

*We make, although inside an egg,*
*Variations on the words spread sail.*

*Stevens, "Things of August"*

*It's a form that allows the listener to measure the distance from theme to its late transmutations--as from the Diabelli waltz to Beethoven's concluding minuet.*

*Merrill, interview with author*[2]

One sign of Stevens's and Merrill's shared dandyism is their poetry's frequent use of a form analogous to theme and variation in music--a relatively rare form in poetry. As Calvin Brown in Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts points out, while "repetition with variation is a basic literary device," theme and variation as an independent literary form does not appear until the early nineteenth century (128). Even then, theme and variation remains a problematic form for poetry, according to Brown, who points

to the obstacles the poet must overcome--the difficulties of controlling the lengths of variations, distinguishing variations, and maintaining the reader's interest (131-32). For these reasons, few poetic themes and variations have achieved the success of their musical analogues. Instead, most poets content themselves with merely repeating rather than varying their subject matter, apparently feeling, as Brown suggests,

> that the originality of the attempt (they apparently arrived at it independently for the most part) was sufficient to carry their poems along without any very serious effort to get beyond the bare idea of doing something roughly like the musical form. (132)

For Stevens and Merrill, however, the theme and variation form has proven so flexible and potent that they have returned to it again and again throughout their careers. In fact, one or both of them have excelled in the very techniques that Brown found lacking in 1948 in the poets who were writing themes and variations: the techniques of using the form "to view the subject from a different standpoint, or to adopt a different tone . . . [or to use] different meters, rhyme-schemes, and stanzaic forms for different variations" (131). In finding this success, Stevens and Merrill have proven themselves true dandies, like Baudelaire's Constantin Guy, who "was already being obsessed and possessed by form" (8).

According to William Carlos Williams, Stevens was "a formalist as much as Rimbaud or Baudelaire or Remy de Gourmont were . . . which marks in the beginning (because he never went astray) the modern return to accepted verse forms of the present day" (238). While to Williams, uninclined as he is to traditional verse forms, Stevens seems consistently committed to traditional forms, critics see Stevens's treatment of form as more complex. As Riddel acknowledges, in Stevens's mind "stanzas existed to be dissolved: set forms to remind the poet of the set limits of language" (Clairvoyant Eye 15)--limits that, for Stevens, were meant to be tested and extended. For Baudelaire, the dandy's originality consists of "the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of propriety" (27), and, according to D'Aurevilly, the dandy "while still respecting the conventionalities plays with them" (33). In the same way, even Stevens's early poems, Litz points out, consist of "constant experimental adjustments between traditional form and individual emotion" (69). This interaction becomes even more pronounced in the later poems, according to Riddel:

> the traditional forms and even the language of early Stevens become in the later simply a framework which is the essential form of all acts of the mind, while within the framework, like the bed of a river, there flows the ever-changing, ever-various process of

> reality. The structure of a poem, for Stevens, becomes the action of metaphors. (Clairvoyant Eye 15)

In seeking an appropriate framework for this ever-changing flow, Stevens turned to the "major vehicle" of his imagination--his "flexible tercets"--for his stanzic form (Litz 27). For the structure of his poems, he turned to the theme and variation form.

"Fictionally the child of the 'father of forms'" in The Changing Light at Sandover (Vendler, "James Merrill" 28), Merrill has been even more strictly bound to traditional poetic forms (especially in his early and middle poems) and has experimented with a greater range of stanzaic forms (including the villanelle, Spenserian stanza, terza rima, and Rubaiyat quatrain) than Stevens.[3] Merrill remembers the natural process by which he began using quatrains, octaves, and sestets in his first poetry--"Words might frustrate me, forms never did; neither did meter"--and attributes this ease to his "fondness for given arrangement" in the arts ("Acoustical Chambers" 4). Like Stevens, Merrill in his later works moves toward a loosening of form, as he begins to discover (as he did in writing "The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace") that, in the face of "deeply-felt" emotions, "strictness of form seemed at last beside the point" ("On 'Country'" 12). After the exquisite forms of

his first few volumes, Merrill moves to something resembling "the constant adjustment between form and freedom" that Litz finds in Stevens's Harmonium (69). Thus, while in a volume like Nights and Days Merrill still writes a sonnet sequence ("Broken Home"), he also discovers in poems like "The Thousand and Second Night" that "stanzas existed to be dissolved" as he instructs his class in the poem's fourth section:

> Now if the class will turn back to this, er,
> Poem's first section--Istanbul--I shall take
> What little time is left today to make
> Some brief points. So. The rough pentameter
>
> Quatrains give way, you will observe, to three
> Interpolations, prose as well as verse. (ND 14)

But even as Merrill "continued to loosen his forms and began to break the formal continuity of longer poems by mixing sections of differing patterns of rhyme and meter" (Keller 196), he never completely abandons traditional verse forms or theme and variation. Like D'Aurevilly's dandy, he "while still respecting the conventionalities plays with them."

Baudelaire defines inspiration as "the delight with which a child absorbs form and colour" and genius as the "power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has voluntarily accumulated" (8). Stevens and Merrill, in their love of artificial forms (including theme and variation), not only are inspired by the forms

they observe in poetry and the other arts but also possess the genius for achieving those forms in their poems. Furthermore, in their underlying motives for preferring form, Stevens and Merrill reveal a number of affinities with the dandy.

One reason Stevens and Merrill, as dandies, turn to traditional forms in their poetry is for detachment--that is, as a protection from the quotidian and as a masking of painful emotions. Form, as Moers indicates, is part of Baudelaire's "aesthetic of control":

> Disgust with the commonness of a middle-class world . . . was at the root of his aesthetic of control; this principle in turn regulated both the form of his poetry and the form of his life: a mask of indifference concealing inner despair. (274)

Thus, in "The Cruise," while the tourists admire the "monsters wrapped in silk" in the gift shop, Merrill suggests that poetry works to civilize "our hunger and the dread" "into cunning shapes" and wonders if we are "less monstrous when our motive slumbers / Drugged by a perfection of our form" (CTYP 47). Merrill explains how poetic forms can function (for Stevens and himself) as a means of self-effacement, suggesting in an interview with Bornhauser that in using form a poet learns "something about proportion and concision and selflessness" (61) and allowing WHA (Auden) to instruct JM,

> THINK WHAT A MINOR
> PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART
> COMPARED TO THOSE GREAT GIVENS THE ROSEBRICK MANOR
> ALL TOPIARY FORMS & METRICAL
> MOAT ARIPPLE! (CLS 262)

Another reason form appeals to literary dandies like Stevens and Merrill is that it mirrors a transcendent reality or at least represents the common human need for that higher reality, that supreme fiction. Thus, in "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," Stevens discovers there are

> These voices crying without knowing for what,
>
> Except to be happy, without knowing how,
> Imposing forms they cannot describe,
> Requiring order beyond their speech.
>
> Too many waltzes have ended. Yet the shapes
> For which the voices cry, these, too, may be
> Modes of desire, modes of revealing desire. (CP 122)

"For myself," Merrill remarks, "I by and large put my faith in form" ("An Interview with Fred Bornhauser" 61), and, in "The Thousand and Second Night," he pronounces that "Form's what affirms" (ND 15). For Baudelaire, this "blessed rage for order" exists in all creatures (though more so in the dandy) as an indication of their spirituality:

> In their naif adoration of what is brilliant--many-coloured feathers, iridescent fabrics, the incomparable majesty of artificial forms--the baby and the savage bear witness to their disgust of the real, and thus give proof, without knowing it, of the immateriality of their soul. (32)

In attempting to find among "THOSE GREAT GIVENS" an

affirming form that can serve as a fire screen or armour of indifference yet provide the flexibility to suggest change and improvisation, Stevens and Merrill naturally turn to music--an art that is central to their lives and their poetics. Terming Stevens "the musician's poet," Baird notes that his poetry

> is distinguished by a vocabulary from music: variations, scales, fugues, modes of the tonic and the dominant, keys, instruments of the major orchestral choirs, modulations, and effects which should be named as arpeggios and glissandos. (xxiii)

Furthermore, Stevens's use of musical terms seems to be based upon an awareness of the most contemporary of musicians of his day. Michael O. Stegman, for example, makes a convincing case for Stevens's having based Peter Quince's clavier (that allows the speaker to conclude that "Music is feeling, then, not sound" and that "what I feel, / Here in this room, desiring you, / Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk, / Is music" [CP 90]) upon the clavier à lumières or color-piano--an "instrument built to allow the musician to play colors"--for which Scriabin scored his "Poem of Fire: Prometheus" Symphony, which premiered in Carnegie Hall during the year of the poem's composition.[4]

Merrill also employs musical vocabulary in his works, referring to rubato, polyphony, chromatic scales, sustaining pedal, augmentation, glissando, melisme, 6/8 time, and

dotted quavers; instruments (numerous pianos accompanied by guitars, a triangle, a mandolin, and an oboe); and composers ranging from Brahms and Schumann to Lehar and Berg (whose operas Wozzeck and Lulu Merrill specifically cites). While Merrill includes extensive technical discussions of music in his prose, his references to music in his poetry tend to be more incidental and less central than such musical references are to Stevens's poems, many of which indicate their focus on literal and figurative music by their titles: "Piano Practice at the Academy of the Holy Angels," "To the One of Fictive Music," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Sad Strains of a Grey Waltz," "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Thunder by the Musician," "On an Old Horn." Furthermore, Merrill's references to music in his poetry tend to be literal (often included to suggest a certain milieu) by contrast with Stevens's frequent figurative use of music as synecdoche for all art.

While Stevens's titles suggest that he finds music and poetry analogous, both poets frequently develop the trope of the poet as musician. Apparently, for Stevens, the ideal poet is the "Banjo Boomer" "with nothing fixed by a single word" (OP 114). Stevens's use of the musician as the representative artist is most pronounced and extended in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in which the guitarist (with

his punning use of "Good air, my only friend") attempts to work through Stevens's evolving poetic. Not surprisingly, in two of Merrill's poems in which the musician most clearly represents the poet, Merrill echoes the language and imagery of Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In Merrill's "Dancing, Joyously Dancing" and "Marsyas" (as in Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar"), musicians are called upon to define or defend the poet's emerging poetics. In Merrill's early poem "Dancing, Joyously Dancing," the dancers entreat the fiddler to teach them artistic "joy" (which, for Merrill at this time, is based upon "a frosted air" of artifice withdrawn from "a morning's imperfections" [FP 19]). In the same way, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the audience begs the guitarist to "play" Stevens's poetic based upon the interaction of the external world and imaginative artifacts:

> And they said then, "But play, you must,
> A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
>
> A tune upon the blue guitar
> Of things exactly as they are." (CP 165)

In "Dancing, Joyously Dancing," as Keller notes, Merrill's "depiction of the artist/fiddler imitates Stevens' "Man With a Blue Guitar" ('Fiddler, the dancers cried, / Addressing perhaps the sun, teach us this joy'), with Brueghel's painterly model substituted for Picasso's" (190-91).

Similarly, in "Marsyas" (in which "wiry" and "twang" echo the language of "The Man with the Blue Guitar"), Merrill creates a musical duel between competing poetics--the upstart "wiry" beat poet and the triumphant poet/musician of "stiff rhythms, gorgeous rhymes," "whose last avatar," as Yenser claims, "was perhaps Stevens's modern poet 'twanging a wiry string'" (62).

Not only do Stevens and Merrill sometimes represent the poet as a musician, they also frequently see poetry as music or as having a form analogous to that of music. Many of Stevens's titles, for example, present the poems as musical works, sometimes with specific musical forms: "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion," "Sonatina to Hans Christian," "Prelude to Objects," "Asides on the Oboe," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home," and "Song of Fixed Accord."

While Merrill only occasionally gives his poems musical titles (and while he gives only one volume of poems Late Settings a punning musical title), he entitles his prose collection Recitative, as if to suggest that his poems are the arias of the opera that his corpus will become. Furthermore, Merrill often uses musical terminology to discuss the works of other poets, as in his use of baroque music as an analogue for Ponge's poetry:

> One meets a mind desiring and deferring, both, according to the laws of baroque music, solution and resolution. . . . Some one hundred lines, over the next two days, repeat, vary, modulate, improvise upon these and other motifs . . . with the self-reflexive energy of Bach. When this toccata of conceits reaches a crescendo, the subject is sounded again, note by note, letter by letter. ("Object Lessons" 113)

In fact, on several occasions Merrill even goes so far as to explain how he uses musical form in composing his poetry. Admitting that "There's to me a tremendous relation" between music and his own poetry, Merrill tells Donald Sheehan, "Whenever I reach an impasse, working on a poem, I try to imagine an analogy with musical form; it usually helps" (29). Contemplating the finale of operas like Falstaff or The Rake's Progress apparently helps him know when certain poems are finished ("James Merrill on Poetry" 5). After explaining how considering the Rondo of the "Waldstein" Sonata helped him select the meter for the end of the third section of "The Thousand and Second Night," Merrill describes in greater detail to Sheehan the application of musical form to another poem:

> "An Urban Convalescence" is in the form of an Introduction and Allegro. In between comes a trill (on the word "cold"), and organ point (following "self-knowledge"), then the rhymes, the quatrains begin, in 4/4 time, as it were. Need I say how subjective this all is? (29)

Despite this apparent subjectivity, in response to an interviewer's question as to whether the analogy of music

can be "as productive a formal tool for the critic dealing with a finished poem as it is a generative aid to the poet," Merrill responds, "If the critic is him- or herself musical, and the analogy comes without strain, why not?" (Interview with author)

It seems quite natural to speak of theme and variation as the musical form analogous to the structure of many of the poems of Stevens and Merrill. For one thing, both poets on occasion give their poems titles suggesting the theme and variation form. Merrill entitles works in First Poems "Variations": The Air Is Sweetest that a Thistle Guards," "Transfigured Bird," and "Variations and Elegy: White Stag, Black Bear" (later shortened and renamed "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear" for publication in The First Nine: Poems 1946-1976). Similarly, Stevens entitles poems "Variations on a Summer Day," "Three Paraphrases from Léon-Paul Furgue," "Two Versions of the Same Poem," "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," "Analysis of a Theme," "Repetitions of a Young Captain," and "Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn." Furthermore, each of a number of Stevens's longer poems--"The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "Auroras of Autumn," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "The Pure Good of Theory"--is "In a sense . . . a collection of shorter poems, a set of variations rather

than a symphonic movement," according to Marie Borroff (77). And as Moffett points out, the use of theme and variations is central to Merrill's poetry:

> The fusing of a technically demanding verse form or forms with a theme approached from several directions like a musical theme, its different manifestations sparking back and forth between its several parts, will continue to be a hallmark of Merrill's best work. (James Merrill 26)

Despite Brown's claim that theme and variation proves a problematic form for poetry, both Stevens and Merrill seem comfortable with the conventions of the musical form. Both poets frequently write poems analogous to a sectional set of variations in music--that is, poems characterized by discrete, most often numbered sections: for example, Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Six Significant Landscapes," "Variations on a Summer Day" and Merrill's "Transfigured Bird," "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear," "In Nine Sleep Valley." In Stevens's case, the number of these sections often has special musical significance: Stevens's choice of thirty-three sections for his "The Man with the Blue Guitar" hardly seems coincidence, given the thirty-three waltz variations of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, and the thirty sections of Bach's Goldberg Variations match the number of sections in Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and closely

approximate the thirty-one sections of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

The theme and variation form is defined by "the relationship between constant and changing elements" (Randel 902). In music, historical factors determine the elements that are repeated and changed. For example, in the melodic-outline variations of the classical period, the melodic structure is fixed while the figuration and rhythm vary; in the nineteenth-century formal-outline variations, only the theme's phrase-structure and form remain unchanged. Stevens and Merrill, however, experiment by repeating and changing the various elements of their theme-and-variation poems. In certain poems, such as Stevens's "Six Significant Landscapes" and Merrill's "Salome" and "In Nine Sleep Valley," the poets vary what Northrop Frye calls the poem's "nominal subject" (its literal subject or central image) as they move from one variation to another ("Wallace Stevens" 277). In other theme-and-variation poems--Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" and Merrill's "Black Swan," "Morning Glory," and "Transfigured Bird"--the nominal subject (the lines from Williams's poem, the blackbird, the swan, the morning glory, or the cracked eggshell) remains constant while the underlying subject or interpretation changes with

each new variation.

While Calvin Brown argues that the "use of different meters, rhyme-schemes, and stanzaic forms for different variations is another obvious possibility which has not been sufficiently explored" by poets (131-32), Merrill proves himself especially adroit at such metrical and stanzaic variations in poems such as "Variations: The Air Is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards," "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear," and "Losing the Marbles." While certain of Stevens's and Merrill's poems do vary verse forms to suggest shifts in mood and interpretation, both poets (especially Stevens in his long poems) create theme-and-variation poems characterized by what Frye terms a "curious formal symmetry" ("Wallace Stevens" 277). Thus, in creating poems like "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (with its thirty-one sections of six tercets each), "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (with its three parts divided into ten equal sections), and Merrill's "Salome" (with its three variations consisting of three seven-line stanzas), Stevens and Merrill defy Brown's claim that theme and variation is less successful in poetry because the poet cannot conform to the musical convention of keeping the length of variations the same (131).[5]

Stevens and Merrill turn frequently to the theme and variation form not only because they manage the form's

conventions exceptionally well but also because it performs a number of functions necessary to both of them as poets, several of which are closely related to their roles as dandies. One reason both Stevens and Merrill find the theme and variation form useful is that it allows them to return again and again to the same topics or themes. Musical themes and variations are based upon the principal of repetition: that is, "For one section of a piece to be considered a variation of another certain elements must always remain constant" (Sadie 536). As one of his constant elements, Stevens frequently focuses upon a single subject--"the struggle of the artifact with external reality"--that is, the attempt of a limited, frozen work of art to do justice to a world at once so vast and so ever-changing (Vendler, Wallace Stevens 61, 53).[6] As Stevens indicates in "The Man with Blue Guitar," he returns to the subject in hopes of resolving the struggle:

> The imagined and the real, thought
>
> And the truth, Dichtung und Wahrheit, all
> Confusion solved, as in a refrain
>
> One keeps on playing year by year,
> Concerning the nature of things as they are. (CP 177)

As an ongoing attempt to compose that "refrain," the theme and variation form is ideal, as Vendler suggests: "Stevens is notoriously 'narrow' in subject, as he realized in having

frequent recourse to a form that approximates the musical theme with variations" (On Extended Wings 14).

In a similar vein, Yenser notes that (unlike Yeats, whose metamorphic poetry moves from one distinct stage to another) Merrill is one of those artists like Blake and Mozart (and, we might add, Stevens) whose poetic careers "simply unfold" (31).[7] In revising his early poems for inclusion in From the First Nine, Merrill admits to returning to "certain lifelong motifs I hope I may be forgiven for keeping faith with" ("Note" FN 361). As Yenser concludes, "Like fanlight from snowflake, Merrill's work develops from itself" (31). Thus, Merrill, like Stevens, is able to find no better vehicle for transforming the snowflake into fanlight than the theme and variation form. Through poems like "Variation: The Air Is Sweetest that a Thistle Guards," "Salome," and "Morning Glory," for example, Merrill is able to return in each variation to his lifelong theme of love's treachery just as Stevens uses theme-and-variation poems like "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" to explore repeatedly the struggle between the imagination and reality.

It would be easy for Stevens and Merrill, interested as they are in circling central concerns, to fall into the trap whereby, according to Calvin Brown, "Most writers take some

slight lyrical thought and try to vary it, but end by merely repeating it" (134). Stevens, however, finds such repetitions limited and thus implores the robin in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" to vary its music:

> Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing
> Mere repetitions. These things at least comprise
> An occupation, an exercise, a work,
>
> A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
> One of the vast repetitions final in
> Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round
>
> And round and round, the merely going round,
> Until merely going round is a final good,
> The way wine comes at a table in a wood.
>
> And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
> Above the table spins its constant spin,
> So that we look at it with pleasure, look
>
> At its spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,
> The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
> But he that of repetition is most master. (CP 405-06)

Thus, in Stevens, as Frank Kermode observes, "the same" (whether image, concept, or term) "is always changed when repeated" (32), a point Ronald Sukenick also makes:

> Stevens works through nuance, variation, and sudden reversal on a theme, requiring on the part of the reader an absolute attention to the specific text. A term such as 'major man' may signify a complex abstraction in one poem while in another it merely means "the pick of young men." (viii)

Of course, in a number of obvious examples such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens makes dramatic changes in whatever is repeated (in this case, the nominal

subject, the blackbird in the tree).

But in a poem like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," Stevens's modifications are unexpected and more impressive. In "Sea Surface," Stevens repeats the verse form (with six tercets per section), the nominal subject (clouds and sky reflecting on the sea), the underlying subject (the interaction of a single perceiving mind and a vast, evolving reality), the diction (The metaphors for each section include "chocolate," "umbrellas," "machine," and "blooms"), and even exact wording and syntax (Each section begins with "In that November off Tehuantepec" followed by a clause including "slopping," "sea," "still," and "night"; and the fourth tercet in each section ends with a French sentence beginning with "C'était" followed by a list of appositive epithets). Thus, the reader is caught off guard by the distinct shift in mood--"fresh transfigurings" rather than "mere repetitions"--that Stevens is able to create for each new section.

In the same way, Merrill admits that his "weakness" is for the "process of ongoing elaboration" rather than mere repetition (Interview with author). In his most frequent elaborations, rather than beginning with an idea or theme, Merrill will "usually start from a phrase or an image, and work my way through many indirections to something

approaching an idea" ("James Merrill on Poetry" 4). For example, in his interview with Jordon Pecile, Merrill describes the associative experience by which a phrase led to the variations of his poem "Losing the Marbles":

> Two winters ago in Key West, we were talking at dinner about memory lapses, a topic increasingly relevant to everyone present. John Brinnin quoted Lady Diana Duff-Cooper, who stayed young and beautiful for nearly ninety years. It seems that whenever a fact or a name slipped her mind, she would shrug and say cheerfully, "Oh well--another marble gone!" In a flash the image of the Acropolis in Athens appeared on my inner screen, and with it the history of Lord Elgin in the early 19th century, removing and carrying off to London most of the Parthenon sculptures. I remembered that individual consciousness had virtually begun in Greece; I thought of the periodic angry efforts made by the modern Greek government to get the marbles back from England--and so forth. Having already written poems called "Clearing the Title" and "Stopping the Leak," I suspected that I'd presently find myself embarked upon "Losing the Marbles," and shamelessly said so, then and there. For my birthday a month later one of that evening's guests gave me a little bag of marbles from the supermarket. That present in turn gave <u>me</u> the last section of my poem. (4)

Thus, in each of the poem's variations, Merrill explores one (or sometimes several) of the literal or figurative meanings he associates with the phrase "losing the marbles." In a similar fashion, Merrill takes the phrase "The air is sweetest that a thistle guards" (the first line as well as the title of his poem in <u>First Poems</u>) and, in subsequent variations, elaborates upon a number of ideas suggested by his linguistic toying with the phrase: he, for example, develops a pun on "air" and experiments with the syntactic

ambiguity of "that a thistle guards" (Does the musical or poetic air guard or "mask" the harsh reality of the thistle? Does the thistle inflict pain upon anyone attempting to penetrate to the rarefied environs of love?)

Perhaps Merrill's most common and successful elaborations occur, however, in his emblematic variations, in which he presents a single image (alabaster, a black swan, a morning glory) and develops variations by attaching significance to the various physical qualities or configurations of the original image. Thus, in "The Black Swan," the fact that the black swan's neck arches "like / A question mark on the lake" so that its beak is "Aimed now at its own breast, now at its image" leads Merrill in his first variation to present the swan as one who knows how to penetrate appearances, "to break / Through expectation" in order to recognize that blackness and its "wake" are not necessarily what they seem (BS 7). In "Morning Glory"--a poem using Howard Moss's poem "Morning Glory" as its theme (New Selected Poems 294)--Merrill uses Moss's reference to a morning glory bloom as a "lighted tent" in order to develop a variation in which he considers the childless poet's resurrection by "Waking into the next blue 'lighted tent' / Of song and story / Nicely made up" as an alternative to the "Going obediently to seed" of traditional procreation (IR

9). In a similar way, the poem's first variation uses Moss's reference to the morning glory's bud as "wrinkled foreskin" (a phrase Merrill believes more accurately describes the bloom "as it wilts") to transform Moss's treatment of sexual arousal ("As if transcendence were simply a matter of going up and up, and up until / There's no place left in the world to go") into his own treatment of sex's aftermath and consequences.

In many of these poems in which Merrill (in adhering to Baudelaire's "doctrine of originality" [28]) develops an idea by varying his treatment of a phrase or an emblematic image, he also varies the stanzaic form from one section to another. As Merrill suggests in pursuing the musical analogy in an interview with the author, "If a process of ongoing elaboration is what one wants (Diabelli and Goldberg Variations, or Mozart's Sonatas K. 205 and K. 300), the stanzaic form will have to keep changing." Thus, unlike Stevens, who generally uses "formal symmetry" as a constant while changing images, themes, or moods, Merrill, in poems such as "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear" and "In Nine Sleep Valley," varies the form of his stanzas in order to reinforce the other changes he is making. In "Losing the Marbles," for example, Merrill creates variations by applying the pattern of deconstruction and reconstruction

resulting from the "will-to-structural-elaboration" to the "shifting dregs of would-be rock" at the Parthenon, Charmides's notion of sophrosyne or self-knowledge, and the creation of a poetic text. Merrill reinforces this pattern demonstrating his own "will-to-structural-elaboration" as he changes stanzaic form with each variation (IR 87). Thus, the third section in which Merrill presents a poetic manuscript partially obliterated by a storm's rain in a form resembling one of Sappho's fire-ravaged papyruses contrasts with the tight syllabics through which the reconstructed poem is presented in the fifth variation. As a result, just as, according to Merrill at the beginning of the fourth section, "Seven ages make a crazy quilt / Out of the famous web," so the seven sections make a crazy quilt out of the poem (IR 87).

Stevens and Merrill also prefer the theme and variation form because it allows them to distance themselves from their subjects, thereby achieving the dandy's detachment and aloofness. Calvin Brown detects this process of distancing in the musical version of the theme and variation:

> There is a general tendency for the later variations to depart further from original theme than the earlier ones, for with each new variation the general idea of the theme becomes more thoroughly established in the listener's mind, and he thus becomes able to follow more radical departures from it. (128)

Merrill sees this tendency toward greater departures from the theme as one of the advantages of the poetic theme and variation, a form which, in his words, "allows the listener to measure the distance from theme to its late transmutation--as from the Diabelli waltz to Beethoven's concluding minuet" (Interview with author). Thus, part of the pleasure for the reader and presumably the dandy poet himself in approaching "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is in observing how the poem gradually moves from exact repetition in language to syntactic repetition to almost complete semantic transformation. For example, "The slopping of the sea grew still one night" is repeated exactly for the second and third variation, becomes "The night-long slopping of the sea grew still" in the fourth, and in the final variation becomes "Night stilled the slopping of the sea." Similarly, "Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds" becomes "Who, then, beheld the rising of the clouds," then "Who, seeing silver petals of white blooms," then "Who then beheld the figures of the clouds," and finally "What pistache one, ingenious and droll, / Beheld the sovereign clouds as jugglery." In the same way, in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," it is possible for the dandy poet as well as the reader to measure the distance from the original image of a blackbird in a tree to

the remote representations of the late variations, such as variation six, in which the blackbird has become a shadow barely seen crossing behind "the long window" that the icicles filled "With barbaric glass" (CP 93). In fact, one of Stevens's self-ironic points in the poem is that the distance from natural phenomenon to artistic transfiguration can become so great that the artifice-loving dandy riding "over Connecticut / In a glass coach" in variation nine can become alarmed if reality threatens to invade his equipage:

> He rode over Connecticut
> In a glass coach.
> Once, fear pierced him,
> In that he mistook
> The shadow of his equipage
> For blackbirds. (CP 94)

Similarly, in Merrill's "Alabaster," each variation moves further from the original theme--"just the idea of alabaster" (Interview with author). Despite Merrill's use of motifs to string together the variations--swirling bands of color and the decomposition of soft stone ("Zero to 1 on the Mohs scale")--the original alabaster is transformed by the third variation to an autopsy of a "tissue-thin / Section of self . . . on a lighted slide" and by the fourth variation to the Aswan Dam's flooding of the Nile Valley. In "Morning Glory," Merrill, with the dandy's "unshakeable determination not to be moved," uses the theme and variation

form to transform Howard Moss's original passionate morning glory blooms into art--photographs of the most artificial blooms, "'green hearts' and pristine cornets / Twining" around the "iron aureole" (IR 10). Having discovered in early variations that the morning glories' sexuality can lead to jealousy, a "charring from those bursts of fire," and even murder, Merrill knows before the final variation that "behavior that begets / Calls for a camera obscura / To distance, or domesticate, it in" (IR 8). That "camera obscura," in many cases for Merrill and Stevens, is the theme and variation form.

Stevens and Merrill also frequently turn to the theme and variation form because the form allows them to reflect the constant changes in reality and in human perception and imagination. Since the two poets develop sectional rather than continuous variations, each variation represents a fresh beginning that can suggest a new state of reality or a new imaginative or artistic rendering of that reality, a point that Stevens makes in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction":

> The freshness of transformation is
> The freshness of a world. It is our own,
> It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves. (CP 397-98)

Stevens seems to have a similar concern in mind when, as a

student at Harvard in November 1898, he marks with a vertical line the following passage from Pater's Appreciations with an Essay on Style: "Such is the matter of imaginative or artistic literature--this transcript, not of mere fact, but of fact in its infinite variety, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms" (Lessing 24).

Both Stevens and Merrill find the theme and variation form useful in representing the mutability of reality or what Baudelaire calls "modernity"--that is, "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (13). In "The Pure Good of Theory," Stevens uses the metaphor of variations to explain the changing nature of the world:

> Now, closely the ear attends the varying
> Of this precarious music, the change of key
>
> Not quite detected at the moment of change
> And, now, it attends the difficult difference. (CP 332)

Thus, through the variations of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," Stevens tries to present what Vendler calls "the daily impersonal newness of the visible world" (Wallace Stevens 58), and in one of his extended theme and variation poems, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," he notes the world's changeability:

> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, a change not quite completed? (CP 406)

And his Man with the Blue Guitar in each variation attempts to shape his "air" to accommodate the fact that "the grass went round. / The cats had cats and the grass turned gray" (CP 178). For Merrill, the theme and variation form allows him to begin fresh again and again in attempting, as he claims in "In Nine Sleep Valley," "to read in Nature's book," where

> the stock characters
> Come and (marmot mallard moose)
>
> Go too quickly to believe in. (BE 30)

In this poem, Merrill develops nine variations--nine sleeps that must be endured in order to cross the valley--each of which celebrates "a day when beauty, death and love / Were coiled together in one crowning glory" (BE 34). Each variation depicts a parting or loss that reminds us of mutability involving (as it almost always does, for Merrill) love: the fading of yesterday's flower and the death of Robert Kennedy, the anticipated death of a lover on the highway (leaving behind "In our roof . . . swallows, / Young ones breast to breast"), an abandoned cabin, the haircut of a lover, the parting of the halves of a geode. In this poem, as in most of Stevens's and Merrill's themes and

variations, the poet's effectiveness lies in the tension between a sense of ongoing change (created by the new beginning of each variation) and the formal constraints of traditional verse forms (whether repeated or changing, as in "In Nine Sleep Valley"). This tension, as Litz suggests of Stevens's early poems, involves an "intricate series of accommodations between 'making' and 'matching'; between a sense of the world as perpetually renewed and a realization of how dependent we are on inherited ways of seeing and saying" (69). Thus, through this use of the theme and variation form, Stevens and Merrill are able to achieve what Baudelaire considers the "double composition" of beauty--that is, an "eternal invariable element" in conjunction with "a relative, circumstantial element" (3).

The theme and variation form provides an opportunity for Stevens and Merrill to represent not only the freshness of the world but also "the freshness of ourselves"--in other words, the changing ways by which the imagination attempts to press "back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36).[8] Since, as Stevens points out, "one of the motives in writing is renewal" (OP 220), variations are essential in providing what Frye calls "constant fresh beginnings" ("Wallace Stevens" 284). These fresh beginnings of the imagination are necessary for Stevens and Merrill: both are acutely

aware that any fiction or artistic rendering of reality is, at best, provisional since, as Frye suggests, "The imagination in the sunlit world of reality is like food in hot weather: whatever is kept spoils" ("Wallace Stevens" 284). Both poets know, as Stevens claims in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," that

> Poetry is a finikin thing of air
> That lives uncertainly and not for long
> Yet radiantly beyond much lustier blurs. (CP 155)

For this reason, the poet, as Merrill discovers in "To My Greek," must "sound and sound" the subconscious and the chaotic experience of the past, creating poem after poem and variation after variation as a provisional shelter. Thus, Stevens's Man with the Blue Guitar attempts in each variation to create "A tune beyond us as we are, / Yet nothing changed by the blue guitar" only to discover that each tune is only

> For a moment final, in the way
> The thinking of art seems final when
>
> The thinking of god is smokey dew. (CP 167-68)

And, in variation after variation of "Losing the Marbles," Merrill attempts to perform the act of replacing or restoring whichever fragile artifact of the imagination has been lost or destroyed--the mislaid calendar, the "mind eroded featureless," the Parthenon's "looted nymphs and

warriors pristine," or the rain-ravaged papyrus. The most successful of Stevens's and Merrill's poems using theme and variation to suggest imaginative change tend to treat simultaneously the mutability of reality and the provisional nature of fictions. Thus, in poems like "Variations in Spring" (in which each variation represents a new act of the imagination as well as a new moment in the flux of a spring day) and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens, according to Merle E. Brown, creates "a synthesis of recurrent, natural change and the individual efforts of men to fix shapes against the drifting waste of nature" (16). Likewise, just as Merrill in "Morning Glory" discovers that each morning glory bloom becomes "A form gone limp," so he learns that each variation in the poem (and, by extension, each poem) is a provisional myth which must eventually be supplanted by another "blue 'lighted tent'":

> Now more and more we furl asleep
> Waking into the next blue "lighted tent"
> Of song and story
> . . . . . .
> The world at last our own to reinvent,
> This or that bit gets titled "Morning Glory." (IR 8-9)

For Stevens and Merrill in these themes and variations, "it is not the fixed shapes that are of value, but the endlessly varying efforts of man to fix shapes against the drifting waste of nature" (Brown, Merle E. 116).

Northrop Frye observes that poems based on the theme and variation form fall into two types--the "relatively simple" type of variation (poems that are "fanciful in Coleridge's sense of the term") and the "sequential and progressive" form in which (as in the last movement of Beethoven's Opus III) "we feel at the end that they have, so to speak, exhausted the theme, done what there is to be done with it" ("Wallace Stevens" 283). In their attempts to represent change through the use of variations on a theme, both Stevens and Merrill seem to favor the simple type in which the variations occur in random order. Even that anomalous sequential or progressive set of variations by Stevens, "The Comedian as the Letter C" (which Frye cites for its movement "in an ironic circle" as it develops the theme of determining the location of external magnitude), seems to owe its sequence, to a great degree, to its autobiographical rendering of Stevens's aesthetic development ("Wallace Stevens" 286). Otherwise, most of Stevens's shorter themes and variations are randomly ordered "cyclical poems where the variations simply surround the theme" (Frye, "Wallace Stevens" 283). Even in a poem like "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," in which the stanzaic form and much of the diction and syntax are exactly repeated, the apparent randomness of the variations creates what Vendler

terms "a troubling relativity of value (any scene is as valuable as any other scene, any mood is as true as any other mood") ("Wallace Stevens" 59).[9] Stevens's use of what he calls the "casual exfoliations" of the imagination (NA 86) is most obvious in those short poems in which he does no more than "merely diversify the theme" (Frye, "Wallace Stevens" 283)--"Variations on a Summer Day," "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," "Six Significant Landscapes," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

Of course, as Merrill points out in an interview with the author, even in his "unprogressive" variations

> there is in the ordering an inevitable progression, as I feel there must be even in Stevens' Blackbird. I mean, what he puts first or last can't help but take on some meaning as a result of its placement--a progression willy-nilly, albeit not inevitable.

In most of Stevens's simple or diversifying variations, the sequence that results in the placement of the final variation does seem willy-nilly, while in a number of Merrill's themes and variations the final variation seems to be the result of a significant, if not inevitable, progression. For example, "Losing the Marbles" and "Morning Glory" (which Merrill, in an interview with the author, refers to as an "unprogressive" variation) move through successive variations in which the poet attempts to ward off change (the eroding of an artifact or the daily death of

morning glories) to a final variation in which the poet seems (if only temporarily) to achieve a freezing of the process of change through artifice--the still photograph of twining morning glories and the embedding of marbles ("targets and strikers, / Aggies and rainbows") in the pool's deck-slats:

> By night their sparkle
> Repeats the garden lights, or moon- or starlight,
> Tinily underfoot, as though the very
> Here and now were becoming a kind of heaven
> To sit in, talking, largely mindless of
> The risen, cloudy brilliances above. (IR 91)

Even in "Alabaster" (1988), which "strikes" Merrill as "unprogressive" and in which the middle variations do seem randomly arranged, the final variation represents a return to the idea of the "flamboyant, vaguely lewd" contemporary version of alabaster described in the poem's first section. In this return, the contemporary alabaster, which has become the "translucent inset" in a "Thrift-shop table," is presented in language reminiscent of the now extinct and swirled sacred "stones" appearing in earlier variations--the "sacerdotal calcite" of the ancient alabaster lighting a sanctum, the "tissue-thin / Section of self" stained with Lady Hera's red-oxide, and the "'zodiac' cartouche of Sût" whose gods have "fled to high ground":

> In spring but also now in fall
> Earth's tilt allows

Early sun to flow straight through the house,
So catching a catchall
Thrift-shop table in the upstairs hall
That its translucent inset glows,

Mild, otherworldly, from the underside.
As once in love or infancy
Yesterday's cargo--pinecone, junk mail, key--
Floats on a milky tide,
Grime-swirled, with blood-pink glimmerings. For me
The time I dread

Is coming, thinks the table.

This return in the last variation (in which the lewd alabaster feels itself becoming extinct) can be seen as ironic in one of two ways: Either the ancient stones were no more sacerdotal than the thrift-shop veneer, or the modern "translucent inset" (and contemporary culture) are inhabited by otherworldly forces that contemporary humans cannot detect.

Merrill points out that "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and other simple or diversifying variations are "more painterly than musical--a set of Japanese woodcuts" (Interview with author).[10] While the variations in most of Stevens's shorter poems using the theme and variation form are discrete units (painterly woodcuts) with almost no interaction among variations, Stevens's longer variations on a theme and most of Merrill's theme-and-variation poems attempt to capitalize on techniques analogous to musical strategies for creating coherence and connections between

variations (such as harmonic relationships and repeated motifs). Thus, in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," as Merle E. Brown suggests, Stevens attempts to "weave associational variations"--the making of fictions; the relationship of man, major man, and the major man; and differences in fictions and the Supreme Fiction--in order to connect the three major sections of the poem (111). Merrill's poems using variations on a theme, as Moffett points out, are characterized by the theme's "different manifestations sparking back and forth between its several parts" (James Merrill 26). In "Salome," for example, the three variations at first seem to be discrete, almost unrelated variations on the theme of the brutality of love. But, on closer examination, the "thematic crossfire" among the three variations, according to Moffett, "is fairly complex" even in this early version of the theme and variation form: water motifs link all the variations; John the Baptist in the first variation reappears in echoes in the second and third ("prophetic heads . . . / Upon a platter" and "saint"); and the rabid dog in the second variation is anticipated by "slavering" and "bitten to the bone" in the first (James Merrill 29). Perhaps the epitome of such musical interweavings among variations that are not otherwise arranged in a sequence is Stevens's "The Man with

the Blue Guitar," in which, as Litz remarks, the full range of musical relationships is explored:

> The pattern described by the poems is one of variation and recapitulation on a series of related themes, and the inner harmonies of the sequence are far more precise and subtle than its general structure. Sometimes a group of poems will build variations on a single theme (e.g. Poems XXII-XXVIII); at other times the movement from poem to poem is one of deliberate contrasts. Poems are linked to each other by leitmotifs, by similarities in imagery, and occasionally by likenesses in rhyme structure (e.g. Poems IV and VI). In short, the progression of the sequence is musical, and individual poems may be linked with several others by a complex network of formal and thematic resemblances. (234)

While the simple order of Stevens's shorter theme-and-variation poems seems random and, in some ways, purposeless, the random order in Stevens's and Merrill's longer poems using theme and variation is produced for a purpose: to imitate, as Ronald Sukenick notes of Stevens's long poems, "the structure of the poet's mind as it is realized in the act of improvisation" (23). Merrill, in his interview with Ashley Brown, claims that an advantage of using the theme and variations for longer poems is that it provides "a form where one things leads to another--it needn't, but it can" (46). Thus, in creating long poems, Stevens and Merrill do not follow Canon Aspirin of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," who "imposes orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do." They realize instead that

> to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find,
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
>
> It is possible, possible, possible. (CP 403-04)

For both poets, the theme and variation form becomes, as Stevens claims in "Variations on a Summer Day," an activity whereby the poet improvises on the themes and motifs of a changing world--

> An exercise in viewing the world.
> On the motive! But one looks at the sea
> As one improvises, on the piano. (CP 233)

Another advantage of what Sukenick calls "the loose, limitless variations" of the simple theme and variation form for Stevens and Merrill is its lack of closure, its sense that "one thing leads to another--it needn't, but it can." Like Stevens, Merrill finds this open-ended process of "distancing and refining" "more valuable than any 'working out' of theme and counter-theme in the sonata form" (Interview with author). Thus, Stevens selects the seemingly random numbers for his variations--twelve ways of putting together a pineapple, thirty-one sections in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," twenty variations on a summer day, six ways that the landscape can have a significant impact on the imagination, and (most unlikely of

all) thirteen ways of viewing a blackbird--as if to suggest that the process of imaginatively varying the theme could go on indefinitely. Furthermore, Stevens's poems using theme and variation rarely conclude with a sense of resolution. In "Variations on a Summer Day," for example, the final variation (in which "You could almost see the brass on her gleaming, / Not quite" and "It was not yet the hour to be dauntlessly leaping") almost urges that other variations be written in the hope that the hour of gleaming brass and dauntless leaping might yet arrive (CP 235-36). Even in "The Comedian as the Letter C," in which the relation of Crispin's journey "comes, benignly, to its end," the story has been "clipped" (CP 46) since, presumably, it could continue as long as Crispin and "men like Crispin" continue to search for what Vendler calls "the locus of magnitude" for a "mythology of self" (Wallace Stevens 62).

Even in "Losing the Marbles," which attempts to arrest the process of change through the artifact of the embedded marbles in the final variation, Merrill recognizes that it is only "as though" the present "were becoming a kind of heaven"; that the process of deconstruction will continue as we and the pool eventually "lose our marbles," becoming "largely mindless of / The rich, cloudy brilliances above"; and that other variations could be written as art continues

its ongoing attempt to shield against painful loss (IR 91). In addition, Merrill's revisions of two early theme-and-variation poems for inclusion in From the First Nine in 1976 reveal that he values the inherent open-endedness of the theme and variation form. In revising "Variations: The Air Is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards," Merrill adds a final variation on his version of Stevens's notion that "Death is the mother of beauty," a diary-like variation in the looser style and iambic pentameter of Merrill's later poetry that contrasts dramatically with the formality of the original variations:

> Friday. Clear. Cool. This is your day. Stendhal
> At breakfast-time. The metaphors of love.
> Lucky perhaps, big Beyle, for whom love was
> So frankly the highest good, to be garlanded
> Accordingly, without oblivion, without cure. (FN 17)

In calling attention to what seems to be (even without the help of textual criticism) an added variation, Merrill almost seems to suggest that wrestling with his central themes must remain an ongoing process which might easily result in new variations being appended every decade or two. In revising "Variations and Elegy: White Stag, Black Bear" from First Poems for inclusion in From the First Nine, Merrill deletes the formal concluding elegy of the original poem (and omits "Elegy" from the title), preferring instead to conclude the poem with another unresolved variation.[11]

In fact, it is in reference to the revised "Variations: White Stag, Black Bear," that Merrill notes, in an interview with the author, the advantage of the open-ended theme and variation form in serving "to mitigate the topheavy dialectic of the theme." Instead of resolving the dialectic in favor of spirituality in the poems's physicality/father/bear and spirituality/mother/stag dialectic (as he suspects he might be prone to do), Merrill elects to end the poem with another in a series of unresolved struggles, this time between the white stag and the black stone, in which the one party (like the archangel Michael in Guido Reni's "Archangel") has gained what we know is only a provisional dominance:

> the white stag who demands
> Of veined black stone on which he stands
> Reflection into flesh. (FN 30)

Stevens also seems to prefer using the theme and variation form as an alternative to a dialectical treatment of a theme (in his case, the struggle between human imagination and external reality as the source of magnitude). Stevens's dialectic is never "topheavy"--that is, neither the imagination nor reality seems in danger of completing the other. On the other hand, Vendler claims Stevens's treatment of the source of external magnitude does not seem to be a dialectic in which the imagination and reality reach

a happy synthesis or equilibrium, as many critics seem to believe:

> The dialectical model for consideration of his poetry, in which a recognition of antithesis, however full, usually yields to a diapason of synthesis, seems to me oddly at variance with the taste of much of the poetry on the tongue, a taste at once more astringent and more provisional than that offered by either antithesis or synthesis. (Wallace Stevens 62)

The theme and variation form works well for Stevens in leaving a "more astringent and more provisional" taste on the reader's tongue. Thus, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," after the occasional dialectical pairing of contrasting variations (dominated alternately by the imagination and by reality), the poem consists mainly of variations in which the two struggle to a tension that is not resolved. Even when the ending variation makes what seems to be a concluding and synthesizing statement--

> That's it, the only dream they knew,
> Time in its final block, not time
>
> To come, a wrangling of two dreams.
> Here is the bread of time to come,
>
> Here is its actual stone. The bread
> Will be our bread, the stone will be
>
> Our bed and we shall sleep by night.
> We shall forget by day--

Stevens, as a playful afterthought, undercuts the apparent synthesis with the poem's final words:

> except

> The moments when we choose to play
> The imagined pine, the imagined jay. (CP 184)

Northrop Frye sees as the most important function of the theme and variation form in Stevens's poetry the imitation of the process by the which the unity that exists in the universe is transformed into variety. Merrill's spiritual medium Mirabell recognizes this generative process, explaining to JM and DJ,

> ORGANIC LIFE RESPONDED THE IMPULSES OF THE UNIVERSE
> WERE AS [t/o]
> STEADY AS THE PULSES OF MAN
> ANIMATE FORMS WERE AS VARIED AS THE FORMS YOU KNOW
> AND AS VARIED AS THE PLANETS THEY EMERGED ON AND AS THE
> WEATHERS THEY LIVED IN.
> . . . . . .
> THIS ACCUMULATED ENERGY BECAME THROUGH EONS AN ANCIENT
> AND IMMORTAL INTELLIGENCE
> WHICH ASSUMED AS MANY FORMS AS THERE WERE LIFE FORMS.
> (CLS 275-76)

In an analogous way, for Stevens, as Frye explains, the human "imagination is . . . an informing principle of reality transmuting its uniformity into variety" ("Wallace Stevens" 284). Stevens explains this natural generative process in "Things of August," in which he proclaims that, as humans,

> We make, although inside an egg,
> Variations on the words spread sail. (CP 490)

Stevens and Merrill use the theme and variation form to represent the variety inherent in unity in three ways, which

correspond to the "three effects of analogy" that Stevens describes in his essay in The Necessary Angel.

First, according to Stevens in "The Three Effects of Analogy," every image is an elaboration or variation of the underlying idea or theme of the poem (NA 127-28). In their theme-and-variation poems based on this principle, Stevens and Merrill keep the same true, underlying subject while introducing with each variation a new nominal subject or image as a manifestation of the theme, with the effect being that described by Stevens in "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors": "How close / To the unstated theme each variation comes" (CP 356-57). In most cases, since Stevens and Merrill do not state the theme directly, as Stevens notes in "The Pure Good of Theory," "it is never the thing but the version of the thing" that is presented in each variation (CP 332).

For this reason, many of these themes and variations by Stevens and Merrill resemble Schumann's "associative variations," in which the variations seem to be, as the composer notes of his Blumenstück (op. 19), "Variations on no theme." In these associative variations by Schumann, as in their poetic analogues by Stevens and Merrill, it is up to the listener to determine the "'secret' or veiled relationships" that bind the variations together (Sadie

551). Thus, in Stevens's "Six Significant Landscapes," the variations at first seem unrelated, and only with difficulty does the reader discover that the distinct nominal subjects in the variations each present the unstated theme: the external world affecting human perception and imagination. Likewise, in Merrill's "Salome," only the persevering reader will discover the veiled relationship--the theme of "love's murderous relationship," as Moffett calls it (James Merrill 29)--that binds together John the Baptist's beheading, the attack by the rabid pet, and the doctor's performing a dissection in his lab. Furthermore, the interweavings among the variations--the water motif, the anticipations and echoes sparking from one variation to another--seem analogous to the technique of Schumann's associative variations in which "occasional motivic associations" provide the works' cohesion as, according to Schumann himself, "everything intertwines peculiarly" (Sadie 551). This same sort of interweaving occurs in Merrill's recent poem "Alabaster," in which the leitmotifs (stone, penetrating light, swirling, otherworldliness, and extinction) link otherwise distinct nominal subjects--ancient alabaster being replaced by glass, an autopsy of a thin section of the self, the flooding of the Nile Valley by the Aswan Dam, and light reflecting through a thrift-shop

table. It is only after close analysis that the reader discovers the "veiled" theme presented by the variations--the surrendering of the sacrosanct to scientific empiricism and positivism.

Stevens's and Merrill's second use of the theme and variation form to represent variety in unity corresponds to Stevens's principle in "The Three Effects of Analogy" that "every image is a restatement of the subject of the image in the terms of an attitude" (NA 128). This type of theme and variation, though less frequently used by the two poets, resembles the musical "character variations" of the Romantic period, in which (in Weber's variations) a "character - picture . . . arises from an idea which corresponds to the inner life" (A.B. Marx quoted in Sadie 549) or in which (in Schubert's case) the theme "appears in the individual variations in a constantly changing light" (Sadie 550). Thus, in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," each of the five variations, as Frye notes, represents a "distinctive mood of the imagination" as it responds to the same objective correlative ("Wallace Stevens" 277). While none of Merrill's strict theme-and- variation poems seems to be character variations, the variations in verse forms in "The Thousand and Second Night," according to Keller, "function as reflectors of the speaker's condition" (212).[12]

Stevens's and Merrill's final use of theme-and-variation poems to suggest variety within unity illustrates Stevens's principle that "every image is an intervention on the part of the image-maker" (NA 128). As Frye suggests, this effect of analogy "takes us deep into Stevens's central notion of poetry as the result of a struggle, or balance, or compromise, or tension, between the two forces that he calls "imagination and reality" ("Wallace Stevens" 277). Often, in musical themes with variations, the composer selects a composition by another as his theme to be transformed imaginatively, such as Diabelli's simple waltz melody that Beethoven, as the "image-maker," transforms in each of his thirty-three variations. In Stevens's and Merrill's most analogous poems, a passage or poem from another writer serves as the given theme or nominal subject to be varied, as when Stevens provides two interpretations of four lines by William Carlos Williams in "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" or Merrill reworks Howard Moss's "Morning Glory" in a set of variations in his recent The Inner Room. In other poems of this type, reality provides a scene or an object--a pineapple, a black swan, a blackbird, a cracked eggshell (in "Transfigured Bird")--as the nominal subject to be transformed by the imagination. In these variations on a theme, Stevens and Merrill address what Vendler calls the

"difference in magnitude between the single mind and the limitless universe it contemplates" (Wallace Stevens 62).

Thus, in these poems, the poet allows the single mind in each variation to wrestle with the given theme until it reaches a new but limited interpretation of the nominal subject. These "variations on an epistemological theme" (as Litz calls "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" [65]), resemble the musical formal-outline variations, such as Beethoven's Diabelli variations, in which each variation retains only certain "aspects of the theme's form and phrase structure" (Randel 904) and the theme serves "more as a framework with individual characteristic motifs than as an integral melody to be varied as an entity" (Sadie 548).[13] In Stevens's "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," for example, the entire original theme by Williams--that is, the complete idea that Williams's four lines convey in their address to the "ancient star"--does not appear in either variation. Instead, the first variation develops the motif of the star's shining alone while the second variation expands upon the motif that the star "lend no part" to anything around it (CP 18). Likewise, in Merrill's "Morning Glory," while the nominal subject, Howard Moss's morning glory, appears in every variation (or at least a metaphoric version of it serves as a framework for each variation), the entire

"melody" of Moss's poem does not appear in any one variation. Instead, faced with the "magnitude" of all the possible resonances and all the possible expansions of the images in Moss's poem, the single mind of the poet in each variation selects a quality or motif from the original theme for full development--the sexuality and regenerative power of the morning glory, its blooms' competition for supremacy in the sun, its development of aberrant blooms, the fierceness of the sun's rays, the cost of the blooms' flaring, and the morning glory's "reinvention" through new blooms.

The final way in which the theme and variation form is useful to Stevens and Merrill is in allowing a self-conscious attention to artifice. Just as Baudelaire's dandy feels the "need to surpass Nature" in his adoration of the "incomparable majesty of artificial forms" (32-33), so Stevens and especially Merrill, in a number of their poems, use the theme and variation form to express sheer delight in illusion and its power to "mask " a painful reality.[14] These theme-and-variation poems resemble the musical melodic-outline variations that dominate the Classical period, in which in each variation the "theme's melody is recognizable despite figuration, simplification, or rhythmic recasting" (Randel 903). These musical variations, as David

R.B. Kimbell notes, are often "adorned with progressively more brilliant embroidery" until the final variations (especially the Adagio in the case of Mozart), in which "the theme is encrusted with a profusion of decorative filigree work" (95-96). Just as these melodic-outline variations are "an ideal form for the virtuoso pianist to exhibit his prowess as an improvisator" (Kimbell 95), so the theme and variation form is ideal for a poet like Merrill whose specialty is the command of verse forms. Thus, in a poem like "Variations: The Air Is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards," Merrill moves from a variation of ottava rima to strictly rhymed, syllabic octets to a relaxed, blank-verse paragraph, in a display of technical virtuosity. In the same way, Merrill exhibits technical wizardry in the progression of verse forms in "Losing the Marbles" and "In Nine Sleep Valley." In poems like these (as Keller suggests of Auden's The Sea and the Mirror), "each shift in form provides a further reminder that all this is art, quite distinct from 'reality,' a game to be enjoyed for its own sake" (211).

While Stevens is less concerned with displaying his virtuosity in manipulating verse forms, he does shift verse forms for each variation as a means of ornamenting his theme in poems like "Variations on a Summer Day" and "The Man with

the Blue Guitar," in which contrasts in form call attention to artifice and to the attempt to contain the magnitude of a limitless reality within human artifacts. Stevens's greatest display of virtuosity and love of illusion, however, comes in a poem in which the stanzaic form is strictly repeated--"Sea Surface Full of Clouds." In this poem, Stevens's dix-huitième display of "prodigal inventiveness" and embellishment through wordplay and manipulation of mood creates a "dandy's tour de force," as much characterized by "mannerism, virtuosity, and sensuous beauty" as any set of variations by Mozart (Kimbell 97).

In their use of the theme and variation form to distance themselves from their subjects and to explore a variety of verse forms (in tension with the improvisational nature of variations on a theme), Stevens and Merrill demonstrate that they are part of the dandy tradition. More specifically, they manipulate the theme and variation form to develop epistemological poems (in which each variation represents a different version of the limited human mind's rendering of a limitless reality) and to display the virtuoso's love of artifice. In this exploration of epistemology and cultivation of artifice, both Merrill and Stevens demonstrate the dandy's most significant trait--his self-consciousness. This trait is most evident in the final

shared feature of Stevens's and Merrill's poems: their metapoetry.

# NOTES

[1] "Rien ne ressemble plus à ce qu'on appelle l'inspiration, que la joie avec laquelle l'enfant absorbe la forme et la couleur" (Baudelaire 690).

[2] Personal interview with author of 5 October 1988.

[3] Early in Mirabell's Books of Number, WHA (Auden) joins JM (Merrill), DJ (David Jackson), and MM (Maria Mitsotáki) in forming a family to participate in the seminars with the Ouija board. Thereafter in the trilogy, Auden ("father of forms") serves as Merrill's poetic father. And, as Keller points out, Auden serves as Merrill's most obvious model in the use of "TOPIARY FORMS" (196).

[4] Merrill seems to echo "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (if not Scriabin's "color clavier") in the following passage from Mirabell:

> MAN PLAYS A TUNE IN COLORS  THE VIBRATIONS OF MUSIC LIGHT UP MACHINES.  SIMPLER YET, WRITE 'AZURE' & THE LANGUAGE- [t/o]
> CONDUCTING BRAIN IS FLOODED WITH A TONE OF SUMMER SKIES. [t/o]
> (CLS 215)

[5] Merrill's sonnet sequences, despite their obvious formal symmetry, seem to be distinct from the theme and variation form because of their narrative threads.

[6] Vendler uses the phrase "the struggle of the artifact with external magnitude" as an alternative to the "extraordinary banality" of early critical commentary, "in which poem after poem was said to be 'about' the encounter between 'the imagination' and 'reality'" (Wallace Stevens 61, 53).

[7] According to Kalstone, Merrill "having circled and recircled key figures and scenes . . . had amassed a large repertory of analogous experiences, moments so resembling each other that each begins to provide a context for the other" (125). Merrill himself notes the persistence of certain themes and images from his earliest poems through the trilogy:

> Returning to those early poems now, obviously in the light of the completed trilogy, I've had to marvel a bit at the resemblances. It's as though after a long lapse or, as you put it, displacement of faith, I finally, with the trilogy, reentered the church of those original themes. The colors, the elements, the magical emblems: they were the first subjects I'd found again at last. ("An Interview with J.D. McClatchy" 76)

[8] Stevens receives his most significant treatment from Merrill in the trilogy in the S section of The Book of Ephraim:

> Stevens imagined the imagination
> And God as one; the imagination, also,
> As that which presses back, in parlous times,
> Against "the pressure of reality." (CLS 66)

[9] Vendler's claim that any mood or scene is as good as

another in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" can be disputed on the grounds that in the final variation the imagination and the scene achieve a triumphant equilibrium.

[10] Frye agrees with Merrill, noting that themes and variations such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Variations on a Summer Day," and "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" are the result of "the affinity to the pictorial in Stevens, with his fondness for subjects analogous to still life or landscape painting, where the real object and the imaginative variation of it are most dramatically exhibited" ("Wallace Stevens" 283). Merrill and Frye also agree in their assessments of these poems. Merrill notes that such poems don't "(again, to me) 'yield' as much as" variations using ongoing elaboration (letter to author). Frye claims that "As such, they are not the most serious kind of writing" ("Wallace Stevens" 283).

[11] Interestingly enough, in including another theme-and-variation poem from First Poems "The Transfigured Bird" in From the First Nine, Merrill leaves the rare resolution of a concluding couplet attached to a final variation consisting of tercets:

> And though it was still early morning he went home
> And slept and would not till nearly dusk be woken. (FN 23)

[12] The loose narrative structure of "The Thousand and

Second Night" means that, strictly speaking, the poem does not consist of variations on a theme.

[13] The exception here seems to be "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The variations' lack of motific interweavings, as Stevens attempts to make each variation represent a <u>different</u> single mind, makes this poem more analogous to the published musical variation sets of the Classical period, in which different composers wrote each variation, rather than the formal-outline variations. This effect also accounts for the variations seeming more painterly than musical.

[14] Merrill terms "Quite accurate" the author's suggestion that, at times, both Stevens and Merrill, "(in poems like 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' and 'Variations: The Air Is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards') seem to use the theme and variation form for a display of virtuosity, as if to call attention to artifice and to suggest a sheer delight in illusion and its power to 'mask' a painful reality" (Interview with author).

# CHAPTER IV

# METAPOETRY

*The dandy is by definition someone who lives always as though reflected in a mirror.*

*Milton J. Bates, Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*

*Poetry is the subject of the poem,*
*From this the poem issues and*

*To this returns.*

*Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"*

*Indecisions, pentimenti, glimpses of bare canvas, rips & ripples & cracks . . . stressing the fabric of illusion, required a greater attention to what was being represented.*

*Merrill, on The (Diblos) Notebook*

The dandy, according to Daniel Fuchs, is guided by "self-conscious absorption" (6)--an acute awareness of what he is doing and exactly what effect he will have upon his audience--a trait D'Aurevilly's translator Ainslie less flatteringly terms "impertinent self-concentration" (16). Thus, the dandy is "by definition someone who," Bates

claims, "lives always as though reflected in a mirror" (115). For two dandy-poets like Stevens and Merrill, this self-consciousness takes the form of metapoetry--those self-referential elements of their poems in which the human mind reveals its chief characteristic, which is (as Stevens notes in quoting Henri Focillon) "to be constantly describing itself" (NA 46). Both Stevens and Merrill expend an unusual amount of energy in their poems drawing attention to the mental activity of the poet, the ways poems and metaphors are made. In fact, Merrill seems, in part, to have acquired his interest in metapoetry and his ease in handling poetic self-reference from Stevens, as his impressions of studying Stevens at Amherst suggest:

> Finally I was struck, even then in 1945, by how naturally Stevens handles his references to art and poetry, the aesthetic performance, the "theatre of trope." Without embarrassment--without the concomitant cigarettes and whiskeys and women that in those days accompanied any American account of the artist-as-novelist--he seemed to trust his text to hold its own against the world it evoked, as part of that world. ("On Wallace Stevens' Centenary" 119-120)

In poem after poem, Stevens's subject is poetry and the poet, or, as Riddel calls it, "the activity of this mind, the act of creation, to which the reader is witness and in which he is involved" (Clairvoyant Eye 15). In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," for example, Stevens describes the process by which the poet's mind examines itself and reality in the

making of a fiction:

> I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
> For the music and manner of the paladins
> To make oblation fit. (CP 16)

In "The Comedian as the Letter C"--"a poem about language," according to Litz (124)--Stevens points out that the subject of the poem is Crispin's learning to "round his rude aesthetic out" (CP 36).

John Crowe Ransom remarked upon Stevens's death that "surely no poet has written more verse about the understanding of poetry, unless it be Wordsworth" (401).[1] Thirty-five years later, we may be tempted to add, unless it be Merrill. Baird could as easily remark of Merrill as he does of Stevens, "the subject of the total poem is poetry, a poetic process . . . a process of rejoicing" (xix).[2] For example, just as the "collision of words" in the title of Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," according to Litz, "tells us that the play of language will be as much the subject as the play of personality" (83), so in Merrill's "18 West 11th Street" the potential collision of NIX and ON in the headlines "NIX ON PEACE BID PROPHET STONED / FIVE FEARED DEAD IN BOMBED DWELLING" suggests that the poem deals with the interaction of language as much as it does the collapse of a building (BE 26). In "The Thousand and Second Night," as Ashley Brown suggests in interviewing Merrill,

the poem has as its subject or "immediate reality" the "writing of the poem itself" (47). In "Dream (Escape from the Sculpture Museum) and Waking," Merrill's subject (on at least one level) is "Softening the marbles"--that is, attempting to transform his own poetics, which is cold and formal like the marble statues in the museum:

> for a long time now
> I have wanted to be more natural
> Than they, to issue forth anew
> In a profusion inimitable
> As it is chaste and quickly through. (CTYP 72-73)

In addition to making poetry the subject of a significant number of their poems, Stevens and Merrill share a specific technique of metapoetry--the use of passages of dandiacal "self-mirroring" in which, J. Hillis Miller notes, the passage serves as "both text and commentary" (Linquistic Moment 4). In many of their poems, Stevens and Merrill pause (as Ross Labrie suggests in interviewing Merrill) "to comment on how the poem itself is working out" (27). Such passages, in which, according to Keller, the poem calls attention to itself as "poetic artifice" (201), Miller terms "linguistic moments": "moments of suspension within the texts of poems . . . moments when they reflect or comment on their own medium" (Linquistic Moment xiv). According to Miller, this metapoetic technique involves a type of parabasis, "a breaking of the illusion that language is a

transparent medium of meaning" (Linguistic Moment xiv).

Such moments of self-conscious awareness of poetry's artifice occur often in Stevens's poems. In "Metaphors of a Magnifico," for example, Stevens interrupts his speculation over whether

> Twenty men crossing a bridge,
> Into a village,
> Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
> Into twenty villages,
> Or one man
> Crossing a single bridge into a village

with his impatient, self-reflexive comment, "This is old song / That will not declare itself . . ." (CP 19). Such a "subjective interpolation in a narrative or descriptive pattern," according to Marie Borroff, is "a sign that what the speaker of the poem is really concerned with is not the actions of a group of men, but the quality of thought itself" (22). In these and other "linguistic moments" in Stevens, Miller finds a "suspension of the forward-moving working of language toward the production of meaning, in a prolonged, hovering instant of self-reflection" (Linguistic Moment 15). Similarly, while Irvin Ehrenpreis claims that Stevens's nonsense syllables are "subrational and prelinguistic" (228), in some instances these syllables also provide a poem's "instant of self-reflection." In "Depression Before Spring," for example, Stevens uses what Borroff classifies as one of his many "iteratives suggesting

laughter"--Ho! Ho!--as derisive commentary on his somewhat outrageous simile:

> The hair of my blonde
> Is dazzling,
> As the spittle of cows
> Threading the wind. (CP 63)

Similarly, in "Bantams in Pine-Woods," Stevens, according to Litz, "both exercises and mocks his penchant for 'high talk'" (116), exercising it in his description of the cock ("Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles, halt!") and mocking himself and the cock with his nonsensical "Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!" (CP 75)

Stevens also uses language in a self-referential way to call attention to poetry's status as artifice through hypostatization--the referring to a word or phrase by its grammatical or linguistic category in order to make it seem to exist independently from the poem. Mac Hammond cites Stevens's hypostatization in using "amorist Adjective" in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP 172) as one of many examples of Stevens's metapoetry that "presents, of necessity, a highly grammatical drama, for it consists of concepts about poetic language itself of which grammar makes up a large part of the story" (184).[3]

A more complex use of hypostatization and Stevens's "theatre of trope" occurs in "Prologues to What Is

Possible." Early in the poem, Stevens describes a passenger in a boat, "As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable without any meaning." Stevens continues by treating the linguistic terms syllable and meaning of his simile as if they have an independent, even concrete existence:

> A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed sureness, [t/o]
> That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter, [t/o]
> A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the boat and leave the oarsmen quite [t/o]
> As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment, much or little [t/o]
> Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none. [t/o]

Furthermore, the second section continues with the boatman pausing to respond to the metaphor that the poet has just created and finally lapsing into a muddle of self-referentiality:

> The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared [t/o]
> Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of him extended [t/o]
> Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself [t/o]
> And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to be recognized, [t/o]
> The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
> On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep. [t/o]

Merrill also uses "linguistic moments" that, according to Keller, interrupt the poem's coherence "so as to keep us

aware of the provisional, purely linguistic nature of its meaning" (230).[4] For Merrill, these self-mirroring moments include, as he notes of Ponge's poetry, "provocative sidelong glances (at thoughts, at things) contained by words that stress their place in a black-and-white, two-dimensional composition" ("Object Lessons" 111). Merrill describes for Labrie his first use of such self-conscious commentary--the moment in "An Urban Convalescence" when he "first hit upon this sense of the self-reflexive side of the poem" ("James Merrill at Home" 29). In the poem, Merrill describes the fate of new uninspiring buildings: "The sickness of our time requires / That these as well be blasted in their prime." A few lines afterwards, Merrill reflects on the lines he has just written:

> There are certain phrases which to use in a poem
> Is like rubbing silver with quicksilver. Bright
> But facile, the glamour deadens overnight.
> For instance, how 'the sickness of our time'
>
> Enhances, then debases, what I feel. (WS 5)

As Merrill notes in his interview with Ashley Brown, "I loathe that phrase and tried to put it into perspective" (46). Thus, just as in The (Diblos) Notebook "the notebook and the narrator are always examining themselves, turning back upon themselves to establish and define themselves" (Axley 130), so in numerous poems following "An Urban

Convalescence" Merrill pauses to consider the poem he is writing. In "Mirror," for example, he calls attention to "each milling- / Downward dumb conceit" (CTYP 37), and in "Eight Bits" he refers to the poem's eight sections as "Fragments like this" (IR 49). In "Losing the Marbles," Merrill describes the preceding section, the rain-blotted text of a poem, using the metaphor of "spilt milk" or a stationer's "white out":

> Yet should milk spilt
> . . . . . .
> White out the sense and mutilate the phrase,
> My text is Mind no less than Mallarmé's. (IR 87)

Halfway through "The Summer People," Merrill stops to critique his choice of verse forms and to disrupt our suspension of disbelief:

> I should perhaps have trusted
> To dry-eyed prose like hers.
> The meter grows misleading,
> Given my characters.
>
> For figures in a ballad
> Lend themselves to acts
> Passionate and simple. (FS 64)

And, in "Verse for Urania," Merrill provides a "beanstalk couplet" ("The beanstalk's tenant-cyclops grown obese / On his own sons; the Bears and Berenice") and then pauses to analyze it:

> Take, for that matter, my beanstalk couplet, above,
> Where such considerations as rhyme and meter
> Prevail, it might be felt, at the expense

Of meaning, but as well create, survive it. (DC 32)

With a "provocative sidelong glance" into the dandy's mirror, Stevens and Merrill attempt not only to discuss the language of the finished artifact, the poem itself, but also to discover the process by which the poet perceives and imagines the world. Unlike the imagination, which is actively "pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36), perception, according to Stevens, is the attempt simply and passively to become aware of external magnitude. As he points out in his Adagia, "In the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination" (OP 165). In their poems, Stevens and Merrill explore what occurs when, according to Stevens in "The Sail of Ulysses," "the world goes round and round / In the crystal atmospheres of the mind" (OP 102). Both poets recognize the importance of simple perception. With the dandy's concern for "the outward show of life" (Baudelaire 24), Stevens in his epigraph for "Evening Without Angels" quotes Mario Rossi to suggest that "the voluptuousness of looking" is one of the "great interests of man" (CP 136). Thus, Stevens presents "disembodied" eyes in "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past" ("There they sit, holding their eyes in their hands," "They polish their eyes / In their hands") and "Page from a Tale" ("Lashing at images in the atmosphere, / Ringed round and

barred, with eyes held in their hands") to make the point that "the failure to see . . . [is] a misuse of life" making impossible the "ideas from which to construct a landscape of the mind" (Baird 131-32).

Such disembodied eyes are overwhelmingly the subject of Merrill's early poems of The Black Swan and First Poems: "The Green Eye," "The Cosmological Eye," "Perspectives of a Lonesome Eye," "The Flint Eye," "The Formal Lovers" ("In evening's deepening you swerve your eyeball"), "Entrance from Sleep" ("Upon the eye . . . the first world takes shape"), and "Accumulations from the Sea" ("A while they gloat, eyes lidded in the sun, / Then play at drowning, smiling submerge"). In these poems, Keller suggests, Merrill makes "Oracular--and unpersuasive--claims for the powers of the imaginative eye" (190).[5]

Both Stevens and Merrill seem to argue for the necessity of unclouded perception as a corrective to the abstracting, transforming power of the imagination. In fact, Lensing claims that Stevens builds "his own poetics upon the need for decreating the imagination's distortions as part of the process of valid perception" (108). Thus, "The eye's plain version is a thing apart, / The vulgate of experience," Stevens announces at the beginning of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (CP 465). Similarly, in

Merrill's "The Cosmological Eye," the myopic dreamer who uses only "his ultimate eye," his abstracting imagination, sees "blue Bewilderment" and "Blue of horizons made of yes and no". while missing the "sharp elegance / That is birds flying" and

> birds, foam, subtleties of blue,
> Smoke, bone, a sail, blue shells that are of less
> Being to him than ideal blues. (BS 16)

And even in Merrill's later poem "From the Cupola" from Nights and Days (1966), the speaker makes it his decreative task to clean the glassed cupola until its panes are wiped free of "spatterings and reflections" (ND 44) so that his sisters "will look once more upon pale water and clear sky" (ND 49).

Of course, both Stevens and Merrill acknowledge that perception itself is not without its distortions. The glassed-in cupola in "From the Cupola," which "suggests the poet's vision," is "both clear and reflective," as Merrill tells Garret Condon (17). Like Merrill, Stevens knows, according to Frank Doggett, "that perception is a complex psychological experience. The real external world unfolds within our experience of it--and experience is the very life of the self" (Stevens' Poetry 5). Everything that the poet sees is filtered through his experiences. Thus, the speaker of Merrill's "The Broken Home" tells of looking "Through the

smoked glass of being thirty-six" (ND 27) and Merrill, in speaking to graduating Amherst seniors, describes "the whole academic experience" (represented by the commencement tassel) as a windshield wiper--"that series of rapid, brief, ongoing clarifications which allow us to face, through glass no doubt, but on our worst days, the inrush of emotion and event" ("A Class Day Talk" 165).

It is not surprising, then, that both Merrill and Stevens often examine the process of perception through images of distortion, particularly colored or refracting glass. Stevens's poems and Merrill's early poems are filled with colored eyes and colored glass, suggesting, as Merrill announces in "The Locusts," that "preconceptions dye / The whole world drab" (CTYP 77-78). In Stevens's "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," for example, the "figure in a poem for Liadoff" is "a shell of dark blue glass, or ice" that flashes on "more than muscular shoulders, arms and chest, / Blue's last transparence as it turned to black" (CP 297). And in "Arcade of Philadelphia the Past," lilac bushes "still bloom in the agate eyes, red blue, / Red purple, never quite red itself" (CP 225). As for Merrill, just as his persona in "Driver" (one of his few short stories) notices how "Off to the right a discoloration of the windshield made for the constant rising of a greenish cloud"

(178), so the abundant colored eyes in Merrill's early poems cast their shades upon the external world: in "Accumulations of the Sea," the submerged eyes "Describe in strip of light impossible curves, / Wrist, throat, and ankle clothed in a green cold" (BS 13); in "Perspectives of a Lonesome Eye," "The canvases like landscapes in a lonesome / Eye flicker upon the iris, the primitive / Sensation altered . . . Seen through the glass of personal feeling" (BS 17); and in "The Green Eye," the speaker implores the child to come and "with your sunbeam gaze assign / Green to the garden as a metaphor / For contemplation" (BS 15).[6]

Furthermore, the crystals, many-faceted gems, shards of glass, and prisms that fill the poems of Stevens and Merrill not only reflect the dandy's love of "light lying in pools or exploding in bursts, drops or diamonds" but also suggest the refraction of light by the perceiving mind. For example, in "The Snow Man," in which a "mind of winter" attempts to behold frost, pine boughs, and junipers through crusts of snow and shags of ice, Stevens makes a point of the limited, refracted nature of individual perception, as Richard Macksey suggests:

> this perceiving instant expanding to its epistemic limits is itself a fiction, a private world, incontemporaneous with the world about and refracted by and fragilely confined in the interior distance of the consciousness. (198)

Similarly, in Merrill's "Prism," the poet views the world through the distortions of a glass paperweight--a "pea-sized funhouse" and "Crystal, hypnotic atom" (WS 16)--that, like Valéry's diamond, serves as an "image of refraction" (Macksey 223). In a pair of poems, Stevens and Merrill use surprisingly similar images--flowers, light, and broken shards from a crystal bowl--to examine the potential distortions by the perceiving eye. In Stevens's "The Bouquet," a bouquet of flowers is "quirked and queered by lavishings" of the meta-men's "will to see," as the flowers' colors "cast deeply round a crystal crystal-white / And pallid bits . . . round the fracture of the thing / Turned para-thing . . . The prismatic sombreness of a torrent's wave" (CP 451-52). Similarly, in Merrill's "The Broken Bowl," once the crystal bowl holding daisies and bluebells has crashed to the floor, its fragments' rays "though disarrayed, will postulate / More than a network of cross-angled light" while

> The splinters rainbowing ruin on the floor
> Cut structures in the air,
> Mark off, like eyes or compasses, a space
> Of mathematic fixity. (BS 9)

While Stevens's and Merrill's self-conscious awareness of their craft includes consideration of the process of perception, it is even more concerned with what is the

dominant focus of Stevens's poetry--the interaction of the imagination and the external world. While Stevens makes a number of appearances as one of the literary influences in Merrill's The Changing Light at Sandover (1983), he receives his most significant notice from Merrill in section S of The Book of Ephraim:

> Stevens imagined the imagination
> And God as one; the imagination, also,
> As that which presses back, in parlous times,
> Against "the pressure of reality." (CLS 66)

The impact of Stevens's interest in the god-like powers of the imagination extends throughout Merrill's career beginning well before the trilogy, with Merrill remarking to Ashley Brown in 1968 that "I still like Stevens's idea about the imagination 'pressing back against the pressure of reality'" (48).

Like Stevens, Merrill is concerned with the process by which the imagination struggles to order a chaotic world through art at the same time that the external world demands to be accounted for by an art that otherwise might become too formal, too insular. Merrill (though perhaps to a lesser degree) is, like Stevens, concerned with what Riddel calls "transformation, and the vexing struggle, both philosophical and experiential, of how transformation might avoid the solipsistic extreme of pure subjectivity on the

one hand and the comic pathos of surrender to dull objectivity on the other" ("Blue Voyager" 62). Thus, in his early poem "Mirror," Merrill juxtaposes the gilded mirror of "perfect silver . . . reflectiveness" (a mirror that Yenser claims "evokes the kind of poetry Merrill has sometimes been charged with writing" [63]) with the chaos of reality, represented by the window that "can embrace a whole world without once caring / To set it in order" (CTYP 36). Unlike Merrill's "Marsyas," however, in which the duel between reality and the imagination is settled in favor of imaginative artifice in the form of the god Apollo, the struggle is left unresolved in "Mirror." Just at the point when the claims of a chaotic world seem dominant and the mirror seems "shaken to its core," the poem, according to Yenser, "begins a defense of appearances," artifice, and subjectivity (63). Even in his trilogy, Merrill represents the balanced interplay of imagination and nature by having the Ouija board's messages composed, as Merrill tells McClatchy, by the equal pressure upon the overturned teacup by the right hand of DJ ("spokesman for human nature" and reality) and the left hand of JM, the Scribe (66-68).

In creating poems that examine the struggle between reality and the imagination, Merrill uses some of Stevens's dominant images and color symbolisms. While Merrill

frequently uses Stevens's favorite images of the palm ("The Smile," "For Proust," "Clearing the Title," "A Room at the Heart of Things") and the angel ("A Dedication," "The Peacock," "Angel," "A Survival," "Walks in Rome"), more pronounced is the similarity in the poets' use of color symbolism. While one must be wary of reductionism in dealing with what seems to be a dichotomy of blue and green in Stevens's poems, it seems safe to claim that green usually designates the "primitive potentiality or vitality in nature" (Baird 126): "my green, my fluent mundo" ("Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"); "a green that is the ash of what green is" ("Someone Puts a Pineapple Together"); "April's green endures" ("Sunday Morning"). Stevens, on the other hand, uses blue to signal the activity of the imagination or, as Bates puts it, "the impulse to alter reality" (226): "fresh transfigurings of freshest blue" ("Sea Surface Full of Clouds"); "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar" ("The Man with the Blue Guitar"); "the world beneath the blue, / Without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase, / Any azure under-side or after-color" ("Landscape with Boat"). A similar use of these colors dominates Merrill's early poems. In "The Black Swan," the blackness of the swan challenges the child's abstract generalities--his "white ideas of swans"--by calling him nearer to the

complexity and chaos of reality--"that green lake / Where every paradox means wonder" (BS 7). In "Accumulations of the Sea," the "eye's blue zenith" encounters "green shallows sporting" (BS 12). In The Black Swan (1946), "The Green Eye," a poem asking whether green is "a metaphor for contemplation," "green of an imaginary life," or "green / Of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf" (BS 15), is immediately followed by "The Cosmological Eye," which discovers that "the pure expanse of dream . . . Fluent in the idiom of blue" (while "no whit / Less exquisite") still prevents the myopic eye from seeing the "unblurred" blues of "broad, unbleached experience" (BS 16).

Helen Vendler claims that, contrary to the "extraordinary banality" of the critical approach in which "poem after poem" by Stevens is "said to be 'about' the encounter between 'the imagination' and 'reality'" (Wallace Stevens 53), Stevens's poems are just as often concerned with "the struggle of the artifact with external magnitude" (Wallace Stevens 61). Vendler's revisionist stance seems as useful in approaching Merrill's poetry as it is in considering Stevens's works. Certainly, much of Stevens's and Merrill's metapoetry seems to focus on the struggle of artifacts--fictions, works of art, myths, linguistic constructs--to keep up with the magnitude of a shifting

world and the shifting states of the poet's mind.

This struggle between the static artifact and the dynamic reality of nature and the human mind is evident in one of the shared stylistic features of Stevens's and Merrill's poetry--what Moffett calls their poems' breaking out in a "pox of plural gerunds" (James Merrill 27). These plural gerunds represent the struggle of an artifact--a single word or linguistic unit--to contain the changing activity of external reality. While even simple gerunds can create the impression of the activities or processes of external nature and the poet's mind, Stevens's and Merrill's frequent use of plural gerunds suggests the ongoing repetition of these activities--that is, the necessity of beginning these natural, mental, and artistic processes again and again.

Stevens uses plural gerunds to represent repeated natural, external processes (that is, processes outside the human mind): "visible, voluble delugings" (CP 24); "faint, memorial gesturings" (CP 29); "these gawky flitterings" (CP 294); "iris frettings" (CP 397); "brilliant vanishings" (CP 423); and "liquid lingerings" (CP 497). Merrill uses similar plural gerunds (although, not surprisingly, he represents human physical activities as often as he does natural ones): "gleamings onto the Rhine" and "nightly /

Drainings of one's life" (CTYP 28); "water's claspings" (CTYP 31); "our wakenings" (CTYP 75); "clinkings from the chandeliers" (CTYP 80); "Outside, I hear her tricklings" (WS); "Its gasps and gurglings" (ND 16); "White tremblings" and "flamelike ripplings" (ND 34); "lonely shudderings" (LS 13); "glimmerings from buried nozzles" (LS 18); "tricklings to a wind-creased pool" (LS 40); and "wanderings into homecomings of a sort" (IR 89). A number of Stevens's and Merrill's plural gerunds, however, attempt to capture in a single linguistic artifact repeated mental activities: "reason's click-clack, its applied / Enflashings" (CP 387); "lavishings of their will to see" (CP 451); "flitterings from within" (CTYP 28); "dreamy blinkings-out" (IR 84). (Of course, many of the plural gerunds that represent physical activities in Stevens's and Merrill's poetry--"delugings," "gesturings," "iris frettings," "liquid lingerings," "gleamings," "wakenings," "melismatic sparklings," "glimmerings"--serve as metaphors for mental activities as well.) Furthermore, a number of Stevens's and Merrill's poems include agonistic plural gerunds suggesting the struggle or interaction between external reality and the perceiving, imagining mind of the poet--a struggle in which, according to Stevens, "a violence from within . . . protects us from a violence without" (NA 36): "oracular rockings"

(CP 30); "rubbings of a glass" (CP 398); "finned flutterings and gaspings of the ice" (CP 422); "fruitful grapplings" (ND 22); "clockwise flailings of the dark" (LS 39). These gerunds serve as a reminder that, as Stevens proclaims in "The Planet on the Table,"

> his poems, although makings of his self,
> Were no less makings of the sun. (CP 632)

Perhaps most significant are those plural gerunds used by Stevens and Merrill to suggest one of their central metapoetic concerns--the provisional nature of myths or fictions. In plural gerunds such as "silken weavings" (CP 69), "fresh transfigurings" (CP 102), "Flickings from finikin to fine finikin" (CP 488), "edgings and inchings of final form" (CP 488), "melismatic Sparklings" (DC 31), "jeweled self-windings" (LS 82), and "fluent soundings" (IR 93), Stevens and Merrill indicate that, as Frank Kermode points out, "fictions necessarily grow obsolete" (39).[7] As a result, these plural gerunds suggest, the activity of artistic creation must begin again and again in what Riddel calls "the continual process of adjusting the mind to its time-space matrix" (Clairvoyant Eye 273). Because, as Stevens insists in "The Comedian as the Letter C," "the plum survives its poems" (CP 41), each new fiction or artistic shelter must be abandoned and replaced with a new one

through a process described by J. Hillis Miller:

> No sooner has the mind created a new fictive world than this "recent imagining of reality" . . . becomes obsolete in its turn, and must be rejected. This rejection is the act of decreation and returns man once more to unadorned reality. ("Wallace Stevens'" 150)

Thus, in their metapoetry, Stevens and Merrill discover not only that the imagination and reality must struggle against one another to create myths or artistic shelters, but also, as Merrill's speaker claims in "Conservatory," that

> Nothing is not so wasted, my dear wastrel,
> That of our shelters you should fear to say
> They totter. (FP 24)

Many of the poems by Stevens and Merrill have as their subjects, either literally or metaphorically, those creative and decreative processes by which provisional myths are created and abandoned. Just as Stevens, in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," examines the creation of music (through the interplay of sound and feeling) and then the shattering of the "melody" and harmony of Susanna's bathing by the elder's intrusion, so Merrill's poetry examines the process of artistic order by which fragile constructs or shelters are built and then destroyed. In "An Urban Convalescence," "cheap engravings of garlands" are made and then "crumpled up to stanch / Boughs dripping," and "the whole structure" of memories that has been painstakingly retrieved

"soundlessly collapses" (WS 3-4). And in "18 West 11th Street," Merrill creates what Yenser points out is "yet another poem about the partial destruction and rebuilding of a house" (27). Like the speaker in "The Idea of Order at Key West," whose "blessed rage for order" forces him to "portion out" the night after the girl's singing stops ordering the "meaningless plungings of water and the wind," Merrill must "sound and sound" the subconscious and the past (as "To My Greek" suggests) in order to create yet another "Morning Glory," another "blue 'lighted tent' / Of song and story / Nicely made up" but "furling asleep" after only a day (IR 9).

Through their metapoetry--their examination of how the poet's eye perceives, how the imagination and reality struggle together, how poetic fictions can only provisionally capture the magnitude of reality and the human mind--Stevens and Merrill seem to imply a dualism between subject and object, between imagination and reality, between "look and its twin / Our landscapes," as Merrill terms it in "Suspense of Love" (BS 28). The very metapoetic techniques that allow the two poets to view their poetry through the dandy's mirror--the self-reflexive commentaries, the theme and variation form, the plural gerunds, the use of hypostatization--by calling attention to poetry as artifice,

serve to strengthen the boundary between reality, on the one hand, and the poet's perception, imagination, and artifacts, on the other.

Furthermore, Stevens and Merrill, in exploring what Litz calls Stevens's "lifelong preoccupation with our response to climates and seasons" (285) and in asking art (as Merrill does in "Dreams About Clothes") "Won't you help us brave the elements?" (BE 62), often seem to create a dichotomy between inner and outer realities. Just as Merrill recalls, from a glass-bottomed-boat ride at Silver Springs, "the heavy pane of glass that, like a kind of intelligence, protected me and my mother from that sunken world while revealing its secrets in magical detail" ("Acoustical Chambers" 7), so Stevens's and Merrill's poems often seem to present pronounced barriers between subject and object. Thus, even when the perceiving mind in Stevens's sixth section of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" only sees the shadow of the blackbird crossing to and fro, mind and shadow are separated by a "long window / With barbaric glass" (CP 93). Likewise, Merrill uses a pane of glass to suggest the separation of subject and object in "Dream (Escape from the Sculpture Museum) and Waking":

> Now that my life has lost its way
> I watch for it, through a cold pane

> Out past all this eloquence
> Inside. (CTYP 72)

Thus, Stevens and Merrill seem to share in what Riddel considers the legacy of romanticism: "a personal dualism which set the ideal against the real" ("Blue Voyager" 71).

Despite what initially seems a dualism in Stevens's and Merrill's poetry, closer examination reveals each poet's self-conscious effort to transcend such a "sense of polarity in his poetic world" (Frye, "Wallace Stevens" 277). The critical notion of a simple dialectic in Stevens's poetry, as Vendler suggests, seems "oddly at variance with the taste of much of the poetry on the tongue" (Wallace Stevens 62), and, as Yenser points out, Merrill "has devoted himself to confounding the dichotomy" between art and life (9). As Merrill claims in describing a "fog-spangled book / Left out, face down, all night" on a stone balustrade,

> We strain to see beyond the stone
> That has soaked upward into words
> That have soaked downward into it. (YP 63)

And in his critical remarks on Ponge, Merrill declares that Williams's dictum "No ideas but in things" is only true "so long as the notorious phrase argues not for the suppression of thought but for its oneness with whatever in the world--pine woods, spider, cigarette--gave rise to it" ("Object Lessons" 109). He continues,

> For a thought is after all a thing of sorts. Its density, color, weight, etc., vary according to the thinker, to the symbols at his command, or at whose command he thinks. One would hardly care so much for language if this were not the case. (110)

Paradoxically, one way in which Stevens and Merrill attempt to transcend dualism and suggest the oneness of thoughts and things is through the use of self-reflexive comments. While these comments or linguistic moments seem to widen the gap between art and life by calling attention to the artifice of poetry, they also seem to confound the distinction between art and life by making poetry part of the reality described by the poet and making thought one of the "things" that gives rise to poetry. As Merrill recalls of Stevens's use of self-reflexive comments, "he seemed to trust his text to hold its own against the world it evoked, as part of that world" ("On Wallace Stevens' Centenary" 120). As Miller points out, linguistic moments reveal the poet's "wish to escape the prison house of language and stand where one could see it from the outside" (Linguistic Moment xv). Furthermore, such self-mirroring comments allow Stevens and Merrill to assume the dandy's stance of refusing to satisfy the general reading public's expectation that poetry be referential, through what Miller calls "the effacement of extra-linguistic reference initiated by the apparent act of self-reference" (Linguistic Moment 4).

Stevens and Merrill also attempt to transcend the dualism between subject and object and art and life through an occasional alteration of their most common images--eyes, glass, crystal--images that in most instances represent the perceiving mind or artifice. In a few instances, the poets transform these images to make them include their opposites. For example, in "Accumulations of the Sea," Merrill attempts to transcend the dualism inherent in the act of perception by fusing subject and object (perceiving eye and perceived object) into a single phrase, such as "waterfall eyes" or "pebbled eye": "To greet with waterfall eyes the gentle air" and "The pebbled eye propelled / By the elastic rhythms of the tide" (BS 13). Likewise, both Stevens and Merrill attempt to transcend dualism by "marrying" art and life in a single image--an image, in fact, that Merrill borrows from Stevens. Stevens concludes "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" with the lines--

> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
> You will have stopped revolving except in crystal. (CP 407)--

which Merrill echoes in his line "Yet the gem / Revolves in space" in "Prism" (WS 17). By creating an oxymoronic image of a revolving crystal, Stevens and Merrill attempt to transcend the dualism of a fluent, changing world and frozen art--the "crystal of a poem," as Doggett calls it (Stevens'

Poetry 28). The two poets focus instead, according to Michel Benamou, on the poetic act "symbolized by a metamorphosis into glass" ("Wallace Stevens" 107).

Another image that Stevens and Merrill use to attempt to "confound the dichotomy" between the imagination and reality is the ubiquitous and ambiguous seraph--Stevens's "necessary angel." This angel first appears in Stevens's "Angel Surrounded by Paysans"; becomes the source of Stevens's title for his collection of essays, The Necessary Angel; and finally appears in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" as "the angel in his cloud, / Serenely gazing at the violent abyss" and plucking "on his strings to pluck abysmal glory" (CP 404). The critical controversy over Stevens's use of the angel centers on the issue of whether the necessary angel in "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" is the angel of reality or the angel of the imagination. Benamou, for one, claims that the angel is "the necessary angel of earth," unlike Mallarmé's angel of the imagination of dualistic structures ("Wallace Stevens" 107). Indeed, in the first half of the poem, the angel proclaims "I am the angel of reality. . . . I am the necessary angel of earth" and describes itself as having "neither ashen wing nor wear of ore" nor "tepid aureole" and as being "one of you" (presumably the "Paysans" or peasants) (CP 496). Certainly,

Stevens's own comments seem to confirm Benamou's interpretation: Stevens claims in a letter of 1952 that "in Angel Surrounded by Paysans the angel is the angel of reality" (L 753) and in a letter of 1954 to the poet Mona Van Duyn that "The Necessary Angel is not the imagination but reality" (L 852). Stevens's comments seem suspect, however, since, as Lensing and Kermode suggest, the issue in the poem and the background for the poem are more complex than Stevens's remarks would indicate.

As Kermode points out, Stevens in 1949 bought a still-life by Tal Coat, which he called "Angel Surrounded by Peasants," in reference to a Venetian glass bowl and the objects surrounding it in the painting (85). The image of Venetian glass (the angel) seems to have more affinities with the imagination and artifice than with reality, and, as Lensing notes, an angel "is itself a curious representation of reality" (280). In fact, in the poem Stevens shifts from the early earthier description of the angel to one more traditionally ethereal in the poem's second half, referring to the angel as "only half of a figure of a sort, / A figure half seen, or seen for a moment . . . an apparition apparelled in / apparels of such lightest look" (CP 497). Thus, Kermode suggests that the angel, referred to late in the poem as "a man / Of the mind," becomes the "imagination

which redeems earth" (85), and Lensing claims that "The sound of the earth reheard through the powers of the angel . . . suggests another quality, its imaginary potency" (280). Indeed, in the poem, the "sight" and "hearing" of the angel cause the earth's "tragic drone" to "Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings / Like watery words awash" (CP 497). This complexity suggests that, for Stevens, the dichotomy between the imagination and reality is false and the two are inseparably intertwined. In fact, the poem's "turn" midway through the poem--

> I am one of you and being one of you
> Is being and knowing what I am and know (CP 496)--

hints that the angel attempts to be one of the peasants fully in contact with earth while the peasants have the potential to see with greater imaginative potency. In addition, this passage suggests that the "necessary angel" is neither reality nor the imagination but a way of "being and knowing" that confounds the distinction between the two. Certainly, Stevens's inclusive subtitle for The Necessary Angel, his collection of essays--Essays on Reality and the Imagination--seems to reinforce this interpretation.

Furthermore, employing the necessary angel to transcend the dualism of imagination and reality seems to be what Merrill has in mind in creating his self-satirizing version

of Stevens's angel in his poem "Angel." While angels function as muses in a number of Merrill's poems ("A Survival," "A Dedication"), Merrill's spiritual guest in "Angel" serves as an antimuse.8 Just as Stevens's necessary angel teaches a way of knowing both reality and the imagination (and just as Merrill's angelic muses in Mirabell's Books of Number attempt to indicate the workings of God Biology while simultaneously inspiring JM to make "POEMS OF SCIENCE" of his knowledge), so Merrill's "patently angelic visitor" in "Angel" gestures at once toward life and art: he "points one index finger out the window / At winter" while "with the other hand" indicating "the piano / Where the Sarabande No. I lies open" (WS 42). But instead of encouraging the poet to consider both the earth and the "liquid lingerings" of the imagination in writing a poetry that transcends any dichotomy of the two, Merrill's antimuse finds Merrill's "clotted" phrases inferior to "the world God made / And this music of Satie" and discourages him from writing "even these few lines" (WS 42).

Stevens and Merrill also use their images to transcend dualism (in this case, of subject and object) by manipulating them in order to blur inner and outer realities. What Stevens in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" calls

the philosopher's search

> For an interior made exterior
> And the poet's search for the same exterior made
> Interior (CP 481)

takes the form of the motif of merging interior and exterior landscapes. In a number of instances the very windows or panes of glass that Stevens and Merrill employ to separate inner and outer realities or subject and object can be used to blur those same distinctions. In "The Octopus," for example, Merrill begins with a metaphor in which an inner "monster" ("vision asleep in the eye's tight translucence") is compared to another monster outside the mind (the octopus "that a glassen surface / Restrains") (CTYP 3). This comparison is followed by a simile beginning "like the octopus" and extending for six lines, after which it becomes impossible to distinguish the inner monster from the external one. As Merrill continues,

> Chilled by such fragile reeling
> A hundred blows of a boot-heel
> Shall not quell, the dreamer wakes and hungers,

it becomes uncertain whether his ambiguous "dreamer" is the inner vision or the octopus. Similarly, the "His" in "His hands move clumsily in the first conventional / Gestures of assent" seems to refer equally to the inner monster and the octopus (as well as Vishnu). When Merrill concludes the poem with the lines--

Till on glass rigid with his own seizure
At length the sucking jewels freeze. (CTYP 3)--

the reader does not know, for certain, whose seizure has made the glass rigid nor whether the jewels are frozen on the inside or the outside of the glass.

In a much more recent poem, "Think Tank" from Late Settings (1985), Merrill continues his blurring of subject and object, by constantly shifting our perspective as readers back and forth from the inside to the outside of the tank. The title, while proposing a view inside the human mind, also places us outside a tank looking in. As the poem begins with "Because our young were drab / And slow to grow, for Carnival we ate them" (LS 13), Merrill's use of "our" places both us and the speaker inside the tank. We simultaneously become sea creatures eating our young and the writer's mind destroying unpromising ideas, as we look out through "the dechlorinated crystal slab" of the tank/mind. Ultimately, outer and inner realities become "of one mind," each mirroring and blending with the other. They both exist "Within a medium secured by trick / Reflections": the medium of a tank in which the gliding snail cannot be distinguished from the writer's "braille / Eraser" (LS 13).

This paradoxical blurring of inner and outer realities through the use of a partition of glass also occurs in the

"It Must Change" section of Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," which at its end proclaims,

> The freshness of transformation is
>
> The freshness of a world. It is our own,
> It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,
> And that necessity and that presentation
>
> Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer. (CP 397-98)

In this passage, Stevens tries to penetrate by cleaning it, while making it into artistic reproductions or "rubbings" in order to propose that transformations of art, the world, and the imagination are indistinguishable. As Doggett suggests,

> When Stevens peers into that glass he is peering both within his mind and into the world that holds him. This is why the transformations, the changes of the world, are also transformations within the self. And these changes are changes that affect perception, what is brought by eye and ear, and that spread into parts of the mind that are pure imagination and beyond perception. (Stevens' Poetry 25)

Stevens and Merrill also attempt to blur the distinction between subject and object by experimenting with weather or climate. As Macksey points out, Stevens's climate is "neither wholly of the earth nor of the mind, but a human creation rooted in the weather" (187). It is, as Stevens claims in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," "half earth, half mind; half sun, / Half thinking" of the sun (CP 257). Thus, in "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu," when Stevens speaks of turning "To the ever-

jubilant weather," he means an attention to reality and the imagination. For him, the two have become indistinguishable, as he claims at the poem's end:

> Ever-jubilant,
> What is there here but weather, what spirit
> Have I except it comes from the sun? (CP 128)

Thus, in his letter to Hi Simons of 28 August 1940, Stevens notes,

> "ever jubilant weather" is not a symbol. We are physical beings in a physical world: the weather is one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities. The state of the weather soon becomes a state of mind. (L 348-49)

Similarly, Merrill enacts this blurring process by which "the state of the weather" becomes "a state of mind" in his early poem "The House." After beginning with a listener observing wind and rain from inside "pale windows" to learn "what houses were," Merrill shifts to the "cold house" of dreams with wind and rain within its walls, which takes "wet-faced sleepers" to heart (FP 71-72).

Similar to this coupling of inner and outer reality is Stevens's and Merrill's use of a diction based on "odd verbal combinations," as Marie Borroff calls it (71). These unusual combinations or pairings of the abstract and the sensory are what Merrill mentions most often throughout his career in explaining Stevens's influence on his poetry. On at least five different occasions, Merrill acknowledges his

fascination in learning from Stevens the stylistic technique of using "the very gaudiest words with the grandest philosophical terms as if they were on a par with each other," of throwing off "a philosophical term the way you might name a color to get texture and a certain dimension."[9] In his interview with McClatchy, Merrill describes the impact these verbal combinations had on him when he first read Stevens in the 1940s:

> There were effects in Stevens, in the Notes, which I read before anything else--his great ease in combining abstract words with gaudy visual or sound effects: "The alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala," or those "angular anonymids" in their blue and yellow stream. You didn't have to be exclusively decorative or in deadly earnest. You could be grand and playful. The astringent abstract word was always there to bring your little impressionist picture to its senses. (75)

Merrill apparently learned this lesson well since he, like Stevens, "typically modified abstract nouns with concrete adjectives or attached abstract modifiers to concrete nouns" (Keller 204).[10] Thus, Merrill's phrases--"crystal rudiments," "slender hungers," "noon deflating summary," "voluminous pistachio," "poignant thistles," "polymorphous green," "demotic droplets"--match Stevens's couplings of abstract and concrete terms--"fecund minimum," "sonorous nutshells," "granite monotony," red emptiness," "green phrases," "ponderous cinnamon." By combining these abstract and concrete nouns and modifiers, Stevens and Merrill again

seem to blur the boundaries between reality and the imagination. As Merrill suggests in a letter to the author, Stevens mixes "verbal, even painterly, hedonism . . . and high philosophical concerns, as if thought were voluptuous and sensuality a form of thinking."

Borroff detects in Stevens's poems a specific instance of Stevens's and Merrill's odd verbal combinations--"the coupling of Latinate with sound-symbolic words" (71). These unexpected combinations in Stevens--"syllables of gawky flitterings," "angular anonymids gulping," "honky-tonk out of the somnolent grasses"--find their counterparts (though less frequently) in Merrill's poems: "glittering neutrality," "teenage plankton luminously twitch," "grayly glimmering sublimate." Litz notes a similar coupling strategy that Stevens employs to confound the dichotomy between the ideal or imaginative and the real--his use of titles in which generalities or abstractions are "balanced or validated" with a concrete place (Wallace Stevens: Man Made Out of Words): "Fabliau of Florida," "Jasmine's Beautiful Thoughts underneath the Willow," "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Academic Discourse at Havana," "A Weak Mind in the Mountains," "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." In all of these pairings within phrases and titles, Stevens and

Merrill attempt to fuse the sensual and the earthy with the formal and the abstract, as if these opposites are equal and interchangeable. As Borroff suggests, such verbal sequences "are dramatically significant in that they blend abstraction with sense perception, solemnity with familiarity, embodying on the level of diction one kind of 'choice [not] / Between, but of' [CP 403]" (72).

Stevens's and Merrill's final technique for attempting to transcend the dualism between art and life is their repeated use of puns that refer at once to a real object as well as its artistic rendering. These puns involve what Miller calls the "interplay between language about reality and language about the mind . . . in which a single word names both simultaneously" (Linguistic Moment 12). A favorite Stevens pun throughout his career (one that Merrill borrows in his early poems) is the use of "air" to indicate not only atmosphere but also a song: "The heaving speech of air" (CP 129), "Air is air" (CP 136), "Poetry is a finikin thing of air" (CP 155), "Good air, my only friend?" (CP 175). In some of Merrill's early poems, he seems to toy with Stevens's use of "air" as a means of exploring the relationship between reality and art and transcending the division between the two: "Variations: The Air Is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards" (FN 14), "The air preserves a staunch

relationship" (BS 27), "In dangerous air between our love and us" (BS 29), "As though the air, being magician, pulled / Buds from a sleeve of cloud" (FP 16), "a kind of dance / Such as breath makes upon a frosted air" (FP 19), and "the oval mirror face / Showing us vacantly how to become only / Bare room, mere air, no hour and no place" (CTYP 18). Perhaps the most complex manipulation of such a pun on "air" appears in Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

> The weather and the giant of the weather,
> Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
> An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought. (CP 385)

In these lines, not only does Stevens merge life and art and inner and outer "weather" in creating "An abstraction blooded," he also develops the series "the weather, the mere weather, the mere air" to enact the process of transforming the external world into art, but so subtly that we cannot tell with which phrase reality ends and art begins.

In his later poetry, Merrill more or less abandons puns using "air" to fuse life and art in favor of puns on "foot" or "feet" and "page"--not a surprising shift since Merrill gradually moves in his career from natural to human subjects. In a number of poems, Merrill uses "foot" or "feet" to refer to human appendages as well as poetic units of meter: "Come put the verb-wheel down / And kiss my mouth despite the foot in it" (FS 21) and "Greek proverb: He who

has no brains has feet" (FS 49). In The Book of Ephraim, Merrill puns on "feet" and "sound" to evoke simultaneously, as if they were the same, the experiences of wading in the water at "the point" and struggling to make verse:

> Hardly lingering,
> We've reached the point, where the tired Sound just
> washes [t/o]
> Up to, then avoids our feet. (CLS 41)

Similarly, Merrill creates puns using "page" in hopes of blurring the difference between a young boy at court and his rendering on paper: "Page after page" (LS 23) and "You there in the mirror, did our / freshest page get sent to the Hall of Cobwebs?" (IR 14"). One of Merrill's most complex puns--one that combines both "page" and "feet"--occurs in "The Doodler," in which Merrill simultaneously describes the process by which he developed as a doodler of little "page" boys with feet and as a maker using feet to create pages of verse. In the poem, Merrill concludes his description of his early, crude attempts at drawing "pin-heads, bodies each a ragged weevil, / Slit-mouthed and spider-leggèd, with eyes like gravel," with his punning use of "page" to suggest both boy and paper: "That page is brittle now, if not long burned" (CTYP 55). He continues with a description of his present skills, as drawing and writing merge:

> This morning's little boy stands (I have learned
> To do feet) gazing down a flight of stairs (CTYP 55).

In "Life Is Motion," Stevens speaks of "Celebrating the marriage / Of flesh and air" (CP 83). With these puns on "air," "feet," and "page," Stevens and Merrill celebrate the marriage of life and art.

While their shared metapoetic techniques place Stevens and Merrill within the tradition of literary dandies, Merrill seems to have been directly influenced by Stevens's using metapoetry to examine the process of making poetry, to explore the relationship of the imagination and reality, and to transcend the dialectic between subject and object. In fact, the influence of Stevens's metapoetry is even more pronounced in Merrill's later works--that is, in those poems in which the influence of Stevens's style is less obvious. To demonstrate how these metapoetic techniques and concerns borrowed from Stevens persist after Merrill's first volumes and how Merrill's awareness of this influence takes the form of intertextuality, it is helpful to examine Merrill's complex poem "Lost in Translation" from Divine Comedies (1983), the poem Merrill places last among the poems from his first nine volumes in From the First Nine.

As Yenser points out, "Lost in Translation," is "at once a memoir and a poetics with metaphysical and epistemological aspects" (10). In the poem, Merrill echoes

Stevens's poetry to reinforce the authority of Valéry and Rilke evoked in the poem and to clarify his own metapoetic interests. While the poem's ostensible subject is putting together a puzzle, the poem also concerns itself with the epistemology (as well as the supernatural factors) involved in other processes of translation: translating a poem from one language into another and translating the memories of painful experience into art. Merrill signals that the poem is concerned with the "theatre of trope" by his self-reflexive comments: Merrill uses the line "hidden here is a freak fragment" (DC 6) to refer not only to a psychic's vision of a hidden piece of a literal puzzle but also to alert the reader to a number of other fragments or "puzzle pieces"--Rilke's translation of Valéry's poem "Palme," Mademoiselle's mysterious heritage, the name of the "minor lion attending on Gérôme" (DC 8), and the puzzle piece the boy pockets--hidden in either italics or parentheses within the poem. Furthermore, Merrill's use of hypostatization--"the fluted nouns / Made taller, lonelier than life" and "The owlet umlaut peeps and hoots / Above the open vowel" (DC 9-10)--announces the poem's self-conscious interest in the making of linguistic artifacts and in those artifacts' attempts to "translate" the magnitude of experience.

The poem's most significant metapoetic concern is the

struggle between the imagination and a chaotic reality, as each presses back against the violence of the other--that is, the struggle between a chaotic experience that pushes toward deconstruction and the imagination's "will-to-structural-elaboration," as Merrill calls it in "Losing the Marbles" (LS 87). Indeed, such an attempt at structural elaboration and ordering forms the central action of the poem--the struggle by the boy and Mademoiselle to discover a coherent picture among the seemingly unconnected, randomly-shaped pieces of their long-awaited puzzle and, in doing so, to make sense of the apparently meaningless events of a "summer without parents" (DC 4). The first stanza of the poem establishes a tie between chaotic life and an unsolved puzzle by suggesting that life, "Full of unfulfillment," can result in one of two opposing fates: it can remain random and meaningless ("fallen piecemeal into place") or, through an imaginative feat, ordered and meaningful ("Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands") (DC 4). The form of the poem dramatizes the tendency toward deconstruction and chaos by jumbling past, remote past, and present experiences as well as incomplete puzzles and missing pieces--all of which must be reordered and solved. At the same time, the poem itself enacts the opposing process of creation and ordering on a number of levels, as evidenced by the poem's string of

verbs--"does borders," align," "form a more sophisticated unit," "formed," "Anchor," "Putting together Heaven."

Merrill also uses Stevens's color symbolism of blue and green to suggest the imagination's transformation of experience. At the beginning of the poem, the green felt covering for the table ("tense oasis of green felt") corresponds to the meaningless events of summer days "felt" or experienced by the boy, as he awaits the order that the artistic completion of the puzzle will bring. "As promised," by Mademoiselle and the Valéry poem ("Patience and still patience, / Patience beneath the blue!"), the puzzle arrives "out of the blue" (DC 5). As the boy and Mademoiselle begin to assemble it, they impose upon "the green abyss," or "the shrinking Green," first "two ragged wooden clouds" (also associated with the imagination in Stevens's poems such as "Sea Surface Full of Clouds") and then "a hundred blue / Fragments." Thus, in "Putting together Heaven," they enact the process by which imagination presses against the violence of chaotic reality.

This imaginative ordering, of course, is only provisional, as it always is in Merrill's and Stevens's poems. The puzzle begins to disassemble itself as soon as it is complete:

All too soon the swift

> Dismantling. Lifted by two corners,
> The puzzle hung together--and did not.
> Irresistibly a populace
> Unstitched of its attachments, rattled down. (DC 8-9)

Although the "blue" of the puzzle "holds out" for a while before crumbling into chaos, it is the green beneath--"the green / On which the grown-ups gambled. A green dusk . . . Last glow of west Green in the false eyes" (DC 9)--that remains, the green of past experience that must be "sounded" and ordered again on another occasion, in another poem.

Finally, "Lost in Translation" attempts (like so many of Merrill's and Stevens's poems) to confound the dichotomy between subject and object. In coupling concrete and abstract nouns and modifiers in his phrases "crystal hypothesis" and "self-effacing tree," Merrill attempts to blur the difference between imagination and experience, while, in a similar phrase, "Color of context," he also echoes the language of Stevens's "color of comedy," "momentary color," and "comic color of the rose."[12] Furthermore, Merrill develops a number of his characteristic puns using "page" and "feet" in the poem as a means of transcending dualism. In his lines,

> a small backward-looking slave or page-boy
> (Her son, thinks Mademoiselle mistakenly)
> Whose feet have not been found, (DC 7)

Merrill simultaneously suggests the processes of composing

the puzzle-part feet of the page-boy and composing a poem on a backward-looking page whose "missing feet" (and indeed misplaced couplet) will not be found until some sixty lines later:

> It's done. Here under the table all along
> Were those missing feet. It's done. (DC 8)

Later in the poem, Houri and Afreet (father and mother figures) "Both claim the Page"--that is, the child of the divorce as well as his literary rendering in the poem--as "He wonders whom to serve, / And what his duties are, and where his feet" ((DC 8).

Merrill's most complex attempt at transcending dualism in "Lost in Translation," however, comes at the end of the poem when (in echoing the language of his own translation of Valéry's poem "Palme") he introduces two of Stevens's most common metapoetic images--the palm and the angel:

> And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
> Color of context, imperceptibly
> Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
> To shade and fiber, milk and memory. (DC 10)

The "self-effacing tree" is a palm, anticipated by the oasis/mirage imagery early in the poem and the shape of the boy's puzzle piece ("an inchling, innocently branching palm") and evoked in Valéry's poem"

> These days which, like yourself,
> Seem empty and effaced
> Have avid roots that delve

To work deep in the waste.
Their shaggy systems, fed
Where shade confers with shade,
Can never cease or tire,
At the world's heart are found
Still tracking that profound
Water the heights require. (LS 73-74)

In his poetry, Stevens consistently uses the palm to suggest a fiction or imaginative ordering of experience: "cloudy palm / Remote on heaven's hill" (CP 68); "palms are clear in a total blue" (CP 86); "the conscience is converted into palms" (CP 59); and "the palm at the end of the mind" (CP 117). This palm, however, does not exist in a dichotomy with reality. Instead, in sending its "avid roots" to delve "deep in the waste" and in "tracking that profound / Water the heights require," it has become "a self-effacing tree, / Color of context," which cannot be distinguished from the reality it evokes or feeds upon. Furthermore, the palm rustles (or wrestles) with Stevens's necessary angel of the earth, which insists on pointing the way toward a knowing of both reality and the imagination. Thus, in developing his complex image of a deep-rooted palm rustling with Stevens's angel, Merrill attempts to repeat what he and Stevens strive for in poem after poem--that celebration of "the marriage / Of flesh and air."

Such a marriage, however, is uneasy at best, in Stevens's and Merrill's poems (as it is in "Lost in

Translation"). Even when Stevens and Merrill struggle most to fuse reality with the imagination or artifice, their language and images suggest that they cannot fully or permanently transcend the dichotomy that has haunted the post-Romantics. Thus, each poet faces what Merrill calls "Corot's principal dilemma--loyalty to the senses or to the imagination?" ("Notes on Corot" 158). For each, a choice must be made between a vital but threatening reality and the products and processes of the imagination, between Nature and Baudelaire's "need to surpass Nature" (33).

For Stevens, any choice between reality and imaginative artifice never seems final. In writing to Bernard Heringman in his letter of 20 March 1951, Stevens notes,

> Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time, and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that. (L 710)

This same ambivalence is reflected in Stevens's poems, with our sense of Stevens's preference depending on which poem or even part of a poem we happen to read. Thus, in poem after poem, Stevens celebrates what he calls in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" that "fictive covering" that "weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396). In "Peter Quince at the Clavier," for example, Stevens exults in the music of "Concealed imaginings" that "makes a constant

sacrament of praise" (CP 91). Thus, in the poem, as Riddel suggests, Stevens "pays homage" to the problem of the poet in a post-transcendental world, in which "art itself is the only refuge from time"--as provisional as that refuge may be (Clairvoyant Eye 76). Likewise, in "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade," the poet, according to Litz, insists "that a frivolous artifice is the necessary coloring of poetry" (113), by allowing the revolutionists to implore their captain,

> Ask us not to sing standing in the sun,
> Hairy-backed and hump-armed,
> Flat-ribbed and big-bagged.
> There is not pith in music
> Except in something fake.
> . . . . . .
>
> This must be the vent of pity,
> Deeper than a truer ditty
> Of the real that wrenches,
> Of the quick that's wry. (CP 102-03)

Just as many of Stevens's poems, however, reveal that he is also not the "conscious aesthete 'at war with reality'" that Untermeyer believed him to be ("Five American Poets" 160). Riddel claims that Stevens's late poetry "evidences the wish to get beneath appearances to a thing-itself . . . its own style seems intent on pulverizing the metaphors and myths by which the mind clothes reality" ("Contours" 136). Yet even many of the early poems of Harmonium make it clear that Stevens, like Crispin in "The

Comedian as the Letter C,"

> could not be content with counterfeit
> With masquerade of thought, with hapless words
> That must belie the racking masquerade,
> With fictive flourishes. (CP 39)

Thus, in "Metaphors of a Magnifico," the poet elects to return to the sensory elements of the scene--"The boots of the men clump / On the boards of the bridge. / The first white wall of the village / Rises through fruit-trees"-- when he cannot find success or satisfaction in using his mental powers to transform "Twenty men crossing a bridge, / Into a village" into a declarative proposition or a metaphor (CP 19). And, in "Bantams in Pine-Woods, "the speaker berates the "ten-foot poet" and his artificial "hoos" because they "pay no heed to the particulars of his world" (Riddel, Clairvoyant Eye 101). Even in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," in which the poet/speaker celebrates the imagination as "the substance in us that prevails" (CP 15), by the end of the poem the speaker aspires to be, not one of the "fops of fancy," but, as Riddel suggests, "poet of earth, of fluttering things and not of golden boughs" (Clairvoyant Eye 92).

Thus, in a few of his earliest poems and increasingly with his later poems, Stevens seems to become more conscious of the risks of committing himself and his poetics entirely

to artifice and the imagination. He gradually comes to question the imagination's distortions--"the words of things entangle and confuse" (CP 41)--and the detached coldness of artifice:

> Detached from us, from things as they are?
> Not to be part of the sun? To stand
>
> Remote and call it merciful?
> The strings are cold on the blue guitar. (CP 168)

Most of all, he begins to fear the isolation, the solipsism inherent in excessive indulgence of the imagination--a solipsism that causes the observer of Stevens's blackbird to mistake the bird's wings for the shadow of his coach's "equipage" (CP 94). Thus, in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," the poet and the imagination wrap themselves tightly within "a single shawl," a single room where "The world imagined is the ultimate good" and where "we forget each other and ourselves" (CP 524).

As a corrective to this potential solipsism, Stevens searches in his poems for what he calls in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" "incalculable balances" between the claims of the mind and the world (CP 386).[11] Thus, in "The Comedian as the Letter C," Crispin travels to Carolina to discover what Riddel calls a "provincial compromise between two extremes" (Clairvoyant Eye 97). As Lensing observes, "For Stevens, the persistent and elusive quest for the

mind's harmonious encounter with exterior objects was more than fundamental and absorbing; it was antecedent to all other human interests" (64).

Thus, for a variety of reasons--a joy in the vitality of the real, fears about the excesses of the imagination and artifice, and a concern for "incalculable balances"--Stevens cannot commit himself in his poetry to being the pure dandy driven by the "need to surpass Nature." Notably, in his self-consciously arranged Complete Poems, Stevens's final poem is "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself," in which the final line calls for "A new knowledge of reality" (CP 534).

Bates asserts that Stevens "modified aesthetic dandyism while absorbing it: characteristically, he is aesthete and dandy in a natural rather than artificial universe" (103). Ultimately, some of the very fears that cause him to maintain a doubleness in his life--fears of being charged with frivolity and distortion, fears of isolation or solipsism--prompt him to maintain a doubleness in his poetry. While Stevens found it redemptive to inject a somewhat covert element of dandyism into his life as an insurance lawyer, he found it necessary to inject a steady dose of reality into his poetry. As he notes in his Adagia,

Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems

> inevitably necessary to add, provided life is the better part of literature. (OP 158).

Merrill, by contrast, throughout his poetic career as well as his personal life, remains the truer dandy, who demonstrates the desire "of lifting . . . [himself] above Nature" (Baudelaire 33). Rather than fearing the excesses of artifice, Merrill early in life embraces them as the source of his faith in poetic transformations. Merrill recalls his early encounters with Baudelaire at Lawrenceville in "Days of 1941 and '44":

> In vain old Mr Raymond's sky-blue stare
> Paled with revulsion when I spoke to him
> About my final paper. "Jim,"
> He quavered, "don't, don't write on Baudelaire."
>
> But viewed from deep in my initial
> Aesthetic phase, brought like a lukewarm bath to
> Fizzy life by those mauve salts,
>
> Paradises (and if artificial
> So much the better) promised more than Matthew
> Arnold. Faith rose dripping from the false. (LS 24)

Indeed, throughout most of his life, Merrill (like Auden), according to Keller, celebrates "the value of consciously invoked illusion. The more theatrical the art--that is, the more it proclaims and delights in its own artifice--the better" (206).

Unlike Stevens, who fears the solipsism of the Interior Paramour's "single shawl," Merrill welcomes the dandy's isolation, even retreating in the title of his most recent

volume of poems to "The Inner Room." In fact, Merrill sees the isolation produced by artifice as a necessary protection against the threat of reality. In "Prism," for example, the speaker, after a brief glimpse of a harsh reality--

> 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 (WS 16-17)--

welcomes the return of the illusion and safety of the world seen through a prism:

> A toneless waltz glints through the pea-sized funhouse.
> The day is breaking someone else's heart. (WS 17)

While Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar" points out the coldness of a world of artifice, Merrill's fiddler in "Dancing, Joyously Dancing" (while imitating Stevens's guitarist in many ways) draws "cold pulses with fiddlestick . . . Such as breath makes upon a frosted air" in order to evade the "morning's imperfections" (FP 19). In addition, as Keller points out, Merrill believes "that love, our necessary fiction, could be sustained only by masks" (207). Thus, in "Variations: The Air Is Sweetest That a Thistle Guards," lovers are masked with "the red- / Checkered-lavender and bordered with seed pearls," disguising the "dry heart" and "cruel, vivid lives" beneath (FN 15) and

preventing the painful recognition Merrill makes in "For Proust"--"the loved one always leaves" (WS 19). In "Days of 1964," when Merrill discovers his housekeeper Kleo wearing "the erotic mask / Worn the world over by illusion," he asks, "was love illusion?" only to comprehend the necessity of masking by way of his lover beside him, "masked, / As who was not, in laughter, pain, and love" (ND 55-56).

Briefly, at mid-career, Merrill begins to discover the need to step outside the dandy's isolating artifice and make contact with reality. As he notes of Buddhist priests in Bangkok in his essay "The Beaten Path" (1957),

> Consider that the priests here (in robes of gamboge, a color that means Cambodia) must renew their vows only for the month ahead. They may go back into the world whenever and as often as they please. This may account for some of the smiles, that there is nobody who hasn't gone back into the world, as we all should, over and over and over again. (150)

Even as early as "The Parrot," Merrill predicts a day when

> Our revels now are ended, pretty Poll,
> For midnight bells extol
> The individual face behind the mask. (FP 50)

Thus, in his transitional volume The Fire Screen, Merrill shows signs of desiring a more direct relationship with the actual world. In "To My Greek," Merrill prefers nakedness to masking:

> Dear nut
> Uncrackable by nuance or debate,
> Eat with your fingers, wear your bloomers to bed,

Under my skin stay nude. (FS 19)

While Merrill, true dandy that he is, is never able to achieve this nakedness himself, his need to achieve it vicariously through a relationship with a lover like Strato in the poem allows us to understand his later comment in The Book of Ephraim that "However seldom in my line to feel, / I most love those for whom the world is real" (CLS 51).

By the time Merrill writes "Flying from Byzantium," however, he "has had to abandon the attempt to remove his masks," according to Keller (234). Having immersed himself for a while in Yeats's country of "dying generations" and "sensual music"--a world of laundromat, gray cat, and Strato--he has glimpsed the prophecy (presented in "To My Greek") whereby Strato and their love grow "stout, serviceable gray. / A fishwife shawled in fourth-hand idiom / Spouting my views to earth and heaven" (FS 21). Praying "God save me from more living" (FS 29), Merrill boards the "priceless metal bird" and flees to Yeats's holy city of golden bough and "artifice of eternity" (FS 31). Even earlier, in "From the Cupola," Merrill recognizes that love's and life's illusions must be protected by artifice rather than be exposed to the harsh light of reality. Unlike Stevens's speaker in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," who

commands "Let be be finale of seem. . . . Let the lamp affix its beam" (CP 64), Merrill's narrator in "From the Cupola" requests that the "seem" of artifice be spared brutal destruction:

> The point won't be to stage
> One of our torchlit hunts for truth. Truth asks
> Just this once to sleep with fiction, masks
> Of tears and laughter on the moonstruck page. (FS 38)

He instead suggests that we see by the lamp of fiction so that

> All our pyrotechnic flights
> Miss the sleeper in the pitch-dark breast.
> He is love:
> He is everyone's blind spot.
> We see according to our lights. (FS 46)

Even in the latter stages of his life and in his latest poetry, Merrill has resolutely maintained his commitment to the dandy's mask, even when ageing and the events of his life may have caused him to perceive the inadequacy of artifice to shield him from the cruelest reality--death. Merrill's struggle to maintain illusion in the face of reality's destructiveness is most evident in "Prose of Departure," a prose piece interspersed with hokku, in Merrill's latest volume The Inner Room (1988). In "Prose of Departure," Merrill's travels in Japan are interrupted by thoughts of his dying friend Paul (critic David Kalstone) and by surrealistic images of his own death:

> Pictures on a wall:
> a View of Fuji challenged
> by The Dying Gaul.
>
> Syringe in bloom. Bud
> drawn up through a stainless stem--
> O perilous blood!
>
> Tests, cultures . . . Weeks from
> one to the next. That outer
> rim of the maelstrom
>
> hardly moved. Its core
> at nightmare speed churned onward,
> a devolving roar:
>
> Awake--who? why here?
> what room was this?--till habit
> shaded the lit fear. (IR 69)

In the face of these nightmarish fears of death and the images of the death of a culture (gravestones "vertically incised" for the victims of Hiroshima), Merrill finds refuge in the formalized rituals of a culture that takes "care to place its ugly realities out of sight" (IR 71). His greatest consolation comes in "a form of conscious evasion": Japanese dance-drama at the Noh, in which the protagonist assumes a series of masks (pearl-diver, mother's ghost, dragon), each of whom "has entered the realm of legend and artifice to become 'a something else thereby'" (IR 60). Even then, however, the images of puppet-like movements and emotions suggest Merrill's doubts about the ultimate success of artifice in warding off life's ultimate threat. Disoriented, "Blindfolded by their masks," the actors grope

with the palms of their feet across the stage (IR 61). Yet, in the beauty and artifice of their formalized dance, Merrill finds an anaesthesia to numb his sense of mortality, as he recalls the story of an Emperor ordering a legendary dance troop to perform for a childhood friend before the friend's execution:

> On this occasion they outdid themselves. Yet well before the stars had set, the doomed man turned to his host: "The Son of Heaven has shown unmerited consideration, but really, can't we call it a night and conclude our business without further ado?" The Emperor raised his eyebrows: "My poor friend," he smiled, "haven't you understood? Your head was cut off an hour ago." (IR 61)

Just as the dandies of Baudelaire's day struggled as the "last representatives of human pride" against "the rising tide of democracy" (29), so Merrill refuses to concede his dandyism to the horrors of modern death, to the ghastly forces of twentieth-century existence. When the word "dying" tolls in his ear (as "Forlorn!" like a bell tolls the speaker back to earth in "Ode to a Nightingale"), Merrill refuses to concede that "fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do." Instead, just as in "Processional" (his final poem in The Inner Room) Merrill achieves a resurrecting, alchemical transformation--

> in three lucky strokes of word golf LEAD
> Once again turns (LOAD, GOAD) to GOLD (IR 95)--

so in a single stroke of "word golf" in "Prose of Departure"

he transforms "dying" into its homophone "dyeing." In doing so, he clings to a vision of death as a ritualized transformation into artifice--a kimono:

> Dyeing. A homophone deepens the trope. Surrendering to Earth's colors, shall we not <u>be</u> Earth before we know it? Venerated therefore is the skill which, prior to immersion, inflicts upon a sacrificial length of crêpe de Chine certain intricate knottings no hue can touch. So that one fine day, painstakingly unbound, this terminal gooseflesh, the fable's whole eccentric
>
> star-puckered moral--
> white, never-to-blossom buds
> of the mountain laurel--
>
> may be read as having emerged triumphant from the vats of night. (<u>IR</u> 72)

Thus, in a heroic attempt of the imagination to press back against the reality of modern death, Merrill remains committed to the dandyism treasured by Baudelaire: "a sunset; like the declining daystar . . . glorious, without heat and full of melancholy" (29).

# NOTES

[1] Untermeyer reacts less favorably than Ransom to Stevens's metapoetry, commenting in "Departure from Dandyism" on Stevens's tendency "to mix program and performance, to write (too often, it seems, poetry) poetry about poetry" and, as a result, to create "an art that was insulated by its preoccupation with esthetics" (11).

[2] While Stevens and Merrill give equal attention to the subject of poetry in their poems, Stevens does so deliberately, noting that "Poetry is the subject of the poem, / From this the poem issues and / To this returns" (CP 176). Merrill, on the other hand, writes poetry about poetry more reluctantly, commenting to Ashley Brown that "Writing poems about the act of writing both attracts and repulses me" (47) and remarking to Donald Sheehan that

> It's one [the subject of the difficulties or joys of being a poet] I've tried to resist. In principle, I'm quite against the persona of the poem talking about the splendors and miseries of writing; it seems to me far too many poets today make the act of writing one of their primary subject. Obviously I'm following the crowd myself, but I've hoped as much as possible to sugar the pill by being a bit rueful and amusing about having to do so. (32)

[3] Terrance J. King argues that the poems by Stevens

involve metalanguage as well as metapoetry "because he is concerned with the poem, not just as a work of art, but as a composition of words as words" (599).

[4] Keller claims that Merrill's use of self-conscious commentary in his poems is borrowed from Auden, who "provides precedents for this sort of commentary" (201). Keller also notes, however, that Auden does not "strive for more sophisticatedly modern form of mimesis to capture human perception, to mirror the action of human thought" (206). Both Merrill and Stevens strive for this very kind of mimesis.

[5] Merrill concentrates on eyes, glass, and perception in his early poems, but Stevens continues and perhaps even increases his awareness of perception in his later poems, perhaps as a result of his increased concern for the distortion and potential solipsism of the imagination and his increased sense of the need for an unclouded attention to reality.

[6] Some of the most striking echoes of the language of Stevens's poems occur in Merrill's poems concerning perception. "With your sunbeam gaze assign" from Merrill's "The Green Eye" echoes the diction and rhythm of "Let the lamp affix its beam" of Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice Cream," as "Let green put on the livery of grief" matches

"Let be be finale of seem." The "Enchanter" stanza of Merrill's "The Black Swan" and Merrill's "A Vision of the Garden" recall the phrasing and imagery of "The Snow Man." A number of lines from "The Formal Lovers"--

> Their own will
>
> Is at once fever and form, is like
> Sun in the littered studio,
> Seurat's destruction of a lake,
> Or my desire to utter you
> In words, in movement, in a stroke
>
> Of bronze (BS 22)--

match the rhythm and syntax of the opening lines from "Peter Quince at the Clavier":

> Just as my fingers on these keys
> Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make a music, too.
>
> Music is feeling, then, not sound;
> And thus it is that what I feel,
> Here in this room, desiring you,
>
> Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
> Is music. (CP 90)

Perhaps most striking is the echo of Stevens's conclusion to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" ("You will have stopped revolving except in crystal") in Merrill's lines from "Prism": "Yet the gem / Revolves in space, the vision shuttles off" (WS 17).

[7] Riddel describes Stevens's eventual "rejection of all mythologies and ideologies, in the sense that he rejects any

final synthesis, any ultimate fictions, knowing that one's moment-by-moment experience is always destroying the old by way of discovering the new" (Clairvoyant Eye 94). Keller describes how Auden, by contrast, moved away from the provisional--the role of language as creator--toward a belief in Truth and absolutes in which "a purely private verbal world is not possible" (230-31). Keller also notes that while Merrill in The Changing Light at Sandover is "Happy to entertain orderly systems provisionally, and to be entertained by them," he does not consider "the word of his angels as 'the real Word'" (230). Keller concedes that "In denying absolute truths and accepting fiction as a substitute, Merrill aligns himself with other modernists such as Stevens" rather than with Auden, whom she considers Merrill's dominant influence (232).

[8] In Merrill's "A Survival," the angel of imagination and inspiration struggles unsuccessfully with the earth: "Outside, the angel fumbles with a rake" (CTYP 65).

[9] Merrill's comments about gaudy words and grand philosophical terms named like colors are from his interview with Ross Labrie ("James Merrill at Home" 23). In his interview with Ashley Brown, Merrill recalls, "My reaction to Stevens, for instance, was merely that it was wonderful to mention strange colors along with big abstract words"

(41-42). To McClatchy, Merrill speaks of "Stevens' odd glamorizing of philosophical terms" (78). In writing "On Wallace Stevens' Centenary," Merrill remembers discovering in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" vocabulary by turns irresistibly gaudy and irresistibly abstract" (117).

[10] Keller attributes Merrill's use of combinations of abstract and concrete nouns and modifiers to the influence of Auden's style. However, most of the supposedly comparable phrases that Keller cites in Auden--"dozing afternoons," "lenient amusing shore," "ignorant shadow"--seem to be instances of "personifying abstractions" rather than the coupling of concreteness and abstraction that she discovers in Merrill's "Auden-like phrases" (204).

[11] A number of critics believe that Stevens commits himself unconditionally to reality rather than seeking a balance between the imagination and reality. Doggett claims that, starting with Harmonium, Stevens's "allegiance is to earth, and the sentiment is expressed in many celebrations of the reality that is the substance and support of his existence (Stevens' Poetry ix). Riddel argues that Stevens's "rage for order and appetite for the pure abstraction could never deny the vitality of chaos and with it the primacy of the ordinary" ("Blue Voyager" 66).

[12] "Color of comedy" appears in Stevens's "An Ordinary

Evening in New Haven" (CP 477). "Comic color of the rose" and "momentary color" appear in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (CP 384, 397).

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