

Music More Abstract Than Metaphor: Locating a Poetics of Tone
in Henry James and James Merrill

by

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Abstract

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Music More Abstract Than Metaphor explores a number of issues surrounding speakers, audiences, the ear and the music of a writer's speech. It also deals with the relation of a writer's voice to his written, and thus graphically delimited, performances. Specifically it seeks to locate *tone*, traditionally understood as mere style or manner of expression, inside a much broader category of linguistic and textual hermeneutics. Starting with a history of *tone* and a genealogy of its original relation to harmonic theory, *Music More Abstract Than Metaphor* locates tone as the fundament of any viable poetics. Later, taking its cue from post-Romantic music, the whole-tone scale and nineteenth-century theories of acoustics, this dissertation attempts to apply a more evolved definition of its subject to the centrality of dictation in the late manner of Henry James and, finally, the experimental works of American poet James Merrill.

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Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Sounded Relation: Defining Tone	6
Chapter Two: Audible Vibration: The Tone of Henry James	40
Chapter Three: ‘A Concert of One’: The New Criticism and the Growth of a Poet’s Craft	83
Chapter Four: The <i>Novelization</i> of Verse, or Romancing the Tone: James Merrill in Quest of Narrative	121
Chapter Five: ‘An Immeasurable Keyboard’: <i>The Changing Light at Sandover</i>	156
Afterword	186
Bibliography	189

Introduction

All discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score.

—Lacan, “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious” (1968)¹

I must ask you to consider our mouth with its different constituent parts as an instrument upon which are able to play certain meaningful tones that together we call language. Like any other instrument, this one can be played with or without notes ... Reading then consists in the art of playing our language instrument from the page of notes before us.

—Heinrich Stefani, *Beschreibung meines einfachen*

Lesemethode für Mütter (1807)²

Almost inevitably when we speak of “tone” in a literary work we are speaking of a group of issues surrounding speakers and audiences. The first of these issues is the pre-spoken intention; in other words, what the speaker means to say and how he means to say it. The other issues have to do with what, in the end, he thinks has been communicated *above* and *beyond* the words themselves. Readers often are wont to classify such “above and beyonds” as innuendoes, subtleties, or nuances. In a Victorian novel, such innuendoes, subtleties, and nuances are never mere exigencies of the text; rather, they aim to form internally a set of complex meanings fundamental to that novel’s putative success. To *say* one thing and *mean* another is seldom more

¹ *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), 154.

² Quoted in Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 33.

duplicitous than pragmatic; such is the strange economy of linguistic sense: meaning as eternally translatable. The classic definition of this type of tone can be found in Cleanth Brooks' and Robert Penn Warren's popularization of New Critical doctrine, *Understanding Poetry* (1938):

In ordinary life, a great deal of our meaning—our basic attitude toward the *what* and *whom* of any transaction—is indicated by the tone. In a poem this is also true, but the poet must depend on the words on a page to take the place of his expressive human voice; he must choose and arrange his words so that the poem will dictate to the reader the desired tone, with all the subtle modifications of meaning.

(Brooks 181)

They go on to declare that their own intention is to generate an understanding of “how this may be accomplished” (181); thence follows the classic New Critical redaction of traditional notions of how poems may be directed toward the reception of certain pre-conceived audiences into how, specifically, the voices in poems may be addressing themselves: or, the poet may be “talking to himself.” But, as they add, “even in this talking to one’s self, there is a sense of audience, and *a law imposed by this sense*” (182, emphasis mine). Notwithstanding the evenhanded, amenable tones of Brooks and Warren, they do betray a well-meaning somberness, which colors many a representation of the critical establishment at mid-century (albeit linked to the idea that poetry and knowledge of it could accomplish something in the mind of the individual reader). They seem completely to ignore the sonorities of poetry and fiction. In short, they favor the tight-lipped, socially astute innuendoes (premonitions,

shades, and unspoken intentions) of, say, dialogue in a novel as well as the rhetorical curiosities of a Donne or a Crashaw while ignoring the sheer *sound*-sense of sentences, lines, and paragraphs.

The New Critics and their counterparts in Britain wrote voluminously on tone in poetry and the Anglo-American novel. Reuben Brower, James Merrill's literature professor at Amherst, lectured extensively on what he considered "the implied social relationship of the speaker to his audience and the manner he adopts in addressing his auditor" (Brower 22). In *Practical Criticism* (1929), I. A. Richards singled out tone as an important mode of meaning and a means toward understanding both the spoken and unspoken intentions of the speaker in his relation to his ideal reader (Richards 182). In the same year that Richards published *Practical Criticism*, Robert Frost singled out tone in the preface to *A Way Out: A One-Act Play*, mentioning the centrality of a "speaking tone of voice entangled in the words [of a sentence] and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination" (Frost 713).

Predating New Critical notions of tone and voice, Mikhail Bakhtin and V. N. Voloshinov theorized the nonverbal aspect of tone. In their article, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry," they write: "[L]inguistic matter constitutes only part of the utterance; there exists another part that is nonverbal, which corresponds to the context of the enunciation" (Todorov 41). Bakhtin notes that "the situation enters into the utterance as a necessary constitutive element of its semantic structure" (Ibid. 41). Such a conception of the utterance goes beyond both Brower's and Richards' evaluation of the implied social relation between speaker and audience; it factors in spatio-temporal elements under a "common horizon" shared by all who hear the

utterance (Ibid. 42). For Bakhtin, *intonation* lies “at the boundary between the verbal and the unverbal, between the said and the unsaid” (Ibid. 46).

Langdon Hammer locates tone as “an interpretative construction of some putative interiority on the basis of gestures and signs” (Hammer 76). Hammer echoes F. R. Leavis’ remark in his essay “Sociology and Literature” (1962) that “inwardness is partially expressed through the metaphor of voice, accent, and tone. The assumption is that what is inward can be externalised by the voice” (Leavis 203).

So what is tone? What comprises a tone? Where do we locate it—on the page *or* in the act of perception? Does tone give pleasure? Because essentially unspoken, does a tonal understanding give the reader the feeling of being an *insider*? Is tone cliquish? Is it a way of signaling (or winking) to a reader, or is it the bestowal of a crucial password to a reader—signifying kinship or mutual understanding? Or is it the opposite—an abstract, purely aesthetic, and restless refusal to grant *constative* meaning? Questions such as these, questions which are constantly interacting with the experience of a text, are essential means towards understanding a variety of texts and how language *performs* in them.³ Tone is a slippery term. It is as connected to sound, pitch, timbre, color or frequency as to manner of expression (intonation and accent) and the shading of meaning. One theorist places it in the province of those things “which might sustain up to a certain point the attention of a musical theory, as was the case in the long history of the operatic recitative, or even a stylistics” (Lacoue-Labarthe 159).⁴

³ To slightly modify Frost’s advice about the dramatic qualities of great poetry is to mark the starting point of one conception of texts as *performative*, albeit in the non-Austinian sense.

⁴ In the same essay Lacoue-Labarthe goes on to ask: “What is to be made of the voice, of *lexis*, and of phonation if they concern not only the ‘psyche,’ desire, or even, as Barthes would have it, *le corps en*

The existence of tone can signal an a-textual subversion of fixed meaning, and thus support a definition, or version, of tone, which is provisional and improvised. Tone can be imagined, then, as a thin surface or crust, both clinging to and hovering above a word or group of words; it is nothing less than an ingeniously constructed veil (and, by extension, an *aura*, *specter*, and *ghost* of language). On the other hand, a single tone may dominate a given piece of writing and thus potentially lend itself as a device for understanding the relations between the ideas therein; a key, if you will, that ideally opens some of the locks.

jouissance,' but equally an investment that is social, historical, cultural, aesthetic—in short, *ethical*, in the strict sense of the word *ethos*?' (159).

Chapter 1: The Sounded Relation: Defining Tone

Words in sequence have a form to the mind's ear and the mind's tongue and larynx, even when silently read.

—I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (1929)⁵

1.

The marriage of sound and sense in writing and oratory originates with Aristotle. In his *Art of "Rhetoric,"* he explains that the one true foundation of rhetoric is psychology, or the science of mind. This fulfills Plato's earlier definition of rhetoric, mainly the science, or skill, of "winning men's minds by words." As one commentator writes: "The true rhetorician is assumed to have settled the question whether all mind is one, or multiform. . . . If it is multiform, he must know what are its different varieties; he must also be acquainted with all the different forms of argument and know what particular forms of it are likely to be effective as instruments of persuasion in each particular case" (Freese in Aristotle xxi). In other words, a rhetorician must have knowledge of his audience's type, personality, and level of comprehension; he must shape his discourse to fit its receivers. Implicit in this injunction to know the mindset of a particular audience is the necessity of knowing the constraints of the particular occasion of words. Audience and occasion find themselves inextricably intertwined.

⁵ *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*, 14.

For Aristotle, style is concerned not with what one ought to say but with how one ought to say it. For him it is important that “speech appear of a certain character” (III, i, 1-3). He connects style with delivery, “which is of the greatest importance, but has not yet been treated by anyone” (III, i, 1-3). He continues:

In fact, it only made its appearance late in tragedy and rhapsody, for at first the poets themselves acted their tragedies. It is clear, therefore, that there is something of the sort in rhetoric as well as in poetry Now delivery is a matter of voice, as to the mode in which it should be used for each particular emotion; when it should be loud, when low, when intermediate; and how the tones, that is, shrill, deep, and intermediate, should be used, and what rhythms are adapted to each subject.⁶ For there are three qualities that are considered—volume, harmony, rhythm. (III, i, 1-3, 3-6)

There is, then, the clear sense that audience dictates the appropriate emotion; delivery reinforces that emotion and its reproduction in the audience. Sound, however, is problematic in Aristotle’s conception. He cites a fundamental disagreement between the functions of sound in poetry and prose:

The poets, as was natural, were the first to give an impulse to style; for words are imitations, and the voice also, which of all our parts is best adapted for imitation, was ready at hand; thus the arts of the rhapsodists, actors, and others, were fashioned. And, as the poets,

⁶ Cope in commentary on Book III writes: “The tone of voice, the expression of the features, the gestures employed, the kind of language used quite independently of the arguments, will materially assist the impression of moral (or any particular) character which the orator wishes to assume, on the mind of the audience” (Cope III, 2).

although their utterances were devoid of sense, appeared to have gained their reputation through style, it was a poetical style that first came into being, as that of Gorgias. Even now the majority of the uneducated think that such persons express themselves most beautifully, whereas this is not the case, for the style of prose is not the same as that of poetry. (III, i, 6-9)

In the second chapter of Book III Aristotle disparages disagreeable sounds in poetry, faulting their inarticulate character: “Forms of words are also faulty, if they do not express an agreeable sound” (III, ii, 10-11).

“Agreeable sound” is established in the *exordium* or beginning of a speech, “as the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute-playing; for all these are beginnings, and as it were a paving the way for what follows” (III, xiv, 1-5). Aristotle emphasizes the flute-playing simile, saying that just as the flutist should begin “by playing whatever [he] can execute skillfully and attach it to the key-note,” so in epideictic speeches the speaker “should give the key-note and then attach it to the main subject” (III, xiv, 1-5). In the next section he makes the distinction between 1.) epideictic speeches and 2.) forensic speeches and epic poems, by saying that in the former case the speaker is at greater liberty to amuse his audience with topics not necessarily connected to the body of the speech, and that, in the latter cases, the *exordium* can provide “a sample of the subject, in order that the hearers may know beforehand what it is about, and that the mind may not be kept in suspense” (III, xiv, 5-7). He then quotes the *exordia* of Homer (“Sing the wrath, O muse,” from the *Iliad*, and “Tell me of the man, O muse,” from the *Odyssey*). For Aristotle such *exordia*

(and he gives additional examples from tragedy and comedy) clarify the goal and purpose of a speech. We can take him to mean, then, that epic and forensic *exordia* are both aural and semantic, preparing the ear with beautiful sounds and preparing the mind with a foretaste of what is to follow. Epideictic *exordia* are considered closer in affinity to the *proemium*, which according to Cope, bear the “same relation as the prologue to a tragedy, or the prelude to a piece of music.” He continues:

But here we must point out a difference between the opening as applied to epideictic speeches and to the other kinds of rhetoric. In the former, namely the connexion between the opening and the body of the speech is allowed to be much less close than in the other two. For here there is no real interest at stake, the author is allowed a much greater liberty ... a license which would be intolerable in a case for instance of life and death, or in the suggestion of a course of action which may involve the safety or ruin of a state. Here the audience are too eager to come to the point to admit any trifling with their anxiety. The exordium accordingly of the epideictic branch of rhetoric is rather to be compared to the *proemium* For the flute-player in contending for the prize opens his performance with a flourish, by which he thinks he can display his powers and his instrument to their best advantage and recuse the favourable attention of the judges, which has usually no connexion whatsoever with that which is to follow, but gradually works round until it connects itself with the *exordium*, the real commencement of his theme. (Cope III, 337-38)

Understandably, these Classical texts with their dependence on other, perhaps more nuanced uses of similar terms, present a contemporary scholar with a number of problems, not the most serious of which is the reliability of our equivalents. E. M. Cope, whose commentary is itself the product of nineteenth-century classical scholarship, alternately translates “theme” as “tone” and even “cue.” But each of these terms points to a radical concern at the beginning of any speech: the ability to find and express things in the right *key*. Of the *exordium*, which stands between the *proemium* and the body of the speech, it is the responsibility to lend a tone to what follows. Using a more blatantly musical metaphor, Cope observes: “It appears to be one or more *notes* struck, or a bar played, to mark the character of the piece, as the time or the key or perhaps the mode, or *tonos*, ‘tune, air,’—one or all; and corresponds in its use and its application pretty nearly to the key note” (Cope 338). Thus Aristotle establishes a notion of tone as setting or atmosphere, tone as a sound- and thought-space to be occupied by an audience for the length of a speech. This is all to be done through the sounds of words and their meanings, as appropriate to the time and the place. The tones simply prepare us for what is to come.

At this point, the notion of *style* seems still to be the property of the poetic schools and the early rhetoricians of the school of Gorgias. Aristotle disparages rhetorical styles that upset the sound-sense balance, which, in other words, place the power of sound above the power of content, idea, and form.

2.

Only three hundred years later, with Cicero and Quintilian, would the specific concerns of oratorical delivery, or *actio*, be examined and taught. Both authors discuss matters which Aristotle overlooked or deemed unimportant to his theory; these include articulation of the voice and pronunciation of words (which we would translate as “elocution”) and the body gestures which accompany public speaking. Cicero, in Book III of *De Oratore*, notes the singular importance of knowledge of grammar and syntax but also mastery of the voice:

[We] must also regulate our tongue and breath and actual tone of voice. I want neither excessive precision nor yet slackness in the pronunciation of the letters, neither faintness or feebleness nor yet excessive fullness and volume in the utterance of the words. For on the question of voice I am not yet speaking of points that concern delivery [*actionis*], but about a matter that seems to me to be connected with utterance as such [*sed hoc quod mihi cum sermone quasi coniunctum videtur*]: these are certain faults which everyone without exception desires to escape—a soft or effeminate tone of voice [*vocis sonus*], or one that is unmusical and out of tune [*quasi extra modum absona atque absurda*]. (III, xi, 40-42)

It would seem, then, that for Cicero tone is the character of a particular voice. Either it is pleasing or awkward, and if the latter, should be corrected. However, Cicero makes a distinction between, on the one hand, what seems to be the larger

issue of delivery [*actionis*] and, on the other, “a matter that seems to be connected to utterance” [*sed hoc quod mihi cum sermone quasi coniunctum videtur*]. It is not clear whether “the matter that seems to be connected to utterance”—utterance here being taken to mean pronunciation—is something which a person can correct. Could it be that Cicero is referring to impediments of speech, i.e., intrinsic problems in the voice, rather than affectations of speech, such as arcane or regional word pronunciations? Central to Cicero’s conception of good oratory is a mastery of something like “correct speaking,” which stresses moderation over excess. He adds:

There is one fault that some persons deliberately affect: certain people enjoy using a rustic countrified pronunciation, with the object that if their speech is in this tone it may seem to preserve a greater flavour of antiquity; just as your friend Lucius Cotta, Catulus, appears to me to take pleasure in a heavy tone and a rustic pronunciation, and thinks that what he says will seem to have a flavour of the good old days if it is downright countrified. I on the contrary like your tone of voice and delicate precision [*tuus sonus et subtilitas ista delectate*]—I do not at the moment mean precision of language [*omitto verborum*], though that is of chief importance, but it is the product of method, and learnt from literature, and strengthened by practice in reading and in speaking,—but I mean actual charm of utterance [*sed hanc dico suavitatem quae exit ex ore*], a merit which as among the Greeks it is peculiar to Attica so in Latin speech is specially the attribute of this city. (III, xi, 42-43)

Here the distinction Cicero makes between “precision of language” and “charm of utterance” is even more problematic than the previous one. “Charm of utterance” can neither be learned by method nor by study. It seems to originate in a particular place and to be practiced by its inhabitants. The tone, or sound, of a good speaking voice is therefore conditioned by its city or region. Likewise, that city or region holds up an unspoken tone-standard, or accent, as the desired norm for the rest of the speakers of the language.⁷ A person who wanted to reproduce such “charm of utterance” might go to Rome or Athens to listen, imitate, and thus appropriate the tone-standard. He could not simply learn it from books.

The next reference to tone in Book III of *De Oratore* comes in Cicero’s discussions of the rules for “ornate style.” As with the affected, countrified tones of the previous section, Cicero counsels his reader against excessive ornament and showing-off. Like Aristotle, his explorations into audience desire reveal a cunning, nascent psychology. “[It] is hard,” he writes, “to say why exactly it is that the things which most strongly gratify our senses and excite them most vigorously at their first appearance, are the ones from which we are most speedily estranged by a feeling of disgust and satiety” (III, xxv, 98). Audiences want to be entertained and moved, but after a period of time novelties die. Likewise Cicero counsels against excessive pleasure and pain, as the result of over-coloring in writing and delivery. He adds:

Hence although we hope to win a ‘Bravo, capital!’ as often as possible,
I don’t want too much of ‘Very pretty, charming!—albeit the actual

⁷ For example, the term *Hochdeutsch* implies a German tone-standard, originating in Northern Germany.

ejaculation ‘Couldn’t be better!’ is one I should like to hear frequently; but all the same, this applause in the middle of a speech and this unlimited praise had better have some shadow and background, to make the spot of high light appear to stand out more prominently.

When Roscius speaks the lines

since for the wise

Honour is valour’s prize and not its prey,

he never uses the action at his command, but just throws them off, so he can put his whole weight into the next lines—

But what see I? A sword-girt warrior

Seated within the sanctuary shrine!

—which he delivers with a stare of stupefied surprise. Again, how quietly and gently and with what little energy the other great actor gives the line

What succour shall I seek?

For he presses on:

O father! O fatherland! O palace of Priam!

—on which he could not work up such an energetic delivery if he had used up his whole supply of energy on the preceding gesture. Nor did the actors see this sooner than the poets themselves did, or indeed sooner than the composers of the musical accompaniment, for both poets and composers employ *a definite fall in tone and then a rise, a*

sinking and a swell, variations, pauses. (III, xxvi, 101-103, emphasis added)

In the preceding passage, tone functions to optimal effect in a wavelike fashion.

While a later chapter will investigate the wavelike nature of sound and scientific discoveries in the nineteenth century, let it suffice here to say that as early as Cicero there is germinal knowledge of how tone's wavelike (falling, rising, sinking, swelling) character is pleasurable to listeners and beneficial to speakers. Cicero also shows that actors, poets, and composers, people in vastly differing social and linguistic roles, have uncannily similar understandings of tone's functionality.

Toward the end of Book III, Cicero examines the connections between tone and the emotions. He posits a correlation between emotion, facial expression, and tone of voice, saying that "every look on [a person's] face and utterance of his voice are like the stirrings of harp, and sound according as they are struck by each successive emotion" (III, lvii, 216). Based on differing emotions, he differentiates the various tones of voice "keyed up like the strings of an instrument": "high, low, quick, slow, *forte*, *piano*" and a "medium note" which mediates between the extremes. As in the passage quoted above, the wavelike character of tones is betrayed in a variety of terms, such as *tenuto*, *staccato*, *diminuendo*, *crescendo*. The voice is treated as another musical instrument, sharing a similar vocabulary of descriptive adverbs. Cicero concludes that "there are none of these varieties that cannot be regulated by the control of art; they are the colours available for the actor, as for the painter, to secure variety" (III, lvii, 216).

A deep-set fear and avoidance of the *monotonous* is evident throughout *De Oratore*; this is never as pronounced as in the expostulation on the care of the human voice in the penultimate section. It is there that Cicero states the importance of modulating one's tone of voice. "What is better suited," he asks his listeners, "to please our ears and secure an agreeable delivery than alternation and variation and change?" (III, ix, 224). He offers the following anecdote:

Accordingly the same Gracchus (as you, Catulus, may hear from that scholarly person, your retainer Licinius, who was a slave of Gracchus and acted as his amanuensis) made a practice of having a skilled attendant to stand behind him out of sight with a little ivory flageolet [*eburneola*] when he was making a speech, in order promptly to blow a note to rouse him when he was getting slack or to check him from overstraining his voice.

(III, ix, 225)

When asked further about the significance of the flageolet, Crassus replies:

In every voice ... there is a mean pitch, but each voice has its own; and for the voice to rise gradually from the mean is not only agreeable ... but also beneficial for giving it strength; then there is an extreme point of elevation, which nevertheless falls short of the shrillest possible screech, and from this point the pipe will not allow one to go further, and will begin to call one back from the actual top note; and on the other side there is similarly an extreme point in the lowering of the pitch, the point reached in a sort of descending scale of sounds. This

variation and this passage of the voice through all the notes will both safeguard itself and add charm to the delivery. But you will leave the piper at home, and only take with you down to the house the perception that his training gives you. (III, lxi, 227)

The anecdote and exegesis are strange indeed. The flageolet, or *eburneola* (literally, a pitch-pipe made of ivory)⁸, differed from the more commonly known *fistula* in material, number of holes, and pitch. The *fistula* was made of a reed and bore a closer affinity to panpipes. Presumably, as a type of duct-flute, the *eburneola* had only three or four holes, a pitch of D, and a range of an 11th or 12th. Three-holed versions allowed for fingering four separate notes. According to one source, “The fundamental tones of the instrument can be sounded by blowing gently, but are not required; hence, the first four degrees of the scale are produced as 2nd partial tones above the fundamentals. Overblowing causes a rise of a 5th, making available the upper tetrachord of the scale [...] and so on to complete the compass, using whichever partials speak best” (Grove III, 117). Crassus tells of the flageolet leading the voice on a passage through all the notes. The tones of the flageolet act like the rungs of a ladder up which the voice climbs and then descends, in a type of voice-training exercise. What is most prescient in this passage, especially in view of the discussions in later chapters, is its awareness of vocal *inflection* as a safeguard against the

⁸ According to the *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, “a type of duct flute (that is, an instrument of the flute family in which the sound is generated by directing the player’s breath through a fixed channel and against a rigid sharp edge or lip, as opposed to the type of flute which sounds when the player blows directly across a mouth-hole, as with the modern orchestral flute)” (I, 763).

monotone. As in Aristotle, there is no mention of inflection's modifications as modifications of the meanings of words and phrases.

In the preceding section, piper and reader participate in what I will refer to as a *scene of accompaniment*. It is not clear who is leading who, pipe or voice, but together they constitute a relation between abstract sound, i.e. pure tone, and the semantic domain of speech, words, and discourse. The speaker is neither performing a song for purposes of entertainment nor participating in some sung ritual behavior. While his speech is necessarily oral, it is not “marked speech.”⁹ He modulates his tone both to save his voice and keep his audience's attention.

3.

If carried to their practical conclusion the preceding remarks question the stability of generic divisions, especially with regard to the *spoken* performance of prose works. It is debatable whether the Latin rhetoricians were aware of the Greek tradition of oral performance and how it might have influenced their own ideas of “right speech” and “agreeable sound.” In ancient Greece, iambic trimeter and the elegiac distich were performed not by singers but by rhapsodes in a recitative or

⁹ In relation to “marked speech,” Nagy writes: “[...] the function of marked speech is to convey meaning in the context of ritual and myth. In most societies the pattern of opposition between marked and unmarked speech takes the form of an opposition between singing and speaking respectively, with ‘singing’ being marked by a wide variety of constraints on available features of the given language. From the standpoint of our own cultural preconceptions, ‘singing’ is a combination of melody (stylized tone or intonation) and rhythm (stylized stress, duration, intensity, or any combination of the three)” (“Early Greek Views on Poets and Poetry” in Kennedy, 4).

Sprechstimme.¹⁰ This was exceptional, as for the most part poetry was performed as song. Nagy writes:

In considering the internal and external references to the performance of compositions attributed to the canonical nine poets of lyric [Alcman, Stesichorus, Alcaeus, Sappho, Ibrycus, Anacreon, Simonides, Bacchylides, and Pindar] we can find clear traces of pan-Hellenic systematization, as we have already seen in the example taken from Pindar: the seven-string lyre, presented as a symbol of systematization, allows Apollo to lead the choral performance of ‘all sorts of *nomoi*’ (Nemean 5.25). The word *nomos* itself, however, is hardly adequate for designating the actual process of systematization, since its basic meaning of ‘local custom’ retains a built-in emphasis on the local origins of the constituents of the system. A more adequate word is *harmonia*, in the specific sense of ‘tuning’ or *accordatura* that fits a given melodic idiom In a more general sense, *harmonia* can be understood as a ‘system of intervals in pitch’ as in Plato’s *Republic* 397d, where the point being made is that the traditional *harmonia* and rhythm in song is regulated by the words of song. (Kennedy 45)

Nagy goes on to cite Barker’s indispensable study of Greek musical theory and notation, which states that Plato’s use of *harmonia* “points to the fact that the existence of melody depends on the prior existence of an organized scheme of pitches standing to one another in determinate relations, on the basis of whose relations the

¹⁰ In ancient Greece both poetry and prose were referred to as *kleos*, a term which originates in the act of giving praise to the doers of great deeds. Later, *kleos* reemerged in Latin epideictic rhetoric (Ibid. in Kennedy 7).

selection that generates a melody is made” (Barker 130 n. 18). Plato does not use the word *tonos*, but his positing of *an organized scheme of pitches* would later be expanded on by Aristoxenus (c. 320 B.C.), a student of Aristotle. For Aristoxenus, Barker states that “each *tonos* had the same pattern of intervals: they differed one from another ... only in respect of pitch.” Thus, Aristoxenus’ more developed *tonal* theory moves away from issues of rhythm and melody, as in Plato, to more subtle issues of musical *key*.¹¹

Taking modern biases into consideration, it is difficult to distinguish between the terms *nomos*, *tonos*, *harmonia*, and *accordatura*. Even the closest study of these in their original contexts is fraught with ambiguity. Such, in general, is the weakness of etymologies and genealogies of words, but especially in the case of early musical theory. Isobel Henderson, in a careful article on traditions in harmonic science, notes a distinction between, on the one hand, *harmonia*, and on the other, *tonos*, *eidos*, *genos*, *tropos*, and *systema*. “*Harmonia*,” she writes, “...means a musical idiom together with the tuning which it postulates—whereas in musically ignorant theorists it is confused with an *eidos* or a *species* of the octave, which like *systema*, is a term of theory, not of music” (Henderson 347). Henderson notes that *tonos* “first occurs in harmonic theory in the fourth century B.C.” and means, literally, “to stretch.”¹² In its earliest usage, as a verb, it does not connote a melodic style. However, Aristoxenus’ notion of *tonos* seems to already hint at key-pitches as types of local style. From his notion, we are not far from the notion of key connoting a specific place (as in terms

¹¹ Barker posits an equivalence between *tonoi*, *keys*, and *modes*; cf. *Greek Musical Writings* p.19

¹² Henderson expands on the use of *tonos* as a verb: “Music, though practically ruled by the voice, was theoretically analysed in terms of the stretched string, which yields the words *syntonos* (taut) for high pitch and *aneimenos* (slack) for low, the nomenclature of notes from the plucking fingers, and some basic features of the notations” (Henderson in Wellesz 341).

like Phrygian, Dorian, and Lydian) or an occasion (as in martial, pastoral, and elegiac).

Tuning, or “attunement,” then, literally means stretching a cord or string until it vibrates at a particular frequency, a frequency which in our own day connotes quality of sound as well as mood. According to Henderson, this tuning was “pitted against the free-wheel of the human voice plotting its own consonances, along its undivided continuum” (Henderson 341). The discussion above of speaking tone in Crassus’s anecdote of piper and speaker exemplifies this pitting of one set of tones—the human voice—against another—the fixed tones of a three- or four-holed flageolet. While there the voice follows the leading of the piper, the voice is able to show itself as one instrument *tuning* itself *by*, or *attuning* itself *with*, another. Thus, through the wavelike vibrations which enter by the ear, the vocal cords are able to resonate at the very same frequency. By sheer physiology the aural is reproduced orally.¹³

4.

Of concern here is tone’s fundamentally relational character, supported both by early musical theory and more recent views. Carl Dahlhaus, whose *Musikaesthetik* (1962) remains the benchmark text in the study of music aesthetics, defines the “meaning of music” as the “inner coherence of the relations of the tones constituting a work” (Dahlhaus 12). Few would differ with this definition. Dahlhaus’ important study sketches changes in the psychology of music reception in the West since

¹³ As I will explain later, such attunement is identical to Hermann Helmholtz’s theory of *sympathetic resonance*.

antiquity. It explores the Renaissance notions of *meravigliosi effetti*, or the marvelous effects of tones on the emotions, as well as the ideas of nineteenth-century aestheticians of music, foremost among them Eduard Hanslick, who inveighed against such “primitive listening,” holding that there was no direct link between a tone and an emotion. As Dahlhaus writes:

Ever since antiquity, in esthetic-therapeutic investigations and speculations seeking an explanation for the ‘*meravigliosi effetti*’ of tones, it was the concept of motion that provided a connection between music and affection or ethos. The motions of tones sympathetically release those of the soul, a soul that is often described by the simile of a stringed instrument; both musical and psychic motions are subject to the same laws. The hypothetical ‘animal spirits’ that were supposed to account for the transfer of physical stimuli into psychic reactions either stretch or contract The movements of the animal spirits, according to Nicola Vincentino (1555) and Gioseffo Zarlino (1558), are the reason for the effects of intervals: major ‘stretched’ intervals of the second, third, and six attune to joy, while minor ‘contracted’ intervals on the contrary attune to sadness. (19)

Again, the image of the stretched cord or string which vibrates at a determinate frequency is stressed. Such links between tones and emotions were exploited in Western musical theory. As Dahlhaus later notes: “The system of tones in itself, without emotion ‘put in,’ is eloquent and expressive, indeed, according to a theory formulated by Johann Nikolaus Forkel in 1788. The system of tones, as emblem and

image of the human soul, was becoming constantly richer and more differentiated, as was the soul itself” (Dahlhaus 41). Such conceptions radically shifted in the nineteenth century. Instead of thinking about music filled with emotion, philosophers¹⁴, aestheticians, and musicians began to consider music’s emancipation from content—what would become, according to Dahlhaus, music as pure and absolute sound.

This shift had already begun to take place with Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*. His references to what he calls the “art of tone” embrace both music and rhetoric. As with the Greek and Roman rhetoricians, Kant associates tone with “charm and mental stimulation” (CJ 193), and notes that

[while] it speaks by means of mere sensations without concepts, and so does not, like poetry, leave behind it any food for reflection, still it moves the mind more diversely, and although with transient, still with intenser effect. (193)

In addition to tone’s “sensation,” Kant analyzes tone’s tendency to inhabit, or create, the space of discursive *modes*. While a genre of writing can possess a presupposed tone (tragedy: tragic; satire: ironic), Kant goes further to state that “every expression in language has an associated tone suited to its sense,” which “indicates more or less a mode¹⁵ in which the speaker is affected” (194). While tone speaks without concepts or determinate thoughts, as a “language of the affections” it can communicate “aesthetic ideas” through certain pleasing arrangements, by means of harmony and

¹⁴ Dahlhaus quotes from Hegel, *Lectures on Esthetics* II: “[A musician’s] penetration into the content proceeds not as an outward constructing, but rather as a retiring into the inner life’s own freedom. It is the voyaging of the composer within himself. In many kinds of music it is even a process of testing and confirming that as an artist he is free from the content” (266).

¹⁵ Hölderlin’s theory of tone, greatly influenced by Kant, is indeed hard to distinguish from a theory of literary modes. Cf. “Wechsel der Töne,” *Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, v. 4, 1, 238-39.

melody (194). However, Kant interprets the art of tone as secondary to the formative arts of painting and sculpture. The latter advance “from definite ideas to sensations,” while the art of tone “advances from sensations to indefinite ideas” (194). Kant concludes by distinguishing the plastic arts from the aural arts by the opposition of “lasting” versus “fleeting” (194).

5.

Sound pure and simple? In the first chapter of his magisterial study of tone, *Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik* (1863) [hereafter *Sensations of Tone*], Hermann von Helmholtz distinguishes between musical tones and another type of absolute sound—noise. Looking past the aesthetic-therapeutic ideas of the previous four centuries, Helmholtz sought to reveal the hard facts about acoustical phenomena and the faculty of hearing. He defines a musical tone as a sound which “strikes the ear as a perfectly undisturbed, uniform sound which remains unaltered as long as it exists” (Helmholtz 8). He goes on to characterize musical tones as possessing “regular motions,” such as oscillations, vibrations, upward and downward swings, to and fro motions—in short, all manner of motion which can be called *periodic*. For Helmholtz, the *Empfindung* or “sensation” of tone is “due to a rapid periodic motion of the sonorous body” (8). These motions are “conducted to the apparatus of the human ear by means of the atmosphere, through wave-like, *undulatory* vibrations. Helmholtz draws his first example from the aqueous ripple-effect:

Suppose a stone to be thrown into a piece of calm water. Round the spot struck there forms a little ring of wave, which, advancing equally in all directions, expands to a constantly increasing circle.

Corresponding to this ring of wave, sound also proceeds in the air from the excited point and advances in all directions as far as the limits of the air extend. (9)

Helmholtz identifies three ways by which musical tones differ: by *force*, by *pitch*, and by *quality*. He shows that, when created by conventional instruments, notes can be analyzed and shown to be composed of a variety of musical tones simultaneously sounded. Musical tones, in turn, are composed of series of partial tones, known as *harmonic upper* partials (overtones) and fundamental or *prime* partials (Helmholtz 30-34). Musical tones, then, are compound structures which under analysis reveal a complexity of internal relations, much as blended colors reveal a vast interrelation of shades. Such indeed is the chromatic nature of tone.¹⁶

In Chapter 3 of *Sensations of Tone*, Helmholtz outlines his theory of sympathetic resonance, which posits that “simple partial tones contained in a composite mass of musical tones, produce peculiar mechanical effects in nature” (Helmholtz 36). Claiming that one sounding body can cause another body to sound identically, Helmholtz shows that the vibration of a sounding body causes analogous vibrations in the air, which in turn cause the same rate of vibrations in a nearby body. A chapter of a recent book on notions of sound in the nineteenth century draws attention to the fact that Helmholtz was not the first scientist to describe the

¹⁶ For further explanation of this, especially Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ideas on the chromaticism of nature, see Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 254-55.

characteristics of such resonance but he was “the first to place it so centrally and with such lurid precision in a broadly conceived theory of hearing” (Picker 86).

Throughout his chapter on sympathetic resonance Helmholtz gives precise examples of vibration in a variety of sounding bodies, such as sounding boards, stretched membranes, bell-shaped glasses, and stringed instruments. A piano provides an object lesson in how the unadorned human voice can be “echoed back” by the untouched strings of the instrument:

Gently touch one of the keys of a pianoforte without striking the string, so as to raise the damper only, and then sing a note of the corresponding pitch forcibly directing the voice against the strings of the instrument. On ceasing to sing, the note will be echoed back from the piano. It is easy to discover that this echo is caused by the string which is in unison with the note, for directly the hand is removed from the key, and the damper is allowed to fall, the echo ceases.... The more exactly the singer hits the pitch of the string, the more strongly it vibrates. (Helmholtz 39)

Some bodies, however, are harder to put into sympathetic resonance than others. Tuning-forks, for example, must be attached to “sounding boxes which have been tuned exactly to their tone” but which can then be “excited” by a violin bow and resonate from opposite ends of the same room (Helmholtz 40). The novelty of such experiments leads Picker to term them veritable “parlor tricks,” though he does not connect them to the growing vogue in the nineteenth century for pseudo-science and the paranormal. Picker cites Helmholtz’s example of a musical automaton in which

each of the strings of a piano is connected to a nerve fiber, in essence giving a peculiar figure for hearing.¹⁷ Picker concludes:

Uniting established acoustical phenomena with recent breakthroughs in mathematics (Ohm's principle of wave analysis as derived from Fourier's theorem), physiology (Mueller's doctrine of specific nervous energies), and anatomy (Corti's cochlea discoveries), Helmholtz set forth a resonance theory of hearing that was both revolutionary and elemental: it posited that hearing ... is nothing less than a bodily form of sympathetic vibration, and the ear a kind of microscopic Aeolian harp wired to the brain. (87)

Unlike the musical theorists of the Renaissance who offered aesthetic-therapeutic explanations of tone's effects, and equally unlike those of the nineteenth century who denied tone's effects altogether in favor of close inspection of tonal relations within music itself, Helmholtz, a man as much interested in acoustics as in musical science and aesthetics, bridges the affect-intellect divide by again reinforcing a notion of tone that is fundamentally a sensate scheme or, to use his own term, an "architecture" of relations (Helmholtz 2).

¹⁷ Helmholtz describes the situation: "Then every musical tone which impinged on the instrument would excite, as we know to be really the case in the ear, a series of sensations exactly corresponding to the perpendicular vibrations into which the original motion of the air had to be resolved. By this means, then, the existence of each partial tone would be exactly so perceived, as it really is perceived by the ear. The sensations excited by the different higher partials would under the supposed conditions fall to the lot of different nervous fibres, and hence be produced perfectly, separately, and independently" (Picker 86).

6.

At roughly the same time that Helmholtz was constructing his theory of the sensation of tone, the trajectory of Western music was shifting. A reliance on what Wagner disparaged as the prevailing tonal idiom, the “quadratic phrase,” was giving way to what David Michael Hertz refers to as “a free bonding of parts [...] a new organism” (Hertz 5, 21). Classical tonality, in the Helmholtzian sense of pitches dictated and grounded by a dominant pitch and a regular periodic¹⁸ structure of sound, was being jettisoned in favor of new combinations, new tonal idioms. The effects of this shift were to be felt throughout the arts, especially in literature and music. Hertz offers Baudelaire’s poem “La Musique” as an example of music’s (especially Beethoven) effect on the poetic imagination and a first glimpse of the poet’s theory of *les correspondences synthétiques*. As Hertz puts it: “Baudelaire recognized that music is essentially ambiguous and mysterious in its inherent nature, that its power to communicate is great but that it is difficult to identify just what kind of information is communicated in music” (Hertz 31). Later, in French music, Debussy would “work the harmonic and tonal ambiguity of the tritone [a figure of dissonance] into a fresh musical pattern—the whole-tone scale,” thus “stretching the old musical language with freer usages of dissonant intervals” (Hertz 33).

Helmholtz’s theories, while using as its exemplar a style of musical composition that was quickly becoming extinct, was reinforcing a new awareness of

¹⁸ For Hertz, periodicity in music connotes assumptions of structure. In a periodic musical phrase, he writes, “each idea is presented in a complete, cogent, clear form. Each excerpt has a clearly defined tonality that makes the point of departure and the point of return, and a simple complement of chords—dominant and tonic—that are evenly spaced and politely expose the aural possibilities of tonality” (7). Hertz also cites Roland Barthes’ idea that the periodic phrase is related to the “*va-et-vient du souffle*” (the intake and outtake of the breath) (“*L’Ancienne Rhétorique*” cited in Hertz 3).

the sheer power of sound in the modern artwork. The wave-theory of sound, in particular, would be ramified in a new music which did not move in numerical patterns similar to that of an intricate *quadrille* but “ebbed and flowed in undulating waves” (Hertz 44). In a similar fashion, poetry would strive to imitate music through a new form of compositional syntax and an emphasis on the aural/sonic rather than the mimetic/semantic. Hertz paraphrases Mallarmé: “Like music, poetry should be able to resist the temptation of explication [“suspendre ... la tentation de s’expliquer” (Hertz 58)]. Tone, in its divorce from strict harmony, is involved in the evocation of atmospheres and moods rather than objects of sound.¹⁹

In *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, or *The Artwork of the Future* (1849), Wagner anticipates, albeit in an unscientific manner, Helmholtz’s wave-theory of sound. Wagner attempts to draft, among other things, a general theory of interrelation between the humanistic arts. The book contains chapters on the “arts” of dance, tone, and poetry, which are figured as muses engaged in, what he calls, a “stately minuet” (Wagner 95). The discussion of dance allows for some musings on the centrality of rhythm; indeed, Wagner says, “[it is] the moving, self-progressive *Skeleton* of Tone” (103). *Voice* however is the “living flesh” and *the Word*, “the bone-and-muscle rhythm of this human voice” (103). In the section entitled “The Art of Tone,” Wagner explains that melody and rhythm are the “shores through which [Tone] the sea, herself, unites two continents” (111). He extends the metaphor:

¹⁹ Hertz sees this shift from a music of correspondences to an ideal, absolute music as exemplified by Mallarmé’s poem “Un Coup de dés,” where principal, subsidiary, and adjacent motives are signaled by differences in typography and typographical arrangement. Thus the printed words act as musical notes, indicating rises and falls in the voice while reciting the poem. Hertz quotes Mallarmé: “La difference des caracteres d’imprimerie entre le motif prépondérant, un secondaire et d’adjacents, dicte son importance à l’émission orale et la portée, moyenne, en haut, en bas de page, notera que monte ou descend l’intonation” (Hertz 59).

We cannot yet give up our simile of the *Ocean*, for picturing Tone's nature. If *Melody* and *Rhythm* are the shores through which the art of Tone lays fruitful hands upon twain continents of art, allied to her of yore: so is Sound itself her fluent, native element, and its immeasurable expanse of waters make out the sea of *Harmony*. (112)

Wagner liberally applies his aqueous metaphor to tone, melody, rhythm, and harmony. True to the skeleton metaphor employed above, rhythm is pictured as firm, yet potentially erosive: a shore. However, just a few lines later Wagner refers to the "ever-widening rings of Rhythm" crossing the "sea of Harmony" and the "swelling, sinking waves of Melody" (112). For Wagner, then, tone is hard to conceive of when not viewed in inextricable relation to rhythm and melody; for him, it is a dynamic and eminently relatable element, like his "beloved element" water (113).

7.

In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James uses tonal similes to describe the workings of the human consciousness. His conception of consciousness seems strikingly similar to Helmholtz's conception of acoustic phenomena. The "wonderful stream of consciousness" flows, not in the sense of "ebb and flow" but rather strangely birdlike in a continuum of flights and rests or, as James refers to them, perchings. The moments of flight represent transitive parts of thought and the moments of rest the substantive parts. Feeling and sensation are characterized as the "shading[s] ... of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between

the larger objects of our thought” (PP 243). For James, such relations, subtle as they are, are revealed by conjunctions, prepositions, adverbial phrases, syntax, vocal intonation. James notices that the substantive parts of thought by and large have dominated human conceptions of thought; he especially prizes the latter, transitive forms of thought.

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. (245)

For James, such terms, representing (even the minutest) shades of relation, are tonal. “A feeling of *if*,” “a feeling of *by*”—each of these sensations evokes, indeed prizes, an atmosphere which surrounds and suffuses larger, substantive objects of thought. This atmosphere, thus evoked, has parity with the thoughts themselves because it is the vital ether in which they have their existence. In addition to this, they represent vital tonal shifts in thought, modulations of such thought, and nodes of possibility in semantic structures of language. “The truth is,” James writes, “that large tracts of human speech are nothing but *signs of direction* These bare images of logical movement . . . are psychic transition, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight” (253). In such a way, the stream of consciousness would seem to resemble Helmholtz’s waves of sound: aqueous, vibrating, composed of varying currents which, with proper care, can be broken down into constituent parts.

Concluding a section entitled “Feelings of Tendency,” James uses terms like “psychic overtone,” “suffusion,” “halo,” and “fringe” [each distinctly *aural*] to “designate the influence of a faint brain-process upon our thought, as it makes it aware of relations and objects but dimly perceived” (258). “Relation,” he continues, “is constantly felt in the fringe, and particularly the relation of harmony and discord” (65). James then goes on to explain how each word carries with it psychic overtones which, like Helmholtz’s *harmonic upper partials*, are comprised of a series of lesser tones. He refers to these constituent tones again as “fringes” or “halos” of relation. These overtones in turn suffuse the phrases and sentences with a “feeling that brings it nearer to a forefelt conclusion” (260). In the next section, James goes a step farther by claiming that such overtones cling not only to phrases but even (and especially) to individual words within the periodic structures of phrases and sentences. Here James’s notion of meaning seems to move much closer to that of Mallarmé.²⁰ He writes:

Now I believe that in all cases where the words are ‘understood,’ the total idea may be and usually is present not only before and after the phrase has been spoken, but also *whilst each separate word is uttered*. It is the overtone, halo, or fringe of the word, ‘as spoken in that sentence.’ It is never absent; no word in an understood sentence comes to consciousness as a mere noise. We feel its meaning as it passes; and although our object differs from one moment to the other as to its verbal kernel or nucleus, yet it is ‘similar’ throughout the entire segment of the stream. The same object is known everywhere, now

²⁰ Cf. the previous footnote.

from the point of view, if we may so call it, of this word, now from the point of view of that. And in our feeling of each word there chimes an echo or foretaste of every other. (281, emphasis mine)

In Chapter 5 of *Principles of Psychology*, James, referring to “proper accent,” attempts to show how certain accentuation patterns reinforce the proper meaning and intelligibility of sentences. He differentiates between the pattern accentuation learned through a local style of intonation and the proper accent, which is true to the sentence being spoken and *not* the person speaking it. According to Steven Meyer, James ignores instances of written speech where local tone forms a potentially meaning-yielding relation with the meaning particular to a certain sentence:

Had the sentence turned out to possess an entirely unfamiliar shape—had been, for instance, one of the ‘delicately modulated’ long sentences of William’s brother Henry—and had the reader been exposed hitherto only to the sentence constructions of the daily press, then the grammar would presumably have served to prevent a properly accented first reading. (Meyer 297)

Meyer documents what he calls the “correlation of intonation and meaning” in the sentences of the younger James. He draws a comparison between a Jamesian author’s construal of tone as the string on which his words are strung and a contemporary linguist’s view that “organized sound” possesses a master thread.²¹ “Running through [the] fabric of organized sound,” the latter notes, “there is a master thread that holds it all together and by its weavings up and down and in and out shows the design of the

²¹ Cf. Hugh Vereker’s speech in James’s story, “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896) and Dwight Bolinger’s study *Intonation and Its Parts: Melody in Spoken English* (1985)

whole—the motifs from phrase and sentence to paragraph and discourse” (Bolinger in Meyer 299). Let us say then that tone is a type of undetectable substratum to all we say and have heard said—to all spoken sound—and therefore also a kind of cumulative band of all that we have remembered hearing. Shifts and changes, modulations and chromatic transformations, accentuations and emphases will be the only clue for us that it is there in the first place. These things, according to William James, are “present in every perception we have.” “To begin at bottom,” he says,

what are our very senses but organs of selection? Out of the infinite chaos of movements, of which physics teaches us that the outer world consists, each sense-organ picks out those which fall within certain limits of velocity.... It accentuates particular movements in a manner for which objectively there seems no valid ground.... Out of what is in itself an undistinguishable swarming *continuum*, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to that motion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade.

(PP 284-85)

Dwight Bolinger, in his important study *Intonation and Its Parts*, refers to intonational emphasis as *accent*. He interprets accent as a type of interruption in the flow of speech, auditory and/or visual.²² He notes *pitch, length, loudness, rhythm,*

²² “If a speaker wiggled his ears every time he wanted to emphasize a word, he could make the word stand out by the interruption of the visual field. Watching a speaker from a distance—and not understanding a word—one can often tell when an accent is being applied by observing the shifts in bodily movement that take place” (IP, 15).

vowel quality, delayed release, and breathiness as signposts, or cues, of intonational emphasis (IP 16-20). Pitch is by far the most important of these.

When conditions are arranged artificially to pit one cue against another, pitch usually carries the day against length and loudness. It is probably the most efficient cue. Length and loudness can be varied in only one dimension, more vs. less; pitch can in addition adopt a variety of shapes, including skips, glides, arrests, and combinations of these.

(22)

Pitch accents refer to acoustical deviations, such as a jump up or down or a rise or fall from a uniform base-line. Bolinger employs a metaphor from music, saying that in music we are conscious of pitch in two dimensions: melody and harmony. Roughly, viewed on a musical staff, harmony runs vertically as chords and melody runs horizontally. “Speech,” he writes, “too, makes use of pitch in more than one dimension simultaneously, though strictly speaking there is no harmony [I]n general it creates impressions of mood or emotion” (9). While Bolinger states that the term *intonation* denotes the “mere fact of there *being* one or more accents,” he admits its greater application in the formation of “an overall landscape, the wider ups and downs that show greater or lesser degrees of excitement, boredom, curiosity, positiveness, etc” (11).

The third part of *Intonation and Its Parts* deals with *accent configurations* or *profiles*. These “profiles” represent recognizable patterns of pitch in standard English and American intonation. Bolinger identifies three basic intonational profiles:

- 1.) Profile A: the accent given at a relatively high pitch followed by a jump down;
- 2.) Profile B: the accent is jumped up to;
- 3.) Profile C: the accent is at a relatively low pitch reached by a downward jump with no further jump
(139-152)

Bolinger defines each profile according to its pattern of accent. Thus, due to its terminal fall, Profile A signals feelings of termination, settling, or coming to a state of rest (164). Profile B signals the opposite, reinforcing an “up in the airness” or “keyed-upness ... which may be excitement, anger, surprise, or merely the curiosity that goes with having a question to ask” (341). And Profile C has “metaphysical associations related to reining in, checking, restraint” and de-emphasis (342, 178). Bolinger holds that such profiles affect the semantic meanings of discourse, be it spoken aloud or read silently from the page. This aspect of intonational emphasis will be key, in later chapters, to my discussion of Jamesian dialogue.

8.

In a letter to W.H.D. Rouse, Ezra Pound faults the eminent translator for failing to imbue Homer’s cast of characters “with greater variety of intonation and of sentence movement” (LEP 298). Pound calls for the “indication of tone of voice and varying speeds of utterance” but admits that to render these perfectly requires “the

technique of one or more lifetimes” (LEP 298). Such “indications” in literary texts are the subject of my later chapters, but it would be worthwhile to introduce at least some notions of how the written form of discourse has been seen in relation to aural (spoken) forms. For the past four thousand years, theoreticians of poetics in the West have viewed sound as (1) central and thus represented by, but superior to, the written form of poetry; (2) subsidiary and thus secondary to the written form; and (3) equivalent to the written form (Brogan 1172). The first view holds that the written form of poetry is analogous with the musical score, “a set of marks on paper which via a set of known conventions are intended as directions for performance” (Princeton 1172). The second, championed by Derrida and deconstruction, holds that due to the absence of a totalizing “voice” the visual signifier holds sway over the aural one. The third holds that the “poetry (the Word) is an ontologically bivalent entity” (1172). While some would point to lineation as a sign that visual issues prevail, others would hold that, sans the printed page, poems are constituted by “segmentation of the soundstream,” characterized by pauses and vocal articulation (1173).

Tone has a complex and problematic relation to sound; for tone can be both a sounded phenomenon and an unheard quality. Sound is quantifiable, specialized, and localized. Tone, conversely, is floating, atmospheric, and intangible. It is linked to intonational emphasis or accent as well as tension (as in the state of something held under tension until it vibrates at a certain pitch). The challenge of theorizing tone comes about when we make a decision on what, or how, to call the relation between voice and the printed page. When a writer pens, or more often types, a word, he isn’t inscribing or imprinting a literal sound onto a piece of paper. “Written speech,” states

Brogan, has “but few orthographic [and by extension, graphological] markers for conveying inflections ... so tone has to be inferred from the context by attentive readers, reasoned out or argued for as a plausible interpretation of the statement” (1293).²³ Timbre, or sound-color, on the other hand, is qualitative; it denotes the “sonorous quality of a sound, as opposed to its length (duration) or pitch or accent” (1291) or “an aspect of auditory sensation” (Slawson xvi) which unlike pitch is determined by the particular instrument or voice producing the sound. However, since all human voice-boxes are identical, it is supposed that variation comes about in the creation of vowel sounds. By changing shape and tension, the vocal cords become different instruments for different sounds, thus creating differing timbres.

In the discourses of rhetoric, music, and poetics tone enacts a slide from a reified, definite position within the register of aural sensation to an unspeakable-because-unspoken position within the register of discourse (Fenves 11). This slide affects both the meaning of the term *tone* and its applications. It takes tonal theory from being a predictable table of near-mathematical precision (i.e., Greek musical theory, Pythagorean theories of harmony) to a calculus of aural and semantic effects. Whether or not the effects of tone are quantifiable, the mere fact of tone’s possession of a source and a receiver, of dispatcher and receptor, makes it an undeniable trope of

²³ A discussion of Marcel Proust, whose centrality in any discussion of tone and its link to literary style cannot be stressed enough, would swell this dissertation to monstrous proportions. Indeed this topic merits another Proust study. However, I would direct the reader’s attention to some important tonal ideas in the narrator’s description of the writer Bergotte:

He had indeed a peculiar ‘organ’; there is nothing that so alters the material qualities of the voice as the presence of thought behind what is being said: the resonance of the diphthongs, the energy of the labials are profoundly affected—as is the diction. His seemed to me to differ entirely from his way of writing, and even the things that he said from those with which he filled his books. But the voice issues from a mask behind which it is not powerful enough to make us recognize at first sight a face which we have seen uncovered in the speaker’s literary style. (*A l’ombre* 168)

relation in Western aesthetics. Equally important in this discussion is the understanding that tone, semantically sound-*less*, is neither identical with sound nor completely separate from issues of sound and sounding.²⁴

As we shall see in the chapters following, the words of Henry James and James Merrill possess what Wallace Stevens calls “an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them” (Stevens 663). We will discuss how both the willing of intonational emphasis and the decipherment of the same are such “selections.” Let it suffice to say here that in the middle and late novels of Henry James, characters’ points-of-view are as important as their acoustic perspectives.

²⁴ How often in literary theory is the ‘scene’ of writing reduced to a soundless void or, equally disfiguring, a construction site where all the intricate, meticulously tuned machinery noiselessly excavates and erects, silently, the envisioned result? Is it possible to theorize a soundscape in—or of—writing? Can’t the sounds a writer hears, be they remembered voices inwardly heard or the ambient sounds in a room or Mozart’s “Jupiter” Symphony, exert an influence over the lines or sentences he is composing; and, by extension, can’t what the writer heard and perhaps attempted to reproduce, in sum or part, exert an influence, equally powerful, over how we read his words?

Chapter 2: Audible Vibration: The Tone of Henry James

One must go one's way & know what one's about & have a general plan & a private religion—in short have made up one's mind as to the ce qui en est with a public the draggling after which simply leads one to the gutter. One has always a 'public' enough if one has an audible vibration—even if it shld. only come for one's self.

—Henry James to William
James, July 23rd, 1890²⁵

Language is no longer to the same extent that sign—more or less distant, similar, and arbitrary—for which the Logique-de-Port-Royal proposed as an immediate and evident model the portrait of a man, or a map. It has acquired a vibratory nature which somehow has separated from the visible eye and made it more nearly proximate to the note in music.

—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (286)

1.

In the spring of 1897, Henry James employed an amanuensis for the first time in his life. The pain and annoyance of a “lame rheumatic wrist” [right hand] had made this something of a necessity if he was to continue writing lengthy prose fictions (Kaplan 423). After some experiments with shorthand, James’s amanuensis, a Scots

²⁵ CWJ, v. 2, 145.

newspaper stenographer, William McAlpine took to typing James's words as he spoke them (Edel, IV, 175). In a typed letter to W. Morton Fullerton, dated February 25, 1897, James writes:

Forgive a communication, very shabby and superficial. It has come to this that I can address you only through an embroidered veil of sound. This sound is that of the admirable and expensive machine that I have just purchased for the purpose of bridging our silences. The hand that works it, however is not the lame *patte* which, after inflicting on you for years its aberrations, I have now definitely relegated to the shelf, or at least to the hospital—that is, to permanent, bandaged, baffled, rheumatic, incompetent obscurity.

(*HJL* 4: 41)

Later that day, James wrote another letter to James Whistler, in which he apologized for the typed format, saying: “Yes, even though it be an outrage to a man of your touch to address him in accents condemned to click into his ear—thanks to interposing machinery—a positive negation of every delicacy; yet I *must* thank you ... (*HJL* 4: 43). While James's respite from longhand left him again able, at least eventually, to pen his letters himself, he quickly found himself preferring the pleasures of composing aloud while pacing the length of the Garden Room at Lamb House, with the *musique concrète* of the Remington as his accompaniment. James's attachment to his newfound mechanical aid was so complete that without it he could not compose (even to the extent of not being able to compose when a different model

of typewriter was interposed). Many have conjectured about how dictating changed James's style. According to Edel, "Henry James writing, and Henry James dictating, were two different artists. [...] Out of several years of consistent dictating the 'later manner' of Henry James emerged" (IV, 176). James's sentences grew and grew, until they burst the bonds of saleable prose.²⁶ They were becoming a type of verbal counterpoint to the clicks which entered his ear.²⁷ He was approaching what Leon Edel refers to as the "ultimate perfection of his verbal music" (IV 177). In *Bodies and Machines*, Mark Seltzer explains how James's dependence on the typewriter represents "an automatism of machine-writing" which James, in turn, makes central to the process of composition-by-dictation (Seltzer 195n57). In a dictated letter to Mrs. Cadwalader Jones, dated October 23, 1902, James defines the "value" of his new process as residing in

its help to do over and over, for which it is extremely adapted, and which is the only way I can do at all. It soon enough, accordingly, becomes *intellectually*, absolutely identical with the act of writing—or has become so, after five years now, with me; so that the difference is only material and illusory—only the difference ... that I walk up and down: which is so much to the good. (*HJL* 4:247)²⁸

²⁶ Edel adds: "His sentences were to become, in time, elaborate—one might indeed say baroque—filled with qualifications and parentheses; he seemed often in a letter to begin a sentence without knowing what its end would be, and he allowed it to meander river-like into surprising turns and loops" (IV, 176).

²⁷ According to A. C. Benson, "The *motif* [of James's speech] was precisely enunciated, revised, elongated, improved upon, enriched, but it was always, so to speak, contrapuntal" (from *The Legend of the Master*, ed. Simon Novell-Smith [London: Constable, 1947] 11-12).

²⁸ The majority of James's letters were handwritten. On the rare occasion when the typewriter was employed for the sake of efficiency, James usually disparaged the machine for the printed coldness of its transcriptions. He refers to it variously as "this gross machinery," "this cold and mechanical form," and "the outrage of this legibility" (*HJL* 4: 270; 276; 335). In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, dated December 26, 1898, James mentions, "the ugly fact of my finding myself reduced, in my declining

The Remington typewriter, which James's successive amanuenses would operate, pitted verbal music against background "music," vocal accent against machine accent. Could it then be that the changes in James's style, its increasing discursiveness, its Baroque-ness, were the result of two orders of discourse knocking up against each other—indeed two modes sometimes rubbing up, sometimes outright wrestling, with each other? This new 'relation' need not have been one of intergenerational (Victorian versus Modern) antagonism, but rather it could have been one of efficiency—one mind describing another, getting inside the relation of two other minds, recording—recounting with the *grande vitesse* of the living thought. But dictation, while perhaps making things more efficient, put James's tone—his speaking tones—at center stage. Thus, composing a novel or an essay became a rhetorical performance.²⁹ It may be that the sudden (uncomfortable?) relation between two modes of discourse—specifically, the spoken and the written—brought James's tone (in the larger sense) into being. Tone here could also spring from the most obvious or concrete 'relation' of the late works, mainly James's relation to his amanuensis or what, in the act of dictation, Sharon Cameron sees as "a practice which exteriorizes thought and moves it between persons" (Cameron 32). It also could be noted that the cold sound of the typewriter, associated by James himself with

years, like a banker or a cabinet minister, altogether to *dictating* my letters. [...] Many people, I find, in these conservative climes, take it extremely ill to be addressed in Remingtonese" (*HJL* 4: 95).

²⁹ James's third, and last, amanuensis, Theodora Bosanquet recounts such performances of dictation in her memoir, *Henry James at Work*:

Each morning after reading over the pages written the day before, he would settle down in a chair for an hour or so of conscious effort. Then, lifted on the rising spring of inspiration, he would get up and pace up and down the room, sounding out the periods in tones of resonant assurance. At such times he was beyond reach of irrelevant sounds and sights. [...] The only thing that could arrest his progress was the escape of the word he wanted to use. When that had vanished he broke off the rhythmic pacing and made his way to a chimney-piece or book-case tall enough to support his elbows while he rested his head in his hands and audibly pursued the fugitive. (252)

efficiency and “expedition,” effected an artificial distancing between maker and made. That James was composing by means of a machine meant that, in the end, his creations were mechanically reproduced, and thus containing all the positive and negative traits of mechanically reproducible objects.

2.

What is a Jamesian tone? Or better, what is Jamesian intonation? One commentator, identifying it with the actual voice of Henry James, refers to it as “a vernacular of one, distinct from the English spoken in both his native and adoptive countries” (O’Donnell 143). On their first meeting at Miss Petheridge’s Secretarial Bureau in London, Theodora Bosanquet noted James’s “sensitive mobile mouth” and a rebellion so complete “against both the American accent and the English manner that he seemed only doubtfully Anglo-Saxon” (Thurschwell 88; Bosanquet 244). She also notes James’s increasing sophistication of expression; so involved with itself “that his questions to a railway clerk about a ticket or to a fishmonger about a lobster, might easily be recognized as coined in the same mint as his addresses to the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature” (Bosanquet 264). Ezra Pound, who met James on a number of occasions in London, was asked by an interviewer whether James’s “talk” resembled his writing. Pound answered: “‘Exactly, *exactly*’—

and hunching his shoulders forward, clasping his hands between his knees, he became for 90 seconds Henry James, eyes fixed on a point in

space some yards past a ghostly auditor—some young Mr Pound in some vanished person’s drawing room—as he mimicked what had magnetized his attention at 26 [...]. He mimicked, moreover, an impish deferring and deferring of climax: the lifting, after an intent showman’s pause, of some unforeseen syntactic shell to disclose not the pea last glimpsed but ... an awk’s egg on the point of hatching (with patience) yet further wonders. (Kenner 11)

In his well-known essay, “Henry James,” Pound himself notes the “slow uplift of the hand, *gli occhi onesti e tardi*, the long sentences piling themselves up in elaborate phrase after phrase, the lightning incision, the pauses, the slightly shaking admonitory gesture ...” (LEP 295).³⁰ Dekker comments on Pound’s inclusion of James in his world of voices and predecessors: “Pound clearly suggests that James, whose ‘endless’ sentences mimicked no physical reality, was uniquely gifted to deal with Victorian interiors where, as his heroines ruefully discovered, ‘tone’ was everything” (Dekker 19). In other words, spoken language potentially manifesting a full palette of shades of meaning was everything. It was one’s verbal currency, paint for one’s social portrait.

The importance of speaking tones in James’s novels makes obvious a whole range of problems concerning the differences between spoken and written language.

Primarily, how does one make writing manifest the multiple semantic and gestural

³⁰ Pound would later use these words elegiacally to evoke the ghost of Henry James and his residence at Lamb House, Rye, in *The Cantos*:

And the great domed head, *con gli occhi honesti e tardi*
 Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
 And the old voice lifts itself
 weaving an endless sentence.

(VII, 24).

possibilities of the speaking voice? G. L. Brook in *Varieties of English* (1973) states that “Some important aspects of speech, such as stress and intonation, are capable of almost infinite variation in the spoken language, whereas in the written language they are hardly expressed at all,” and notes that:

Obvious variations in stress and intonation can be expressed clumsily in the written language by means of punctuation: an exclamation point marks a sharp rise in pitch, a question mark a less violent rise and a full stop falling pitch. Italics can be used to show that a word is strongly stressed.

(19)

It is important to note that while James tried hard to compose his sentences in such a way that readers could hear the sound of the speech and the meaning-packed intonations with little margin for error, he hardly could expect that they would get all of them right. While James paced up and down the length of his Garden Room performing the lengthy sentence, his audience was an audience-of-one—a sort of pale voiceless, opinion-less double—seated at the clicking typewriter. William McAlpine, Mary Weld, and finally Theodora Bosanquet ostensibly were the only ones to hear the tempi and original intonations and to see the gestures (of the face, of the hands,) of the great mass (“*grave incessu*”) of Henry James. Not being able to hear James’s speaking voice—there being no known recordings extant—further complicates the situation when one considers how word-stress, intonation, and rhythm have changed in spoken English over the past two hundred years.³¹

³¹ The nonexistence of wax-cylinder recordings of Henry James’s voice may appear as a sad oversight by sophisticated Victorians who had the technological means to effect it. It may also be that James was

Of course, as I discussed in Chapter One, tone's relationship to meaning is highly complex. As far back as 1877, Sweet, in his *Handbook of Phonetics*, admitted that "the whole relation of tone to language has yet been only imperfectly studied" (Romaine 519). He singles out "three primary 'forms' or 'inflections' (level, rising, falling tones; glide-tones; and a variety of compound tones)" (519). MacMahon notes that for C. H. Grandgent "the characteristic features of English intonation were the use of 'exceedingly high pitch' (with abrupt transitions from falsetto to bass), together with their rise-fall (which 'gives to the English accent now a deprecatory, now a peculiarly supercilious effect'). By comparison, the use of high and middle tones, as well as the fall and the fall-rise, were the commonest intonation patterns in America" (519). With regard to James, an exploration of intonation must also take into account the sophisticated structures of his rhythms. In transcribing "talk" and "silence" in his novels James was, not unwittingly, writing in a new mode, a kind of poetry which eschewed the fanciness of style (as in Pater) for the fineness of consciousness.³² As Kenneth Graham puts it: "James created his fiction and earned

offered the opportunity and, in his usual self-deprecatory manner, declined it. MacMahon in a chapter on phonology in *The Cambridge History of the English Language* states: "Much additional research is required before a full picture emerges of the precise sociolinguistic and stylistic changes that English has undergone over the past 200 and more years... . A comprehensive comparison of pronunciations listed in dictionaries, grammar-books, spellers, etc. would create an historical 'pronouncing dictionary' database of English covering the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries... . An analysis of the extant recordings of speakers born during the nineteenth, especially towards the beginning... could certainly help to reveal more about the phonetic features of various 'educated' idiolects" (Romaine 521).

³² What wasn't being transcribed, voiced, or literally 'heard' was often just as important as what was—it represented the 'essence' of the thing. As Hugh Kenner writes:

[James's] geomancers's response to impalpabilities—tones and airs, surfaces and absences—inaugurated ... a poetic of eschewals and refrainings ... That one cannot say, or else may not blatantly say, just who did what to whom, is the premise of a kind of situation that fascinates him ... James's effort to articulate such matters within the shape of a formal English sentence yielded the famous late style, where subject and verb are 'there' but don't carry the burden of what is said. Other syntactic structures do that. And a subject and verb, in a poem, need not always even be stated. (*PE* 16)

his living, no longer just by the pen, but by the mouth and the ear, instruments intimately close to the mind and its processes” (Graham 149).

3.

The rheumatism in James’s right hand, and thus his inability to handwrite his novels and stories, came about in the wake of his most painful failure. From 1889 to 1895, James had made a spirited and thorough effort at becoming a popular playwright.³³ While dramatizations of “Daisy Miller” and *The American* were successful, James’s original plays were, famously, not—either never coming to fruition or failing quite miserably. The accidents of an opening night’s performance, and subsequent “wounding to death,”³⁴ of James’s period-drama *Guy Domville* in January 1895 sealed his fate as a failed playwright. The following month, James wrote his brother William: “There is nothing, fortunately, so dead as a dead play—unless it be sometimes a living one” (*WJL* 2: 349). James’s mind, however, was far from dead, and the efforts which followed rank among his most important. The failure in the theater had been mainly a failure to give audiences what they had been conditioned to want in the wake of Wilde’s *coup de théâtre*. Success in the theater-market would have brought James’s increased financial security, but the rigors in which it involved him—particularly the creation of effective dialogue—were to pay off artistically in the years following. *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Awkward*

³³ Prior to the completion of his five-volume biography of Henry James, Leon Edel edited and prefaced an edition of *Guy Domville* with a lengthy biographical essay, entitled “Henry James: The Dramatic Years.” (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961). Also see, Kaplan 373-79.

³⁴ Cf. Letter from Henry James to W. Morton Fullerton, January 9, 1895 (*HJL* 3: 510).

Age (1899) are thought of as James's *dramatic* novels. Both develop James's growing *scenic* faculty, which came out of his life-long fascination with the *scenario*, as well as his interest in voiced and unvoiced forms of communication.³⁵

It is telling that both of these fascinations, both of them tonal—the first visual, the second aural—coincided with James's renewed interest in childhood.³⁶ The idea for *What Maisie Knew* came to James in 1892, after hearing a story about a terrible divorce in which the child was made the parents' pawn. But James did not return to it until his theatrical fiasco had ended, and he had opted once again for that "other ink—the sacred fluid of fiction" (*GD* 73). James began work on *What Maisie Knew* in June 1896. In the novel, Maisie finds herself in the midst of a bitter divorce between Beale and Ida Farange. It is agreed that each parent will take care of her for six months of the year, the result of which is the little girl's being heaped with the scorn of one parent for the other and being tossed, literally, between warring camps. Both parents, in turn, cultivate new relationships with people who, not much later in the novel, as Maisie's "stepparents," come to love each other in spite of Beale and Ida. Later that year, commenting on the sheer novelty of these dramatic structures, James wrote in his Notebook:

Ah, this *divine* conception of one's little masses and periods in the scenic light—as rounded ACTS; this patient, pious, nobly 'vindictive' application of the scenic philosophy and method—I feel as if it still (above *all*, YET) had a great deal to give me, and might carry me as

³⁵While James's interest in the dramatic *scene* has received a great share of critical attention, his experiments in tone (and here again I use the term inclusively) have not been the subject of a systematic study. For a discussion of silence in late James, see Bradbury, *Henry James: The Later Novels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

³⁶Other novels and stories dealing with children are: "The Pupil" (1890), *The Other House* (1896), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and "In the Cage" (1898).

far as I dream! God knows how far—into the flushed, dying day—*that*
is! (*Notebooks* 162)

It carried him far indeed. *What Maisie Knew* represented James's talents to their fullest degree. Its representation of a child-consciousness growing toward new understandings of grown-up greed and mendacity had no equal among his works, and it served as a deprecatory, minor prelude to the major triad of 1901 to 1904. That the "conception of ... little masses and periods" becoming "rounded ACTS" is "*divine*" emphasizes not simply the Eureka-moment of James's realization that novels could *do* a thing, provide an effect, that only the audible could in theater; it also provided James with a set of new problems, new enigmas if you will, for the artist to solve: how to imbue the traditional narrative framework of the novel with the breath, touch, and texture of the theater. It once again reminds us that James's interest in the literary arts was "general and comprehensive" and that, for him, the great artist was expected to synthesize the separate strands of the drama, the novel, the critical essay, and, perhaps, the poem.

Maisie—young, innocent, possessing an incipient beauty—takes her place in the fabled parade of impressionable young women in James's fictions. She runs between houses as much indeed as she runs between functions (dumb, innocent lamb and ever-so-curious lass). Like her fictional counterparts in *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Other House*, and *The Awkward Age*, she is for-adults-only. Not once is the reader shown a Maisie who interacts with other girls her age. And yet, not belonging to the adult world which rules her young existence, she is shunned and abused by it. She is duly made into the interlocutor of the adults, their alliances and their hatreds.

As the narrator tells us: “[S]he was the little feathered shuttlecock they could fiercely keep flying between them. The evil they had the gift of thinking or pretending to think of each other they poured into her little gravely-gazing soul as into a boundless receptacle” (*WMK* 42). Maisie’s consciousness is seemingly passive as it internalizes, or “introjects” in the psychoanalytic sense, the ill-will of her guardians. The narrator often speaks of her consciousness as a vessel or a space into which objects and energies can cluster (“a missive dropped into her memory with the dry rattle of a letter falling into a pillar-box” [42]). Likewise, they become the signs and alphabet-letters which precipitate knowledge about herself and the world. Often they overcrowd each other, bringing the narrator to state that “she saw more and more; she saw too much” (43).

What Maisie saw, I will argue, however, is just as important as what Maisie heard. In the course of the novel, hearing becomes an impetus for seeing things more clearly as well as a synecdoche of the faculty of sight. In a nineteenth-century milieu attuned to the subtleties and obscurations of accent, intonation, and gesture, Maisie begins to see shades and grades of meaning through the metaphor of the ear. Her body becomes a vast aural apparatus, a giant ear which can register a range of audible vibrations.

Toward the end of the second chapter Maisie sits with her nurse-governess, *chez* Mr. Farange; she asks of her father:

‘Does he know he lies?’—that was what she had vivaciously asked Miss Overmore on the occasion which was so suddenly to lead to a change in her life.

‘Does he know — ?’ Miss Overmore stared; she had a stocking pulled over her hand and was pricking at it with a needle which she poised in the act. Her task was homely, but her movement, all her movements, graceful.

‘Why papa.’

‘That he “lies”?’

‘That’s what mamma says I’m to tell him—“that he lies and he knows he lies”.’ Miss Overmore turned very red, though she laughed out till her head fell back; then she pricked again at her muffled hand so hard that Maisie wondered how she could bear it. ‘Am I to tell him?’ the child went on. It was then that her companion addressed her in the unmistakable language of a pair of eyes of deep dark grey. ‘I can’t say No,’ they replied as distinctly as possible; ‘I can’t say No, because I’m afraid of your mamma, don’t you see? Yet how can I say Yes after your papa has been so kind to me, talking to me so long the other day, smiling and flashing his beautiful teeth at me the time we met him in the Park, the time when rejoicing at the sight of us, he left the gentleman he was with and turned and walked with us, stayed with us for half and hour?’ ... The wonder now lived again, lived in the recollection of what papa had said to Miss Overmore: ‘I’ve only to look at you to see you’re a person I can appeal to for help to save my daughter.’ Maisie’s ignorance of what she was to be saved from didn’t diminish the pleasure of the thought that Miss Overmore was saving

her. It seemed to make them cling together as in some wild game of
‘going round’. (*WMK* 45)

Maisie, perhaps unwittingly, here shows herself to be aware of her father’s burgeoning relationship with Miss Overmore. She appropriates, albeit in fits and starts, the speaking tones of another woman, a peer instead of a young charge. “*Does* he know he lies?” Considering that Maisie’s voice is that of a young girl, the pitch of the italicized *does* starts off quite high. But to this can be added the tone of innocent disbelief, of implicitly wishing that her father might not know what he is doing. Of course, Beale Farange is a cad, and both narrator and reader know that. It increases our sympathy for the child. In *Intonation and its Parts*, Dwight Bolinger holds that accents of heightened pitch which occur early in a line of speech originate in an “effusion of feeling;” they constitute the very essence of “climactic effect” (*IP* 83). Whether she intends to or not—and agency is consistently under question in this novel—Maisie is shocking her listener. James’s narrator chooses only to italicize the word *does*, which Bolinger classifies as the carrier of affirmation (128). The greatest amount of intonational accent falls *not* on the word “knows” or “lies” but rather on *does* (as in “Does-Did he know it happened?). Thus the word, *Does*, can be applied to both the verb “to know” as well as the verb “to lie.” Maisie also questions the “truth” or “actuality” of her mother’s affirmative accusation (“he lies and he knows he lies”) whereas Beale Farange’s *knowing* that he lies makes the act of lying more despicable yet. Beginning her question with the word *does* also lends intonational emphasis to the interrogatory statement in its entirety. Applying Bolinger’s method of naming intonational profiles, Maisie’s question is a CAC profile, which “embodies the low

pitch plus abrupt rise of the CA,” thus a rise-fall-rise sequence (161). This profile reinforces a general tone of incredulity in the voice of Maisie: *How can my father lie if he knows what, and how bad, a lie is?* (162). Generally, however, profiles characterized by a slight rise in accent at an already low-pitch (“he *lies*”) imply some foreknowledge, whereas a profile characterized by a quick fall in terminal pitch would denote assurance (178). In questioning what her mother takes to be a commonplace, Maisie adopts a heightened tone which has the potential to grant her power in the scheme of relations between the adults.

While the lie undoubtedly has everything to do with Miss Overmore’s “duties” in the Farange household, it places the greater part of its attention on Beale Farange while spotlighting the eye of the storm: Miss Overmore. Maisie doesn’t ask her father whether he lies; rather, she asks the person “saved” or “given up” by the lie. Miss Overmore’s repetition of the question, albeit without the emphasis on whether Beale *does* lie, betrays her surprise at the child’s lack of decorum. While the narrator has Maisie’s tone come solely through her words, Miss Overmore’s tone is reinforced by an element of adult communication: gesture. She takes the accusation with grace, repeating Maisie’s words and continuing her mending. However, when Maisie brings the matter closer to home by parroting Ida’s words and asking whether she is *really* supposed to tell her father what Ida said, Miss Overmore communicates in an alternative language: “the unmistakable language of a pair of eyes of deep dark grey.”³⁷ The eyes give first affirmative and then negative answers, which Maisie hears and *does* know without the aid of sound. Maisie has asked a question that,

³⁷ In chapter 2, facial gestures are emphasized when Miss Overmore sows “seeds of secrecy [...] not by anything she said, but by a mere roll of those fine eyes which Maisie already admired” (*WMK* 43).

because of its prickliness, cannot be answered in words; for to answer in words would be to affirm the accusation either way.

In Chapter 3, Maisie's curiosity in the affairs of her erstwhile "guardians" is dampened by her mother's news that Mrs. Overmore will not be seeing after her while she is on her father's turf:

‘You understand of course that she’s not going with you.’

Maisie turned quite faint. ‘Oh I thought she was.’

‘It doesn’t in the least matter, you know, what you think,’ Mrs Beale loudly replied; ‘and you had better indeed for the future, miss, learn to keep your thoughts to yourself.’ This was exactly what Maisie had already learned, and the accomplishment was just the source of her mother’s irritation. It was of a horrid little critical tendency, a tendency, in her silence, to judge her elders, that this lady suspected her, liking, as she did, for her own part, a child to be simple and confiding. (*WMK* 45)

Throughout the novel, Maisie is counseled repeatedly not to voice ideas or objections to the terrible ways in which she is treated. Of course, Maisie cannot keep her thoughts to herself for long, but, for James, having Maisie keep her thoughts to herself is a way of keeping focused on the workings of an expanding, gradually maturing consciousness. Maisie, however, *is* encouraged, and even commanded, to parrot the horrible statements of her warring parents. The instrument of her voice is reserved, then, for verbal missiles, such as when she closes the opening chapter with her father’s words: “‘He said I was to tell you, from him [...] that you’re a nasty

horrid pig!’” (*WMK* 42). She rebels, however, against such conscription into their ranks: “Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing [...]” (*WMK* 43).

Tropes of iteration populate the pages of *What Maisie Knew* (as indeed they do in *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*). Here, iteration is the capacity of speech to resound or to echo (either in a confined space, such as a parlor or stairwell or between persons). In such a way, speaking tones reproduce themselves in a variety of forms or registers. Speaking tones become either acoustical atmospheric effects or they are subject to a kind of ventriloquism. In the case of a painful dentist’s visit, Mrs. Wix ventriloquizes Maisie’s silent pain:

Maisie ... had been heroically still, but just when she felt most anguish had become aware of an audible shriek on the part of her companion, a spasm of stifled sympathy. This was reproduced by the only sound that broke their supreme embrace when, a month later, the ‘arrangement,’ as her periodical uprootings, played the part of the horrible forceps.
(*WMK* 51-52)

In this scene, not only is the sound, which is supposed to come from Maisie emitted by another person, but the “audible shriek” propels itself forward into a future scene of extraction—that of Maisie’s translation from her mother’s house to her father’s. Later in the same chapter, Maisie muses on the effect of her doll’s innocent, ventriloquized questions to her mother’s company:

Nothing was so easy as to send the ladies who gathered there off into shrieks, and she might have practiced upon them largely if she had

been of a more calculating turn. Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock—this seemed to produce from within such sounds of derision. Little by little, however, she understood more, for it befell that she was enlightened by Lisette’s questions, which produced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in the very darkness of Lisette. Was she not herself convulsed by such innocence? In the presence of it she often imitated the shrieking ladies. There were at any rate things she couldn’t tell even a French doll. (*WMK* 54-55)

Providing a persona for Maisie to speak through and to learn from, without the embarrassment of ‘owning’ the innocence of such questions, Lisette empowers the young girl’s voice. She is able to be both the questioner and the questioned, even to the extent of deriding her own questions, by imitating the ladies’ shrieks, as they come through the mouth of Lisette. However, there are moments when Maisie, mimicking the voice of her mother, chides the doll for its stupidity (‘Find out for yourself!’) and afterwards finds herself ashamed, “though as to whether of the sharpness [her mother’s] or of the mimicry was not quite clear” (*WMK* 55). The image of the “long, long corridor with rows of closed doors” at which it is “wise not to knock” metonymically carries the trope of iteration, but not explicitly. Maisie understands that “sounds of derision” are caused by her knocks, but she does not understand that, regardless of the sounds on the other side of the door, her curious,

well-meaning knocks reverberate down the corridor. Their echoing in fact can grow more deafening than any shriek.

The long hallway, recurrent in James's stories and autobiography, is a type of interior horizontal abyss.³⁸ Never a comforting image, it represents the diachronic nature of human life: as a character walks through its corridors, time slips away. The rooms ahead and behind repeat themselves to infinity. And yet the sounds which resonate and reverberate down the stages of this hallway only can be said to exist when they are dissipating and dying. As Walter J. Ong points out: "Sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. [...] It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent" (Ong 31). The sheer coupling and echoing of disparate sounds in the scene above confuses Maisie into discreetly choosing not to knock at those doors, not to elicit sound.³⁹ For her, sound's significance is cancelled by its evanescence. She doesn't understand that in a society "in which for the most part people were occupied only with chatter," sound carries the greater degree of meaning (*WMK* 37).⁴⁰ The old catch-phrase, "It wasn't what he said, but how he said it," reinforces the idea that

³⁸ Cf. "The Aspern Papers," "The Jolly Corner," and *A Small Boy and Others*. It is in this last that James twice muses on the sensation of an interior dimension through the metaphor of the forced hallway door, first in the nightmare he recounts of the Galerie d'Apollon and, second, during his typhus at Boulogne, of which he writes, "I took on, when I had decently, and all the more because I had retardedly, recovered, the sense of being a boy of other dimensions somehow altogether, and even with a new dimension introduced and acquired; a dimension that I was eventually to think of as a stretch in the direction of essential change or of living straight into a part of myself previously quite unvisited and now made accessible as by the sharp forcing of a closed door" (SBO 224).

³⁹ Earlier in chapter 2, Maisie realizes that she is being conscripted as her parents' interlocutress, and she decides against filling this role: "Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing" (*WMK* 43).

⁴⁰ That is, she doesn't understand this explicitly:

By the time she had grown sharper, as the gentlemen who had criticized her calves used to say, she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't big enough to play. (*WMK* 41)

people receive not words or mere data but, rather, tonal contours and harmonizations. These latter form the greater part of the basis of any received meaning.

The education of Maisie, in the absence of a proper governess, becomes such a self-taught ‘reading’ of tonal contours, gestures, and modes. In *What Maisie Knew*, as in all of James’s dramatic novels and later in *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*, knowledge of how to act, behave, and respond is derived not from rule-books and primers but rather from the correct decipherment of signs which hang as in mid-air. Without parents, “untutored and unclaimed,” Maisie is an *enfant sauvage* self-taught for survival or demise (*WMK* 69). As the narrator informs us,

[The amount that Maisie wasn’t learning] was so great as to fill the child’s days with a sense of intermission to which even French Lisette gave no accent—with finished games and unanswered questions and dreaded tests; with the habit, above all, in her watch for a change, of hanging over banisters when the door-bell sounded. This was the great refuge of her impatience, but what she heard at such time was a clatter of gaiety downstairs the impression of which, from her earliest childhood, had built up in her the belief that grown-up time was the time of real amusement and above all of real intimacy. Even Lisette, even Mrs Wix had never, she felt, in spite of hugs and tears, been so intimate with her as so many persons at present were with Mrs Beale and as so many others of old had been with Mrs Farange. The note of hilarity brought people together still more than the note of melancholy,

which was the one exclusively sounded, for instance, by poor Mrs Wix. (*WMK* 69)

In the absence of the enduring structures of “home,” of regularity, of sturdy vessels to fill with received ideas, the body of the young girl is not just another empty resounding chamber. Maisie learns what the grownup world sounds like, and in imitating it to doll or household help, thinks that she too has “grown up.” Her schoolroom desk is the banister, her received ideas eavesdropping. John Carlos Rowe notes, “What Maisie reads for most of the novel is merely the comic melodrama of a shabby everyday reality; what James and his narrator hope to encourage her to represent is the larger ethical significance that can be drawn from such negative lessons” (*OHJ* 139). As we can see in the passage directly above, Maisie is able to differentiate between notes, or modes, of relation—of air, atmosphere, *Stimmung*. She can read between the lines of a social situation and so tell the difference between the humorous chatter of the upper class and the dejected moroseness of Mrs Wix.

Each of the characters in *What Maisie Knew* comes to be identified according to a particular tone or mode which, according to one critic, ranges “from the burlesque to the high tragic” (Graham 128). Some characters embody tones traceable to distinctions in social class; others, to age. For James, the primary fascination lies in how tone can illustrate differences in personality and individual consciousness. Beale and Ida Farange epitomize the stoniness of the British upper classes, with tones which most often impale listeners on pikes of verbal invective. Ida, as the narrator describes her, is an imperious woman known for “triumphal entries and breathless pauses” (*WMK* 88). Beale is a man who, having done little but serve on a foreign legation,

hangs onto expressions like, “In *my* time in the East” (*WMK* 38). Mrs. Beale née Miss Overmore is simply referred to as “lovely,” but, as time passes, betrays a calculating, social-climbing air. Mrs. Wix’s tone is at once tragic and maternal, stern and caring, eminently old-fashioned. For Maisie, it contains something “indescribable and inimitable” from which she draws a “sense of support, like a breast-high banister in place of ‘drops’ that would never give way” (50). Sir Claude’s tone is sympathetic and humorous, but innocent of depth and strength. As in melodrama, James’s characters embody a certain number of rather predictable stereotypes, and, even as their personalities clash, their modes of relation are constant. Separate from each other, they constitute a rogue’s gallery, a satire of class and classism; taken together, they work for James’s full effect. In short, they sound to the fullest the *note*—they constitute the key (in the dual sense)—of his dramatic-narrative endeavor.⁴¹

But what of Maisie’s tone? The narrator’s? James’s? Sheila Teahan, while identifying *What Maisie Knew* as an “exemplary center of consciousness novel,” sees therein an “ambiguous relation between reflector [ostensibly Maisie’s consciousness] and narrator” (Teahan 2). Rowe, Mitchell, Wolk and Rivkin conceive of Maisie as an alter-ego of Henry James, albeit in a younger version of himself (Rowe 135). Each of these authors points to James’s own sojourn in Boulogne in 1857 and 1858, which in turn is mirrored by Maisie’s trip to Boulogne in the concluding chapters. The earlier date of that sojourn coincided with the fourteen-year-old James’s typhus infection as

⁴¹ Musing in his *Notebooks*, James extracts from the “whole tragic experience” of the “wasted years” of his failed theatrical endeavors the following two conditionals:

IF there has lurked in the central core of it this exquisite truth [...] that what I call the divine principle in question is a key that, working in the same *general* way fits the complicated chambers of *both* the dramatic and the narrative locks: IF, I say, I have crept round through the long, apparent barrenness, through suffering and sadness intolerable, to that rare perception—why my infinite little loss is converted into an almost infinite little gain. (*Notebooks* 167)

well as the James family's purse-tightening in the wake of an American investment gone bad. James himself in his *Notebooks* conceives of the point of view of *What Maisie Knew* as "my *line*, the consciousness, the dim, sweet, sacred, wondering, clinging perception of the child" (*Notebooks* 148), words themselves similar in tone to his own in *A Small Boy and Others*, the first volume of his autobiography: "my infant sense of wonder" (*AS* 33), "Mere mite of observation though I have dubbed myself" (23), "He is a convenient little image or warning of all that was to be for him ... For there was the very pattern and measure of all he was to demand: just to *be* somewhere—almost anywhere would do—and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration" (13-14).

In Chapter 26, Maisie and Mrs. Wix at last have their general taste of the Continent as they ride together through the environs of Boulogne. These moments witness Maisie's nascent realization of her companion's moral strength in the face of the immorality of her parents and stepparents. As the narrator notes: "a certain greatness had now come to Mrs. Wix" (*WMK* 210). And Maisie "still bore the mark of the tone in which her friend [Mrs. Wix] had thrown out that threat of never losing sight of her" (211). Maisie still does not recognize how badly things bode for her. Her idolization of Sir Claude as stepfather and potential *amour* blinds her. The outing meets an ostensible "conclusion" in Mrs. Wix's asking Maisie if she possesses "really and truly *any* moral sense?" (211). A pause ensues in which the narrator has Maisie musing on their surroundings at a beautiful time of the day, "the splendour of the afternoon sea," the motions of their coachman and his utterance of "unintelligible sounds," and the absence of bathers (*WMK* 212). The narrator reflecting the things

which impress themselves on Maisie's youthful consciousness, her observations, brings the diachronic progression to a standstill, until Mrs. Wix's tones break back in to end the mostly descriptive paragraph with the iteration: "'Have you absolutely none at all?'" (212). The question could be rephrased as, "Have you any tonal sense?" and so come to include other questions such as, "Don't you understand the atmosphere of danger in which you are moving?" or "Don't you know that, for all his precious words, at the end of the day, Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale don't care a fig for you?" Maisie knows that she is supposed to *know* something which, heretofore, owing to her position as a girl, she hasn't been allowed to comprehend. The narrator interrupts: "I so despair of courting her noiseless mental footsteps here that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time forward a picture literally present to her" (212). That Maisie's mental peregrinations are "noiseless" is telling, but it isn't entirely clear why. Up until this point, Maisie's thought-processes are contingent on the visual aspect of things. She knows implicitly that truths can be hidden in silence (and conversely in tonal variation) but she doesn't yet know how. The narrator continues:

As she was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? It came to her in face as they sat there on the sands that she was distinctly on the road to know Everything. She had not had governesses for nothing: what in the world had she ever done but learn and learn and learn? She looked at the pink sky with a placid foreboding that soon she should have learnt All. They lingered in the flushed air till at last it turned to grey and she

seemed fairly to receive new information from every brush of the breeze. By the time they moved homeward it was as if this inevitability had become for Mrs. Wix a long tense cord, twitched by a nervous hand, on which the valued pearls of intelligence were to be neatly strung. (*WMK* 213)

This passage, coming before the terrible events of the final chapters, presages the knowledge-that-is-to-come. Omens of a sort crowd air around her, but she hasn't risen to interpret them systematically. While connected to a chain of understanding, of reading clues, Maisie's consciousness is attuned mainly to sensation: to color, to touch, and finally to idea. The metaphor of the stretched cord is bivalent in its implications: it fulfills both the functions of a string (as in a musical instrument) and a means of stringing, or concatenating, ideas in a logical progression. It is a *tonos* capable of both "thinking" and "feeling."⁴² As would come to light in the composition of his three last novels, the inception of true knowledge for James was less a moment of interruption, breaking-into, or weighty narrative revelation and more a becoming-attuned-to, a contemplation and deciphering of aural impalpabilities.⁴³ The thoughts of character and narrator-reflector alike were conceived of as tones relayed by audible or inaudible sympathetic vibrations.

4.

⁴² Cf. the first chapter of this dissertation, pp. 19-20.

⁴³ In her indispensable study of the late fiction, Nicola Bradbury characterizes *What Maisie Knew* and *The Awkward Age* as the spaces where James both developed what he referred to as "really constructive dialogue" [AN 106] and as "the novels most precisely located in worlds between two poles of silence: what must not, and what cannot be said" (Bradbury 17).

James's enduring interest in the 'scenic' has obscured an equally enduring fascination with the aural and the 'sounded.' F.O. Matthiessen famously characterized James's imagination as "intensely visual," and James himself reinforces this by his exactitude in rendering visages, places, appearances, stages (in the dramaturgical sense).⁴⁴ However, James's use of the word 'tone' is both visual and aural. The portrait in "The Tone of Time" possesses a visual tone (as in its patina or varnish), while Mrs. Wix in *What Maisie Knew*, for all her anachronisms of dress, interests us with her verbal tones. The sheer "spokenness" or talkativeness of James's fiction after 1896 has a strong correlation to the process of composing aloud to a machine. James's 'talkative' fiction is a fiction in which, as Millicent Bell notes, "his narrative voice and the voices of many of his characters strive for expressiveness" while at the same time recognizing, if only grudgingly, the "gaps and voids" of their spoken words (Bell 17). As James's characters strive for such expressiveness, they employ a shifting set of vocal idioms. Each character can be "placed" according to the way he or she speaks. Certain of these tones are contingent on differences in gender, class, profession, morality; less often are they affected by verbal eccentricity or idiosyncrasy. Unlike Dickens, with few exceptions, James does not use phonetic spellings to mimic accents or impediments of speech. In fact, for James, as for many of his class and calling, there was a right and a wrong way of speaking. Such regulation extended to his fiction, where the words in which a thing was put were ideally the words most fitting.

⁴⁴ "James and the Plastic Arts" *The Kenyon Review* 5, No. 4 (Autumn 1943), 535-550.

During his year-long trip to America in 1904-5, James, who had not been in the United States since the death of his father twenty years earlier, observed not only the physical changes wrought on his native land but also changes in the way his countrymen and women spoke. In June 1905, a little more than a month before returning to London, James addressed the graduating class of Bryn Mawr College with a talk entitled “The Question of Our Speech.” It was the final lecture of a series James had delivered throughout the country to packed houses, earning him thousands of dollars. “The Question of Our Speech” was a spirited (if holier than thou) criticism of American speaking style, pronunciation, and, by extension, culture.⁴⁵ Along with his earlier lecture, “The Lesson of Balzac,” “The Question of Our Speech” sought to “address—and redress—the cultural state of the Union” (O’Donnell 134). At Bryn Mawr, James jocularly scolded a captive audience which, in his opinion, “would not think of expecting that [their] having failed to master the system of vocal sounds that renders [their] fruitful association with each other a thinkable thing should be made a topic of inquiry or conversation” (“Question” 43). To be “intelligibly, or completely, expressive” was, for James, the one true thing, and he stressed that

We may not be able to study—and *a fortiori* do any of the things we study *for* unless we are able to speak. All life therefore comes back to the question of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other; for all life comes back to the question of our relations with each other. These relations are made possible, are registered, are verily constituted by our speech, and are successful (to

⁴⁵ The year previous William had warned his brother that “the *vocalization* of our countrymen is really, and not conventionally, so ignobly awful that the process of hardening oneself [sic] thereto is very slow, and would in your case be impossible” (CWJ 233).

repeat my word) in proportion as our speech is worthy of its great human and social function; is developed, delicate, flexible, rich—an adequate accomplished fact. (HJC 44)

James's conception of proper speech is never, apparently, one which is reliant on fashion or convention; rather, to use his brother's trademark term, it is eminently "pragmatic," eminently efficient. Proper speech "promotes and enhances life" because it "works" relations and patterns of relation to their fullest. A culture which prizes relations, prizes the benefits of relations (in the most general sense), is civilized, and James goes on to note that "Of the degree in which a society is civilized the vocal form, the vocal tone, the personal, social accent, and sound of its intercourse, have always been held to give a direct reflection" (45). In short, he continues, "sound, vocal form [...] is the note—representative of its having (in our poor, imperfect human degree) achieved civilization" (45). James then identifies at least six national cultures that possess "tone-standards," which in his estimation are the hallmarks of "education" and "civility" (45). The American culture is glaringly absent; for America, as James notes, 'militates' against a "care for tone" and fails to teach, or ensure its inculcation, in the young (45). For James, a lack of care for tone presupposes an ignorance of tone, which, in turn, means that the shades and nuances of meaning—of James's own brand of the complex consciousness—soon would be jettisoned from social and self-consciously aesthetic discourse. As he notes:

You don't speak soundly and agreeably, you don't speak neatly and consistently, unless you *know* how to speak, how you may, how you should, how you shall speak, unless you have discriminated, unless

you have noticed differences and suffered from violations and vulgarities [...].

(46)

Tone, for James, is nothing less than an art “to be acquired and cultivated” and which consists in “avoiding vulgarity, arriving at lucidity, pleasantness, charm, and contributing by the mode and degree of utterance a colloquial, a genial value even to an inevitably limited quality of intention” (46). He rails against what he calls, the “imperfect disengagement of the human side of vocal sound,” seeing it as nothing short of a reversion to “an easy and ignoble minimum,” itself synonymous with the “grunting, the squealing, the barking or the roaring of animals” (46).

To pay adequate attention to tone, to care for it, is for James a very important step toward “speaking with consideration for the forms and shades of our language” (47). Anything less would represent a sort of burying of the talent, a desecration of the genius of a developed, varied, multiple national tongue, like English. James defines these “forms” and “shades” as

the innumerable differentiated, discriminated units of sound and sense that lend themselves to audible production, to enunciation, to intonation: those innumerable units that have, each, an identity, a quality, an outline, a shape, a clearness, a fineness, a sweetness, a richness, that have, in a word, a value. (47)

“Forms” and “shades” thus become “units of sound and sense,” which are then further reduced to no less than eight attributes (four of them specific, four of them abstract) and finally a quantifiable equivalent: “value.” For James, speech is

worth something. It can be either fast and cheap and vulgar or deliberate and expensive and precious. The equivalence with “value” certainly can be taken beyond its fiscal sense to embrace a full range of senses having to do with what I will term “fair equivalences.” In other words, while words and phrases can be refashioned to “mean” more than the mere idiom (and here the later James has a pronounced, if overdeveloped, edge), certain words and phrases more aptly define particular ideas and states of mind than others. There is a skill and efficiency with spoken language which James admires as much as he admires finding *le mot juste* for the dialogue of one of his characters. But James breaks things down even further, admitting the syllable (“emphasized or unemphasized”) as the smallest unit of such value: “our syllables [...] our parts of sentences, coming in *for* value and subject to be marked or missed, honored or dishonored—to use the term we use for checks at banks—as a note of sound” (47). O’Donnell sees James as “propos[ing] to develop, at the level of the syllable, the critical skills necessary for the appreciation of the novel” (O’Donnell 141). To not understand the proper intonation of vowels and enunciation of consonants is to botch not so much the rawest, most pragmatic sense of what we say but, rather, the “shades” and subtleties that mark all sophisticated speech. “All our employment of constituted sounds, syllables, sentences,” says James, “comes back to the way we say a thing, and it is very largely by saying, all the while, that we live and play our parts” (“Question” 47).

Like German physicist Hermann Helmholtz who demonstrated that audible phenomena were divided into tones and simple noise (*Klang*), James differentiated

between a world of correct pronunciation, enunciation and verbal harmony, and a world of simple noise when he states that:

Nothing, sayable or said, that pretends to expression, to value, to consistency, in whatever interest, but finds itself practically confronted, at once, with the tone-question: the only refuge from which is mere making of noise—since simple noise is the sort of sound in which tone ceases to exist. (48)

For James, where there is no tone, there is little possibility of reliable, communicable meaning; in fact, lack of a sense of tone (in speaker or listener) indicates more often than not “want of attention,” which “results in a graceless and unlighted effect, an effect of accident and misadventure” (48). For James the novelist, nothing was more anathema than accident; to entertain mere ‘chance’ in the composition of one’s fictions would be to drown one’s books, wreck one’s rod, sunder one’s crown of bays, and ignominiously “to accept the doom of the slovenly” (48). However, James’s polemical tone and intention—sententiously browbeating the daughters of the rich and mighty—do not go much further than polemics. Where “simple noise” for him is “slovenly,” for Helmholtz it is merely non-complex, not possessing a series of simultaneously sounded notes which support, or bolster, a *prime partial tone*. However, the point on which they do undoubtedly concur (and it is highly unlikely that James knew Helmholtz’s writings in their original form, or at all) is on tone’s polyvalent character. If tone is the result of the simultaneous sounding of a series of notes, and the “notes” of discourse are the meanest “units of sound and sense,” then speech too can sound a series of notes which must, with proper care and training, be

heard and “understood.” Meaning, in all its shades and forms, cannot be communicated otherwise. Perhaps one of the prime reasons for the difficulty that many readers have with James’s later style is that it is attempting, experimentally, to reproduce the tonal complexity with which James hears (or sees) phenomena. It is dissecting speech streams—sound-streams—in order to savor the contrapuntal, often contradictory, faltering perfection-seeking of consciousness itself.

5.

The “currency” of tone in the later novels is exemplified in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). Bell holds that *The Wings of the Dove* is “all about money . . . all about the fact that Kate and Densher cannot be happy unless they get money,” but I contend that it is as much about tone as about money (Bell 291). In fact, tone is a form of currency: You either have it or you want it. You are marked by it. If you try to acquire it, you may be accused of not deserving it. If you pretend you have it, you are a despicable “bounder.” You may even be thought not worthy of it. Even more important, however, than the trope of tone as currency *possessed* is the trope of tone as currency *for exchange*.⁴⁶ Resonance itself precipitates an exchange, an exchange of tone from one sounding body to another. The currency of tone in later James is expressly a currency for exchange, the exchange of meaning between two consciousnesses.

⁴⁶ Bell dwells on the first of these meanings: value. However, in the following quote she notes that in the later James value is being assigned to things previously thought unappraisable: “With extraordinary insight into the nature of modern experience, [James] recognizes that it is not sufficiently descriptive of modern man to say that he is subject to a market economy and constantly engaged in a contest for economic advantage. The competitive establishment of market value extends *to those part of a person, those aspects of behavior, once thought to have incalculable value*” (Bell 292) [emphasis mine].

The Wings of the Dove provides an excellent example of the importance of sound- or voice-scape in James's later fiction. Representative of a sea-change in James's art of the (dramatic novel), *The Wings of the Dove* not only represents different speaking tones but what I would like to refer to as *tones of mind*, or ways of hearing and thinking the unheard and the unseen. There is in *Wings* another space of tonal exchange, more integral than dialogue because more interiorly inflected and not reducible to a single system of linguistic communication. As John Bayley notes, "[James] was investigating the incalculable, things intimated by the deepest processes of living which, for that reason, can never be fully known" (*WD* 7). Bayley goes as far as to identify James's process with the composition of "a sort of poetry [...] essentially a mode of enquiry" (7). Unlike the characters of other novels of his time, why, in addition to what they do hear, do James's characters "listen" and respond to stimuli which are difficult, if not impossible, to see or hear or sense in any empirically verifiable way? One critic finds here a balance, or "precision," between "revelations of speech and voice" and what he terms "silent discoveries, gambits, and reversals unseen and guessed at only by the power of their effects" (10).

Often the principal characters of *The Wings of the Dove* don't simply talk to each other but rather "sound" *notes* inside each other. Their tone, wording, phraseology effect changes in mood, accentuate understandings previously tacit, and otherwise "work" the sympathies, affinities, and disagreements between them. To *sound*, however, takes on ambiguous meanings in James. In common parlance, it is the exploration and measurement of a depth, usually of water, a depth whose bottom cannot be ascertained not only because of its remoteness but also because of

intervening forces, such as different currents and temperatures and turbulences and sometimes balder, more substantial obstructions. More often than not, one sounds a depth whose bottom cannot be seen. But for James, *sounding* resonates with aural associations, as in “to strike or sound” a key or group of keys (as on a keyboard) in order to elicit a sound whose character is derived from the vibration of the sounding body and which will vibrate in sound-waves of equal length until another body, such as a hand or damper, intervenes. As in the previously discussed *What Maisie Knew*, James’s characters in *The Wings of the Dove* inhabit, each of them, certain primary tones. When they sound notes inside each other, they are sounding themes which, more or less, become associated with their person.⁴⁷ Kate Croy, the “handsome girl” of James’s fiction, who suffers beneath the dual weight of a ruined, ostensibly wastrel father and the necessity of the lucrative marriage envisioned by her aunt, Mrs. Lowder, continually sounds the note of naturalist tragedy, of being hard-put but clever, of needing to rise up above circumstances which viciously assert their inhuman power over her. Milly Theale, the doomed dove, rich, innocent, American, and soon to die prematurely, sounds the note of perfect sacrifice, self-deprecation, and eternal good will. Of her James writes in his New York Edition Preface that she was “passionately desiring to ‘put in’ before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived” (AN 288). Susan Stringham, her traveling companion and lady in waiting, sounds the note of selfless, borderline masochistic devotion when, at the outset, she tells Milly of the extremity of her self-sacrifice: “I would die for you.” Merton Densher, gifted,

⁴⁷ Understandably, this use of the verb “to sound” diverges from the primary sense of the aural, which I have used above. “Sounding” here is a metaphor for a critical response which is unique to the individual reader.

captivating to Kate, Milly, and Aunt Maud, sounds a note of torpor, uninterested in securing (by crass practical means) the financial security needed to win an acceptable marriage to Kate. He is not wholly dissimilar from her father, Lionel Croy, whose nameless offense ostracizes him from the world of the novel as it paradoxically resounds with the oft-repeated *leitmotif* of fiscal, familial hell. Empty and, according to Milly, *blasé*, Lord Mark is the epitome of a younger upper class that emulates the vacuities of its elders. His is the distinctly British note of class and wealth, dampening the pitch of Milly's attempt at living through the ingenious, unconscious *memento mori* of the Bronzino portrait. Sir Luke Strett, Milly's physician, sounds the note of attentiveness and silent "observation." He is able to still himself to the point of hearing, even sympathetically resonating with, the vibrations of Milly's interior. The diametrical opposite of Sir Luke, Maud (*née* Manningham) Lowder embodies statuesque impenetrability, a simulacrum of a Britannia or a lioness. Though gilded, her ring is distinctly leaden.

There seems to be a strong correlation between the primary tone of a given character and the type of note which he or she sounds in another; however, such an understanding of tone as tied to character can be further expanded to include issues of point of view. James has been admired for the subtle shifts of tone which occur throughout his novels, but rarely has it been noted that these shifts of tone occur most frequently when the point of view, or Jamesian center of consciousness, shifts from that of one character to another. The character and her tone of consciousness, her way of feeling and experiencing the narrative through which she is flowing, shape the very tone of the discourse. For a tonally predisposed novelist like James will compose

heterogeneous, multi-stranded, polyvalent narratives the success of which is contingent on the successful rendering, and modulation of, varied tones. At times, the heterogeneity of Jamesian tone will be apparent when a reader compares different scenes; at others, it will be apparent within scenes, say, in the dyadic nature of a dialogue. Nicola Bradbury in *Henry James: The Later Novels* refers to this as “the ‘open’ conversation, ‘where more is meant than meets the ear’” and which is “peculiarly able to modulate between ... levels of controlled farce and comic grotesque” (Bradbury 90). And, finally, heterogeneity of tone can be reinforced through the metonymic positioning of intertextual motifs, where the diction and tone of another literary text (Shakespeare, the Bible, Milton, Carlyle) has infiltrated the primary text and caused it to bristle with more associations than are available in the world of the text alone. Once again, the problematic semantic iteration of terms such as *theme*, *note*, *mode*, *tone*, and *key* becomes apparent.

The painful meeting of Kate Croy and her ruined, disgraced father constitutes the first scene of *The Wings of the Dove*, and it is there that James gives us, albeit in concentrated form, the themes or strands which will be woven together in the chapters which follow. The primary note is the note of financial ruin. The narrator tells us that

the whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid voluminous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes without sense, and then, hanging unfinished, into no words or any notes at all. Why should a set of people have been put into motion, on such a scale and with such an air of being equipped for a

profitable journey, only to break down without an accident, to stretch themselves in the wayside dust without a reason. (*WD* 56).

Kate Croy has been told by her maternal aunt, Mrs. Lowder, that her support and advancement of Kate's prospects is contingent upon her ceasing contact with her disgraced father. Kate, bidden by her father on the pretense of illness, offers herself up sympathetically to her father's plight. He rejects her, citing the importance of her making a good marriage and not, under any circumstances, being a burden to him.

The narrator reflects Kate's state of mind:

He wished her not to come to him, still less to settle with him, and had sent for her to give her up with some style and state; a part of the beauty of which, however, was to have been his sacrifice to her own detachment. There was no style, no state, unless she wished to forsake him. His idea had accordingly been to surrender her to her wish with all nobleness; it had by no means been to have positively to keep her off. She cared, however, not a straw for his embarrassment—feeling how little, on her own part, she was moved by charity. She had seen him, first and last, in so many attitudes that she could now deprive him quite without compunction of the luxury of a new one. Yet she felt the disconcerted gasp in his tone as he said: 'Oh my child, I can never consent to that!'

'What then are you going to do?'

'I'm turning it over,' said Lionel Croy. 'You may imagine if I'm not thinking.'

‘Haven’t you thought then,’ his daughter asked, ‘of what I speak of? I mean of my being ready.’

Standing before her with his hands behind him and his legs a little apart, he swayed slightly to and fro, inclined toward her as if rising on his toes. It had an effect of conscientious deliberation. ‘No—I haven’t. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.’ (*WD* 60)

Here motives, true as well as false, crowd the scene; the scene itself being the epitome of what James referred to as “the endless equivocation of the English.” Though the rhetorical figure of *chiasmus* is never explicitly invoked, the endless back-and-forth of this distinctly Jamesian dialogue has the feel of chiasmus. Kate’s mind is confused while her father’s is resolute, but the reason for his resoluteness eludes her as much as it eludes the reader. Characteristic of the later James, the indefinite general pronoun “it” swarms the passage, making the chance of misunderstanding three-way in application.

Kate’s conversation with her father is complemented soon after by her conversation with Merton Densher. Densher, whom Lionel Croy refers to as “some blackguard without a penny,” does little to remedy Kate’s situation. He is aware that by Mrs. Lowder’s standards he is unsuitable. He also is aware that little will change in his situation to make a suitable marriage possible. Certainly he is compelling, but, all in all, lackluster. The narrator describes him loitering thus:

You would have got fairly near him by making out in his eyes the potential recognition of ideas; but you would have quite fallen away on the question of the ideas themselves. The difficulty with Densher

was that he looked vague without looking weak—idle without looking empty.

(*WD* 86)

For Kate, Densher possesses a personality quite different from the many suitors her aunt has tried to pick for her. “He represented,” the narrator tells us, “what her life had never given her and certainly, without some such aid as his, never would give her; all the high dim things she lumped together as of the mind” (87). Bradbury notes: “Densher is not blind to the material, but alien to it, in a way that Kate, with her ‘dire accessibility to pleasure from such sources’ is not. Densher can figure himself and Kate, from Mrs. Lowder’s point of view, in terms of visible assets and market forces” (Bradbury 85).

Echoing the “fine florid voluminous phrase” which, as Kate’s house, fell apart, the narrator says of Kate and Densher:

Any deep harmony that might eventually govern them would not be the result of their having much in common—having anything in fact but their affection; and would really find its explanation in some sense, on the part of each, of being poor where the other was rich. (*WD* 87)

Densher’s “want of means” strikes the note of poverty; indeed, strikes it loud and long. He strikes it long enough, indeed, for Kate to resonate with the hard-to-distinguish overtone of her previous run-in with Lionel Croy. She gives Densher the background of her family’s financial (and supposed moral) ruin: her father’s unspeakable, undisclosed (even to her) wicked deed. She admits to Densher that she

has internalized her father's "dishonor," telling him "it's a part of me." Densher queries:

'A part of you?'

'My father's dishonour.' Then she sounded for him, but more deeply than ever, her note of proud still pessimism. 'How can such a thing as that not be the great thing in one's life?'

She had to take from him again, on this, one of his long looks, and she took it to its deepest, its headiest dregs. 'I shall ask you, for the great thing in your life,' he said, 'to depend on *me* a little more.'

(99-100)

Kate seems to be one of those heroines who bristle at the idea of dependence, even as her sister and father crowd around her with open palms. She tries to offer them, give them, what they need, but she herself lacks the kind of 'care' for which they yearn. In the face of Kate's stolidity, Densher's spurious offer of help, along with his announcement of a trip to America, seems more spurious. Kate wants freedom from the "value" she has been assigned by these others, and her lover strikes us as standing around, mildly deliberating, with his hands in his trouser pockets. Densher adds:

'And the fact you speak of holds you!'

'Of course it holds me. It's a perpetual sound in my ears. It makes me ask myself if I've any right to personal happiness, any right to anything but to be as rich and overflowing, as smart and shining, as I can be made.'

Densher had a pause. ‘Oh you might by good luck have the personal happiness too.’

Her immediate answer to this was a silence like his own; after which she gave him straight in the face, but quite simply and quietly: ‘Darling!’ (102)

James makes this final, seemingly harmless word of dialogue a site of enormous tonal resonance. “Darling” does not merely contain two opposite meanings; it resoundingly holds within itself—its tintinnabulation—the two tones of *Wings*: the innocent and the diabolically tragic.

6.

One of the challenges of any shared analysis of Henry James and the next subject of this study, James Merrill, is the genre-divide that exists between them. Many scholars would point to the obvious differences, formal and semantic, between a novelist and a poet; not the least of which would be a fundamental difference in their structures and styles of composition. And yet, by the mid-1960s, Merrill was the author of two novels (one explicitly Jamesian, the other a worthy nod to the then-modish *nouveau roman*) and the fashioner of lengthy periodic narrative poems. James, though he did not write poetry for publication, had an intense appreciation for poetry and the drama. For example, the scenic quality and multiple points-of-view in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1889) greatly appealed to him, and one of his later literary essays, “The Novel in ‘The Ring and the Book’” (1912), is an

analysis of the book-length narrative poem.⁴⁸ James's forays into the theater, and subsequent theatrical failure, provide an instructive parallel to Merrill's forays into both the novel and the play. It would be beneficial for an analysis of James and Merrill to explore the meaning of *desire for another genre* and the failure to adequately possess that ideal. In the Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1904), James ratifies the kinship of the poet and the novelist by revealing both to be under the "descent," aegis and inspiration of the "god." He writes: "The poet becomes so worth it and the god so adopts him, and so confirms this charming office and name in the degree in which his impulse and passion are general and comprehensive – a definitional provision for them that makes but a mouthful of so minor a distinction, in the fields of light, as that between verse and prose" (AN 341). Tone, as a revealed or uncovered aspect of the kinship between genres, can be said to lie along the genre divide. Can it be that, in the respective cases of Henry James and James Merrill, tone is so generated along that same divide that in the desire, say, to write novels instead of poems, or plays instead of novels, a particular tone is born?

In the following chapters, I will attempt to shed light on some of the stylistic affinities between James and Merrill. It is first necessary, however, to prepare the ground for my discussion of James Merrill's achievement by providing a brief summary of the New Criticism and its exponents in Britain and America. It will suffice here to say that one of Merrill's debts to James and New Critics, such as R. P. Blackmur, who feted James's fiction and criticism, was what Roger Fowler, in

⁴⁸ *The Awkward Age* (1899) mimics *The Ring and the Book* by making each of its parts contingent on the center of consciousness of a single character. In addition to "The Novel in 'The Ring and the Book,'" James wrote one other literary essay on Browning, as well as a remembrance to coincide with Browning's funeral and interment at Westminster Abbey.

Linguistics and the Novel (1977), refers to as “an extreme technique of internal perspective ... a mind-style ... that we begin to suspect [as] James’s own” (109).

Chapter 3: ‘A Concert of One’: The New Criticism and the Growth of a Poet’s Craft

*Probably there is something between the mood and the vocal imagination
(images of the voice speaking) that determines a man’s first commitment to
metre and length of line... We play the words as we find them.*

—Robert Frost, “The Constant Symbol” (1946)⁴⁹

In his classic essay, “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953), T. S. Eliot singles out three distinct voices of poetry: first, the inward, that of the poet in conversation with himself; second, the public, that of the poet addressing an audience; and, third, the dramatic, that of a character or persona created by the poet. Separately or taken together, these voices imply a unified intention on the part of the poet (Eliot 96). Applied to a broader grouping of texts, this tripartite model can also reveal something about the voices in a novel, provided one takes into the account the possibility of more of them.

Eliot fails however to make obvious one of the key elements of voice, mainly its sound. One is accustomed to contextualize a voice’s content—its meaning(s)—as much by its choice of diction as by its, necessarily, perceived volume, pitch and timbre. When in the discussion of a particular poem we refer to voice, we must try with the help of the meter (in the case of accentual-syllabic poetry) to decipher these from the printed words on the page.

This is to raise implicitly the burning question that has dogged deconstructive criticism for the past three decades: Does the spoken word precede the printed letter?

⁴⁹ *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 404.

Or, to be more precise, must the printed poem, in order to fulfill its end, contain all the prompts necessary for a correct recitation, thus conjoining the orality of the poet with the aural receptivity of listener/audience? According to Fabian Gudas and Michael Davidson in their entry for *voice* in *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (1994), vocal sounds are an essential component of the poetry-reading phenomenon, entering “directly into the aesthetic experience of performance...but no less do these sounds resonate in the ‘inner ear’ of a fully attentive silent reading” (Brogan 337).

Fully attentive silent reading: the very words are like a bell to toll me back to my sole self in an undergraduate classroom. They are catchwords for a technique, indeed an entire interpretative *ethos*, that flourished in English and American classrooms in the forties, fifties, and sixties (and in some places, particularly the American secondary school system, through the present day). Paul de Man, who was Reuben Brower’s TA at Harvard in the fifties, recounts his experience of the New Critical classroom:

Brower...believed in and effectively conveyed what appears to be an entirely innocuous and pragmatic precept, founded on [I. A.] Richards’s ‘practical criticism.’ Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move out at once into the

general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them.

(de Man 23)

Brower's precept, shared by many critics and teachers of literature, sought to reign in students' spurious syntheses of biography, sociology, and tangential thinking. As such, it was a conservative precept, popularized as "Nothing but what is in the text."

As de Man continues:

The papers they handed in at the end of the course ["The Interpretation of Literature" HUM 6] bore little resemblance to what they produced at the beginning. What they lost in generality, they more than made up for in precision and in the closer proximity of their writing to the original mode.

(23)

One cannot help but think that de Man's terminal phrase "original mode" could be read as signifying the students' proficiency at a type of tonal mimicry; as if their 'interpretations' could be read as a sort of imitation plus augmentation and/or finalization of the text under scrutiny. By limiting themselves solely to the text they were able to successfully model themselves on the consciousness that generated it in the first place.

The New Critics' eschewal of the philological and biographical styles of literary criticism that had characterized much of the scholarship done until the First

World War—scholarship which thrived on the *ancillary* rather than the *internal*—was tantamount to a rebellion waged to “restore” an organic criticism concerned with, what one scholar has called, “the tropic, imagistic, and thematic motion[s] they saw as intrinsic to the poem” (DuBois in Lentricchia 6). While each of the New Critics had his own distinct sphere of influence and expertise, taken as a unified whole they praised the paradoxes, tensions in logic, ironies, complex *images* and Empsonian ambiguities of a host of Renaissance, Romantic, and Modernist models. Of prime importance was the double-sided relation between a poem’s speaker—its rhetorical voice—and its implied audience. In certainly one of the earliest books to sketch a ‘new’ style of criticism, I. A. Richards singled out tone as a crucial mode of meaning as well as a critical means of understanding both the spoken and the unspoken intentions of the voice in relation to an ideal reader (Richards 182). In the same year that Richards published *Practical Criticism* (1929), Robert Frost penned an introduction to his decade-old play, *A Way Out*, in which he noted, like Eliot in “The Three Voices of Poetry,” the *dramatic imperative* of poetry. For Frost the reader’s attentiveness to the subtleties of the text is contingent on the text’s inherent dramatic qualities. He writes:

A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentences.

Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structures will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination (Frost 272-73).

Frost's 'dramatic necessity' can be translated into *what a group of words can and must* do, effect, or cause *proleptically*. In other words, the pattern of words in a sentence enact a coding of meaning which both anticipates and practices the human voice prior to voicing. This proleptic performativity, coupled with mention of an "ear of the imagination," belies a Romantic prejudice on Frost's part which many critics and readers would find strained in the face of a contemporary poetics. Frost's metaphor of a voice with materiality, which can be tangled and fastened as if one were tacking down a piece of unruly paper streamer or a strand of kelp (or even a human tongue) at first seems far-fetched, even ridiculous. But at bottom it reveals a deep-seated belief in the complex and vexing theoretical relationship between words and the combinations of sounds, which, strangely enough, communicate sense or meaning from one mind to another.

R. P. Blackmur, in "Language as Gesture" (1954), an essay collected into his volume of the same title, removes the discussion to a more fundamental plane by seeking to, at once, "solve the puzzle" and "discover [an] approach to" what he terms "the central or dead-end mystery of meaningful expression in the language of the arts," by linking the "language of words" to successful gesture, as in the case of a dance which succeeds in communicating the choreographer's intention. He observes: "Words are made of motion, made of action or response, at whatever remove; and gesture is made of language—made of the language beneath or beyond or alongside of the language of words" (Blackmur 3). Like Frost's "dramatic necessity," Blackmur's "gesture" reinforces the conception of a deeper design intrinsic to the poet's conception of his or her poem. A good poem therefore will contain within its

structure all of the features, directions, etc., required for the reader's proper reception.

Blackmur notes:

There is a line in *Othello* which I think makes it all plain beside us...
 "I understand a fury in your words / But not the words." I do not propose this language as itself a gesture, but it is proposed as a fair example of the situation in which language gains the force of gesture... For gesture is native to language, and if you cut it out you cut roots and get a sapless and gradually a rotting if indeed not a petrifying language... It seems that the highest use of language cannot be made without incorporating some such quality of gesture within it. How without it could the novelist make his dialogues ring? How could the poet make his cry lyric, his incongruity comic, or his perspective tragic? (3; 4; 6).

Essentially, Blackmur's stance remains a Scholastic one, as readily discoverable in the pages of Aquinas as in Maritain: that in the best art, form and content become one substance, identical inside and out. Interpreted from a postmodern point of view, this stance is constraining and radically limiting—quite contrary to the classical view which would interpret it as 'pure' and thus favorable; it is posited on a pervasive use of control—in Blackmur's own words "a kind of reduction, condensation, telescoping of free instinctive movements that transforms them into residual gestures, almost as closely ordained as the gestures in ritual" (9). Blackmur's "gesture" can be taken as being congruent with the definition of tone which is being explored here. It seeks a "something more" which single words

seldom possess outside of a contextualized scheme. A gesture that can be called successful, that evokes the desired feeling, that elicits the sought after emotion, is the product of a severe discipline. Not surprisingly, Blackmur uses the example of the composer whose only freedom lies in his ability “to play with the elements of musical meaning until they become gesture. This is no doubt why Pater said that all the arts tend to the condition of music; the condition is gesture” (11). The invocation of Pater’s famous aphorism from *The Renaissance* is, to say the least, telling. Pater’s conception of music as the *telos* of the arts denotes an aesthetic liberated from the didactic, moral, and semantic spheres, whereas Blackmur’s gesture seems to be the very product of the things which Pater’s definition eschews: an *ascesis* of imagination and technique. Pater’s is a pure art for sure, but pure because it is *sui generis*; not because it has been tamed, emasculated or tortured into submitting to an appropriate form. Lawrence Lipking in his article “Poet-critics” limns the relationship between notions of textual purity and the Modernist text, noting that the notion of poetry aspiring to “an art of sound and form independent of subject matter and meaning” is best embodied by French Symbolism but is not limited to that particular school (*CHL* 441).

For the New Critics the creation of a tone, or rather of proper tone, does not come easy. It is a technique known to only a few and drilled into the heads of students using only a handful of examples. Shakespeare, the Metaphysical Poets, and Eliot are the few that come to mind. As I. A. Richards reminded his students in *Practical Criticism*, there was much bad poetry; that is, poetry which did not sustain the rigors of *figure* and trope and the eminently perfectible correlations between feelings and

objects. Blackmur mentions a writer who (understandably!) felt thwarted in his mission to lend *gestural* meaning to his words:

He says in explanation of why he cannot write... 'The trouble is I don't have the benefit of gesture in writing—or of inflection either.' He is wrong; his trouble is that he has put himself in the position of a stenographer, and what he wants is what the stenographer cannot take down—on the one hand rhythm and cadence and interval, the gestures of the voice that speaks, and on the other hand the look and feel and movements of the man while speaking, whatever is necessary to render what we may call the whole gesture of the scene. What he has to do is to forget the whole theory of stenography...and make the words of his pen do...what the words of his mouth did...and most of all, what they failed to do at those crucial moments when he went off into physical gesture with face and hands and vocal gesture in shifting inflections. And he must do this by making his written words sound in the inward ear of his reader, and so play upon each other by concert and opposition and pattern that they not only drag after them the gestures of life but produce a new gesture of their own. (12)

Under such duress, one cannot help but wonder how a poem would ever get written. Blackmur takes the New Critical stance to its ridiculous conclusion, leaving both reader and writer wondering whether either of them will ever get it right.

Thus there exists within the New Criticism a fissured definition of tone. On the one hand, there is the relationship between speaker and audience, and on the other

the relationship between the printed word and its sound and/or intonation. Predating the New Critical definition, and perhaps included in it, is the Formalist definition, which interprets tone solely as intonation and positions it “at the boundary between the verbal and the un verbal, between the said and the unsaid” (Bakhtin in Todorov 41).

James Merrill, whose strong misreading of New Critical ideas was coupled with a working knowledge of musical composition and performance, exploited each of these definitions of tone. In a 1968 interview with Donald Sheehan at the University of Wisconsin where he was Poet in Residence, Merrill remarked “The point about music and song is that theirs is the sound of sheer feeling—as opposed to that of sense, of verbal sense. To combine the two is always worth dreaming about” (*R* 30). For Merrill, the tones of words, their sounds if you will, are music to support and indeed carry home to the reader, in the least painful way possible, the broadest range of the poet’s feelings. Merrill remarks:

Certainly I cared about music long before I cared about literature. When I was eleven years old, I began to be taken to the opera in New York; and the sense of a feeling that could be expressed without any particular attention to words must have excited me very much. I daren’t go into the effect Mrs. Wix would have pounced upon, of the opera on my moral sense. All those passions—illnesses, ecstasies, deceptions—induced for the pure pleasure of having something to sing beautifully about. Whenever I reach an impasse, working on a poem, I try to imagine an analogy with musical form; it usually helps. (*R* 29)

Merrill goes on to show how sections of his poems “An Urban Convalescence” and “The Thousand and Second Night” are modeled, in part, on a Beethoven rondo and an Introduction and Allegro. He stresses the seminal importance of French *mélodies* (art songs) and German *Lieder*. Recordings of Maggie Teyte, whom Merrill mentions in numerous places throughout his poetry and prose, are studied. Through what he terms his “musical education,” Merrill says he came to the realization that there was a way of “uttering a line to have it make real sense, real human sense” (R 30). Childhood experiments in drama, a marionette theater in which Merrill and his nanny concocted all the disparate voices, and subsequent acting in school plays at Lawrenceville and, later, Amherst reinforced the importance of correct style of utterance. As in opera, Merrill’s poems present voices woven with music; in this way, they upset any reading of them that would fall prey to what de Man, in his essay “Tropes [Rilke],” terms “the Cratylic illusion . . . which subordinates the semantic function of language to the phonic one” (*Allegories* 32). Rather, the music generated by the “forms” and “phrasing” bolster and intensifies the semantic content. However, in its support of the semantic content of a given poem, it may also serve to place some distance between the speaking voice and its emotion, and this is very important to keep in mind when we consider for Merrill, as for James, tone was as much an intensifier as a sort of screen between the signifier and its frequently overdetermined signified. For both Merrill and his aesthetic forefather, desire is something to be hinted at, implied but never blatantly (or sloppily) expressed.

Merrill’s teacher in New Critical methods of reading was none other than Reuben Brower who taught at Amherst College in the mid-forties before his long stint

at Harvard.⁵⁰ Of his experience with Brower, Merrill not surprisingly recounts: “I now see it was chiefly a course in tone, in putting meaning and the sound of meaning back into words” (R 30).

Brower’s ideas of this period can be found in his book *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (1951) which, rather revealingly, takes its title from the very New York Edition preface in which Henry James attempts to erase the boundary between verse and prose. As Brower explains in his introduction, his method (and the one which he enjoins his students to follow) is one in which, through “simple activities,” the unfamiliar is translated into the familiar and “the complex into the simple” (Brower 16). While choosing to focus on the figures (metaphor, imagery, irony) in order to locate the “imaginative organization” (Brower 4) of a poem or novel, Brower’s choices and, later, his assumption about what the poet is trying to do are far from common sense. In the construal of “large relationships” between figures, words, expressions, repetitions and the like, the critic takes great liberties in his reification of a proper, correct, “good” reading of a text. As he notes:

To be concerned with finding designs of imaginative organization is to
be concerned primarily with defining the meaning of words in

⁵⁰ As Wallace Martin notes in his contributing chapter to volume 7 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Modernism and the New Criticism*:

According to Douglas Bush, one of the scholars most vocally opposed to the new critics, their only representative at Harvard (his institution) was Reuben Brower (‘Memoirs,’ p. 603). After going abroad to complete a second BA at Cambridge where he came to know both Richards and Leavis, Brower taught at Harvard and Amherst before returning to Harvard as professor in 1953. There he supervised the introductory course ‘The Interpretation of Literature,’ in which graduate students served as teaching assistants. According to Paul de Man, who was one of them, the course was based on a precept derived from *Practical Criticism*: students ‘were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering’ (‘Return’, p. 23). Between 1930 and 1955, about one in eight American doctorates in English was granted by Harvard or Yale; the transmission of practical criticism through their graduates began toward the end of that period (Litz et al., 298).

literature and with showing their relationships with meanings of other words. (14)

These semantic relationships do not exclude the more abstract tonal and sonic “meanings” generated and kept in tension by word order, syntax, and the virtual auditory imagination of a poem, what Brower refers to as the “sound design.” He states: “In analysis of sound design, we are pointing out relationships among perceived sounds or between perceived sounds and meanings” (14).

In his chapter entitled “The Figure of Sound,” Brower emphasizes a point which was to have great importance in the poetic imagination of Merrill; he states: “An intonation is imposed that sets the reading of verse apart from all but the most verse-like prose” (58). He elaborates in a Frostian vein:

The reader cannot know how a poem ‘sounds’ or make any valid remark about what he hears unless as he reads he enacts the dramatic situation, unless he senses the value of the images and the bindings of metaphor, and unless he is constantly responding with the feelings that are ordered through all the possible organizing modes.... In the inner ear we record all those nameless but wonderful modelings of the spoken word that place under the pressure of feeling and that express its quality better than any words can do. (59)

Certainly, as readers of poetry, we cannot slight Brower for his effort at bringing a greater share of attentiveness into the reading practices of his students, an attentiveness that, beyond a rude understanding of the argument of a poem, locates values of image and metaphor. That said, like many New Critics of his generation

Brower impoverishes the voice of the poet himself, the speaking tones that may very well have been translated from the literally spoken and sounded to the literally inscribed. He does not ask the question, Can we as readers form an accurate sound-image of the poet we are reading? Recording technology is mentioned briefly but, again, the poet isn't. Rather, an expert reader, at appropriate emotional distance from the text—an en(actor) if you will—is imagined who is “successful in making the sounds that words seem to demand. . . . Indeed it may be argued that the best readers of poetry try in reading aloud to render the sounds they first “hear” as images” (62). He concludes:

Even among sounds we can render, the variety to be included in the total is enormous: vowel and consonant sounds in all their combinations, variations of pitch, variations in tempo, in loudness or softness, and so on. . . (62)

There is also the gender, class, politics, and sexual orientation of this superlative reader, which will affect any number of these variables. So much of the elite status afforded poetry in the minds of readers can be derived from preconceptions about the people who read poetry *correctly*—e.g., school teachers, librarians, actors, celebrities, intellectuals. The sort of totalization of the poetic artifact which the New Criticism would propagate in the classroom becomes nearly impossible when poets, readers, and audiences do not adhere to its particular ideology.

Brower's ideas about tone had been informed and shaped by Cleanth Brooks's and Robert Penn Warrens' seminal New Critical guide to the teaching of poetry, *Understanding Poetry* (1938). Brooks and Warren define poetry there as “a form of

speech, written or spoken” (1, emphasis mine). Poetry has a job of communicating but good poetry communicates through subtleties, feints. It asks the reader to distance herself from the historical poet and to look more closely at the voice, indeed the character, she has created and breathed into life in a given poem. Brooks and Warren state also that: “Usually a hearer unconsciously bases much of his definition of such pieces of communication, not on the words themselves, but on the gestures, tone of voice, and facial expression of the speaker, and on what he knows about the speaker” (5). This is, for them, a “‘massive’ kind of communication” (5). Not deviating from the New Critical stance, tone is, again, “the speaker’s attitude toward his subject and toward his audience, and sometimes toward himself.” They continue:

The word is, strictly speaking, a metaphor, a metaphor drawn from the tone of voice in speech or song.... In ordinary life, a great part of our meaning—our basic attitude toward the *what* and the *whom* of any transaction—is indicated by the tone. In a poem this is also true, but the poet must depend on the words on a page to take the place of his expressive human voice; he must choose and arrange his words so that the poem will dictate to the reader the desired tone, with all the subtle modifications of meaning. (5)

Brooks and Warren turn the word into a metaphor which, itself, approximates a musical note. While devoid of any set meaning, it transmits or *carries* an atmosphere of significant feeling to the *hearer*. Brooks and Warren also propagate a concept of poem as utterance *cum* drama, thus stressing repeatedly the reader’s position as both audience and audience-member. The limitation of such a New

Critical concept of the poem is that, while accepting the poem as complex, it all too often forces the reader outside the poem's boundaries and discourages the type of reception that fosters new, creative readings. And, in reverse fashion, poets who subscribe to such a limited idea of the poem write a poem which often thwarts active participation and instead favors a sort of cool admiration. There may be an audience but it is only worth the price of admission. Audience participation is firmly discouraged. Movements, loud noises, and heckling are expressly forbidden.

But what is a reader to make of Merrill's shift from an emphasis on meaningless sound that lends feeling—indeed weight—to certain moments and passages to *sound imbued with meaning*? Commentators such as J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser focus on Merrill's preference for the doubled perspective, the logical contradiction, the preference for being of two minds, a preference which McClatchy holds as crucial to a "temperament that goes to the heart of metaphor" and which embodies, both in the work and in the mind which created it, an "elegant tension" (McClatchy, "On Water Street" 5).⁵¹

Such a tension could be appreciated by another of Merrill's mentors at Amherst, Robert Frost, with whom Brower and some other faculty arranged a meeting for the young poet in his second semester. But, as Merrill himself acknowledges in his memoir *A Different Person* (1993), while the "famous old man bent over my stanzas...and looked up to say kind things...I knew secretly how much [my poems] owed, that year, to Rilke and Yeats. So no doubt did [he]; only, gentler with students than with their teachers, he hadn't wanted to dampen me by saying so" (*DP* 15). The type of poet that the young Merrill sought to emulate—the poet he

⁵¹ Also cf. Yenser, *The Consuming Myth* (Cambridge, 1987)

fancied as “European” and thus more sophisticated—did not necessarily invalidate the powerful influence of poets from Merrill’s own land. Frost and Crane, consummate masters of tonal modulation, certainly had a place in the Brower syllabus, as did Yeats and Rilke. Frost’s famous dictum, “the voice of the imagination, the speaking voice must know certainly how to behave, how to posture in every sentence [the poet] offers,” surely imparted to Merrill an appreciation of the vital phrasal economy of truly successful poems. As he himself was to admit:

To the extent that phrasing leads to content. I don’t really know how to separate those. The poems I most love are so perfectly phrased that they seem to say something extraordinary, whether they do or not.

(*R* 79)

Perfect phrasing was Frost’s primary strength. Poems such as “Death of a Hired Man” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” reveal an ear for northeastern idiom, figures of speech, and speaking tones. As Frost expressed in a July 1914 letter to John Cournos, such an ear (and its artful taking-down of such common “dictation”) was not always appreciated by his critics:

My versification seems to bother people more than I should have expected—I suppose because I have been so long accustomed to thinking of it in my own private way. It is as simple as this: there are the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation.

I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained

relation. I like to drag and break the intonation across the metre as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle (Frost 680).

Less than six months later, in December 1914, Frost's idea would be reified into the famous 'sentence sounds' statement:

I have about decided to begin by demonstrating by examples that the sentence as a sound in itself apart from the word sounds is no mere figure of speech. I shall show the sentence sound saying all that the sentence conveys with little or no help from the meaning of the words. I shall show the sentence sound opposing the sense of the words as in an irony. And so I shall establish the distinction between the grammatical sentence and the vital sentence.... A word more. We value the seeing eye already. Time we said something about the hearing ear—the ear that calls up vivid sentence forms. (Frost 681-82)

In March 1915, Frost reiterated his belief that centuries of poetry had subordinated ear to eye: "We must go out into the vernacular for tones that haven't been brought to book. We must write with the ear on the speaking voice" (Frost 685). Earlier in the same letter Frost coins his expression "the sound of sense," which sought to embody the idea that "words are chiefly a kind of notation for indicating and fastening [tones] to the printed page" (Frost 684). Words, to Frost, were beginning to resemble notes arranged on staves.

In May 1915, in his talk to the students of the Browne and Nichols School, Frost spoke from an even more convinced position regarding the supremacy of

speaking tones in the poetry he was composing. He remarks in that talk, entitled “The Imagining Ear,”

You are generally told to distinguish simple, compound, and complex sentences,--long and short,--periodic and loose,--to varying sentence structure, etc. ‘Not all sentences are short, like those of Emerson, the writer of the best American prose. You must vary your sentences, like Stevenson, etc.’ All this is missing the vital element. I always had a dream of getting away from it, when I was teaching school,--and in my own writing and teaching, of bringing in the *living* sounds of speech. For it is a fundamental fact that certain forms depend on the sound; -- e.g., note the various tones of irony, acquiescence, doubt, etc. in the farmer’s “I guess so.” And the great problem is, can you get these tones down on paper? How *do* you tell the tone? By the context, by the animating spirit of the living voice. And how many tones do you think there are lying around? Hundreds of them—hundreds never brought to book. (Frost 687)

Frost concludes his talk by showing the students the points of tonal modulation in one of his earliest poems, “The Pasture,” as well as in his poem “Mending Wall.”

Throughout the ’teens and ’twenties Frost continued to discuss in correspondence and in lectures the importance of “sentence tones.” When examined against the backdrop of poems which are ripe with, albeit homespun, symbols, the reader of today might respond to Frost’s iteration of “voice first” with suspicion; but viewed against the classical Greek and Roman lyrics and satires which Frost so

admired, that same reader comes to his senses once he realizes the synergies which Frost strove to effect through the modulations of speaking tones and the semantic tones (the indicators of nuance and shades of meaning) in his greatest poems. As he told Walter Pritchard Eaton in September 1915, “What bothers people in my blank verse is that I have tried to see what I could do with boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones (for there are such) and forty eleven other tones. All I care for is to catch sentence tones that haven’t been brought to book.... But summoning them is not all. They are only lovely when thrown and drawn and displayed across spaces of the footed line” (Frost 690-91). Merrill expresses similar sentiments in his 1982 *Paris Review* interview:

Just as I love multiple meanings, I try for contrasts and disruptions of tone. Am I wrong—in the old days didn’t the various meters imply different modes or situations, like madness, love, war? It’s too late, in any event, to rely very much on meter—look at those gorgeous but imbecile antistrophes and semichoruses in Swinburne and Shelley or whoever. I’m talking from a reader’s point of view, you understand. Poets will rediscover as many techniques as they need in order to help them write better. But for a reader who can hardly be trusted to hear the iambics when he opens “The Rape of the Lock,” if anything can fill the void left by these obsolete resources, I’d imagine it would have to be diction or ‘voice.’

(R 80)

In the wake of a poet like Walt Whitman, phrasing is as indispensable a tool as succinct, interesting diction. The way that words and phrases are placed in a creative dialogue with the—often shifting—parameters of the poetic line is more important than any classical meter or fancy end-rhyming.

Paul Valéry, whose poetry and prose works fall high on Merrill's list of essential reading, defines lyric poetry as "the development of an exclamation." (How different is this, one might ask, from Frost's definition of a poem as "a reaching out toward expression" [Frost 701]?) "Lyric poetry," Valéry continues, "is the kind of poetry that thinks of the *voice in action*" (Valéry 149). The "development" initially represents the improvement or fleshing-out of the original utterance. The "exclamation" can be translated as a feeling, theme, or meaning (as in a statement or message). Taking this one step further, however, "development" can be interpreted in the musical sense. For example, both *Lieder* and string quartets are most successful when they develop, indeed complicate, then resolve, an initial melodic theme.

Mutlu Konuk Blasing, in her important study *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry* (1995), comments on Merrill's debt to formalist ideologies of composition as no doubt the proficiency of developing a "*rhetoric of formalism*" with "forms, posed as rhetorical gestures in their exaggerated artificiality, decorum, and anachronism" (Blasing 157). But, as Blasing expertly states, these forms, for all their museum-quality imitations of older formalist systems of rhetoric, are at bottom "rhetorically and functionally discontinuous with the canonical tradition[s]...invoke[d]" (Blasing 160). She goes on to argue that Merrill's trademark use of the very thing which critics and readers most take Merrill to task on, mainly

“convention,” does not cohere within the usual framework of society versus individual:

To begin with, he refuses to place socially sanctioned conventions in opposition to individual or natural language. Speaking of “manners,” he observes: “One could paraphrase Marianne Moore: using them with a perfect contempt for them, one discovers in them after all a place for the genuine.” Not only are manners “more hospitable to irony, self-expression, self-contradiction, than many a philosophical or sociological system,” but manners for me are the touch of nature, an artifice in the very bloodstream” (1986: 33). “From my own point of view,” he tells J. D. McClatchy in an interview, “voice in its fullest tonal range—not just bel canto or passionate speech”—would be “utterly unattainable without meter and rhyme and those forms we are talking about.” (Blasing 169)

Later on in that same interview with McClatchy, Merrill proposes that the so-called “obsolete resources” of form (meter, lineation, stanzaic division, diction, tone) allow simultaneously for an air of the “natural,” or effortlessness, and, perhaps comically, perhaps detrimentally, an “air of pastiche” (*R* 80). Blasing goes on to note that the anachronistic dimension of Merrill’s clinging to conventions long jettisoned by the poetic institution signify what she calls a “social class position.” She quotes Robert von Hallberg: “Merrill held on to his meters and chose his phrases with a sense of class...Merrill’s distinction [in the politics of style in American poetry] is his skeptical

view of that American *idée fixe*, the democratic or classless style” (von Hallberg 112 in Blasing 170).

Merrill’s poetic “music,” indeed the stuff of which is verse is made—its traditional (sometimes archaic) forms, rhythmic oddities, rhyme schemes, intricate *cabotinage* of puns—is never oblivious to the content it is “forming.” But, to give the merest nuance, mastery of form is meant both to be ironic and to signal to the reader that the poet possesses virtuosic powers; this all while being, rhetorically and functionally, discontinuous with the tradition such “forms” evokes. As Blasing notes:

Puns escape the idealizing economy of referential and representational substitution, since their multiple meanings are coeval, residing in the letters of the word. Hence, as Merrill defends them, puns are immoral (there can be no question of "justice" or "equity"), cheap (their "wealth" has no measurable value and posits no standard for such evaluation), transgressive (of the naming father and the hierarchical structures of substitution, whether of name for thing or vehicle for tenor), and "unseemly" (they offer forbidden sexual pleasure and economize on psychic expenditure ... by skirting the economy of sublimation).

(181)

Merrill makes the textual dangers and “losses” of signature--of authorship and authority bestowed by his muse (which one might speculate was, at turns, his own history and his relative fame)—his explicit subjects. As in other modes

of discourse, Merrill's exaggerations and ironic "edges" both ramify and criticize the very politics that gave them (and him) primacy in the first place.

Regarding tone, much of Merrill's traditionalist stance has to do with a profound shift of "culture" in his poetry, the shift from artificial forms which possessed sophisticated means for veiling personal meanings to a confessional mode which demolished the screen of artifice and, finally, to a nostalgia for artifice—albeit the blending of many—which is expressed in the camp sensibility of *Sandover*. Merrill certainly is not alone in this series of shifts; rather he is accompanied by other poets of his generation, who prized the poem firstly as an utterance. Ashbery, Bidart, Olson, Duncan, and Zukovsky were the others. Each "did" voices, each specialized in his own distinct type of metonymic fireworks, but, perhaps most importantly, each developed in his poems a fecund mixture of modes, "keys," and registers of speech. In this they share a divided lineage with Pound who saw *The Cantos* as an elaborate Bach fugue in which voices were woven together into a complex sound-structure. Unlike the New Critics, who totalized the poem (and placed it at arm's length) as a "complex symbol," they were looking to write, read and comment on categories of discontinuity and textual contingency as reflection on a complex inner self, a self as involved in the world as in the poem the world was writing through them.

Camp tone increasingly came to mediate, and even to place under erasure, some of the boundaries between "high" and "low" forms of art that had existed throughout Merrill's apprentice years. As camp, it self-consciously exploited a vast storehouse of material, from Ronald Firbank and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Perelli* to Richard Strauss and *Der Rosenkavalier*. As Sontag points out in

her now-classic essay, camp is about being overdone, *de trop*, not allowing oneself to have “good taste” but being, rather, an arbiter *of* taste to the point of never second-guessing one’s aesthetic decisions and often standing out from the rest of the crowd (Sontag 112). Merrill’s poems are elegant, charming, and full of beautiful surfaces that many readers have a hard time building anything upon. Some find their predominant tone effete, world weary, unable to be moved by anything out of its immediate sphere of focus. Others find them too obviously gay. Yet others (and this may very well be the biggest objection) find them snobbish and upperclass. Certainly, other than descriptions of the denizens of his Greek world, Merrill’s perspective is not a proletarian one. Descriptions of childhood fantasies in the Music Room of The Orchard, his parents’ Southampton estate, or of rare collectibles, or of pre-World War II sopranos and the music of Wagner, are not the stuff of which mass appeal is made. Merrill’s choice of subject-matter as well as his treasury of cultural references rivals that of Proust and Henry James and, in this alone, one begins to see how his content, perceived through the gossamer scrim of expensive education and a type of social *finishing*, signals the type of tone which he will employ. Merrill’s camp is not a sloppy, rhinestone tiara but the real thing gleaming on its velvet tray for the customer who has ready funds on which to draw. As a student once remarked to me: “Merrill assumes we’ve had a classical education and can understand all his references”; while I would reply that he assumes a type of reader who is in league with him, who shares his sensibility, sexual, social, literary, or otherwise.

Wallace Stevens, from whose essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” I quoted in chapter 1, attempts there to link sonics with the idea of nobility,

and perhaps in this he provided a basis for Merrill's comment that a society which lacks Greek or Latin or Anglo-Saxon "goes off the gold standard." Stevens, in turn, may very well have taken his cue from Henry James's conservative convictions on the protection of the English language from modern slackness, and yet Stevens is sagely equivocal: "I do not know of anything that will appear to have suffered more from the passage of time than the music of poetry and that has suffered less" (Tate 121). Good poets, he says, "make us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them...for a finality, a perfection, *an unalterable vibration*" (121). But Stevens is terribly vague when it comes to the idea of nobility itself, divorcing it from its generic social form and stating that it "resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes" (123). "To fix it," he says, "is to put an end to it" (123). As for 'contemporary poetry,' Stevens fails to acknowledge one jot of the indefinable quality in it. "There is no element," notes Stevens, "that poets have sought, more curiously and more piously, certain of its obscure existence." He concludes:

Its voice is one of the articulate voices which it is their business to overhear and to record. The nobility of rhetoric is, of course, a lifeless nobility...Poetry is a cemetery of nobilities. For the sensitive poet ... nothing is more difficult than the affirmations of nobility and yet there is nothing that he requires of himself more persistently, since in them in abut quickly follows it up by stating that, rather than a thing which can be reified, nobility is a force, not an artifice: "It is a violence from

within that protects us from a violence without.... [It is] the imagination pressing up against the pressure of reality” (125).

Merrill, while possessing a more personal voice than Stevens, acknowledges the influence of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* on youthful efforts, such as “The Green Eye” in which “colorful scenery gave rise to questions about the nature of reality” (R 117).⁵² The younger poet admired Stevens’s refusal to separate “involuntary philosophy” from “irresistibly gaudy...irresistibly abstract” vocabulary (117). Merrill admits that, as a college student, he was “struck by how naturally Stevens handled his references to art and poetry, the aesthetic performance, the ‘theatre of trope’” (119). It was completely understandable that he would aspire to a type of imitation and innocent misreading, and create such poems as “The Black Swan” and “The Peacock.” Even if one does not know the poems, their titles betray promise joined to the worst type of preciosity.

After evolving from the nacreous, polished, and impenetrable verses of *First Poems* and *The Black Swan*, Merrill began to make greater reference to his vast storehouse of high-culture *objets*. Not surprisingly, this loosening of the collar coincided with a loosening of Merrill’s tone into the personal, confiding, if moneyed and well-traveled register of *Water Street* (1962). It is this volume that contains some of his most anthologized poems, poems which garnered him great attention for their ability to confess his life while not compromising elegant speech. As with his earlier volume, *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), the predominant concern

⁵² From “The Green Eye” (1946) which Merrill wrote as a junior at Amherst College: “Come, child, and with your sunbeam gaze assign / Green to the orchard as a metaphor / For contemplation, seeking to declare / Whether by green you specify the green / Of orchard sunlight, blossom, bark, or leaf, / Or green of an imaginary life” (FFN 6).

is with finding equilibrium between life and artistic expression—“the tension,” as Mona Van Duyn remarks, “in life, love, and art, between passion and restraint” (Rotello 28).

“An Urban Convalescence” is one of the finest examples in American poetry of a fundamental reading of the text of the self within the context of a particular landscape, which in this case is New York City. To summarize its scope, “An Urban Convalescence” chronicles the poet’s stroll down his block after an undisclosed illness—which one can take as signaling a general malaise or depression-- and his witnessing of the demolition of a Beaux-Arts building. He begins in the tone of a letter-writer sharing details with a friend:

Out for a walk, after a week in bed,
 I find them tearing up part of my block
 And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the dozen
 In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane
 Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.
 Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man
 Laughs and curses in her brain,
 Bringing to mind the close of *The White Goddess*.
 (WS 3)

After the cold precision with which he penned his New Critically-inflected poems, Merrill would like to be able to fumble, but he qualifies his projected fumbling with the adverb “luxuriously.” He knows he cannot but allow himself virtuoso performances, and so even here in the poem which grants the first glimpse at a real

person, a real poet behind the poem, he is telling his audience that he is a certain type of consciousness, a *flâneur* in no rush to get anywhere in particular. As critic J. D.

McClatchy notes:

There is much about the design and tone...that is reminiscent of Henry James—of “The Jolly Corner,” say, or parts of *The American Scene*. Merrill’s convalescent is one of James’ poor sensitive gentlemen. The fateful ‘inner detachment’ of John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle” comes strongly to mind in this connection. Marcher—whose very name links him with Merrill’s walker—is blocked from life by his sense of “being kept for something rich and strange” and suffers, as Merrill’s speaker does not, a terrible failure of human energy. Both men are ill, though... (*WP* 265)

Merrill’s recovery, or recapitulation, is greeted with the destruction of an edifice that, though not overly important to him—an upper class feint of mannered detachment?—represents a violent dismantling of the (his?) past. “As usual in New York,” he writes in the second stanza, “everything is torn down / Before you have had time to care for it. / Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall / What building stood there. Was there a building at all?” (3). Merrill’s dialogue with himself has to do, perhaps, with the questioned ability to summon up a previous version of himself. He pauses:

Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises
Some five floors high of shabby stone
—Or am I confusing it with another one

In another part of town, or of the world?

(3)

Merrill sketches the image slowly. It is as if he is channeling a rather immature, if inanimate, version of the ghosts that would populate his epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. His tone is mock-profound as he tells the reader about what the reader cannot see, and then his tone shifts to the conversational interjection introduced with that elbowing-in of a long dash “—Or am I confusing it...?” Is Merrill lamenting/honoring a past voice, a voice he has tapped into once but cannot any longer? The heavy-handed reference to Robert Graves leads one to believe that Merrill is reassessing here an older image of the poet/prophet as grayed over, masculine, incontrovertible, rummaging through the cultural grab bag of Western culture for themes and tones; to quote Merrill, a lot of “shabby stone” which he has discovered he neither loved nor misses. The silver, bucolic (s)tones of Robert Frost (“Mending Wall”), the upended marbles of Graves, these are passing away to make room for alternative influences: Proust, opera, the *nouveau roman*.

However, the spectral presence reasserts itself, and, as we will see later in the poem, it is connected to shame and confusion over the poet’s homosexual desires:

A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves,
 Which years of grit had etched until it thrust
 Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.
 When did the garland become part of me?
 I ask myself, amused almost,

Then shiver once from head to toe.

(3)

The image of the single architectural garland, eschewed by the International Style of architecture of the Fifties, enables Merrill to recover a memory of ten years before in Paris with an unnamed woman whose “white gestures filled a cab,” whose name and face elude him—another ghost—lying “toppled underneath that year’s fashions” (4).

Of her, he simply says:

The words she must have spoken, setting her face
 To fluttering like a veil, I cannot hear now,
 Let alone understand.

In his “queer panic” of a decade before, the reader continues to hear a certain tone of suspicion toward the outer world, after which the speaker suddenly, even abruptly, translates himself into the state of his former life through the metaphor of the building under demolition:

So that I am already on the stair,
 As it were, of where I lived,
 When the whole structure shudders at my tread
 And soundlessly collapses, filling
 The air with motes of stone.
 Onto the still erect building next door
 Are pressed levels and hues—
 Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.
 Who drained the pousse-café?

Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.

Well, that is what life does. I stare

A moment longer, so. And presently

The massive volume of the world

Closes again.

(4)

The tonal-shift that Merrill affects ushers his reader into the most terrifying of scenes in which the former self, literally, collapses in a soundless void. The image is filmic and dreamlike, like watching a video slowed down and projected without audio. I cannot help but think that the metonymic proximity of “soundless” to “motes of stone” and “levels and hues” symbolizes an as-yet unknown affinity in Merrill for the synesthetic experience. The traces of the former building (the colors of the “exterior” walls, the “wires and pipes”) are nothing but a new kind of poetic notation on the stave of its neighbor, on the face of the self which must get on with its life autonomously.

In the next stanzas, the apparition gone with the closing of the “massive volume” of the world, Merrill admits to ratify “that book”: “I swear / To abide by what it teaches: / Gospels of ugliness and waste” (5). Having come to a certain humbling self-knowledge, he acknowledges his malaise, again, under the phrase “the sickness of our time.” But then he retracts:

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.

(5)

As would be his wont in the decades following the publication of *Water Street*, Merrill encapsulates criticism of poetry under the guise of self-criticism. He will continue in his poems to teach a certain brand of poetics learned from his New Critical forefathers. While he may differ from them in the pronounced personal aspect of his poetry, he nevertheless returns to their precepts when the need presents itself. In the lines quoted above, the lesson is on proper phrasing. To leave the phrase “the sickness of our time” would be to adopt the tone of the minister, the popular journalist, and perhaps the philosopher, and Merrill wants to be clear that he does not fill their functions or share their hackneyed sentiments. His phrasing is to be intelligent, challenging to the reader, and never entirely straightforward. There are always to be feints in the words chosen, which the faint of heart will usually miss. There is, as poet Rachel Hadas notes in a reevaluation of the early Merrill, “the presence of a cold, transparent medium intervening between the self and the world (or the self and feeling, or the self and others)” (Hadas 187). For Merrill, these words are for a chosen few who have read and read again. After all, that is what Brower and the New Critics taught, close-reading, slow, unyielding perseverance in the thin air which blows about those steps.

Unlike most of Merrill's early oeuvre, which catered to New Critical tastes, "An Urban Convalescence" resolves itself, even in the midst of a horde of enigmatic, freely associated images. The "presence" the poet summons toward the beginning of the poem—as, later, in "The Book of Ephraim" (1976), he would summon the voice of a chatty Greek scribe—can be seen as a portrait of his old self. There is also the "building" (which brings to mind the German *Ausbildung*, *Bildungsroman*) as the image of a former self. There is the nameless female and, finally, the ingestion of a pill swallowed in a glass of water, a pill which "They told me not to take until much later

With the result that back into my imagination

The city glides, like cities seen from the air

(6)

This, in turn, brings the poet to the realization that he now has a perspective on his ~~life~~ art, and he can see his proper destination. As McClatchy notes: "Merrill's stanzas...while similar [in tone to that of James's Marcher]...resolve *in time*, not only to face up to the world of brutal experience, but to acknowledge the 'ugliness and waste' ... in his own life and character" (*WP* 265). The voice of "An Urban Convalescence" renounces the image of the cab and the nameless girl and the "honey-slow descent of the Champs-Élysée," opting instead for an earthly, secular, temporal destination which resides inside him. He calls this "the dull need⁵³ to make some kind of house / Out of the life lived, out of the love spent." No longer the potentially neurasthenic wanderer, he has come to terms with himself. The tone is one of

⁵³ A term which McClatchy aptly recognizes as possessing "all the understatement of real and inescapable conviction" (*WP* 269).

peaceful resignation, and the poem, as the introduction to his watershed volume *Water Street*, ushers the reader into the poet's reality. It blesses his experiences as worthy of daily transmutation into art.

A decade after *Water Street* Merrill published *Braving the Elements* (1972), his seventh collection and the one which directly preceded the first installment of his epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. The confessional tone of the two intervening collections was still present, the all-out novelty and Browningsque blank-verse sophistication of *Divine Comedies* was still at bay. The volume was a hybrid form, filled with multiple-page narrative warm-ups to what he was about to embark on but framed by two "elemental" lyrics: "Log" and "Syrinx." Both poems enacted something of a return to the guarded, vatic tone of his youthful productions. "Log" is brief enough to quote here in its entirety:

Then when the flame forked like a sudden path
I gasped and stumbled, and was less.
Density pulsing upward, gauze of ash,
Dear light along the way to nothingness,
What could be made of you but light, and this?

Besides its ingenious slant-rhyme, which imitates the transformation of matter from one intermediary form to another, "less" becoming "ash" becoming "nothingness" becoming "this," the poem alludes to Dante's encounter with Ulysses in the *Inferno*. The tone is awestruck, respectful. The poet, having come to his full powers, interrogates that same "source of light" (the light of the intellect, imagination, rationality, a divine Being) and its translation into Art: "What could be made of you

but light, and this?” All that is left after the flare-up, the incineration, is light’s antithesis, carbon ash. With time, this again will, as in the case of one poet influencing another—and there is no greater influence on the following volume, *Divine Comedies*, than Dante—be turned to fuel for future projects. Merrill also cannot hold himself back from his appetite for a good pun; in this case, the pun is on the figure of speech “to make light of,” and, once again, reveals the poet’s penchant for a flip tone which can let even the most solemn insights simply go up in smoke.

“Syrinx” is the pastoral counterpart to “Log.” Like another initially descriptive lyric in the same volume, “Willowware Cup,” it ostensibly begins with an *ekphrasis* on objects in the poet’s view but evolves into a convoluted retelling of the myth of a sound trying to become a voice:

Bug, flower, bird on slipware fired and fluted,
The summer day breaks everywhere at once.

Worn is the green of things that have known dawns
Before this, and the darkness before them.

Among the wreckage, bent in Christian weeds,
Illiterate – X my mark – I tremble, still

A thinking reed. Who puts his mouth to me
Draws out the scale of love and dread –

(BE 72)

Where this voice comes from—a single reed growing amid the fecund disarray of a marsh in high summer or from the mythical nymph who, to protect her chastity, eluded the satyr Pan by turning herself into a handful of reeds from which was fashioned the first syrinx-flute, or a recording of Debussy’s *Syrinx* or the poet’s own flight from an unwanted romantic entanglement—is unclear. What is clear is that Merrill wishes in this lyric to push words to the point where they literally become their aspiration and, with some respiration, the musical line. As Stephen Yenser notes: “Improvised on and by this scion of Pascal’s ‘thinking reed,’ the poem ascends the scale of means of expression until it is teased out of thought, until there seems no place for it to go unless it translates itself,” that is, into music or, as Merrill would have it, music’s purest harmonic form: mathematics (Rotella 42).

Some formula not relevant any more
To flower children might express it yet

Like

$$\sqrt{\left(\begin{array}{c} x \\ y \end{array}\right)^n} = I$$

--Or equals zero, one forgets --

The *y* standing for you, dear friend, at least
Until that hour he reaches for me, then

Leaves me cold, the great god Pain,
 Letting me slide back into my scarred case
 (*BE 72*)

Music takes refuge inside the reed but in a less-than-mathematically-perfect, less-than-ideal state, which is, as Merrill reminds his readers again and again, the true contingent condition of art:

Whose silvery breath-tarnished tones
 No longer rivet bone and star in place

 Or keep from shriveling, leather round a stone,
 The sunbather's precocious apricot

Or stop the four winds racing overhead

Nought

Waste Eased

Sought

(73)

The four directions, the four elements which Merrill has chosen to brave throughout this and previous volumes, become a concrete-poem-within-the-poem and a symbolic mouthpiece through which to blow. Words will always be imperfect, ugly even, until they are transmuted, like life itself in "An Urban Convalescence," into something

which can approximate music and thus musical tone. Whether or not this distancing of himself from message and idea—this seeming embrace of pure *form*—is a regression to a New Critical ethos, one thing is clear: Merrill continually will push poetry over its traditionally assigned generic boundaries, into—as we shall see in the chapters that follow—the novel and, finally, automatic writing and POEMS OF SCIENCE, i.e., the middle and concluding volumes of *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

Chapter 4: The *Novelization* of Verse, or Romancing the Tone: James Merrill
in Quest of Narrative

We recall his First Poems, their desire to escape to a projected ideal world. Later in his career he turns to the everyday, to wit, to an accomplished social tone and to narrative.

—David Kalstone⁵⁴

EVEN AS WE TALK I'M SEPARATING

THE TONES IN A DOUBLE GLISSANDO, A FULL YEAR

CD BE DEVOTED TO EACH ONE'S LEAST VIBRATIONS

—Robert Morse to JM in *Sandover*⁵⁵

1.

The joint influence of Henry James and Marcel Proust on the young James Merrill was to affect directly the content, scope, and tone of his poems, plays, and novels, and while this chapter will only explore these first and last, in the end it should be apparent that the dramatic *scène* as enshrined by James and the involuntary reconstitution of memory as dramatized by Proust are important precursors to Merrill's own tonal achievement in lyric and narrative forms. It is the blending of

⁵⁴ Kalstone, David. *Five Temperaments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 119.

⁵⁵ *CLS*, 529.

these forms, each constitutive of a particular generic tone, that comprises the style of Merrill's middle period. Merrill himself has observed: "I've enjoyed reading novels more often—or more profoundly—than I've enjoyed reading poems. There seems to be no poet except perhaps Dante whose work has the extraordinary richness of Tolstoy or Proust; and there are few poets whose work gives as much fun as James" (*R* 27). Throughout five volumes, *Water Street* (1962), *Nights and Days* (1966), *The Fire Screen* (1969), *Braving the Elements* (1972), and, finally, *Divine Comedies* (1979) Merrill tried to negotiate the limits of the lyric form and, in doing so, managed to expand its breadth and reach to accommodate the varied trajectories of narrative and its attendant social tone (or acute consciousness of audience). Perhaps Merrill, who long emulated the tones of the great novelists, wanted to switch his genre for what he perceived to be the better. Or, maybe, he was simply riding the great wave of Confessional poetry as practiced by W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell. Certainly his close friendship with Elizabeth Bishop was to play a role in the younger poet's translation of personal experience and the reproduction of a personal voice.⁵⁶

Additionally, as I intend to show, the poems and lyrics of Merrill's middle period would reveal a poet obsessed with music and its compositional structures. It would have to wait until *Divine Comedies* and its first installment of the *Sandover* trilogy, "The Book of Ephraim," for the poet to realize something on the scale of the symphonic (or perhaps more aptly put, the grand opera à la Richard Strauss), but the

⁵⁶ Merrill remarks in his interview with Donald Sheehan that voice, or tone, is what he is after in his poetry. "For example, though a lot of the sound of James is prose, can't one tell he'd read Browning? You hear a voice talking in prose, often a very delightful voice which says all kinds of odd things. For me, to get something of that into poetry was a pleasure and even perhaps an object." Sheehan asks if this achievement of "getting a voice" impacts the autobiographical correlatives which some critics choose to focus, perhaps unduly, in Merrill's verse. Merrill responds: "To *sound* personal is the point" (*R* 27).

poems of the middle period show clear attempts at mimicking music, musical tones and, what is more, a consciousness of *key*. According to the *Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music*, key is synonymous with tone (viz. the French *ton*, the German *Tonart*) and, “in a tonal composition [is] the main pitch or ‘tonal center’ to which all the compositions pitches are related” (251). While in my second chapter I showed the novels of Henry James to be concentrated centers of tonal emphasis, indeed soundscapes of his characters’ mental life, in Merrill there is an explicit linkage between the form of the musical “idea” or “figure”—posited necessarily on tonality—and the very form of a poetic phrase, line, stanza, chapter or complete volume.

2.

Merrill’s most memorable lyrics, “The Broken Home,” “The Thousand and Second Night,” “Days of 1964,” “Matinees,” and “Lost in Translation” are hybrid forms in themselves; at once lyric, narrative, comic and tragicomic, they attest to Merrill’s gift of modulating through a spectrum of tones. As with his earlier poems and linking back to James and Proust, Merrill negotiates his revealing of ‘himself’ through his constant employment of elaborate tropes, metaphors, tonal shifts, and puns. Likewise, he takes refuge behind the scrim of speaking tone, always a step further than his reader, ever a bit cleverer, ever more sage. Tone, *as the poetic mirror image of Merrill’s voice*—delicate, mercurial, and under threat of being shattered—was dramatized early in Merrill’s career in the poem “Mirror,” which, coincidentally, has been read as a dialogue between the identities of the poet and the novelist. In *The*

Changing Light at Sandover, a mirror is propped in a chair so that the spirits contacted at the Ouija board can see their human counterparts; later, in a symbolic move, it is shattered by the poet. For Merrill, the mirror (which I will use throughout this chapter as a symbol of mediation between the “revelations” of each genre) affords the poet a chance to address the self as Other and to practice a dialogue with that Other.⁵⁷ Mirrors thus are given voices and, as such, the ability to *voice* certain of the poet’s inner concerns, phobias, and desires. Merrill enacts rhetorical dramas in which the mirror reveals (or provides a glimmering plane to speculate on) previously obscured aspects, or versions, of the self. In equal fashion, he fetishizes the mirror and sees it as constituting a self, which nevertheless will allow for the fantasies of various other selves. In addition, in Merrill’s work the mirror is connected to his “narrative turn” in that it reflects the self that often is implicated in the stories he tells: mainly, his own. For Merrill, as for Proust and James, the novel was the test of his powers of observation and thus also of the perceiving subject himself.

In his essay, “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James instructs the aspiring novelist to be “one on whom nothing is lost,” and thirty odd-years later, in the New York Edition Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*, speaks of “an instinctive disposition” and a “provision for interest [in his novels] which consists in placing advantageously, placing right in the middle of the light, the most polished of possible mirrors of the subject” (AN 70); the two most noteworthy examples are, in James’s opinion, Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* and Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl*. Of

⁵⁷ Merrill, with his acute attention to words, would likewise have seen the “mirror” embedded in his own name, which comes from the French *merle*, or blackbird, robber and imitator of other birds. Interestingly, Henry James adopted the French word to name one of his least likeable characters, Madame Merle.

the former, James writes, within the mirror-halves of parentheses, “(he is a mirror verily of miraculous silver and quite pre-eminent...for the connection)” (*AN* 70). Later, making reference to Vanderbank, a protagonist in *The Awkward Age*, and to Maisie, the girl consciousness of *What Maisie Knew*, James uses such terms as “perceiver” and “recorder” to refer to what he, in his *Autobiography*, calls a “usurping consciousness.” In each example the power of observation and reflection is considered essential to the success of the novelistic pursuit. The mirror of human consciousness is represented as a potential key; but to what exactly is never made clear.

One need not go far from James’s conception of the reflective center of consciousness to arrive at Merrill’s own conception of art’s necessarily reflective surfaces in “Mirror,” a poem which looks like a block of prose and which, perhaps for the first time in his career, showcases Merrill’s virtuoso handling of tone. Published in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), “Mirror” is a dramatic monologue, written in couplets which rhyme on the last and penultimate syllables of the respective lines and which one could interpret as symbolizing the imperfect, or slightly distorted, character of almost any reflection. The mirror speaks:

I grow old under an intensity

Of questioning looks.

(*CTP* 36)

The looks come from the children in whose home the mirror hangs. The mirror tells of its limitations. (The reader should note the use of italics to signal changes in the

vocal, *intonational contour*, specifying thoughts which originate below the surface of the mirror, as explained in chapters 1 and 2):

Nonsense,

I try to say, *I cannot teach you children*

How to live.—If not you who will?

Cries one of them aloud, grasping my gilded

Frame till the world sways. *If not you who will?*

(CTP 36)

Reflected in the speculum of art (the italicized, intoned mirror-consciousness), the phenomenal world of room and window and landscape is always already altered, played-with, and potentially distorted. Yet the soon-to-be-enlightened children turn to it for advice, for instruction, and ostensibly for truth.

The scene is very soon laid out. There is a table, “its arrangement / Of Bible and Paisley, all past change,”⁵⁸ and a window, addressed simply as “*you*,” which “provides examples” of “what others endure” and which is described as “Wide open, sunny, of everything I am / Not” (CTP 36). The enjambment is telling in its revelation of the mirror’s obvious lack. Silvered on one side, there isn’t much to mirrors; just what happens to be around. This is an understandable crisis for a mirror. The window, on the other hand, “embrace[s] a whole world without once caring / To set it in order. That takes thought” (CTP 36). Minus its flip tone, the mirror is right. While its silvery surface reflects and, mysteriously, reconstitutes reality immaterially, the likewise framed window only ‘embraces’ reality. It cannot distort what is there. Seemingly,

⁵⁸ The table floats like an island in the scene, a Neverland, sole province of Art and Thought.

however, the window has no consciousness—it lacks a voice, it lacks the artifice of art.

M. H. Abrams, in his classic study *The Mirror and the Lamp*, delves into the history of mirrors and the mimetic function in Western literature. Starting with Plato's *Republic*, he outlines the way in which mimetic theories dominated Renaissance poetics and only began to show signs of weakening in the late eighteenth century.⁵⁹ Abrams, however, points out how Plato's own theory emphasized the distance of words, i.e., poetry, from images. "The mirror as an analogue for poetry," he notes, "suffers from the conspicuous defect that its images are fleeting" (*ML* 32). Likewise, the mirror in Merrill's poem speaks of the transient life outside the window, its words the very reflections. According to the one-to-one correspondences of an objective theory of mimesis, the things the mirror beholds, reflects, even sees, are actually there. But the "red and white bandannas" and the "fine young man...on horseback" pass in and out of a predetermined frame, and thus imply a cut off, truncated view inaccessible to the mirror's surface. The enjambment of the phrase "Out there / Something being picked" emphasizes regions outside the traditional reflective limits.

John Hollander, in his critical essay on "Mirror," is reminded "of all the mythology which lies behind the speaking mirror—the looking glasses of both the nude lady of Vanitas or Venus, and the one who is surely truth; the mirror into which it is dangerous to gaze...; the strong enabling mirror held up to the goddess by Amor, an emblem of her own power; the *esoptron* [glass] of St. Paul ... [as well as] the

⁵⁹ Abrams writes: "As late as the middle of the eighteenth century, important critics [such as Johnson and Rousseau] continued to illustrate the concept of imitation by the nature of a looking glass" (32).

mirror of modernism, an image of paradox reversal, self-reference, and schematic reversal....” (Bloom 125). While never allying himself with the forces of literary Modernism, Merrill does (in this and in the earlier poems discussed in chapter 3) work within the last of these designations. Such is the debt he owes to the critics of his formative years, and one wonders why his mirror does not reflect a well-wrought piece of lawn furniture, or, for that matter, an urn.

In the light of later poems, however, it is not altogether surprising that Merrill’s poem outgrows its modernist mold. The mirror reflects a world that it reflects subjectively and temporally. As critic Paul Breslin notes in his essay “Closet Necessities: James Merrill’s Poetics of Reticence” (2002): “Like Dorian Gray’s portrait, it shares its mortality despite its mimetic remove” (Breslin 47). Indeed, Merrill’s mirror grows old. It addresses the window:

Years later now, two of the grown grandchildren
 Sit with novels face-down on the sill,
 Content to muse upon your tall transparence,
 Your clouds, brown fields, persimmon far
 And cypress near. One speaks. *How superficial*
Appearances are!
 (37)

As if to undermine all the mirror’s previously held assumptions, the words stick in the mirror’s mind, presaging a breakdown.

Since then, as if a fish
 Had broken the perfect silver of my reflectiveness,

I have lapses. I suspect
 Looks from behind, where nothing is, cool gazes
 Through the blind flaws of my mind. As days,
 As decades lengthen, this vision
 Spreads and blackens. I do not know whose it is,
 But I think it watches for my last silver
 To blister, flake, float leaf by life, each milling-
 Downward dumb conceit, to a standstill
 From which not even you strike any brilliant
 Chord in me, and to a faceless will,
 Echo of mine, I am amenable.

(37)

The breakdown of James's mirror (and his narrative) is, at once, the breakdown of an emblem, a mimetic device, and a consciousness. More than that, it is the literal breakdown of a voice and, by extension, the corruption of a thinking mind under dementia. The mirror divests itself of a personal voice and, at the same time, questions the autonomy of its voice (its previous self-assurance, wit, and charm). "Mirror" becomes an allegory of Merrill's own tonal shift from the polished, *nacreous* lyrics of his early period to longer, more socially astute narrative poems. A stale, static and, quite honestly, difficult *voice* (*à la* the New Critics) gives way to the living, mercurial, vibratory (and, thus, potentially shattering) *tone* of his middle period. An alternate vision—both the sense and the visual phenomenon—surreptitiously infiltrates as the window opposite receives the desperate-sounding

monologue and remains mute nature. The mirror imagines its demise, its decomposition back to the menacing blackness (“looks from behind”) which was for a time coated with quicksilver. It suffers a fate similar to Narcissus’s, and even addresses, in a clever closing pun, the nymph Echo, a “faceless will” to which it is simply “amenable.” This last point is important to keep in mind when noting with what amenability JM greets the messages of *Sandover*’s Ephraim and with what trepidation he entertains the idea that all the messages are issuing, reflection-wise, from his pre-consciousness.

Hollander, in *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (1981), notes that, “Negative readings of Echo come from associations of fragmentation of the anterior voice, the hollowness of her concavities of origin transferred to the figurative hollowness of her words, and the progressive diminution of successive reverberations. George Sandys adds to his translation of *Ausonias*, in his lengthy commentary on Ovid’s story, that “the image of the voice [here Hollander points a literal Latin equivalence between *imago vocis* and *echo*] so often rendered, is as that of a face reflected from one glass to another, melting by degrees, and every reflection more weak and shady than the former” (Hollander 11) (emphasis mine). J. D. McClatchy, in his essay “Monsters Wrapped in Silk: *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*,” notes a shift in Merrill from high reticence (couched in the *objets* of his early poems) to “the more naturalistic possibilities of direct address.” McClatchy considers this “a step toward autobiography,” but with the qualification that, in the aforementioned volume, “a poem’s speaker and the poet’s self are rarely merged...only paralleled” (Bloom 132). This distance or parallel can be seen ,

according to Hollander's terminology, to constitute a kind of visual echo. In such a way, then, the mirror's "I" is merely an echo of the self.

The recognized presence of the darker 'half' of the mirror is occasioned by a paranoid breakdown in which the power of reflection is impaired. Readers must keep in mind that at the time that "Mirror" was composed in the early 'fifties, Merrill himself was undergoing psychotherapy and trying to come to terms with a true self, a self which, similar to the mirror-speaker's, seemingly wants the spontaneity of real life rather than an image. Or this breakdown could be conceived as an example of the "primordial Discord" on which language acquisition is predicated. Merrill's mirror would then be enacting a staging of the Lacanian Mirror Stage in its brokering of a relationship between the inner world (the world in the mirror) and the outer world (framed by the window), the relationship "between the organism and its reality" (Lacan 4). Feelings of fragmentation and images of bodily integration coexist up until the time that the Mirror Stage ends. Of this, Lacan notes:

This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart [the Other] and the drama of primordial jealousy...the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations. (5)

It would seem, in Lacan's analysis, that the very nature of the first-person pronoun is specular and, though Merrill is able to transcend in future poems mere speaking emblems and to grow more or less explicitly confessional, his "I" remains a self-reflexive, mercurial, and specular site. Breslin, likewise, recognizes "an ambivalence that runs through Merrill's lifework: art finally cannot get beyond surfaces, or leap

free of its entanglements with human mortality and error. And yet it ensures that things are ‘fitted together’ as they would not be without it” (Breslin 48). Such an ambivalence, one can surmise, is also indicative of a mind that, over time, fails at comprehending many of the widely accepted meta-narratives and thus also tries to fashion a private, less rigorous—but, conversely, more artificial—aesthetic.

That much of the contrived aesthetic of Merrill’s youth came from his idea of what poems were supposed to look and sound like can be assumed. Clearly, the power over him of canonical poets was strong during this stage of his career. If not taken from “real life,” his own, that of the world, or art, where did his poems come from? Later, as I will explore in Chapter 5, Merrill would betray an ironic stance regarding whether great poets mimic, or consciously echo, the voices of their notable predecessors. Such propagation is not so much Bloomian as it is *acoustic*: poets of today channeling, so to speak, the “vibes” of past greats. For Merrill, as for many poets who took up the task of the long poem in an age for which the charms of a Pope or Byron were left unappreciated, authenticity (especially of the Confessional brand) was difficult. W. H. Auden, a scion of the eighteenth-century poetic tradition grafted onto twentieth-century angst and vast cultural malaise, resorted to mimicry when trying to complete “The Sea and the Mirror,” his critique-cum-epilogue to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The longest section of the poem, Caliban’s address to the audience, is executed in Jamesian prose.

3.

Alongside his early poetry, the important achievement of Merrill's youth was the loosely autobiographical novel, *The Seraglio* (1957). It is the single most crucial work of Merrill's early adulthood. It was the novel that he had to write, hemmed in as he was by a family for which reticence could be characterized as one of the Cardinal Virtues. And it has all the flaws of a novel which one is obliged—albeit by one's conscience—to write. Merrill had to reveal himself and his struggle with his homosexuality, and a novel was at first the only place where he could systematically explore the variables and constants of that most delicate equation. Likewise, as scholar Timothy Materer points out in his chapter “‘Thick with Revelations’: Merrill's Fiction,” “[Merrill's] privileged and conventional life on his father's estate, which he calls *Sandover* in *The Changing Light*, nurtured his sense that the ordinary social world was unreal and concealed a truer one” (Materer 48). Materer quotes from an unpublished journal entry which Merrill wrote during the composition of *The Seraglio* and in which he criticizes the voice of his novel, which he fashioned to conform to the moneyed, repressive world of his father, as “cold, defensive—not, above all, leisurely, tolerant; a constipation; little pellets of hardly digested matter” (Materer 48). As was the case with the speaker in his poem “Mirror,” Merrill's diagnosis finds fault with himself as superficial. As a young novelist who must be “one on whom nothing is lost,” Merrill is disappointed by his inability to understand himself and to extrapolate deeper meanings from the actions of the people he observes. It is not an accident, then, that Merrill chooses a young girl, modeled on his

niece, to act as the female protagonist of his novel. Lily Buchanan has all the curiosity and coyness of James's Maisie, if little of her Edwardian innocence (Materer 60). *The Seraglio* starts with the transgression of this young girl: the accidental defacement of her mother's portrait. The portrait, which is propped up facing a wall in her grandfather's palatial Southampton home,

showed her mother wearing a blue velvet gown with bare shoulders, and diamonds in her hair. She was smiling the gently bewildered smile of somebody soon to be scolded or punished. Poor Mummy, thought Lily. All her resentment melted. With the tip of the silver knife [which she had picked up from the top of her grandfather's bureau] she caressed, as with a wand, her mother's features, traced the curve of the lips, the eyebrows and cheek. The faint grating gave her gooseflesh ... Before long a puzzlement came over her, to see that a speck of paint, no bigger than a gnat's wing, had chipped away, leaving a tiny patch of pale color beneath. How? When? Just at the corner of her mother's eye, in which a streak of white created an uncanny liveliness. Lily's heart began to pound. She wouldn't have dreamed this face could be so fragile. Experimentally she touched the point of the knife to the same spot; a second, larger piece of paint fell off, exposing the dead white canvas. She had now a sense of fatigue. It was becoming such a slow, complicated process, not like the shattering of an ornament. And beyond repair ... A door slammed. The knife with a will of its own pierced the canvas and tore briskly downwards five or six inches

before she succeeded in letting go. She closed her eyes. She knew that she was going to die. (*TS* 8)

It is unclear, in this passage, whether the chipping away of paint from the countenance of the portrait's subject represents Lily's disturbing discovery that surfaces conceal reality or that "surfaces" enact a purposeful concealment of an empty, or emptied, inner space—in short, that the vocabulary of a substantive, inner space, such as a true self or soul—is a fiction. Regardless, the canvas beneath is a frightening dead space for Lily. It seems to be implicated by the girl's consciousness in the destruction of her mother's image, as if something—Nothingness itself—is trying to hatch from its shell. As the speaker in "Mirror" admits in its pun: "I suspect / Looks from behind, where nothing is . . ." (*CTP* 37). The failure of the canvas to hold her mother's face together for all eternity upsets the innocence of youth and, ostensibly, ushers Lily into a world of mere 'kept-up' appearances. When Lily closes her eyes and knows that she is "going to die," the reader must read both her fear of punishment and her naïve belief that her transgression against her mother's image will result in death. Moreover, the primitive fear that defacement of an icon will bring wrath is here mixed with the existential fear of losing the mother as the literal loss of connection to the clan and to life itself.

Francis Tanning, Lily's uncle and son of the powerful, womanizing patriarch Benjamin Tanning must, like Merrill himself, navigate the shoals of sexual identity and family allegiance. As Materer suggests: "[He] must discover an identity utterly different from his father's and yet one worthy of the family name. The first step toward independence is to understand how the family's worship of money distorts

everything in their lives” (Materer 54). *The Seraglio* thus operates as a type of *roman à clef* in which Merrill is able to criticize his family while furthering his skills as a social observer. However, owing to the similarity of Francis to himself—sexually ambivalent with artistic aspirations—it is also an, at times, harsh self-critique. Like Lily’s slashing of her mother’s portrait, Francis’s ambivalent sexual identity is a potential source of scandal and division. The climax of the novel comes when Francis, visiting with a family friend in Boston, returns to his hotel room after a rather unambiguous nighttime walk in the Public Garden (“He understood what had gone on in the hearts of those who now and then were found dead in parks at dawn, grass-stained, anonymous”) and castrates himself in a warm bath:

While the tub filled he watched his body in the mirror that backed the door. He couldn’t feel it was his ... disturbingly marked with the two flat rose-brown eyes set in the chest, the navel, the patch of hair, the thing, a desolate pallor of skin encircling, dividing. Unlike the face, which did belong to him, hanging white and worried above it, his body had no meaning. Like a hieroglyph, a sun or a ship, it signified something quite apart from what it represented.... His bath was full. He sprinkled it with a handful of pine-scented salts. Before dipping a foot in the water he unlocked the door—it had never been his wish to die—and looked about one last time. There was the mirror, the razor, the towel.... Up to his neck in warm water now, almost afloat, he used his last defense against the flesh. The blade was very sharp; something began easily to separate, then to resist, tougher than a thong of leather.

The water, so dazzling clear when he began cutting, turned red instantly. *Porta fortuna!* He could no longer see what he was doing, or tell, when the severe pain overcame him, whether or not he had succeeded. He cried out once, and lost consciousness. (*TS* 165-66)

The sentence, “Something began easily to separate, then to resist, tougher than a thong of leather,” while straightforward, is curious for its vague diction. The act of cutting, here *separating*, is clearly meant to be understood as Francis’s ritual action of distancing himself from his father and the duties of being an adult male. But whether or not he is allying himself with other gay men is a problematic question which neither narrator nor Francis is able to answer. Materer notes that Merrill considered dropping the passage altogether or changing it to a less disturbing “symbolic castration” (Materer 58). But it was retained in the final manuscript copy. As Merrill remarks in the preface to the reprint edition: “I was too pleased by its neat ‘objective correlative’ for my quarrel with the prevailing social and sexual assumptions to listen to reason. Freely granting its Grand Guignol aspect, I’ll stand by the scene to this day” (*Seraglio* ix). It could also be that the castration—the temptation of many early Christians, such as Paul of Tarsus and Origen, who succeeded—is necessary to the growth of its subject from a merely secular and mortal status to a priest- or medium-like status. Later, while recovering from his wound at his father’s estate, Francis and his friend Jane discuss religious beliefs, especially the belief that messages can be handed down from on high. Francis remarks that he believes none of it: “Whether the word comes from a medium or from the Mormon Temple or from the Pope himself...” (*TS* 238).

But when it comes to the sorts of messages received at the Ouija board—so central to Merrill’s own poetic output in the years following the publication of his first novel—he avers:

‘Once or twice before, I’d amused myself with this,’ [Francis] nodded at the Ouija board, ‘but nothing came of it. It depends so much, you know, on who your partner is. Oh, I did once speak to a young German engineer, drowned in the Indian Ocean sixty years ago; and, once, briefly, to someone who *said* he was Beau Brummell, but wouldn’t answer a single question In the light of what Meno has told me, those are the voices that merely echo one’s own subconscious preoccupations.’ At the sound of a faint ringing Francis stiffened. ‘It’s nothing,’ he said presently, ‘just the phone in the next apartment.’
(*TS* 238)

Sensitivity to sound and to message increasingly characterize Francis’s personality. When pressed by the skeptical Jane as to his ‘belief’ in the voices from the ‘other world’ and their complex systems of reincarnation and occult patronage of human subjects, Francis is evasive and merely hits a key on the nearby harpsichord. He tells Jane that when he and his confrere Marcello first contacted a spirit called Meno, the teacup that they used as a planchette “began to move so firmly, so swiftly ... And out came these messages. We could hardly get them on paper—long, splendidly formed sentences” (*TS* 238). Thus it is apparent that for both Francis and Merrill the Ouija board becomes a method of accessing communication, be it from “inside” or “out,” and that such communication is transmitted in raw prose.

The Seraglio is so rife with symbolic episodes and overwrought diction that it reads like the work of a poet not yet in possession of his powers. The plot does not move with the swiftness of a comparable mid-century novel. The scenes are overdramatized. And, as a *roman à clef*, persons and scenes strain under the weight of rank overdetermination. Owing to its highly rarified setting, its choice to focus on one, rather claustrophobic, sphere of American life, and its troubling male protagonist, the book appears now to be more of an attempt on Merrill's part to gain respect as a writer at a time when serious literary celebrity was still the domain of the male novelist. *The Seraglio* also had much to do with a young, rich gay man needing to expiate himself from the intrigues, inequalities, and prejudices of the leisure class. Merrill did not want to be seen as an effete writer incapable of seriousness and engagement with the real world, but it is obvious that, as real as the world of his novel was to him, it was not the real world to its intended audience. Its greatest strengths are undoubtedly its clever mimicking of upper-class conversation, the ubiquitous vocal tone of the Merrill lyric, its juxtaposition of deeply internal passages with light, external description, and its inauguration of Merrill's sexuality as a guiding force in his writing and appraisal of himself.

4.

Eight years after the publication of *The Seraglio* Merrill published his second novel, *The (Diblos) Notebook* (1965). It billed itself as ~~A Novel~~. In other words, a notebook masquerading as a novel, the quotidian masquerading as high art. Dealing

almost entirely with a 1964 trip to the Greek island of Poros (“Diblos”), Merrill called the novel’s form, in retrospect, a “wistful, half-conscious critique of the Beat Generation.” *The (Diblos) Notebook* could not have been more different than its predecessor: less a critique of Burroughs and Kerouac than a ‘half-conscious’ attempt at the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet or Maurice Blanchot or Georges Poulet. Stephen Yenser remarks that the shift from neo-Jamesian to New Wave was a suggestion (by Merrill to his audience) that “we look for the strengths of his fiction in verbal effects rather than in plot and character” (Yenser 49). Nevertheless, the *The (Diblos) Notebook* strives to flesh out the real-life relationship that inspired it, i.e., the thwarted romance between Merrill and his poetic mentor (and sometime Amherst teacher) Kimon Friar. Personal affect was turned into literary effect. “Sitting, then, under an awning on that blazing waterfront, at an hour when the little town nodded off,” Merrill wrote in his Afterword (1994)—itself cast a brief “journal-entry”—“I cast about for language. When phrases took shape, I welcomed them grudgingly, disdainfully, as if ‘we artists’ were entitled to scorn our medium” (D 151). There are not just a few pieces of evidence in that statement to show that the present of writer’s block was present along with the phrases. Casting about for language, Merrill casts himself in the mythical mode, a poetic Ulysses trying to find his way home to an idiom. But there is much in Merrill’s late-in-life memoir, *A Different Person* (1995), to show that he was casting about for love as much as he was attempting to keep himself out of a depression. Thus, as for Prospero (one of Merrill’s favorite literary personalities), language itself was becoming the arena for the personal and the esthetic.

The (Diblos) Notebook employs several shifting techniques in which landscape description, say, gives way to a catalogue of a character's physical attributes, which, in turn, give way to candid revelations of authorial intent. An extended passage might appear like the one that opens the novel:

Orestes

The islands of Greece

Across vivid waters the islands of Greece lie. They
 have been cut out of cardboard and set on bases of
 at subtle odds with one another, upon bases of
 pale haze

...

One early evening

(Name) had grown used to this contradiction.

...

At the top of the hill she met Orestes. He

Her body was strong and graceful, her features
 first darkened, then silvered by the dry summer.

White strands in her iron-colored hair shot
 backward into an elaborate plaited bun.

...

Let me see. Orestes can give her ice-cream at
 the café. (It must be summer. O's sabbatical
 year will have begun.) A mild dusk. The

awnings that close me in won't be needed. It will divert her
to sit in full view of the populace—the grande dame of the island,
already on such jolly terms with the newcomer. (*D* 1-3)

The hankering after a clear poetic line is obvious in the sudden stops and starts. The narratorial voice opens up just enough for the reader to gain a sense of spaciousness before it claps abruptly shut. The third line of the passage, above, has the look and feel of a piece of verse translated from a foreign language—Racine's *Phèdre* comes to mind. It is both majestic and pretentious. The phrase “vivid waters” sounds awkward in its attempt at raising a too-exquisite curtain on the tragedy to come. However, the sentence's majesty should not be dimmed: It is a perfect alexandrine. The Greek islands are portrayed diva-like, recumbent on waters which in their vividness teem with slumbering spirits of erotic love. As the reader learns on the novel's second page, one of the protagonists, Orestes, has stepped out on a holiday stroll in order to find something called the “Sleeping Woman” (actually, a mainland geological formation for which Poros serves as a perfect point of vantage). Meeting Dora on a small promontory, he quickly finds out that the best view is from town, and the narrator explains:

O., who found all his traits extraordinary, set about marveling
at his ~~stupidity~~ imperception. Did she mean those slopes directly
facing the port? *Their* silhouette made up the Sleeping Woman? He
laughed out loud, swinging his zippered notebook from his little
finger. (*D* 2-3)

The “zippered notebook” notwithstanding, this passage serves in its entirety as a synecdoche of the novel itself. Out of scattered words, perspectives, and descriptives—indeed, out of the openwork style of the notebook entries—there emerges a sleeping thought, a portion of the painful past seen from an angle at first apparent but then ignored. Less a figure in the carpet than a figure that, back of us, pulls the carpet out from under the reader’s feet.

Though partially obscured, a narrative progression is set in place. But the structure is folded in what it sees and feels. Imaginings and observations reinforce a novel, which ostensibly is only notes toward one. Likewise, there is narrative play with Orson/Orestes’s brother, Sandy, who keeps a journal in Merrill’s style from 15 June until 6 August 1961. In such a way, the reader is given multiple pieces of paper which, given some distance, can be separated, regrouped, classified, and afterwards sewn together into a grand new Text. This reminds one of an activity similar to that of Apuleius’s Psyche, whom the Goddess of Love gave the tedious task of sorting seeds in order to win her freedom and happiness. But, then again, the goal of the grand Text may be too ambitious. Stories of lost love metamorphose into narratives of broken emotion, and the reader is left questioning: Can these memories/apprehensions be trusted? Do they mimic a unified self or many selves? Merrill’s imaginary island of Diblos (double of Poros) effects the manufacture of multiple personalities and voices that alternately blend together and separate. Echoes of Whitman’s “Always the knit of identity. Always distinction.”

To paraphrase, briefly, the novel’s action: A twenty-seven-year-old goes to the Greek island of Poros/Diblos in order to revisit a time, now seven years in the

past, when his half-brother Orson had fallen in love with Greece and the island's doyenne, Dora. It is that relationship which the novel's narrator is trying to reconstruct. As the *Notebook's* subject matter is doubly close to the author's own life, naturally reality and fiction begin to blend together: life imitating art and vice versa. It is the journal form which the novel adopts that, in the end, dramatizes the doubleness of the story and, what is more, the process of memory/memorialization, itself.

While on Diblos the narrator (John in life, and later Sandy in fiction) meets an American painter named Lucine, through some old friends of Dora, known simply as the N.'s (In addition, the narrator meets Dora's son by her first marriage, Byron, now caretaker of the "House.") It is at the invitation of the N.'s that the narrator and Lucine travel to the island of Epidauros to attend a performance of Euripides' *Oresteia* and learn of Orson/Orestes's recent return to Greece. Returning to Diblos, the narrator begins the writing of his novel from the point of view of Orson/Orestes. After writing the first section of the novel, pages 98-130, part III of *Notebook*, in "Fair Copy," dealing with Orson/Orestes' and Dora's time in New York City, the two worlds of Art and Life overlap in Orson's arrival on the island. Parodying a Greek tragedy, Orson/Orestes is rebuffed, offstage, by Dora's son. Brother meets brother as Orson/Orestes, bleeding from the head after his confrontation with Byron, enters the fishing port. The novel ends with the narrator sailing with the N.'s to Athens and then returning to the States. In his thorough reading of *Notebook*, scholar Stephen Yenser notes that "there is a comparable relationship between the 'actual' events and the narrator's reshaping of them into fiction ... None of [the] differences [between

‘reality’ and fiction] is significant ... What counts is that it is often impossible to separate the actual from the fictional” (95).

As does his first novel, *The (Diblos) Notebook*, though a well-wrought novelty of form, has a thin plot. As majestic (and precious) as its opening lines, *Notebook* is a novel worthy of attention because of its important place in the type of poetry Merrill was writing in the mid-’sixties, a poetry that, as Yenser points out, lived in the shadow of C. P. Cavafy and Francis Ponge—verbally adept and inflected with the long, sad strains of autobiographical reflection and not a little of the boredom born of wealth, leisure, and great talent. Just as Cavafy candidly unclothed personal histories of love and the classical histories that “imitated” them, just as Ponge unclasped the golden buckles of *vers* in order to reveal the *plaisirs* of language, Merrill was making poetry “out of the life lived, out of the love spent” (*WS* 4).

In an interview conducted by Donald Sheehan in the spring of 1967, while Merrill was Poet-in-Residence at the University of Wisconsin, Merrill was asked whether his second novel did in fact grow out of a notebook. His answer to that question reveals some of the facts behind its composition. He admits he “had the story in mind several years before ... writing the book.” He continues:

During that time I had no idea how to write it, although I made a few conventional beginnings. Then, one summer, when I’d been traveling in Greece, unable to do any real work, I kept a journal. But whenever I tried to inject any of those impressions into my conventional narrative, they went dead on me. The notebook itself, though, seemed

comparatively full of life. It took quite a while to realize that this was a possible technique, and use it. (R 34)

The pages of the quotidian impressions Merrill recorded during his real travels could, then, be supplemented with the fictions of his imaginary travels—a technique he would hone in his poetic volumes, *Nights and Days* (1966), *The Fire Screen* (1969), *Braving the Elements* (1972), and which he would bring to near-perfection in *Divine Comedies* (1976). Like his contemporaries, Merrill was realizing that the personal was poetic. However, unlike what he perceived as the fatal flaw of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, he refused to divulge the raw, uncooked details of his life. Poetry always was to be a re-formation of personal matters. The prosaic, caged in ephemera, could be taught to sing like one of Yeats's golden birds. The poet was the alchemist, deciding what to put in and what to reserve. In fact, from all the raw manuscript elements the reader is allowed to see, one can only deduce that Merrill wanted to perform both actions simultaneously. Referencing his memories of an edition of Keats's letters where the typesetter allowed the reader to see cross-outs and sentence variants, Merrill mentions the excitement that comes upon the reader of a missive in which things have been overwritten or erased—palimpsests—saying, “It seems to promise so much more than the words left exposed” (R 34). Feeding not simply the curiosity of the reader for things of the psychoanalytic bent—the repressed, the half-true, the trace of the original intention—the cross-outs are interesting visually. They mimic visual forms, elements of landscape, room interiors, cluttered desks and, thus, produce a topographical effect on the page. Unbeknownst to itself, its second-guessing of lived or imaginary experience reveals a

choice in how the author wishes to configure his personal “landscape.” In addition, it complicates our understanding of the element of autobiography present in nearly all first and second novels. The landscape is cultivated, placed under the pressure of memory and other concerns. Yenser, celebrating Merrill’s vanguard status in the face of critics like Judith Moffett who choose to lay waste his mannered elegance, notes: “In his second novel, well before Jacques Derrida popularized the term that is for the moment an earmark of subversiveness, much of the writing exists literally ‘sous rature’” (Yenser 40).

Though, for Merrill, the best writing has poise and “manner,” there is a vital truth which seems to emerge from the commonplace forms employed in *Notebook*; this is that great literature is never too far from life and never too experimental not to eagerly desire the revelations of the ‘human.’ Like the finest seventeenth-century Dutch painting, poetry emerges from the prosaic. The notebook form is, in addition, an inadvertent capturing of the moment under no apparent predetermination. Structure is unable to be detected. Events, memories, meals, assignations—all come at breakneck speed and must be inscribed before they are forgotten. Structure is sacrificed to a kind of “truth.” Schedules, timetables, menus—and, afterward, complexes, paranoia, neuroses. In *Notebook*, plot and poetry battle to infiltrate—or flee—the most prosaic travelogue. Some representative passages:

24. vi. 61

A Monday. Father’s seasonal letter. When I was returning, money not grown on trees, enclosed check the last. ‘Mother joins in love to you &

Orson.’ Let them think we are together. I need time here, now; the book is starting to take hold. (15)

4. vii. 61

A flood of letter yesterday. I wrote no more in the book. One would think friends understood the evils of correspondence. (43)

The hot water brought for shaving has cooled as usual. 6. vii. 61—a beard begun. (47)

For the young American abroad, indeed the sylphlike Merrill, how was it possible to capture the lives and loves of others when he himself resided in the guarded labyrinth of the self, hemmed in by upper-class propriety? A notebook was a way of capturing time and events without provoking them to disguise. Simple recording.

The notebook was also a place where Merrill could try effects he would never have thought of including in a finished poem. As, later, in *Divine Comedies*, where Merrill could compose long blank-verse poems out of common kitchen-garden fare, *The (Diblos) Notebook* contains much in the way of prose pulling itself together into verse. A seeming web of everyday things—the beard indeed would make it into one of Merrill’s last poems—the prose of *Notebook* could be charmed into producing shorter lines, which, while adumbrating certain topics, lent an expansiveness to the entire venture. Helen Vendler has noted this, saying that “[Merrill] wanted more than the usual proportion of dailiness and detail in his language” (Polito 134). A good example comes in the section of the novel where Sandy must bid farewell to Lucine:

Diblos. Past midnight. I've seen L. off on the caique.

Her face in moonlight, gray & mild, as if about to ~~administer~~
receive an anesthetic.

Before that, in the empty street. Her bags packed, the N.'s
already aboard. I stepped back from her, trying to reason. She'd given
up her room. I couldn't take her to mine.

face in moonlight, grown transparent, a darkness bleeding
through lips & eyes. The cricket's gauze-dry

"Yes I see." (33)

The setting is given straightaway, not preceded by a date, as the notebook-keeper has written more than once that same day. Place and time denote a dramatic setting. The ambiguous 'face in moonlight' lends an air of the macabre. It is not clear whose face is being described, though the tone of the passage turns deeply internal as if the poet is regarding his reflection. Finally, the consciousness is drawn to sound, the "words" of the cricket advising resignation, acceptance. The beginning of the passage is mimicked in the "Rigor Vitae" section of Merrill's long Scheherezade tale, "The Thousand and Second Night," which reads:

Istanbul. 21 March. I woke today

With an absurd complaint.

(*ND* 4)

The method, if that is what it can be called, has a precedent in Cavafy's poems, in the marriage of poetic experience and a precise historical moment. Merrill has written at least two poems with titles allusive to Cavafy: "Days of 1964" and "Days of 1935,"

while his masterful “Lost in Translation” could just as well be titled “Days of 1942.” However, in the passage above and in the mentioned poems, “time” is broader than a private period of imagining. The explicit date-marks make the poetic moment common to all readers. They undermine the specific “poetic” value of the moment, making it appear democratic and general when, in fact, it is specific and privileged. The “face in moonlight” is evoked in the style of self-regarding poetry. It equivocates on who he/she is what his/her intentions are. Either the face is going to administer or receive something to drive away not only pain but *all* feeling. Is it not a mere coincidence that the “absurd complaint” of the speaker of “The Thousand and Second Night” is Bell’s Palsy, a malady which struck Merrill during his Mediterranean travels? The circumstances in *Notebook* afflict another *figura* and the reader has no way of knowing whether the temporarily paralyzed face reflects a character flaw—albeit an allegorical effect—or a mere observation. One thing does seem certain: in these lines, the face described becomes something more than Sandy can bear. It becomes a phantom that cannot be grasped as well as a sign of Sandy’s obtuseness and inability to grasp, in words, the reality he beholds.

Such inability to fully grasp reality also can be found in the poem “The Mad Scene” in *Nights and Days*, in which a dream is recalled. The poet sees elements—the “sheets and towels”—of domestic life with his lover. But, terribly, a scene of almost comic horror awaits, in which:

The milk-stiff bibs, the shroud, each rag to be ever
Trampled or soiled, bled on or groped for blindly,

Came swooning out of an enormous willow hamper
 Onto moon-marbly boards. We had just met. I watched
 From outer darkness.

(*ND* 37)

The “dream called Laundry,” though slightly ridiculous in tone, reveals a frightening repression of the poet’s passion, a theme found throughout *Notebook*. The domestic life, the prosaic, is usually seen by the artist as one of the many things anathema to real invention. It is too predictable for something to jump out and surprise—though that is what happens when the lid pops off the willow hamper. The return of the repressed or—to pun—the unpressed.

Published around his fortieth birthday, *Nights and Days* shows an *agon* between two completely divorced tonal registers, the domestic and the exotic. Put simply, it is a book which attempts to dramatize the tension between the days of experience and the nights of poetic creation. A night-piece, “The Mad Scene,” modulates from the dogged and commonplace into a scene of grand opera where the speaker has, in contrast to the linen-closet mayhem of the first five lines, dressed himself in “clothes / Of a new fiber that never stains or wrinkles, never / Wears thin.” He continues:

The opera house sparkled with tiers
 And tiers of eyes, like mine enlarged by belladonna,
 Trained inward. There I saw the cloud-clot, gust by gust,
 Form, and the lightning bite, and the roan mane unloosen.

Fingers were running in panic over the flute's nine gates.

(*ND* 37)

The scene is one of passion being freed; both a concentration of power (“cloud-clot, gust by gust / Form”) and dispersal (“the roan mane unloosen”). As in the *Notebook* passage describing Lucine’s nighttime departure from Poros, the poet responds in “The Mad Scene” with the question: “Why did I flinch? I loved you.” Note the similarity to the resignation expressed by the cricket call: “Yes I see.” Both scenes—one encased in poetry, the other in prose—are places of acceptance. However, the acceptance in *Notebook* is also an acceptance of the thing Sandy does not wish to accept: that his relations with women always will stop short of sex. Lucine tactfully places the conflict of sexual interests under the rubric of artistic creation: “You don’t want it to happen. You’re writing your book, you don’t need anything else” (*D* 33).

The *Notebook*’s scene of farewell is so fraught with unspoken, unexpressed yearning that it comes as no surprise that the speaker of “The Thousand and Second Night” and “The Mad Scene” flinches or is paralyzed by the presence of sexual love. Despite Lucine’s candor and the self-knowledge that it should trigger in Sandy, he continues to abstract things from the scene until the truth comes:

I said we would meet again. Athens, America ...

Easten by light silver maw

The moon had risen and drunk the water

“I thought the Greek boys weren’t human beings, were animals really thinking just of their bodies. It seemed so selfish—”

Whispering.

She was right. The soul's selfishness was worse. The thirst for pattern, whether that of words on a page or stresses in the universe.

(34)

The penultimate thirst for pattern is characteristic of almost all Merrill lyrics. As noted in chapter 2, he reminds interviewers and fellow poets that, for him, manners are essential to poetry, to what Valéry calls “a holiday of the mind ... solemn, ordered, and significant” (Valéry 147).

The melting of separate identities into a unity might well be Merrill's reason for creating characters that, in turn, create characters similar but not identical to themselves. The Orson/Orestes and Sandy/John, however, do fall away after a while and the reader begins to see how Sandy and Orson behave—though never explicitly—as the same person. At one point, midway in the novel's “action,” the narrator responds to a cunning remark by Mrs. N. by saying:

Her tone, pure Guermantes, told me she meant precisely the opposite. Having decided long ago that Orson was an adventurer bent on marrying a rich wife, but never having had occasion to wither him by saying so to his face, Mrs. N was finding it appropriate & economical—2 birds, 1 stone—to act as if he and I were the same person. (28)

Merrill and his narrator have delved into their respective daily journals and divided personal experiences between his characters. This can be for some a bird's-eye view into the process of writing a novel where personal episodes suddenly become attached to other acting personae. It is an action which Merrill took greater and greater

liberties to show his reader. The obscure and polished beauty of an early love poem, such as “The Black Swan,” in which a single figure represents the poet and his passions, gives way to the multiplicity of “The Thousand and Second Night.” Merrill reveals, through the contradictions of *The (Diblos) Notebook*, the increasing importance of the bifurcated, or doubled, voice in his poetry. The novel proves a two-fold desire on Merrill’s part: first, to reinvent himself in the idiom of the day, the *nouveau roman* or what you will; second, to recognize and show the potent destructive forces unleashed by such reinvention. The latter is more than obvious in *Notebook* as doubled characters tend to obscure, or cross out, each other’s identity. The potential for form’s destruction also is apparent in the notebook method itself. As the notebook’s keeper remarks toward the novel’s conclusion, having copied out the “finished pages” of “Fair Copy”: “I had hoped to escape the tyranny of the Notebook—all my false starts, contradictions, irruptions of self, bound together, irrevocably. Books ought to consume their sources, not embalm them” (*D* 132). And yet, to read false starts as mistakes is a mistake Merrill is too smart to make. A paragraph more and he recants—as in “An Urban Convalescence”—

Actually, this last passage struck me as less artful than the earlier ones, with all their indecisions, pendimenti, glimpses of bare canvas, rips & ripples & cracks which, by stressing the fabric of illusion, required a greater attention to what was being represented.

(132)

It is precisely this discontinuous flow of the notebook which engages the interest of both narrator and reader.

For Merrill, *Notebook* was the most imperfect and perhaps the most forward-looking of his novels, but, that being said, it continued a dialogue with the problems which he was trying to solve in *The Seraglio*. Separations, shifts, cuts, divides, divorces—these represented the vitality of a living text. Just as his foray into fiction improved his skills in the narrative mode of verse that would characterize his mature effort, so it effected a meeting between the poetic line and its necessary Other, the plot- and meaning- and tone-imparting sentence.

Chapter 5: “An Immeasurable Keyboard”: *The Changing Light at Sandover*

He knew that the very memory of the piano falsified still further the perspective in which he saw the elements of music, that the field open to the musician is not a miserable stave of seven notes, but an immeasurable keyboard (still almost entirely unknown) on which, here and there only, separated by the thick darkness of its unexplored tracts, some few among the millions of keys ... have been discovered by a few great artists who do us the service, when they awaken in us the emotion corresponding to the theme they have discovered, of showing us what richness, what variety lies hidden, unknown to us, in that vast, unfathomed and forbidding night ...

—Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*⁶⁰

The silly is best avoided, ‘the wide strong wing’ of amusement and wonder most easily spread, and neatness of effect best achieved ‘by hugging close the supernatural—especially the ghostly...’

—Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult* (1972)⁶¹

⁶⁰ Proust, 497.

⁶¹ Words in single quotes are taken from James’s New York Edition Preface to “The Altar of the Dead” and “The Beast in the Jungle.”

1.

Tone can be conceived of as the ghost of language, something which haunts words and has the power to haunt meaning out of them even after their material demise. Often a listener will remember a tone of voice, or the tone of some writing, long after she has forgotten the words themselves. Has the listener taken into herself a particular valence of meaning, in part because its origin is extinguishable, evanescent? Great writing—be it a poem, a play, an essay, or a philosophical treatise—can be said to hold the tone within itself, through either a masterful use of diction, meter (rhythm, tonal movement), any of the figures of sound (including rhyme), or through successful phrasing (as in free verse) and uses of metonymy.

In James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a salon of intriguing, but often obtuse, voices compete, blend, separate, and reunite; and, while there are a plethora of poetic forms used to the point of bravura virtuosity, it is the tonal shifts (changes and diminishments) which occur between these *voix dans la coupole* that lend it its strange appeal. For a moment a voice may be heard, but suddenly the tune changes as a new voice vies for the hearing of its unwitting summoners. But something remains to remind us of itself as the voice modulates again and again, with the manic glidings of the pointer across the letters and figures of the Ouija board. Devin Johnston in his excellent essay, "Resistance to the Message: James Merrill's Occult Epic" (2000), invokes Derridean "figures for ghostliness, including *trace*, *remains*, *remainder*, *ruin*, *cinder* and *ghost* ... a written word predicated upon a self no longer present" (Johnston 108). A voice is here one second and is gone the next.

The Changing Light at Sandover (1982) began as what Johnston terms “the ghost of a lost novel, a failed attempt,” the manuscript of which, according to Merrill, was left by accident in a taxicab (Johnston 95). In it, Merrill wished to prove his powers as a novelist, by telling an old story through a fully developed cast of characters. His previous novels had been *Bildungsromanen* of sorts, which allowed for a longer and more linear narrative than he had been able to achieve even in his lengthy, narrative poems. “Looking about me,” he writes in “A,” the first section of *The Book of Ephraim*, “I found characters / Human and otherwise (if the distinction / Meant anything in fiction). Saw my way / To a plot, or as much of one as still allowed / For surprise and pleasure in its working out” (DC 47). Merrill tells his audience that, *contra* his previous narrative productions (the thinly veiled Jamesian autobiography of his youth, *The Seraglio*, and the pretentious attempt at a *nouveau roman*, *The (Diblos) Notebook*), he wanted

the kind of unseasoned telling found
In legends, fairy tales, a tone licked clean
Over the centuries by mild old tongues,
Grandam to cub, serene, anonymous

[...]

So my narrative
Wanted to be limpid, unfragmented;
My characters, conventional stock figures
Afflicted to a minimal degree
With personality and past experience—

A witch, a hermit, innocent young lovers,
 The kind of beings we recall from Grimm,
 Jung, Verdi, and the commedia dell'arte.
 (DC 47-48)

But, Merrill informs us, the venture foundered on the rocks of overwriting and “word painting”: “The more I struggled to be plain, the more / Mannerism hobbled me” (DC 48). Merrill’s expertise as the master of the urbane, polished, and elegant tone of his poems got in the way of the sort of lean, forward-propelled style needed to tell a good story and keep a reader’s attention.

Alongside the failed novel stands another influence: Ouija. Since the mid-’50s Merrill and his longtime partner, David Jackson, had engaged in this parlor game as a way of whiling away evenings in their new home away from the city, in the sleepy fishing hamlet of Stonington, Connecticut.⁶² With his right hand Merrill took down the board’s dictation, while his left hand rested on teacup *qua* planchette along with David’s. In the world of the board, Merrill became known as “JM,” Jackson “DJ” or, simply, the “hand” (as he had relative control of the planchette’s movements). Thus Merrill played the scribe, while Jackson played the medium or, in New Age parlance, the “channeler.” In section “B” of *The Book of Ephraim*, Merrill describes the setting of the Ouija sessions:

Properties: A milk glass tabletop.

A blue-and-white cup from the Five & Ten.

⁶² According to Jackson the Ouija experiences began on August 23, 1955. He and Merrill were joined by his wife, Doris Sewell Jackson. The system of spiritual representation, patronage, and reincarnation are introduced immediately by the spirit Ephraim. Jackson notes that Merrill copied the transcripts into “a small black notebook” and began writing the poem “Voices from the Other World” within a few days of their first contact, regarding it as “the first in a deepening set, dealing with one’s relation to that world” (Lehman 301-2).

Pencil, paper. Heavy cardboard sheet
 Over which the letters A to Z
 Spread in an arc, our covenant
 With whom it would concern; also
 The Arabic numerals, and YES and NO.
 (DC 49)

The first spirit that JM and DJ encountered was the eponymous Ephraim from whom they began to receive messages, JM dutifully taking them down in a series of quadrille-lined notebooks. As Johnston notes: “The raw transcripts that resulted were essentially block letters, unpunctuated and unspaced, which often needed to be divided with slashes into discrete words” (Res 88). As the Ouija phenomenon is posited on question and response, and since JM had little time to reproduce the actual questions asked, throughout he often had to re-create the questions from the spirits answers which he had recorded in his notebook.

Unlike the lost novel, the book-length poem “The Book of Ephraim” (from which *Sandover* eventually grew to three books) was a collaborative work which cannot be characterized as representing the labor of a single person. As the Ouija sessions progressed over more than a twenty-five-year period, Merrill’s unfinished “novel” was borne out by a cast of characters or “voices” from the other world. Thus the “collaboration,” at least as it developed between JM, DJ and the board, was a group-project, involving as much the interface between partners as between deceased friends (including W. H. Auden), mentors, past greats, and, finally, the full cohort of the otherworldly. Alison Lurie, in her memoir/exegesis of Merrill, remarks:

Though the spirits continually encourage [JM], and even demand that he continue, now and then he protests. Toward the end of *Mirabell*, when Auden declares

ON WITH THE WORK! THRILLING FOR YOU JM

[JM's] response is:

And maddening—it's all by someone else!

In your voice, Wystan, or in Mirabell's.

Only just now, copying these lines, did I notice that Auden does not suggest that the 'work' is thrilling for DJ. If this was a disguised message from David to Jimmy, he didn't seem to receive it. Instead he focused on his own creative difficulties:

I want it mine, but cannot spare those twenty

Years in a cool dark place that *Ephraim* took

... I'd set

My whole heart, after *Ephraim*, on returning

To private life, to my own words. Instead,

Here I go again, a vehicle

In this cosmic carpool. (Lurie 99-100)

If, as the New Critics would agree, tone is posited on an implied relationship between the writer and his or her audience, then its modulation necessarily involves a manifold of relations as well as the juxtapositions of voice, content, and attitude. *Sandover's* collaboration of the many voices—those of JM and DJ as well as those of

the spirit participants—provides the poem with a plethora of vocal tones, or as David Kalstone notes, “a compendium of voices—individual and social, emulated, sometimes feared and discarded” (Kalstone 124). Not a few of these explicitly conflict with Merrill’s own by-then-established style of highly distilled reflections, observations and meditations on the self-in-the-world mixed with doses of irony, mordant wit, and camp sensibility, employing “the apparently random material of our lives and reading, history, gossip—the rational and irrational bombardments” (Kalstone 125). As Merrill himself admits of *Sandover*’s singularity in his oeuvre, its work produced “not at all the type of page I could turn out by myself” (R 64). Thus, as Robert Polito points out in his indispensable *A Reader’s Guide to James Merrill’s The Changing Light at Sandover* (1994), *Sandover*’s collaborative qualities marked it out as the long poem that precipitated Merrill’s “passage from a chiefly lyric poet to one who is preeminently a medium” (Polito 2). That said, *Sandover* reveals mediumship not in the light of passive reception of instructions from above/beyond but, rather, in light of the labors necessary to turn it into a good poem. Merrill’s and Jackson’s reception of the messages from the ‘other world’ indeed involves their own volition.

In the essay which Polito uses to introduce his book, entitled “Sybilline Listening,” he quotes from Delmore Schwartz’s “T. S. Eliot’s Voice and His Voices,” an essay in which Schwartz discusses Eliot’s debt to the people on whom he eavesdropped. “Often,” Schwartz says of Eliot, “the actual substance of a passage is first of all a hearing or a quoting” (Polito 2). One need not look far beyond the most famous poem of Eliot’s career to admit the keen accuracy of Schwartz’s claim.

Indeed, Merrill himself admits, in relation to his early poems, his own debt to “some chance phrases, usually attached but not always, not even always attached to a subject” (interview with McClatchy in *R* 76).

A voice, a captured tone or vocal inflection, even a sound which cannot be readily attached to a *person*, incites in its listener a passion to reproduce, to mimic, to synthesize, and sometimes to develop, however fragmentary, a given theme. Jeffery Donaldson, in his essay “The Company Poets Keep: Allusion, Echo, and the Question of Who is Listening in W. H. Auden and James Merrill,” highlights the distinction between allusion—a sophisticated form of namedropping—and echo, which presupposes the poet’s active mediumship. Of echo, he writes: “There is a stronger sense of a cohabitation or mutual dwelling of voices, past and present. The correspondences between the two voices are heard *in* the line, a line which, if the echo is an evasive or faintly audible one, we would need to repeat and dwell upon before it would yield its secret source” (40). Merrill’s echoes are seldom “evasive” or “faintly audible.” Even if the provenance of a spirit voice is questionable, Merrill doesn’t let his reader lose too many steps before bringing it to light.

The first of Merrill’s poems to explicitly discuss the Ouija sessions was “Voices from the Other World,” published in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959, rev. 1970). In it Merrill reenacts his and David Jackson’s very first “contact” with the world that would give them the bulk of the material for *Sandover*.

Presently at our touch the teacup stirred,

Then circled lazily about

From A to Z. The first voice heard

(If they are voices, these mute spellers-out)

Was that of an engineer

Originally from Cologne.

Dead in his 22nd year

Of cholera in Cairo, he had KNOWN

NO HAPPINESS. He once met Goethe, though.

Goethe told him: PERSEVERE. (*CP* 112)

The “first voice heard” is, as Merrill acknowledges, *spelled out*—first through the navigations of the teacup across the letters printed on the board, and then through their inscription in the notebook. Technically, the voice is heard only after it has been inscribed and extracted from the vast sea of capital letters. Not surprisingly for an interpreter of Merrill, voice and *grapheme* are inextricably linked; as, say, voice and music are linked in *Lieder* or *mélodies* to create a hybrid experience in the listener. Merrill seems to impart to his readers the motto: Train your ear as well as your eye. But in the third stanza, Merrill’s typical ironic stance serves to undercut or mock even that lesson:

Our blind hound whined. With that, a horde

Of voices gathered above the Ouija board,

Some childish and, you might say, blurred

By sleep; one little boy

Named Will, reluctant possibly in a ruff

Like the large-lidded page out of El Greco,
 Pulled back the arras for the next voice,
 Cold and portentous: ALL IS LOST.
 FLEE THIS HOUSE. OTTO VON THURN UND TAXIS
 OBEY. YOU HAVE NO CHOICE. (*CP* 112)

Merrill's dog, a pathetic parody of Eliot's Sybil, grows annoyed with the scene he cannot see but perhaps can hear. He emits a whining sound, which itself mocks the popular image of the medium making odd noises before the voice of the spirit or lost loved one breaks through the ether. The reader's senses, meanwhile, are shuttling back and forth between visual and aural. As in El Greco's triumphalist painting *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, a group of spirits commune above the Ouija board but as pure sound, some even distorted ("blurred / By sleep"). There is a blending of various levels of discourse, various tones—some funny, some dear, some "cold and portentous." With the voice of Otto von Thurn und Taxis—a character who appears only once in all of Merrill's work but who can be said to parody a certain Teutonic high seriousness to which Merrill was, to say the least, constitutionally opposed—comes the first indication that the messages which issue from the "other world" will not always be suited to the entertainment of their "receivers." Once tuned in, so to speak, there is much unpleasant static, too, in that outer darkness.

Taking his cue from Rilke, Merrill adheres to a theory of poetry that, more often than not, conceives its spokesmen as seers who, using the tools of the trade, must successfully communicate their inner experience to their readers. This tradition likewise views poems as eminently changeable—*able to be tinkered with* is probably

more like it—until such point as the poet deems the poem finished. Besides his allergy to high seriousness, Merrill puts distance between himself and a kind of poetry beholden to ideas and *Sehnsucht*. As Vendler notes: “sublimities remain...at the edges of this deliberately social and tempered poetry. Wanting consuming passions, Merrill says, he has found only refining ones” (Polito 139). As scribe, Merrill labors to reduce and distill the conflict of disparate, disembodied voices; labors, that is, without draining them of their curious ‘otherness.’⁶³ This very well may, as Vendler points out, have a direct correlation to Merrill’s devotion to good aesthetic appeal: simplicity mixed with complications. A certain postmodern Baroque (no, Rococo!) sensibility reveals itself. She remarks:

Because Merrill is a poet whose devotion goes to the Absolute under the form of the Beautiful, his range, like that of the beautiful itself, is diverse: the Good and the True do not really participate in a spectrum of more or less in quite the same way. From bibelots to Beatrice, from embroidery to altarpiece, goes the scale, and Merrill’s tone modulates along with its object. 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’ exchange of vows to friends’ sentences in intimacy—as the highest form of human expression in contrast to the rhapsode’s hymns, the orators harangues, or the initiate’s hermetic

⁶³ Merrill’s task for much of *Sandover* lies in taking the raw prose matter and re-shaping it. In doing so, he practices a habit of redaction on the messages received from the “other world,” thus showing the efficacy of many models of *Rezeptionstheorie*.

colloquies with the divine) Merrill becomes susceptible to charges of frivolity, at least from readers with a taste only for the solemn. But this espousal of the conversational as the ultimate in linguistic achievement is a moral choice, one which locates value in the everyday rather than in the transcendent. (Polito 140)

But the second two installments of *Sandover* to follow suffered from an opposite tendency; for, as Merrill sought to transmute the raw dictation (with little intervening passage of time to allow what happened to “become literature”) he lost some of his touch. And, as Lurie notes, “the results were uneven” (Lurie 99). Raw dictation, rushed to the table with little preparation, may have satisfied an appetite in Merrill to lend immediacy, or to merely finish his masterwork, but it has left many a reader with an upset stomach.

That said, Merrill and Jackson are both suspicious⁶⁴ of the part-racist, part-New Age mumbo-jumbo, part-occult dogma which comes across on the board in the second and third volumes of the trilogy, and Merrill battles it with his wit, with his Stevensian preoccupation with the Theater of the Imagination, with his nostalgia for a poetry which indeed can and will make nothing happen. For Merrill, the experience

⁶⁴ As do a few of their friends. Robert Morse, a Stonington friend, criticizes JM in Book 8 of *Mirabell's Books of Number*:

Everything in Dante knew its place.
In this guidebook of yours, how do you tell
Up from down? Is heaven's interface

What your new friends tactfully don't call Hell?
Splendid as a metaphor. The real no-no
Is jargon, falling back on terms that smell

Just a touch fishy when the tide is low:
'Molecular structures'—cup and hand—obey
'Electric waves'? Don't *dream* of saying so!
(S 256)

and message are nothing if not fodder for his poetic art. In a prescient move, decades earlier when he published *First Poems*, Merrill states in “The Blue Eye”: “horizons made of yes and no / Tilt him beyond all telling—empty shell” (*FFN* 5). YES, &, and NO consequently would be the chapter divisions in the trilogy’s final book, *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980). Merrill refuses to take a side. Anything less would be unacceptable.⁶⁵ He confronts the darker forces of the other world with a humanistic approach such as he expressed masterfully in the dictum from the classroom in his poem “The Thousand and Second Night”: *Form’s what affirms*.

Plugging another Merrillian operative into the above dictum, we wind up with: *Tone’s what attunes*. Certainly, after perusing sections of any of the three *Sandover* volumes, a reader comes to realize that, in the ventriloquism of Merrill’s setting down voice after voice after voice, tone goes from not only being an attitude conveyed to an audience but a distinctly personal category for each speaker: Tone is owned by its speaker, whether JM or DJ or Ephraim or Auden; owned, that is, like a *persona* which communicates above and beyond the interface of content and meaning. Tone becomes for Merrill-the-medium/scribe a blueprint for a consciousness; or put another way, voice becomes synonymous with an autonomous consciousness. Vocal line is made equivalent to the streaming of a consciousness. In the case of a poem comprised mainly of voices, tone communicates the invisible.

Much of Merrill’s previous style is apparent in *Sandover*, a style which, while prizing

⁶⁵ Charles Molesworth, in his review of *Scripts*, writes: “‘Yes’ and ‘No’: taken serially these three words for irreducible language acts, namely assertion, qualification, and denial. Taken all together they form the essence of equivocation, which can be seen as the fullest sort of language act or the very subversion of language” (quoted in Rotella 10). Molesworth’s view of *Scripts* is replete with the linguistic catchwords of the late ’Seventies. Equivocation, short of full language-actship, is the also the essence of decent, intelligent conversation. Time and again in *Sandover*, the reader witnesses a poet who grows increasingly nervous that momentarily the experiment of the past three decades will have to come to an end.

beautiful surfaces, does not fetishize the concrete or the clumsily “material.” Rather, as Denis Donoghue characterizes it, Merrill’s style is “a net of loose talk tightening to verse... Auden is his chosen master” (Polito 179). We must keep in mind that for the most part Merrill and his partner *see* nothing. It’s just a lot of talk, but it’s not vapid. As Stephen Yenser in “Dantean Andante,” his 1979 review of *Mirabell; Books of Number*, notes: “[Merrill’s poem] justifies time and again his metaphorical transformation of the twenty-six letters on the board into footlights ... Often using the fewest words, those in the other world convey gestures, facial expressions, poses, and strike whole chords of emotion” (Polito 149).

Merrill and Jackson never use words like “trance” or “possession” to describe Ouija activity. The messages received are, just that, *received*, but through an interactive partnership. Indeed, *Sandover* bristles against the trope of the “received” or “inspired” sacred text. Merrill constantly interjects, interprets, shapes, and revises the message as he understands it. Not once does Merrill counter the view (shared by many skeptical critics and Merrill’s therapist) that what they were doing was a mere *folie à deux*; neither did he affirm it. What is clear is the fact that he and David Jackson, having gone to the board initially for entertainment, wound up using the board as a ‘third’ in an otherwise stable, domestic relationship. Whether, as a ‘third,’ it was meant to introduce the threat of a third party in order to prove the relationship’s mettle, or to allow the participants access to new horizons of creativity, is never made clear.⁶⁶ By the time *Braving the Elements* was published, Merrill’s reputation had

⁶⁶ Margaret Nelson, in her unpublished dissertation “Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions,” notes: “a long poem is not just a literary adventure, but a way of living a life” (254). For Merrill and Jackson, after the publication of “The Book of Ephraim,” *Sandover* became their life together, for better and for worse.

been secured. He had experienced fame as great, if never as wildly lucrative, as his father's. David Jackson, on the other hand, while a man of adequate means, was a frustrated novelist whose four or five completed novels never got published. At the time of *Sandover*'s composition, he had resorted to amateur mural painting in the houses he and Merrill resided at throughout the year. As Lurie notes in her memoir of Merrill and Jackson, "these works of art, though Jimmy admired them volubly, were at best decorative and pleasant; they expressed none of David's intelligence, energy, and originality." She goes on to note how participation in the Ouija sessions plumbed depths inside Jackson, whom she views as "in an essential sense the co-author of *Sandover*, so much of which flowed through his hand ... none of which could [have been] written without him" (Lurie 105). The importance of Jackson's influence, Lurie observes, is evidenced in the form of the spirit's messages: prose rather than verse (Lurie 105). However, given that he is not credited as a co-author, Lurie concludes that most readers overlook the importance of his hand in the task.

Jackson, in his essay "Lending a Hand" (1983), admits Merrill's indispensable reshaping of the Ouija transcripts into a unified work. Employing a musical metaphor, he remarks that, "As the poem progressed I was always astonished by my own fascination, as if I were listening to an orchestration of what had been a wobbly or unharmonic melody" (Lehman 299). While one does not want to overstrain the metaphor, the mention of music is a reminder that a voice constitutes a *line*—melodic or not, whether constrained by the rules of prosody or not—and derives its most general meaning in the act of being heard, either audibly or, as discussed in chapter 3, by what some have called "the ear of the imagination." *Sandover* differs from most of

Merrill's lyric poetry in that it attempts the polyvocality of his fiction and thus, in order to cohere (for Merrill's sensibility) as a poem must arrange—or set—the vocal line as a composer would arrange the “voices” in a fugue.⁶⁷ Polito identifies the text's polyvocality with a “disdain [for] the authority of any single human speaker” (Polito 2).

The second-generation New York School poet Alice Notley has observed that “voice carries poetry.” She notes:

I can almost imagine a poetry of telepathy: a transference of thought in which the density and simultaneity of thought are also transferred, obviating linearity and therefore voice. But time implies a voice, and though there might exist a sort of page meant to be taken all at once and not linearly, the page would most probably have been constructed linearly, letter by letter, and that linear construction is the author's voice. An author's voice is existence and presentation in time.

(Notley 147)

Indeed, to Notley's point, *Sandover* is a kind of telepathic work, which construes a line—poetic, melodic, rhythmic—that aspires to something approaching, but never quite, the condition of music. The poem, indeed, complicates traditional models of the metaphor and the sign, failing as it does to posit a feasible signified—New Critical ideologies of tone subverted by pervasive camp humor and POEMS OF SCIENCE never quite amounting to anything approaching comprehensibility. Instead, like the *petite phrase* of the composer Vinteuil in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it exists

⁶⁷ The image is nothing new to modern poetry—Pound had envisioned his *Cantos* as such an accomplished fugal composition.

“latent in the mind on the same footing as certain other notions without material equivalent, such as notions of light, of sound, of perspective, of physical pleasure” (Proust 497). Rarely has the question been asked why Merrill chose the title of his completed poem to be *The Changing Light at Sandover* if not perhaps to underscore its evanescence, its attunement to Proust’s own oft-misunderstood meditation on the passage of time, the reconstitution of memory, the transmigration of souls, and the timeless rituals of human society. Merrill implicitly puts into question a whole gamut of powerful inner experiences which lack material tangibility but which, like music, constitute themselves as private languages. He implicitly asks the question of how such a private language (of the self) is affected by dispersals into voice, by relationships, by education. Finally, he implicitly undermines an epistemology of form which posits a transcendental signified by viewing his construal of form as purely aesthetic, for purposes of pleasure rather than knowledge.

2.

By the time Merrill had distilled twenty-five years of Ouija sessions into “The Book of Ephraim,” he and David Jackson were committed, duly (and dually), to the “messages.” *Mirabell: Books of Number* represents the modulation of memory, wit, and the “lost novel” into a systematic education by a bat (‘741’) who metamorphoses into a peacock named Mirabell, and who eventually reveals himself to be the Archangel Michael. Book 8 of *Mirabell* is a seminar in the history of culture, starting with “THE 2 BASIC APECHILDREN WHO IN PRE / CARNIVOROUS PRE IN

FACT FIRE DAYS” go to nurse at their mother’s breast, and extending into their acquisition of language, the true mark of incipient “culture”(M 147). Mirabell asks: “SO WHAT IS MOST REWARDING OF MAN’S V WORK?”—“V work” being those actions on the part of humans which aid their souls through the various stage of reincarnation and spiritual growth. More than mere culture, the answer Mirabell provides is “HIS ENTIRE LIFE-FABRIC WOVEN IN LANGUAGE” (M 147). He then describes the evolution of language, not from “GIBBERISH GRUNT AND SQUEAK” but from the first drawn designs the child makes: “A SQUARE IN THE MUD” (147). At this point, GOD B (IOLOGY) allowed Mirabell and his other angelic messengers to enter into the child’s mind (“A JUNGLE OF GREENERY FRESH, QUIVERING WITH TRAPT LIGHT”) and to create pathways for ideas (147). From the first conceived idea, apechild is led to spoken language:

THE APECHILD

WEAND & ABANDOND BY HIS REVOLTED MOTHER KNEW THIRST
 BUT WE HAD TO LEAD HIM TO THE SPRING. THEN SWIFTLY AS IF
 WATER HAD NOURISHD A PLANT CALLD IDEA THE JUNGLE
 GAVE WAY, & SIMPLE SURVIVAL CONCEPTS WERE SUPPLANTED
 BY IDEAS IN CULTURE’S 2ND BROAD CATEGORY:
 CURIOSITY. HAD GOD B TOLD US TO INSTILL (SAY)
 THE NOTION ‘SUCCEED’ RATHER THAN ‘SURVIVE’ WD THE APE-
 CHILD
 HAVE RUSHED TO KILL & DRINK BLOOD OVER HIS FALLEN
 RIVALS?

YES MOST LIKELY. INSTEAD THAT FRESH, LIQUID THOUGHT:
 WATER WAS PLACED IN HIS CUPPD HANDS BY NATURE & SO THE
 IDEAS
 THE CULTURE OF MAN’S UNIQUE GARDEN WERE UNDER WAY.
 NEXT: SOUND. THE APECHILD BEGAN BY POINTING. HIS
 LANGUAGE LIKE THAT OF THE ARTIST AT HIS PALETTE WAS
 MOTION. BUT ONE DAY
 & IT IS WHY NEAR THE SCRIBE STANDS MUSIC, THE UNIVERSE
 WAS STARTLED, SHOT WITH LIVE COLOR, AS ON A SERIES
 OF TIMID & THRILLING TONE-SIGNALS THERE BURST FROM THE
 CHILD
 (NOW NO LONGER APE BUT SINGER, THINKER, LOVER) SPEECH
 & WORD
 (148)

Thus, Mirabell teaches JM and DJ that sign-language and pointing—both of which employ motion—are interrupted by a new development, sound, which transforms the primitive mind, the apechild, into something capable of conversation and artistic creation (which Mirabell defines as “A REASOND INDIRECTION”) (148). Through the arts of science, poetry, and music, humans cultivate their jungle-turned-garden. However, there is a double standard, and though humans create their own culture, in their greatest works of culture they are assisted by the angels (“CULTURE & LANGUAGE ALWAYS NEED THE MESSENGER AT THE ELBOW”) (148). Mirabell explains that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer were “SENT

INTACT” from the “other world” to the scribe, while the Koran was merely “A
 WORK / PATCHD TOGETHER BY A NOMAD RACE” (148). The Bible, however,
 adhering to the orthodox Judeo-Christian view of divine inspiration, seems to be the
 product of an active human participation in “divine” revelation. Mirabell
 characterizes the Jew as having “THE MOST ATTUNED OF EARS [WHO]
 HEARD / THE UNEARTHLY MUSIC OF THE SINGLENOTED ATOM, /
 LISTEND TO IT & WROTE: IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD” (149). At
 this message, the ghost of Auden derails the history by commenting on the dress of
 his heavenly companion, MM (Maria Mitsotáki), and questioning the clearing of
 pathways through *his* mind. A hurricane is blowing on the eastern seaboard, and the
 “prelude” to Book 8 concludes: “HAPPY CANDELIGHT” (149).

If Book 8 has as its guiding metaphor this fantastic, hard-to-believe, evolution
 of motion to sound and finally to spoken and written language, Book 6 presents a
 less-developed (though less elaborated-on) idea: that, according to Auden,

MUSIC MORE ABSTRACT
 THAN METAPHOR MUST BE THE BOND THAT LINKS US
 (112)

To which, MM responds

I PREFERRED
 EFFECTS UNSTUDIED INDEED SCARCELY HEARD
 AS ONCE WHEN 3 COINCIDENTAL SOUNDS
 A WIND BELL IN THE GARDEN A DOOR CHIME
 & THE HIGH CRY OF A SEAGULL MADE ONE FLEETING

TONIC CHORD IS MUSIC NOT LIKE TIME
 RETOLD? LIKE THE NO ACCIDENT MOTIF
 A WAY OF TELLING THAT INSPIRES BELIEF?
 WOULD AN UNMUSICAL MIND TAKE IN THE PEACOCK?
 THE MESSENGER THE MESSAGE THESE RING BELLS
 I ANSWER TO
 (112)

It certainly would seem that tone—in the aural sense, pure, vibratory, analyzable, single—as opposed to *Klang*, mere confused noise, is central to *Sandover's* mythology of time and the universe. As in *Mirabell's* excursus in Book 8, tone is at the heart of creation and a prime mover in both writing and music. As I stated in the first and second chapters, musical note and intoned syllable are close equivalents. Merrill evinces this again in his “Coda,” which carries the subtitle “The Higher Keys” (itself an allusion to Lady Good in *The Seraglio*, who entrusts her most personal feelings to the “highest whitest keys” on her piano).

Whether or not Merrill expects his readers to believe the teachings imparted by *Mirabell*, the angelic messengers, and, finally, Archangel Michael, is not clear. *Mirabell*, at over twice the length of “The Book of Ephraim,” is certainly convoluted and longwinded, in the tradition of many longwinded books that masquerade as, or purport to be, the reflections of some type of transcendental signified. Halfway through his own analysis of *Mirabell*, Stephen Yenser admits:

Even a brief summary of this sprawling volume will suggest that it poses certain problems. For one thing, to take the least troubling first,

the variety of speakers and points of view, the congeries of tones and attitudes, and the sheer multifariousness of it all render impossible the sleek unity characteristic of *Ephraim*. (Yenser 258)

3.

To derive from *Sandover* an airtight theorem of music's relation to the word would be futile. (So much of *Sandover* represents a light-hearted dramatization and obscuration of Merrill's guiding "light," be it the musico-poetic phrase, the passage of time, light comedy or the truth of change.) Rather, what Merrill's epic poem begs is speculation on why the twinned acts of creating music and poetry carry such strong associations with the occult. The telegraphic style of so much of *Sandover* implies that, in a common sense sort of way, messages do not originate at the same place where they are received. It raises the question of where the impulse to utterance—especially inspired or received utterance—originates, how and, more importantly, *where* it is received, and how it is recorded (by inscription and for sonic reproduction). And, finally, it proposes a concept of hearing, or attunement, very close to that of "exteriorized consciousness" proposed by Sharon Cameron in her analysis of thinking in James's novels and prefaces. Like the the Jamesian typewriter, the Ouija board is a writing tool. It spurs on the writing process through what is, at heart, a chance-driven game, and it mediates between the thoughts of multiple consciousnesses. If great poetry, following "the Great Tradition" from Homer to Pound, embodies the act of synthesizing the ideas of the best consciousnesses which

came before it, then Merrill's Ouija board attempts, purportedly in real time, to effect the synthesis and transcription of many voices, tones, and ideas by what scholar Pamela Thurschwell calls "occult ways of imagining cultural transmission and communication" (Thurschwell 2).

In her provocative chapter "*On the typewriter, In the Cage, at the Ouija board*" in *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (2001), Thurschwell first analyzes the position of the telegraphist in Henry James's 1898 novella *In the Cage*. She pays special attention to the telegraphist's relative position of mediation (what she later terms "telepathic intimacy") in "the world of other consciousnesses" (96). Thurschwell speculates on the paradox of the telegraphist's expansion of consciousness through her supposed access to a variable number of other consciousnesses as well as the cheapening of such an act through the quantifying of words, and word count, into their monetary equivalents. Thurschwell notes that: "For James the potential vulgarity of consciousness seems to lie in the possibility of locating it so precisely" (Ibid. 96). Thurschwell then goes on to ask the question: "How do we determine the status of mediator's intimacies as fantasy or reality?" As with the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, the mediator's credibility (as well as the veracity of the experience) is put in question. However, the very atmosphere in which both novellas were composed supports, at least for *In the Cage*, a privileged view of mediation. Both novellas were dictated and transcribed through the mediation of amanuensis and typewriter.

Thurschwell goes on to explain that James's amanuensis, Theodora Bosanquet, was the only one of his work-mates to extend her relationship with the

Master beyond the grave. After James's death, Thurschwell notes, "Bosanquet was to become intensely engrossed in sittings with mediums and her own experiences of automatic writing, *living out the similarities between the secretarial position and the spiritual world*" (100; my emphasis). As a woman, Bosanquet performs the more popularly conceived role of the medium, even going so far as to carry the sexually denying adjective of "nunlike" for one of her otherworldly contacts. Here I see certain similarities with David Jackson, who, while manning the teacup-pointer, is denied the unique agency of the scribe, JM. Agency in transcription necessarily involves preconceived gender roles, which crisscross the categories of sex and sexual orientation. (Bosanquet, whose boyish demeanor enchanted James, was a lesbian.⁶⁸)

The most salient feature, however of Thurschwell's expert "cullings" from Bosanquet's automatic writing and Ouija transcriptions (stored in the archive of the Society for Psychical Research, hereafter "SPR") is the revelation of Henry James's otherworldly voice; that a community of deceased writers was very much alive and ready to embark on a bold new "literary work." Bosanquet is called a "mouthpiece" for James ("a lending of the mind to follow mine"), an "instrument" to reproduce the sympathetic vibrations of the Master's mind. Thurschwell comments: "Bosanquet herself is the instrument to be produced" and, not surprisingly, "the typewriter incarnate" (102). As I noted in the second chapter of this dissertation, the typewriter played, for James, the role of compositional aid; the click of the Remington freed up inside of him a stream of discourse—or what Thurschwell terms "unstoppable flow"-

⁶⁸ Of Bosanquet, Thurschwell remarks: "The boyish Miss Bosanquet—whose sexual othering of James may have been played out in complicated but difficult to trace dynamics between a lesbian secretary and a gay male author—finds herself, after her boss's death, still subject to his words and his dictation" (108).

—and grants access to “some form of alterity ... inside James, which can be ‘pulled out’ with the help of speech and a technological spur” (103). The technological mediumship of the typewriter is thus displaced to the person of the amanuensis and, from there, to that of the female medium Bosanquet and her transactions with the voices (and consciousnesses) of the dead. Thurschwell, likewise, notes the eclipse, precipitated by Freudian models of the psyche and female hysteria, of mediumship:

Clearly the séance was a space in which sexually transgressive desires could be enacted, but the collapse of the medium into the hysteric, and the apparent historical disappearance of them both, does a disservice to the complicated dynamics of mediumship. (107)

Invoking the thesis of Jamesian intra-subjective consciousness expounded by scholar Sharon Cameron, Thurschwell notes that, *contra* a hysteria- or superego-driven reading of Bosanquet’s automatic writing, “the ‘self’ in trance is similarly complicated” (107).

James himself was not innocent of interest in spiritualism, that particularly American brand of unorthodox spiritual belief. His father, Henry James, Sr., a Swedenborgian scholar and philosopher of the spirit, had raised his children with an open mind. William James’s classic exploration of psychology and mysticism, the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, betrays a certain desire to both systematize some of his father’s undeveloped notions of the supernatural and to complete the work that he had started in his own *Principles of Psychology*. As Martha Banta observes in *Henry James and the Occult* (1972):

The Jamesian religion, as well as the fiction of [Henry], laid great stress upon man's ability to be "something free and uncommitted." The vital importance of "inward consciousness," placed in "an intensity of relation to the actual," was the issue essential to father and son, as was "a passion" which "kept together [the] stream of thought, however transcendent and the stream of life, however humanized Henry would write William that he could "enjoy greatly the spirit, the feeling, and the manner" of their father's "whole system." But he added the parenthetical modifier, "full as this last is of things that displease me too. . . ." The manner: that was the eye of the needle through which all things must be drawn before they could enter the kingdom of James's paradise of art. His father's expression was too thick a thread to pass; or rather, and even worse, it seemed no thread at all. (Banta 38-9)

Both William and Henry prized an economy of thought which, through its rigors, would leave something concrete and practical in the place where their father had left only jottings and enthusiastic speculations. As history reveals, each accomplished this goal in his own particular fashion. However, in light of Bosanquet's automatic writing, we are left with the nagging suspicion—indeed nearly a certainty—that Henry and William would have objected. Looked at through the lens of William's writings on spiritual phenomena, the objection would not apply to the trance itself but, rather, to the earnest interpretation of the often incomprehensible, illogical transcript of such a trance. Like the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, automatic

writing may be interesting for its novelty and its betrayal of unfathomable depths within the human psyche, but taking it as the literal revelation of some ultimate message is risible. We can indeed speculate that Henry's objection would be similar, with the exception of one thing which both Banta and Cameron discuss in their analyses of James's writing, the notion that consciousness can exist *between* persons and thus outside of a body. As Banta remarks: "[E]ven as James repudiated—with wit and bite—the inanities, the absence of style, and the self-imposed limitations of scientific empiricism and spiritualist vaporizing, he took note of what they said about the human consciousness" (Banta 4).

William James took an active interest in the research that institutions such as the SPR were doing, as did many other high-profile writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century. While distancing himself from the philosophizing of his father, he sought more and more empirical evidence of people's contact with the dead. His brother Henry, on the other hand, suspected Modern Spiritualism of charlatanry and of missing the larger issue of consciousness, its definitions, boundaries, etc. But, at the same time, Modern Spiritualism's inclusion of "psychical research" was to change James's literary situation:

[F]irst, it gave new definition for what supernaturalism is—extending its dimensions and clarifying its qualities, thus making it, in a sense, new material altogether; secondly, it offered up these new definitions in a new form—the psychological case study of the so-called haunted or supernaturally-attuned consciousness. (Banta 33)

Modern Spiritualism gave literature some of its most enduring themes: the multiplicity of selves, the alter ego or doppelgänger, and that great symbol of the forever-unresolved, the ghost.⁶⁹ While James chose not to exploit all of the above, he clung to the ghost of human consciousness as the surest key to truly engaging writing. More terrifying for him was the ghost we know, rather than the purely fantastic ghost of pulp fiction. Banta prefaces her remarks regarding James's belief in souls and spirits (as opposed to sheer materialism) with R. P. Blackmur's comment that James was "an example of what happens to a religious man when institutionalized religion is taken away" (Banta 65). His various mappings of human consciousness in the masterworks of his late period were nothing less than attempts at wedding *style*, and by extension, *beauty* to a spiritually inflected understanding of attunement between separate consciousnesses. *Contra* a mechanistic model of the universe, Banta notes that James was more convinced of consciousness's extension than of the extension of concrete matter. For him, consciousness was the true *matter* of the modern art-form, as Proust and Mann would prove in the years to follow.

It is as if in James's fiction that consciousness is able to move freely and unimpeded by obstacles real or imagined. And yet, this ability is not some novelty that James has invented to make his novels more palatable to a public hungry for sensation; rather, it comes from his endless listening and observing and indeed attuning himself to the subtleties of a gamut of human relations. He knows it to be

⁶⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, stymied by writer's block and staying at a friend's castle near Zurich, would famously be visited by a male spirit. The result was the *Duino Elegies*. As Corinna Treitel notes in her study *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (2004), numerous artists and writers of the fin-de-siècle experienced crises such as these, "before breaking through to a new inner voice ... They tapped a novel occult tool known as the 'spirit guide'" (118). Merrill and Jackson, stymied by boredom and a cooling off in their relationship, experience a series of such guides (Ephraim, Auden, the peacock 741) in *Sandover*.

that way with people, that their bodies can be doing one thing and their minds another; and the life of their minds, of their consciousness, is of infinitely starker consequence. That James came to some of these observations and attendant conclusions while dictating to, or through, the Remington typewriter that his amanuensis operated is matter of interest. For my part, I would like to imagine him as that “divine musician” to whom he likens the mature Shakespeare in “Introduction to *The Tempest*” (1907):

Alone in his room, [he] preludes or improvises at close of day. He sits at the harpsichord [the console of Bosanquet’s Remington], by the open window, in the summer dusk; his hands wander over the keys. They stray far, for his motive, but at last he finds and holds it; then he lets himself go, embroidering and refining: it is the thing for the hour and his mood. The neighbors may gather in the garden, the nightingale be hushed on the bough; it is none the less a private occasion, a concert of one, both performer and auditor, who plays for his own ear, his own hand, his innermost sense, and for the bliss and capacity of his instrument. (“Shakespeare” 653)

The phrase, “a concert of one, both performer and auditor,” resonates with “his own ear, his own hand.” It reveals an artist with such control over his powers that he is finally able to let himself go. James’s tone is dusky, shadowy. Everyone is listening, even the totemic nightingale hushed on his bough. “If I see him,” James continues, “at the last, over *The Tempest*, as the composer, at the harpsichord or the violin,

extemporizing in the summer twilight, it is exactly that he is *feeling there for tone, and by the same token, finding it*—finding it beyond any register of ours...” (655).

Looked at alongside James’s sober, awe-filled exploration of the supernatural, Merrill’s *Sandover* appears conspicuously like something neither William nor Henry would have cared for. Despite its method of composition—Ouija board rather than dictated-to typewriter—and the notion of the voice-in-the-head dictating the words of the narrative or the lyric poem, *Sandover* utilizes the baggage of the contrived supernatural, the fairy-story, the retold myth, to such an extent that its posturings cannot be taken seriously. Certainly it would be pleasant to consider Bosanquet’s dabbling in automatic writing, the Ouija board, and spirit-channeling as more than mere coincidences when looked at from the perspective of *Sandover*, but in actuality they are little more than that, coincidences—clues to a more obscure lineage within a post-Romantic tradition which still divines compositional value in ideas of inspiration, celestial dictation, tone and voice. What contemporary poets are attuned to, however, has not changed much: the word as note, as sounded value; the phrase as an integral unit of poetic meaning; meaning as relative and (in *Sandover*’s case, alphabetically) relational.

Afterword

When Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren stated in 1938 that “the poet must depend on the words on a page to take the place of the expressive human voice,” perhaps unknowingly they were drawing more attention to the voice than to the page. The primacy of that voice, be it heard or felt or, as I have argued, channeled, is reinforced by the notion (prevalent in this age of voice- and sound-reproduction technologies) of the dictated word as the authentic and, perhaps, final word. The charm of the immediate, of the infinitely repeatable; the novelty of the actual “expressive” voice caught on vinyl, magnetic tape, or in digital sound-files; the idea of “sound-design” (far different from that envisioned by Allen Tate) or the ambient, spectral noises captured unawares on a recording—each of these augmented, and in turn was augmented by the desire of writing to pass for sound. That Brooks and Warren preface their restatement of this dependence by remarking that “in ordinary life . . . our basic attitude toward the *what* and *whom* of any transaction . . . is indicated by tone” itself makes obvious the sheer dependence of “the subtle modifications of meaning” on, in an analogous sense, the subtle modifications of pitch, timbre, color, intonation and accent.

As I have stated throughout, Henry James, James Merrill, and their shared literary heritage value the poverty of the printed word—in its notational capacity—to capture prior spoken, sounded “meaning.” Postmodern conceptions of tone, as evinced by works like *The Changing Light at Sandover*, shy away from the

Modernists bias toward the printed character, the inscribed grapheme and, again, posit the *sounded* word as the “restored relation” between the sonic and semantic spheres. That said, postmodern conceptions of tone also invoke a non-unitary idea of “voice.” Such conceptions tend to favor the coterie, the salon, group-speak, the Other.

I would also argue that such postmodern notions of tone prize conversations had not so much with oneself as with the full range of voices, characters, personalities, and the charting of such “rich relations” over, say, the traditional notion of passive audiences needing diversion, placation, or education. F. R. Leavis and Langdon Hammer posit tone as “a sort of externalized inwardness” or “interpretative construction ... of some putative interiority.” Most often the voices we hear may be our own. Less a secret password to be divined through close study, tone may be more an invitation for the reader to pick up the thread of conversation, participate in the text-under-construction, and bring up to date the issues and themes found therein.

Before I close, I must confess an honest loss at not being able to hear James’s voice in recording. For a while I hoped that the telephone would ring and some enthusiastic young Sussex archivist would tell me of the discovery of a wax cylinder, but as I progressed I came to the realization that the Master had offered me a recording of sorts, in the unmistakable transcription of his tone—his golden center of consciousness. Merrill’s voice is easily accessible on audiocassette and CD, and embodied in a few film recordings, including *Voices from the Other World*, the acting version of *Sandover*.

As I have tried to prove in the preceding chapters, James and Merrill play primarily for our ears. Each favors a direct link between the ear and the mind: the

modulation of sound into thought and feeling. In the end, we can only say that we have the sense of having been made use of, of having resonated in sympathy with something beyond ourselves.

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