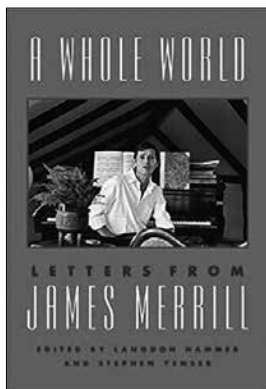


STEPHEN YENSER & LANGDON HAMMER (eds.), *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill*, New York, Knopf 2021, pp. 692, \$ 45



In an introduction to a reading given by James Merrill at New York University in September 1992, Stephen Yenser recounted a visit to the poet in his home in Athens, Greece, where he had a chance to see how «James customarily spent the morning: in a flash there would be a stock on the stove, a new letter in the typewriter and a poem on the desk, Schubert lieder on the stereo, a marinade

in the fridge, a shopping list taking shape on the refrigerator door, someone on the line from Vermont, books on biochemistry and preliterate astronomy open on the harpsichord-bench [...] ». This vignette encapsulates the life we are invited into by *A Whole World: Letters from James Merrill*, edited by Stephen Yenser, author of the best book on the poet (*The Consuming Myth*), and Langdon Hammer, who published a monumental biography of Merrill in 2015. Of course, it is a privileged life, and some people are put off by the thought of a writer who, thanks to the good fortune of being the son of the founder of the Merrill-Lynch investment firm, never had to work for his living. Yet in fact few writers have worked so intensely (and so productively) at their craft.

But the important point is that the «poem on the desk» in Yenser's account is a direct product of all that surrounds it: the art, the music, the reading in esoteric subjects, the daily life of shopping and cooking—and, most important, the friendships implied in the phone call from Vermont and the letter in the typewriter. This book, which takes us from age 6 (a letter to Santa Claus) all the way to his final days in Tucson, Ariz., where he died from AIDS-related complications in 1995, immerses us in that world and enriches

our understanding of the poetry that came out of it.

Merrill's poems explore the complex bonds between himself and an ever-widening circle of friends, lovers and relations around the world. That circle—bewilderingly and for some people disturbingly—also expanded to take in the next world, via the poet's longtime practice of conducting seances via the Ouija board (which served as the portal to his extraordinary epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*). The final poem of Merrill's 1962 volume, *Water Street*, concludes, «If I am host at last / It is of little more than my own past. / May others be at home in it». It is no accident that the volume's title is the address of his Connecticut home. The concluding lines of the first poem in the same volume speak of the «need to make some kind of house / Out of the life lived, out of the love spent». Merrill's poems constitute a vast, hospitable home into which we are invited. With the possible exception of Yeats, no poet since Wordsworth has made such great poetry from the material of his own life; however, while Wordsworth mainly reflects on his own relations with the natural world, Merrill focuses on his connections with other people. It is worth noting that the most penetrating criticism of his work so far has been written by people who knew

a cura di Elisabetta Bartoli, Gregory Dowling, Antonella Francini, Michela Landi, Camilla Miglio, Niccolò Scaffai, Francesco Stella, Fabio Zinelli

him intimately, such as Stephen Yenser, David Kalstone and Rachel Hadas —all recipients of letters in this volume.

For those not so privileged, these letters, together with Hammer's biography, constitute the next best way to acquire a similar feeling of intimacy. As he lived much of his life divided between homes in Stonington, Conn., and Athens, letters provided an essential bond between these worlds. While one of the reasons for choosing to live half the year in Greece was apparently to get away from the disapproving eyes of American society («I'm as happy as I can be, without the people closest to me,» he wrote from Greece in 1950), it is clear that he was never able (and never wished) to break ties irrevocably. In his critical work on Merrill, Yenser described him as «an inveterate dualist», but one of the interesting things we notice in these letters is the constant move toward the reconciliation of opposites. In 1971 he wrote: «Over the years, to my surprise, to my sadness and my delight, the gap between my two lives has narrowed. One can barely detect the crack, one wonders if there ever was one, or what all the fuss was about. There is no such thing as a double life.»

However, perhaps the real point is in the next sentence: «There's one life that takes new aspects and is enriched.» Merrill, who wrote a famous sequence of poems entitled *The Broken Home*, was

forever seeking to repair what was shattered and to create new works of art from the reunited fragments. The second letter in the book (March 1933) is about the successful completion of a jigsaw puzzle, an event which, some 40 years later, would become the subject of perhaps his greatest poem, *Lost in Translation*, a fascinating meditation on the connections between life and art. Stephen Yenser has noted the way Merrill's critical remarks on such poets as Dante and Cavafy focus on the points of connection between different poems, suggesting that he saw his own works as similarly forming a unified and unifying fabric.

The same instinct for reparatory stitching can be found in these letters; there are very few ruptures. Even when love affairs end, the relationship remains unbroken, and letters continue to be exchanged over the decades (sometimes creating a challenge for the reader, as Davids and Peters proliferate in his life; he reports that his longest life partner, David Jackson, «has much to say about the economy of names in my 'love-life'»). Perhaps the clearest example of this gift for reconciliation can be found in letters to his often-exasperating mother, who never got over her disapproval of his homosexuality; he remained in affectionate contact to the end (she died five years after him, at age 102).

The intensity of his social life is stag-

gering—and it is clear that he himself at times was wearied by it, writing with mock envy to his friend Richard Howard: «How wise of you to stay in empty New York. Another summer I'll simply arrange to be packed in ice at one of those clinics». But, as Langdon Hammer put it in his biography, the fact was that «he enjoyed people, and he needed lots of them. His friends were arrayed around him like an opera cast: the principals, supporting singers, fabled stars with cameos, comic relief, an ingénue or two, and the full chorus behind».

The operatic comparison is apt; it not only pays due homage to one of his greatest loves (at age 12 he announced that *Carmen* would be his «18th opera») but suggests yet again the seamless interweaving of his life with the world of creative art. Many of the letters recount episodes that would later become memorable poems. As Stephen Yenser puts it in his introduction: «The point was to turn the perishable by means of the formal into the perdurable, and the correspondence of this man of letters was integral to the process». This book shows us that the term «man of letters» has never been more appropriately applied to a writer.

(Gregory Dowling)

(This is a modified version of a review that originally appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*.)