

Langdon Hammer  
Professor of English  
Yale University

Stavros S. Niarchos Faculty Research Grant Report  
For *James Merrill: Life and Art* (a biography)

I have received two Niarchos Faculty Research Grants (2002, 2003) from the Hellenic Studies Program at Yale to support travel to Greece for research on my current project, a biography of James Merrill, one of the key poets in English in the second half of the twentieth century. The biography, Merrill's first, will be published by Knopf. My research in Greece has resulted in more than four hundred draft pages describing Merrill's life in the 1960s. The American College of Greece in Athens invited me to give its annual Kimon Friar lecture in 1993, the text of which was published by the college with rare photographs and a library catalogue as "Masks of the Poet: James Merrill and Kimon Friar." I presented another version of this lecture at Yale at the invitation of the Hellenic Studies Program in October 2003. Another piece from the biography, an essay about Merrill's visit to the island of Thasos in 1965 with Vassili Vassilikos, called "Life into Art: James Merrill's 16.ix.65," is forthcoming in the journal *Literary Imagination*. I have attached, with this report, a description of the biography and texts of the essay publications.

Merrill saw Greece for the first time in 1950, at the age of 24, as the guest of his mentor and lover, the Greek-American translator and man of letters, Kimon Friar, who lived then on the island of Poros. Merrill returned to Greece to live in 1960; in 1964 he bought a house in the Kolonaki section of Athens. He lived there with his partner, David Jackson, for six months each year until 1982, after which he returned for short periods until his death in 1995.

Merrill's move to Greece coincided with the composition of his third book of poems, generally viewed as his breakthrough work. Greece served as the scene and inspiration of his second novel, an experimental work based on classical myth and his first experiences in Greece with Friar in 1950. Later books of poetry center on Greek subjects and sites. Parts of Merrill's occult epic, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, are set in Athens, on the island of Samos, and elsewhere in Greece. Modern Greek literature entered his work in several ways. Merrill translated Cavafy's lyric poems, for example, and he wrote his own poems based on Cavafy's "Days of . . ." series.

This rich body of writing was rooted in Merrill's Greek friendships. He and Jackson befriended some American expatriots, such as Alan Ansen, a poet, and Chester Kallman, W. H. Auden's lover and collaborator. But they were also close to figures in Greek culture and society, including Vassilis Vassilikos, the novelist and man of letters, his wife Mimí, and Maria Mitsotáki, daughter of a former Prime Minister, Constantin Dmertzis (both Vassilikos and Mitsotaki have central roles in *Sandover*). There were other longtime, intimate friendships, and Merrill and Jackson both met lovers in Athens. Minor figures from their daily life (housekeeper Kyria Kleo, her wastrel son, and others) appear repeatedly as familiar characters in the poems.

To recover Merrill's life in Greece, I have studied documents relating to Merrill (primarily letters and manuscripts) in private hands and among the Kimon Friar Papers in the library of the American College of Greece. I have conducted interviews with many Greeks, some of them close friends of Merrill, including Vassilikos, and traveled to sites, including Delphi, Poros, Aegina, and Sounion, that Merrill knew well and described in his writing. I have also used my Niarchos Faculty Research Grants for an assistant and interpreter, Maria Walker, who has aided me in my interviews with Greek speakers and in the translating of Merrill's correspondence in Greek.

For English-language readers of Merrill, Greece is a familiar backdrop for the poetry, but something about which they know very little. Research in Greece has been a revelation for me, and the results will substantially change the view of Merrill and his relationship to Greece, which is deeper and more complex than anyone had thought. Support from the Niarchos Foundation will enable me to represent the centrality of the Greek people, language, culture, and landscape in Merrill's important body of writing.