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Life into Art: James Merrill's "16.ix.65"

In 1964, at the age of 38, the American poet James Merrill bought a house in Athens; and so began a period in which he and his companion David Jackson, who had been visiting Greece together since 1960, determined "to reverse the proportions of our lives" spent there and in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Part of the impulse was poetic: midway in his life Merrill wanted to create another, second life, distinct from the one he led in the United States, that he could write out of and about. What follows is an account of the composition of a poem demonstrating that impulse. The case suggests something of how Merrill worked, and of how Greece worked on Merrill. Even as its title---"16.ix.65"---locates the poem precisely in time, and its dedication---"for Vassilis and Mimi"---links it to two friends, we will see Merrill pushing past particulars toward ritual and myth. The poem's fine exhilaration, its sense of release, derives in part from what it has left behind, and to that extent, what it has triumphed over.

That includes war. In May 1965, from Stonington, Connecticut, Merrill wrote to a friend in Athens, "When one turns on the radio, it's Viet Nam---don't let me ever learn Greek well enough to understand a news broadcast!"<sup>2</sup> That summer, however, when he arrived in Athens, Greece entered a political crisis of its own, and he couldn't ignore it, whether or not he turned on the news. Merrill described the upheaval to his friend David Kalstone, trying his best to sound like the Duchesse de Guermentes: "Last night coming back from a tavern we were suddenly faced with some smouldering barricades, some faint remaining gusts of tear gas; so unpleasant in an open car. The demonstrators had been burning furniture removed from shop windows (someone has been reading American newspapers) as well as greengrocer's carts; while at [the] theatre the applause for a Soviet conductor rapidly degenerated into the Pa-pan-DRE-ou rhythm we live by of an evening."<sup>3</sup> The violent street demonstrations in Athens that August were part of a power struggle between King Constantine II, Greece's young

sovereign, and George Papandreou, leader of the majority Centre Union party.<sup>4</sup> Presenting a liberal alternative to the nation's far-Left and right-wing parties, the Centre Union had gained a broad mandate in 1964. Over the next year, with Papandreou as Prime Minister, the Centre Union made educational and economic reforms, and strengthened Greece's diplomatic and economic ties with the Soviet Union and its aligned states. Then, when Papandreou tried to consolidate power, the King, acting with conservatives in the army and in the Centre Union government itself, successfully opposed him and forced him to resign as Prime Minister, leaving Greece with no head of state. Papandreou's loss of power won him further popular support, and Greek life descended into the chaotic spectacle of the King and his allies attempting to establish the legitimacy of a government against the will of the people.

Even when he wasn't forced to smell the tear gas, Merrill was brought close to the political crisis by his friendship with Vassíli Vassilikos. Vassilikos, in David Kalstone's words, was "charmingly shaggy, a brown bear, very literate, and very eager to tell people about Greek literature."<sup>5</sup> Over the decades, he would become an important man of letters in Greece, the author of the political novel *Z.*, which was made into a popular film by Constantin Costa-Gravas; today he is his country's ambassador to UNESCO. When Merrill met him in 1964, he was 31 years old, and he had just published a prose trilogy in English translation--*Plant; The Well; The Angel*---with Knopf, Merrill's own publisher. When Vassilikos next published a strongly anti-American book, *Mythology of the United States*, and his wife, Mimí, lost her job as a teacher in a Greek-American school in Athens because of it, a one-thousand dollar "scholarship" from Merrill rescued the couple. Later, in 1967, when Vassíli and Mimí were forced into exile after the military coup of that year, emergency money from the Ingram-Merrill Foundation, Merrill's fund to support artists and writers, rescued them again.<sup>6</sup>

In the summer of 1965, Vassilikos opposed what was being called the King's coup. "I was so involved with politics at the time," he remembers, "to go to Jimmy's was to go abroad, to another world where I had peace and tranquility. Jimmy was open-minded. He made me feel accepted. And it wasn't because Jimmy was *unpolitical*. He was deeply political. He understood what I wanted for my country, and he esteemed it."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, but if Merrill was political, it could only have been "deeply." His sympathy with his friend's cause didn't extend to marching in the

street. He knew very well that he was rich and an American at a moment when, in some parts of Athens, it would have been unpopular and possibly even dangerous to be such a person. Still, Merrill had insisted in his autobiographical poem "The Broken Home," written in 1964, that "I am no less time's child than some / Who . . . on the barricades risk life and limb"<sup>8</sup>--a statement that could be interpreted to mean: I'm on your side, Vassíli, in my way. His way was to refuse the priority of politics, and to value private over public life. What he offered Vassilikos was what he wanted too: an "escape" from politics<sup>9</sup> at a moment when politics meant fires in the street.

On September 14, the four of them---Jimmy, David Jackson, Vassíli, and Mimí---escaped from Athens for five days together on Thasos, Vassíli's island birthplace. The mythical home of the Sirens, Thasos is mountainous and wooded, with a circular coast of cliffs and white-sand beaches. One hundred and fifty miles from Thessaloniki, the island is remote even today; in 1965 it was all but untouristed. Merrill found a pre-modern world there: dirt roads crowded with goats; farmyards with braying donkeys; bread baking in outdoor clay ovens; groves of pine, fig, olive, almond, and pistachio trees; and "a slow rain of honey from the trees around the house."<sup>10</sup> He jotted down observations in a small, pocket-sized notebook, including these about a village Homer: "The blind accordion player, about 38-40. . . . He lives in a vortex of sound. A child sits by him learning the songs."<sup>11</sup> The group visited Vassilikos's fishermen cousins, and went into the mountains to meet his grandmother who lived "in a house full of fantastic photographs (moustaches, warlike skirts) and embroideries (delicate flowers on black, wreathing the words, in Greek, 'This too will pass.')"<sup>12</sup> Courtly Vassíli kissed her "walnut-stained" hands, impressing the poet.<sup>13</sup> Living with her was another character who drew Merrill's attention, "Old Aunt Maria . . . who tied herself up to the neck in a sack on her wedding night. 7 nights of this + her husband walked out. She has lived happily ever since, a respectable married virgin."<sup>14</sup> Later, Merrill would display in the dining room of his apartment in Stonington his own piece of Greek embroidery with the motto, "This too will pass."<sup>15</sup>

While Vassíli was charming and talkative, Mimí was shy,<sup>16</sup> and yet she "grows on one," Merrill felt. Named Demetra after the ancient goddess of the harvest, she was born in Ithaca, New York, to Greek immigrant parents. She had studied at Cornell with Vladimir Nabokov before coming

to Athens as a medical student and meeting Vassilikos. What did her husband's island relatives think of this Bohemian, Greek-American wife? "In a society of four pregnant cousins," Merrill observed, "it took a certain amount of style to carry off her childlessness."<sup>17</sup> In his notebook he recorded her remark when the two couples met that fourth pregnant cousin: "'Ah, Vassili,' said M. 'The time has really come, I fear, for you to take my virginity.'"<sup>18</sup> Mimí was, Merrill reflected, "an odd girl, heavy, hidden in her long hair and weird flowered dresses; rather like honey herself"---he was thinking of that magical honey dripping from the trees---"with a kind of hysterical slowness and grace about her, all created by something with a sting to it. She appears to have no friends at all, and can't get over our liking her."<sup>19</sup> In time their friendship would grow intimate, even vaguely romantic. "It was a deep relation I wasn't part of," Vassilikos says.<sup>20</sup>

On September 16, King Constantine gave his royal sanction to Stephanos Stephanopolous to succeed Papandreou as Prime Minister, and Stephanopolous soon won the minimum majority in parliament, bringing an end to the political crisis of the summer.<sup>21</sup> The same day on Thasos Merrill made this entry in his notebook:

D's birthday. Up at 5 to go fishing with M. + V., while D. slept. Sunrise. The donkey charcoal among the black almond tree trunks, its rear legs in delicate contrapposto against the pink stubble. The foliage done in small strokes of rust, yellow, green. The half moon shining. The sky becomes a deep, serious color.

In town, waiting for a boat, two male turkeys, with bald blue heads + stiff exaggerated costumes entertained us with a kabuki interlude.

We fished. I had done so last at the age of 12 + may never do it again. The fish were small---not the violent struggling I remember. Small, spent, shining bodies pulled up through a medium never less opaque. Like occasional verse compared to the deep-sea 'serious' poems. The smallest fish we cut up for bait to catch larger ones of the same species, like the fragments of verse we plow back into longer poems.<sup>22</sup>

Jackson's forty-second birthday was celebrated that night with a cake with twenty-four candles, reversing his number of years. Earlier that day Merrill had gone backward in time: getting up before the sunrise, in an ancient land, he returned in memory to deep-sea fishing at the age of twelve

in Florida. In his notebook he communicates a momentous sense of how much time has passed, but also a sense of stasis, of time held still or even reversed. The "age of twelve" would be just before his parents' divorce, and the breakup of his home. Vassili, a history-obsessed novelist whose name means "king," and Mimi, an earth-mother named for the harvest goddess, slow as honey in her flowered dresses, were the newest incarnations of the mythic couple in "The Broken Home," a poem in which Merrill treats the divorce of his parents as a version of the cosmic division between Father Time and Mother Earth that set history in motion. In the company of these married, childless friends, the poet turned back the clock and returned to the deep sources of his creativity in childhood play.

Aware, as he wrote, that the rapturous writing in his notebook was on its way to poetry, Merrill's mind turned to the relationship between different forms of writing. The poet kept notebooks from 1939 (beginning when he went away to boarding school, after his parents' divorce) until his death in 1995. More often than not, his purpose in these notebooks was as it is here: to give himself something to work with, to sift, refine, and revise; to record life in a way that would allow him to turn it into art. In this case fishing gives him a way to reflect on that process. The "small," "shining" fish that he and his friends caught that morning are "Like occasional verse compared to the deep-sea 'serious' poems," while the small fish "cut up for bait" are "like fragments of verse" used to make "larger poems." The entry breaks off just as it moves out of prose into verse:

The sayonaras lit matches between our toes  
With each step

We were not used to the sayonaras. Each  
Homeward step struck a match between our toes---

Translated by evening into the 24 candles  
On a friend's cake.

"Sayonaras" is the Greek word for flip-flops. Merrill, with the "Kabuki interlude" on the beach in mind, must have been amused by the Japanese homophone. The word seems to nudge him out of prose into verse with the kind of repetition of a phrase that he typically built poems out of. Very soon<sup>23</sup> he took his pen and went back over the whole entry, cutting phrases and changing words. The early sky's "deep serious

color" became a "young" color; the turkeys' "costumes" became "taffetta kimonos"; "fragments of verse" became "sketches," such as this notebook entry itself. Then, at the poet's desk in Athens, the entry would be "cut up" and "plowed back" to become a lyric poem. By this time those "sayonaras," with their the bi-lingual pun, have been replaced by simple English "sandals":

16.ix.65

for Vassilis and Mimi

Summer's last half moon waning high  
 Dims and curdles. Up before the bees  
 On our friend's birthday, we have left him  
 To wake in their floating maze.

Light downward strokes of yellow, green, and rust  
 Render the almond grove. Trunk after trunk  
 Tries to get right, in charcoal,  
 The donkey's artless contrapposto.

Sunrise. On the beach  
 Two turkey gentlemen, heads shaven blue  
 Above dry silk kimonos sashed with swords,  
 Treat us to a Kabuki interlude.

The tiny fish risen excitedly  
 Through absolute transparence  
 Lie in the boat, gasping and fanning themselves  
 As if the day were warmer than the sea.

Cut up for bait, our deadest ones  
 Reappear live, by magic, on the hook.  
 Never anything big or gaudy---  
 Line after spangled line of light, light verse.

A radio is playing "Mack the Knife."  
 The morning's catch fills one straw hat.  
 Years since I fished. Who knows when in this life  
 Another chance will come?

Between our toes unused to sandals  
 Each step home strikes its match.  
 And now, with evening's four and twenty candles  
 Lit among the stars, waves, pines

To animate our friend's face, all our faces  
 About a round, sweet loaf,  
 Mavríli brays. We take him some,  
 Return with honey on our drunken feet.<sup>24</sup>

"Yes, the donkey's name was Mavríli," Vassilikos recalls, with the poem open before him. "The donkey kept coming up to *Jimmy*---not to David, not to us. And Jimmy rewarded him by remembering him, memorializing his name in a poem." Vassilikos generalizes: "The fluidity of everyday life---it's ephemeral. Jimmy knew very well it is the beauty of life. The poet selects from it. His art makes it eternal. It's a butterfly, and one moment . . . the poet plunges a pin into it, and there it is, wings outspread, with all its colors."<sup>25</sup>

Plunging his blade into the everyday, Merrill fixed September 16, 1965, with its shimmering colors and cheerful companionship, permanently in verse. His awareness of the appetite in that act, its willfulness and its tinge even of violence, is playfully signaled by the radio that keeps playing Bobby Darin's version of the Kurt Weill song, "Mack the Knife": "O the shark has pretty teeth, dear, / And he keeps them pearly white. . ." The poem, with its notebook-style date for a title, shows Merrill, like many other American poets of the 1960s, pushing his art close to life, moving out of the realm of symbols into daily experience, with a colloquial, seemingly casual idiom to match. He could not have written it before he lived in Greece, with the immediacy and sensuality of his experience there. He could not have written it without the new liberty that he found in his relationships with friends such as Mimí and Vassíli.

Merrill models the poem on a form well suited to represent that immediacy: "16.ix.65" is an instance of art wanting to be like life, as easy and natural, as time-bound and actual, as a notebook entry. But it is equally true that Merrill treated his notebook entry like a poem. Even in the informal writing of his notebook, the poet casts his line into the day's "absolute transparency," pressing life to produce style and meaning. The entry that results was a lucky catch meant to be "plowed back" into a formal piece of writing arranged in metered quatrains. "16.ix.65" is nothing "big or gaudy," but its light verse shimmers with deep feeling, like sunlight on sea. Experience has been preserved in this form, "spangled," reconstituted "on the hook"---kept from merely passing away---as if "by magic." Time is held still, history forgotten. At the end of the

day, then, by candlelight, four friends are drawn together with "stars, waves, pines" for a meal of bread and, almost certainly, fish---which we suddenly recognize as a communion table. We have witnessed a miracle of loaves and fishes, a pagan, Dionysian miracle to be sure, in which the celebrants are happy and drunk, even the ass gets into the act, and there is honey, the island's balm, for smarting feet. But it remains a kind of miracle. For the world has yielded its store---or more exactly, it has been made to do so (at knife point, it may be); and the poem enters the realm of symbols afterall.

Which is where Merrill was headed all along, because the two forms of writing---poem and notebook entry---are not finally different in kind in his practice, just as the small fish and the large are not of different species. The notebook entry and poem share a way of seeing the world, a point of view from which life, even in its most relaxed, spontaneous forms, is already art, or straining to become it. That is the message of the turkeys' "Kabuki interlude," of the trees that try "to get right, in charcoal, / The donkey's artless contrapposto," and of the "yellow, green, and rust" "strokes" of sunlight that "Render the almond grove" in both senses of that verb. Merrill's notebook and the poem he made of it show him taking part in the same project. They express his own drive to make life the work of art it wants to be.

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<sup>1</sup> James Merrill to Daryl Hine, letter, March 15, 1965 (Merrill Papers).

<sup>2</sup> James Merrill to Nelly Liambey, letter, May 6, 1965 (Merrill Papers).

<sup>3</sup> James Merrill to David Kalstone, letter, August 21, 1965 (Merrill Papers).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the crisis, see Richard Clogg, *A Short History of Modern Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), 183-85. For a detailed account of it from the perspective of the Centre Union, see Andreas Papandreou, *Democracy at Gunpoint: The Greek Front* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 142-86.

<sup>5</sup> David Kalstone to Kenneth Bleeth, letter, February 11, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Vassili Vassilikos, Athens, June 2003.



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- <sup>7</sup> Author's interview with Vassili Vassilikos, Athens, June 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> James Merrill, "The Broken Home," *Collected Poems*, eds. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Knopf, 2001), 199.
- <sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Vassili Vassilikos, Athens, June 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> James Merrill to Irma Brandeis, letter, September 27, 1965 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>11</sup> James Merrill, notebook, September 19, 1965, Journal 31 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>12</sup> James Merrill to Irma Brandeis, letter, September 27, 1965 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>13</sup> James Merrill to Irma Brandeis, letter, September 27, 1965 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>14</sup> James Merrill, notebook, September 19, 1965, Journal 31 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Laurence Scott, telephone, October 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> Author's interview with George Lazaretos, Athens, June 2003.
- <sup>17</sup> James Merrill to Robin Magowan, letter, October 12, 1965 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>18</sup> James Merrill, September 19, 1965, Journal 31 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>19</sup> James Merrill to Irma Brandeis, letter, September 27, 1965 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>20</sup> Author's interview with Vassili Vassilikos, Athens, June 2003.
- <sup>21</sup> Andreas Papandreou, *Democracy at Gunpoint*, 183.
- <sup>22</sup> James Merrill, September 16, 1965, Journal 31 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>23</sup> Merrill sent a draft of the poem ("I keep changing what the radio plays each time I type it out") to Robin Magowan in a letter, October 12, 1965 (Merrill Papers).
- <sup>24</sup> James Merrill, "16.ix.65," *Collected Poems*, 233-34.
- <sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Vassili Vassilikos, Athens, June 2003.