Empire of Ideas:

Genre and Geography

in James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*

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THESIS
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2015

Chicago, Illinois

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SUMMARY

*Empire of Ideas* takes a fresh look at James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Although previous studies have done a good job of acclimating readers to the poem’s oddity, teasing out the dominant themes in Merrill’s career and exploring his debts to other writers, there is an oversight in this critical corpus that I wish to correct. I am talking about the failure to investigate *Sandover’s* connection to the epic tradition.

The introduction delineates a conception of the epic that both builds on and argues against the work of M. M. Bakhtin and Georg Lukács. It offers a minimalist definition of the genre: *An epic is a work that seeks to encapsulate an entire “world,” in its geographic and discursive extent, and that can therefore serve as a model of its author’s society for readers who are distant in space or time.* I use this definition to place *Sandover* among the global epics of the late 20th century. Drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory and the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto, I construe globalization as the process by which “Atlantic civilization” – defined by the societies that border the Atlantic Ocean, particularly in the north – has engulfed parts of the world that were once relatively autonomous. *Sandover’s* ambivalence about this phenomenon sets up tensions between art and politics, cultural survival and political collapse, that shape the poem’s epic dimensions.

I organize my investigation of the poem’s engagement with globalization around three simple geographical categories: the *center*, the *margins*, and what I call *invisible cities*. In the first chapter, I investigate the poem’s split center. Although Stephen Yenser, the best of the poet’s critics, finds "divisions and dichotomies" everywhere in Merrill’s work, he grants little significance to what I consider a central opposition in *Sandover*, that between “two worlds, the
SUMMARY (CONTINUED)

American and the Mediterranean.” As a late 20th-century epic of Atlantic civilization, Sandover chooses to spread its center across the ocean, and to divide its action between a site of economic and political power (the Eastern seaboard of the United States) and a mythical source of cultural energy (Greece). The first chapter explores the significance of that choice. Specifically, I examine the ways in which the poem uses its divided center to create a cordon sanitaire between Atlantic civilization and “Western culture” – between the political base of its world, in other words, and its intellectual and artistic superstructures. This separation is an instance of what Franco Moretti calls the rhetoric of innocence, that verbal legerdemain by which the epic writer, working in an age of international capitalism, makes a picture of the whole that erases or redescribes the violence by which the system is maintained. Although Sandover does practice such a rhetoric, it also undercuts its innocence through the depiction of Venice. This “whole heavenly city / Sinking” becomes a synecdoche for Atlantic civilization, a way to come to grips with the fact that no art – however self-conscious or sophisticated – can escape entanglement with its political context.

My second chapter looks at how Sandover represents the margins of its epic totality. I show that the poem employs the putative periphery of the global whole in three interconnected ways: to mitigate the responsibility of Atlantic civilization for the ills that have accompanied its ascent; to reinforce the safety of the center by staging easily controllable displays of exoticism; and to prophesize a shift in the center of global power. The last move is the most important one. Sandover points toward this shift in global power through the reincarnation of several major characters on the margins – most notably, Chester Kallman in Africa and Maria Mitsotáki in India. From one angle, these relocations can seem like an attempt to seed a new environment
SUMMARY (CONTINUED)

with sympathetic readers and thus *colonize* the future. From another vantage, however, they represent a prescient take on the politics of the late 20th century. They reveal that *Sandover* sees globalization not as the triumph of the West but as a “period of terminal crisis” for the “entire capitalist world-system” (as Wallerstein put it). The epic fears this crisis, but also welcomes it as a necessary stage in its cultural afterlife.

My final chapter deals with that afterlife. I suggest that *Sandover* uses its imaginary locales – places like the Ouija board, the Land of the Dead, and the Ballroom at Sandover – to think about what will persist into the future as part of the human inheritance. They are a figure, in other words, for the cultural information that endures *regardless* of who has political power. In particular, these sites allow *Sandover* to develop a model of cultural evolution that resembles (without imitating) the memetic theory that Richard Dawkins sketched out in *The Selfish Gene*. I examine the steps through which *Sandover* conducts its own investigation: the denigration of biological reproduction and corresponding elevation of a cultivated childlessness; the use of science as a unifying worldview and redescription of evolutionary biology in cultural terms; and the figuration of cultural evolution in three invisible cities. Working with the biological notion of a “selectional system,” I show that the Ouija board is associated with *variation*, the Land of the Dead with *selection*, and Sandover with *survival*. Such concerns move beyond the duality of center and margins and posit instead an enduring Empire of Ideas – one that nonetheless remains marked by traces of its political origins.

Ultimately, this study aims to unravel the epic dimensions of *The Changing Light at Sandover* – to make sense of the poem’s engagement with the globalized landscape of the late 20th century, and to understand its vision for literary art in the *longue durée*. 
Preface

Early in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a fellow traveler speaks to JM and DJ about the world tour they are taking:

A mapmaker (attendant since Jaipur)

Says that from San Francisco our path traces

The Arabic for GREAT WONDER . . . (39)

The moment is quintessential Merrill – a tiny touch with large implications.

Most obviously, the passage exemplifies the poem’s almost obsessive concern with symbol systems and how to read them. The book's narrative is centered, after all, on a Ouija board, which functions as a kind of burlesque of the symbolic universe – a kitschy toy, decorated with the letters A to Z, the numbers 0 to 9, a few punctuation marks, and the words YES and NO. I will let biographers like Langdon Hammer sort out whether the poet’s use of the board was a sign of psychological health or a mild delusion: *within the text*, it should be understood as a trope like any other, one that allows *Sandover* to meditate on how the mind, with its standard repertoire of operations and its relentless assessments of value, interacts with the elements of language to make sense of the world. Seen in this light, the cartographer acquires a clear significance. As he leans over a sheet covered with symbols and scrutinizes them for secret meanings, he recalls both the two lovers with their absurd toy, and the epic writer hunched over his manuscript, trying to coax "GREAT WONDER" out of a miniature world.

At the same time, one can see in those three lines an encapsulation of the author’s aesthetic position, midway between modernism (with its taste for monuments and big pay-offs) and postmodernism (with its emphasis on aleatoric traces and their transient readings). The
passage clearly embodies some of the central tenets of postmodern thought – a distrust for the notion of “direct” experience, a conviction that even the most vivid impressions will only make sense once we map them onto our human categories. It also acknowledges the interpretative uncertainty that enters whenever we try to read such maps and the variety of “languages” with which we might try to decipher them.¹ (A few pages earlier, the poem lists several of these tongues: “bird-flight, / Hallucinogen, chorale and horoscope, / Each its own world, hypnotic, many-sided / Facet of the universal gem” (31).)

Yet the last two words of the passage – “GREAT WONDER” – reveal a key distinction between Merrill and most postmodernists. In Paul Auster’s City of Glass, when the detective Daniel Quinn maps the wanderings of a madman around New York City, the loops and squiggles that he transcribes end up spelling out THE TOWER OF BABEL – a suggestion (albeit a somewhat ham-handed one) that the only truths we can hope to construct out of our efforts to know the world are those of nonsense and unknowability (Auster 104-13). Merrill, on the other hand, is much less pessimistic. Like any good modernist, he insists that – despite the epistemological difficulties – there is meaning to be had, and one who possesses extraordinary powers of observation and exercises painstaking craft can convert that knowledge into symbolic structures of “GREAT WONDER.” In terms of Ihab Hassan’s famous table of antitheses, we might say that even the brief passage above embraces both sides of the chart – play and purpose, chance and design, irony and metaphysics (see Harvey 43).

More mundanely, the lines also evince the narrator’s great wealth. This wealth is what bankrolls the subject of section K of The Book of Ephraim – a “flying trip / Round the world” (36) that encompasses Japan and Thailand, India and Turkey, Switzerland and Italy and England. The same riches allow JM to hire a cartographer to transcribe the journey in real time – to picture
its progress in lines as intricate as the characters in Arabic calligraphy. Clearly, the “attendance” of such a personage is not a prerogative of the lower or middle classes, any more than is the constant company of a governess (see “Lost in Translation,” CP 362-7) or the comforting isolation of a bank vault (see “Up and Down,” CP 339-42). Indeed, hints of economic inequality are built into the very diction, punctuation, and typography of the sentence. The mapmaker – already marked as marginal by his origin in India – is further designated as subordinate to his wealthy patrons by three telling traits: a name displaced by a function; a history enclosed in parentheses; and a voice overwhelmed by the emphatic capitals of the Ouija board.

Why do such crude material details matter? Because both JM and his creator have inherited tremendous amounts of capital – economic capital from the United States, and cultural capital from Europe. Such an inheritance makes possible (among many other things) the composition of epic poems. Its ultimate source is a world-system – what Felipe Fernández-Armesto calls “Atlantic civilization” – whose range and power had grown so much by the last quarter of the 20th century, when Sandover was composed, that it became fashionable to speak of a process of globalization.

Throughout this study, I intend to argue that Sandover is – again among many other things – an attempt to make sense of globalization. As a work composed on both sides of the Atlantic, immersed in the culture of “the West,” and focused on the social, political, and environmental concerns of the fin-de-siècle, the poem has little choice but to reflect – and reflect on – its own epoch. At the same time, as an epic, the text will inevitably engage with this “world” by sketching out its own global map – by representing, through selection and synecdoche, one take on the totality.
My task in this dissertation will be to look at this peculiar projection. After an opening chapter about the epic as a genre, the investigation will move from the center to the margins to imaginary places – a trajectory that reflects the motion of *Sandover* itself, and one that is set by the poem’s intuition that globalization is not simply the triumph of Atlantic civilization, but also the start of its decline.
Introduction:

Sandover and the Path of the Epic

To many of its potential readers, The Changing Light at Sandover remains “that Ouija board book” – a 560-page monstrosity, replete with archangels, unicorns, and voices from beyond the grave. The first generation of its critics (most notably, Stephen Yenser, Timothy Materer, and Judith Moffett) had to work hard to acclimate such novices to the poem’s strangeness. More recent critics – like Reena Sastri, Piotr Gwiazda, and Mark Bauer – have done valuable labor teasing out the dominant themes of James Merrill’s career and exploring his debts to other writers, and their studies have, in the process, cast new light on Sandover. Yet there is an oversight in all of these works that I wish to correct. I am talking about their failure to investigate the poem’s connection to the epic tradition.

I do not mean that critics have been slow to use the word epic in relation to Sandover. In an essay on “Our Apocalyptic Scribes,” Charles Berger takes for granted that Sandover – like his other subject, Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow – is an example of “encyclopedic mock-epic” (289). Helen Vendler seconds the identification, adding perceptively that Merrill’s poem “learns . . . as much from Pope and Byron as from Dante” (85). Most online sources simply use the term epic, with no mock or modern attached. (See, for example, the entries at Wikipedia, PoetryFoundation.org, and the University of Arizona Poetry Center.) Don Adams refers to Sandover as the “epic that . . . will form the basis of [Merrill’s] enduring reputation” (163), while Evans Lansing Smith describes “Voices from the Other World” (an early account of the Ouija board) as a “small poem that contains the seeds of an epic” (50). Similar examples could fill
several pages. Yet, despite this widespread agreement about the poem’s genre, critics have not asked a simple follow-up question: What are the consequences of our categorization?

Such an oversight would not matter if questions of genre were not crucial to understanding Sandover. I would suggest, however, that no other critical approach is likely to yield so large and unexpected a payoff. Although critics may be right to read most of Merrill’s oeuvre by the light of writers like Stevens and Bishop, Auden and Yeats, Sandover can only seem a riddle (or a muddle) in such lyric company. Yet many of the poem’s notorious difficulties disappear if we simply recontextualize them – and, at the same time, many new interpretative vistas open up. Such an opening up is the purpose of this project.

Towards a New Definition of the Epic

The epic has always been difficult to define. Does such a work need an armed hero? Does it require gods and monsters? Is a catalog of ships essential, or a long and arduous voyage? A typical reference book describes the epic as a “long verse narrative on a serious subject” that relates, in a “formal and elevated style,” the actions and adventures of a “heroic or quasi-divine figure” (Abrams and Harpham 81). Yet this definition immediately strikes its authors as inadequate, and they decide that some texts can become epics simply by “manifest[ing] the epic spirit” (83) – whatever that may mean. Other critics have been tempted to force outliers like The Divine Comedy and Ulysses into the traditional category, whether by seeing heroism in the fainting spells and gossip of Dante, or by taking Joyce himself, looking down magisterially on his characters, as a kind of “celestial machinery.” The conviction, in any case, has been that the
genre is best defined by a collection of textual traits, present in everything from Homer to Omeros.

In the end, all such definitions strike me as insufficiently functionalist. “What makes something a sparkplug,” the philosopher Daniel Dennett has written, “is that it can be plugged into a situation and deliver a spark when called upon . . . [I]ts color or material or internal complexity can vary ad lib, as long as its shape permits it to meet the specific dimensions of its functional role” (68). The question for the critic thus becomes: What kind of spark is the epic meant to deliver? Whatever the answer, it seems self-evident that a 20th-century writer like Merrill would not benefit much from the specifics of a template that developed in an isolated, technologically-backward warrior culture.

The challenge is to formulate a definition that is thin enough to cover the diversity of texts in the genre, but thick enough to do real critical work. Granted, the old checklist of traits – assemblies and catalogs, feasts and funerals, long voyages, “battles with supernatural or monstrous beings,” and so on (Yu 12) – will not do. Yet what definition could cover the hodgepodge of texts that critics call epic? For the purposes of this study, I want to posit a rather minimal answer:

*An epic is a work that encapsulates an entire “world,” in its geographic and discursive extent, and that can thus serve as a model of its author’s society for readers who are distant in space or time.*

Rather than focusing on traits, this definition looks at the origin and destination of the epic – at the intention of its author, in other words, and the function of the work in the literary system. It tries to downplay certain distinctions that have loomed large in criticism of the epic –
oral vs. written, poetry vs. prose, epic vs. romance, epic vs. novel – and to replace them with questions about totality and transmission.

Many scholars have agreed with the essentials of my definition, even as they have squabbled over the details. Hegel said that the epic attempts to capture the “total world of a nation and epoch” (qtd. in Moretti, *Modern Epic* 11), while E. M. W. Tillyard stressed the genre’s “amplitude, breadth, inclusiveness, and so on” (6). Writing about *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Edward Mendelson preferred the term *encyclopedic narrative*, but nonetheless saw works like *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *Faust*, and *Ulysses* as essentially epic, as efforts “to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture” (162). A more recent scholar takes a less colloquial approach: the epic wants to “adequate a spatiotemporal vastness” and to do justice to the “multiplicity of sociopolitical and cultural frames” that surround the individual (Kelly 17). Once again, the examples could be multiplied at length. Each one suggests that the epic – whatever its incidental qualities – is always a representation of (and variation on) a particular society’s notion of the whole, from the minutiae of daily life to the operations of the largest and most inclusive structures.

Even Georg Lukács – a prominent skeptic about the genre’s survival into modernity – allows that the epic *once* specialized in representing the “extensive totality of life” (56). In *The Theory of the Novel*, he banishes the epic to a prelapsarian past, one in which human beings lived, complete and content, within a unified cosmos. I doubt that such a paradise ever existed – but its passing would not, in any case, mean the obsolescence of the epic. No one will deny the close link between cultural artifacts and the material bases of the society that makes them: Marx was right that a world of “railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs” will never give rise to the poems of Homer (*Grundrisse* 45). Yet Lukács takes this truism too far. Although the
emergence of a form may be “bound to the historical moment” (Lukács 152), its persistence is governed by what Althusser has called the “relative autonomy of the superstructures” – the ability of customs and manners, sciences and arts, to develop according to their own logics, subject only “in the last instance” to economic determinism (111). The epic does not die just because the society that produced The Iliad vanishes.

Ultimately, I sought a definition that would bring some order to a motley collection of texts:

– the heroic tales of Homer and Virgil;
– the classical-Christian hybrids of Dante and Milton;
– the parodies of Cervantes, Pope, and Byron;
– the monstrous modern encyclopedias of Goethe, Melville, and Joyce;
– the American mega-novels of Pynchon and Don DeLillo;
– the postcolonial counter-narratives of Derek Walcott and Roberto Bolaño.

At the same time, I wanted to exclude those “epics” that earn the appellation simply through great length (Clarissa springs to mind) and to avoid works that merely allude to the epic tradition (Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” for instance, or Margaret Atwood's Penelopiad). I also wanted to set to one side cinematic epics, since, although movies like the Star Wars saga may someday serve a function similar to the Homeric tales, and instigate a line that will follow its own developmental path, for the moment they seem too distinct from the literary tradition to warrant inclusion.

Although I could have delimited the field in a different way, the definition I chose has three key advantages. First, it is consistent with an evolutionary perspective, the kind of selectional thinking that increasingly defines how we understand change over time. Mikhail
Bakhtin may have dismissed the epic as “already antiquated” (3), a more or less dead form, out of step with modernity and superseded by the novel, but such a view depends on a progressive model of literary history that few theorists would now accept. Second, the definition gives rise to a number of interesting questions – about the whole a work wants to represent, about the synecdoche it employs, and about the balance it strikes between geographic and discursive breadth – that may prove useful in comparative studies of the epic, both within and across eras. Third, the two parts of the definition help to discourage too exclusive a focus on the political context of a work: they remind us to give due weight to the state of the literary system, which always comes into play at both the origin and the destination of a text.

The idea, then, is that the epic is a miniature totality, representing a lost “world” to readers who are distant in space and time. Taken as no more than a tool – a way to carve the canon into periods and to cut to the core of a text – this minimal definition will help us to make sense of Sandover: as a moment in the author’s history, in a genre’s history, and in world history.

From the Primary to the Global

 Scholars agree that the epic tradition in the West starts with Homer – with the martial Iliad and the wandering Odyssey. These two works – already quite disparate – are examples of the primary epic, a group that also includes texts as far-flung as Gilgamesh, The Mahabharata, the Malian Epic of Sundiata, and the Balkan and South Slavic poems that Milman Parry and his disciples studied. For all its variety, the primary epic does permit of a few generalizations. The form retains close ties to oral poetry and tends (as Abrams and Harpham note above) toward a heroic theme; it usually possesses a “festal, aristocratic, public, ceremonial tone” (Lewis 19).
Such works frequently present themselves as history – of the Trojan War, for instance, or of the exploits of the founder of Uruk – but are often more concerned with elaborating the interconnections around a small number of actions than with the exhaustive accumulation of detail in which the historian specializes (see Aristotle 1459a16-b7).

The primary epic is surely what Bakhtin had in mind when he described the genre as the product of a “monolithic and closed” (29) society – since such a characterization would seem like nonsense if we took it to refer to Virgil’s Roman Empire, or Dante’s Italy, or Milton’s England. It is true that the primary epic tries to represent a societal whole, one that sees itself as self-contained (hence “monolithic”) and that meets the outside world mostly by way of warfare and incomprehension (hence “closed”). Yet Bakhtin oversimplifies matters. His conviction – stated as a first principle, rather than rigorously defended – that the novel is the “sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted” (3), is empirically false to the point of perversity. Like every other genre, the epic is not a static essence, but rather a kind of clade, shaped by history. Over the past three millennia, the genre has mutated and evolved, and these formal metamorphoses have left “monolithic and closed” societies – and the kinds of narratives they support – far behind.

One aspect of the primary epic seems particularly germane to my work on Sandover. Because of the cultural conditions out of which primary epics tend to emerge, such works often become canonical centers – books out of which whole literatures (and sometimes whole civilizations) spring, and around which whole literatures (and sometimes whole civilizations) organize themselves. Any reader of the Greek tragedians can attest to the centrality of the Homeric stories in Greek literature, and any reader of Plato knows that, in order to make his arguments, the philosopher must make constant, sometimes grudging references to Homeric
verse. Writing about *The Ramayana*, R. K. Narayan has observed that in India “[e]veryone of whatever age, outlook, education, or station in life knows the essential part of the epic” (xi).⁵ The primary epic can become so central because in a society with few books – at a relatively early stage in its material development – a premium will be placed on a tale that can incorporate as many of the culture’s stories, as much of its ideology, and as wide a range of its knowledge as possible. (This is even more true of societies without books, of course.)

Like all epics, *Sandover* aspires to such centrality. Yet the poem also realizes that, by the end of the 20th century, the Western epic has become a marginal form, its preservation the province of a tiny elite of super-readers. (I am defining the Western epic as those texts that descend from Virgil's appropriation of Homer.) The critical industries that support works like *Ulysses* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* only emphasize how little presence they have in the society as a whole. As Walter Benjamin once noted, the “greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public” (234) – and the gap, for the epic, is now immense. *Sandover* both recognizes the problem and comes up with an ingenious solution. As we will see, the poem casts its own historical moment as a transition between epochs and imagines a future in which its fictions – like those of Homer or Valiki or Sinn-leqe-unninni – are seen as both primitive and primary.

The secondary epic is best seen as an instance of speciation. We might view the collection of primary epics as so many potential points of origin and the West’s “epic tradition” as one particular line of descent, shaped by a specific set of literary and historical forces. A reader should picture not a procession of increasingly upright apes, but rather a real evolutionary
diagram, with its many bifurcations and dead ends. What happens in imperial Rome, where most scholars see the secondary epic commencing, is simply a first branching.

Around the beginning of the first millennium, the emergence of a large-scale political entity, coupled with a distinctive worldview, leads to a cluster of epic attempts – most notably, *The Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, and Statius’s *Thebaid*. Thinking of this period, C. S. Lewis has described the secondary epic as a willed simulation of the primary form, one whose author, no longer guaranteed a place at court, must make “sheer writing” do “what the whole occasion helped to do for Homer” (40). This formulation may be too pat, but it does identify a pattern of belatedness and emulation that will occur again and again throughout the secondary line. For the next two thousand years – even as the genre undergoes more metamorphoses – each epic in the West will have the same ambition that Virgil had: to become for a new reading environment what some predecessor was for an earlier one.

The historical trajectory of the secondary epic – its path away from the primary – is marked by two key departures. The first was Virgil’s decision to link his work to a “great subject” (Lewis 29), to adopt a “single, symbolical hero who stands for the qualities and the experience which are typically Roman” (Bowra 34). Such a choice made explicit, conscious, and more or less cozy the relationship between the epic and the political structures that support it. Such coziness should not be surprising, since what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri said of Empire – that it “posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire ‘civilized’ world” (xiv) – is structurally almost identical to my definition of the epic. The synecdoche that an epic author chooses will have much to do with his society’s notion of what counts as “civilized,” while the “spatial totality” he limns will tend to be a map of his culture’s consciousness of the wider world.
The second departure came as ambitious writers, looking at the reception of their epic forebears, began to realize that a successful epic would have an audience far beyond its own society. When Virgil initiates the secondary line, for instance, he knows that Homer’s poems have survived eight centuries and mediate his entire culture’s knowledge of the Hellenic world; when Dante follows Virgil, he knows that *The Aeneid* has survived the fall of an empire and the rise of a religion, and desires a similar durability for his own work. Together, these departures made it almost inevitable that the appearance of a new “great subject” would give rise to a new outbreak of secondary epics, as artists vied to encapsulate and transmit this freshly-recognized totality.

As it turns out, a great subject *did* present itself. After a centuries-long lull, the emergence of modern Europe – brought about by the rise of the nation-state, the differentiation of the vernacular languages, the spread of humanistic thought, the growth of a bourgeois class, the invention of the printing press, and many other factors – created both a new “world” to represent and new positions from which to represent it. In medieval Europe, according to David Harvey, the “relatively isolated worlds” (240) had little sense of external space, and citizens could expect the same “time-honored routines of daily life” (243) to persist indefinitely. Culture and geography were static and easy to grasp. But early modernity opened up a much larger world, one that accelerated and disrupted the sense of space-time as continents were explored, maps were improved, and history became an important discipline.6

The consequence was the Renaissance epic, an outbreak even more striking than the one that accompanied the Roman Empire. As C. M. Bowra has pointed out, the “full force of literary epic [usually] comes at the end of some historical process” (28, italics added). Thus, the real flurry of epic activity in the Renaissance occurs during the 16th and 17th centuries, when the
One may understand this period as one in which literary niches are being filled: each European nation, each European language, has a slot available for its representation of the new totality, and the competition to claim these spots is what accounts for the surprising number of epic attempts in a relatively short span.

The mechanism behind this process is a simple one. As history both broadens and deepens, readers need representative texts—works that will encapsulate a particular time and place and allow the harried consumers of literature to weed out less synoptic contenders. Thanks to its totalizing ambition, the epic is well suited to the task. The Metamorphoses contains an entire library of classical mythology, for instance, while The Divine Comedy gives its readers access to a whole panoply of medieval art and thought—Augustine and Aquinas, Bertrand deBorn and Brunetto Latini, geography and geometry, astronomy and meteorology. This encyclopedism of the epic makes it an ideal candidate to replace other books. A successful epic comes to resemble a planet that “cleans its orbit”: the lesser texts of its time are either obliterated or else, if they are lucky, preserved as satellites.

Like all inheritors of the secondary tradition, Sandover is eager to exploit this mechanism. The poem presents its own miniature totality, one that can function as a manageable facsimile of a whole—both geographic and discursive—that distant readers would otherwise have to assemble piece by piece. Yet this strategy has an unexpected side effect. On the one hand, Sandover must depend on “Western culture” as a source of raw material—in its case, for classical literature and French history, opera and evolutionary biology, Byron and Batman,
Gandhi and Gandalf. On the other hand, the poem seems – at least in certain passages – downright *impatient* for the collapse of Atlantic civilization, the political system from which Western culture draws its strength. Such ambivalence is one consequence of the epic’s peculiar survival strategy. Seeking to serve as a synecdochic replacement for a vanished or inaccessible whole, each member of the genre actually *needs* its own society to disappear. Until that happens, the text cannot fulfill its major function – a double bind of which *Sandover* is acutely aware. When the book ruminates about the “LIFE RAFT LANGUAGE” (119), it leaves no doubt what wreckage the craft is floating away from.

A whole generation of critics saw *Paradise Lost* as the “epic to end all epics” (Quint 340), the culmination of a glorious tradition, but it would be more accurate to say that Milton’s poem marked a boundary. What followed the Renaissance outbreak was a period of floundering and stasis, the age of what one might call the *compromised epic*. Parodies and experiments, failures and false starts – such works dominate European epic production for most of the 17th and 18th centuries. Whether one considers Tassoni’s *The Ravished Bucket* or Dryden’s *MacFlecknoe*, Fenelon’s *Telemachus* or Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, this flurry of near-epics and non-epics suggests a form that has reached a crisis.8 The writers of this period do not lose their desire to emulate some of the master texts of the Western tradition, but the possibilities of success suddenly seem remote, or the terms of entrance unreasonable.

From certain angles, *Sandover* can seem as badly conceived as those 17th and 18th century misfires. Highet has described *Telemachus* as a kind of hopeful monster – “prose romance crossed with epic hybridized with instruction manual” (339) – and similarly uncharitable views have been taken of Merrill’s poem. Although critical reaction to *The Book of*
Ephraim was overwhelmingly positive, the reception of the second and third volumes was sometimes less friendly, with reviewers saying they were marked by “portentousness and vanity” (Donoghue), allowed “abstruse mystical doctrine” to “[drown] out the poetry” (Simic), and smacked of “intellectual sham” (Stitt).\(^9\) The protests have subsided over time, but the impression remains that Sandover as a whole is a bit of a mess.

It might be more accurate, however, to call it a text of transition. The poem embodies what is falling, in other words, but also points toward what is on the way. Viewed through this lens, Sandover resembles not those Neo-Classical botches, but the works that ended the era of the compromised epic – in particular, Byron’s Don Juan, whose parodic elements attach it to satires like The Rape of the Lock, but whose scope and fundamental seriousness foretell a generic reawakening.\(^10\)

In Modern Epic, his classic analysis of that reawakening, Franco Moretti makes a convincing case that the books he discusses – works like Faust, Moby-Dick, Ulysses, and One Hundred Years of Solitude – are epics because of “structural similarities” that “[bind them] to a distant past” (2), but modern because of the new transnational context in which they appear. Such texts tend to eschew organic form in favor of the mechanical – chapter tacked to chapter, act to act – because the process allows them to “[vie] in extent with the world” (97). Like Sandover, they risk boredom, frivolity, and infinitude in an effort to represent an unwieldy whole. They are thus best seen as another stage in the slow, irregular speciation of the epic genre. Although genetic traces of their primary and secondary ancestors may remain, their phenotypes grow more and more distinct from the classical, less and less conformable to any list of Homeric or Virgilian traits.
It was in the age of Goethe, at the beginning of the 19th century, that a “crisis of representation” swept through Europe: “Neither literature nor art could avoid [any longer] the question of internationalism . . . and the tension within the dominant measures of value” (Harvey 262). Such “internationalism” stemmed from the integration of the continent by way of capitalism and the extension of its power by way of colonialism, while the tension came from both political change – the French and American Revolutions, most obviously – and a growing sense among intellectuals that the Christian worldview might not be compatible with science and history. These alterations in Europe’s self-understanding gave rise to new possibilities of representation, as well as to a new division of labor among the genres. Over the next two centuries, the novel would function as a stabilizing agent, a way to spread new “measures of value” across the continent and, eventually, across the globe. At the same time, the epic would experience a resurgence: after a period of inconsequentiality, it would again emerge as a favored mode for major works, even if writers and readers sometimes failed to identify the works in question as epics. While the novel helped to homogenize Europe, nation by nation, the epic tried to bind together the disparate elements of an increasingly global whole.

The modern epic comes in three waves, corresponding roughly to phases that Harvey outlines in The Condition of Postmodernity (see especially 10-38). The first rolls in around 1800 and does not roll out again until mid-century. According to Harvey, this modernity is set in motion by anxiety – the uneasy sense among European artists and intellectuals that they had fallen under the sway of “the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fragmentary, and the contingent” (11). These writers did not reject the Enlightenment’s quest for better social arrangements and a perpetual progress based on science and reason, but were made nervous by the slow rate of change, the elusiveness of improvement, and the sheer destructiveness of modern productivity.
The characteristic epics of this wave are *Faust* and *Moby-Dick*, both of which center on visionary capitalists – Ahab on his ship, Faust with his devil – for whom creation and destruction are virtually inseparable, as in Joseph Schumpeter’s famous formulation (*Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* 81-6).

This initial phase helps to clarify why, in discussing the epic, both the literary and the political system must be considered. Yes, the integration and expansion of Europe offered writers a new “world” to represent – but, by the beginning of the 19th century, almost every European nation already had an epic entrenched in the center of its canon, and these monoliths deterred competition. Thus, the modern epic did not originate in England, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, or the Italian states: the mutation occurred instead on the margins of the Western literary system, where such central slots had not yet been filled. Because the German-speaking lands experienced their Renaissance “200 years late,” thanks in part to a strict separation between high and popular cultures (Highet 367-9), a niche remained open for the epics of Goethe and Wagner. Because Russia oscillated for centuries between East and West, there was no 16th-century masterwork to ward off *Eugene Onegin* and *War and Peace*. In the United States, more predictably, the desire of a newly-decolonized land to create its own literary tradition led to a bevy of epic attempts, from Joel Barlow’s unfortunate *Columbiad* to *Moby-Dick* and “Song of Myself.”

Not until the second wave, a couple of generations later, did modern epics begin to appear in societies closer to the literary center. This is the era of high modernism, of course, early in the 20th century. Writers of the period adopt and adapt the epic, a genre that already specializes in world-building, and use it to construct fresh totalities out of the wreckage wrought by the “[c]onstant revolutionising” of capitalism (Marx and Engels 54) and the quicker
demolitions of the First World War. The landmark texts of this era reflect a shift in the organization of global capitalism from the nation to the metropolis. They include *Petersburg* (1913), *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27), *Ulysses* (1922), *The Waste Land* (1922), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1938), and, somewhat belatedly, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-43) and *The Death of Virgil* (1945).¹²

By this point, the epic has undergone what Bakhtin, in one of his less Manichean moments, called “novelization” (39).¹³ To compete in a new literary environment, the genre has migrated – in all but the most eccentric or anachronistic instances – from poetry to prose. (The list above, for instance, contains about eight hundred pages of verse and about eight thousand of prose.) At the same time, the divide between epic writers and the general public has widened dramatically. The same zest for experimentation that marks things like Cubism and dodecaphonic composition also pushes the epic into increasingly unorthodox – and sometimes unmanageable – forms. A large part of this unconventionality comes from the concerted search by 20th-century epicists for what Moretti calls *world effects*, formal tricks that will make their texts as “open, heterogeneous, [and] incomplete” as the world itself (*Modern Epic* 59). One need only think of Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness, or Dos Passos’s newsreels, or Bely’s abrupt juxtapositions. Such techniques may be mimetically efficacious, but they tend to clash with the relatively neat formal conventions of the mainstream novel.

These changes left their mark on *Sandover*, despite the interval of decades. In section A of *The Book of Ephraim*, JM – faced with a subject matter “so intimate, so novel” – contemplates a return to the genre of *The Seraglio* (1957) and *The (Diblos) Notebook* (1965):

Best after all to do it as a novel?

Looking about me, 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.
Knew my setting; and had, from the start, a theme
Whose steady light shone back, it seemed, from every
Least detail exposed to it. (3)

Such considerations should remind us how much of the rejected genre remains in
_Sandover_. The novel may be abandoned, but its ghost lingers on. This is why the usual
touchstones when one talks about Merrill – Ammons and Ashbery among his contemporaries,
Stevens and Bishop among his elders – must be supplemented by a less obvious list of fiction
writers, one that includes not just Proust and Henry James, but also Italo Calvino, Georges Perec,
and Thomas Pynchon. To treat _Sandover_ as a bloated version of, say, _The Country of a
Thousand Years of Peace_ (1959) is to ignore Merrill’s slow and steady shift away from the
lapidary lyric, an artistic transformation signaled by his statement to an interviewer in 1968 that
“I’ve enjoyed reading novels more often – or more profoundly – than I’ve enjoyed reading
poems” (CPR 52).

The novel in _Sandover_ also represents the desire to close the gap between art and
audience – to reach the “widest public in the shortest time.” A little later in section A, JM
mentions his pursuit of a clear style and a comprehensible storyline, simplicities that would serve
as a rebuke to the experimental excesses of his modernist predecessors:

Fed

Up so long and variously by
Our age’s fancy narrative concoctions,

I yearned for the kind of unseasoned telling found

In legends, fairy tales, a tone licked clean. (3)

But the ideal of lucidity eludes him. The poet ascribes his failure to a penchant for

“‘word-painting’” (4), but we might also blame it on the search for those world effects, on the need to represent a distressingly complex whole. The polyphony that Moretti discerns in Faust’s second half – “Pace Bakhtin” – and that becomes a favored technique for everyone from Melville to Döblin (Modern Epic 56-9) is present in Sandover as well, and it keeps the poem some distance from “unseasoned telling.”

The third and final wave of the modern epic is a wave of reception, rather than of creation. Every successful revolution eventually becomes a status quo, and the period after World War Two marks the ascendency of an “official” modernism, stuffy and state-sponsored (Harvey 35-8). In literature, epics like Ulysses and In Search of Lost Time become bywords for modernist genius, even if they are not widely read, while The Waste Land settles into a central place in English-language poetry, aided by Eliot’s transatlantic prestige as a critic. Such works seem to discourage competition. With the absence of major new attempts from 1945 to 1967, the epic genre seems on the verge of returning to its characteristic state: dormancy.

Thus, like the Roman and the Renaissance epics before it, the modern epic appeared to have run its course by the Forties – or, really, by the Great Depression. Why, then, should One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), Gravity’s Rainbow (1973), Midnight’s Children (1981), Omeros (1990), Underworld (1997), and perhaps a dozen others – including Sandover – appear relatively suddenly, after more than two decades of generic silence?
I would suggest a whole complex of causes:

– *The ascendancy of American power.* The Gross Domestic Product of the United States goes from 103.6 billion in 1929 to about ten times that amount in 1970 (“National Economic Accounts”). In the form of movies from Hollywood and music developed mostly by African-Americans, American popular culture becomes internationally influential during the same period, while the American military emerges from World War Two as the world’s strongest and most active (see Collier). Together, these changes lead to a justifiable sense among writers and intellectuals that a new, American-led totality might be emerging. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the Seventies give rise to a plethora of American epics – *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren* (1974), Joseph McElroy’s *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), William Gaddis’s *J. R.* (1975), and the first two parts of *Sandover* (1976 and 1978).¹⁵

– *The entrance of former colonies of occupation into the European literary system.* Along with decolonization in places like India (1947) and Nigeria (1960) comes the increasing presence of writers from these societies in a literary system still centered on Europe and the United States.¹⁶ The process starts, roughly speaking, with the rise of Négritude in the Thirties and culminates in the presentation of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Wole Soyinka in 1986. In terms of the epic, this realignment has two main effects. First, many “post-colonial” nations seek the sorts of canon-centering texts that already define the literatures of the center: hence, the allure of self-consciously national or regional epics like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Derek Walcott’s *Omeros.* Second, consumers of literature already comfortably
ensconced in the Eurocentric system tend to be drawn to representative texts from newly-integrated regions – books like epics that purport to sum up the whole society. Their synoptic ambition is perfectly suited to readers who, sympathetic and cosmopolitan as they may be, are not inclined to enter too deeply into the cultural life of India, Africa, or the Caribbean.

– *The exponential increase in the power of information and communications technology*. Whether one looks at the development of written language or the invention of the printing press, each leap in information and communications technology alters and expands ideas of what constitutes “the world.” The rapid technological turnover of the late 20th century, however, brings about a new situation. As David Harvey puts it, the capitalist world has “been experiencing . . . an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact on . . . cultural and social life” (284). The impression of novelty and obsolescence – of one totality replacing another – has begun to reappear every few decades, and the historical and aesthetic conditions that tend to spur epic attempts have become something like the new norm.

– *The cachet of postmodernism*. Although somewhat oversold as a cultural trend, postmodernism nevertheless plays a small role in the unexpected resurgence of the epic. The postmodern practice of historical *bricolage* allows the would-be epicist to reconcile two seemingly contradictory demands – the epic urge to affiliate with the past, and the novelistic desire to remain in a “zone of maximal contact with the present” (Bakhtin 11). At the same time, the postmodern suspicion of foundations and fixities – of Lyotardian “grand narratives” – frees the epic writer from certain
constricting coherencies and permits the cultivation of the kinds of fruitful tensions (like those between paranoia and anti-paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow* or between YES and NO in *Sandover*) that make the literary work a plausible simulacrum of the wider world.

Of course, this complex of causes already has a familiar name. Thus, I am merely echoing common usage when I suggest that we think of *Sandover* and its generic contemporaries not as belated modern epics, but as *global* epics – as representations, that is, of a terminal phase of the European world-system.

Despite recent hyperbole, globalization is nothing new. In his work on world-systems theory, Immanuel Wallerstein traces the current global configuration to the rise of European capitalism in the 16th century (*World-Systems Analysis* 23). As far back as *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels could see that the “need of a constantly expanding market . . . chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe,” and that capitalism, through its very structure, tends to replace “[n]ational one-sidedness” with the “universal inter-dependence of nations” (54-5). European colonialism was also a global phenomenon, one that permitted that continent’s nation-states to extend their sovereignty beyond the bounds of the center and to spread their languages and cultures around the globe – a fact made plain by the literatures of India and Nigeria, Senegal and Haiti, Australia and Algeria, Angola and the Americas.

Critics have not seen *Sandover* as an engagement with globalization, but the whole Merrill chooses to sing is clearly the Western capitalist “world” of the late 20th century. True, the poem also deals with everything that scholars like Yenser and Sastri have discerned in it – with love and innocence, skepticism and belief, the manipulation of symbols and the possibilities of myth. But it is primarily an attempt – in the grandest and most grandiose epic sense – to
represent the “big old globe” (CLS 482). To understand it, we will need to investigate the geography of its world, the contents of its encyclopedia, and the character of its epic canon.

When I connect the poem to globalization, I will follow the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto and construe that process as one by which “Atlantic civilization” – defined by the societies that border the Atlantic Ocean, particularly in the north – has come to engulf parts of the world that were once relatively autonomous (Civilizations 435-68). This definition makes clear that we should seek in the late 20th-century epic what David Quint found in older examples of the genre – namely, winner’s epics and loser’s epics. In his Epic and Empire, Quint traces these twin lineages as they weave their way through literary and political history, the winner’s epic identifying with the “linear teleology” (9) of a master narrative told by the powerful, the loser’s epic attempting a “deliberate deformation” (134) of that story by insisting on what lies outside it. Until recently, the former category has contained most of the landmarks of the genre (The Iliad, The Aeneid, Jerusalem Delivered, and so on), while the latter has had to settle for marginalities like Lucan’s Pharsalia and Ercilla’s La Araucana. Yet one characteristic of the global epic is that the ambivalences that used to percolate beneath this tidy dichotomy are now on the surface, and so the boundaries between the winner’s version and the loser’s version have become much more difficult to discern.

Among recent epics, works like Gravity’s Rainbow and Underworld must surely qualify as winner’s epics. Their clear aim is to represent the “multiple new relations among the local and the global, the personal and the planetary, the private and the multinational” (LeClair 2) that have grown out of America’s dominance in the late 20th century. Yet these texts are not simple apologies for American power. They emerge from a time in which doubt about foundations is de rigueur, and in which both ideology and manners demand a certain skepticism about one’s own
society, and a certain deference toward select Others. Thus, the “Richard M. Zhlubb” who
appears in the closing pages of Pynchon’s novel (769-72) is hardly some idealized Augustus, and
the book’s Hereros are sacrificed with considerably less eagerness than the Carthaginians in the
*Aeneid* (see *Gravity’s Rainbow* 319-23, 366-8).

Nevertheless, these American mega-novels *do* tend to elide or marginalize or
misrepresent the perspectives of the people whom globalization has swept over or left behind.
According to Quint, these dispossessed are the “bad conscience of the poem that simultaneously
writes them in and out of its fiction” (99) – the bad conscience, that is, of the winner’s epic.
Postcolonial works like *Midnight’s Children* and *Omeros* attempt to complement and correct
such “fiction” by representing the global whole as it looks from below. (The most important
example of this approach comes in the 21st century, with Roberto Bolaño’s harrowing *2666*.)
Yet this salutary aim is complicated by the ambiguous position of the loser’s epic. Each of these
texts wants to center an emergent literature, but each also aspires to speak for a place and a
people to the rest of what Pascale Casanova has called *The World Republic of Letters*. The latter
function makes a certain cosmopolitanism the price of entry: such writers must make peace with
the winners in order to have a chance to make their critique.

Where does *Sandover* fit in this dichotomy? At first glance, it can seem like the winner’s
epic *par excellence*, with the poet and his lover at their Ouija board a pair of typical Western
consumers, calling up the riches of the world on a whim and mistaking the combined powers of
technology, hegemony, and violence for benign magic. Yet the truth is much more complex.
*Sandover* may be quite comfortable sitting in the political and cultural center, but it sees the
worldwide spread of Atlantic civilization not as some kind of triumph, but as a moment of
transition, akin to the “period of terminal crisis” about which Wallerstein writes, “in which the
entire capitalist world-system will be transformed into something else” (“Globalization or the Age of Transition?”). Indeed, as we will see, the poem even prophesies a shift of the global center of power to the societies that are currently on the margins – a prophecy that is already a long way toward being borne out (see Fernández-Armesto 462-6).

None of this makes Sandover a loser’s epic. But it is something of an oddity – the one “world-text” of its time that realized that the epic genre must be obsessed with the transition between civilizations, since that notion is inseparable from its artistic mission. Late in the 20th century, writers were justifiably uncertain whether they were witnessing the Twilight of the West, the apotheosis of America, the end of history, or the beginning of some epochal shift. Alone among global epics, Sandover managed to see all of these things at once, and to make art of them.

**Epic Revisions**

In a perceptive essay, Van Kelly has sketched out an analysis of the ways epics simultaneously attach to the tradition and differentiate themselves from their predecessors. Drawing on the Russian formalists, Kelly argues that “[g]reat structural variance between works from different epochs, which are nevertheless recognized as belonging to the same genre, create[s] an esthetic of citation and allusion” – a tendency, that is, for each new epic to “italiciz[e]” some prior member (or members) of the genre. Virgil evokes Homer, Dante invokes Virgil, and so on. Once it establishes this kinship, the new epic is free to define its own identity by way of what Kelly calls “regenerative traits” (4), resources from its own epoch that lie outside the epic tradition. Such a mechanism can only lead to a succession of “one-off cases, oddities,
[and] anomalies” (Moretti, *Modern Epic* 1) – a canon marked, as the epic’s is, by quirkiness and discontinuity. This is why the critic must pay particular attention to the “creative habit, mentality, and practice” (Kelly 17) that pursues the epic “esthetic” in the first place. He must consider not only the epic’s function, but also its source.

By his own account, James Merrill was a late convert to the genre. In 1968, he told an interviewer that “psychological action is more interesting than epic” and dismissed modern revivals like Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*: “It’s not me, I’m afraid!” (CPR 69). A decade later, he could still mock the “long, ‘impossible’ poem” and ask: “How many of us get out of our cars when we hit the badlands in the *Cantos* or take that detour through downtown *Paterson*?” (CPR 88). Even in one of his last interviews, Merrill was still apologizing for *Sandover*’s generic ambitions: “There may still be poets positively yearning to write an epic. I always found myself shying away from what I saw as megalomania” (CPR 172).

I can think of three reasons for this antipathy. First, there is that “megalomania” – a descriptor that seems to pop up each time Merrill discusses the epic. In his memoir *A Different Person* (1993), he recalls that the poet and scholar Kimon Friar – his mentor and lover in the Forties – used to extol epic writers such as Dante, Milton, and Pound and then pointedly ask his protégé: “What would their shorter works amount to without the great achievements that crowned them?”18 This call to epic grandeur, Merrill writes, “struck me . . . as a dangerous form of megalomania, and I wasn’t buying any of it” (CPR 479). Modest by temperament and mannerly by training, he seems to have seen the long poem as an unseemly boast, the Self puffed out beyond its proper bounds.

Second, there is the epic’s reputation as a male – or, rather, masculinist – form. Such a reputation should come as no surprise, given the Western epic's roots in the heroic warfare of
Homer’s *Iliad*. The genre has as often as not celebrated the macho and the martial and advocated the subservience of the individual to his society – a society almost invariably embodied in a powerful man, from Augustus Caesar in *The Aeneid* to the Christian God in *Paradise Lost*. This cult of masculinity seems to have made Merrill uneasy. He once praised Elizabeth Bishop because she would never “have been prey to either of those (male?) drives, the one that produced *The Cantos*’s huge unruly text, the other that made its bid to change the map of Europe” (*CPR* 237-8). The aside conflates book and map, literary heft and fascist dementia, then ties the whole complex to a self-aggrandizing brand of patriarchy – a clear sign that Merrill wants to distance himself from the epic’s unsavory side, and that he sees that side as male.

Third, and finally, there is the perception that the epic is *straight*. Such a view persists despite the prominence of male couples in the earliest texts of the tradition, whether those couples are explicit (Nisus and Euryalus) or implicit (Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Achilles and Patroclus). E. M. W. Tillyard summed up and embodied the mistake in a passage from his *The English Epic and its Backgrounds*: "While at home in large areas of life, the epic writer must be centred in the normal . . . No pronounced homosexual, for instance, could succeed in the epic, not so much for being one as for what his being one cuts him off from" (8). Such a pronouncement – complete with its subtle overtones of castration – seems both offensive and misguided today, but would have raised few objections in 1954, when Tillyard uttered it. Critical wisdom of this sort may have played a part in Merrill's alienation from the epic. The genre belonged to straight men, allegedly, and its business was to embrace the dominant order, and to sanction its reproduction.

Given these strong reasons for resistance, a new question arises: How did Merrill overcome his hostility? A talk he gave at Amherst in 1986 hints at one possible answer.
Discussing the course of his own career, Merrill pointed out that, among the major American poets of the 20th century, “the men” began “by writing small, controllable, we might say from our present vantage ‘unisex’ poems,” but tended to descend, later in their lives, into monumentalism. On the one hand, this is the poet’s familiar critique: the epic as a fall from lyrical grace, a lamentable case of masculine self-indulgence. On the other hand, it is also a piece of self-analysis. “As time went on,” Merrill continues, “through their ambitious reading, their thinking, their critical pronouncements, a kind of vacuum charged with expectation, if not with dread, took shape around them, asking to be filled with grander stuff” (CPR 351). The results were The Waste Land, The Cantos, Paterson – and Sandover itself. In this view, the epic is a summing up, one summoned by the “dread” of impending mortality. It is a little universe that compensates for the loss of the large one.19

This explanation is psychologically astute, but I can think of two other causes for Merrill’s conversion. As important as any middle-aged "megalomania" must have been his decision – after decades of preparation – to finally write about the "Thousand and One Evenings Spent / With David Jackson at the Ouija board / In Touch with Ephraim Our Familiar Spirit" (CLS 4). Now, the actual verity of these revelations matters little to my study. One may read The Divine Comedy without placing much stock in the dogmas of Catholicism, just as one may analyze The Ramayana and The Mahabharata without thinking that their battles and intrigues took place in a historical past, in actual Indian villages (see Sax, especially 171). For my purposes, what counts is that the Ouija board – for all its silliness – gave Merrill a tool and a trope too perfect to abandon, a device whose procedures could evoke the symbolic manipulations and many of the media (including telegram, telephone, radio, and even, prophetically, the Internet) that give a modern writer access to the totality. Its cacophony of voices and discourses
was a fortuitous *world effect*, an accidental synecdoche for what every epic seeks to depict – “ALL LIFE & ITS WORKINGS” (108).

Furthermore, any writer who aspires to long-term survival will likely be drawn to the epic. The challenge, Merrill once noted, is to "create works whose resonance would last for more than a season" (*CPR* 295). It is ultimately a kind of engineering problem. The literary work is released into a reading environment or – more accurately – a complex *system* of reading environments, and its success is defined by its ability to find readers and become an element, however fragmentary and distorted, in their minds. But the work that wants to *survive* must not only succeed in this first set of environments – this first synchronic slice – but also persist diachronically, in one slice after another. The epic is well suited to this challenge. The genre's encyclopedism allows it to find a partial response in a wide variety of reading environments, while the steady accumulation of such partial readings creates around each epic an aura of "seriousness," the sense that the work is polysemic and not to be exhausted in any foreseeable future.

By the mid-Seventies, Merrill was a well-feted writer. He had won Mount Holyoke's Glascock Poetry Prize as a young writer, had published a half-dozen volumes of poetry and a pair of novels, had received praise from artists like W. H. Auden and Mary McCarthy, and had been awarded both the National Book Award (for *Nights and Days* in 1967) and the Bollingen Prize (for *Braving the Elements* in 1973). At the same time, he was not mentioned in the same breath with Eliot and Pound, much less Yeats and Blake, and still less Milton and Dante. Thus, he faced a dilemma: he had reached an apex in his career, and yet, like all ambitious writers, he wished to ascend still higher. In such a situation, the epic is in many ways the only game in town.
As the literary historian David Perkins has pointed out, “classification brings with it a context of other works” (62). This is true of self-classification as well. In overcoming his antipathy toward the “megalomania” of the long poem, Merrill inherited a set of predecessors with whom he had to engage. Early in Mirabell’s Books of Number, the bat-angel 741 – later to become the eponymous peacock – speaks of the line that JM has been chosen to join: “AN UNBROKEN CHAIN HOMER DANTE PROUST” (121). These three authors are, of course, practitioners of the three main varieties of epic – primary, secondary, and modern. Together, they reflect a notion of the genre that is worth looking at more closely.

In Sandover’s odd mythology, Homer – the conventional embodiment of the epic tradition – is one of the five “CLONED” souls whose aim is to teach humanity that “MAN HIMSELF” is “THE KEY” (179) to a future paradise. The epic writer is thus seen from the beginning as a central figure in the creation and preservation of cultural knowledge. Homer’s chief virtue seems to have been his receptivity. Unlike other poets, he simply “SAT BACK” (255) and transcribed a text “SENT INTACT” (242): there was no unseemly Self to get in the way of revelation. He became a conduit through which “Fable and old Song” (Marvell 192) could pass unimpeded. During a recital sponsored by the archangels, his unexpected apparition – as “a young / Dwarf clad in homespun, large head cocked” – marks him as both a “LISTENER” (338) and, by association with the dwarf Alberich in Wagner’s Ring Cycle, a guardian of cultural treasure.

Like any writer of primary epic, Homer sought “TO PROVIDE A CATALOGUE & PRESENT / HIS ERA WITH A PANTHEON” (219) – but he also set language rippling into the distance, so far that even the archangel Michael can speak of space as a “WINEDARK SEA” (275). Merrill clearly would like Sandover to have the same sort of range. His use of the
Homeric phrase both ties him to the epic tradition and establishes his difference, since, even as the words evoke the ancient Mediterranean, their new context suggests the need for a dramatic broadening of scope. Indeed, the task that a reincarnated Homer has taken on sounds suspiciously like the composition of Sandover:

I NOW HAVE INSTRUMENTS TUNED,

LORD, TO THE VERY STARS . . .

I LISTEN, RECEIVING THE MESSAGES, MAKING SENSE OF THEM.

(338)

Such references construe Merrill, with his own receptivity to the Ouija “MESSAGES” and his desire to write “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (113), as the true inheritor of the epic enterprise. Sandover also invokes and revises the second name in that “UNBROKEN CHAIN.”

Most obviously, The Book of Ephraim first appeared in a volume called Divine Comedies (1976), a somewhat campy allusion to Dante’s epic. The poem also borrows its epigram from Paradiso:

Your thought is true, for both the small and great

of this life gaze into that mirror where,

before you think, your thoughts have been displayed. (15.61-3)²¹

For Dante, that “mirror” is God, while for Merrill it is a wide array of means of reflection: the mind, for instance, and the word, and the doublings that occur when two lives (especially two lovers) face each other over time. Once again, the procedure is to italicize and revise the predecessor – or, one might say, to use the predecessor as a special kind of mirror. Such complex “triangulation” (CPR 183) abounds in Sandover, from a passing mention of Dante’s patron “St Lucy” (102) in an account of Maya Deren’s cinematic dreams to JM’s dark quip that “Dante would have fainted dead away” (208) at the tale of Maria’s soul-eating radiation
treatments. Such allusions tend to characterize Dante as a kindred spirit or a fellow traveller whose tale will add weight and credence to Sandover’s own. At times they also offer consolation. Anxious about his own originality, for instance, JM is relieved to learn that Dante too was instructed by one of the bat-angels – in the guise of a "MENDICANT PRIEST" – and that the Paradiso is merely how he "ARRANGED & ORCHESTRATED" (219) those teachings.

In one passage from Scripts for the Pageant, we hear of Dante’s vision of an “Eagle made of ruby souls” (299) and of his mother’s dream of a “peacock in a laurel tree” (298). Each of these episodes reflects back a facet or two of Sandover. The peacock is first and foremost a piece of self-evaluation, Mirabell wreathed in the traditional symbol of poetic excellence. But the account of the mother’s pregnancy is also notable for the way it intertwines biological reproduction and artistic creation, so that a mention of her “labor” (298) leads seamlessly into several lines about the fruits of poetic labor – Keats’s nightingale, Poe’s raven, Catullus’s sparrow, Chaucer’s fowls. Such a conflation of books and children should remind us that, in Sandover’s worldview, the crucial links among past, present, and future are not so much genetic as cultural (see Chapter Three). In the case of the ruby Eagle, Merrill takes care to emphasize one particular aspect – the “letter M” (299) from which the bird emerges. A reader is supposed to notice at once how this image anticipates JM’s method of invention, with the sublime rising out of the alphabetical, and how the initial suggests, centuries in advance, newer sources of revelation – Mirabell, Michael, and Merrill himself. Such touches border on the typological, twisting The Divine Comedy into a prophecy of Sandover.

Yet Rachel Jacoff is surely right to insist on the daunting differences between the two poems: "Dante's totalizing syncretism is the very emblem of what a modern poet, qua modernist, dare not attempt except in ironic or nostalgic admission of its otherness" (145). As an epic poet
in an age of skepticism, Merrill can only envy Dante his "FIERCE CREDULITY" (132) and his "GULLIBLE / & HEAVENLY WORLD" (149). The horizon of reception in the 20th century is much less welcoming. Robert Morse, JM’s neighbor in Stonington, Connecticut, puts the case succinctly: "Everything in Dante knew its place. / In this guidebook of yours, how do you tell / Up from down?" (256).

This remark – like so many of the casual asides in Sandover – is meant to do serious duty. It recalls the notion of the epic's obsolescence that was commonplace during Merrill's youth, the idea that the "extensive totality of life is no longer directly given" and that the "immanence of meaning" has therefore "become a problem" (Lukács 56). According to this view, the modern writer can no longer hope to represent a coherent world in the way that Homer and Dante did. At times, Sandover seems almost resigned to such belatedness. Although Maria Mitsotáki may speak of the "BEATRICE / MECHANISM" (468) by which she came to lead JM to the sublime, Sandover clearly sees an immense gulf between this chain-smoking, suicidal Greek aristocrat and The Divine Comedy’s innocent Florentine girl. A strong sense of decline may explain why JM at one point dismisses the Ouija board's revelations as so much "Warmed-up Milton, Dante, Genesis" (136).

Yet Sandover ultimately does find a place for itself, by executing a deft swerve away from its fervently nationalistic, fiercely moralistic, and quintessentially believing predecessor. First, the poem inverts The Divine Comedy by making the erotic realm justify the gods, rather than vise-versa. Pushing aside Dante’s claims to factuality and absolute authority, Merrill uses a variation on the misreading that John Cowper Powys once put forth – “[Dante] makes sex the centre of everything” (37) – to turn his revelation into an extended metaphor for the soul’s erotic history. This is why Sandover organizes itself around manifestations of eros – from pure
sexuality, to the long-term sublimation of such drives in a domestic relationship, to the artistic impulses that craft objects of desire (whether in the shape of men like Ephraim or poems like *Ephraim*) out of their maker’s erotic restlessness.²³

Second, *Sandover* distances itself from *The Divine Comedy* through its embrace of contemporary science. For instance, an important passage in *Mirabell* reinterprets *Paradiso’s* "uncanny shining tininess / Ringed with decelerating zones of light" (*CLS* 132) – Dante’s vision of the Empyrean – as a nucleus surrounded by electrons.²⁴ Such a reclamation of obsolete imagery seems to me a clear example of what Harold Bloom has called *tessera*, the style of revision whereby a later poet seeks to carve out some canonical space by “reading the parent-poem” so as “to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough” (*Anxiety of Influence* 14). Thus, although the passage does link *Sandover* and *The Divine Comedy* as two “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (113), it also subtly condescends to the earlier work: “CALL IT A SATELLITE TRUTH THAT ORBITS THE ESSENTIAL” (132). Through that glib evaluation, and its underlying metonymic logic, Merrill becomes the earth to Dante’s moon, the nucleus to his flickering electron, and the God to his attending angel.

A similar canny ambivalence marks *Sandover’s* attitude to more recent works. For instance, the text makes frequent allusions to Goethe, the putative father of the modern epic. Although the "Bargains and more bargains" of *Sandover* may be "far cries from that fierce original one / Struck by Faust" (265), they connect the two poems as part of a single literary enterprise. The black dog that JM and DJ run over in their car (270) is an allusion to and a diminution of the "black dog through seed and fallow roaming" (*Goethe* 1147) that first signals the presence of the demonic to Faust – Mephistopheles, that is, in his canine incarnation. These
echoes allow Sandover to assert its kinship with Faust, but also to emphasize its comparative benignity, as if Goethe's fiery tones had been "redone / A la Redon in aquarelle" (265).

Other references, however, are less generous, as Sandover seeks to surround this predecessor with an air of tedium and obsolescence. The archangel Michael's "TAG FROM GOETHE" may be "SEHR DISTINGUE" (344), but his Father – precisely because he resembles the God in Faust – comes off as a "morality-play bore" (348). We also hear that, in the afterlife, Goethe himself has become as "DULL AS RILKE," a kind of clod among raconteurs. (We do not learn what Rilke has done to deserve this insult.) DJ speculates that the great man’s mind may have been "mined out" by living readers, and Wystan adds that Goethe is the particular prey of academics, who unlike the "LUCKY AMATEUR" do their intellectual quarrying "WITH DEEPER BLASTS" (292). The whole exchange can seem somewhat inconsequential at first glance, but it comes into sharper focus if we see it as part of Sandover's struggle with the epic tradition. As Moretti has pointed out, modern epics – unlike their primary ancestors – "are not self-sufficient" (5) and tend to require institutional support for their survival. Thus, the suggestion that the critical industry has exhausted Goethe's epic is both an astute observation about the nature of the genre and, more important, an implicit offer of Sandover as fresh rock for blasting.

Other modern epics are alluded to – The Waste Land (217) and Finnegans Wake (83), most notably – but for Merrill the crucial one is clearly In Search of Lost Time. Many critics have noted the poet’s deep affinities with Proust, the final link in that “UNBROKEN CHAIN.”

Sticking to superficialities, Ross Labrie points out that each writer “came from a wealthy background, was homosexual, apolitical, and avoided becoming trapped by intellectual systems” (6). I will grant the wealth and the homosexuality, but each of the other assertions requires a
small asterisk. Although Merrill memorably rejected political writing – “when the tide of feeling goes out, the language begins to stink” \((CPR 72)\) – I will show in subsequent chapters that he was hardly oblivious to the political contours of his era, particularly on a global scale. Similarly, although his skepticism could border on the Pyrhonnic, Merrill was clearly fascinated by “intellectual systems” and loved the crackpot architectonics of Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend’s *Hamlet’s Mill* and Julian Jaynes’s *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*.\(^{26}\) Part of the point – and the fun – of *Sandover* is that it is one huge intellectual system, albeit an intentionally preposterous one. The poem is in some ways an exercise in pragmatism, an attempt to explore the usefulness of an intellectual system without assigning it any ontological truth.

Richard Howard offers a more complex account of Proust’s importance to Merrill. Writing of “For Proust,” from 1962’s *Water Street*, Howard sees the French novelist as providing the model for Merrill’s transformation from an aesthete in retreat to a mature artist open to the world and ready to engage with it:

> In these clear stanzas . . . the novelist is now conceived as an agent of preservation . . . a man concerned to perpetuate the universe. The thin gold mask [subject of the last line in Merrill’s poem] is not a defence against reality, not a concealment from it; it is a funerary enduement which will withstand and redeem the wreckage of a life. (23-4)

As my discussion of the epic has already tried to make clear, two of these words – *preservation* and *wreckage* – represent the two central facts in the genre’s history. Epics are responses to the inevitable decline of cultures, and they seek to “perpetuate the universe” they know by constructing a simulation in language that might conceivably outlast the society itself.
If Proust truly taught Merrill to become “an agent of preservation,” and to think about what might “redeem the wreckage” of his time, then he is not just Merrill’s “truest precursor,” as Harold Bloom has perceptively observed (Introduction 2), but also his most important epic forefather. Thus, it should come as no surprise that, early in Sandover, Ephraim refers to the French writer as "A GREAT PROPHET THRONED ON HIGH" (76), and later on tells JM that Proust is "[his] OWN" (547), an aesthetic ancestor of unusual intimacy.

It is also no surprise that a key scene in Sandover – the ceremonial reading of the completed poem that concludes the book – takes care to put Proust in epic company: not just Goethe, Eliot, and "THE FLORENTINE" (546), but even "tiny Pope" (557), that purveyor of mock-epics.27 At this climactic moment, a piece of stage business casts an oblique light on Proust's importance to Merrill. Most readers of Sandover will agree that Dante's is the presence that really jumps out – in the tripartite structure of the work, in its heavenly hierarchy and its beloved guides, in the endless gossiping of the dead, and in many other details. Such readers might wonder, then, why the "truest precursor" is comparatively scarce. (The entry for Dante in Robert Polito's A Reader's Guide is three times as long as the one for Proust.)

Here are Sandover's last words on the subject:

. . . With a stern nod

Dante agrees to change seats, so that Proust

Be as far as possible from Agatha's

Huge baby's-breath and rose and goldenrod

Arrangement masking the lectern. (557)

The passage gives a terse (and lightly ironic) summation of what unites Merrill and his two chosen predecessors – each an epic writer, each with a strong pedagogical bent, each prone
to camouflage his ideas within elaborately arranged and sometimes florid writing. (These connections strike me as more significant than Labrie’s.) At the same time, the relocation of Proust, his movement away from the lectern, is a tacit acknowledgement that the “truest predecessor” has to be pushed to the background. Through this move, Merrill manages two agonistic victories – a gentle mockery of Proust’s weakness (by way of those ridiculous allergies), and his replacement with a safer guarantor of epic seriousness, one less central to Merrill’s own development. The overall effect is to acknowledge and neutralize these two influences, and to cast the author of *Sandover* not just as their equal, but as a culmination of the epic line. The tradition of "HOMER DANTE PROUST" is thus slyly supplemented by a new trio: DANTE PROUST MERRILL.

*A Map of the World*

*Sandover* is an epic, then, and an epic represents a totality – an entire world, as it is perceived from a particular place and time. The question remains: What is the most productive critical response to this fact?

A complete study of any epic will look at the work’s geographic breadth, its discursive breadth, and its relationship to the epic tradition. In this dissertation, I plan to focus on one of these aspects – *Sandover’s* geography, the map it makes of the global whole – both for its intrinsic interest, and because I believe this approach will allow me enough leeway to discuss matters of discourse and tradition as well.

Geography has always loomed large in the epic, whether one considers Homer’s Mediterranean world or the cosmic topography that Dante mapped out, Goethe's
Mephistophelean empire or Joyce's city of capital and commerce. Although I do not intend to engage in the kind of literal cartography that Moretti advocates, I do want to "highlight the ortgebunden, place-bound nature of literary forms" (Atlas of the European Novel 5) and to examine the selection that Sandover makes from the whole it represents. I will organize this investigation around three simple categories: the center, the margins, and, less conventionally, what I call invisible cities.

In my first chapter, I will show that Sandover has a split center, and that this center sketches out the boundaries of Atlantic civilization. Within this "world," the small town of Stonington, Connecticut serves as the focus of the American side, and is associated with the conditions necessary for literary creation – with things like solitude, affluence, and leisure. Athens – the focus of the European side – is linked to the cultural inheritance on which such artistic creation relies. I will demonstrate that Sandover uses this divided center to create a cordon sanitaire between Atlantic civilization and “Western culture” – between the political base of its world, in other words, and its intellectual and artistic superstructures. This separation strikes me as an instance of what Moretti calls the rhetoric of innocence, that verbal legerdemain by which the epic writer, working in an age of international capitalism, makes a picture of the whole that erases or redescribes the violence by which the system is maintained (see Modern Epic 22-30, 245-50). As I will show, Sandover – characteristically of two minds – both entertains and rejects this rhetoric, an ambivalence made evident by its depictions of Athens and Venice. The latter in particular becomes a synecdoche for Atlantic civilization, a “whole heavenly city” in the process of “Sinking” (CLS 75).

My second chapter will examine how Sandover uses its marginal locations to come to grips with the fact that no art – however self-conscious or sophisticated – can escape
entanglement with its political context. The poem uses three main approaches to alleviate its anxieties about the eventual eclipse of the West. First, it takes threats like nuclear war and environmental degradation and – in a classic case of Freudian projection – pushes them away from the center, consistently linking Asian locales with bombs and radioactivity and the margins in general with overpopulation and decay. Second, it attempts to reinforce its safe center by using marginal settings such as India and the Sudan as sources of spectacle, occasions for epiphany, and vehicles for metafiction. Third, and most strikingly, it executes a subtle shift in its cultural allegiances, gradually coming to accept the decline of Atlantic civilization and to embrace the rise of societies now on its margins. Although this is a prescient take on globalization, it has its unsavory side. Even as Sandover seeks to seed the future with readers – through the reincarnation of characters both major and minor – it also seems intent on colonizing that future, on replacing its refractory Asians and Africans with congenial, compliant Euro-Americans.

In my final chapter, I will look at Sandover’s invisible cities – the kinds of invented places that have played such a large role both in historical geography and in the epic tradition. This part of my argument will consist of three stages. First, I will look at the poem’s strange denigration of biological reproduction and corresponding elevation of childlessness. Second, I will show how this process leads to an epic less dependent on bodies and land – the key components of any political totality – and allows for the elaboration of a notion of cultural transmission grounded in the neo-Darwinian principles of variation, selection, and survival. Third, and finally, I will look at how this evolutionary perspective is inscribed into an unmappable geography – namely, the Ouija board, the Land of the Dead, and Sandover itself. Through this model of cultural evolution, the poem moves beyond the duality of center and
margins and toward an aesthetic strategy that will permit it to both embody and outlast Atlantic civilization.

My ultimate goal in this dissertation is to unravel the epic dimensions of *The Changing Light at Sandover* – to make sense of the poem’s engagement with the globalized landscape of the late 20th century, and to understand its vision for literary art in the *longue durée*. Like so much of Merrill’s work, *Sandover* speaks of loss and consolation: civilization after civilization goes toppling “OFF THE HIGH HISTORIC CLIFF” (*CLS* 553), but out of this wreckage arises an Empire of Ideas.
A Bit of a Whitewash:

The Center and the Rhetoric of Innocence

The first thing I want to note about the center in *Sandover* is that it is split.

Merrill himself has acknowledged the importance of such "splits" in his work. In his preface to Richard Kenney's *The Evolution of the Flightless Bird*, he describes that poet's "The Hours of the Day" in terms that could easily apply to *Sandover* – as a "high romantic fantasia on certain inescapable doublings: self and world, past and present, loss and recovery" (*CPR* 288).

Yet a doubling is merely a division looked at with different expectations. In *The Consuming Myth*, Yenser finds "divisions and dichotomies" (4) everywhere in Merrill's work – between the world and the page, between the world and the Ouija board, between art and science, between *eros* and *psyche*. Yet Yenser does little besides mention what I consider a central opposition in *Sandover*, that between "two worlds, the American and the Mediterranean" (5). Every reader of the poem knows that its main action oscillates between Stonington, Connecticut, where JM and his lover, DJ, reside, and Athens, where the two men have their summerhouse. Yet is this division merely a matter of biographical truth, as Yenser and most other Merrill scholars seem to assume? I do not think so. If Merrill made much of his habit of seeing "both ways at once" – of possessing a refined version of that *negative capability* that Keats admired in Shakespeare (Keats 539) – he did so because he thought such oppositions *always* fraught with meaning, the "plus and minus signs of a vast, evolving formula" (*CPR* 122). We should expect the split between Stonington and Athens to be as fraught as any other.28

I want to suggest, then, that this back-and-forth across the Atlantic is not simply autobiographical. The doubling of its center allows *Sandover* to establish the geographical
totality it wishes to represent and its own vantage on that totality. As a late 20th-century epic of Atlantic civilization – as a global epic, in other words – the poem chooses to spread its center across the ocean, and to divide its action between a site of economic and political power (the Eastern seaboard of the United States) and a mythical source of cultural energy (Greece). Such a choice is surely significant, and my task will be to make sense of it. Thus, I will look closely at Sandover's construction of this dual center and, in particular, at its distortions – what is present, what is absent, what is reconfigured, what is replaced.

Ultimately, any attempt to read the center, and to decipher Sandover's thoughts about globalization, will need to resist two temptations. The first is to make Merrill all message – to reduce the complexities of his text to some pithy negation or affirmation, and to ignore the poem's tendency to deconstruct everything, even the deconstructing of its own deconstructions. The second is to stop looking for definite meanings altogether and to settle for a tally of Sandover's ambiguities and evasions. Either style of reading will impoverish the poem. A satisfactory account of Sandover must recognize that – like his literary idol, Marcel Proust – Merrill tends to give equal weight to his initial mistakes, his second thoughts, and his "final" conclusions. The reader's job is to understand how these various levels interact, not to take one or another for the whole story.

*The American Empire*

Recently dead, and communicating for the first time through the Ouija board, Wystan – who will be an unflappable presence in most of Sandover – flies into a panic about "A BOX in Oxford that must QUICKLY BE / QUICKLY BURNED." The double QUICKLY underlines his
urgency. What sort of secrets might this box contain? The narrative does not speculate, but instead directs the reader back eighty pages to a "manuscript – / Remember? – buried beneath a red stone / At the empire's heart" (87). The reference is to an "incriminating" document that the Emperor Tiberius has ordered Ephraim to destroy, one that will be found "UNDER PORPHYRY / Beneath the deepest excavations" (8) in Capri.

In the explicatory passage that follows Wystan's outburst, JM focuses on the words "buried" and "heart" and interprets his friend's fear as a dread of the contents of the unconscious:

. . . And in the final

Analysis, who didn't have at heart

Both a buried book and a voice that said

Destroy it? How sensible had we been

To dig up this material of ours? (87)

Yet the noteworthy word – the key to the box – is really empire. The diction in the later passage is vague enough to evoke not only Rome and imperial Britain, but also the newer global configuration – whatever its exact nature – within which Merrill is writing his epic. I have already pointed out that, at least in the Western tradition, epics tend to appear in societies or institutions that possess great temporal power. Although David Quint may distinguish between winner's epics and loser's epics, the former vastly outnumber the latter. Virgil and Ovid sang the indestructible Roman Empire, Dante the ascendant Catholic Church, Goethe the consolidation and expansion of capitalist Europe, Joyce the rise of the European city as a nexus for global trade. Attuned to such predecessors, Merrill must have realized that his epic was appearing at a time of unprecedented American might – and, more disturbingly, at a time when the line between a new global culture and yet another Western empire was far from clearly drawn.
In this context, the detail "UNDER PORPHYRY" becomes quite significant. On the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a description of a Roman basin states: "Porphyry was regarded as a stone that had special associations with the emperor, because of its purple color and also because of the great expense of quarrying, transporting, and carving it" ("Porphyry Basin"). Slaves dragged the rock from a pit in the "eastern deserts of Egypt," presumably under conditions of great hardship (see "Porphyry Support for a Water Basin," on the same website). Thus, the "incriminating" document that Tiberius wants destroyed lies under a stone whose very presence in Rome attests to an enormous amount of suffering and injustice, imposed in distant lands and justified by the production of exquisite artworks. This fact clearly has implications for other exquisite artworks, including Sandover.

Merrill was not insensitive to the rebuke implicit in such an entanglement of art, economics, and politics. It may have seemed gauche to point out – as I did in my Preface – that the poet was a rich man, and that most of his wealth was inherited from his father, Charles E. Merrill III, the co-founder of a powerful American investment bank. Yet Sandover gives its readers implicit permission to mingle reality and fiction. The character "JM" and the author "James Merrill" share so many attributes that we are welcome – even encouraged – to confuse the two. The composite figure that emerges can hole up in that opulent house, and commune with spirits, and compose long, esoteric poems, because he possesses immense wealth, derived from the operations of American capitalism. Could these gains have been ill-gotten? Certainly JM sounds a bit troubled when, musing about the "powers that be" and "our dollar sign / Where snake and Tree of Paradise entwine," he must acknowledge: "Like it or not, such things made the soul's fortune" (54).
As we unpack this box of maps – as we make sense of the poem’s geographical representations – we will see that Sandover itself may be an "incriminating" manuscript, one buried like Wystan’s and Tiberius’s “At the empire's heart.” But incriminating to whom? On the one hand, although the poem has its roots in Empire, it might still be a subversive text, "incriminating" to the established powers and "buried" in anticipation of the future's validation. (One thinks of the sculptor in Shelley’s "Ozymandias,” who captured and preserved the Pharaoh's "sneer of cold command" (107).) On the other hand, Sandover might be not so much an exposé as “A BIT OF A WHITEWASH” (394), an apologia for the dominance of the West. Despite its attempts to distance itself from Atlantic civilization, the poem may remain close to "the empire's heart" – a complicity that will become evident to anyone who burrows down to its ideological core, "Beneath the deepest excavations." In that case, the manuscript would damn not its society, but its author.29

I will start with Sandover’s map of the United States.

At first glance, James Merrill can seem a little un-American. A review of Christopher Bram's Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America complained that the study confined its subjects to a "gay, male American cultural bubble" ("Stories of Consenting Adults"). No such bubble – not even one as assiduously constructed as Bram's – could hope to contain Merrill.

Sandover itself has scant use for American culture of any kind, "high" or popular. Consider, for instance, the published studies of intertextuality in the poem – Piotr Gwiazda's monograph on Merrill and the Englishman Auden, Mark Bauer's book on Merrill and the Irishman Yeats, Rachel Jacoff's essay on Merrill and the Italian Dante. (Similar analyses might
be written about Merrill and the Frenchman Proust or Merrill and the Greek Plato.) Despite the poem's rich allusiveness, American literature is barely present, with references to Whitman and Dickinson brief and pro forma, and less tangential allusions to T. S. Eliot and Henry James more a confirmation than an exception, since both writers were voluntary exiles and honorary Englishmen. Another exile, Gertrude Stein, makes a handful of appearances, most of them centered on her sexual practices, rather than her literary output. This leaves Wallace Stevens – whose entry in Robert Polito's Reader's Guide contains fifteen citations – as the only sizable American presence in Sandover. The rest of the country's literary inheritance might as well not exist.

The same kind of neglect is visible in other art forms. Sandover's range of musical reference extends as far as Wagner, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, but does not include Aaron Copland or Duke Ellington. The poem may devote a set piece to Giorgione's La Tempesta, but it has nothing to say about Jackson Pollock. Similarly – aside from that unexpected reference to Batman (288) and a quick smirk at "Von and Torro [two of the more ludicrous figures in the poem's pantheon] in their Star Trek capes" (136) – American pop culture has almost no place in Sandover. The Looney Tunes cartoons and old Hollywood musicals of Gravity's Rainbow are nowhere to be seen.

Here is how Charles Berger sums up the situation:

Merrill seems the least explicitly “American” of our major contemporary poets, the least afflicted with the ambition to speak to and for America. One gets the sense in [his work] . . . that America itself is peripheral. It is only too easy to forget that the events of Mirabell transpire during the Bicentennial summer of 1976. (“‘Mirabell:’ Conservative Epic” 182)
Part of this can be chalked up to simple cosmopolitanism. When his friend, the writer Alison Lurie, suggested that the two of them had been contaminated – in the eyes of their compatriots – by spending so much time across the Atlantic, Merrill gave a characteristically ironic and accurate response: "It's not fair. We're as American as lemon chiffon pie" (CPR 512). This quip reflects the poet’s habit of taking clichés apart and reassembling them in a way that both expands and undermines their original meaning. Thus, while “American as apple pie” suggests a version of America in which the plain and the homespun predominate, Merrill’s revision reminds the reader that this is a limited view – all Steinbeck and no Stein – and that other Americas exist in which the mores are as colorful as lemons and the manners as airy as meringue.

Yet the paucity of American culture in Sandover is not simply a matter of eccentric tastes. It is also a signal to the reader that, as an epic of the late 20th century, the poem has much bigger fish to fry. In his work on what he calls metageography – the "enunciative space within literary discourse that ironizes the notion of geographical space itself" (6) – Jon Hegglund has connected cosmopolitanism to a vantage by which the "viewing subject rises above the place-bound attachments of the nation-state to take the measure of the world as a wider totality" (11). This is the quintessential epic position, and the decision not to privilege American culture in Sandover – to actively shortchange it – is one consequence of such a viewpoint. It leads to the odd distribution of settings and geographical references in the poem, an irregular network that bears little resemblance to the neatly national scattering that Moretti finds in the novels of Jane Austen and other canonical writers (Atlas of the European Novel 12-29).

And the United States that Sandover does delineate is a curious entity. A cartographer who tried to trace out the poem’s geography would produce a map that was blurry or blank for
most of the nation – from the (absent) redwoods of California to the (dematerialized) banks of the Mississippi to the (invisible) cliffs of Maine. This distortion can be ascribed in part to the way that space tends to be perceived in an age of telecommunications and high-speed travel. The spatial relations among far-flung locations are not experienced directly by the traveler, but must be imposed retrospectively – hence that mapmaker from Jaipur – or replaced by something more impressionistic. In such conditions, the "unified topographical perspective" (115) that Eric Bulson says is missing from *Ulysses*, despite Joyce's constant citation of Dublin's street names, is likely to be missing from other texts as well.

Yet the strange mapping in *Sandover* is more than a symptom of its era. Its real significance will begin to emerge if we contrast the representation of most of the United States with that of Stonington, Connecticut.

The West is depicted – on the few occasions when it is depicted – in a manner that alternates between strikingly negative and trickily distant. An innocuous passage about DJ’s parents will nonetheless refer to Arizona as their "desert ghetto" (88) – a phrase that suggests both sterility and corruption – while Mirabell will dismiss Los Angeles as a "HUB OF POWERFUL ILLUSIONS" (169), a place that needs frequent earthquakes to check the reproductive excesses of its insufficiently civilized populace (245). Santa Fe is a site of unsettling "eeriness," while "THE AIR / ABOVE LOS ALAMOS" (33) – in keeping with *Sandover*’s "brood[ing] on a nuclear holocaust that threatens the end of humanity" (Materer 2, see also 103-8) – "IS LIKE A BREATH SUCKED IN HORROR" (33). In each case, the West is linked only to the most ominous and unpleasant details.
Other Western settings are more allegorical than real. For instance, Truth or Consequences, New Mexico is simply an apt place for a minor character to undergo a "Conversion" and then suffer a "breakdown" (87) – to accept a truth, that is, and pay the consequences. That this character is called "Milton" and that his crisis of faith centers on the Ouija board – a piece of celestial machinery even more suspect than God and the Son in *Paradise Lost* – is surely a sly comment by the author on his own belatedness within the epic tradition. In any case, Truth or Consequences is more a serendipitous opportunity for wordplay than an integral part of *Sandover's* depiction of the West.

Out of a half-dozen Western settings, only one of them seems to escape the poem's dismissal or scorn. *Sandover* presents Chimayo, New Mexico and its environs – where JM and DJ travel in the summer of 1958, and where several important scenes in JM's lost novel take place – in an unambiguously positive light, as an ideal locale for retreat and rejuvenation. Yet this praise comes at a price. To redeem this slice of the West, *Sandover* feels impelled to *denationalize* it, to separate it from the 20th-century American chronotope and offer it as an antidote to the tensions and complexities of the Cold War.

During JM and DJ's visit, Chimayo appears not as a typical Southwestern tourist destination, but as a piece of the past trapped within the nation's borders, like a chunk of older rock that has gotten swept up in an eruption of magma. The strange deity that Ephraim encounters there is clearly (if unidentifiably) pre-Columbian: "HALF MAN HALF TALKING TREE ICECAPPED PEATSHOD." The "wooden crosses" that the vacationers wander among antedate the statehood of New Mexico, and the tombstones – "Sun-bleached Martinez, splintering Ortiz" – have been weathering since well before 1912. Some "Tall dolls" sold at a gift stand and "smocked by Sears" (34) suggest a noble past cloaked in bourgeois vulgarity, but the
absence of other signs of 20th-century American life allows the poem to praise the desert as a mythic locale and thus to distance it from the "HORROR" and "POWERFUL ILLUSIONS" of the rest of the West.

The region around Chimayo serves a similar purpose in JM's lost novel, curing the characters by lifting them away from contemporary America. This approach works on the physical ailments that Lucy Prentiss treats with "wonder-working clay" (34) – probably the tierra bendita of the Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas in Chimayo (LaRocca) – but also on the more psychological ills of Leo Cade, her daughter's husband, who comes home from the Vietnam War "different" and damaged, in "crippling debt" to a world his country sent him to meet with "automatic fire" (48). Leo has his cleansing epiphany on a "deep shelf" behind a waterfall, "deep in Indian land" (49). (The double deep distances the spot doubly.) Merrill himself has noted that such secret chambers tend in his oeuvre to represent "some inmost reality or some inmost image underneath the rush of experience" (CPR 98). Thus, when Leo steps through the cataract, he steps outside of time, into a space that does not exist on any map – and thereby, the poem implies, washes away the guilt of being an American in the second half of the 20th century.

Leo's friend Sergei experiences a similar ablution. A Russian-American, he sees himself in Manichean terms, as both a "crudely-colored / Capitalist" and a revolutionary "slitherer," subject to an uneasy "détente" (69-70) – in other words, as the Cold War made flesh. Like Leo, he can only heal his wounded psyche by exiting the American present:

The waterfall that day. Chill tremblings floored
A space to catch one's death in. Or sun shone
And no wind blew, and soft white inchdeep mist
Crept over dry ice. Wall to wall's
Reverberation of a spectral chord,
All the white keys at once came thudding down. (70)

Passage into this placelessness is what leaves Sergei "cured, refurbished, on his way" (34). Yet Merrill will not evoke any kind of transcendence without immediately putting an asterisk by it. There is a hint of stage trickery in that "dry ice," as if mystical visions – like the occult revelations of the Ouija board – were a product of clever stage-management, a triumph for the suspension of disbelief. The expression “catch one’s death” also recalls the earlier poem “McKane’s Falls,” in which (as Reena Sastri points out) the space behind the cascade “sounds very like a tomb” (77).

Leo's escape is also undercut by the content of his vision. Behind the falls, he sees a Pueblo brave "ringed round by twenty weary men." This hallucination may separate him in a trivial sense from the contemporary United States, both in time (the brave has been "dead these hundred years" (49)) and in space (Leo seems to have left the cartographic grid altogether), but it also clearly represents the return of the repressed.34 The reader is meant to think of American history – of the systematic extermination of native tribes in the 19th century, and of the atrocities that Leo witnessed (and may have participated in) in Southeast Asia. The implication seems to be that, even within a "chamber of black stone' that stands for the underlying stability of experience" (Labrie 106), one cannot escape the foundational crimes of one's society or evade its more recent misdeeds.35

As we will see, although Sandover would like to cut away, cauterize, or cleanse any aspect of the United States that might infect its epic enterprise, it will find – again and again – that the contagion keeps returning.
If the West is a warning or a way station in *Sandover*, then the middle of the United States is more like a punchline. The territory between New Mexico and New York would be almost invisible were it not for Kalamazoo, Michigan, hometown of the clueless car dealer whom Matt Jackson – DJ's father – meets in the afterlife (103), and chilly Minnesota, a setting meant mostly to establish the hopeless parochialism and inhospitality of the milieu into which Robert Morse will be reborn (see 524). 36

A couple of Middle American locales do engage in a different kind of distancing – a reduction of the landscape to pure language. Toward the middle of *Mirabell*, a brief set piece celebrates the meeting of David Jackson’s parents in Deadwood, South Dakota (195). 37

Whatever their biographical warrant, the two syllables of *Deadwood* are clearly meant to produce in the reader the same kind of chill that William H. Gass found on biting into *Bloomsbury* (Gass 216). They reinforce the sterility that defines the Jacksons' "desert ghetto," and their dire connotations pass implicit judgment on Matt Jackson, the "nut-brown old maniac" (40) and "rich old skinflint" whose mission in life is to "beat intelligence into [his wife]" (88).

With his rugged name, his patriarchal tan, and his bluff way of speaking, Matt parodies a certain ideal of American manhood – the Marlboro man as spousal abuser. *Sandover* criticizes this ideal by associating Matt with the bleakest spots on its map, but also condemns those places simply by placing Matt in them. 38

The second of these verbal villages is Purgatory, Oklahoma, where JM travels to meet Miranda, a chimpanzee who is learning sign language. A reader notices at once the town’s implausible name – one that suggests, not the American Great Plains, but the many-terraced mountain of *The Divine Comedy*. (A search of Google Maps reveals a Purgatory Pizza in Los
Angeles and a Purgatory Tattoo in Casa Grande, Arizona, but no Purgatory in Oklahoma.)

Adding to the air of fictionality, an aside about the "poor furniture / Of Miranda's island" (18) evokes *The Tempest*, a play that – despite its references to Naples and Tunis – takes place precisely nowhere. These allusions turn Purgatory into a setting that, like Leo's waterfall, abuts but does not occupy cartographical space. They confirm that *Sandover* thinks of a journey into the heartland as somewhat unreal – as a penitential trial, if not quite the fully infernal experience one finds at Los Alamos.

Other American locales are treated even more cursorily. Wystan surfaces briefly in Alaska, where he is trying to disrupt a "NOISY RADIO SHIP" (511) – but in *Sandover's* geography such a location is merely a remote Cold War battleground, hardly more American than "Petrozavodsk" (512). *Sandover* simply does not consider such places to be possible *homes* for its characters. For a poet as fond of domesticity as Merrill, such a deficiency is no small matter. From California to Kalamazoo, his America is mostly military sites and movie studios and miles and miles of "Parched landscape" (*CLS* 35) glimpsed from a plane – all of it farther from the book's real center, in some ways, than the margins are.

The sketchy portrayal of the rest of the country makes clear that, for *Sandover’s* purposes, the *real* United States is the East Coast – and the real East Coast is the “Enchanted Village” (90) of Stonington.

A quiet town near where three Sounds meet, Stonington appeared in the disguise of “Caustic (Me.)” (*CP* 272) in “The Summer People,” the “tidy ballad stanza-boxes” (*CLS* 68) with which Merrill concluded *The Fire Screen* (1969). That poem’s first two quatrains give a fairly good idea of Stonington’s character:
On our New England coast was once
A village white and neat
With Greek revival houses,
Sailboats, a fishing fleet,

Two churches and two liquor stores,
An Inn, a Gourmet Shoppe,
A library, a pharmacy.

Trains passed but did not stop. *(CP 272)*

The tidiness of the rhyme and meter, and the quaintness of the details, suggest a picturesque artificiality that “The Summer People” does not do much to darken. In *Sandover*, however, matters are more complex. While Stonington does function as a “Backdrop” (5) for the action, it is also – thanks to the geographic distortions that I have already discussed – a synecdochic representative for the rest of the United States. A tiny part that reconstructs the whole, the village gives the poem an invented center that can be summed up in three key traits.

First, Stonington is a literary spot. Unlike most epics, *Sandover* represents its own composition, and most of these metafictional passages focus on Stonington.39 The few glimpses the reader gets of JM at work are set in the study at Stonington – and inevitably suggest, in keeping with a post-Flaubertian view of the artist, arduous revision and agonizing structural decisions. In one scene he “Quarries from the transcript murky blocks / Of revelation,” while in another he constructs a text “by now more Tower of Babel than pyramid” (311). In each case, Stonington is portrayed as a place that the artist himself centers, rapt in his work, with the rest of the locale set in orbit by the gravity of his composition.
Stonington is also where JM and DJ have their first encounter with the occult, in 1955, during the “Second summer of [their] tenancy” (5). The house there is the implicit setting for many of the supernatural communications that give Sandover its occasion and structure – messages that, however one chooses to construe them, are the avowed source of the epic’s material, much as a “Celestial Patroness” who “dictate[d]” to “slumb’ring” John Milton (9.21-3) was the purported source of Paradise Lost. Because Sandover associates these “communications” so closely with the house in Stonington, the village itself comes to seem like a collaborator in the literary enterprise.

Second, Stonington is remote. As we have seen, the rest of the United States is relentlessly distanced from the poem’s concerns – treated with scorn, reduced to metaphoric insubstantiality, or (when absolutely necessary) relocated to a mythic, denationalized past. Stonington is like the fixed axis at the center of the centrifuge. Geographically, as the “village / Hideaway” (22) to which DJ and JM retreat to “civilize themselves” – a process that can only occur “away from the rat race” (326) – the town might as well be a thousand miles from New York City or Washington D.C. Both thematic and spatial distance are present in the scene in which the “Whistles and bells” outside their window remind DJ and JM that America is celebrating its Bicentennial – “it’s the Fourth of July!” (163) – and the bat-angel 741 remarks, perhaps ironically, of their disconnection: “U ARE NOT UNLIKE HEAVEN LOOKING DOWN ON TIME PASSING” (164). Stonington remains somehow separate from the American chronotope, and the spectacle of nationhood can only engross for a line or two.

One of Sandover’s most celebrated passages offers a rainbow-tinted description of Stonington – “Lighthouse and clock tower. Village green and neat / Rosebush factory,” along
with “spinnakers” sailing on “the Sound’s quick sapphire” – only to wrest JM and DJ away from the scene with the aid of a line break and an emphatic dash:

– This outside world, our fictive darkness more
And more belittles to a safety door
Left open onto light. Too small, too far
To help. The blind bright spot of where we are. (148)

For a few moments, the town itself seems to become a rejected part of the “outside world,” a distant “light” the two men glimpse from within their “fictive darkness.” Yet this trick of perspective ultimately reinforces the poem’s geographical scheme. Even though the passage opens up a gulf between the lovers at their Ouija board and the little village outside, it also creates a further isolation within the isolation of Stonington, and thus stretches close to infinity the gap between that haven and the rest of the world.

Third, Stonington is safe. The distance from the rest of the world is clearly protective. Timothy Materer has written of a “sense of [global] crisis” (125) that Sandover wants to evoke, and Charles Berger has asserted that the “trilogy’s center of anxious concern, its deep origin . . . is the development of the atomic bomb” (“Merrill and Pynchon” 282), but these matters do not disturb the action much, and only impinge on the characters’ consciousnesses indirectly, hypothetically, thanks in part to the sanctuary of calm and domesticity that Stonington provides. Descriptions of the village emphasize this tranquility, with “sunlight / Fleet on the calm Sound” (261) and the occasional “ROULADES / OF LIGHT & THUNDER” (526) banished to the horizon. Even when a hurricane hits town (243-4), the storm is safely contained within a divine lesson on weather, and thus stripped of all menace and unpredictability.

After the storm, the language hardly bespeaks dread about the end times:
Out of what fairy tale
Fell this inchdeep, multicolored hail . . .
Chromosomes on holiday? A vast
Decomposed Seurat? Or has at last
The inmost matter of the universe
Called it quits, yet left us none the worse?

The scene is festive, the tone whimsical. The hailstones are pellets from a local plastic factory, “rainbow gravel” (244) scattered around Stonington by the flooding Sound. They diminish the storm to a colorful distraction and return us to the poem’s discursive world—through the reference to cellular biology, the quip about pointillism, and the allusion to the rainbow that God sent to Noah, guaranteeing that no cataclysm would ever again destroy mankind (Genesis 9:13-7). Snug within these tight couplets, Stonington remains inviolable. I do not deny that the poem worries about things like the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the degradation of the environment, and the consequences of overpopulation— but, after this storm, JM and DJ are “none the worse,” and the sessions at the Ouija board, the real business of the book, are barely interrupted. Nature subsides outside, “While we, long since at home in the mild bloom / Of candlelight, exchange a look, resume” (244).

Most striking is how completely Stonington protects JM and DJ from less tangible threats. Take the episode of “the Wrong Wallpaper,” a bit of décor so ghoulish that its strange patterns threaten to turn into “Neuroses full-blownd.” In another setting, the incident could easily develop into a Gothic psychodrama out of Henry James or Charlotte Perkins Gilman; Oscar Wilde might have made the paper’s emergent grotesqueries a symbol of the writer’s hidden corruption, or an emblem of the inevitable decay of his relationship. Within the safety of
Stonington, however, the whole episode is just backstory and comic relief. It explains how JM and DJ chose the *right* wallpaper, whose new pattern – featuring the “limber, leotarded, blue-eyed bats” (98) that will inspire the atomic messengers of Mirabell – surrounds JM and shields him with his own fictional creations. In the end, Stonington is isolated within the United States, and the writer is insulated within Stonington.

**What is the overall effect of this portrayal of Stonington?**

The village is disproportionately large on Sandover’s map of the world – a stand-in, in fact, for the entire United States. Thus, the reader gets a very peculiar view of America at century’s end. There is no working world and no consumer culture. There is no stock market, even though the son of the co-founder of Merrill Lynch must have known *something* about its workings. There is no academia to speak of. And the military and political power of the United States – one of the motors of globalization – is banished to the national periphery, confined to a few Western settings that the poem unambiguously rejects.

The implication seems to be that even the most powerful nation on the planet exists mostly for the sake of the artist, to give him a comfortable place to do his work. Within the nation, the author occupies a calm center: within that center, he is master of a safe house: within that house, he is walled in protectively by his creations. In such extreme condensation, one can discern something similar to what Hegglund saw in *Howards End*, a “tension between a symbol so compact and spatially self-contained as a house and the multiple spaces and heterogeneous subjectivities of the ‘real’ England” (74). In Sandover’s case, the “heterogeneous subjectivities” whose struggles most marked the decade or two prior to its composition – African-Americans, Native Americans, students, women – are noticeably absent from the text, particularly from the
scenes set in Stonington. Given that Merrill also excludes things like Stonewall and the publication of C. A. Tripp’s *The Homosexual Matrix*, I would suggest that this absence is not evidence of conscious exclusion or unconscious bigotry, but rather a consequence – obviously a problematic one – of the poem’s desire to protect the cultural realm from all hints of politics and topicality.⁴¹

In a passage from *A Different Person*, Merrill tries to explain – and justify – his disenchantment with politics. Touring Europe with his lover Claude in the Fifties, he avoids historical sites and sticks to museums, cathedrals, and the like: “If our choice excluded, as choices will, broad realms of experience – so be it. The events of the past decade had spoiled any appetite we might have had for public life. It was Culture’s turn now, and we meant to get as much as we could” (*CPR* 505). The poet is ventriloquizing a younger Self here, with all the irony that pose usually implies, but this dichotomy – politics versus culture – will persist throughout his oeuvre. The split is particularly evident in “18 West 11th Street,” from 1972’s *Braving the Elements*, in which the language of topicality is simultaneously incorporated and rejected:

The swallow-flights

Go word by numbskull word

– Rebellion . . . Pentagon . . . Black Studies –

Crashing into irreality,

Plumage and parasites

Plus who knows what of the reptilian. (*CP* 314)
Out of context this dismissal can seem glib or cranky. But it also reflects an aesthetic position, as remarks by Merrill in a 1968 interview with John Boatwright and Enrique Ucelay DaCal make clear:

Oh dear. These immensely real concerns do not produce poetry. But of course one responds. A word-cluster like napalm-baby-burn stimulates the juices as infallibly as the high C of a Donizetti mad scene. Both audiences have been prepared for what they get and are strongly moved. The trouble with overtly political or social writing is that when the tide of feeling goes out, the language begins to stink.

(CPR 72)

Although the diction in these two passages – all parasites and putrefaction – may suggest a disgust that precedes reason, and the ability to think of one’s politics as “apolitical” is a well-known luxury of rich white American men, I am not pursuing a symptomatic reading here. For my purposes, I want to emphasize that this problematic purification of the United States – this abstraction away from anything that might evoke class conflict, systematic oppression, political violence, and so on – is a moment in the poem, not a position into which Sandover settles. Across the Atlantic, on the other side of the epic’s center, the rhetoric of innocence does not take long to break down.

The European Heritage

Leafing through Polito’s Reader’s Guide, one finds the names of European artists and intellectuals on every page: Aquinas, Arcimboldi, Arnold, Austen, Bach, Beethoven, Berlioz, Bernhardt, Bernini, Blake, Boccaccio, Bohr, Bosch, Burne-Jones, Byron . . . I will not continue
all the way to Zola. Yet, even though the cultural freight that Sandover carries is overwhelmingly European, the geography of its “Europe” is more idiosyncratic than the list above might suggest.

Many of Europe’s major cities do make brief appearances in the poem, but they are usually – like Truth or Consequences, New Mexico – stripped of all geographical actuality, subordinated to JM’s personal history or the machinations of the spirit world. Thus, in Amsterdam, JM and DJ watch their reflections ripple in the Prinsengracht, while in Geneva – home of Hans Lodeizen, a close friend of JM’s in college – the talk is mostly of cardboard silhouettes (38, see also 61). In each case, what the author discovers in a European setting is simply a representation of himself, subjected to a mild and aesthetically pleasing distortion. The Rhine becomes little more than a means to evoke apocalypse – “Götterdammerung” and “Valhalla / In flames” (56) – and a reminder of the formative role that Wagner’s operas played in JM’s development. The “Silver / Jubilee in England” (352) becomes an excuse to celebrate DJ and JM’s twenty-fourth anniversary.

Other European locales seem slightly blurred, as if the poem’s weird occult mythology had wrapped the globe in a case of cloudy glass. Even that allusion to Queen Elizabeth slyly suggests the supernatural: “Newsweek / Says London is a pulsing fairyland” (352). Versailles is simply the place where Ephraim spent his courtly “heyday” (238), the Rock of Gibraltar is a remnant of Akhnaton and Nefertiti’s celestially-inspired attempt to create a “CALM & TIDELESS” Mediterranean (226), and the area around Avebury is one of the bat-angels’ “GREAT ANCHOR SITES” (125), a “NERVE CENTER OF THE SACRED EARTH” (121). Each setting becomes visible only to the extent that it will fit into the nutty cosmos of the Ouija board.
With the exception of Venice – which I will discuss later in the chapter – Italy plays only a slightly larger role. Here is what Merrill wrote in his foreword to Julie Agoos’s *Above the Land* (1987):

> What have the look and speech and manners of our hometowns – settled only a few centuries ago by a fanatic sect and a shipload of criminals – in common with Parma’s or Fiesole’s age-old ways of doing and saying, just as effective in the pruning of trees as they are about to be in the seduction of that Lit major reading her guidebook at the café table[?] . . . [Unlike the United States,] Italy *teaches.*

*(CPR 302-3)*

In *Sandover*’s geographic scheme, Italian cities serve two main purposes. First, they are used to evoke debauchery and dark secrets, as if the country’s cultural achievements were inseparable from a certain erotic recklessness. For instance, Capri is the “locus classicus” of Caligula’s orgies, which involve “dwarfs, tame leopards, [and] ancient toothless slaves / Unmarrred by gender” (15). Milan is where “LA BEATA / LUCA SPIONARI” – a “LISSOME LOMBARD STRIPLING” (124) as genderless as those slaves – plays countless campy pranks on his (or her) worshippers. Sicily is where a bat-angel appears in the sky on the day of Jesus’s crucifixion and drives Tiberius insane (204-5). This association of poetry, sexuality, and madness is striking and sustained – a consequence of Merrill’s deeply-rooted Platonism, which takes for granted that poetry is a kind of divine possession (*Ion* 533d-534e) and that Eros fathers philosophical “wings” (*Phaedrus* 252b).44

Italy also allows *Sandover* to develop its complex (and skeptical) outlook on religion. Through Tiberius’s “BAT FEVER” (205) and Luca’s ludicrous miracles – his cult believes that he cured a policeman of “SEVERE PAIN IN GROIN” (235) – Italy is repeatedly linked to early
Christianity and later Catholicism. On the one hand, these references function as a respectable counterpart to Merrill’s bizarre inventions, lending a certain gravitas to the revelations of the spirit world. On the other hand, they also implicitly criticize orthodox religion, since the juxtaposition of the two systems drives home the fact that only many centuries of convention – and the odd auto da fé – can make angels and miracles seem more plausible than talking bats and Ouija boards.

What, then, do these uses of Italy “teach” us? I take them primarily as a signal of Sandover’s commitment to humanism – a commitment that is, admittedly, as ambivalent and ironic as everything else in the poem. An early critic like Ross Labrie can be forgiven for calling the original trilogy “spiritualistic” (105), and Walter Kalaidjian is simply typifying an era of American academic criticism when he sees Merrill’s poem as anti-humanist, as well as anti-science and anti-literary tradition (see Languages of Liberation 93-119). Yet such readings are ultimately misleading. Sandover may flirt with deconstruction and dabble in mock metaphysics, but it devotes most of its attention to questions that are both earthly and deeply rational. Thus, that “TUSCAN HILLSIDE” where a “SIMPLE MENDICANT” (556) – one of the bat-angels in disguise – gave Dante the inspiration for The Divine Comedy should be seen as a kind of secular holy place. Call it the humanist Mount Sinai.

In an interview from the early Eighties, Merrill contrasted Greece with the “great American world of business, technology, and political machines” (CPR 91) – a world that is conspicuously absent from Sandover. Greece was a place of benevolent otherness for Merrill, a sanctuary in which he could cast off his linguistic inhibitions and construct a more autonomous self, liberated from what Richard Rorty has called “blind impresses,” the “tissue of
contingencies” (32) that shape us before we shape ourselves. Yet Greece was not simply a way for the poet to break with his past. In a perceptive essay, Rachel Hadas has shown that Merrill also considered the country a “cultural continuum,” one in which “Homer, Cavafy, and contemporary poets can be seen to be executing the same gesture” (54). Such continuity contrasts strongly with the United States, where a nearly unbridgeable fissure seems to separate mass culture from the African, European, and pre-Columbian folkways that preceded it.

Drawing on poems like “More Enterprise” and “Santorini: Stopping the Leak,” Hadas also suggests that Merrill saw Greece as an “heirloom, keepsake, or gift – something to be acquired or given and cherished but then passed on” (66). Together, these two notions – continuity and transmission – go some way toward explaining the importance of Greece in Sandover. If an epic always aligns itself with a collection of predecessors, then seeks to extend this line by sending its own miniature totality out toward readers who are distant in space and time, then clearly continuity and transmission are central to the whole enterprise. Yet Sandover’s use of Greece is also more complicated than this bare schematic suggests.

Sometimes Greece serves as local color, a gorgeous setting on which the poet can exercise his formidable descriptive and prosodic skills. This is most evident in the canzone that opens the ampersand section of Scripts for the Pageant, a tour de force built around the elemental words sense, light, water, fire, and land (369-70). The passage constructs Samos – with a single small exception that I will mention in a moment – as a “sleepy place” (372), one in which the visiting sophisticate can “Know nothing, now, but Earth, Air, Water, Fire!” (370). Várkiza is similarly all-natural, its rocks and water a prompt for some philosophical musings (more elementary than elemental) on DJ’s part (406).
Other Greek settings are relegated to the past – and are, in fact, “Greek” only because Hellenic civilization once claimed them. In the “bleached boneyard” (372) of Ephesus, for instance, JM twists his ankle missing a ghost step, one that vanished millennia earlier – an accident that emphasizes the limits of tradition, and how a present that relies on the past without reconstructing it will wind up hobbled and disoriented. The city known as “XANTHOS” (8) when the ancient Greeks possessed it – it has since become Kinik in Turkey – is mentioned as the birthplace of Ephraim, while Minoa, we learn, “PERISHD” (127) thanks to the quasi-nuclear explosion of Akhnaton and Nefertiti’s pyramid. Each of these geographical references seems intended to construe Greece as a place of vast cultural fertility, where lines of commerce and travel intersect, where (as in Samos) “Voices from Sweden or Somaliland” cross the waters, and ships arrive bearing boxes of “Turkish delight” (370).

Few other Greek cities appear in Sandover, and those that do only in minor roles – Salonika, for instance, as the site of an earthquake (526). It is true that Sounion – a promontory on the tip of the Attic peninsula – comes up several times, as one of Maria Mitsotáki’s old haunts. Despite its prominence, however, Sounion functions mostly as an adjunct to Athens. The citified Maria goes there to think her deepest thoughts, just as an actor will walk upstage to speak a soliloquy.

Athens, however, is one of the poem’s twin centers – a European counterpart to the secluded, literary Stonington. Throughout Sandover, Athens is associated with intellect and artistry, and within its precincts even the harshest political realities get twisted into something more literary. At one point, we hear that the city is headquarters of “the dictatorship” (13) – the oppressive right-wing junta that ruled Greece in the late Sixties and early Seventies. Yet the expression has no real political content, since it serves mostly to evoke the “dictation” that JM
and DJ will take by way of the Ouija board. Similarly, when Maria recalls how as a child she overheard the charismatic statesman Eleftherios Venizelos speaking about “THE GREAT PROPOSALS” that “COME TO US FROM ON HIGH” (286), Merrill wants his readers to think not of the intricacies of Hellenic political life, but of the “great proposal” that has come to him from on high, the order to write an epic poem.

Again and again, Sandover portrays Athens as the source of Western culture, and conflates this with the notion of eros as the source of all culture. When DJ’s parents visit Athens, for instance, they spend their time “Restaging” primal scenes that, seasons past,

Inaugurated, as [they] had and would

Countless other Western theatres, this

Innermost one of David’s. (100)

The syntax is intricate, but the import is clear. The three great Athenian playwrights – Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, whose works did indeed inaugurate “Countless . . . Western theatres” – are superimposed onto the “family triangle” of Freud’s Oedipal model (The Ego and the Id 21-2). The effect is to create the constellation: Athens, artwork, origins.

This constellation might be seen as the astrological sign presiding over the poem’s European center. It is no accident, I think, that Athens is the only city in Sandover explicitly linked to the epic tradition. Not only is it where JM and DJ run over that black dog (270) – an allusion to the first manifestation of Mephistopheles in Faust (Goethe 1147) – it is also the place that Homer calls “HOME” (355), despite recent scholarship that traces the author of The Iliad and The Odyssey to the Aegean Sea or Asia Minor (Finlay 6, Taplin 44). This last bit of poetic
license strikes me as particularly significant, since it allows Wystan to celebrate a self-described Athenian as the source of all poetry:

HOW JOYOUSLY

WE LITTLEMEN HAVE SAILED YOUR WINEDARK SEA,

IMMORTAL BARD, YOU WHO CREATED ME! (355)

The same constellation shines down on Sandover’s most audacious piece of intertextuality, the revelation that Maria is in fact an avatar of Plato – the quintessential Athenian. The philosopher makes a useful symbol of origins for all the obvious reasons – because custom places him, along with Socrates, at the head of the Western intellectual tradition; because he was an early theorist of sublimation, the notion that eros is the ultimate source of artistic creation and intellectual aspiration; and because, as an early partisan of gay love, he functions as the “great-grandfather of queer writers searching for self-knowledge” (Gwiazda, Merrill and Auden 72). It is in honor of these traits that Sandover makes Plato one of the “CO-CHAIRPERSONS” of the all-male, all-gay, ostentatiously intellectual “Athenian / Club” (305).

Late in Sandover, the constellation appears one final time. Nature – personified throughout as a kind of maternal variation on Goethe’s Ewig-Weibliche – is prophesying the future elevation of humanity, and foretells an exalted role for Merrill’s magnum opus:

WE WILL ALSO SAY: YOU SEE,

IN ATHENS ONCE THERE WAS AN ACADEMY . . . (513)

The trope manages a tricky reversal. On the one hand, the reference to the Academy reinforces the notion of Athens as a source; on the other hand, the poem also casts its own moment as a new beginning, and imagines a future in which some epic poet looks back on Merrill’s Athens – JM and DJ, Maria and Maisie, Strato and Kleo – as an origin in its own right.
The implication is that *Sandover* will mark the start of a new tradition, as fruitful and multifarious as the one initiated by Plato and his students.

Together, the two cities, Athens and Stonington, provide a joint center for the totality that *Sandover* wants to represent. Athens is associated with artistic and intellectual inheritance – the rich cultural heritage that custom traces back to the ancient Greeks. Stonington is associated with artistic and intellectual *production*, abstracted away from the political and economic realities of the United States. The sum total of this portrayal is two-fold:

- *To sketch out the boundaries of Atlantic civilization.* Through the use of Stonington and Athens as synecdoches for the United States and Europe, *Sandover* quickly sketches out the twin centers of the world-system that grew out of the emergence of Europe as a unified continent, its empowerment through the institutions of capitalism and the nation, and its spread through trade, cultural diffusion, and colonialism – a process that has reached either an apotheosis or a crisis in the phenomenon called globalization. The delineation of this dual center gives *Sandover* an immediate sense of what it is an epic of.

- *To separate the political and economic bases of that society from its artistic and cultural superstructure.* In *Sandover*, the cultural side of this totality is kept sequestered from the economic, political, and military machinations by which Atlantic civilization achieved its global prominence. To maintain a kind of purity, the poem reduces the entire United States to one sleepy village in Connecticut, and embodies all of Europe in a relic from the earliest days of classical civilization. Within the logic of this geographical distortion, both locations are depicted in a way
that implies that cultural creation – the composition of epic poems, for instance – can be considered in isolation from the political misbehavior of the society that makes it possible.

This two-step sounds suspiciously like the rhetoric of innocence that Franco Moretti describes in *Modern Epic*, a literary version of the “blend of truth and lie . . . typical of a West that is proud of its own world dominion,” but ashamed of the “violence sustaining it” (26). According to Moretti, such rhetoric often takes the form of the epic hero retreating to a safe center, where his “universality” puts him “in a position to desire, and obtain, the advantages of an entire world” (34), without any of the guilt that accompanies actual action. *Sandover* takes such passivity to an extreme, setting its heroes in front of the rectangle of the Ouija board like a couple of couch potatoes in front of a TV.

Fortunately, Merrill is too self-conscious a writer to become a mere symptom. A revealing passage in *A Different Person* – composed a decade after *Sandover* – describes the author’s participation in a friendly game of Murder: “Everyone was asked where he’d been at the fatal moment. I stuck to a simple alibi: in such and such a room near the bookcase” (*CPR* 665). Clearly Merrill is having a laugh at his own expense here, mocking any self-exoneration predicated on the supposed innocence of literary activity. It is in the same spirit that *Sandover* will interrogate its own rhetoric of innocence – and find it lacking.

*A Rotten House, A Sinking City*

The set piece entitled *The House in Athens* unsettles *Sandover*’s portrayal of Athens as a pure reservoir of *eros* and art. Take these lines:
Starting with our basement spinster “frozen”
Since wartime there by rent
Control (unlike her roaches),

They [the walls] end high up in splendor –
Well, actually a terrace
Of waving oleander,
Geranium, jasmine at its plummy lushest.
Between extremes the space
Is filled with our two stories. (430)

In a psychological reading, the house would represent – as houses often do – the mind, and the spinster “frozen” beneath the ground floor would signify the core of JM’s psyche, defiantly unproductive, fixed in place by the “wartime” between his parents, the divorce and custody battle that so traumatized the 11-year-old child. Less psychologically, the house might stand for Earth itself, the lushly vegetative world that the trio of flower names suggests. Finally, the structure may be a way to reflect on the human condition, to locate mankind between the animals (those cockroaches) and the angels (that “splendor” on the terrace), in a space defined by the narratives we invent, “filled with our . . . stories.”

Even as I recognize these meanings, I want to focus on a more subtle aspect of the imagery in The House in Athens. The title may point to the world of art and beauty that I believe Sandover wants to construct in Athens, but the language in which Merrill describes the house betrays a deep concern about this cultural inheritance. The owners are “neo-Grecian” (433), for instance, but the architecture is “Mediterranean Fascist in style” (431) – a detail that brings out
the hint of a Hitlerian Übermensch in those “blond-washed” (430) walls. (This adjective should also remind us of the “WHITEWASH” (394) that Wystan perceives in JM’s epic.) Furthermore, the secret in the basement is hardly an Eleusinian mystery. Just as in Capri, an aestheticized surface covers up something far more “incriminating” (8) – in this case, overtones of sterility (the spinster), death (her “frozen” body), and decay (those roaches again). Keeping the whole structure going is a “Greedy, / Erotic little orc” (433) – a furnace, literally, but one that the poem invites us to take also as a voracious desiring in the psyche, as the infernal insides of the Earth, as the negative resistance necessary to articulate the cosmos, and as the violently acquisitive core of Atlantic civilization.

The orc acquires what it burns in ingloriously material ways. Thus, for perhaps the first time in Sandover, we meet firsthand that “great American world of business, technology, and political machines” (CPR 91) – a world of tense go-getters, steeped in “envy and aggression,” making their money in “air-conditioned Tulsa / Or on the Persian Gulf.” The repressed returns to poison culture at the source. Worse still, the spatial relationship between those businessmen in Oklahoma and those rigs off Saudi Arabia or Kuwait resembles too closely that between Merrill and the distant totality his epic delineates. The fear is that, just as dependence on petroleum may warp America’s foreign policy, so Merrill’s dependence on deep reserves of Western power, tapped all over the globe, may warp his poem’s perception of the whole. On the terrace, where the residents of this Athenian house have gone to be at their “bright airiest,” the chimney belches forth “Upgusts of smut” that “[pepper] everything” – an intrusion, into the realm of art and angels, of the waste products of that “Greedy . . . little orc” (433). Small wonder that the maid Kleo – named, we learn elsewhere, after Clio, the muse of history (CLS 53) – tends to despair at the way her tidy presentations are sullied, again and again, by these dark explosions.
The House in Athens culminates – somewhat cryptically, at first reading – in a scene of aesthetic contemplation, capped by an implicit question:

Now think of that anemic
High-rise Cranach Venus
We saw how many years ago (in Munich?)

... Not having found Greece yet, we spent a while
Admiring “values,” “volumes,”
“Relationship” of brat
To smiling, cat-faced goddess,

As if in that long hall
The work had been a wonder
Dreamlike, neat, abstractable from all
The moods and codes of matter,
Goings-on kept under
Her nodding ostrich hat. (434)

The scene recreates in miniature the whole dilemma of The House in Athens – and, in some ways, of Sandover itself. Whether in the “long hall” or in the long haul, can a work of art be disentangled from the material interests of the societies in which it is produced and received? JM and DJ would like to have a purely aesthetic appreciation for this painting of the Goddess of Love, to discuss it in the most rigorously (or pretentiously) formal terms. They have no interest in, say, the relationship between Cranach and Lutheranism, or his habit of catering to the
“provincial aristocracy” of the court at Saxony (Janson and Janson 490). Yet even the rarefied vocabulary these aesthetes use betrays them. “Values” involves them in the messiness of human morality, “Relationship” evokes the untidiness of human interactions, and “volumes” suggests the mundane, marketable containers for human stories (see also the allusion to Mallarmé on 57). There is no getting away from what Culture keeps “under / Her nodding ostrich hat,” just as there is no escape from that “Greedy . . . little orc” buried in Culture’s basement.

In this context, the subjunctive of the last stanza acquires a peculiar, interrogative force. It asks us to entertain the possibility that art may be “abstractable from all / The moods and codes of matter.” Because this set piece comes at the end of the pivotal ampersand section of *Scripts*, we do not have to wait long for an answer. The word is there, all alone and in emphatic capitals, on the very next page:

NO.

At first glance, Venice resembles Athens, a simple symbol of cultural inheritance. *Sandover* describes the city almost entirely in terms of artworks – Titian and Giorgione, Wagner and Stravinsky – and, when JM and DJ take a tour there, they are accompanied by an eclectic cast of creators, including Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, Maya Deren, and Pythagoras. Yet there is a key difference between the two locales: the overtones that trouble *The House in Athens* are the dominant note when it comes to Venice.

In an interview, Merrill sought to downplay the symbolic significance of Venice: “I think it’s the most magical city in the world. I don’t think it’s a symbol. It’s just a wonderful place” (*CPR* 101). This deflection depends on a certain sloppiness in the listener – a willingness to conflate an actual physical location with the complex of associations that cluster around a name.
But the name *Venice* is certainly “symbolic” in *Sandover*, no matter what the author says. You do not call a place a “drowning, dummy paradise” (502) or describe it as a “whole heavenly city / Sinking” (75) unless you want to trigger thoughts beyond the literal. Thus, in two key scenes, *Sandover* uses Venice to make explicit its doubts about the separation of art and politics, culture and commerce, and to think through the consequences of their inextricability.

The first of these scenes stretches across sections V and W of *Ephraim*. The action itself is simple. Ruminating in Venice – and ruminating on Venice – JM gets caught in a thunderstorm and, afterward, runs into his nephew Wendell. The two of them share a convivial dinner, then stroll together through the city. From the beginning, Venice is presented as a place defined by dualities, as the pairing of “nirvana” and “vice” in V’s first line indicates. Even before he encounters Wendell, JM has begun to have his doubts about the city. Looking at a statue of Saint Theodore of Amasea, Venice’s original patron, he sees not a magnificent artwork, but its ignoble foundations – a “monumental / ‘I’ of stone,” spattered with bird shit, that “Each visit stands for less.” The uninspiring view from the Accademia Bridge suggests a view from *academia* that is similarly dispiriting, no more than a vista on Western civilization’s “emptily-lit display / Rooms.” Such considerations culminate in JM’s dismissal of Venice’s economic patrons – the real Guggenheims and fictional Santofiors – as so much “historical garbage, in the Marxist phrase,” and his conclusion that anyone who keeps faith with them is a contemptible “valet,” writing “scented drivel” for a dying class whose corruption has left the city “caked with slime” (75).

The rest of the accusation against Venice – and, implicitly, against all of Atlantic civilization – comes from JM’s nephew, Wendell. Eager to learn from the artworks around him, Wendell nonetheless distrusts Venice, much as he distrusts the feast to which his uncle
treats him: “Though omnivorous // He rather looks down on the scene, I sense” (79). This scorn derives from the distance he sees between art’s elegance and the real political behavior of human beings:

“I guess that’s sort of how I see mankind,”


They talk about how decent, how refined –
All it means is, they can afford somehow
To watch what’s happening, and not to mind.” (80)

This time Mao, rather than Marx, endorses the critique. Of course, this is adolescent outrage of a familiar kind – an exaggerated recoiling from the world’s more unpalatable aspects that betrays a shame at how thoroughly and how recently one was ignorant of them. Yet the poem does not simply mock Wendell. Faced with such an accusation, JM can only trail off lamely: “The Renaissance / Needn’t be judged by its aristocrats, / Etc.” (81). In that “Etc.,” one hears a halting acknowledgement that, whatever its glories, Venice may no longer provide a refuge (as it did for Proust and the modernists) from the “hollowness and emptiness of the surrounding civilization” (Adams 79), or from its brutality and destructiveness. The hope that underlies the depictions of Stonington and Athens – that the creation of art and the transmission of culture can be isolated from the ugliness of economic and political life – is shown to be a false one.

Only before and after the encounter with Wendell does JM mount a more vigorous defense of the city – almost as if art’s claims must in the late 20th century be made privately,
even esoterically, rather than in polite intellectual society. The key to this defense is a complex metaphor at the end of section V, just before the meeting by the bridge:

it came to mind

How anybody’s monster breathing flames

Vitrified in metamorphosis

To monstrance clouded then like a blown fuse

If not a reliquary for St. James’

Vision of life. (77)

In this difficult passage, the central transformation is that between “monster” and “monstrance” – two pieces of medieval mythology, each as distant from most readers (and therefore as unambiguously not literal) as Ephraim, Mirabell, and the chattering archangels. “[B]reathing flames,” the monster is both the vanquished opponent of Saint Theodore, in the incident that statue in the Piazzetta di San Marco dramatizes, and the “crack! boom! flash!” of the thunder and lightning that beset JM. Worm or storm, it is clearly an agent of “metamorphosis,” one that can turn Theodore into a saint and convert Venice – “Pure menace” a moment before – into a “window fiery-mild” (77). Each metamorphosis harnesses an uncontrollable, destructive power and uses it to make something bounded and manageable.

With that in mind, the passage can be seen to have a metafictional meaning as well. Caught in a storm of commerce and corruption, the artist is the one who can transform the flow of power; he interferes with the usual means of transmission, just as a “blown fuse” does, and becomes a vessel for his own kind of energy – a “reliquary” that will bear not that first annihilating flash, but rather an illuminating “Vision of life.” Such a transformation sanctifies the
artist: it turns even humble James Merrill – an aging uncle, drenched on the streets of Venice – into saintly James. Thus, when JM asserts that Wendell has found a “cleaner use for power” (81), he offers the young man, despite his adolescent skepticism, as a paradigmatic artist, one who has – without knowing it – found a way to take the social, political, and economic energies that converge in Venice and convert them into something valuable and lasting.

I want to conclude by looking briefly at a second key scene set in Venice. At the beginning of the Venetian Jottings (502-6), JM “shuts his Dante” – a gesture that suggests a turning away from Italy’s cultural inheritance, and implicitly from all of Europe. The phrase recalls JM’s earlier statement that “I’ve read Proust for the last time. Looked my fill / At the Tempesta.” We are supposed to entertain the possibility that such works, though “timeless in [their] fashion” (76), are ripe for replacement, as outmoded as the “PREWAR GONDOliERE HAT” for which Stevens and Stein fruitlessly “WINDOWSHOP.” Such obsolescence is certainly the idea behind an “anti- / Biennale” (502) that JM and his friends attend – a kind of mirror version of Venice’s famous (and famously Eurocentric) festival. There they are confronted with a tradition outside their own, and JM – watching Maya Deren’s film of a Haitian voodoo ceremony – utters an appalled exclamation: “We are the ghosts, / Hers the ongoing party” (505). The moment makes explicit the anxiety lurking behind Sandover’s depiction of Venice. When the West eventually sinks, will art and literature – like Pythagoras in “Peggy Guggenheim’s / Waterlogged gondola” – go “DOWN WITH THE SHIP”? (503). Or might a mortal artist – like the voodoo god Ghédé, who presides over the “meeting of the quick and the dead” (Deren 37) – find a way to make his “dyings live”? (CLS 506).
One last detail suggests an answer to these questions. Even though JM has closed his copy of *The Divine Comedy*, he still composes the *Venetian Jottings* in a masterful *terza rima*, and ends them with the Dantesque word “Stars” (506, see also 78-82). Such structural, intertextual survivals do not require that medieval Florence still stand, or that anyone still subscribe to an Italian poet’s peculiar brand of scholasticism. Like the Venetian glassblower whose work mimics the transformative lightning of section V, an epic writer is able to “conflate / Ember with embryo” (504) and rescue from the conflagration of his society the seeds of some new creation. True, every epic may be “A BIT OF A WHITEWASH,” enmeshed in a rhetoric of innocence – but every epic also draws its own map, plotting and replotting the whole, in the hope that someday someone will steer by its coordinates.
Epic Projections:

_Sandover_ on the Margins

Early in _The Book of Ephraim_, we hear that a “Previous incarnation of JM” (11), one Rufus Farmetton, died of a heart attack in the Transvaal in 1925 – a surprising piece of information, given that it links the author, James Merrill, to some of the least reputable practitioners of European colonialism. The choice is all the more puzzling in that Rufus only appears twice more in _Sandover_, once in a brief death scene (42-3) and once in order for 741 to dismiss him as “A PARTIAL FICTION” meant to “DRAMATIZE / THE KIND OF FACT YOU BELIEVED AT THAT POINT HAVE BELIEVED” (145). What should we make of this Afrikaner’s brief transit through the poem? Apartheid was widely condemned during the years of _Sandover_’s composition, after all, and Merrill must have known that the words “Farmer” (his first guess for his predecessor’s last name) and “Transvaal” (42, 11) would inevitably suggest to his readers the white settlers responsible for this unjust and racist system. Why not pick a less loaded identity? It may be that Merrill – from the safety of his homes in Stonington and Athens – felt somewhat _compromised_ in his relation to the margins of Atlantic civilization. I am not suggesting that he or his work partook of the kind of crude racism we associate with Rufus’s descendants, the defenders of apartheid. All the evidence indicates that Merrill was a kind, generous, liberal-minded man – Langdon Hammer’s biography does not contain any nasty surprises – and his oeuvre reveals a sensibility the very opposite of ethnocentric, receptive to the variety of the world and scornful of all fanaticisms, including those of nation and race. Yet there is always a touch of the globetrotting capitalist in this persona, and a hint of _noblesse oblige_. Merrill may have been buried in a kimono (Magowan and Magowan 5), he may have
taken a Caribbean santero as his model of the artist (see “The Image Maker” in *CP* 513-26, *CPR* 153-4), and he may have been fascinated by the intricacies of Muslim culture (see “Chimes for Yahya” and “Yannina” (*CP* 371-8, 380-4)), but in many ways his perspective remains that of a privileged tourist, content to hop from stop to stop.51

This may explain why, even as he gives Sandover its global extent, Merrill seldom assumes the identities of the downtrodden or dispossessed, and almost all the figures he ventriloquizes – from Montezuma to Vladimir Nabokov – are part of someone’s aristocracy. The power of the West is a prerequisite for his poem, and he is keenly aware that power “kicks upstairs those who possess it, / The good and the bad alike” (54). The epic writer – working in his room “upstairs,” and dependent for his vocation on this powerful position – can take neither his society’s nor his own virtue for granted. Whether he is Virgil looking at the losses of the Latins or Goethe grappling with European capitalism’s notion of “people who are in the way” (Berman 67), the epic writer is always a little like Rufus Farmetton, in a compromised position and barely a step from guilt.52

As I have already shown in Chapter One, Sandover builds its safe center by reducing Atlantic civilization to two key locales – Stonington, Connecticut, presented as a perfect place for the creation of literary works; and Athens, Greece, presented as the ideal source for the writer’s cultural inheritance. Yet – as the depiction of Venice makes clear – the poem also fears that Atlantic civilization is sinking, brought low by world wars, genocide, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the reality of environmental degradation, and a host of other mortal concerns. Admittedly, epic writers must always think in terms of the longue durée (as historians of the
Annales school call it) and thus be keenly aware of the ephemerality of their own contexts. But Sandover has worries less distant than these. As Auden put it in the late Sixties:

I think a great many of us are haunted by the feeling that our society, and I don’t mean just the United States or Europe, but our whole world-wide technological civilization, whether officially labelled capitalist, socialist, or communist, is going to smash, and probably deserves to. (Mendelson, “The Secret Auden” 4)

That tension – between “the United States and Europe” and “our whole world-wide technological civilization” – also informs Merrill’s thinking on global matters. On the one hand, he makes Atlantic civilization the unmistakable center of his totality. On the other hand, he seems uneasily aware that this is an imperial center, imposing its dominance on an often unwilling periphery, and accomplishing its ends by the usual combination of force, money, and cultural persuasion.

How does this play out in Sandover? In a scene from the lost novel, Sergei – who, as Yenser points out, “bears a discreet resemblance to JM” (220) – stands before the mirror and beholds his dark double. As I noted earlier, the passage means to establish Sergei as an embodiment of the Cold War, someone whose Russian and American sides hold “summit meetings” and “hangfire talks” and strive for a “fumbling détente.” But it also emphasizes that neither party in this Manichean face-off has much appeal to the “Third World” (69):

“Need I, mon cher,

Expatiate on how we figure there? –

You in its communes as a crudely colored

Capitalist gorged on oil and gold,

I in its temples as a slitherer
Tombless, untamed, whose least coalfire-blue scale

The phantom of an infant whimpers from . . .” (70)

The passage is gnarly and arcane, but it is hard to miss the sense of guilt this authorial doppelganger feels under the gaze of the margins. To those who seek economic justice, he is a capitalist exploiter, fattening on the people’s “oil and gold,” while to those who want to preserve their cultural integrity he is a revolutionary snake, menacing the “temples” and corrupting the children. In either case, the sense of innocence so laboriously constructed in Sandover’s center seems to fall apart when it comes to the margins. Unflattering reflections double and redouble.

The rest of section T goes out of its way to link this two-faced destroyer – Sergei in the mirror – to the characteristic activities of the creator. One four-line flurry drops allusions to Dante, Mozart, Kandinsky, and Garbo. In another dense passage, Sergei’s “Designs” on a “backwardly emerging / Notion” are entangled with the designs of his two societies on backward and emerging nations, while his pursuit of “dream-deposits” and “raw / Dignity” (69) is conflated with their pursuit of mineral deposits and raw materials. By way of such wordplay, the artist’s enterprise is presented as a slightly refracted version of Empire’s rapacity.

What else but Merrill's meditation on the political and aesthetic implications of this situation can explain a speech that Andrew Marvell makes to Robert Morse, midway through Scripts for the Pageant?

‘WHAT'S WRONG WITH EMPIRES, PRAY?
GREATLY BENEFICIAL. FOR THE SUBJECTED,
DELICIOUS SUBJUGATION & FOR THE RULERS,
TERRIBLE FEARS OF LOSING, BALANCED BY
RARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BEASTLINESS.’ (381)
Campy as they are, these lines nonetheless betray Merrill’s acute self-consciousness about the political status of his project. An encyclopedic narrative does tend to echo the structure of an empire, representing the world – including all that is marginal – chiefly in order to control it. And writers like Virgil and Goethe have depended on empires for both their immediate context and the subsequent transmission of their work. The accusations that Wendell made in Venice return in a more troubling form, and the arts are once again seen as a tacit endorsement of exploitation and oppression.

Yet structural similarities do not imply functional identity. As Edward Said has acknowledged, even the most historically-minded critic “must allow . . . that the refinements, the personal style, the individual genius, may finally supersede the political restraints operating impersonally through tradition and through the national ambience” (Orientalism 271). The determinations of history may be absolute when it comes to parameters, but within these boundaries the number of possible outcomes is nearly infinite. Sandover is not simply a symptom, the inevitable result of 2800 years of winner’s epics and three decades of American hegemony. Although the poem does draw on its society’s preconceptions about the differences between East and West, North and South, us and them, it also turns such distortions to its own purposes, refunctionalizing them as elements in a global epic.

In this chapter, I will look at how Sandover represents the margins – inconvenient, unmanageable, other – of its epic totality. I will show that the poem employs places like China and Japan, Ethiopia and Egypt, Haiti and “THE ARGENTINE” (313) – the putative periphery of the global whole – in three interconnected ways:

– To mitigate the responsibility of Atlantic civilization for the ills that have accompanied its global ascent;
– To reinforce the safety of the center (see Chapter One) by staging easily controllable displays of exoticism;
– To prophesize a shift in the center of global power, one that, by making the margins a continuation of the story of Atlantic civilization, effectively colonizes the future.

These three responses correspond broadly to a rejection of the margins, a flirtation with the margins, and an apotheosis of the margins. Understood as a function of the poem’s epic ambitions, they both deepen Sandover’s artistic interest and add new levels of complexity – and complicity – to its rhetoric of innocence.

The Art of Exculpation

One strategy of Sandover is to acknowledge some of the weak spots of Atlantic civilization – how under its dominance, for instance, population has tended to outstrip available resources, and scientific accomplishment to outstrip political wisdom – and to project these flaws onto the margins. This approach can be seen as a refinement of the rhetoric of innocence, a further attempt to clear the freight of the epic of any taint and to satisfy the usual human desire that the distribution of power in the world should somehow reflect the distribution of virtues and vices.

I am not suggesting that the poem consciously has such aims. But Merrill himself has described Sandover as the “unconscious . . . taking its revenge” (CPR 156), and part of that revenge is the “vast amount of questionable dogma” (CPR 159) that flows through the Ouija board, unimpeded by the filters of intelligence or ethics. These uppercase communiqués are the means by which the poem takes the threats of overpopulation and nuclear annihilation and turns
them *outwards*, towards the margins. They draw on a collective unconscious that is not the universal one posited by Jung but a kind of societal mind, shaped by the history and limits of Atlantic civilization. I want to take a look at these unconscious projections, before I contrast them – in the chapter’s last two sections – with how *Sandover* uses the same material in its more conscious moments.

Late in *Ephraim*, JM sees the crowd crossing the Accademia Bridge in Venice as a harbinger of a “population explosion / Of the greatest magnitude and brilliance” (75) – or a “gente nova,” as he playfully puts it, conflating the Italian word for *new* with the name for an exploding white dwarf star. The messengers from the divine realm see these coming billions as a catastrophe, and Mirabell exclaims in exasperation: "2 CHILDREN PER COUPLE: IS IT NOT A SIMPLE RULE?" (247). The bat-angels are working to "CORRECT THE SIGNAL" (248), to encourage countermeasures – from birth control to suicide to androgyny to feminism – that will stave off such senseless reproduction. "FOR IT IS GOD'S WILL," the archangel Elijah says, "THAT HIS CHILDREN REDUCE THEIR NUMBERS" (307).


First, the concept of overpopulation becomes entangled with the harsh elitism of the celestial messengers. These spirits have nothing but contempt for the mediocre masses, “FRACTIONAL HUMANS” (117) who lead “USELESS LIVES” in an “ANIMAL STATE” (188). The bat-angels care only about “two million relatively fleet / Achievers” (140) and
consider the rest of mankind so much fodder: “HAVE NO FEAR  WE CLONE THE HAPPY FEW THE MASSES WE NEED / NEVER CONSIDER.” This heartlessness horrifies JM and DJ’s democratic sensibilities – “You don’t know how such talk upsets us. / We’re all for equal rights here” – but such “fat-cat / Attitudes” (188) seem to appear every time the poem considers overpopulation.

Second, *Sandover* tends to *displace* its concern onto places like Asia and Africa, consistently equating these continents with out-of-control population growth. For example, *Sandover* reduces China to a single aspect: what Maria refers to as “MILLIONS OF LITTLE / YELLOW FACES STRAIGHT OUT OF THE DAISY PATCH” (193). Although the comment describes Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev’s reaction to a nightmare Maria stage-managed – a vision of China’s rise as a communist rival – such stereotypes reappear (minus the color-coding) in other passages. A lesson on weather equates low reproductive rates with “INTELLIGENCE” and adds this appalling footnote:

WHEREVER NATURE STILL

NEEDS DROUGHT EARTHQUAKE ET AL TO SLOW THE CROWDING

(INDIA

CHINA OR YR WEST COAST) OUR CLONING OF THE COMMISSARS

HAS BEEN INCOMPLETE (245)

Natural disasters are seen as a tool used by the cosmos to offset the fecundity of the insufficiently mindful. Now, the statement is made by Mirabell, of course, and no attentive reader will mistake the peacock’s position for the poem’s, any more than he would take the blustering of Thrasymachus for the doctrine of *The Republic* itself. The mention of America’s “WEST COAST” also softens the insult a bit, since it augments the two Asian nations with a
representative from Atlantic civilization. Yet the passage remains slightly shocking, if only for the nonchalance with which this divine messenger draws on a vulgar Western cliché – about relentlessly breeding "minorities," whose inability to control their instinctual urges goes along with an incapacity for modern civilization – and uses it to create an aura of disreputability around the margins.

According to Wystan, Ethiopia – one of the few sub-Saharan countries to appear in Sandover – is also afflicted by this tendency to “OVERPRODUCE” (139), and so a “COOL HALF MILLION” (508) there are susceptible to starvation. (Since this passage comes from Scripts, published in 1980, it may refer either to the historical prevalence of famine in Ethiopia or to the specific conditions that led to the severe famine of 1983-5.) The words seem merely callous in isolation, but Wystan speaks them as part of a set piece about his coming reincarnation in the mineral world, not long after he has admitted his biggest fear about the moment of “SURFACING”:

    WELL, WHAT IF SOME AFRICAN
    DUSKY PICKS A BIG BRIGHT SPARKLER UP?

Again, these words are clearly meant to function as characterization – to hint at the stodginess and snobbery that lurk behind the venerable poet’s refinement and to clarify why he might have tolerated the frank racism of his long-time lover, Chester Kallman. Yet they also cast a disturbing light on Wystan’s mission among the minerals:

    OUR WORK BEGINS:
    COVERING THE SINS OF MULTITUDE
    WE MARCH WE GRAINS OF SAND! (507)
Wystan is referring to a kind of divinely-inspired desertification, designed to keep population down and pave the way for that future paradise. Such a mixture of Malthus and Thomas More is bizarre to begin with, but becomes almost sinister when one realizes that – according to the cover story of Time that JM mentions in response – those “Creeping Deserts” are located mostly in Africa and Asia: the Sahara, the Rajputana, the Negev (“Environment”). Thus, although the excesses that lead to “Nature’s Revenge” (507) are overwhelmingly associated with the activities of central powers like the United States, the “thinning” that will bring on utopia is focused on the margins, whose citizens are seen as just so much worthless rock for human progress to cut into gemstone.

These two responses to overpopulation combine in a troubling way. Even though Sandover distances itself from the snobbery of the divine messengers, the poem nonetheless believes in a kind of cultural elitism – the idea that, whatever the political appeal of “equal rights,” the making of art is necessarily hierarchical, so that every creator, from the poet to the mapmaker, is subject to judgments of greater than and less than. Merrill put it this way in a 1991 interview with Augustin Hedberg:

I’m afraid I don’t see how you can separate art from a degree of elitism. Even in a primitive society there’ll be a drummer or a carver of pictographs who stands out as better than his fellows. Must the tribe’s children not be allowed to appreciate this difference? (CPR 164)

Unfortunately, the interaction of ideas in Sandover twists this position into some unintended forms. Thanks to the bat-angels’ rhetoric, “Some artists are better than others” metamorphoses into “Some people are better than others,” which in turn looks a lot like “Our people are better than those Others.” The projection of overpopulation onto the margins only
strengthens this impression. As I hope my study will make clear, the sense that Sandover elevates the West and dismisses the rest is a false one – but it lingers anyway, an unpleasant aftertaste easily discernible by palates educated in the hermeneutics of suspicion.

The tendency to project – and reject – is even more striking in the case of nuclear disaster. Many critics have pointed out Sandover's anxiety about the state of the world, circa 1980, and have paid particular attention to the prospect of nuclear annihilation. Judith Moffett claims that the original trilogy was “undertaken as a warning against nuclear disaster” (154), while Timothy Materer calls this “threat to humanity” the “dominant concern of Mirabell and Scripts” (88). Don Adams also reads Mirabell as a jeremiad against "our addiction to nuclear power and weaponry" (112), while Lee Zimmerman sees Sandover as an “anti-apocalyptic” (181) work, primarily engaged with the “radical contingency posed by nuclear weaponry” (183).

I believe these critics overstate the case – they are too quick to take the teachings of the spirits for the lessons of the poem itself – but I will grant that Sandover is apprehensive about the fate of mankind. When it comes to nuclear destruction, however, this anxiety is once again displaced in an odd way.

In 1957’s “The Beaten Path,” an account of the world tour that he took with David Jackson, Merrill describes a visit to the Peace Museum in Hiroshima. The displays include the “end of a child’s thumb . . . which dropped off during the five days before the little boy finally died,” along with “melted rock, flattened bottles, scorched clothing on charred mannequins, photographs of scar tissue, a shot of Truman at the telephone – and beyond the plate glass, the filthy flat field with a man on crutches picking through a trash can.” Merrill is wounded and overwhelmed by what he sees – “one of the most painful experiences imaginable” (CPR 325-6). Two decades later, in Sandover, he makes Hiroshima into an obvious symbol for the Nuclear
Age. The city is haunted by the "SMASHED ATOMS OF THE DEAD" (55), and JM and DJ weep when they learn that “All trace was lost / Of souls that perished in that holocaust” (183). Statements like these express a generalized horror at the destructive powers inside the atom – and thus serve as compelling evidence for the fears that critics have ascribed to *Sandover*.

Yet some of this horror also attaches to the *victims* of the atom. Take this passage from *Mirabell* about the drawbacks of cities:

EARTH

RADIATES TO US THESE HEAT CENTERS WHICH ALARM GOD B

INTO EFFECTING NEW METHODS WE MUST CLONE THE SCRIBE TO

REGULATE URBAN GROWTH LEST IN ITS PLAGUE MAN HIMSELF BE

BOILD. HIROSHIMA PRODUCED 2 DRAMATIC NOTIONS: FEAR

OF THE FUSED ATOM AND OF THE FUSED MAN IN HIS CLOSELY

PACKD CITY. (194)

The word “RADIATES” functions as what Freud called – in the context of dream analysis – a “switch-word,” a “junction” (*Fragment 207*) where meaning can shunt from the ostensible to the hidden. It prepares the reader for an extended metaphor in which men and women are atoms and the "PACKD CITY" an atomic pile, making the crowded masses of the metropolis as fraught with danger as the critical masses of nuclear fission. Yet this clever comparison has an unintended consequence. To unify the metaphor, the "PLAGUE" of urban crowding must be exemplified by Hiroshima – a city whose population in 1945 (or, for that matter, in 1975) was tiny compared to that of New York, London, or Paris. This choice means that the rational "FEAR" of the "FUSED ATOM" becomes entangled with an irrational fear of
the “FUSED” Japanese, dense as atoms in their blasted city. The two kinds of explosion – population and nuclear – are themselves fused, and the cumulative threat is projected onto Asia.

Once we move away from Hiroshima and its nuclear history, this style of projection seems even more gratuitous and complex. For instance, the archangel Gabriel inserts an underground nuclear test into The Last Lessons: 4. Even though the test's location is later identified as Siberia (462), and the blast clearly belongs to an internecine squabble between different poles of Atlantic civilization – between Washington and Moscow – Sandover takes pains to stress that it occurs on "THE ASIAN PLAINS" (456). Thus, even a Soviet explosion helps reinforce the identification of the margins with nuclear disaster.

The most striking case is that of China. I pointed out earlier that Sandover uses that nation mostly as a synecdoche, a shorthand way to denote the global population crisis. But the poem also invents a “VAST CIVILIZATION . . . BEFORE EDEN” centered on “PEKING” (121), one that ignited the “Chinese plain” (458) in a “pre- / Historical atomic blast” (441). Here Sandover may be engaging in some etiological mythmaking, explaining the flatlands – the Zhongyuan – at the heart of Chinese civilization. It may also want to transfer the threat of a contemporary state – China had just begun testing nuclear devices in the decade before the composition of Sandover (Richards and Kim) – into an unthreatening past. I am more interested, however, in how such details assist the poem’s epic mission.

Certainly the Chinese explosion adds a new inflection to Sandover’s rhetoric of innocence – for, if the splitting of the atom is a kind of fall (see CLS 119), then shifting the origins of nuclear weaponry away from Atlantic civilization and onto a sufficiently distant Other keeps the center in a prelapsarian state. (This may not make logical sense, but it works well enough emotionally.) Furthermore, the two explosions – the “pre- / Historic” and the historical –
combine to make nuclear catastrophe into a characteristic of a place. The “FLAME” of Hiroshima is thus said to fill the Chinese with an “ANCESTRAL AWE” (139), as if America were simply fulfilling the destiny of a continent when it dropped the bomb.

More subtly, the piling on of threats – the association of the margins with both overpopulation and nuclear disaster – helps to departicularize the danger. Any single problem runs the risk of becoming political, and Merrill had a long history of resistance to topical verse.56 Such a rejection doubtless made sense during his formative years – not long after World War Two, the Holocaust, and the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and may have seemed newly apt during the era of Sandover’s composition, when a whole generation was souring on political life, thanks to the Watergate scandal and the ugly futility of the Vietnam War. As Albert O. Hirschman has pointed out, “Western societies appear to be condemned to long periods of privatization during which they live through an impoverishing ‘atrophy of public meanings,’ followed by spasmodic outbursts of ‘publicness’ that are hardly likely to be constructive” (132). The style of his dissatisfaction, and the rhythm of his pendulum, may separate Merrill from his countrymen, but it seems clear that the period of “atrophy” that fell on America after the intense “publicness” of the War left a decisive mark on the poet’s temperament.

The epic as a genre necessitates some engagement with politics – a writer cannot represent the whole if he neglects its political structures – and so Sandover cannot sidestep the political realm entirely. But the poem habitually folds its topical concerns into an aesthetic context, using its anxieties about overpopulation and nuclear disaster to evoke the inevitable extinction that is intrinsic to the epic enterprise. Each lost society in Sandover – from the centaurs and the bat-angels to the Romans and the Egyptians – drives home the point that the
epic plays a long game. Thus, the fate of the society on the Chinese plains becomes a prolepsis for the fate of Atlantic civilization.

For Sandover, this commonality is both ominous and oddly reassuring. If we can still feel the waves of that explosion – in the flatness of the Chinese plain, and on the flat plane of the Ouija board – then Atlantic civilization and its epic poems may also be felt far into the future.

*Spectacle, Metafiction, Epiphany*

Sometimes the margins in Sandover are there solely to create a sense of sweep – the impression, essential to any epic, that the text can embrace the entire world. When the reader learns that the bat-angels placed one of their sacred sites in Peru (125), or that Gertrude Stein will have “ONE LAST BRIEF LIFE” in “THE ARGENTINE” to “STRAIGHTEN OUT [her] GENDER” (313), these details are not meant to coalesce into a coherent picture of South America; they are like the decorations on the edge of a map, all the more impressive for being imprecise. Similarly, when the World Tour starts in medias res, among the puppets and priests of Japan, the exotic place names – Osaka, Kamakura, Koya-San (36) – serve mostly as metrical counters, evocation combinations of consonants and vowels that embellish the white spaces of the poem’s margins.

Such references often suggest the quality of interconnection, that “universal interdependence” (55) of which Marx and Engels wrote. A passing reference to “CARIBBEAN WATERS,” for example, casts a line across the Atlantic to connect the disappearance of planes and ships in the Bermuda Triangle with the “NEGATIVE FORCEFIELD” (146) of Akhnaton’s pyramid, many miles and many centuries away. The historical suturing of the Atlantic – which
brought Africans to the Caribbean and Americans to the Middle East – is encapsulated in a single, somewhat ridiculous detail. Such efficiency allows an epic to imply “sections” and “episodes” (Aristotle 1459b22-31) that it does not go on to develop – tips, so to speak, with no iceberg beneath. Thus, the “holy terror” Joselito appears on his “plantation near Caracas” (12) just long enough to establish that Venezuela exists, and that stories might be woven out of what happens there, if the narrative were not too busy shuttling back and forth between Stonington and Athens.

And yet, despite this desire to take in the entire world, Sandover tends to show little interest in anyone who might actually live on the margins. For example, although the Indian city of Fatehpur-Sikri so impresses Ephraim – who accompanies JM and DJ on their World Tour – that he declares himself a "TEMPERAMENTAL MOSLEM," he hardly means this comment as praise for Islam or its adherents.  

57 (He has already written off Hindu philosophy as a “DULLARDS DISCIPLINE.”) Ever the aesthete and libertine, Ephraim is simply indulging in a kind of decadent Orientalism, marveling at the "Mogul palaces / Ghosts of flouzis primp and twitter through" (37) and paying little attention to the less spectral individuals who occupy the city now.  

58 Again and again, Sandover seeks to depopulate its margins, emptying them of the unmanageable billions who make “maximal contact with the present” (Bakhtin 11) such a challenge. To accomplish this, the poem relies on two main techniques. First, it consigns many marginal locales to a long-vanished past. Thus, Jerusalem qualifies as a "NERVE CENTER OF THE SACRED EARTH" (121) only because of its ancient Judaic and Christian history, while contemporary Iraq counts for less than Assyria in its Mesopotamian heyday (179). Similarly, the contours of Egypt on Sandover’s map are filled in with two ruined cities, Alexandria and Thebes.
The former is where Ephraim was "More than a slave" (47) to the astronomer Ptolemy, while the latter is where Akhnaton and Nefertiti purged the old gods and purchased for their culture “A SURGE OF CREATIVITY” (225). When the bat-angel 741 mentions that the “MELTED LAKE” of the Pharaoh’s crystal pyramid lies “UNDER THEBES TODAY” (126), we are meant to think of modern Luxor— if at all— chiefly as an incitement to excavation.59

In this antiquarian mode, Sandover often speaks of the margins as if they had slipped outside of time, much like that space behind the waterfall near Chimayo that I discussed in Chapter One. The past persists within a present that is invisible or repudiated. The tone can recall the rhetoric of imperialists like Arthur James Balfour, who praised the “great centuries” and “great contributions” of “the East,” but mourned the fact that such lands had long since “passed [their] prime” (qtd. in Said, Orientalism 32-3).

A second strategy involves translating the messy reality of the margins into the strict regularity of a literary pattern. As Merrill admitted in a 1982 interview with Jack Stewart, “I suppose I’m uncomfortable with any event, object— anything I’ve come into contact with— unless it has a second level of meaning” (CPR 133). In certain moods, he would deplore this habit of mind, expressing exasperation with the “emblematic lyrics” (Saez 42) that define his early work:

Goodness, how tired one grows

Just looking through a prism:

Allegory, symbolism.

I’ve tried, Lord knows,

To keep from seeing double. (CP 161)
In a similar passage from *Mirabell*, the poet yearns to “drown the double-entry book / I’ve kept these fifty years” (*CLS* 122) – a metaphor that draws on both accounting techniques and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (5.1.57). Such doubts are doubtless real, but they are also a rhetorical pose. Ultimately, to remain a writer, Merrill must admit defeat – “I am not yet / Proof against rigmarole” (*CP* 161-2) – and make his peace with the idea that “anything worth having’s had both ways” (*CLS* 174).

This tendency to see double – or triple, or quadruple – is particularly strong on the margins. For instance, in section K of *Ephraim*, whose images play variations on the idea of reflection, JM mentions a "jeweler in Kandy" (a city in Sri Lanka) who sells “Flawed white sapphires” – a detail that at first glance seems to evoke everyday life in a marginal location. Yet the passage has other matters in mind. The stones that "Broadcast" DJ’s face “in facets to the brink of Space" (37) point back a few pages to the “hypnotic, many-sided / Facets of the universal gem" (31) – by which Merrill means the many disparate ways of making sense of existence. The first trope prepares us to *look through* the second. The “facets” are meant to suggest the linguistic turn, perspectivism, the relationship between Self and Whole – anything but an actual jeweler's shop in Asia. Each lapidary metaphor also presents a limited space (whether a precious stone or a "language") that gives access to a totality (whether cosmic or global). It is no accident that the power of these “Facets” is one shared by the epic itself, when it broadcasts the writer's consciousness "to the brink of space" and attempts through its "many-sided" structure to model the "universal gem.” Such metafictional touches are everywhere in *Sandover*. They are a sure sign that the poem is more interested in the nature of literature – and cultural transmission – than in the denizens of distant lands.
This focus on the literary and aesthetic can resemble what Said called a *textual* understanding of the world – he saw it as characteristic of colonialism – in which a person, confronted with a strange or threatening place, uses a book-mediated knowledge to move painlessly from the "specifically human detail to the general transhuman one" (*Orientalism* 96). D. L. MacDonald has pointed to such “Romantic Orientalism” in both “The Thousand and Second Night,” where Merrill experiences Istanbul by way of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” and “Yannina,” where he engages with the Islamic world through Byron and his biographer William Plomer. MacDonald takes this tendency – which he analyzes perceptively – as an evasion of “authentic literary relations between the East and West.” He suggests that Merrill’s poetry lacks even the equivocal openness of Byron’s work, relying instead almost exclusively on “earlier texts” (63) to pursue its own obsessions.

Yet *Sandover* hardly reserves its bookishness for the margins. The poem thinks about *everything* textually: it is engaged, after all, in the enterprise of converting a geopolitical totality into a large stack of paper and print, a text that will one day stand in for that vanished whole. As such, the use of the margins as exotic coloration is not that different from the distillation of the center to a useful aesthetic essence – a ruthless condensation of the world to enable it to fit “In a slim volume” (57).

In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said saw the works of Joyce, Eliot, and Proust as a migration of the imperial impulse from the political to the literary realm: “When you can no longer assume that Britannia will rule the waves forever, you have to reconceive reality as something that can be held together by you the artist, in history rather than in geography” (189-90). This would explain why the epic recalls so many manifestations of colonialism – survey
expeditions and maps; catalogs of flora, fauna, and folkways; illustrated encyclopedias and universal exhibitions. Epic writers of the West function as “guardians of a magic totality” – to adapt a phrase that Said employs about characters in Conrad’s *Victory* and Flaubert’s *La Tentation* – and “incorporate a hostile world purged of its troubling resistances to their control” (163). In this view, the very act of “converting a geopolitical totality into a large stack of paper and print” is a byproduct of imperial politics.

As I have already made clear, I want to complicate this position – but also to acknowledge its partial justice. I can do both at once by taking a brief look at section O of *Ephraim*, which moves uneasily through a series of Western stereotypes before it finds (or asserts) common ground with the margins. This epiphany relies on an “image of Africa” – to borrow Chinua Achebe’s phrase this time – that has deep and disreputable roots in Western literature, but employs this distortion for reasons more complex than any simple insistence on supremacy or difference.

In section O, a short set piece about “the Sudd” – a swamplike area in what is now South Sudan, formed by the waters of the White Nile – seems at first merely a self-indulgent exercise in exoticism, all “Insidious flora” and “hippopotami” (52). A second glance reveals that it too – like that passage about Akhnaton and the Bermuda Triangle – uses stray fragments of culture to bring together disparate parts of the globe. And a third glance makes clear that places like the Sudd are not admitted to the poem on equal terms, but are “contained and represented” within a variety of “dominating frameworks” (Said, *Orientalism* 40). Chief among these is a notion decried by Achebe in his renowned essay on *Heart of Darkness* – the idea that the marginal Other exists primarily to provide spiritual breakthroughs for characters from the center (Achebe 12).
Section O opens with a setting of the scene: “Athens. This breathless August night.”
There follows a cluster of images, allusions, and names that long-time readers will immediately recognize as Merrill’s home turf:

- the mirror, Ephraim, and Strato;
- a pun based on banking (compare that “double-entry book” that JM later longs to drown (CLS 122) or the first three lines of the second sonnet in “The Broken Home” (CP 197));
- language that evokes the four elements (“earthward,” “dampens,” “breathless,” “BURNING” and “ASHES, “elemental C”);
- an oblique reminder of an earlier poem (the Cavafyesque “Days of 1964,” from Nights and Days);
- a final playful flourish, the adjectival signature “MERRILY” (50).

The whole complex is clearly rooted in the epic’s Atlantic center. At the same time, it also prepares the way for a characteristically Merrillean move – what Yenser has called, in reference to “Lost in Translation,” a “little vortex of metamorphoses” (Consuming Myth 13).

Soon Strato has turned into a dog, panting and scratching and loping along, apt to chase any “stray bitch” or unleash a “bristling snap of fear” (50-1); soon the dog has transformed into a pack of alley cats, their “Devil-baby altos” tormenting JM’s beloved pet Maisie; and not long after that Maisie has died, “Gone with the carrier pigeon’s homing sense, / The stilted gallantry of the whooping crane” (51).

These sneaky transitions – from house pets to wildfowl, from stuffy bedrooms to the open air – transport the reader, trope by trope, from housebound coziness to something wilder. The movement culminates in eight quatrains set in Africa, a continent otherwise mostly absent
from the poem. A second “little vortex” takes the reader from the fables of La Fontaine to a
Conradian riverboat called the La Fontaine, and from there to Aesop’s fables and the sub-
Saharan “realm of Totem.” This “realm” – the latest addition to Sandover’s epic whole –
becomes less geopolitical and more mythological by way of phrases like “Below the Falls” and
“eastward of the Sources” (52), whose allegorical capitals construe Africa as both primal and
postlapsarian. Other small touches – a “bush-pig scream[ing],” mentions of “‘fetishes’” and
“witchcraft” (53) – draw on familiar shorthand to present the continent as primitive, dangerous,
irrational, and bestial.

This is the context for JM’s epiphany, in which some ruminations about the African
experiences of “Tania” – Tania Blixen, the less famous pen name of Karen Christenze Dinesen –
lead to a realization of the deep kinship between animal and human:

The mere word “animal” a skin
Through which its old sense glimmers, of the soul.

On the one hand, the interlude simply develops one of the book’s ancillary themes,
building on those earlier metamorphoses – Strato the dog, Maisie the “half mad old virgin” (51),
and so on – and harking back to JM’s realization that he and Miranda the chimpanzee were
“kissing kin,” both products of what Ephraim calls the “GREAT GENETIC GOD” (19). On the
other hand, it also employs Africa merely as a bridge to the animal kingdom, reducing the
continent (as Conrad did in Heart of Darkness) to primitive vitality and the “wild irresistible
allure of the jungle” (Achebe 18). Thus, when the reader hears about Dinesen’s “Craft narrowing
to witchcraft” (53) under the influence of Kenya, he is supposed to see Europe as the
embodiment of conscious artistry and Africa as a place where a writer can uncivilize herself.62
This notion is only reinforced by what follows the epiphany, a brief account of JM’s confusion about his Greek maid’s name:

“Kleo” we still assume is the royal feline
Who seduced Caesar, not the drab old muse
Who did. Yet in the end it’s Clio I compose
A face to kiss, who clings to me in tears. (53)

Even in this anecdote, North and South are set in opposition. Through the person of Cleopatra, Africa serves once again as a foil to Atlantic civilization – a natural, animal, and seductive counterpart to the place where history is made.

Through such passages, Sandover both makes a claim on the riches of the world and insists on its own separateness. This “dominating framework” replicates the structures of global capitalism – of Western cities, which draw on global resources for the products they consume, and of Western artists, who (as Merrill acknowledges in an aside about the “days when ‘Cubist fetishes’ brought low / Prices at the Hotel Drôuot” (53)) appropriate and make marketable the artworks of the margins. That “PRAYER RUG” on which Ephraim wishes to be ”CARRIED WESTWARD FACING EAST” (37) makes an apt symbol of this relationship: it not only mirrors the movement of section K, which starts in Kamakura and ends in Kew, but also recalls both the magic carpets of Orientalist lore and – more pointedly – the airplanes on which JM and DJ fly. The planes offer a privileged vantage on the wider world by way of a safe, stable, and yet miraculously mobile center.

Indeed, we should not underestimate the importance of air travel to Sandover’s epic worldview. As Marit J. MacArthur has observed, Merrill was a “frequent flier avant la lettre” (267), one who – unlike Elizabeth Bishop, whom she also discusses – tended to ignore flight’s
“possible complicity in the poverty and destruction it allows us to fly over” (270). Like Wordsworth, he “could be characterized as ‘achiev[ing] his penetrating vision through selective blindness,’” using the windows of the plane only to frame the “drama of his private life” (273).  

Such distance is a lack, but not – as Macarthur acknowledges – only a lack. Merrill gives us a hint about its function in his 1982 essay “Acoustical Chambers,” which describes a youthful visit to Silver Springs, Florida:

I’d like to go back there one day and ride again in the glass-bottomed boat, peering down at the cold pastoral of swaying grasses and glinting schools. There would be much to say about “unconscious depths,” about my zodiacal creature the Fish, above all about the heavy pane of glass that, like a kind of intelligence, protected me and my mother from that sunken world while revealing its secrets in magical detail. (CPR 7)

The “heavy pane” both protects against and gives access to the depths of the psyche, while the touristic gaze both welcomes and wards off the Other. This complex mixture of attachment and detachment takes many forms in Merrill’s work, from his preference for the Romantic ideal of “emotion recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth 661) to his love of the vicarious histrionics of opera. In each case, separation seems to make space for the practice of intelligence.  

In the case of the margins, this may explain why Sandover has so few qualms about starting with a limited and even shallow perspective, since the poem’s habit of “seeing double” (CP 161) immediately goes to work on such simplistic responses – mirroring them, flipping them, and ultimately taking them apart with the tools of artistic technique. Thus, although Section O may equate Africa with “natural” exoticism, it also confuses the categories of natural
and unnatural by turning a hippopotamus into a “fat chess-knight” and the tropical foliage into “power plants” (52). Similarly, the evocations of the occult in relation to Dinesen’s African experience can only make us think of JM’s possession by Ephraim and company – a connection that undermines the notion of the Western artist as purely conscious, and calls attention to the corresponding artistry in African “witchcraft” (53). This is what Yenser – always eager to see deconstruction in Merrill’s practice – calls “confounding the dichotomy” (9). The patterns of imagery complicate the “[e]conomy of stereotype” (Morrison 67) to which the narrative resorts.

Admittedly, this is a risky procedure. Yet, where Achebe sees the imperial writer as insisting on the West’s “spiritual grace” (3) in opposition to Africa, Merrill seems more “conciliatory and convivial” (Westover 217). Agon in its cruder forms is simply not his style.65

As he explained to an interviewer:

> How [cosmic forces] appear depends on us, on the imaginer, and would have to vary wildly from culture to culture, or even temperament to temperament. A process that Einstein could entertain as a formula might be described by an African witch doctor as a crocodile. What’s tiresome is when people exclusively insist on the forms they’ve imagined. (CPR 110)

Here as elsewhere, the poet seems to be a structuralist, interpreting the details of the surface as evidence of deep shared structures. The comparison of Einstein and the witch doctor may draw on stereotypical imagery, but it nonetheless allows Merrill to make the point that – even though a given creator may feel more at home with one “form” or another – both discourses give access to the depths.

Of course, this stance also admits of a more cynical interpretation. The epic writer wants access to the world, and a posture of equality – coupled with the reality of Western political
power and cultural hegemony—insures that he can plunder the cultures of Africa and Asia as much as he does those of Europe and the Americas. He maps the Other, in other words, mostly so he can project his own.

*Colonizing the Future*

We might understand what I have said so far about Sandover’s engagement with the margins in terms familiar from American cultural debate. In its commitment to a hierarchy of inclusion and exclusion—a necessity for any workable synecdoche—Merrill’s poem can seem like the worst sort of Eurocentric discourse, hostile to the realities of a multicultural world. Laden with the freight of the West, committed to traditional notions of greatness, the epic can look from some angles like a mausoleum for the bones of those Dead White Men who come up so often in discussions of the canon.

Uneasiness about this situation may explain a question that JM asks, just before the ceremony in which he and DJ return their friends to the elements: "How shall we speak of these things in Bombay?" (514). He is referring to a meeting with the reincarnated Maria, but I also hear a more literary question: How will *Sandover*—this concoction involving Ouija boards and dead poets and a celestial hierarchy that suggests both Dante's afterlife and the author's own circles—play outside the West? What will happen to the book when its current crop of readers disappears? How will something so rooted in Atlantic civilization seem to a South African activist? To a Punjabi scientist? To a 21st-century Haitian woman?

These questions bear on what I consider the most striking aspect of the poem’s representation of the margins. Amid all the diminution and distortion, all the evasion and
effacement, it is easy to overlook a curious fact – that when Sandover imagines its own literary afterlife, it looks precisely to the places that everywhere else it seems to slight.

I have already mentioned the passage in section V where the Accademia Bridge, momentarily personified, says in garbled Italian “per me va la gente nova” – over me goes a new people. The context here is a section that portrays Venice as a “whole heavenly city / Sinking,” an embodiment of Western civilization “caked with slime” and on the verge of “dying.” Yet the coming disappearance of the city’s “fabled / Denizens” – its patrons of the arts – does not at first seem to dismay JM, who greets this decline with a simple “And high time.” What does make him nervous is the exact nature of this “gente nova”:

Gente nova? A population explosion

Of the greatest magnitude and brilliance?

Who are these thousands entering the dark

Ark of the moment, two by two? (75)

Although the lines refer literally to the tourists coming over the bridge to snap photographs of each other, they also deftly balance imagery of destruction and construction, evoking a star’s demise and the biblical flood, but also the nova after the explosion and the arc after the ark (see Genesis 9:13-7, CLS 5, 293). Such dualities set up a tension that will persist throughout section V. When it concludes in fire and flood – a thunderstorm breaks out and drenches JM – even this miniature apocalypse will be a new beginning, since it sends the narrative across to section W (the only such leap in Ephraim) and prepares the way for JM’s meeting with his nephew Wendell.
In V, as he considers the voyage of that “dark / Ark,” JM swears off his old favorites—Proust and Giorgione—and contemplates a future in which culture’s possibilities lie far from Venice:

   Now give me the alerted vacuum
   Of that black, gold-earringed baby all in white
   (Maya, Maya, your Félicité?)
   Her father focuses on. (76)

Félicité is a Haitian girl for whom Maya Deren—whose Divine Horsemen dealt with Vodoun rituals—serves as a heavenly patron (CLS 72). Yet Félicité also carries a greater freight in this passage. After the astronomical punning of a few lines earlier, on novae and stellar magnitudes, “alerted vacuum” should make us think of the creation of matter ex nihilo, as in Edward Tryon’s notion of the universe as a vacuum fluctuation (Ferris 353-4). The baby’s blank slate thus becomes an emptiness exploding with potential, as if her birth—in the context of the “Sinking” (75) of Venice and the repudiation of La Tempesta and Proust—were the Big Bang of some new cultural universe. Maya has already said that “Heaven / Hangs on her black Félicité newborn / In Port-au-Prince” (72), as if patrons and angels were hovering over Haiti, excited by the new arrival. In such a context, it is hard not to read the “father” who “focuses on” Félicité as God Biology, and to suspect that he has felicitously written off the West in favor of a new Eden on the margins.68

At such times, it seems as if Sandover not only prophesies but actually yearns for the collapse of Atlantic civilization. There is an element of glee in the poem’s pronouncement that the “SUPERMAN” of the future will not have “SUCH A WHITE COMPLEXION” (375), and a hint of the celebratory when the archangel Michael describes his political role:
I THROW BLINDING LIGHT INTO A SCENE TOO SLOWLY PICKING
ITS WAY
ALONG SOME FATAL PATH: ‘AH, HERE’S THE TURN!’
AND OFF THE HIGH HISTORIC CLIFF GOES TOPPLING
A MOTLEY PAGEANT CALLED IMPERIAL ROME,
TRAILLING ITS SHRIEKING PANTHEON. (553)

Here “ROME” stands in for Alexander’s Greece and Victoria’s Britain and all of the
other Empires that have toppled off that “HIGH HISTORIC CLIFF.” The poem gives us ample
reason to expect that Atlantic civilization will be next, ushered offstage not by Michael but by
some divinity more akin to Papa Ghédé, the “dark figure” from Haitian Vodoun who “attends the
meeting of the quick and the dead” (Deren 37).

In the rest of this chapter, I want to look at the way such a shift is reinforced by the
various instances of reincarnation in Sandover. Like much of the occult, mythical, or religious
material in the poem, reincarnation is entertained as if it were true – that is, as a way to make
available (in Merrill’s own words) a “range of metaphor . . . that hadn’t been available to me in
earlier poems” (CPR 112). The ability to relocate souls in space and time allows Sandover to
deal imaginatively with its literary afterlife – with the inevitable disappearance of the totality it
represents, and with the social, political, and cultural configurations that are likely to follow.

The first to be reborn is Matt Jackson. In keeping with its general distrust of the
patriarchal, Sandover does not paint a very flattering picture of DJ’s father. Irascible (40) and
slow-witted, he is also racist (103), intolerant (105), and physically abusive (88, 100). His
connections to the American West are another flaw, given the poem’s association of that region
with “HORROR” (33) and “POWERFUL ILLUSIONS” (169), and his failure to leave any money to DJ, although trivial in itself, acquires more weight as part of an attack on biological inheritance that I will discuss in the next chapter.

We can understand Matt’s character a little better by the light of the passage in *A Different Person* in which Merrill tells of his mother’s “frank distress” at having to interact socially with an African-American couple. He wonders ruefully: “Was it simply beyond her ability to cope with any ‘minority’ at all, including the one I belonged to?” (*CPR* 581). In *Sandover*, too, Matt’s other prejudices are capped by an intolerance for alternative sexualities. Just as Hellen Merrill does all she can to keep her son safely closeted, so Matt responds to “Unspeakable / Rumors” in the afterlife by lashing out and sputtering in disbelief: “THAT A SON OF MINE” (105). He becomes – like Merrill’s mother – a representative of a particular disease, the unworldly assumption of the superiority of one’s own kind, whether national, ethnic, or sexual. Portraying him so unsympathetically allows *Sandover* to clarify its own attitudes toward those who live on the margins of its world – to emphasize that, although the poem focuses on Western culture and Western characters, this should not be seen as a sign of blindness or distaste.

After his death, in his first message via the Ouija board, Matt remains as stubborn and inept as ever: “IM NOT CNOFUSDE GODDAM THIS TYPEWRITAR.” He misunderstands reincarnation so badly that JM exclaims, in a rare display of impatience:

Oh, pay attention, Matt.

It won’t be in California. This time maybe

You’ll be a little black or yellow baby. (103)
The taunt makes clear that Matt’s eventual reincarnation in Iraq – as an “ALERT BROWN SUCKLING” (139), in the bat-angels’ regrettable phrase – is a kind of contrapasso, albeit one less infernal and more purgatorial than the “counter-penalty” in Dante (see Inferno 28.130-42). The lessons he receives in the afterlife leave him “SMARTING & SMARTER” (108), but his new life in Iraq – in the body of the Other – will be the decisive piece of instruction, a way for him to learn that to “rejoin the race” (139) does not mean to rejoin white America.

This position is developed further by the reincarnation of Chester Kallman, W. H. Auden’s long-time lover and collaborator on the libretto for Stravinsky’s The Rake’s Progress. Although still a minor character, Chester plays a much greater role in Sandover than Matt Jackson, thanks to his connections to Wystan, his garrulity at the Ouija board, and his campy posthumous antics with “LA BEATA / LUCA SPIONARI” (124). Yet the poem also devotes a surprising amount of energy to establishing Chester as a racist, one who sees his reincarnation in Africa as "THE ULTIMATE REJECTION SLIP":

It's too exciting! PLEASE TO SEE MY BLACK
FACE IN A GLASS DARKLY? I WONT BE
WHITE WONT BE A POET WONT BE QUEER
CAN U CONCEIVE OF LIFE WITHOUT THOSE 3???

"Well, frankly, yes" (184) is JM’s reasonable reply. The whole exchange is a terse rejection of “blind impresses” (Rorty 32) and what Merrill in an interview called the “sociological prism” (CPR 58) – the sort of traits that we now associate with identity politics. The rebirth is clearly a way to convince Chester to cultivate other values, another attempt to educate a bigot by placing him in a body he fears and despises.
Yet the *contrapasso* is more complex than Matt’s. In one of the poem’s many contradictions and reversals, Chester manages to *become* gay in his new life, despite the Research Lab’s initial plans: “AS IN THE OLD SAW, CK GOES STRAIGHT / INTO THE JEWELRY STORE & COMES OUT CROOKED.” Robert Morse – also recently dead – reports that Chester’s new environment will serve as “A VACCINATION / AGAINST ONE MORE LIFE SABOTAGED BY SEX.” Johannesburg does not have a thriving gay scene, apparently, and the absence of “outlets” for anything but dull “CONVENTIONAL TRIBAL WHOOPEE” (419) will allow Chester to focus on his destiny. His mission, according to Mirabell, is to “BRING COHERENCE TO A RACE LARGELY WITHOUT SPOKESMEN” (183).

What should we make of this announcement? Generously, we might see Chester’s reincarnation as a way for *Sandover* to detach racial physiognomy from "LEADERSHIP & SURVIVAL,” to acknowledge that the center may stifle “GIFTS” (183) as much as it nourishes them, and to convert an American racist into an African leader whose “V WORK” (161-2) will be to end the oppression of his people. Just before his rebirth, after all, Chester is proclaiming: “BUT WE WILL RISE!” (272). Such language construes Africa as an ascendant part of the world and thus makes Chester’s death seem like a stage in both an *emptying out* (the extinction of a comfortable Western elite) and a *transference* (the relocation of valuable cultural material to a new center of energy). The reincarnation permits *Sandover* to confront the demise of its own context and, at the same time, to project elements of that context into the future.

Yet we might also note that the allusion to the anti-apartheid movement seems to insinuate – in typical imperialist fashion – that all intellectual "COHERENCE" comes from the West. This implication is only reinforced by Mirabell’s insistence that Chester will be raised in a “DECENT EDUCATED AFRICAN HOME” and shaped by a “FATHER / WHO WORKS FOR
A WHITE ORG” (198). The equation of European culture and civilization is obviously problematic, and the notion that Africans lack “SPOKESMEN” is a strange one for a contemporary of Mandela, Senghor, and Soyinka to voice, even through the mouth of an imaginary peacock. From some vantages, Chester’s relocation looks a lot like colonizing the future – as if Sandover, as an epic of Atlantic civilization, wanted to plant a settler colony in time. The inhabitants of the current margins – rather than receding into a spectacular scene, or becoming counters in some metafictional scheme – are magically transformed into Westerners, ones whose unsavory traits have been cleansed in the solvent of reincarnation. It all makes for a truly odd variant on the rhetoric of innocence.

The questions raised by this rhetoric are explored most thoroughly through the reincarnation of Maria Mitsotáki, a member of the Greek aristocracy and a friend of DJ and JM during their days in Athens. As the poet noted in “Nine Lives” – a work that I will discuss in a moment – Maria functions in Sandover as the epic’s “astral Beatrice, / Its very Plato” (CP 592), both a celestial muse and a source of wisdom. Her posthumous job planting “FLEURS DU MAUVAISE CONSCIENCE” (102) in the minds of the powerful also makes her an embodiment of the poem’s politics, while her role (along with Wystan) as a surrogate parent helps JM to fashion an autonomous self – to become the offspring of poetry and philosophy, rather than of money and manners.

Thus, when we learn that Maria will be reborn in India, it is a matter of considerably more consequence than Matt’s or Chester’s reincarnation. She will be a "chubby brown young man we've never known, / Dressed in white Nehru jacket and puttees" (486), the scion of a "RICH / PUNJAB FAMILY" (428) in Mumbai. (Like many Indians, Merrill still says Bombay.) About this Indian future we hear only scattered details. Nature apologizes to Maria for the place
of her rebirth, rather like a British matriarch apologizing for a posting to the colonies, and her joking advice – "BEAT YOUR SERVANTS, THEY'LL WORSHIP YOU!" (507) – both mocks mankind’s relationship to the gods and signals Merrill's awareness of the faintly imperial tinge to the whole enterprise. At the same time, the "ONE SHADED VILLA" (524) that Jane Austen decorates in preparation for Maria’s arrival seems more like a passing of the torch, from a power of the past to a center of the future.

The Coda relates the early stages of Maria’s new career. As the "YOUNGEST / ORDAINED PRIEST IN HISTORY,” she performs a motley collection of miracles – riding sacred cows, fighting off “ALL CLOTHES NOT SAFFRON,” performing a “FOURFOLD ORDINATION” of Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim divines. According to Ephraim, Nature has a “GAME PLAN,” whereby the reincarnated Maria will retreat from “VAST CHILDHOOD FAME” only to reemerge as a scientist and commence “A SAGA OF DISCOVERY & INVENTION” (543) that will amaze the entire world. Although she will be educated in London, the rest of her career as a “SCIENTIST-PREMIER” (549) suggests that India will be part of a rising world-system destined to eclipse the West. Thus, the solution to overpopulation – an otherwise unspecified “THINNING” (543) – will come from Maria’s work in India, rather than from Atlantic civilization, and the global benefits of her discoveries will offset the “PROMETHEAN/ OUTRAGE” (213) of the West’s development of nuclear weapons.

The most striking aspect of Maria's new life is how it points to the obsolescence of JM's own milieu. Near the end of Sandover, JM and DJ impulsively make arrangements to rendezvous with the future premier:

Going on recklessly to set the year

1991, the hour and day
And landmark in whose shade there will appear

A SCRUBBED 14 YEAR OLD PUNJABI LAD
CARRYING SOMETHING YOU WILL KNOW ME BY.
IS IT A DATE? You bet your life. (509)

I suspect that this encounter is meant to evoke literary reception – the meeting with a future audience that any ambitious text bets its life on. “A work of art,” Rachel Hadas says, “presupposes some kind of recipient, even if that person is removed in space and time, faceless, unknown, unimaginable” (42). The “PUNJABI LAD” is that recipient. He comes into being precisely through Maria’s death, as if the cost of any future context were the extinction of the present one. Although we do not hear much about him in Sandover, we can get a sense of his significance by looking at “Nine Lives,” published posthumously in 1995’s A Scattering of Salts. It is with that poem that I want to conclude this chapter.

“Nine Lives” opens in the house in Athens, establishing its speaker (once again) as a figure of the center. After a seven-line introduction, the first section opens with the kind of italicized stage directions that appear so often in Sandover, setting the stage for the return of the Ouija board’s capital letters. Yet here Merrill plays a little trick on the reader. The first capitals we see are not a message from beyond the grave but a newspaper headline: “GET THE U.S. BASES OUT OF GREECE.” Taken literally, the words are simply the occasion for JM’s latest rejection of the topical: “That old refrain, where’s their imagination?” (CP 591). They can also be read as an aesthetic imperative, a demand to separate politics (symbolized by those American military outposts) from art (symbolized by the putative cultural origin of the West). Yet there is – as always – more to say. Because the headline gives political concerns a momentary precedence over occult communiqués, it suggests the widening of focus that marked Merrill’s work after
Sandover. And the dual reference of “BASES” – applying both to military installations and to houses like the one JM and DJ shared in Athens – dramatizes the inextricability of the personal and the political, and thus evokes the power disparity between Greece and the United States from which more than one “dictatorship” (CLS 13) profited.

Again and again, the poem makes explicit a political content that Sandover left submerged. Not only are “worlds like Strato’s, now disaster areas / We [the United States] helped create,” but DJ offers a still more direct critique:

Remember when the Nestlé Company
Shipped its formula to Ghana, free?
The babies thrived on it. Then one fine morning,
End of shipments. No thought for all the mothers
Who weaned their babies on the formula
And had no milk left. There in a nutshell’s
American policy. (CP 596)

The candy company that attempts to provide nutrition to the rest of the world is analogous to the United States in its interaction with the margins, and the ending of the shipments reveals the profound selfishness at the heart of the enterprise – the way it salves consciences and generates publicity, but shows no real concern for others. Beneath this comparison I suspect a deeper question – whether the delicious but inessential flavors of literature can make more than a dubious claim on those in need of immediate sustenance. To “ship” one’s discourse to a distant place creates responsibilities that the author may not be ready to assume.
As in *Sandover*, there are intimations of a coming shift in power. In the fourth section, the mad proliferation of cats around the house in Athens prompts an aside that Urania and *her* cats “have long outgrown / The Stonington arrangements” (*CP* 594) – a detail that returns us to the world of the epic and the “arrangements” that made a small town one of the poles of Atlantic civilization. In that context, the phrase about Urania (Merrill’s goddaughter) and Stonington seems to suggest a muse’s departure – the wrong muse, admittedly, but strict distinctions between disciplines count for little in a work as syncretic as *Sandover*. And the exact direction of the departure becomes clear a line later with JM’s quip that, among the cats back in Athens, a “kind of ‘flight into Egypt’ air pervades” – as if Athens and Stonington were both being emptied out, and the movement were toward the South and the East.

The passage ends in the courtyard of the House in Athens. As JM is setting out food for the cats – an “old white tom” stands guard – the mother approaches and “with speaking glances” beseeches him:

‘Take him, my blackest and my wiliest,

Teach him the table manners of the West.’

Grounded in imagery of black and white, the words smack a little of the *mission civilisatrice*, but the mockery in “table manners” undercuts any real assertion of superiority, implying that what is distinctive to “the West” is not civilization but the etiquette behind its management. JM is eager to fulfill his charge – “If I could touch him –!” – but doubts his abilities, while the kittens themselves (black or white) seem to resist him instinctively: “The sight of me still throws them into fits.” As if to drive home the connection to Merrill’s literary enterprise, the stage directions that follow (and detail the dark kitten’s perilous tumble from an
awning) contain two references to the epic tradition – to “Pandemonium” from Paradise Lost, and to the “Trojan Horse” from Homer and Virgil (CP 594).

It is within this context – complicated, compromised – that JM and DJ break out the Ouija board. They intend to make a “courtesy call merely,” but Ephraim immediately delivers some startling news:

A CERTAIN 8 YEAR DARLING LEAVES BOMBAY

BY PLANE FOR ATHENS ONE WEEK FROM TODAY.

Picking up the story started by the Coda, the poem fills in the details of Maria’s new Indian life. (Merrill also offers two stanzas of background on his “muse” for the “neophyte.”) Her name is Shantihprashad Chatterjee – or Shanty for short. She will one day be a “(male) Nobel / Prize-winning chemist” (CP 592) – a description that suggests both the imprimatur of a passing civilization (that Nobel Prize) and the rise of a new cultural center. Everything we learn casts Shanty as a figure of balances, an embodiment (even more than a santero) of the doubleness that Merrill values so much. Shanty’s layered identities combine both male and female and science and philosophy. Furthermore, the boy bridges the gap between the rational and the occult, much like Sandover itself. When he turns water into wine, or creates smoke without fire, he may seem like a miracle-worker, but it is really his “Junior Chemistry Kit” (CP 593) that allows him to make myths into realities and prove conventional wisdom wrong.

All of these details work together to turn Shanty into a kind of ideal reader. He will embrace the ambiguities of gender in which Sandover traffics; he will move easily between magic and Merrill’s “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (CLS 113); he will have an internal Plato who makes sense of the abstract and a Maria content to drink the “cool black teas of . . . appearances” (the phrase comes from “Words for Maria,” CP 236). Furthermore, as “Nine Lives” sets up a
string of correspondences, whereby the kitten equals the Ghanaian children equal Shanty, the entire fourth section comes to seem an encapsulation of Merrill’s artistic predicament – he can sense things ending, both his own career and the dominance of his society, but fears that, in his designs on the future, his motives are as mixed as those of the Nestlé Corporation and his habits of mind as dated as “table manners.”

Shanty’s father has come to the city “AS A MEDIATOR / IN (HO HUM) GOVT TRADE TALKS” (CP 593) a mission that once again focuses our attention on politics and power. Ephraim tells DJ and JM that Shanty will run into them at an outdoor café in Athens, after his hat blows off and lands near their table. The set-up recalls C. P. Cavafy’s story “In Broad Daylight,” which Merrill translated about a decade before he wrote “Nine Lives,” in which a supernatural stranger appears in a young Athenian’s dreams and, speaking of a spot “where a great treasure lies buried,” arranges to reveal himself at a street café. Because the “little iron box” (CPR 415) that the mysterious stranger seeks is the source of Sandover’s image of a box buried at the heart of empire (87), we might expect that Merrill wants to activate a related complex of ideas here – thoughts of the epic, and of empire, and of what kind of treasure young Shanty might be promising.

The answer is that Shanty is also an apparition from a dream – the dream of literary survival, the dream that in some distant time and place a reader will open his consciousness to the structure and contents of yours. This aspect of his character may explain why Shanty has been trained (Ephraim does not specify by whom) to speak a single sentence to the two men at the café: “‘WE WILL MEET AGAIN IN MY HOME CITY’” (CP 593). The statement implies that one day, instead of the marginal outsider coming to the Athenian cultural center to meet these American insiders, the representatives of the old center will have to come to him. Like
Shanty’s dad, they too will become “MEDIATOR[s],” but power this time will flow in the opposite direction. We will speak of these things in Bombay – and in Johannesburg, Port-au-Prince, Basra, and Buenos Aires – but only between the covers of a book.

“Nine Lives” comes to a crisis as evening falls, and the light in the square begins to change. The shadows are also falling on Merrill’s career and on his life – the poem was written after his diagnosis with AIDS – but he does not want them to swallow his masterwork. As he and DJ sit at their table in the little café, the stage directions become pleadingly urgent:

Now or never, as in the old play,
Its moonbeam-dappled feats performed by day,
Titania, Oberon, wake up! Employ
Your arts, produce that little Indian boy! (CP 598)

In this extraordinary passage, the poem tries to summon the “magic child” (CP 593) whose attention will redeem Sandover, whose existence will show not only “Earth at one with Heaven, and past with future,” but also East with West, and margins with center. But “Nine Lives” does not end altogether optimistically. That “blackest” and “wiliest” kitten is saved, but only because DJ – clearly the one who keeps up with the news – builds “A stopgap ramp connecting the two levels” between the House in Athens and the new ground below. JM’s own attempt to bridge divides is less successful. Shanty never shows, and the poem can only return to its mundane limits: “Here our revels / Grind to a halt on Ephraim’s shifting ground” (CP 600). The echoes of A Midsummer Night’s Dream remind us of that play’s counterpoint of kings and queens – of politics and the imagination – and of how dense and deep are the woods into which an epic like Sandover wanders.
Invisible Cities:

Cultural Selection in Sandover

Most of the biosphere cannot see the infosphere; it is invisible, a parallel universe humming with ghostly inhabitants. But they are not ghosts to us – not anymore. (323)

James Gleick
_The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood_

Helen Vendler has said of Sandover: “What is in the American mind these days – the detritus of past belief, a hodgepodge of Western science and culture, a firm belief in the worth of the private self and in the holiness of the heart’s affections, a sense of time and space beyond the immediate – is here displayed for judgment” (93). To this description I would add two crucial words: by posterity. I believe that Sandover is a model of one consciousness as it meets the global whole, around 1980 or so, but I also believe that this model is designed to travel, to sail toward readers who are distant in time and space.

After all, epics – whatever their original function – do not belong to the cultures that produce them. They work as life rafts, rescuing bits of culture from its inevitable wreckage. The fragments that accumulate serve Others – not by giving an accurate picture of a particular society, but by showing what an individual can make of the various forces that intersect in him. So, when discussing epics, the critic may ask: Of what did the author think himself heir? But another question might lead to more interesting answers: Of whom did the poet imagine himself predecessor? And how does he float his craft toward that unknown audience, for whom he must make his literary “world” – in the absence of its referent – self-sufficient?
In this chapter, I will argue that *Sandover* uses its imaginary locales as a way to think about what will persist into the future as part of the human inheritance. They are a figure, in other words, for the cultural information that endures *regardless* of who has political power – for the tiny percentage of any totality, however successful, that actually makes it into the future. I will analyze this engagement with cultural transmission in three stages:

- An examination of *Sandover’s* denigration of biological reproduction and its corresponding elevation of cultivated childlessness;
- A discussion of the poem’s use of science as a unifying worldview and its attempt to recast evolutionary biology in cultural terms;
- An analysis of how this notion of cultural evolution is figured in three imaginary locales – the Ouija board, the Land of the Dead, and the “ROSEBRICK MANOR” (262) of Sandover.

Together, these sections will reveal how *Sandover* achieves its vantage on two superimposed geographies. One might say that the geography of late 20th century globalization – the configuration of center and margins that I have discussed thus far – is based on the distribution and deployment of *bodies*, while the geography of *Sandover*’s invisible cities depends on *ideas*. As bodies live and die, and political powers rise and fall, an Empire of Ideas poaches off these biological and historical processes. This structure, although far from immutable, nonetheless preserves elements from each previous configuration, in the same way that science, in the midst of paradigm shifts, retains collections of true statements, even as it adjusts the overarching theories that explain them (Kuhn 160-73).

Speaking for the poet, Maria suggests that this *selectional system* contributes to the species-wide spread of intelligence:
IS IT NOT THAT WE, MANKIND, MUST DO
IMMORTAL WORK? AND WHEN HEAVEN, LIKE A LOVELY
MINT-SCENTED FRESHENING SETTLES & EARTH BECOMES
PARADISE, MY LORDS, WILL NOT OUR RACE OF THIEVES
HAVE EMERGED AS THE ELDERS IN A RACE OF GODS? (455-6)

Sandover thus envisions its invisible cities as part of what Edward Said has called an
“infinitesimal politics,” one that “clarifies, reinforces, perhaps even occasionally advances
perceptions and attitudes about . . . the world” (Culture and Imperialism 75). Such a politics
works at a slow rate, on a small scale, reader by reader and generation by generation, but it is in
the end – or so Sandover believes – a “cleaner use for power” (CLS 81).

Bodies vs. Ideas

In section A of Ephraim, the reader hears that avant-garde art – even The (Diblos)
Notebook, the nouveau roman that Merrill himself wrote – betrays a failed link between
generations. Such works are produced by writers who, “Suckled by Woolf not Mann,” had
“stories told them / In childhood, if at all, by adults whom / They could not love or honor” (3-4).
These lines subtly dissociate the “adults” one can “love” and “honor” from the realm of mere
biology – from creatures like wolves – and portray them instead as manipulators of symbols and
transmitters of culture. The letters of your DNA matter less than the letters in a book of fairy
tales. Real people, with real bodies, count for less than the “kinds of being we recall from
Grimm, / Jung, Verdi, and the commedia dell’ arte” (4).
Merrill makes this contrast more explicit in one of the italicized commentaries in *A Different Person*:

>The miraculous gift of life we receive from our parents comes in a package almost impossible to unwrap; often it seems wiser not to try. Inside are the various clues – most of them older than time – to who we are and how we behave . . . Surely (thinks many a gifted child) a different self, formed in my case by the pages of ‘The Snow Queen’ and W. H. Hudson’s *A Little Boy Lost*, by passions enacted within the Metropolitan Opera’s gold proscenium or the Ouija board’s alphabetical one, continues to give that genetic other a run for its money. (CPR 585-6)

The genetic self is an Other, more alien than dead courtiers, atomic bats, or temperamental archangels. As we will see, this idea informs the hostility to biological reproduction that pervades *Sandover*, an animosity that goes far beyond concern about overpopulation or any queer critique of how even the most miserable married couples, like Matt and Mary Jackson, get to “Bask in the tinted conscience of their kind” (*CLS* 88). Once again, Richard Rorty’s thought may come in handy here: the idea is that the genetic self is a *blind impress*, and that one might fashion a better Self – more autonomous and more durable – through interaction with cultural objects (see Rorty, especially 23-43).

*Sandover* develops this case in two phases. First, parenthood itself is criticized or condemned, mocked or marginalized, diminished or outright dismissed. Despite the role in the poem of many of JM’s friends and acquaintances, for instance, his mother is barely present, refracted instead into two difficult characters – Mother Nature, an avatar of fertility whose “TOWERING & TOUCHY PRIDE” (235) seems to intimidate the quartet at the Ouija board,
and malignant, chain-smoking Joanna, a version of Jung’s “destructive / Anima” (35) meant to be “routed” (71) at the end of JM’s lost novel. These two women embody a notion of mothers as taxing or downright dangerous.

Paternity fares little better. In section Q of Ephraim, Merrill includes an excerpt from John Michell’s The View Over Atlantis, one of a “rash of nutty paperbacks” (118) whose traces in the text – pyramids, UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle – lead JM to exclaim: “Nobody can transfigure junk like that” (136). The passage in question is a pat encapsulation of Oedipal struggle, in which the warrior Lambton swears to sacrifice the “first living creature he came upon,” only to have his own father hobble into view (60). Although Sandover does not quite stoop to patricide, the character of CEM – Charles Edward Merrill – remains an ambiguous one, not the “mild and undemanding presence” (CPR 492) of Merrill’s memoir, but a slightly crude man who complains after death that “Some goddam fool / Hindoo is sending him to Sunday School” (36). His riches are mostly a cause for embarrassment. When JM concedes that, “Like it or not, such things made the soul’s fortune” (54), he implies that the sole justification for such a patrimony is its conversion into culture.

We have already seen that DJ’s parents are two sad figures in an eternal tableau of dysfunction. The cumulative effect of such portrayals is to problematize the biological links between generations – to portray the biological side of humanity as inefficient and even destructive, making us little more than what Lynn Margulis once called “upright mammalian weeds” (119), a threat to the environment and to ourselves. Thus, when JM and DJ try to emulate the “GREAT GENETIC GOD” (19) by arranging for the souls of Hans’s and Ephraim’s representatives to be slipped into expectant mothers they know, this attempt at biological transmission – this “odd / [Insemination] by psycho-roulette” (30) – is a complete fiasco.
Although one child somehow recovers from his inauspicious beginnings and becomes the artistic nephew that JM meets in Venice, the other – born into the teeming madness of the “STATE / ASYLUM” (29) – could serve as Sandover’s cynical figure for all the products of sexual reproduction.⁶⁹

Although Wendell Pincus, born to JM’s niece Betsy, does at first seem to be a real triumph for the “DULL TRANSMISSION OF A GENE / BY EGG & SEMEN” (375), subtle touches in the text point to a less corporeal sort of reproduction. The boy’s “serene blue eyes” (29) and “sparkling blue / Gaze” (78) recall Ephraim’s “eyes that amazing / blood-washed gold our headlights catch, foxes perhaps / or wildcats” (27). This resemblance to his patron makes Wendell almost a changeling, an incarnation of that supremely symbolic spirit on Earth. Similarly, in the trattoria near the Accademia Bridge, amid the “fleet blur of [reproductive] couples” (76), JM and Wendell play the role not of uncle and nephew, but of elder artist and younger. Faced with the young man’s political rhetoric, JM can only hope to “Guide Wendell’s theme (this world’s grim truths) around / To mine (his otherworldly guardian)” (82) – to redirect his attention, in other words, from the biological many “entering the dark / Ark of the moment” (75) to the elite few of artistic transmission.

The second phase in this argument is the elevation of childlessness, by which estrangement from parenthood becomes a source of cohesion and strength, and the poem’s central figures coalesce into a kind of anti-biological clique – “3 OF US IN MM’S EUPHEMISM / COMME CA,” as Wystan describes it, and Maria herself “NOT IN LIFE / MUCH DRAWN TO ROLES OF MOTHER MISTRESS WIFE” (205). The childless genius becomes the true celebrant of life, the one who, like Akhnaton and Nefertiti or DJ and JM, possesses a “LOVE DOOMD TO GIVE BIRTH TO IDEAS ALONE” (250). This attitude
toward childlessness is closely tied to – but hardly determined by – the poet’s sexuality. Piotr Gwiazda has argued that, despite his reputation for isolation and singularity, Merrill was not completely hostile to the “identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s,” but rather worked against heteronormativity by adopting a “markedly queer perspective” on things such as science, religion, the canon, and the family (“A Naked Singularity”). This “queer perspective” is what leads Mirabell to state that “SO-CALLED NORMAL LOVERS” must “PRODUCE AT LAST / BODIES” (156), whereas gay artists are turned not inward to biological compulsion but “OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS & THE MYSTERIES” (216). As Wystan argues, the childless can afford to be truth-tellers because “EXCEPT AS MESSENGERS WE HAVE NO / COMMITMENT TO A YOUNGER GENERATION” (206). They are not beholden to a system in which authority trumps all, propped up by the mystifying equivalences of Patriarch = Monarch = Author = Deity.

The wider context of this reversal – the denigration of parenthood, the elevation of childlessness – becomes evident in the last pages of Sandover. At first glance, the Coda may seem like a reconciliation with biological reproduction, since it celebrates the coming rebirth of Robert Morse. The archangels grant JM and DJ a vision of Robert in his mother’s womb, where the “little man lies drowsing” (538), and perform five ceremonies meant to prepare him, sense by sense, for his next life. These bestowals culminate in the birth itself, during which – amid “overwhelming, unseen radiance” – Nature beams “con amore” at the chance to “LAUNCH UPON THE WORLD OUR LITTLE LOVE” (541). In contrast to the “miscarriage // Of plans for Joselito” (29), the whole episode comes across as a clear case of successful gay parenthood by proxy. Not only are JM and DJ given a privileged view, like two fathers in the delivery room, but their union is uppermost in Robert’s mind as he readies himself for his new life: “YOU
WARMED MY HEART, DEAR ONES / FROM START TO THIS THE NOT SO BITTER END” (538).

Yet the scene is not so simple. In an earlier passage, Maria spoke about her own upcoming reincarnation:

WE FEEL AN URGE LIKE BABY'S KICKING FOOT
THAT SAYS MARCH ON! JM: Or mine to put
These headlong revelations finally
Between the drowsy covers of a book. (418)

Note how seamlessly the lines move from the biological to the cultural, as if the latter were the tenor of the former’s vehicle. A similar transition is signalled by the original title of the Coda, “The Birth of the Musician,” in which emphasis falls not so much on the birth as on the muses who attend it. Robert is destined to become a great composer – “A WEE MINNESOTA MINNESINGER” (418), with a propensity for astringent minimalism (386, 529-30). Focused on this artistic future, Robert sees his biological body as a “RED OFFENSIVE WRINKLED THING” (537), while the archangels care less for the corporeal child than for “WHAT I’M TO MAKE” (535). His compositions will be odes to depopulation, songs to “CLEAN UP & THIN OUT THE WESTERN SCENE” (530) – music contra biology, in other words. In such a context, the tongue’s taste is merely a metaphor for musical taste (534), and touch is not what your fingers do, but the finesse “NEEDED IN YOUR NEW ART” (536). After the delivery, attention shifts at once to preparations for JM’s reading of his completed poem – as if the baby will not be interesting again until he is old enough to present his own creations.

In short, Sandover embraces Robert's birth because it is the birth of a genius. The umbilical cord gives way to the musician's "FIRST CHORD" (533). This desire to displace
biological reproduction runs deep in Merrill’s work. Thus, early in Ephraim, when a scientist tells JM that he plans to watch film of his chimpanzees mating, “‘If I can stand it’” (19), we are meant to assume that JM, his guest, shares this comic revulsion. Although he has taken a keen interest in one ape – “Who / Can doubt she’s one of us?” (18), he asks – the kinship he feels is not biological. Like Prospero’s daughter in The Tempest, Miranda the chimp has been trained in language and “manners” (19), and it is this cultural instruction that JM considers the true human enterprise:

Weren’t we still groping, like Miranda, toward
Some higher level? – subjects in a vast
Investigation whose objective cast,
Far from denying temperament, indeed,
Flung it like caution to the winds, like seed. (19)

The goal is to “le[ave] heredity,” to disseminate a Self without the selfishness of “Narcissus bent / Above the gene pool” (20). Such an aim underlies many of the most striking aspects of Sandover, starting with its preference for phantoms created at the Ouija board over ordinary human beings. Thus, Don Adams is wrong to think of “Childlessness” – as in the poem of that title (CPR 148-9) – as simply a “symbolic state of disconnectedness and desolation” (Adams 22). For Merrill, it is also an opportunity to make a more inventive connection to the future. The turn away from genetics is also a turn toward a wider “investigation” – a scientifically-informed attempt to understand culture and its evolution as the “MACHINE WHICH MAKES THE DEAD AVAILABLE TO LIFE” (260).

Science and Cultural Selection
How does that machine work? To understand it, we must examine the use Sandover makes of science. Like all epic poets, Merrill wants to impose order on a chaotic totality and thus requires the help of a unifying belief system – the kind that Homer found in the Greek pantheon, Virgil in the triumphalism of Augustan Rome, and Dante in the synthesis of classical and Christian traditions. In an interview from 1982, Merrill made clear where he thought a modern writer could find such a system:

I think science is a visionary landscape in the twentieth century and was even in the nineteenth. If as you say we are myth-starved, we certainly are starved for the scientific myths. These are constantly bursting out in front of us in fascinating forms, and I suppose the point would be to show or to somehow open the possibility that the classical myths and the scientific myths are really one and the same. They’re talking about the same things in different ways. (CPR 100)

In a list of books that he read at Amherst, Merrill included the prophetic pair “Shakespeare and Darwin” (CPR 7), suggesting a long-standing interest in some kind of rapprochement between science and literature. (C. P. Snow published his essay on The Two Cultures a few years after Merrill’s graduation.) Similarly, the early poem “Foliage of Vision” links Darwin and Dante, construing each as a seer who beheld things “Dancing an order rooted not only in him / But in themselves” (CP 28). Much later, in “The Education of a Poet,” Merrill reads a paragraph from The Origin of Species about the structure of the eye and notes appreciatively: “The more he dwells upon the eyeball, the more his language sends out filaments toward another subject, a subject implicit both in language and in perception – the shifting densities of consciousness itself” (CPR 16). Everywhere his tendency is to look for the
commonalities between science and literature, and to use the connections between the two as a bridge across scales and landscapes.

In preparation for his epic, Merrill read books like *Asimov’s Guide to Science*, Arthur Young’s *The Reflexive Universe*, and Lewis Thomas’s *Lives of a Cell* (CPR 86, 140; see also CLS 118 for Thomas.) He also seems to have leafed through the work of unorthodox psychologists like B. F. Skinner (CLS 118) and Julian Jaynes (CPR 88, 143). “My ‘learning’ in these fields is paltry,” he told Fred Bornhauser, “to say the least. Yet this doesn’t prevent (it may even have allowed) a broad view of science from being set forth in the trilogy” (CPR 139). By his own account, he wanted to use his “tiny” knowledge of science in order to “reassure a reader that something could be learned” (CPR 40) – to show, in other words, what a consciousness can make of science, now that its knowledge is too vast and its conceptual grounding too abstruse for any individual to master. What Moretti discovers in *Bouvard et Péchuchet* is the same trick practiced by Merrill and his scientific dilettantism: “to recover a relation to totality, superficiality is the answer” (Modern Epic 68).

I am stressing the constructive side of Merrill’s engagement with science to offset a common misapprehension. Many critics have seen the use of science in *Sandover* as primarily critical or even subversive. This notion derives from certain indisputable facets of the text:

– *The critique of analytical physics.* The accusation here is a familiar one: that the same methods and ambitions that allow physicists to understand the atom also lead to the vaporized souls of Hiroshima and the threat of human extinction;

– *The parody of scientific discourse.* The bizarre teachings of the bat-angels are in many ways a wicked parody of the scientific worldview – its inelegant terminology, its distance from the evidence of the senses, its tendency to seesaw between
infinitesimal and cosmological scales, and its ability (and willingness) to unleash truly frightful powers;

- The embrace of marginal scientific ideas. More than once, the poem takes a marginal, somewhat eccentric scientific theory, embellishes it with poetic invention, and makes use of this outlandish hybrid rather than some more respectable model. Witness, for instance, Sandover’s intertextuality with Jaynes’s The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind, with Thomas’s reimagination of Lovelock and Margulis’s Gaia Hypothesis, and with Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend’s treatise on science and myth, Hamlet’s Mill.

Yet, despite these aspects of Sandover, I tend to agree with Reena Sastri, who sees science as central to the poem’s humanistic worldview, an “alternative both to suspicion of science from neoconservative, religiously affiliated viewpoints, and to poststructuralist deconstructions of science’s truth claims and analyses of its complicity with power structures in society” (92-3). This is why JM – normally so skeptical – goes out of his way to distance himself from the postmodern rejection of all foundations:

The world was everything that was the case?

Open the case. Lift out the fabulous

Necklace, in form a spiral molecule

Whose sparklings outmaneuver time, space, us. (274)

There is a foundation – the DNA molecule, along with the rest of the information that structures the universe, and that science gives us access to, however sporadically and partially.

As Ross Labrie has noted, DNA is for Merrill a “hopeful, contemporary version of the shining primum mobile of Dante’s Paradiso” (140), a more scientifically sound answer to the question of
what makes the world go around. Yet the celebration of DNA – as my argument above makes clear – does not imply a celebration of the style of reproduction it makes possible. Rather, the mechanics of DNA serve in *Sandover* primarily as an analog to the process of making a poem through the Ouija board, since both molecule and text are made up of chains of letters that give rise to a complexity the dumb elements alone do not seem capable of.

*Sandover* does not so much diminish science as attempt to establish literature as an episteme in its own right, construing its fictions as both a code for already-known truths and a means to produce new knowledge. Many critics – perhaps inspired, as Sastri implies, by the academic fad for deconstruction in the Eighties and Nineties – have made much of Wystan’s declaration that “FACT IS IS IS FABLE” (263). They have taken that statement to mean that science’s grounds are every bit as shaky and its truths every bit as susceptible to revision as any other system’s. Yet *Sandover* does not settle for such a simplified version of Thomas Kuhn. Long before Wystan delivers his speech, Mirabell has already emphasized the converse proposition – that “ALL LEGENDS ARE ROOTED IN TRUTH” (162) and that even the Bible “IS A CODE OF BLURRD / BUT ODDLY ACCURATE BIOHISTORICAL DATA” (187). In other words, fable “IS IS IS” fact.

If we see “FACT” and “FABLE” as yet another opposed pair – like world and text or *eros* and *psyche* – it becomes inevitable that *Sandover* will embrace them both, in keeping with the pronouncement that “anything worth having’s had both ways” (*CLS* 174). Literature and science can be collaborators, rather than competitors, because – in the poem’s view – the “truth that both fact and fable point to . . . is a fundamental unity” (Yenser 271).
Different sciences play different roles in Merrill’s poem. When Sandover sets out to imagine the extended timescales in which the epic does its work – the globe’s long spin, during which empire follows empire, and cultures rise and fall – it is to evolutionary biology that it turns. At first glance, the poem’s version of evolution can seem too dialectical and too progressive to mesh with Charles Darwin’s decidedly unteleological theories. But Vendler is right to see Sandover as a “hymn to the spiritual evolution that seems possible . . . now that biological evolution has invented man” (93) – a paean, in other words, to extragenetic evolution.

We do not need to wade into debates in the emerging field of memetics to see that literature – like the biosphere – might usefully be construed as a selectional system. In his book Wider Than the Sky, the neuroscientist Gerald M. Edelman lists the three essential traits of any such system:

– A means to generate “diversity in a population of elements;”
– The opportunity for “extensive encounters between individuals in a variant population” and the system in question;
– A way to “differentially amplify the number, survival, or influence of those elements . . . that happen to meet selective criteria.” (41-2)

In literary terms, the “diversity” comes from the superabundance of books, the “encounters” are instances of reading or neglect, and the “differential amplification” has to do with the preservation of texts, whether through individual acts of reading, institutional enshrinement, or traces left in other cultural productions. Although critics have neglected this aspect of the poem, I would argue that Sandover engages intensely with such selectional notions, chiefly by way of its imaginary places:
– the Ouija board, on which a finite number of symbols produce their constant variation;
– the Land of the Dead, where the principle of selection is ruthlessly and relentlessly practiced;
– Sandover itself, where an enduring cultural realm arises thanks to the survival of certain memes in the interplay of variation and selection.

Through these three locations – each slightly less tangible than the last – Sandover investigates the nature of cultural transmission. The poem implies that, while biological reproduction can only inscribe half of a person’s genetic material into a new being, the textual reproduction that the epic offers can preserve the whole symbolic Self and its cultural context. Each time a book is read, the Self for whom the text is a vehicle is transplanted into a distant consciousness, and so that Self’s ideas and their internal relations pass into the future with much more specificity than mere biology could ever muster. This – and not some bodily eternity – is the immortality that Sandover seeks.

*Invisible Cities*

Like *The Divine Comedy*, Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* sets up a counterpoint between solid geography and intangible ideas – but, unlike Dante, and like the author of Sandover, Calvino has little interest in the coherences of cartography. I am thinking about the conclusion of *Invisible Cities*, in which Marco Polo directs Kublai Khan off the map in search of utopia:

“If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the
search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire.” (164)

With this passage in mind, I want to look at three of the invisible cities in *Sandover*. Although they are impossible to pinpoint in space, we *can* map them onto another structure – Edelman’s three essential elements of a selectional system, the neo-Darwinian trio of variation, selection, and survival.

Admittedly, the Ouija board is a peculiar kind of geographical space. I have already mentioned that what constitutes "the world" – the totality – will vary depending on the time and place from which it is conceived, and that a poet like Merrill, working in the late 20th century, will necessarily have a wide and even global scope. The reasons for this expansiveness should be clear. Not only has geographical knowledge increased in the last three thousand years, but the spread of capitalism and liberal democracy has intensified interactions among the disparate parts of the world. Such changes undeniably inform *Sandover's* geography, as I have demonstrated in my discussion of the center and margins.

Yet there is another dynamic at work, one that tends in a different direction. The classicist Oliver Taplin has contrasted the geography of *The Iliad*, which is restricted to four fairly small pieces of turf, with that of *The Odyssey*, which embraces "sea as well as . . . land" and extends as far as "the realm of fable" and "the underworld of the dead" (55). These two approaches – to suggest the whole through sheer geographical inclusiveness, and to concentrate a world's worth of references and memories into a more modest space – are also both present in *Sandover*. Although the narrative possesses a vast geographical range, the single most important space in the poem remains the Ouija board, a rectangle of cardboard smaller even than a
computer or a television's screen, and one that, like those late 20th-century technologies, gives access to the whole through the resources of storytelling and simulation.

This shrinking to the dimensions of a rectangle may explain why, in certain passages, Sandover resembles nothing so much as the transcripts of some interontic chat room, or a collection of otherworldly text messages and tweets, complete with capital letters and eccentric spellings. Like a fervent cyber-utopian, JM wants to use his connectedness to access a world of virtual voices and to construct from them a totality that belongs to – that is – him. Such similarities are neither coincidence nor uncanny prophecy. Sandover is simply reflecting on something already in the air during the era of its composition – the folding of recorded sounds, filmed images, and words back into a single medium, the computer (Kittler 31-49). Merrill barely knew enough about such matters to compare the stars to “HOLES IN COMPUTERIZED CARD RESPONSES” (132) – thus reimagining the universe as an operating system that reads the stellar software – but he did not need much expertise to have imaginative access to the concept of reunification. The Ouija board already reduced all communication to the manipulation of a small number of elements in a compact space, and the epic idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk – the desire of most modern epics to be book and play and movie and song all at once – took care of the rest.

Thus, we might see the Ouija board as the introduction into Sandover of a kind of spaceless geography. Such dematerialization – and its accompanying atemporality – are the culmination of a process that David Harvey described in The Condition of Postmodernity, whereby “each distinctive mode of production or social formation will . . . embody a distinctive bundle of time and space practices and concepts” (204). According to Harvey, postmodernity is the “historical-geographic condition” (336) created by an unprecedented intensification of what
he calls *space-time compression*. Things tend to get closer together and faster. This postmodern condition brings with it a new set of social and psychological adjustments. The most important for my purposes is that, just as Fordist modernity stabilized politics and economy in order to “produce [constant] social and material change” (339), so postmodernity seeks “stable places of being” (344) to compensate for the political and economic instability that accompany space-time compression.

The Ouija board is precisely such a stable place. At the mercy of an unmanageable totality, the epic writer needs a fixed spot in order to orient his work’s motion through time. If stability cannot be found in the center or on the margins, and if no magical whole – think of Dante’s cosmos, say, or Marx’s communist millennium – insures the stability of the future, then the author may have to rely on less material landmarks.

In 1982, Merrill still felt keenly the need to insist on the reality of the experiences in *Sandover*:

> And what I really wanted a reader to feel, by all means, what I wanted the reader to believe, was that we’d had the experience. I didn’t care what he thought of the experience, whether he thought it was silly or boring, but not to say, ‘Oh what an interesting device Merrill has hit on,’ or ‘How would he have thought to set it up as if it had come over the Ouija board,’ which people are really dumb enough to do if they’ve had a certain academic background. (*CPR* 132)

As one of those “dumb” academics, I must point out that the Ouija board *is* an “interesting device.” In the broadest sense, it represents the ingredients of any cultural system – grounded in symbols and information (A to Z, 0 to 9), driven by values (YES and NO), and wedded to first principles that need not be terribly logical or empirical (the Spirit World and its
bizarre hierarchy). More than a mere toy, the Ouija board functions in *Sandover* as a stage on which words and selves collaborate to make a world. The mundane props for the lovers’ séances – a mirror, a piece of cardboard, a Willowware cup – emphasize that even the most abstract or occult visions have a material base, while the arc of typographic symbols serves as a synecdoche for the linguistic means by which human beings know and create their world.

Most important, the Ouija board insures that everything in *Sandover* will be ostentatiously mediated by language. Yet Merrill – unlike many of the philosophers of the linguistic turn – does not dwell on how this situation limits human beings. His poem wants instead to dramatize the improbable way in which an arrangement of conventional symbols can transmit the contents and even the structure of one mind to another – and how such transmissions combine to create a network of selves, each productively intertwined with the rest. *This* is what the poem calls the “incarnation and withdrawal of / A god” (3): the entry of an invisible presence into one’s consciousness through the medium of words. Because of this “incarnation,” the creation of poetic texts is not a retreat from the world, but a different form of engagement with the world.

All of which makes the Ouija board a ground for *productive flux*. Thinking in terms of cultural evolution, and following Edelman’s definition, we might see it as a source of the informational variation on which cultural selection begins to do its work. The figures who flock to JM and DJ at their table are raw material, but, instead of serving a biological system, they are the diverse “population of elements” in a cultural system. These spirits clamor for attention – for reproduction, in other words, in a widening circle of minds. Their utterances are reproduced again and again – first on paper, through their transcription by JM; then in the minds of JM and DJ, when the transcripts are read aloud; then on paper again, when the most useful of the
messages are inserted into the text of *Sandover*; and finally in the consciousnesses of readers of 20th-century American poetry, whose blurry and imprecise copies will become the basis for new cultural transactions.

The Ouija board messages are memes, in other words, cultural replicators seeking survival. Writing in the late Seventies, Merrill may have read – or at least known the basic argument of – *The Selfish Gene*, the work in which Richard Dawkins introduced the idea of memetics. In the final chapter of the original edition of his book, almost as an afterthought, Dawkins argues that the same selectional pressures that work on the genetic level for bodies work on the *memetic* level when it comes to ideas. Here is a lucid explanation of the concept from Harvard University Press’s *Evolution: The First Four Billion Years*:

> We are continually inundated with ideas. Thankfully, most of this information is discarded (otherwise we would have memory overload). Thus ideas are in competition with each other for survival within our minds; the fit ones reside in our minds and get replicated, while the unfit ones get discarded. (Ruse and Travis 727)

Dawkins puts the case more vividly: “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell" (192). 

Of course, Merrill’s habit of looking for multiple meanings, and his desire to write "POEMS OF SCIENCE" (113), could easily have encouraged him to think of cultural transmission in evolutionary and selectional terms, without any assistance from Dawkins. Memetics is in many ways an “old idea in new packaging” (Ruse and Travis 727) – a scientific metaphor, that is, no more or less rigorous than the literary metaphors with which Merrill works.
Yet it is striking how often *Sandover* – with its suspicion of biological reproduction and its emphasis on the combinatorial productivity of the Ouija board – reads like a gloss on the core ideas that Dawkins introduced.

Alison Lurie may be the commentator on *Sandover* who has come closest – however unwittingly – to this memetic point-of-view. In her memoir *Familiar Spirits*, she laments that “my friend’s mind was intermittently being taken over by a stupid and possibly evil alien intelligence” (63) – *parasitized*, in other words, by Ephraim, Mirabell, and the rest. Leaving aside her value judgments, and the vaguely extraterrestrial overtones of “alien intelligence,” we can see that Lurie is on to something. Thanks to his method of creating *Sandover*, Merrill has made himself into a receptacle for ideas that seem almost randomly generated, to the extent that he himself can describe these messages as “junk” or “bubblegum” (136). An academic critic like Jeff Westover may think that the “Ouija transcripts form a repository of letters analogous to Eliot’s tradition” (222), but that is really too grand a description. It retains the notion of a population within which variation is occurring, but underestimates the *variety* of the system, overemphasizing Donne and Dryden and underemphasizing Madame Blavatsky, Robert Morse, and “Von and Torro” (*CLS* 136).

We can see the jostling for inclusion among these variants as a version of those “extensive encounters” that Edelman mentions. Late in *Sandover*, Robert Morse hints at how such encounters work. In what seems at first a puzzling turn of phrase, he talks of a “GENERATION GAP IN HEAVEN” (526) – but his meaning becomes clear if we understand the gap as one between cultural, rather than biological, generations. In “heaven” Emily Dickinson has no trouble leaping the chasm, but Edna St. Vincent Millay – “POOR SOUL, BORED, STUPEFIED / BY ‘MOODS’ & ‘FEELINGS’” – can find “NO PERMANENT /
TOEHOLD.” Whitman could once jump across easily, but he has been “MINED HALF WITLESS” – weakened by familiarity, perhaps, and thus apt to appeal to less intelligent acolytes. Most of the English Romantics are “VEXED TO HAVE FOUND NO HARPS;” their characteristic imagery has staled, and the “MANNERS” and “REFLEXES” of their “THINKING MIND[s]” (527) have dated. Only the epicist among the group can still make the leap: “BYRON MUCH QUOTED FOR HIS OWN / BRAND OF CHAT: ‘AT LAST TWO VERY GOOD LEGS’ . . . “ (527).

On one level, the “GENERATION GAP” can be seen as a competition among these spirits to play a larger part in Sandover – to become as important as Auden to the text, or to appear in allusion and influence as prominently as Dante and Proust. On another level, the passage offers a miniature model of how memes struggle for representation in each new generation – a struggle that the Ouija board mediates. In this context, books might be seen as memecrafts, ideas assembled and stabilized for efficient transmission, and the epic as the memecraft par excellence, perfectly suited to carry integrated complexes of ideas from brain to brain, across time and space. Each member of the genre collects an encyclopedic range of memes and protects them within an artificial totality, then directs the whole package into the future, toward a series of unknown environments.

Thus, the “LIFE RAFT LANGUAGE” carries “ITS PRECIOUS / NUCLEUS OF MINDS” away from the destruction of “THE FLOOD” (119). The ultimate goal of Sandover is to collect and collocate its memes in a way that allows the poem itself – yet another variant – to replicate and survive.
I am borrowing my name for the realm of spirits – the world of dead friends and historical figures that JM and DJ access with their Ouija board – from Auden’s “As I Walked Out One Evening,” a portion of which Merrill quotes in section Q of Ephraim:

“The glacier knocks in the cupboard
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.” (Auden 134; see CLS 58)

If the Ouija board is a small, stable place from which to access the flux of global modernity, Merrill’s Land of the Dead has lost its materiality altogether. This loss shifts emphasis from the technical means of acquiring information – the logistics of the Ouija board – to the principles that govern that information’s behavior as it moves from consciousness to consciousness.

We can better understand this immateriality by contrasting Sandover with an earlier member of the epic tradition. In The Divine Comedy, Dante creates a spectacularly detailed physical geography, ranging from the famous nine circles of hell to the terraced steps of purgatory. The vividness of Gustave Doré’s illustrations indicates how thoroughly Dante describes the visual aspects of his afterlife. Even in heaven, where things are ostensibly less solid, the arrangement remains roseate and easily visualizable. In Sandover, on the other hand, the map of this world – as we have seen – contains immense gaps, and Merrill relies more on names than on descriptions to evoke a sense of place.73 And the afterlife has no geography at all. The hierarchy of souls does not correspond to levels in space, and the dual location of the bat-angels – who are also, apparently, forces inside the atom – confirms that we are in a world that is
not meant to be touched. At the tiniest scales, after all, matter itself becomes less localizable – discernible only in its traces, and apt to behave in ways that confound the senses.

Because of this near-inmateriality, focus in the afterlife falls on the discourse of the various celestial messengers. It is a discourse filled, as Yenser has pointed out, with “false starts, redundancies, conflicting stories, superfluous information, and vagaries” (262-3). In an interview with J. D. McClatchy, Merrill commented on some of the more bizarre messages:

If our angels are right, every leader – president or terrorist – is responsible for keeping his ranks thinned out. Good politics would therefore encourage death in one form or another – if not actual, organized bloodshed, then the legalization of abortion or, heaven forbid, the various chemical or technological atrocities. (CPR 113)

The idea of thinning out sounds appalling in this context, and Merrill’s tentative qualification (“If our angels are right”) does not help matters. When the bat-angels – the managerial class of the Land of the Dead – speak of “TOO MANY / FRACTIONAL HUMANS ON EARTH” (117) and dream of winnowing humanity down to an elite “NUCLEUS OF MINDS” (119), their talk has a decidedly fascistic and even genocidal ring. It makes Michael Harrington think of the less reputable bits in Brecht and Pound (205). According to the bat-angels, most people lead “USELESS LIVES” (226) – more like humus than blooms – and God wants these “run-of-the-mill souls” (139) to “REDUCE THEIR NUMBERS” (307). The masses are mere bodies, and the divine response to their mindless replication will be either mass infertility (202) or “MORE STARVATION” (310). 74

Harrington refers to such teachings as “elitist neo-Malthusianism.” Although he acknowledges that Sandover ironizes this “objectionable material,” he finds the resistance
insufficient: “Whatever the high theoretical solution to the problem, I must confess I was aesthetically put off by the suggestion . . . that a famine in Africa may be part of a benign plan for the future” (204-5; see CLS 507-8). The notion that the losses of war and environmental catastrophe will lead to a perfected species of humanity “EVOLVING FROM US” (308) will doubtless strike many readers as the rhetoric of innocence at its most egregious. The “new formulae of megadeath” (55) may imperil ninety percent of mankind, but we are supposed to accept as a consolation (however ironically expressed) the idea that “New types . . . like phoenixes will fly / Up from our conflagration” (56-7). The whole discourse seems pure mystification, a way to construe the “creative destruction” of Atlantic civilization as both necessary and productive.

Yet all of this must – once again – be placed in a broader context. Such “ROUGH STUFF” (290) looks a little less dubious if we think of Sandover as elaborating an idea of cultural evolution. We should remember that most of the poem is dialogue, a choice that guarantees a certain discursive complexity, since each sentence functions as both a claim about the world (real or fictive) and an incident in an ongoing drama. As a dramatic element, the elitism of the bat-angels provides Sandover with an objective correlative for some of its Darwinian concerns. Thus, if the Ouija board can be seen as the method by which diversity enters a cultural system, the Land of the Dead may be understood as a figure for the process by which some variants are chosen and others rejected. As the angel Gabriel puts it: “MY FIRST NATURE: SELECTION. MY SECOND: THOUGHT. / . . HENCE THE VERY HISTORY OF MAN, HIS EVOLUTION!” (344).

Selection plus thought equals evolution – cultural evolution. However outrageous the bat-angels’ pronouncements may be as politics, they make sense in the realm of Arnoldian
culture, where “THE STRONG & CLEVER / DRIVE OUT THE REST” (344) not through but simply alongside bloodshed and oppression. Although Merrill did broaden his range as his career progressed and become more public and political, and although he did feel genuine alarm about things like nuclear weaponry and the environment, I would suggest that much of the apocalyptic imagery in *Sandover* points toward this kind of cultural destruction – toward the inevitable moment of survival or extinction that awaits every work of art. Much is lost in the conversion of lost time into literary texts, and much too in the conversion of a superabundance of texts into a meritocratically-selected canon. Yet these losses do have a productive side – more plausibly than “megadeath” does – and within this context the millenarianism of the angels seems less obscene.

At one point, the chief of the bat-angels – known as 00 – tells JM and DJ that “YR / REQUEST IS NOTHING LESS (OR MORE) THAN IMMORTALITY” (314), defined as a “GIFT THAT MAN EARNs (OR NOT) WITH HIS LIFE” (315). The key switch-word here is *immortality*. Within a Christian framework, the meaning would be clear enough – but the afterlife of *Sandover* is far from Christian. In the poem’s beyond, the soul rises not by good deeds, but by “THE HELIUM OF PUBLICITY.” Thus, an early disquisition on the Land of the Dead starts with a list of celebrities:

OURS IS A GREAT WHITE WAY OF NAMES IN LIGHTS
BYRON PAVLOVA BILLY SUNDAY JOB
OTTO & GENGHIS KHAN MME CURIE
Hitler too? YES (54)

These names are minimal memes, bare units of information that might be included – might achieve a kind of immortality – in a book like E. D. Hirsch’s *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. As Frederick Dolan has noted, such immortality is not about *eternity*, static and
immutable, but rather about “that which lives on and which therefore has a history that is to some extent open” (147). (Dolan draws on Hannah Arendt for this distinction.) It is about “traces invented and preserved only through the necessarily public, intersubjective medium of language” (Dolan 154) – about insertion, in other words, into a cultural system. As Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi has noted:

[W]hile genetic instructions are coded chemically in the chromosomes, the information contained in artifacts is coded and stored outside the body – in the action-potential inherent in objects, drawings, texts, and the behavior patterns of other individuals with whom one interacts. (213, italics added)

Immortality of the biological sort would lead only to an overcrowded world, but this memetic kind of immortality is a perpetual process of sifting and selection, akin to Milton's vision in *Areopagitica* of the gathering and assembly of scattered Truth (Milton 741-2). The difference is that, whereas Milton thinks that Truth was once whole but shattered at mankind's fall, Merrill believes in no such original unity. He sees the assembly of Truth as construction, pure and simple – the great "V WORK" of our species, “THE ONWARD DANCE OF THINGS” (161).

Following Dolan, we might say that the movement of *Sandover* is toward a particular kind of power – intelligence – diffusing throughout the universe, spread by things like the reincarnation of Auden as rock, the distribution of George Cotzias among a multitude of scientists, and the dissemination of the poem itself to “fit audience . . . though few” (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 7.31). *This* is the context in which the bat-angels can say that “DEATH IS PRODUCTIVE” (130) – because it makes possible the immortality of cultural survival.
Paradoxically, this immortality is also impermanent, since no selection is ever the final one. It works through an almost respiratory alternation of attrition and accumulation.

Of course, the notion that the Land of the Dead is primarily about Big Names – that the ruthless selectional pressures there have as their telos the accumulation of geniuses and celebrities – may strike some readers as a fundamental mistake about culture. In a 1971 letter to Stephen Yenser, Merrill seems to have agreed. He tells about a miserable plane ride during which a fellow passenger rattled on about “literature and Great Ideas,” dropping names all the while, and notes that he “wanted to kill him.” But we must “be gentle to the nutty,” Merrill says, and so instead he delivers

a little speech about how the Great Ideas, far from being the achievement of men of genius (or look what happens when they are – Nietzsche + Hitler, Einstein + Hiroshima) are the work of thousands of anonymous generations, and take the form of those brain-coral reefs, slow myths + taboos, which keep the shark from the shallows our children swim in. (“Four Letters” 329-30)

Yet the epic is an odd form, and some of the generalities that apply to other cultural products do not hold up when it comes to The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, or In Search of Lost Time. We can understand why by drawing on another parallel from evolutionary biology. To perpetuate itself, the epic adopts something analogous to the approach of what biologists call K-strategists – organisms that “raise a few, finely tuned offspring” – while the novel, its rival, more closely resembles an r-strategist in the way it produces “hordes of poorly adjusted progeny” (Gould 94-5). Put simply, there is no room for run-of-the-mill epics. An epic that fails to fulfill its function – that does not serve as a model of a lost whole for distant readers – hardly qualifies
as a literary work at all. Unable to claim the respectable obscurity that is the fate of most novels, such a book is simply a sad asterisk.

Thus, in the history of the novel, the sheer quantity of texts in each synchronic slice allows a scholar to keep Big Names to a minimum and to concentrate instead on the changes within a large corpus – on movements, the spread of tropes and devices, the diffusion of subgenres across space. But epics are different: they are few and far between, and they aim always for the longue durée. As Fernand Braudel has pointed out, the “names that really dominate the history of civilizations are those which survive a number of episodes, as a ship may ride out a series of storms” – the founders of worldwide religions (Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed), for instance, and the crafters of influential philosophies (Confucius, Plato, Marx). Among those who have withstood time’s selections, Braudel says, scientists and epic poets stand out. If the “measure of an event’s or a person’s importance in the hurly-burly of history is the time they take to be forgotten” (27), then scientists and epic poets are playing a very long game.

Thus, when Merrill embraces the idea of “POEMS OF SCIENCE” (113), he is announcing his intention to become a name. He wants to become one of the “rare spirits that mark the limits of vast periods,” like Dante for the Middle Ages or Goethe for the boundary between modernities (Braudel 27). He seeks to make it past those nasty gatekeepers, in other words, the bats and angels of the Land of the Dead, and to settle in among the Names that have survived.75

In a discussion of Sandover’s shrinking cast – Maria is Plato, while Plato is all nine muses, and so eleven characters somehow become one – Lynn Keller notes: “Moreover, for all
history there is only one Academy (and, by implication, one audience, a select coterie of the living and the dead)” (138, see CLS 558). This “select coterie” represents the survivors of cultural history, whose contemporaries have vanished around them and who are now as widely spaced as major cities on a map of the West.

Sandover is where this elite meets – the poem’s most lovingly described location, as well as its least substantial. Timothy Materer points out that Sandover replaces the “privileged and conventional” life that Merrill led “on his father’s estate” with a “truer one” (48), grounded in language and letters. Thus, the “ROSEBRICK MANOR” is associated from its first mention with “TOPIARY FORMS & METRICAL MOAT,” along with various “GREENWOOD PERSPECTIVES OF THE MOTHER TONGUE.” A series of puns links the figures on the “CORONETED FRIEZE” to canonical authors – Hardy and Milton, Dickinson and Shakespeare – but the grounds also contain an “HERB GARDEN OF CLICHES” and humble, elemental “ROOTSYSTEMS UNDERFOOT” (262). What unites figures of speech and famous writers, the conventions of meter and the convolutions of etymology, is survival. All of these cultural materials have withstood the winnowings of history – and Sandover, a kind of virtual utopia, gives such enduring memes “A local habitation and a name” (Shakespeare, Midsummer Night’s Dream 5.1.17).

Although Sandover is as immaterial as the Land of the Dead, Sandover keeps it connected to the concrete and particular. The last section of the poem emphasizes this by collapsing three locations – the “Empty perfection” of the rosebrick manor, the shared domestic space of the house in Athens, and the “Broken Home” of JM’s childhood (556-7). The point seems to be that the cultural realm is where “Real and Ideal study . . . / . . . compatibility” (320), its geography a series of superpositions that recede toward the earliest scenes of love and loss.
The real suggests perishability, the ideal suggests permanence, and through their interaction cultural evolution arises – the process whereby variation and selection (embodied in the real and the ideal, respectively) lead to either survival or extinction.

The possibility of extinction is broached first. Late in Scripts, after the lessons have ended, the old schoolroom stands empty. Melancholy and decay pervade the scene – a “chalk mote arrested / In mid-descent,” a “horseshoe rusted” beneath the “cracked ceiling.” The stage directions note that on one wall hang two prints – a “sepia ‘School / Of Athens’ and Ignoto’s ‘The Pure Fool.’” The pairing dramatizes the high stakes in seeking cultural survival, which can make one ascend as high as Raphael – or even as Plato himself – or descend as low as any unknown fool. In the midst of these details, JM is haunted by the possibility that Sandover may have arrived too late to survive the selections of history:

the unspoken feeling

That, once we’ve gone, nobody else will thumb

The pages of our old Curriculum.

The Manor is condemned. One doesn’t dare

Say so flatly, but it’s in the air. (482)

What if Western civilization – the freight that Sandover carries – is discarded en masse on the way to that better, more intelligent future? What if the poem one day seems as obsolete as the god that Ephraim wrestles in Arizona, “Left by his followers TO MELT & ROT?” (34).

What if history dismisses it as “A BIT OF A WHITENASH” (394), a tedious apology for a long-vanished privileged class? These are real possibilities as JM ponders the coming ascent of Shanty in India and Félicité in the Caribbean. “We are the ghosts,” he says to David Kalstone,
and “theirs the ongoing party” (505). It will be hard enough to survive that transition, but what about all the other readers and environments to come?

Then a sudden shift in perspective allows JM to glimpse a different future:

Look there! Beyond

The herringbone brick walks, the paddock pond,

Vistas are running wild already – who’s

About to guess at their eventual use?

At first, such vistas merely encourage new doubts about the “fat volumes stamped with gilt” (482-3) that Merrill is sending to the “straight A / Students” of the future. (As the pun on guilt reminds us, these doubts are intertwined with questions about the epic’s relationship to the political structure of the society that supports it.) But the view also suggests the off chance that one day a reader – some unimaginable Other – will discover the “big old globe” in the schoolroom (482) and find that, although it no longer conforms to the planet’s political divisions, it still makes a nice model of the way things once were. Even a model millennia old, after all, indicates how its maker made sense of the world, and so it offers – to those who find themselves on far different terrain – what might be called structural instruction.

The last section of the poem – The Ballroom at Sandover (556-60) – is defined by this slim hope of survival. We may think of the dead assembled in the Ballroom, waiting to hear JM read his completed epic, as a collection of variants who have withstood the depredations of selection. They represent a transient canonical ideal, intangible and unpredictable, with which the real Sandover must interact if it means to survive. In one sense, this scene completes the poem’s movement away from the grubby realities of Atlantic civilization and its politics: the “ROSEBRICK MANOR” is as apolitical as it gets. Yet, in another sense, Sandover remains
bound to its place and time, and so the political returns—however covertly—at the very moment when the poem most wants to escape it.76

Three aspects of The Ballroom at Sandover return the poem to the conditions of its creation. First, the same spatial configuration that defines Sandover’s center reappears in Sandover itself. Just as Stonington and Athens are constructed as safe havens—one for creation and one for inheritance—so Sandover is insulated and secure, with the schoolroom surrounded by a “high hedge” (320) to keep contaminants outside, and the ballroom itself off-limits to anyone whose name does not appear on the guest list (546-8). Because the poem’s geographical center is a crucial element in its rhetoric of innocence, the reinscription of its structure serves to extend that innocence—beyond Merrill’s individual act of creation, beyond the totality his epic embraces, to the intellectual project itself.

This assertion of innocence does not cancel out the critique of Atlantic civilization elsewhere in the poem. But it does clear out some space for Sandover’s epic mission. If innocence "builds in the face of destruction" (Sastri 2) in Merrill’s work, the epic carries this process to its literary extreme. Each member of the genre makes a kind of preemptive strike, trying to preserve a totality by replacing the political with the aesthetic, much as fossilization swaps out living material for more durable minerals. The artifact that results is always deeply conflicted—both politicized and depoliticized, a mold of Empire and a model chronotope with the Empire deftly excised. Sandover recognizes this double truth and, by extending its rhetoric of innocence, attempts to guard itself against any small hint of political guilt.

Second, and more damagingly, the relative diminution of the global margins that characterizes the rest of the poem becomes almost absolute within the confines of Sandover. Despite its range of cultural references and the sweep of its geography, Sandover seems to
contract into a parochial Westernness in its last few pages, with other intellectual and artistic traditions notably absent. Such constriction gives an unintended sting to Ephraim’s earlier talk of the afterlife’s “GREAT WHITE WAY” (54). The members of the Academy include “CONGREVE & COLETTE,” “MARVELL & MALLARME,” “RILKE, STEVENS & MS STEIN,” but the sole non-Westerner even considered for an invitation – the Japanese poet Issa Kobayashi – “BACKS OUT” at the last minute, deferring to JM’s former lover, Hans Lodeizen (CLS 546-7).

The metaphoric implications of this exclusivity are striking. Sandover – schoolroom, ballroom, and environs – becomes a kind of Western nucleus for the cell of the world, home to the cultural equivalent of the “Minute intelligences that indwell / The chromosome” (203). Within this logic, everything outside – including, implicitly, all the cultural traditions not represented at the reading – must function in one of three ways: as a form of insulation; as the necessary physical substrate that allows this control center to do its work; or as a structure that the Western center itself builds, drawing on the information encoded in its DNA. Each of these possibilities diminishes the margins in one way or another, reinscribing their marginality into the ongoing, allegedly transcultural story of human civilization.

Third, and finally, there are the three epicists present in The Ballroom at Sandover – Dante, Goethe, and Proust. On the one hand, they are simply the three epic authors who had the biggest influence on Merrill’s poem. On the other hand, they also represent a notion of the genre deeply connected to the core qualities of Atlantic civilization. Consider the shifts in focus for the epic tradition that these three writers exemplify:

– *From the martial to the erotic.* Aside from its criticisms of nuclear weaponry, *Sandover* makes no mention of military matters and ignores epics of warfare like *The
Iliad and The Aeneid. Instead, the poem draws on three epicists who make erotic obsession the center of their work – whether the love of Dante for Beatrice, of Faust for Margarethe, or of Marcel for Albertine. The implication seems to be that in an era bereft of metaphysics, *eros* can be the commitment without ground that gives shape and meaning to a life's narrative, and so a relation to the totality can be established through the indulgence of individual desire. Such a position contrasts sharply with the main line of the epic tradition – with Virgil, for instance, for whom the dalliance of Aeneas and Dido is a *distraction* from history, not its essence.

- *From the wandering to the domestic.* Even as it ignores their wars, *Sandover* also ignores the wanderings of Odysseus and Aeneas – or, for that matter, of later epic heroes like Leopold Bloom. Instead, the poem emphasizes the rootedness even of a pilgrim like Dante, recasting *The Divine Comedy* so that its events occurred either while the poet lay sleeping in bed (45) or as he sat at the feet of a mendicant friar (219, 556). Together with housebound Marcel and bookish Faust, this version of Dante seems like an endorsement of Merrill’s own epic practice – the way he centers *Sandover* on two houses, in Stonington and Athens, and uses the abstract map of the Ouija board to domesticate the whole and make the cosmos cozy.

- *From the society to the Self. Sandover* has little use for epics whose heroes are ostensibly representative – *The Aeneid*, say, or *Jerusalem Delivered* – and instead prefers works like those of Dante, Goethe, and Proust that focus on an autonomous author-figure. The creators of such figures serve the poem as models of how to disassemble the inherited Self – the Self of parents, nation, and epoch – and construct with the pieces an *Author*. By this light, we might see the schoolroom at Sandover
as a place where biological and cultural inheritance is transformed by learning
(“Star-map, globe and microscope”) and friendship (etched on a desk are the initials
of “MM, WHA, / And others”) (319-20), in the belief that such self-creation can
somehow “SAVE THE GREENHOUSE” (132).79

Although these revisions clearly have aesthetic motivations, they also constitute a
selection in their own right – an encapsulation of the values that might link the origin and the
destination of Sandover. These shifts move the poem in the direction of some of the defining
traits of late 20th-century Atlantic civilization – a preference for a mostly invisible (if
nonetheless active) military, the enfranchisement of eros that is consumerism, the sacralization
of the domestic space, the elevation of the individual, and the conviction that the style of the
Self's consumption is crucial to the planet's fate. They suggest a covert politics for the poem, a
version of Western liberalism that favors the erosion of tradition in the name of identity or
lifestyle, that is broadly sympathetic to consumer capitalism, that is skeptical of collectivity
unless it is conceived in universalist terms, and that both rejects ideological militarism and
accepts the skillful deployment of violence to accomplish salutary ends. As a product of such
conditions, Sandover also has a vested interest in their continuation. If the values and practices of
Atlantic civilization persist into the future, as the unexamined and naturalized ground of
subsequent civilizations, then their presence in Sandover will be seen as a sign of “universality,”
and thus strengthen the poem’s claim on survival.

By the time of its conclusion, Merrill’s epic has been revealed as a complicated act of
conversion, whereby the real geopolitical totality of the late 20th-century – the configuration of
bodies and land summed up in the word globalization – has become another page in the atlas of
the epic tradition. This would hardly be the first time that a writer had a vision of the future, and
the unimaginably Other, and nonetheless managed to perceive mostly what was already his own. The dematerialized world – the Ouija board, the Land of the Dead, the Ballroom at Sandover – is supposed to outlast the solid materials in which empires trade. And yet in some ways it carries the very DNA of Atlantic civilization.
Envoi: A Tale of Two Windbreakers

As David Kalstone has pointed out, Merrill must have at some point seen a “larger pattern emerging” in his oeuvre, since even the titles cohere, with the four volumes that precede *Braving the Elements*, for instance, evoking earth, water, air, and fire, and “*Divine Comedies* extend[ing] it one realm further” (105). The presence of the Ouija board links *The Seraglio*, “Voices from the Other World,” “The Will,” and “Nine Lives,” while *Sandover* itself alludes to everything from “Transfigured Bird” (216) to *The (Diblos) Notebook* (3). Coupled with the autobiographical approach that marks so much of Merrill’s poetry, such intertextuality suggests that we might potentially treat his oeuvre as a single massive work.

This is the spirit in which I want to conclude, by taking a late poem – “Self-Portrait in Tyvek (℠) Windbreaker,” from 1995’s *A Scattering of Salts* – as a commentary on *Sandover*. From its Ashberrian title to its asterisk-specked final stanza, “Self-Portrait” is dense and diverse, so I will restrict myself to a few key passages that relate to genre and geography.

The windbreaker is a “world map” in which Merrill wraps himself, a jacket decorated with oceans and nations – a clear figure for the epic poet, particularly since when he wears the windbreaker to the gym it is accompanied by a “terry-cloth headband . . . green as laurel” (*CP* 669). Yet Merrill goes out of his way to point out the underpinnings of this epic pose. He saturates the poem with brand names, as if to remind the reader of the connections among globalization, capitalism, and the epic. Thus, an American company with a French name – and notorious links to the Vietnam War – made his jacket’s fabric, while an English firm, named after a species of antelope found in territories claimed by Cecil Rhodes, made the shoes on his
feet. His Walkman comes courtesy of the Japanese corporation Sony, and it gives Merrill the choice of listening to San Francisco hippies or an Estonian minimalist – “the Dead or Arvo Pärt” (CP 670).

Like the epic, the windbreaker is durable, made from “Unrippable stuff first used for Priority Mail” – for the most important communications, that is, the kinds of words on which whole worlds hinge. Despite its humble origins – Merrill bought it in a tacky gift shop, all “crystals” and “whalesong” and “Recycled notebooks” – the jacket somehow embodies the “collective unconscious / Of our time and place.” Yet it is no innocent wrapping. The Atlantic Ocean – the structuring body of Atlantic civilization and of Sandover’s epic center – spans the front of the jacket, and the zipper that links the two sides “closes / Over my blood-red T-shirt from the Gap” (CP 669). The implication here is hard to miss. This is what Merrill thinks of the world in which he and his epic have wrapped themselves – a spectacular totality, woven through with capital and underwritten by blood.

A stanza about the famed Neapolitan singer Roberto Murolo makes the link between politics and poetry still more explicit. Murolo bears the old songs “Into the nuclear age” (CP 669), despite the censure of Mussolini, just as Merrill hopes to carry his song of the nuclear age into an unknown future. Yet the poet has begun to have some doubts about the “world” in which he has enveloped himself:

Even this dumb jacket

Probably still believes in Human Rights,

Thinks in terms of “nations,” urban centers,

Cares less (can Tyvek breathe?) for oxygen

Than for the innocents evicted when
Ford bites the dust and Big Mac buys the farm.

The windbreaker represents an obsolete politics – although the *probably* implies an interpretive leap, as if Merrill were unsure of how to read his own “world.” In epic terms, we might say that “greed and savagery” do not threaten survival nearly as much as “dead forests, filthy beaches” (*CP* 670), and unbreathable air do. After all, Homer has made it through three millennia of the former, but no humans whatsoever will make it through the latter. Thus, the allusion to Ford and McDonald’s points to the depredations of those corporations – the tires gnawing at the road, the agribusinesses driving out small farmers – but also punningly hints at this onrushing death, thus suggesting that the old emphases (“Human rights,” “innocents evicted”) may be misplaced in a world in which the very conditions of life are threatened.

Even as it worries about environmental degradation, “Self-Portrait” also doubts the ability of serious art to compete with the distractions of mass culture:

- Prayer breakfasts. Pay-phone sex. “Ring up as meat.”
- Oprah. The GNP. The contour sheet.
- The painless death of History. The stick
- Figures on Capitol Hill. Their rhetoric
- Gladly – no, rapturously (on Prozac) suffered!
- Gay studies. Right to Lifers. The laugh track. (*CP* 670-1)

The list come across as a little glib, but its point is clear. In this context, the “painless death of History” means both the permanent triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War – a notion made popular (however momentarily) by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) – and, more cuttingly, the idea that capitalism has
now provided us with painless new ways to fritter away our lives, a demotic barrage of artificial stimulation designed to keep “men’s minds full, small, and careful” (Gass 272).

In the midst of such concerns, “Self-Portrait” differs from Sandover in that the focus falls not so much on the passing of power to a new center – that shift away from Atlantic civilization that I discussed in Chapters One and Two – as on the bad behavior of the currently powerful:

Americans, blithe as the last straw,

Shrug off accountability by dressing

Younger than their kids – (CP 671)

The poet has little use for people who take his “world” – the jacket, the epic – as a sentimental paean to Mother Earth. He wants his readers to see not just the bright colors on the map – “The countries are violet, orange, yellow, green” – but also the “blood-red” stain underneath (CP 669). His global focus makes him cosmopolitan, with appeal to both the “Albanian doorman” and the “carrot-haired / Girl in the bakery” who touches the “little orange France above my heart,” but it also encourages misunderstanding. Thus, he recoils from the recognition of a teenaged girl he passes, who is “wearing ‘our’ / Windbreaker, and assumes . . .” (CP 671). The claim of commonality is too appalling to speak. I take this encounter as a dramatization of the perils of long-term literary survival, in which one’s initial preservation depends on an audience who (in this case) is responding not to artistry, not to your skillful representation of a totality and the way it interacts with the major texts of the tradition, but to something more like a “corporate synthetic global pitch” (CP 672). Your epic becomes a kind of glorified tchotchke.
“Self-Portrait” ends with a vision. Merrill has decided to get rid of the Tyvek windbreaker – for “Styles,” he says, always “betray / Some guilty knowledge,” and he is no longer content with this particular take on the totality. His dream is about an archangel in outer space who has a matching jacket but “In black, with starry longitudes, Archer, Goat” – emblazoned with the constellations, in other words, and augmented by a kind of celestial Walkman, which the angel uses to listen to the radio signals that the Earth continuously transmits. This is a totality that even Sandover could not imagine. No longer limited by the geography of nations and the parochialism of one population center or another, these “far-out twitterings” (CP 672) offer a complete picture of humankind, although not always a flattering one.

The map of the stars may be more abstract than the one that contains Stonington and Athens, or China and the Sudan, but it has the advantage of being elemental, imperishable, and full of “breathing spaces” (CP 673). One can even imagine a ship departing one day in the direction of the archangel, and each new planet that it settles giving rise to its own Homer, another epic ready to set sail, this time on “THE WINEDARK SEA OF SPACE” (CLS 275).
Notes

1 Despite the poet’s reputation as an aesthetic conservative, such postmodern flourishes should come as no surprise. As Stephen Yenser has pointed out, The (Diblos) Notebook – Merrill’s second novel – was doing Derrida _avant la lettre_ (see The Consuming Myth, especially 39-40).

2 In my parenthetical citations, I will use the following abbreviations for Merrill’s collected works: CP for _Collected Poems_, CPR for _Collected Prose_, and CLS for _The Changing Light at Sandover_.

3 I would omit the noun “nation” that Hegel uses, and the adjective “national” that Mendelson employs, if only because Dante antedates the nationhood of Italy by centuries, and Goethe precedes Germany by decades.

4 Throughout this dissertation, all italicization will follow the original, unless otherwise noted.

5 William S. Sax’s essay “Worshiping Epic Villains: A Kaurava Cult in the Central Himalayas” provides a fascinating example of the interpenetration of Indian epics and Indian life. “Traveling in India,” Sax notes, “one is continually struck by the many ways in which both _Rāmāyana_ and _Mahābhārata_ are popularly invoked” (171).

6 In his _On the Map_, Simon Garfield gives a fine popular account of the Renaissance “golden age of mapmaking” (104). He considers the European rediscovery of Ptolemy’s _Geographia_ a critical moment, one that both called attention to a historical totality and spurred the desire to update it. One of Garfield’s chapter titles – “The World in a Book” – inadvertently makes clear the close connection between atlases and epics.
I think of the works of Shakespeare as England's real epic, more than *The Faerie Queene* or *Paradise Lost*. We could see the First Folio, published in 1623, as the first step in the transformation of a loose collection of plays into a modular world-text, an endlessly reconfigurable encapsulation of England's history, its classical inheritance, and the worldview of Renaissance humanism.

For a capsule history of this era, see the relevant chapters of Gilbert Highet's *The Classical Tradition*, especially 261-88, 314-5, 336.

In a valuable – if now out-of-date – overview of Merrill studies, Guy Rotella calls the reviews of *Mirabell* “puzzled or uncertain” and mentions, as examples of this ambivalence, David Bromwich, Joseph Parisi, and Robert B. Shaw. He also cites Peter Stitt’s more forceful rejection of the book (9-10).

A few hundred pages into his unfinished epic, Byron writes: “These first twelve books are merely flourishes, / Preludios, trying just a string or two / upon my lyre or making the pegs sure” (12.54.5-7). This appeal to the prelude – also made, of course, by Wordsworth – seems to me one sign that these Romantic epicists no longer look backward in the manner of Fenelon and other Neo-Classicists.

Harvey’s phrasing here echoes Baudelaire’s famous dictum from “The Painter of Modern Life.”

The epic attempts of the center were joined by new attempts from the United States, Russia, and Germany, the three nations that initiated the modern epic. Why did the achievements of Goethe, Melville, and Tolstoy fail to deter Musil, Pound, Bely, and the rest? The individual situations and psychologies of these writers are relevant, but I would also credit that sense of
newness so characteristic of high modernism, which, in the most hubristic or wishful moments of the ambitious, made even recent masterworks seem obsolete.

13 Bakhtin defines novelization as the process whereby modernity’s dominant genre — thanks to its “free and flexible” nature (7), its taste for “unofficial language and unofficial thought” (20), and its tendency toward “maximal contact with the present” (11) — liberates older forms from the strictures that “[serve] as a brake on their unique development” (39). The definition reflects Bakhtin’s tendency to overestimate the subversiveness of the novel and to underestimate the diversity of other genres.

14 In “The Education of the Poet,” Merrill alludes to Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (CPR 15), while he mentions *Invisible Cities* in a note he wrote about Barbara Kassel’s paintings (CPR 363). Frederick Buechner — Merrill’s childhood friend, and himself an accomplished novelist — recalls how the poet pushed him to read Perec’s “marvelously lunatic” *Life: A User’s Manual* (31). As members of the Oulipo, both Calvino and Perec might have joined their colleague Harry Mathews in his admiration for Merrill’s commitment to the “apparently daffy universe opened up by the lowdown Ouija board” (Magowan and Magowan 61).

Merrill acknowledged his kinship with the author of *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* in response to an interviewer’s question:

Pynchon’s enthralling. He’s ten times brighter than I am, yet I can recognize, in his centripetal paranoia, a lot of the same energy – the same quality of energy –
that shaped the trilogy. We’ve both made spiderwebs on a rather grand scale. Something fairly sinister is sitting at the heart of his. Is that because he knows things I don’t? Or purely a matter of temperament? I’m not sure I want those questions answered. (CPR 140)

During the preparations for Mirabell, Merrill looked to “Milton and Pynchon” for guidance in how to “put Paradise Lost into a new vocabulary” (Hammer 574, see also 535-6).

15 In The Maximalist Novel, Stefano Ercolino chooses to omit a number of American novels from consideration because he does not want the “primacy” of American works to “overshadow other important voices” (xii). Yet such primacy is surely a big part of the story. Ercolino’s taxonomy could only have been strengthened by the inclusion of works like McElroy’s Women and Men (1987) and Pynchon’s Mason & Dixon (1997), and I suspect it would have moved in the direction of Moretti’s Modern Epic if he had allowed in “maximalist” poems such as Sandover and Omeros.

16 Pascale Casanova has pointed out that the “configuration of contemporary literary space is not easy to characterize. It may be that we find ourselves today in a transitional phase, passing from a world dominated by Paris to a polycentric and plural world” in which places like London, New York, Rome, Barcelona, and Frankfurt “contend with Paris for hegemony” (164). What matters for my purposes is that New Delhi, Nairobi, and Kingston do not appear on the list.

17 This tendency is most evident in Omeros – with its elaborate counterpointing of Homeric, African, colonial, and contemporary Caribbean motifs – but a similar polyphony can be found in many of the other epics of the period.
In the introduction to his translation of Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, Friar describes the author in terms that will seem downright prophetic to anyone familiar with Merrill’s work. We hear that Kazantzakis

- arranged his poem so that each book corresponded to a letter of the Greek alphabet (ix; compare *The Book of Ephraim*);
- composed for his hero a paean to the five elements – earth, fire, water, air, and mind (xxxiv; compare *CLS* 369-70);
- possessed a kind of “double vision” and a desire to “‘join in [his] heart God, anti-God, both yes and no’” (xv, xx; compare *CP* 161 and the section headings of *Scripts*).

Given that Friar dedicates the translation to Merrill, and thanks the young poet for reading and commenting on the early drafts (xxxviii), we can be fairly confident that such connections are not coincidence. Nor is it irrelevant that, at Amherst in the Forties, Friar was Merrill’s instructor for a course entitled “Contemporary Epics in Prose and Poetry” (Bauer 18).

While Merrill sees the epic as a symptom of old age, his most important predecessor considers it a kind of accident. In *The Captive*, Proust writes about how Balzac and Wagner imposed a “retroactive unity” on their works, discovering an order “all the more real for being ulterior” (207-8). Adams argues that *Ephraim* is a “failed attempt to create an epic poem” (116), one that founders on its dependence on the self-centered lyric, and sees the rest of *Sandover* as a retroactive response to this failure.

In *James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence*, Piotr Gwiazda suggests that selflessness is a characteristic strategy of gay male American poets: “Ashbery, Gunn, Duncan . . . seem to be satisfied with positing their writing identity as weak, elastic, even expendable” (13). Although Gwiazda sees Merrill as resistant to Bloom’s notion
that agon is the path to poetic identity, he also sees “little evidence of the purported egolessness, weak selfhood, or even abnegation of selfhood we identify as the primary trope of intertextual relations between gay male poets” (26). In his sense of the poetic Self, Merrill falls somewhere between The Anxiety of Influence and “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

21 Merrill retains the original Italian; I have used Allen Mandelbaum’s translation.

22 The passage alludes to Cantos 18 to 20 of Paradiso. The ornithological references should remind us that Merrill, the creator of Mirabell, was also the author of poems like “Transfigured Bird,” “The Black Swan,” “The Parrot,” “The Pelican,” and “The Peacock.”

23 In the introduction to a volume of essays on Merrill that he edited, Harold Bloom praises the poet’s “erotic wisdom” and, comparing him to the Pynchon of Gravity’s Rainbow, notes that “Merrill’s sexual vision is considerably healthier than Pynchon’s sado-anarchism, while Pynchon’s Tarot coal-tar Kabbalism impressed me spiritually more than Merrill’s Ouijan revelations” (7).

24 In a fascinating essay, composed not long after Mirabell, Merrill spells out and develops this scientific vision of the divine center of Dante’s Paradiso:

We may picture it partly as a model of electrons whirling around the atomic nucleus – in our day, the point on which all nature and its destruction depend; partly as an abstracted solar system – only with the relative planetary speeds reversed, since these Intelligences turn all physics inside out. With a similarly scientific eye, he adds that the Inferno obeys the Second Law of Thermodynamics, since the “[w]ind-driven souls (Francesca) give way to runners (Brunetto), to the painfully-walking hypocrites cloaked in gilded lead, to the frozen, impacted souls of
Cocytus.” Perhaps under the influence of Pynchon, he sees the poem “decelerating” toward Satan, a “figure of raging entropy” \((CPR\ 188-9)\).

\(25\) As an undergraduate at Amherst in the Forties, Merrill wrote an “honors essay on metaphor in Proust” (Rotella 1, see also Hammer 102).

\(26\) A note in the front matter of the original edition of *Divine Comedies* tells the reader that “Verses for Urania” \((CP\ 385-91)\) draws heavily on the mythic and astronomical material in *Hamlet’s Mill*. Indeed, the phrase “from Mystic to Mount Palomar” \((CP\ 387)\) could serve as that treatise’s five-word synopsis. Such allusions suggest that Merrill agreed with de Santillana and von Dechend’s core thesis – that ancient myths have their origin in the transmission of scientific data and that “[c]osmic phenomena and rules were articulated in the language, or terminology, of myth” \((58,\ see\ also\ 1-11,\ 56-75)\). For the poet’s familiarity with *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, see CPR 88, 143, 184.

\(27\) The division of the audience into "LYRICISTS," "CRITICS," and "TECHNICIANS" \((547)\) – and the presence of motley figures such as Mallarmé, Austen, Frost, and Nabokov – only slightly disturbs the coherence of this epic crew. I will discuss this scene from a different vantage in my third chapter.

\(28\) In *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, George Steiner suggests that a “sense of two worlds,” coupled with a “journey towards material or spiritual resurrection,” is typical of the epic. The “divided world” \((95)\) does indeed characterize many of the major texts in the genre:

- *The Iliad* (Greece vs. Troy);
- *The Odyssey* (away vs. home);
- *The Aeneid* (Troy’s ruins and exile vs. Rome’s founding and empire);
- *The Divine Comedy* (the afterlife vs. Earth);
– *Paradise Lost* (both heaven vs. hell and Eden vs. Earth);
– *Don Quixote* (reality vs. chivalric fantasy);
– *Moby-Dick* (land vs. sea and ship vs. sea);
– *War and Peace* (corrupt city vs. rejuvenating country).

In *Sandover*, the most obvious division is that between the Ouija board and the real world, but other splits – like those between Stonington and Athens and between the center and the margins – are just as important.

29 All of these buried boxes may ultimately derive from “In Broad Daylight,” a story by Constantine Cavafy that Merrill got around to translating in 1983. The diabolical figure who comes to tempt Alexander says: “You’re poor, I know that. I’ve come to tell you how to get rich. Near Pompey’s Pillar I know a spot where a great treasure lies buried. I want no part of this treasure myself – I’ll take only a little iron box, to be found at the very bottom. The rest, all of it, will be yours” (*CPR* 415).

30 See 141, 527 for Whitman; 526 for Dickinson; 14, 134, 217, 219, 547, 557-8 for Eliot; and 14, 51, 399 for James.

My hunch that the exclusion of American artists from *Sandover* was intentional is supported by “From the Cutting-Room Floor,” which includes among its excisions long, entertaining passages of Ouija board chat with Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and even Elvis Presley. After a quick insult of Jack Kerouac, Williams dismisses the United States as the “LAND OF THE FREE / SAMPLE, HOME OF THE (GRADE B) RAVE” (*CP* 463).

31 See 22, 313, 500, 502, 547.
Despite his putative elitism, Merrill does defend his own formal practice with a reference to W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues”: “The pentameter – so went the argument in part – wasn’t a truly American line. I had to wonder if these patriots had ever heard the blues. ‘I hate to see that evening sun go down’ – wasn’t that an effortless and purely native music?” (CPR 11).

Similarly, Hermann Broch has noted that the writer who wants to “render . . . the whole epoch” must always find a position outside that time and place to stand (12).

We hear that Sergei plans to draw a map for Leo (49) – but the composition of the scene, and thus the drawing of the map, is permanently deferred by JM’s loss of his typescript.

The quotation from “McKane’s Falls” comes from CP 370. Ross Labrie also conducted the interview in which Merrill offered his own account of waterfalls and the spaces behind them (CPR 90-102).

In a 1969 letter to Stephen Yenser, Merrill mockingly refers to this part of the United States as the “great vacant heartland that has shaped us all” (“Four Letters” 324). I suspect these two cosmopolites, who met at the University of Wisconsin in a poetry workshop that Merrill was teaching, may have shared a laugh or two at the Midwest’s expense.

Two nearby stanzas sing of a “young girl” and a “grizzled old Midas” (CLS 195) in Jacksonville, Florida – Charles Merrill and his second wife, JM’s mother, Hellen Ingram.

David Jackson’s father’s name was actually George Jackson. Merrill seems to have chosen “Matt” for the sake of assonance and to avoid confusion with the Black Panther leader killed during an attempted prison escape in August 1971. Langdon Hammer confirms that Jackson was an “irascible husband and father who grew meaner, even brutish in old age” (165-6).
39 Only the proems in *Paradise Lost* and the prologues in *Faust* come to mind as epic forerunners to Sandover’s particular brand of literary self-consciousness.

40 The passage alludes to both James and Wilde – the former through the “Turn of the screw toward grandeur” (97) that the new wallpaper represents, the latter through an adaptation of his famous (and perhaps apocryphal) last words.

41 For a summary of the gay rights struggle during Merrill’s lifetime, and particularly during the Seventies, see Piotr Gwiazda’s *James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence* (61-9).

42 For more on Wagner, see “Matinées” in *The Fire Screen* (*CP* 267-70), “Revivals of Tristan” in *Late Settings* (*CP* 423-4), and “The Ring Cycle” in *A Scattering of Salts* (*CP* 611-3).

43 There are also a couple of references to the Soviet Union – one to some “fine downpulsing beams” in Petrozavodsk (512), one to a “NEGATIVE FORCEFIELD” (146) somewhere in Russia. Although each case has a supernatural cause in the poem’s world, together they seem designed mostly to evoke the dangers of nuclear weaponry.

44 My references are to the dialogues in Hamilton and Cairns’s English edition. For the verb *fathers*, however, I have relied on a note in Helmbold and Rabinowitz’s translation of *Phaedrus*: “The word play [in 252b] seems to involve *Eros* (love), *pteros* (wing), and *p[ă]ter* (father)” (36). Anne Carson offers a more detailed analysis of the same passage in *Eros the Bittersweet* (160-4), a work whose thoughts on love and language overlap substantially with Merrill’s.

45 After her death, DJ’s mother is reincarnated in Sicily, where she “narrowly . . . MISS[ES] SAINTHOOD” (22) – an appropriate fate, given her long martyrdom at the hands of Matt Jackson.
For more on this visitation, see 132, 219.

Rorty borrowed the phrase “blind impresses” from a poem by Philip Larkin. Where Adams finds in Merrill’s work “Jung’s archetypes of psychic individuation” tempered by “Freud’s skeptical understanding of the constraints of heredity” (xiv), I see a poet who wants to make a self out of the past he has inherited – out of words and the dead. My position differs from Adams’s, then, mostly in terms of syllables and surnames.

Like the Venetian Santofiors, Wendell is a fictional creation.

It is tempting to connect the name Rufus to Frederick Buechner’s novel *The Season’s Difference*, in which a “fat boy named Rufus” shares a story about a robin’s egg that also appears in Merrill’s “Transfigured Bird” (Moffett 25-6, see *CP* 33-6).

I can see why Alison Lurie might find certain passages in *Sandover* anti-Semitic: “Since their first spirit guide, Ephraim, and many of David and Jimmy’s closest friends were Jewish, and I had always thought of them as wholly without prejudice, I was surprised and depressed to come upon these passages, which I suppose must have bubbled up from someone’s subconscious in an unguarded moment” (89). Yet I find more convincing Benjamin Ivry’s argument, grounded in Hammer’s biography, that “[m]ore than simply lacking anti-Semitism, Merrill was positively drawn to Jews as friends and mentors throughout his life.” Perhaps Hammer himself is right to suggest a compromise: “It is possible to see in [the poet’s use of Judaism] both Merrill’s rejection of his father’s anti-Semitism and a dose of that prejudice, undiluted” (578).

In keeping with his emphasis throughout *The Consuming Myth*, Yenser attributes Merrill’s fascination with Santeria to the fact that the “figures venerated by its followers are essentially double,” so that “any given santo is outwardly a Christian saint but underneath an
orisha, or pagan deity” (330). The doubleness of Sandover’s pantheon is related to the
doubleness of all fiction, which asks us both to suspend our disbelief and to withhold our full
belief.

52 In the first chapter of All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, Marshall Berman looks at
Goethe’s Faust and the “issue of development” (63). He sees Philemon and Baucis, the old
couple in Act V, as “embodiments . . . of a category of people that is going to be very large in
modern history: people who are in the way – in the way of history, of progress, of development;
people who are classified, and disposed of, as obsolete” (67). See “Goethe’s Faust: The Tragedy
of Development” (37-86, especially 30-71, 74).

53 Although neither critic discusses the lines I cite, Stephen Yenser in The Consuming
Myth sees Merrill’s usual engagement with the duality of Time in section T (226-7), while Don
Adams in James Merrill’s Poetic Quest detects in Sergei’s speech a confrontation between the
positive and negative poles of the “authorial self” (57). Neither position is incompatible with my
reading.

54 Mirabell apparently does not realize that, due to infant mortality, early death,
imbalances in the numbers of males and females, and the existence of people like JM and DJ
who choose not to reproduce, two children per couple is too few and would lead to a disastrous
decline in humanity’s numbers.

55 The Time article – which appeared in September 1977 – was not actually a cover story,
and Merrill changed its title from “Environment: Earth’s Creeping Deserts” to the more
suggestive “Nature’s Revenge: The Creeping Deserts.” The character of Nature in Sandover is
indeed a vengeful character when it comes to humanity’s excesses.
56 See the complaint about “overtly political or social writing” (CPR 72) that I quote in both the Introduction and Chapter One.

57 Other passages in Sandover reinforce Ephraim’s disapproval of Islam. Mirabell dismisses the Koran as “A WORK / PATCHED TOGETHER BY A NOMAD RACE” (242), while Gabriel arranges for Mohammed to swagger through a few stanzas – blustering and boasting and spewing anti-Semitic remarks and misogynistic asides (448-9) – in a lesson that Wystan describes as “A PARODY” of “ATTITUDES EMBODIED BY HIS FAITHFUL” (472).

58 The palaces in Fatehpur-Sikri are less Islamic than Ephraim thinks. The city incorporates elements of Persian, Turkish, and Indian architecture and draws its decorative motifs from Islam, Buddhism, and many other sources. The emperor Akbar, founder of the city, seems to have dedicated the palace complex to a “local Sufi holy man, Shaikh Salim Chisti” (Waugh).

59 Thebes is also where Moses "CAME TO COURT," although, in a reminder of the fallibility of the divine messengers, JM has to offer a quick correction: "Our book says Tel-el-Amarna" (226).

60 Early readers of The Book of Ephraim, coming to the poem at the end of Divine Comedies, would have been primed by tropes like the equation of artist and puzzle-maker in “Lost in Translation” to think of all craftsmanship – jewelry-making included – in literary terms.

61 These metamorphoses are so intricate that Lynn Keller loses track. In the midst of a fine essay about Merrill’s revisions of Auden and modernism, she mistakenly states that “Strato’s animal nature is underscored as he is revealed to be in his first human incarnation, having previously been a cat” (123).
62 My phrasing is meant to echo the passage in *Scripts* in which DJ explains that he and JM moved to Stonington “to civilize themselves” (326).


64 From an interview with Donald Sheehan: “All those passions – illnesses, ecstasies, deceptions – induced for the pure sake of having something to sing beautifully about” (*CPR* 54). See also “Matinées” (*CP* 267-70) and “The Ring Cycle” (*CP* 611-3). For the nuances of poetry and emotion, see Merrill’s mild rebuke to Sheehan: “‘From the Cupola’ was not composed in a frenzy” (*CPR* 57).

65 Westover is discussing the poet’s relationship to his predecessors.

66 I find Andrea Mariani’s insistence that this expression derives from Dante unpersuasive. To make his case, Mariani must cobble together unrelated phrases from separate cantos of *Inferno*, neither of which has much to do with the meaning or context of Merrill’s words (Mariani 193). It seems to me more likely that Merrill sought a phrase that both expressed his meaning and was rich enough in cognates, and simple enough in grammar, for English readers to translate.

67 The eschatologies of Dante (*Inferno* 3.55-7) and Eliot (*Waste Land* 62-3) are also placed in a new context and renovated in the process.

68 The name *Maya* may also do double duty here, since Merrill was doubtless familiar with the term from Indian philosophy. Read aloud, and stripped out its question mark, “Maya, Maya, your Félicité” sounds like an apostrophe to the cosmic force that converts the eternal unity into a world of things and change – the imagination behind the “construct” of the “ineffable,
The unknowable universe” (*CPR* 168). Repunctuated, the phrase seems like a hesitant hope for Providence, spoken by one whose own civilization is caught up in the flux.

69 Parenthood is undermined throughout *Divine Comedies*, the volume out of which *Sandover* grew. In “Chimes For Yahya,” for instance, Merrill recounts an anecdote about a prank played on a “tall blond from Berkeley” (*CP* 374), an anthropologist who wants to observe a tribal childbirth. With a wink for the poet, Yahya tricks the scientist into thinking she has witnessed the solemn moment – then places in her arms a “wriggly white / Puppy” (*CP* 377), a squalling baby goat, and reveals the ‘mother’ as his wizened old retainer, Hussein. The episode’s primary purpose is to mock anthropological condescension and to contrast it with the genuine bond that develops between the narrator and Yahya – but it also has a clear secondary purpose, to parody the mystifications of maternity and childbirth.

70 Merrill sent Ross Labrie a 25-page “photoduplicated” version of this early draft (Labrie 155).

71 Here Merrill sounds a lot like Wole Soyinka, another literary cosmopolite, who also insisted on a “selective eclecticism” that would allow any “productive being, scientist or artist,” to see Sango in an electrical current or Ogun in “precision technology, oil rigs and space rockets” (44). Compare what Merrill told Fred Bornhauser:

> The only lifeline to science, for idiots like ourselves who find the very vocabulary impenetrable, has to be the imagination. Hence the constant drive to *personify* throughout the transcripts – and throughout history. No average person is going to feel comfortable with the idea of solar energy. So a figure slowly takes shape, takes human, or superhuman form, and is named Apollo or the archangel Michael, and his words, which we put into his mouth, become part of the vast system
whereby the universe reveals itself to us. What can you and I profitably learn from a neutrino? Yet give it a human mask and it will, as Oscar Wilde said, tell the truth. (*CPR* 140)

72 Dawkins’s original chapter in *The Selfish Gene* remains the best introduction to memetics, both for his scientific rigor and for his elegance as a stylist. James Gleick also discusses memetics in *The Information* (310-23), a work whose roots in Claude Shannon’s theories lead it to understand Homeric epics primarily – and properly – in informational terms. Their “incantatory power,” Gleick writes, “made of the verse a time capsule, able to transmit a virtual encyclopedia of culture across generations” (34).

For a valuable (if already somewhat dated) overview of the memetics debate, see *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science* (2003), edited by Robert Aunger. In that volume, Susan Blackmore presents a cogent defense of memetics as a method for understanding cultural imitation, including of behaviors and information “passed on by complex human processes such as reading, writing, and direct instruction” (28), while Adam Kuper – even as he calls for a “neo-Darwinian programme in the human sciences” (187) – argues that the analogy between genes and memes is farfetched and without scientific utility. Ruse and Travis’s *Evolution: The First Four Billion Years* also offers a couple of fine summations of Dawkins’s memetic argument (727-8, 853-4), as well as an overview of how the “success of the meme meme . . . belies its success as a term of art in the academy” (728).

73 The section on Samos (369-70) and the occasional evocations of Stonington (5, 243-4, 528) are the most obvious exceptions.

74 Even Ephraim makes a few shocking statements. In the account of Maisie the cat’s death, her place “Flights above the street” – along with her Jamesian virginity – seems to
associate her with an ideal of "pure" high culture, while the "Voices repellently familiar" that drift up from below and drive her to despair suggest both the demands of the body on the mind and the pressures of everyday life on the necessary isolation of literary art. In the middle of the passage, however, Ephraim abruptly shifts to talking about overpopulation, blaming it for a recent decline in the quality of souls: “LACKING THE WOLF / THE PIG THE HORSE WE MORE & MORE MAKE DO / WITH LESS EVOLVED MATERIAL” (52). “LESS EVOLVED” recalls the abuse of Darwinian language that led Europeans to place themselves at the top of an evolutionary scale and their colonial subjects at the bottom, and the fact that those demotic voices are described as “devil-baby altos” in a “black midst” (51) makes it tempting to detect here a staging of the invasion of “high" Grecian culture by the productions of darker and allegedly less refined folk.

75 The question of what will survive is also a question of what will not. After he learns about those enduring memes – the lucky ones who have their “NAMES IN LIGHT” – JM, prompted perhaps by the fading luster of Billy Sunday and Otto Kahn, has a sudden moment of doubt:

– Might reputations be deflated there?

I wondered here, but Ephraim changed the subject

As it was in his tactful power to do. (54)

Despite its name, the Land of the Dead is in one sense a place for those who have not perished. The dead who speak there are the ones who have made it through the cuts of history. The place embodies selection precisely by what it excludes – by all the Elinor Wylies and José Maria de Heredias who shaped Merrill’s psyche but who do not show up in Sandover (see CPR 5, 147, 164).
The body also returns. At the crucial moment, Sandover suddenly pulls us back from the pure ideality of this cultural system. For JM’s friend Mimi has died unexpectedly, and just as JM and DJ are making preparations for the “parlor game” (558) of the poem’s reading, Vasili Vassilikos, her grieving husband, appears, and to their surprise he wants them to go on with it: “Anything, anything to keep his head / Above the sucking waves” (559). The game of the Ouija board – with its creation of complicated relations among self, text, and world – functions as a form of consolation, a spaceless space and a cyclical sacred time that supplements the bodies and land that make us mortal. This reconnection to the purely human helps to offset the sense that the poem is retreating into ideality, taking its own dematerializations too seriously – leaving the map of human life altogether.

By his own account, Merrill was drawn to this branch of the epic tradition very early, reading at Amherst “Proust, Dante, and Faust in their various originals” (CPR 7).

This process helps to clarify the role of the dead in Sandover. The dead evoke time and memory, concerns that Merrill inherited from Proust, but they also represent the past converging on the present, clamoring and jostling and making demands. Just as Shakespeare put Juliet in the tomb of the Capulets, among her “forefathers’ joints” (Romeo and Juliet 4.3.51), so Merrill uses his central trope – the Ouija board – to figure the uncanny persistence of the past, the way the voices of the dead compose one’s own. The poem wants to argue against two conclusions commonly drawn from this fact. The first might be called the paranoid response, which thinks of the past as a web that constrains and even immobilizes the Self; the second could be called the identitarian response, which considers certain accidental legacies the Self’s immutable core. Sandover rejects both of these positions. As I have already suggested, the poem construes autonomy as a question of whether one can take the “tissue of contingencies” (Rorty 32) that one
inherits and shape it into a new configuration. Ultimately, Sandover reminds its readers that every literary text is a kind of mosaic, each tessera a dead predecessor’s voice, and the genius the one who can most skillfully channel the irretrievably absent.

79 In all of Merrill’s work, Adams sees the “epic endeavor to save in art what life has squandered” – a quest for “individualized salvation” (2) that he associates with the New Testament and with the poetic approaches of Dante and Proust. Adams notes that at the end of Sandover, “[a]s in Proust, only the author and his friends are ‘saved’” (159) and contrasts this exclusivity to the “Old Testament quest in which the fate of an entire nation or people hangs in the balance” (2). Yet I would argue that Sandover attempts a kind of synthesis – one in which the quest for personal salvation becomes the means of saving the species.

80 Just as Sandover itself reaches back to The Seraglio and “Voices from the Other World,” so this image of the Self wrapped in stars has a distant antecedent in “Swimming by Night,” the next-to-last poem in Water Street (1962):

You wear your master’s robe

One last time, the far break

Of waves, their length and sparkle, the spinning globe

You wear, and the star running down his cheek. (CP 167)

The distance between this quatrain – with its exquisite intelligibility – and the asterisks and gaps of the last stanza of “Self-Portrait in Tyvek (™) Windbreaker” is striking. Yet the fundamental unity of Merrill’s work, “FROM START TO THIS THE NOT SO BITTER END” (CLS 538), is even more remarkable.
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