

Reena Sastri
November 29, 2004
Dissertation Abstract

James Merrill: Knowing Innocence

This dissertation reads Merrill's work in light of his career-long engagement with innocence as an epistemological, an ethical, and a literary category. Resembling Blake's imaginative vision of innocence within experience rather than Milton's evocation of Edenic "native innocence" or Emerson's will to an "original relation to the universe," Merrill's knowing innocence combines receptivity, trust, and willing belief in illusions with knowledge, experience, and responsibility. Rather than a dialectical synthesis, it achieves an active ongoing balance between opposite terms. My first chapter argues that Merrill's autobiographical poems resist models of continuity, whether Wordsworthian or Freudian, between child and adult. Approaching childhood with humor, they enact the child's growth through Wildean and Yeatsian masks, costumes, and artifice. Chapter Two examines nature as a referent in Merrill's work. From the 1970s on, Merrill's poetry questions myths of nature's innocence, including pastoralism and the personification of "Mother Nature," but also invokes these myths as ways to model an ethical stance toward nature. Chapter Three argues that *The Changing Light at Sandover* creates a cosmological myth that is more scientifically coherent than has previously been recognized. This scientific, secular myth grants a central role to an innocence that evolves in time. Not lost in the past, nor associated with timelessness, this innocence must be achieved in the present and future. Chapter Four examines how language approaches the origins and limits of subjectivity: birth, death, the body, and the unconscious. Language's evasions of these unknowable nodes create pleasure rather than merely marking loss: they do not find an original innocence, but build something new. Merrill's last volume, *A Scattering of Salts* (1995), the subject of Chapter Five, figures this newly achieved innocence as a gem or crystal, emerging from and returning to a temporal process of change. It also offers knowing innocence as a self-conscious fiction enabling not only personal reinvention as the poet ages, but also – in poems addressing AIDS, the threat of environmental disaster, and what one poem calls the "horrors" of twentieth-century history – ethical social engagement.