

James Merrill's Myth: An Interview

Helen Vendler and James Merrill

MAY 3, 1979 ISSUE

(James Merrill recently published *Mirabell: Books of Number*,* in which he continues his account, begun in “The Book of Ephraim” published in *Divine Comedies*, of conversations held, via the Ouija board, with dead friends and spirits in “another world.” Merrill and his friend David Jackson receive the messages which are transcribed letter by letter; Merrill then edits and rewrites the transcriptions. The transcriptions are set in a frame of autobiographical narrative and personal reflection. The spirits and the dead speak in capital letters; the poet writes in lower case. The questions that it occurred to me to ask Merrill are those of a reader confronting a poem unquestionably beautiful, but also baffling.)

Helen Vendler: When you called your last book *Divine Comedies*, did you mean by that allusion to Dante that you were planning a trilogy?

James Merrill: Not consciously. I’d convinced myself that “The Book of Ephraim” told everything I had to say about the “other world.” Because of its length and looniness I’d taken to calling it the Divine Comedy—not of course a usable title, until David Jackson thought of making it plural. Dante, subtler as always, let posterity affix the adjective.

HV: In your new book [*Mirabell: Books of Number*], you say there will be one more volume in this vein; after that you will be permitted to return to your “chronicles of love and loss.” These three books have all been based on Ouija-board material. Is there anything else that unites them, in general, and that separates them from your earlier poetry?

JM: Chiefly, I think, the—to me—unprecedented way in which the material came. Not through flashes of insight, wordplay, trains of thought. More like what a friend, or stranger, might say over a telephone. DJ and I never knew until it had been spelled out letter by letter. What I felt about the material became a natural part of the poem, corresponding to those earlier poems written “all by myself.”

HV: In “The Book of Ephraim,” the first book, we heard the voices of the dead; but in *Mirabell* nonhuman voices are added, telling a complicated tale of evolutionary history, molecular biology, and subatomic behavior. Would you like to talk about the books you read before creating your phantasmagoria of “science”? (You mention *The Lives of a Cell*, and looking at a model of the double helix.)

JM: They weren’t many. The simplest science book is over my head. At college I’d seen my dead frog’s limbs twitch under some applied stimulus or other—seen, but hadn’t believed.

Didn't dream of thinking beyond or around what I saw. Oh, I picked up a two-volume *Guide to Science* by Asimov—very useful, still, each time I forget how the carbon atom is put together, or need to shake my head over elemental tables. A book on the black holes. Arthur Young's *Reflexive Universe*—fascinating but too schematic to fit into *my* scheme. The most I could hope for was a sense of the vocabulary and some possible images.

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