

## SERIOUSLY FUNNY

### *James Merrill's Puns*

James Merrill's friend W. H. Auden wrote that 'Good poets have a weakness for bad puns'.<sup>1</sup> A punster himself, Auden needed it to be true. Most of his puns are of the blink-and-you'll-miss-it kind. At the end of 'In Praise of Limestone', he ironically sees 'faultless love' in a limestone landscape (p. 542); in 'Letter to Lord Byron,' he refers to the Romantic poet's muse as 'gay' (p. 97). Byron, also a consummate punster, had no wish or need to pun subtly: aroused from sleep and looking lustfully at Haidee, Don Juan 'gazed as one who is awake / By a distant organ'.<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare punned even more indiscriminately than Byron. When accused of a cloudy disposition by his uncle-turned-evil-stepfather, Hamlet replies, 'Not so, my lord, / I am too much i'th' sun'.<sup>3</sup> 'Ask for me tomorrow', says Mercutio, bleeding to death, 'and you shall find me a grave man' (*Romeo and Juliet*, p. 904, 3:1, ll. 93-4). Samuel Johnson registered Shakespeare's ubiquitous 'quibbles' as defects while still admiring his gall: 'A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it'.<sup>4</sup> But for others, including the dying Keats, puns are a weakness worth having. He confesses in his final letter: 'at my worst, even in Quarantine, [I] summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of my life'.<sup>5</sup> For Keats – as for Auden – a weakness for puns could also constitute a strength.

Puns may well be the most paradoxical of all the poetic tropes. The worse they are, the better they are. Coleridge calls puns 'best when exquisitely bad'.<sup>6</sup> They simultaneously imply intelligence (only the clever can pun) while betraying a low sense of humour, suggesting that punsters are smart people with bad taste – except when the makers of taste are punsters themselves. Auden, a tastemaker and among the most influential of the mid twentieth century poets because his reach was both long (he was a Yeatsian poet who 'discovered' John Ashbery) and wide (he enjoyed British and American readerships and held both citizenships), could just as honestly have said that good *critics* have a weakness for bad puns. He once complained that

readers were continually missing his poetry's 'comic undertones', adding that 'only through comedy can one be serious'.<sup>7</sup> Auden knew that most readers enjoy discovering a good pun almost as much as they enjoy cracking one. And indeed few things are as satisfying as coming out with the perfect pun in the heat of the moment. (In writing this I am reminded of my teenage pride when a school friend fell and chipped her tooth on the pavement while we were playing four-square: 'It's not your fault, it's not my fault, it's just the asphalt', I noted triumphantly.) A weakness for bad puns is really only felt as a weakness when puns are not bad enough.

What makes a good pun terrible? Walter Redfern, unwilling to 'pin puns down', suggests that 'bad puns may tell us what makes a good pun'.<sup>8</sup> Charles Lamb is more specific, offering that a good pun must not be too neat: 'it should limp a little, or prove defective in one leg'.<sup>9</sup> Many perfect seeming puns, Lamb writes, are at risk of appearing to predate their occasion – as if 'the incident was invented to fit the line' (Lamb, p. 256). For him, a pun should contain some element of the nonsensical or deformed:

This species of wit is the better for not being perfect in all its parts. What it gains in completeness, it loses in naturalness. The more exactly it satisfies the critical, the less hold it has upon some other faculties. The puns which are most entertaining are those which will least bear an analysis. (Lamb, p. 254)

Such enthusiasm over the imperfect allows for considerable inequity between a pun's two senses. But according to the more scrupulous William Empson, a successful pun *must* bear analysis, particularly if its second meaning appears to be 'detached' from the rest of the poem and its context.<sup>10</sup> A pun is only justified for him when there is some effect – aesthetic or otherwise – produced by the fact that its two meanings reside in a single word. Lamb's lenience notwithstanding, literature's most celebrated puns have tended to be those in which both meanings of the word feel equally apropos. Ideally, these two meanings are vastly different from one another. John Hollander has pointed out a fine example of this kind in the *Faerie Queene*,<sup>11</sup> when the female knight Britomart, upon waking from a dream in which she is impregnated by a

crocodile and gives birth to a lion, finds herself ‘dismayed’ – suggesting she is both disturbed by her ‘uncouth’ vision but also de-flowered, *dismaid*.<sup>12</sup> According to Empson’s theory, what is especially satisfactory about this pun is the way both meanings are implied simultaneously, so that the pleasurable effect is bound up in the fact that they have been ‘fitted into one word’ (Empson, p. 128). Alone, neither meaning is of much interest; but together they feed off of one another and are part of what makes the verse poetical. But Spenser was not a trailblazer in this regard; Chaucer makes similarly poetical puns (for example, on ‘cosyn’, implying both ‘cousin’ and ‘cozen’, in *The General Prologue*), as does Langland in *Piers Plowman* (punning on ‘spire’, meaning both ‘sprout’ and ‘breath’).<sup>13</sup> Punning in English poetry has not only been permissible but admirable since the language’s inception – as long as the poet uses some discretion.

Merrill rarely puns with discretion. His lack of forbearance is part of what makes his poetry so loveable to those who love it. Merrill occasionally puns so energetically that his puns overtake his poetry – like wrapping paper that momentarily distracts a child from the present underneath. Yet they cannot be called ornamental or superfluous: more often than not, Merrill manages to straddle the line between making the not-bad-enough kind of pun Empson calls ‘irrelevant’ and ‘trivial’ and launching a full-fledged Elizabethan triumph (Empson, p. 102). Many of his puns, which Freud calls the ‘lowest form of verbal joke’,<sup>14</sup> work through their lowness to reach an unexpected depth that is counter-intuitively accessed at the poem’s shallowest point – as in these pun-riddled stanzas from ‘Lost in Translation’:

While, thick as Thebes whose presently complete  
Gates close behind them, Houri and Afreet  
Both claim the Page. He wonders whom to serve,  
And what his duties are, and where his feet,

And if we’ll find, as some before us did,  
That piece of Distance deep in which lies hid  
Your tiny apex sugary with sun,  
Eternal Triangle, Great Pyramid!<sup>15</sup>

Pleasurable though it may be, ‘thick as Thebes’ is not a wholly justifiable pun. Merrill has been describing in his poem an Egyptian scene – set behind the ancient gates of ‘Thebes’ – that is

depicted on a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle he is assembling with his governess during a childhood ‘summer without parents’ (his mother and father were divorcing). The puzzle, Merrill has already explained earlier in the poem, sets a veiled woman and a bearded Sheik, Hourai and Afreet, ‘eye to eye’ across the picture (*CP*, p. 364). His pun is Lambian insofar as ‘Thebes’, with its play on ‘thieves’, makes little sense idiomatically, but Merrill is already thinking beyond this paranomasia to his next pun on ‘Page’, the servant to whom both figures lay claim. Stephen Yenser has noted the ‘transparency’ of this primal scene as it corresponds to Merrill’s own relationship with his parents: the confused boy serves both man and woman and must ‘find his feet’ (earlier in the poem Merrill writes that the literal feet of this ‘backward-looking...page-boy’ are on a piece of the puzzle that has yet to be found) in the ‘Eternal Triangle’ that his own family represents.<sup>16</sup> This Oedipal drama retroactively encompasses the first pun when the reader remembers that Oedipus’s own parents, Laius and Jocasta, were king and queen of Thebes. The further pun on ‘Page’ deepens the picture, for in serving the man and woman, Merrill also declares himself a poet – a ‘page-boy’ – whose literal missing feet are also poetic feet in the process of being found. What Yenser calls the ‘*peace* of Distance’ (here is a fully justifiable, Empsonian pun) is an adult poet’s hard-won peace ‘in which *lies* hid’. And if all these puns were not enough, the understated Shakespearian pun on ‘sun’ ekes by here, too.

In substituting ‘thieves’ for ‘Thebes’, Merrill cues up his reader in preparation for the extensive double reading these two stanzas require. He is also revving his own poetic engine with a starter pun: what appears to be a cheap joke eventually opens the poem up, allowing readers to access places it has been secretly inhabiting already. In this way, Merrill’s puns are particularly Freudian; they refer back to previously locked material, un-repressing it as if by accident. Of course when Freud writes about puns, he is thinking about those that happen spontaneously or involuntarily, in mid-conversation or within dreams. Puns in poems work differently because they are decisions; poets may pun unconsciously, of course, but a pun discovered becomes a choice. (Derek Attridge notes that it is the ‘inventiveness and rhetorical skill of the writer’ that

yokes two similar-sounding words and ‘invest[s them] with meaning’.)<sup>17</sup> And yet poetic puns share with their psychic counterparts an ability to bring unexpected meanings to bear on seemingly unrelated contexts. James Brown writes that the ‘the fundamental accomplishment of the pun’ is ‘the definition of context-linking and the resultant expansion of the total context’.<sup>18</sup> One function Merrill’s puns serve is to familiarise for his readers, in a safe and pleasurable manner, an unconscious mechanism of defense that occurs in everyday life. Puns smuggle illicit material into polite society as if it were not contraband. To enjoy a pun is to find, however briefly, similarity in difference – to feel language’s ability to elide. To detest a pun is to deny the contingencies in language that make obvious and intended meanings suspect.

Jonathan Culler, in his edited anthology *On Puns*, has suggested that ‘to groan’ after a bad pun is ‘to reaffirm a distinction between essence and accident, between meaningful relations and coincidence, that has seemed fundamental to our thinking’.<sup>19</sup> Merrill made no such distinction because he did not trust accidents – especially accidents in words – to be accidental. For him, as for Freud, essence and accident could not be more closely related. He was thinking about this psychological aspect of puns when he wrote the essay ‘Object Lessons’ about the French poet Francis Ponge:

A pity about that lowest form of humor. It is suffered, by and large, with groans of aversion, as though no one had done an unseemly thing in adult society, like slipping a hand up the hostess’s dress. Indeed, the punster has touched, and knows it if only for being so promptly shamed, upon a secret, fecund place in language herself. The pun’s objet trouve aspect cheapens it further – why? A Freudian slip is taken seriously: it betrays the maker’s hidden wish. The pun (or the rhyme, for that matter) “merely” betrays the hidden wish of words.<sup>20</sup>

Merrill senses that puns are ‘unseemly’ because they uncover ‘secret’ or personal matters. Here his technique aligns with Auden’s, whose own weakness for puns is something simultaneously to be covered up and revealed. (‘Unseemly’ is also a pun on breaking the dress’s ‘seams’.) To ‘slip a hand up the hostess’s dress’ (another pun on the dress’s material ‘slip’ and the Freudian kind) is to reach for some forbidden place that is both purposefully concealed or disguised and, as Merrill says, ‘fecund’. That the wish they reveal is ‘merely’ a wish of language reflects Merrill’s

own understanding of the correlation between unconscious mental phenomena, which might include the uncomfortable or ‘unseemly’ desires that often result in defensive processes, and linguistic or verbal devices. Merrill is allowing for the possibility that such verbal tropes are as psychologically complex as the humans who use them. In his biography of Merrill, Langdon Hammer notes that ‘the pun says it is language that uses us to speak, and not the other way around’.<sup>21</sup> But equally, it is the poet who chooses the words (or thinks he does), the poet who consciously ‘slips’ his hand up the dress. Merrill’s cheapest puns tempt his reader to look closer – to peek in places one might not always dare to look. What appears as trivial or superfluous (what could be more superfluous than a pun?) may reappear later and be of the utmost importance. In fact the silliest parts of Merrill’s poems often do open out into dark and complicated vistas. His puns can even be figures for their own poems: they carry weight by pretending to be light, they say one thing and mean another. Merrill’s puns operate like metaphors, which themselves operate like poems. He may have used puns as other poets use metaphors because he felt them to have a shinier, or more reflective, surface: one dives into a metaphor, but bounces off a pun. Merrill, even more than Auden perhaps, was proud of his punning. We can tell as much from the words Yenser inscribes in the copy of Culler’s anthology he gives to Merrill: ‘To James, Rajah of the Punjab’.<sup>22</sup>

Merrill touches that ‘secret, fecund place in language’ with a rather outrageous pun at the end of his autobiographical sonnet sequence ‘The Broken Home’. The fourth sonnet in the series begins with an image of his childhood dog leading him to his mother’s bedroom:

One afternoon, red, satyr-thighed  
Michael, the Irish setter, head  
Passionately lowered, led  
The child I was to a shut door...  
(*CP*, p. 198)

Merrill ends the sequence with another sonnet that refers twice more (first directly, then obliquely) to the dog:

A child, a red dog roam the corridors,

Still, of the broken home.

...

The real house became a boarding school.  
Under the ballroom ceiling's allegory  
Someone at last may actually be allowed  
To learn something; or, from my window, cool  
With the unstiflement of the entire story,  
Watch a red setter stretch and sink in cloud.

(*CP*, p. 199-200)

The 'red dog' functions here as both a relief from and an essential part of Merrill's broken home (broken most obviously when his parents split). The dog has become, through his repeated appearance, a character in the myth, a spiritual companion (as his name, Michael, suggests) accompanying the poet as he searches his memory for scenes to make up the poem. But the pun in the last phrase – 'Watch a *red setter* stretch and sink in cloud' – goes beyond this myth, homonymically recasting the setting sun as the dog, its 'red' hues matching, as they descend in the sky, the deep red color of Michael's fur. Is this in bad taste? Hammer points out that the tone is 'more than merely comic: Merrill has achieved a curious, distinctive combination of sublimity and camp'.<sup>23</sup> One might expect, at the end of this long poem, some more profound sense of what was gained or learned in the poem's writing – as the speaker himself suggests in the lines 'Someone at last may actually be allowed / To learn something'. And yet Merrill's red setter pun is merely the last of many that have been building up to it. Each rereading of the sequence reveals more and more puns: in the first sonnet, the word 'sunless' (describing the poet's room but surely also the 'sonless' poet in relation to 'the parents and the child' he sees through the window) (*CP*, p. 197); in the second, his former-pilot father's 'invest[ing] his life / In cloud banks' (besides flying in World War II, Charles Merrill was a founder of the brokerage firm Merrill Lynch) (*CP*, p. 197); in the seventh, 'the unstiflement of the entire story', referring to the poet's confessions within the poem but also to the airing out of the building's upper floor rooms. And the 'sunless' poet of the first sonnet, never quite able to make an un-broken home of his own, obeys his parents, he writes in sonnet six, 'at least inversely' (*CP*, p. 199) – a pun that Reena Sastri hears as suggesting both 'in verse' as well as 'invert' (possibly referring to Merrill's

life as a gay man).<sup>24</sup> With all of these puns behind it, the final ‘red setter’ hardly feels like an isolated flourish. Puns have been integral to this poem’s way of communicating all along. Not only do they punctuate serious reflection with humour, but they also allow Merrill to develop conflictual subject matter about his parents’ divorce and his own development without his having to state the obvious or resort to melodrama. What happens in these puns is a kind of deepening of the poem’s primary narrative via the secondary contexts they make possible. Michael, the passionate and reverent ‘angel’ who leads the child to his mother, eventually leaves the poet in the manner of a sunset. Merrill is not just cross-referencing between sonnets: he deepens Michael by the comparison. These pun-narratives, even more personal in some ways than the main plot, complement what Robert von Hallberg calls the ‘calculated reticence’ of the poetry around them.<sup>25</sup>

One way to tell that Merrill’s puns are working towards a broader motif is to observe how they relate to one another not just within one poem, as in the sequence of ‘The Broken Home’, but across all of his poems. His puns often recur around specific words or images; he particularly favours puns on ‘sun’, and ‘Sunless’ and ‘red setter’ are good examples in ‘The Broken Home’ because they show Merrill’s talent for taking one pun in several different directions. There is an altogether different cadence to Merrill’s sun pun in the third stanza of ‘18 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street’, a political poem that describes the poet’s old home in Greenwich Village, now a literal ‘Broken Home’ after being destroyed by bomb forty years after he lived there:

Now look who’s here. Our prodigal  
Sunset. Just passing through from Isfahan.  
Filled by him the glass

Disorients....

(*CP*, p. 314)

This biblical prodigal sun is not the poet (though one hears a twinge of guilt in the phrase), but it warns of ill events to come. A traveler, too, it represents both departure and return and takes the poem’s reader momentarily away from Greenwich Village into the archetypal landscape where

destruction (of a house, say) is not arbitrary – where it may, in fact, symbolize a kind of restitution. The pun on ‘Disorients’ draws on the sun’s path eastward around the earth from ‘Isfahan’: arriving in New York, it has literally ‘dis-Oriented’ even as it disorients him (in the way light gets distorted across a window). In ‘To the Reader’, Merrill inverts the sun pun of ‘18 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street’ by using ‘son’ rather than ‘sun’ in the opening line:

Each day, hot off the press from Moon & Son,  
“Knowing of your continued interest,”  
Here’s a new book –  
(CP, p. 616)

By suggesting that poems are like days and days are like poems, Merrill turns the sun and the moon into a version of his own publisher – the source of his daily work. Merrill is partly telling the truth here: what gives rise to books if not the poet’s daily ‘Moon’ and ‘Sun’, his nights and days of work? But he also gestures subtly towards something more autobiographical – the fact that his first volume, *Jim’s Book*, was published privately in 1942 by his own father when he was just sixteen (i.e. a production of both ‘man’ and ‘son’).

So ‘son’ and ‘sun’ connect in myriad ways across the poems, each pun deepening and changing the associations of the last. Perhaps the most powerful use of this motif occurs in the final lines of ‘Scenes of Childhood’, a poem about the adult Merrill and his mother watching old home movies of him, her, and his father (scenes from childhood) projected onto a screen until the film suddenly catches fire and they each head off to bed. Blending present sensation with remembrance, Merrill concludes:

Each morning, back of us,  
Fields wail and shimmer.  
To go out is to fall  
Under fresh spells, cool web  
And stinging song new-hatched  
Each day, all summer.

A minute galaxy  
About my head will easily  
Needle me back. The day’s  
Inaugural *Damn*  
Spoken, I start to run,

Inane, like them, but breathing  
In and out the sun  
And air I am.

The son and heir! In the dark  
It makes me catch my breath  
And hear, from upstairs, hers –  
That faintest hiss  
And slither, as of life  
Escaping into space,  
Having led its characters  
To the abyss

Of night.

(*CP*, p. 144)

Merrill describes the sensation of walking out to an atmosphere that awakens him to the world (or, as he writes earlier in the poem, to ‘real noon’) (*CP*, p. 141). But at the same time, his words ‘sun / And air I am’ open the door to a different world encapsulated in the final lyric exclamation: ‘The son and heir! In the dark / It makes me catch my breath...’. Merrill demonstrates here the way many of his puns work by allowing the secondary context of the pun – its secret place – to enter the poem’s primary scene. The lines, ‘life / Escaping into space, / Having led its characters / To the abyss...’ figure this transformation. Merrill’s poem never returns from its journey, reminding him and the reader that death, suggested by the word ‘heir’, is inevitable and always looming. The spontaneous pun on ‘sun and air’ opens the poem up to this eventuality.

Puns like this one act like trap doors transporting readers suddenly to a place where the other sense of the word leads its double life. Sometimes this second life feels distinctly dreamlike or representational; other-times it feels more ‘real’ than the primary scene. Each context is as valid as the other because Merrill’s puns behave like pieces of the jigsaw he describes in ‘Lost in Translation’: they fit together to tell a story – the picture on the front – but they have individual shapes that can be scrutinized independently when ‘put aside, made stories of’ (*CP*, p. 363).

Freud explored this particular aspect of puns by describing the way words can become positive facilitators of defense, especially as we sleep. The dreamer pursues a wish or thought forbidden

in waking life by punning with it unconsciously. Referring to a particular dream interpretation hinging on the pun of a woman's name (Flora), he writes:

I am prepared to find this explanation attacked on the ground of its being arbitrary or artificial. What, it may be asked, would have happened if Professor Gärtner and his wife with her blooming looks had not come up to us or if the patient we were talking about had been called Anna instead of Flora? The answer is simple. If these chains of thought had been absent others would no doubt have been selected. It is easy enough to construct such chains, as is shown by the puns and riddles that people make every day for their entertainment. The realm of jokes knows no boundaries.<sup>26</sup>

Merrill understood the premise underlying Freud's argument about jokes and put it into practice consciously: for him, puns are a positive defense that has some *use*. Even when they feel superfluous – particularly when they feel superfluous – puns give poetry transport. The dreamer uses puns unconsciously as a form of wish-fulfillment; Merrill uses puns aesthetically, not as a form of resistance or denial, but to take his reader farther than he thinks he means to go.

Some of Merrill's most elaborate punning happens in the poem 'McKane's Falls', where he writes about a river that was once the site of a gold rush but is now used to produce electricity. The puns make manifest in a formal sense the poem's primary narrative about a river's changing uses, its own transformations:

His 12 oz. rainbow sizzled in their pan;  
Next morning the first nugget.  
The creek, a crystal tendon strained,

Tossed on its couch, no longer freely associating  
Hawk with trout, or cloud with pebble white as cloud.

(*CP*, p. 368)

Merrill is initially referring to the men who panned the river looking for gold at the end of the 'rainbow', mining it first for fish, then for gold, 'nuggets'. He then turns to the river's pain as the men 'strain' its 'crystal tendons' for loot. These puns (six by my count: rainbow, pan, nugget, strained, couch, and freely associating) take the reader elsewhere almost immediately; before we know of its pain (which Merrill explores in the next section of the poem), the poem has figured

the river's strained tendon 'tossed on its couch'. 'No longer freely associating / hawk with trout', the river free associates like a poet. It becomes a stream of unconsciousness.

The puns that follow these in 'McKane's Falls' belong to the category of the 'red setter' in 'The Broken Home'. They come across as silly, but taken together they capture better than if the poem stayed serious the river's fate of being doomed for use – its ripeness for panning (which is, Merrill suggests, just another form of 'punning'). The river's song begins:

Since being gelded of my gold,  
Grey moods, black moods come over me.  
Where's my old sparkle? Of late  
I've felt so rushed, so cold.

Am I riding for another fall?

(*CP*, p. 368-9)

Perhaps the pun trio of 'sparkle', 'rushed', and 'fall' is overdone. And yet this effect mirrors the plight of the river itself. Its old and recent history, as a source for both gems and power, comes into focus through these tiny linguistic doors. Merrill's poem, too, becomes a source for gems and power, the former in terms of style, the latter in terms of the depth such style facilitates. Both rise from the same source, and so when the waterfall later explains that 'Moments of truth are moments only' and that 'The golden voice turns gravelly and hoarse', it is easier to hear Merrill speaking there, too, claiming for poetry only that flows and that its forms are of some use. The final pun, both serious and comical, is self-reflexive: 'Now you've seen through me, sang the cataract...' (*CP*, p. 370). This plaintive cry from the rapids becomes a commentary on poetic vision. The trap door springs on the word 'cataract', and Merrill's readers gain access to the voice of lyric itself, speaking now of its own effectualness (or ineffectualness depending on how one reads 'see through me'). Old age, with its hearing aids and cataracts, hangs around these lines, too, gesturing towards the shared history between an ancient river of diverse uses and a poet who, panning his own past for whatever gold it keeps in store, undergoes changes as well, a poet whose own aging voice may soon run 'hoarse'.

Not all of Merrill's punning occurs in fits like these. Sometimes he reserves a pun for his poem's title. 'Koi' is a late poem about a fishpond and his dog that is tonally 'coy' itself (*CP*, p. 867). 'Domino', a dramatic monologue spoken by the eponymous American brand of sugar, also follows a domino logic that traces it from teacup to cane field to 'infested hut' and back; its first and last stanzas feature internal puns on 'refined' and 'bitterness' (p. 419). 'Clearing the Title' begins, 'My poem (what to call it though?) is finished', but then immediately turns its attention to a different kind of title: the official document that secures Merrill's and David Jackson's ownership of their new house in Key West (*CP*, p. 406). Mutlu Blasing, thinking through some of these puns and others across Merrill's work, points out that 'a pun may even function as the "center" a poem revolves around precisely by resisting centering and refusing to yield an unequivocal sense'.<sup>27</sup> Merrill's puns often manage to be central by being tangential; there are literally hundreds of them throughout his *Collected Poems*. Other noteworthy examples include the word 'Art' in the line 'Tell me something, Art', spoken to a drycleaner named 'Arturo', in the poem 'Dreams About Clothes' (*CP*, p. 346); the word 'worn' in 'a face no longer / sought in dreams but worn as my own', about the poet's father, in the poem 'Arabian Night' (*CP*, p. 504); the phrase 'Capital punishment' in the poem 'Losing the Marbles' (whose title is also a pun comparing losing your mind to Greece's loss of the Elgin Marbles) (*CP*, p. 572); the word 'crewelwork' in the poem 'Mornings in a New House' (*CP*, p. 261); the line 'Sparkling comes easy to the Gemini' in the poem 'In Nine Sleep Valley' (*CP*, p. 323); and the extended pun on the word 'crane' in the poem 'An Urban Convalescence' (*CP*, p. 127). The poem 'Syrinx', too, is a kind of showcase of puns, with its incorporation of the musical scale ('d – / O ramify sole antidote') and its playful transmutation of a map's cardinal points ('Nought, Eased, Sought, Waste'), though other linguistic factors – language's inability to communicate, or last – are at work here too (*CP*, p. 355-6).

Merrill's most sophisticated punning happens in his long and strange epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover*, where numerous pun motifs connect the primary world of the poet to

the ultimate ‘other’ context: the land of the dead, where ghosts reside and communicate with humans on earth. The trilogy, which Merrill published in three book-length installments, claims to be a record of the contact Merrill and his partner David Jackson make with the dead, as facilitated by a Ouija Board – a game in which living people communicate with spirits from the afterlife using an alphabet painted on a board. The poem begins when ‘JM’ (James Merrill) and ‘DJ’ (David Jackson) contact a ‘Greek Jew’ born in ‘AD 8’ named Ephraim who says he ‘issued from a broken home’ and who tells Merrill and Jackson how human lives are transformed and reincarnated after death.<sup>28</sup> Through inter-poetic puns like Ephraim’s ‘broken home’, which connect the poet’s own life – and particularly his life as he portrays it in poetry – to the world of spirits, Merrill lays the groundwork for *Sandover’s* broader argument towards the existence of an ultimate elsewhere that all the time resides in and around the self and is accessed via language. In the same way that, within the poem, spirits act as guides and patrons for the living (as Hans Lodeizen, a Dutch poet whom Merrill befriended at Amherst, does for Merrill, sometimes even ghostwriting his poems)<sup>29</sup> and the living can act as ‘representatives’ for the dead (as, Ephraim explains, Merrill does for the long-dead editor of Alexander Pope), and in the same way that words on the Ouija board can symbolize contact with characters otherwise forbidden to the living, the poem’s own puns transpose images from the poet’s life into objects, people, and scenes elsewhere. For instance, Merrill’s Ouija board pun on ‘POUND’ in the following passage not only describes a process of give-and-take between living and dead writers but also mimics how this sort of transfer works linguistically:

NO MAN CAN REACH US DIRECTLY    TSE HAD  
 A NUMBER FROM OUR ORDERS    AR HAD THAT SAME NUMBER  
 POINT ONE    THUS YEATS & DJ    TSE DOWN ON CERTAIN  
 SUPERSTITIOUS SCRIBES    WE HAD TO APPOINT RIMBAUD    HE WROTE  
 THE WASTE LAND    WE FED IT INTO THE LIKE-CLONED ELIOT  
 And Uncle Ezra?  
 AS IN SHAKESPEARE WE LET THE CASE REST ON A POUND OF FLESH

(*Mirabell*, p. 219)

Describing, via the spirit world, the process by which the dead inform the living – Rimbaud ‘WROTE’ *The Waste Land* – Merrill puns on Ezra ‘POUND’, the other writer who, through his editing, in some ways wrote Eliot’s poem, too. (His allusion to Shylock’s demand of a ‘pound of flesh’ in *The Merchant of Venice* may also be a subtle reference to Pound’s anti-Semitism.) The pun here illustrates the kind of unconscious or – if conscious – disguised associations that guide the making of all poems. Merrill complains a few lines down, ‘Still, Eliot thought he thought his poem up’, in a sense comparing his own *Sandover* (an epic written, as it were, in letters given by the dead) to *The Waste Land*, a poem that, at least on the surface, claims for its poet a kind of authentic authorship (*Mirabell*, p. 219). Merrill implies by his pun that the tropes embedded in poems enact formally what *Sandover* suggests thematically – that language from other periods and places is always interwoven in the texts of here and now.

The puns of *Sandover* thread the trilogy together and not only connect Merrill and Jackson to a world beyond them but also connect the poems and volumes within it to each other, adding depth to each. For instance, at the end of *Ephraim*, ‘JM’ and ‘DJ’ are waiting inside their cold home in Stonington, Connecticut ‘for someone to fix the furnace’, an old relic that the poet refers to as a ‘period machine’ (*Ephraim*, p. 90, 91). But in certain ways he and Jackson are working on their own ‘period machine’ as they wait – the Ouija board being both an object of kitsch in their own ‘period’ and also a time-traveler allowing them to pass between ‘periods’ of human civilization. Eventually ‘Bob the furnace man’ calls, and with this real-life invasion – a human visitor rather than a spirit one – the first installment of *Sandover* comes to a close. Merrill seems to be questioning whether or not his own epic machinery has failed him, whether his own ‘period machine’ of a poem has reached its final end. With the opening of *Mirabell*, the next installment, we get the answer in the form of new spirits that continue to guide and feed the poet’s work and reveal themselves to ‘JM’ and ‘DJ’ as ‘fallen angels’ who go by the name ‘BEZELBOB’ (*Mirabell*, p. 114, 115). So the human Bob returns in this way, via a pun symbolizing his own success in fixing the ‘period machine’. Later in *Mirabell*, the spirit of Auden makes this

pun more explicit by calling the spirits ‘THE BOBS THE FURNACE MEN’ and saying ‘THEY GLOW LIKE FRANKLIN STOVES’ (*Mirabell*, p. 131). In the same way that these new ‘BOBS’ both signify and add import to the to the original ‘Bob’ in *Ephraim*, their ‘DARK SHAPE’, which they compare to that of the ‘bats’ and ‘gargoyle faces’ in the poet’s carpet and wallpaper, mystifies and deepens the actual world Merrill inhabits. ‘DO YOU IMAGINE YOU CHOSE THAT CARPET THAT WALLPAPER’ the spirits ask the poet (*Mirabell*, p. 116). They remind him, as they remind his reader, that the aesthetic choices that make up poems are often silently and secretly mirrored in a psychic elsewhere that is ever present but remains out of sight.

If Merrill had a ‘weakness’ for puns, he understood this weakness in both *Sandover* and the shorter poems as integral to his poetic process. The sonnet ‘Processional’, a poem about the way words themselves change and distance themselves from their original forms, demonstrates how puns in other poems may act as swinging or trap doors:

Think what the demotic droplet felt,  
 Translated by a polar wand to keen  
 Six-pointed Mandarin –  
 All singularity, its Welt-  
 Anschauung of a hitherto untold  
 Flakiness, gemlike, nevermore to melt!

But melt it would, and – look – become  
 Now birdglance, now the ginkgo leaf’s fanlight,  
 To that same tune whereby immensely old  
 Slabs of dogma and opprobrium,  
 Exchanging ions under pressure, bred  
 A spar of burnt-black anchorite,

Or in three lucky strokes of word golf LEAD  
 Once again turns (LOAD, GOAD) to GOLD.  
 (*CP*, 583)

Turning lead to gold, figuratively, is the wish of any poet, not just one playing ‘word golf’: start with something heavy, common (a memory, a prayer, an object) and transform it, using language, into something rare and bright. As ‘McKane’s Falls’ shows, Merrill is always thinking of ‘panning’ for gold in poetical terms. But in this ‘processional’, even more is at stake. Drawing on alchemical processes, this poem speaks to slow, deliberate change – change that sometimes

leaves the residue of what was there before. Merrill mentions in his essay on Ponge, in the paragraph following the one on puns, the ‘gold standard’, referring to the way in which writers, through ‘the lightweight crackle of wordplay’ keep the ‘treasure’ of Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon English alive (*Recitative*, p. 112). In ‘Processional’, one still hears parts of the word ‘LEAD’ in ‘GOLD’ – the final word not exactly changed but rather grown or derived from the original. It has been *led* somewhere (to make obvious Merrill’s more subtle pun) the way the ‘droplet’ has been led when it turns to flake and then again when it melts. Merrill illustrates a process by which A leads to B without ruining or losing A. Rhymes work this way (as we see in the poem’s sound scheme), but so do meanings. What means one thing in a poem’s primary narrative – for instance, ‘lead’ the noun – changes into something else when the poem puns its way into secret sub-narratives: ‘lead’ becomes a verb, ‘leading’ us to ‘gold’.

It may feel ‘unseemly’ for Merrill to chart so closely the course of an associative technique that usually happens unconsciously; but as Freud says and Merrill writes in *The Changing Light at Sandover*: ‘NO ACCIDENT’ (*Mirabell*, p. 196). Merrill thought psychoanalytically and underwent various forms of psychoanalysis throughout his adult life. He understood his own poems – indeed his own language – to be at once given and made. His puns, unlike those Freud often describes, are not, for the most part, involuntary or accidental, because once they are embedded in the poem, they primarily constitute aesthetic rather than defensive formulations. But Merrill is still interested in the secret confessions poems can make. His poetry is very much of the world he lived in, but it contains doors to other worlds – dreams, the afterlife – that can be accessed along the corridors of language. At one point in *Mirabell*, ‘DJ’ says to ‘JM’ about the Ouija board: ‘Each day it grows more fascinating, more... / I don’t know. Isn’t it like a door / Shutting us off from the living?...Will that door readmit / Us to the world?’ (*Mirabell*, p. 218). For Merrill, language is a permeable tissue – a way of being on both sides.

In the house Merrill shared with Jackson on Water Street in Stonington, the door to the poet’s study – the room where he presumably wrote and read so much poetry – is a secret door,

disguised behind a twisting bookshelf that makes it invisible to the eye. When the door is closed, it vanishes into a bookshelf and the room behind it disappears. But if anyone should touch or push the bookshelf, it swivels round, revealing a further, hidden room with more cases of books and the poet's writing desk inside. This secret door into a poet's private world is emblematic of how Merrill so adeptly surprises and transports his reader using puns. The poet's childhood dog Michael – 'red, satyr-thighed / Michael', or 'red, setter-thighed / Michael', who becomes one with the sunset, also 'a red setter' – eventually evolves, through this complex web of puns, into the Archangel Michael who appears to 'JM' at the end of *Mirabell*:

WE HAVE IN THIS MEETING FOUND YOU INTELLIGENT & YOUR  
 SERIOUS NATURES AT ONE WITH US.  
 TWO HOURS BEFORE THE SETTING SUN, IN THE FULL DAYCYCLE  
 BEFORE THE FULL OF THE MOON, WE WILL MEET AGAIN.  
 I AM MICHAEL  
 I HAVE ESTABLISHED YOUR ACQUAINTANCE & ACCEPT YOU. COME  
 NEXT TIME IN YOUR OWN MANNER. SERVANTS WE ARE NOT.  
 I LEAVE NOW AS THE LIGHT LEAVES AND WIND MY PATH OVER ITS  
 TRACK ON EARTH I AM A GUARDIAN OF THE LIGHT  
 LEAVE THIS FIRST OF THE FIRST TWO MEETINGS IN A CYCLE OF  
 TWINNED MEETINGS IN A CYCLE OF TWELVE MOONS  
 LOOK! LOOK INTO THE RED EYE OF YOUR GOD!

(*Mirabell*, p. 276)

The canine red setter's transformation into this Michael, the poet's kind-hearted guide into the ultimate elsewhere at the end of life (as seconded by *Sandover's Other World*), is a processional that begins with a seemingly small, comic moment at the end of 'The Broken Home'. Vestiges of the first Michael remain in this 'TWINNED MEETING' and bring authenticity and pathos to the angel spirit who once again becomes one with the setting sun, the 'RED EYE' of the poet's 'GOD' – which is an anagrammatic pun on 'dog'. Michael leads the poet of *Mirabell* to a more figurative kind of door than the one the red setter led him to in 'The Broken Home', but both journeys end in sunset and self-revelation. Far from frivolous, Merrill's puns are 'AT ONE' with his 'SERIOUS NATURE'. These unseemly little swinging doors of language, like the door to his study and the Ouija board itself, lead seamlessly in and out of a poet's dreaming. Part serious, part

seriously funny, they connect the poet's everyday life to the other world of words. In so doing, they cannot be called a weakness: Merrily, life is but a dream.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, 'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York, 1991), 619.
- <sup>2</sup> Lord Byron, 'Don Juan', in *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome McGann (Oxford, 1986), p. 471, Canto II: Stanza 152, ll. 1209-10.
- <sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York, 1977), 1674, Act I: Scene 2, l. 67.
- <sup>4</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'Preface' to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), in *The Major Works*, ed. Samuel Greene (Oxford, 2008), 429.
- <sup>5</sup> John Keats, Letter to Charles Brown, 30 November 1820, *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 2002), 369.
- <sup>6</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Letter to John Thelwall, 31 December 1796, repr. in *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford, 1985), 494.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview, Jon Bradshaw, 'Holding to Schedule with W. H. Auden', *Esquire*, 73 (January 1970): 137-139.
- <sup>8</sup> Walter Redfern, *Puns* (Oxford, 1984), 21, 5.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Popular Fallacies IX: That the Worst Puns are the Best,' in *The Last Essays of Elia* (1833), repr. in *The Prose Works of Charles Lamb*, vol. 3, (1836), 253.
- <sup>10</sup> William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 128-132.
- <sup>11</sup> John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York, 1997), 90.
- <sup>12</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New Haven, 1981), p. 803, Book 5, Canto 7, stanza 16.
- <sup>13</sup> See R. A. Shoaf, 'Puns in Late Middle English Poetry,' in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (New York, 1988), 44-61.
- <sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 8, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al (1953-1974), 45.
- <sup>15</sup> James Merrill, 'Lost in Translation,' in *Collected Poems*, ed. J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York, 2002), 366.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephen Yenser, *The Consuming Myth: the Work of James Merrill* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 25.
- <sup>17</sup> Derek Attridge, *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (Ithaca, 1998), 108.
- <sup>18</sup> James Brown, 'Eight Types of Puns,' *PMLA* 71:1 (March 1956), 26.
- <sup>19</sup> Jonathan Culler, 'The Call of the Phoneme,' in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford, 1988), 4.
- <sup>20</sup> James Merrill, *Recitative: Prose by James Merrill*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (San Francisco, 1986), 111.
- <sup>21</sup> Langdon Hammer, *James Merrill: Life and Art* (New York, 2015), 519.
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted from memory after visiting the poet's study in Stonington, CT.
- <sup>23</sup> Langdon Hammer, 'James Merrill: Life and Art' (New York: Knopf, 2015), 362.
- <sup>24</sup> Reena Sastri, *James Merrill: Knowing Innocence* (New York, 2007), 30. Sastri also hears a pun in 'gilt' (i.e. guilt) later in the same sonnet.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (Cambridge, 1985), 93.
- <sup>26</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 4, 176.
- <sup>27</sup> Mutlu Blasing, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O'Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill* (Cambridge, 1995), 173.
- <sup>28</sup> James Merrill, *The Book of Ephraim*, in 'A,' in *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York, 1982), 8.
- <sup>29</sup> Merrill, *Mirabell's Books of Number*, in 'Book 6,' in *Sandover*, 221.