

Rafał Dubaniowski

Pain, Patience, and the Self in James Merrill's Poetry

It does not come as a surprise that out of many poets he admires, James Merrill chooses Auden to represent a central voice of the literary past in "The Book of Ephraim" included in *Divine Comedies*. In his poetry, Auden distrusts the American democratic style; and so does Merrill. The democratic or classless style inevitably implies some ideological alliance, which seems to be especially true of those contemporary American poets who, as Robert von Hallberg points out, "under the influence of Merwin were pursuing styles that apparently disowned social relations" (112). Merrill, however, believes in a style because he believes in the significance of the individual self that tends to be suppressed under claims of democracy, ideology, philosophical dogmatism, or any kind of intellectual framework that rests on universalizing generalizations. In so far as the democratic style eventually subsumes difference in the name of dominant sameness, Merrill's pursuit of style reflects his need to cultivate what is idiosyncratic and private, which makes it possible for his distinct voice to be recognized as one of the more conspicuous voices, for example, in contemporary love poetry.

Merrill's distrust of the democratic style translates into renewable pleasures his lyrics offer the reader, pleasures that can be attributed to his honesty in not promising to do anything more in his texts than to be faithful to the language by which he decides to live. Choosing words around and through which one can organize one's experience and understand better one's longing becomes a serious task for someone who knows that at some point, as Merrill puts it in one interview, "there comes a time when everyone, not just a poet, wants to get beyond the self" and "to reach... 'the god' within you" (*Collected Prose* 107). His faithfulness to and reliance on words partly express his need to distance himself from ideas and concepts that Merrill consistently avoids as elements that threaten to thwart and erase particulars of individual experience, and which obliterate their value in one's attempts to construe and live a meaningful life. In his insistence on language as a means "to get beyond the self" he refuses to acknowledge the authority of concepts and ideas because they establish boundaries of the self that Merrill prefers to see as a domain expanding through personal choice in what is worth following. His strong aversion to the ideas and concepts defining the self should also be seen as a reac-

tion to the realm of politics where language becomes inevitably debased and where interpretations of personhood are already given and imposed.

Choosing to be a person who lives by his language, Merrill is after his own interpretations and revisions of who he aspires to become, as he finds his sources in mundane autobiographical detail and translates it into cherished constituents of an evolving self. In this respect, he may be said to undertake the task set by Rilke, the poet whose influence on Merrill was not strictly aesthetic. "What I got from Rilke," he said, "was more than literary; that emphasis on the acceptance of pain and loneliness. Rilke helps you with suffering, especially in adolescence" (Brown 9). In Rilke, pain and loneliness are necessary modes of being in a world where interpretations are not granted and become both a burden and a blessing for consciousness convalescing through language that is hoped to give shape to experience and make the self habitable. This is one of central thoughts in the first of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*:

Alas, whom can we turn to
in our need? Not angels, not humans,
And the sly animals see at once,
How little at home we are
In the interpreted world. That leaves us
some tree on a hillside, on which our eyes fasten
day after day; leaves us yesterday's street
and the coddled loyalty of an old habit
that liked it there, stayed on, and never left. (*Divine Comedies* 5)

Like Rilke, Merrill finds his consolations and directions in a private language that can sustain his search for meaning and for some stronger being, a language that can do justice to his aspirations to negotiate his place among dominant interpretations of the world. This attitude turns his poetic attention more to how words and syntax come to form and encapsulate experience than to particular external events that act on consciousness. Trusting in images and symbols he creates, Merrill becomes distanced in the impressionistic sense from the objects he perceives so that he can better concentrate on the atmosphere surrounding them. He describes this preference of impressions to the knowledge of solid objects in his early unpublished essay on Proust and impressionism where he stresses "the assumption that the true existence of an individual lies in his mental processes rather than in the external incidents of his life" (Labrie 12).

Delving into his impressionistic sensibilities, Merrill renews his interest in daily habits of poetic observation by moving among subjects and objects that incessantly

demand his attention and to which he diligently responds. He sustains this observation with an ever fresh hope for impressions that may reconfigure the contours of the self struggling to make its solitude habitable by adjusting its capacities to endure pain of not being quite at home in “the interpreted world.” Out of the attempts to maintain distance from the objects of experience and to continue negotiations of meaning that resist closures provided by ideas, there emerges a quality that one may consider to be central in Merrill’s lyric pursuit, and that seems to inform his ambitions to secure the very continuity for the search for meaning rather than for the search’s final conclusions. I propose to identify this quality with patience as a specific orientation of the mind towards persons, events, and objects that are perceived as standing in the way of the mind’s satisfaction.

Patience may be perceived as an existential mode that enables one to relate to hope. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition refers patience to “calm endurance of hardship, provocation, pain, delay etc.,” to “tolerant perseverance or forbearance,” and to “the capacity for calm self-possessed waiting” (“Patience”). As an existential orientation, patience allows one to see suffering as a terrain that may be modified by reason. Being patient promises a meaning that can be eventually teased out of pain and suggests an enduring quality of the mind that exercises resilience to whatever hampers its engagement with the world and thus thwarts its satisfactions. In this respect, patience in Merrill can be seen as a stance toward the mode in which, as Spinoza teaches us in his *Ethics*, “the mind’s power of thinking is diminished or hindered... and therefore the mind in so far as it feels pain has its power of understanding, that is, its power of acting... diminished or hindered” (124). In Merrill’s poetry, patience is a redeeming attitude of the mind that affirms its freedom to conceive its own satisfactions confronted with the pressure of daily occurrences and of Merrill’s unresolved past. Seeking in language forms that can translate pain into the mind’s, however illusive, pleasures of comprehension, Merrill seems to display in his texts what may be called “poetry of waiting.”

The task of orientating oneself towards patience underlies his “Lost in Translation,” the poet’s first mature lyric from *Divine Comedies*, where he attempts to comprehend his situatedness by means of translating his past into meaningful aspects of the present. The present is structured around Merrill’s life in his home in Athens, and by his search in local libraries for Rilke’s translation of Valery’s sublime poem “Palme.” The reading of Valery’s poem shifts Merrill’s attention to childhood memories around the time of a lonely summer without his parents, when the poet is left in the care of “His French Mademoiselle” that becomes his surrogate parent. The lyric begins with a scene of calm resistance that the mind builds by waiting in response to deprivation:

A card table in the library stands ready
 To receive the puzzle which keeps never coming.
 Daylight shines in or lamplight down
 Upon the tense oasis of green felt.
 Full of unfulfillment, life goes on.
 Mirage arisen from time's trickling sands
 Or fallen piecemeal into place:
 German lesson, picnic, see-saw, walk
 With collie who 'did everything but talk' –
 Sour windfalls of the orchard back of us.
 A summer without parents is the puzzle,
 Or should be. But the boy, day after day,
 Writes in his Line-a-Day *No puzzle*. (*Divine Comedies* 4)

Intended to stand for Merrill's former self, the boy exercises his childish waiting by repeated entries in his diary registering the fact that his puzzle has not arrived yet, although one knows that the real cause of the boy's frustrated desire for order and fulfillment lies in the fact that it is a "summer without parents." When the puzzle finally arrives, the boy's putting its elements together acquires the significance of making sense of a life whose disparate painful elements he expects to fall into place. As the assembling of the puzzle progresses, the boy is confronted with an image of grown-up life whose meanings become illusive and paradoxical, as illusive and paradoxical is his childhood. Disclosing a picture taken from a painting that has an oriental theme, the puzzle enforces on the boy's mind a fascination with the emerging meanings that, much like the events compounding his own life, do not entirely satisfy his craving for order:

This World that shifts like sand, its unforeseen
 Consolidations and elate routine,
 Whose Potentate had lacked a retinue?
 Lo! it assembles on the shrinking Green.
 Gunmetal-skinned or pale, all plumes and scars,
 Of Vassalage the noblest avatars –
 The very coffee-bearer in his vair
 Vest is a swart Highness, next to ours.

Kef easing Boredom, and iced syrups, thirst,
 In guessed-at glooms old wives who know the worst

Outsweat that virile fiction of the New:
'Insh'Allah, he will tire –“-or kill her first!” (8)

The shifting world of the puzzle corresponds to the shifting world of the boy engrossed on a playful level in the activity of sense-making whose object reminds him of the source of his pain.

As the reminiscing adult, Merrill self-ironically recalls the final stages of the patient assemblage to the effect of their visual presence that emphasizes the futility of his childhood goal as well as his present striving to structure and cultivate meanings despite suffering:

Then Sky alone is left, a hundred blue
Fragments in revolution, with no clue
To where a Niche will open. Quite a task,
Putting together heaven, yet we do. (8)

Merrill's "heaven" and "Sky" do not serve here as destinations he may choose to follow. He rather seeks departures that may be continued in the mind's projections that, when thoroughly performed, become emblems of order fashioned out of "fragments in revolution" that ask for the arduous task of putting together a life. For Merrill, the activity of assembling those fragments means incessant struggling for patience that, as the quality of the mind, lies at heart of Valery's poem for which, in the present time of "Lost in Translation," "[r]ansacking Athens," he spends the last days of his stay. Merrill's fascination with Valery's lyric is reflected and emphasized by what he seeks to achieve in his poems – a calm self-possession and persevering superiority to time that he attends to through particular forms of waiting. A fragment from Merrill's fine version of "Palme" may be useful here for elucidating the poetic focus of "Lost in Translation":

Patience and still patience,
Patience beneath the blue!
Each atom of the silence
Knows what it ripens to.
The happy shock will come:
A dove alighting, some
Gentlest nudge, the breeze,
A woman's touch – before
You know it, the downpour
Has brought you to your knees!

Let populations be
Crumbled underfoot-
Palm, irresistibly-
Among celestial fruit!
Those hours were not in vain
So long as you retain
A lightness once they're lost;
Like one who, thinking, spends
His inmost dividends
To grow at any cost. (74)

If Valery's poem may be said to underlie the poetic enterprise in "Lost in Translation," it is because Merrill addresses the human condition from the perspective set by "Palme," namely that of patience that enables one to build horizons of expectations and regions of salience where a reality of order is feasible. "Growing at any cost," achieved in patient waiting means ultimately to be willing to depart from former incarnations of the self towards new meanings that can translate those incarnations into fuller versions of life. With the fullness promised by those departures in view, Merrill pursues his goal of translation which helps him to annihilate a sense of loss by his careful refusals not to be trapped in the contexts that have created it.

The poem's ending recapitulates Merrill's attraction to the results of his patient translations:

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(Or found – I wander through the ruin of S
Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
Color of context, imperceptibly
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
To shade and fiber, milk and memory. (*Divine Comedies* 10)

As Merrill walks in his adulthood through "the ruin of S" (which seems to suggest the ruins of Stonington that he perceives as having undergone an undesirable change of aura since he chose it as a place of his residence for its quiet unpretentiousness), he wanders at the same time among the ruins of his former self, when as a child he once undertook the task of putting his toy puzzle together. Through "wandering" and "wondering," the

two activities that seem to emphasize how Merrill uses the resources of language to transcribe and comprehend experience, he can “find” and relocate himself on the map of being yielded by patience that brings about a fresh “color of context.” His mind, itself “a self-effacing tree,” achieves now an orientation that does not promise the erasure of pain, but most important, its subsumption within the continuity of translation that is itself embraced as a goal. “Shade and fiber, milk and memory” are poetic correlates of relevance, “turning the waste” of pain into parts of a puzzle waiting to be reshuffled by Merrill’s pursuit of meaning.

Yet patient attentions with which Merrill attends to the shifting contours of the self are not exclusively aimed at making loss and pain cohere with the economy of behavior that translates frustrations of desire into acceptable positions enabling him to construe a fulfilled life. Merrill repeatedly sets out to renegotiate contexts of personhood not only to dispense with pain, but also to sustain patience as an existential orientation that can shape his contexts of salience. Waiting in Merrill is not only a way in which to comprehend and cope with suffering but, more important, a mode that makes orientations possible at all, since it is by and in waiting that structures of care and of what one finds worth pursuing can be grasped.

It is not my intention here to raid philosophy for ideas to make a point about satisfactions offered by literature, but I can still imagine Merrill not protesting against expanding on the significance of waiting from Heidegger’s perspective on this attitude. For my purposes here, Heidegger seems a most helpful thinker for two major reasons. First, he is the only philosopher that I know of who devotes a considerable amount of reflection to the mode of waiting; and second, the subtlety and complexity of his thought may be claimed to correspond to the subtlety and complexity of Merrill’s translations of the self in ways that can help one to avoid temptations of closure on the level of ideas as far as ideas, persistently mistrusted by Merrill, posit a threat of becoming final knowledge.

In Heidegger, the state of waiting is a mode that participates in shaping the present by establishing the “then” allowing care to express itself. Along with the “present moment” and “on the previous occasion,” the “then” compounds a domain of temporality where existential directions can be demarcated. “In the ‘then,’” Heidegger claims, “taking care expresses itself in awaiting” (373). As a tight unity and interdependence of past events, present moments, and the “then” structured by waiting, temporality opens a territory for “interpretedness” that equips a being with a possibility to establish a direction for care. Put differently, waiting prepares a background of delays, making it possible for objects of care to emerge out of the present. A being or the self that waits can embrace a position, a “there” that initiates acts of interpretation manifesting themselves in time and modifying objects of care. The establishing of a “there” marks a projection of the self in

the world: “The being which is essentially constituted by being-in-the-world is itself always its ‘there’” (125).

By waiting, a being significantly realizes its existence, that is, it begins to live ahead of itself by reaching out towards its possibilities. As Heidegger understands it, an existing being “has always already made room for a leeway. It determines its own location in such a way that “it comes back from the space made room for to a ‘place’ that it has taken over” (336). And taking over of new places that reaffirm the being’s existence is made possible precisely by the mode of waiting. The movement of the self along the lines of projected care sets up a context of relevance. For Heidegger, in taking care, one lets something be relevant by projecting and setting up a relation of usefulness:

Letting something be relevant lies in the simplest handling of a useful thing. Relevance has an intentional character with reference to which the thing is useable or in use. Understanding the intention and context of relevance has the temporal structure of awaiting. Awaiting the intention, taking care can at the same time come back to something like relevance. Awaiting the context and retaining the means of relevance make possible in its ecstatic unity the specifically handy way in which the useful thing is made present. (324)

Waiting then appears to help a being shape an orientation in the world in three central ways: it opens a space for motivation to pursue the present; it inaugurates interpretation through positing a “there” in as much as “[b]eing-in-the-world that takes care of things is directed, directing itself” (337); and finally, it lets one be engaged in contexts of usefulness and salience by seeing things as relevant.

Approaching Merrill’s poems from the perspective of Heidegger’s “awaiting” promises a finer attunement to the contexts which Merrill relies on in his lyric translations of the self. Seeking for more capacious ways in which he can use his memory and powers of observation in order to do justice to the enlarging nature of the self, Merrill may be said to do what Proust discovers in his retrieval of the self through remembering. A passage from *Remembrance of Things Past* may be useful here for grasping the essential qualities of the self as constructed in Merrill’s poetry. The process of change that Merrill responds to in his waiting is redolent of what Proust’s Swann experiences as the shifting contours of his affective investments. Toward the end of “Swann’s Way,” one witnesses Swann’s falling out of love with Odette. For years tormented with jealousy, Swann feels now a change in his desire that announces a relief from his sufferings. Proust thus describes him:

In the past, having often thought with terror that a day must come when he would cease to be in love with Odette, he had determined to keep a sharp look-out, and as soon he felt that love was beginning to leave him, to cling to it and hold it back. But now, to the diminution of his love there corresponded a simultaneous diminution in his desire to remain in love. For a man cannot change, that is to say become another person, while continuing to obey the dictates of the self he has ceased to be. (410)

One can become another person not only by simply leaving behind what has become unattractive, unpleasant, or dull; a new person is feasible in as much as there can be conceived new forms of satisfaction and new forms of love. In Merrill's lyrics, one can point to a similar aspiration to change forms of desire and forms of the self in relation to objects that may freshly stimulate the mind in its search for novel manifestations of care.

Merrill sustains his patience as the attitude to the pain of becoming a new self through words and images that provide the very resistance to pain in that they act as vehicles of thought refusing to be trapped in the present and thus seeing the self's satisfaction in its striving to live ahead of itself. Built patiently of words, in the solitude of quiet observation, his waiting enables him to create images of life that seem to promise more fulfillment than the ones already encountered. This is the case, for example, in "River Trip," an account of Merrill's trip to a shrine on his visit to Japan. The poem markedly focuses not on the trip's destination, but on the boatmen whose activities create a space where the visit to the shrine acquires its significance. Taking Merrill upstream, the boatmen are described as selves positioned by routine of dull work that epitomizes uneventfulness:

One man pulls
the single oar, another poles, a third steers, a fourth stands by
to relieve the first....
Years of this have tanned and shriveled the boatmen. For after
all, the truly exhilarating bits

Were few, far between
-boulders goaded past, dumb beasts
Mantled in glass-green

Gush – and patently
Led where but the landing,
The bridge, the crowds. We

Step ashore, in our clumsiness hoping not to spill these brief
Impressions. (*The Inner Room* 59)

The image of the boatmen points to pain and fading away, but more important, it also becomes an epitome of patience and of a triumph achieved in quiet waiting. Merrill's perception here shifts from his pity brought about by the paucity of exhilaration in the boatmen's work to his admiration of their calm form, leading him to discover his own clumsiness felt in the presence of some stronger being exhibited by the boatmen. The fragment seems to have the adverbial culmination in "patently" that instantly brings to mind another adverb, "patiently." The contrast between his own need for exhilaration sought in the trip upstream and the boatmen's calm resistance to their work achieved in the "patent" of patient repetitions produces a context in which the self experiences some kind of shame at its way of living, as a new image seems to come into view claiming a revision of one's perception.

As far as waiting is a condition of relevance and of making things present, Merrill continues to live in the present by not investing the objects of his perception with final meanings. He may choose though to treat emphatically those elements of his calm visions that forward his goal of waiting, and that provide him with occasions to contemplate and satisfy, however briefly, his need of order in the interpreted world. Such seems to be the case, for instance, of the fine lyric "Rescue" organized around a single incident of saving a turtle. The very fact of noticing and rescuing the turtle may be seen here as a Heideggerian moment of "clearedness" inaugurating a "there" and initiating the efforts of care:

Dusk. Rain over but asphalt hissing
 flooded clear with sea light.
 Sharply, sweet heart, you swerved, pulled off,
 ran back and snatching the three-inch turtle
 we almost hadn't missed as it started
 its perilous crossing deposited it
 there! At the far pasture's edge –
 mission so nimbly, raptly accomplished
 where dizzying beams rushed both ways
 and tears broke from the tall trees
 that I who saw the marvel simply
 filed it away for future use.
 We had seen so many marvels those days... (*A Scattering of Salts* 35)

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the opening stanza's layout with clear mid-line spaces is suggestive of the emergence of some clearing, a kind of light that the mind

uses to decipher the contours of objects motivating its care. Designating a position of safety, the emphatic “there!” corresponds to a moment registered by consciousness as the inception of care that enables Merrill to “see clearly” and contemplate the turtle’s significance with the exclusion of other “marvels” and impressions competing for his attentions. The saved turtle acquires its central place in the poem as it evokes contexts of pain, waiting, and deliverance that underlie our own attempts to live a human life. Merrill lets the turtle play its principal role of claiming our attention precisely because of its neediness and insecurity that are also indelible marks of human waiting and wanting. The final stanza reveals the shared predicament through qualities that circumscribe a realm of human care whose contours are sustained and redrawn by telling:

Back to turtle, here’s a tale
it can tell till the end of time:
‘Night was falling. Too frightened to shrink
into my shell, as the shattering lights
hurtled past I took despairingly
slow steps to appease them.
Upon chelonian powers that shouldered
Terra herself from a waste of waters
childlike I called for help. Was heard!-
only then turning to instinctive stone.
Shame upon me: I had shut myself to
Life even as it uplifted
And heaved me into a green haven. (*A Scattering of Salts* 36)

Fear, slowness, despair, helplessness, shame, a need to appease and please – these defensive elements enter the domain of activity circumscribed by the turtle, and are reminiscent of a Rilkean quiet cry for help in a consciousness situated in the interpreted world and putting together its puzzles of being. The exclamatory “Was heard!” provides a structural and semantic completion of “there!” in the first stanza, both suggesting Merrill’s relying on language as his means of convalescing from states of deprivation and loss inevitably confronting him in human translations of experience.

By looking at the turtle as an emblem of his care and giving it a place, a “there,” Merrill seems to listen to his own projections of the self and “is heard.” The turtle’s paralyzed being enables the poet to demarcate these components in his own waiting for fulfillment that may tempt him to turn “into instinctive stone” and thus frustrate his desire to acknowledge a need for change and new destinations of the self. That is why the

turtle can go on telling its tale “till the end of time,” time revealing one’s forms of care as achievements of one’s waiting. As the turtle finds its help, so does Merrill find his rescue, in words that can purge him of his fear and that may continue to heave his unfulfilled being into green havens of patient translations.

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