

“Both Rooms are Waiting”: Heroic Openness in James Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*

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In the novella *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven*, Mark Twain subjects the Christian heaven to the stern demands of Yankee common sense. The result is a charmingly wry view of heaven as a sprawling, gossipy, class-conscious megalopolis in which only ignorant newcomers are so gauche as to twang their harps or to don their wings as casual attire. This story, the last Twain published in his lifetime, satirizes the foolishness of Americans’ received ideas about the afterlife by depicting them literally. Such a heaven, the text suggests, would in fact be a very lonely place: with so many souls from a plethora of places and eras, merely making simple conversation would entail a tedious quest to establish contact with another resident of the same language background and historical moment. And simple elevation to the heavenly abode does nothing to diminish the rich, quarrelsome, and status-conscious personalities of the angels; as on earth, a celestial hierarchy draws adoring attention from the common folk.

In at least one sense, however, Twain shaped the afterlife in *Captain Stormfield* to suit his own ambitions, making literary merit a ticket to high station in the celestial realm. When the eponymous Captain Stormfield arrives in heaven, a former cranberry farmer named Sandy McWilliams dispels his many illusions and teaches him the ropes of life in paradise. As Sandy explains, great writers are in fact prophets, and “the newest prophet, even, is of a sight more consequence than the oldest patriarch. Yes, sir, Adam himself has to walk behind Shakespeare” (85). Ironically, however, our limited notions of great writing often fail to accord with the heavenly order. The first rank of earthly prophets consists of Jeremiah, Buddha, and “a common tailor from Tennessee” named Edward J. Billings (86). Billings, misunderstood and abused by his neighbors, wrote poetry that outstrips even that of Shakespeare, who follows along somewhere down the train. In this manner, Twain suggests that literary merit and public acclaim are not necessarily equivalent. In fact, Earth’s own luminaries—Buddha and Billings alike—are minor figures who pale in comparison to the three exalted poets “Sa, Bo and Soof, from great planets in three different and very remote” solar systems (91). Twain’s text thus takes a curious double perspective on mankind, exalting the imagination as a divine gift, even while trimming the grandest human expressions of that power down to mere stubble of the cosmic field.

Twain’s story is narrated from the perspective of outsiders to the cosmic jet set, but a more recent writer has explored what it might be like to be a full-fledged member of the celestial

salon, even its darling. James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, a 560-page volume of poetry,¹⁾ places its speaker JM into dialogues with the spirits of dead poets including William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and W. H. Auden, with prophets such as Gautama, Jesus, and Mohammad²⁾, and with various spirits and angels who oversee the functioning of the cosmic machinery. But where Twain's Captain Stormfield has to zoom through space for thirty years before reaching the afterlife, Merrill's JM enjoys the convenience of contacting the dead through a Ouija board in sessions held with his partner DJ.³⁾ The poem renders the speech of the dead and other spirits in small capitals to distinguish it from JM and DJ's comments and responses. Aside from this typographic divide in the dialogue between worlds, the poem reflects a number of divergent stylistic traits, most notably a bifurcation between modes of visionary revelation and skeptical self-reflection. This paper explores these seemingly incongruent aspects of the poem, seeking to reconcile those that place it in the tradition of the heroic quest with others that characterize it as a postmodern text emphasizing linguistic process over any specific content or message.

In its serious attempt to relay voices from the beyond and to sketch a new myth of humanity's place in the universe, *Sandover* is closer to Yeats' *A Vision* or to Dante's *Divine Comedy* than to Twain's spoof on the Christian heaven. Yet while Merrill's text is epic in both scale and subject, it rejects the unfailing seriousness of its predecessors in the visionary tradition. Merrill, like Twain, enjoys imagining a heaven that is in certain senses fully human. The ascended souls regain their earthly senses as they rise higher in the celestial "bureaucracy," and they retain their human predilections for gossip and cliquishness. For instance, the late Robert Morse, who was Merrill and Jackson's Stonington neighbor in real life, endears himself to the luminaries through his playful self-deprecation, and as a reward is summoned to Maria Callas for a chat about music (529). Merrill himself seems to enjoy giving the cold shoulder to the still more recently deceased Vladimir Nabokov, even as he grants Nabokov a respectable fifth-level rank in the bureaucracy. Robert Morse reports the news of Nabokov's passing:

. . . GUESS WHO CHECKED IN TODAY
 WITH TONS OF LUGGAGE: 'AH A GRAND HOTEL
 JUST AS I'D PICTURED, ONCE MORE EMIGRE'
 Who? VN Oh no, did the great man die?
 Which floor have they assigned him? 5 HE'LL BE
 AT LOOSE ENDS LATER HAVE HIM IN? DJ:
 Why not? JM: Alas—*No Vacancy*. (412)

JM's catty response is just one of many instances where rival personalities or aesthetic standards come into conflict in *Sandover*; Merrill's heaven is decidedly not a realm of rarefied and harmonious spirituality.⁴⁾ Instead, the afterlife as accessed through the Ouija board abounds in contradiction, bringing together several pairs of contraries: life and death, reality and imagination, visionary messages and acerbic humor, chitchat and formal verse.

The Ouija revelations themselves occupy a central place among the poem's many contradictory elements. Their divine origin would seem to grant them infallibility: the spirit known as Ephraim, for instance, correctly guesses Maya Deren's age, even when she has hidden it from JM and DJ (23). However, the most important messages about the cosmic order and humanity's future prove to have only provisional applicability. Readers therefore struggle to construct a clear vision of the celestial realm, as older messages that seem foundational are cancelled out when the mediums gain access to more highly placed informants. Ephraim, the mediums' first "familiar spirit," gives way to the peacock (and erstwhile bat-angel) Mirabell, who in turn gives way to the higher angels and the twins of God Biology and Nature. And even these ostensibly final authorities are undercut by rumors of a galactic pantheon among whom God B is but a junior member. This multi-tiered and open-ended structure makes truth in *Sandover* a skittish creature that shies away whenever we draw too close. Moreover, even within the limited context of each level, the revelations do not fit easily into the forms and structures to which human logic is accustomed. The bat-angel named 40070, for instance, describes how his race created a "crust world" that floated above the surface of the earth. A nonplussed JM inquires about possible figurative meanings of this surprising revelation:

Are we to take as metaphor your "crust
World"—for, say, the brain's evolving cortex?
Or for that "froth of electrons" locked within
Whose depths revolve the nuclear Yang and Yin? (126)

40070 praises JM ("HEAD OF CLASS") for this insight, but the next bat-angel, initially named 741 but later dubbed Mirabell, insists that the Earth's moon is nothing other than the remains of the collapsed crust-world and suggests no metaphorical implications of this statement (133). In this manner, the visionary "message" of the text wavers between the literal and the metaphorical, even as its style veers from casual conversation to a disconcerting blend of Milton and H. P. Lovecraft, and on to elegant poetic forms such as sonnets, villanelles, and terza rima.

It is perhaps for these reasons that Judith Moffett, one of *Sandover's* first interpreters, remarks that "not everyone will wish, or know how to approach" a book like *Sandover*, and that "not everyone who approaches will feel welcome" (153). *Mirabell*, the second volume of the trilogy, surely has drawn the most divisive reader reactions. *Mirabell* received the 1979 National Book Award for Poetry, yet it is a far less reader-friendly book than its predecessor *The Book of Ephraim*. In particular, it inverts *Ephraim's* restrained use of the Ouija transcripts, showering us in pages of upper-case text concerning centaurs, UFOs, and the perils of mixing "animal soul densities" into human beings (145-46). Some readers find the revelations dispensed to JM in this poem implausible to the point of distaste; Geoff Klock, for instance, laments the poem's "convoluted and contradictory picture of the cosmic machinery" (154). The novelist Alison Lurie, a longtime personal friend of Merrill and Jackson, remarks that she had been impressed with *Ephraim* but that a reading of the rest of the trilogy left her "feeling that my friend's mind was intermittently being taken over by a stupid and possibly even evil alien intelligence" (63).

Such reactions bespeak Moffett's need to qualify her praise of the poem.

Another vein of response contends that *Mirabell* does not sustain the poetic refinement that stands out in *Ephraim*, perhaps an inevitable response considering the relatively short time in which the poem was composed—a mere two years for *Mirabell* compared to twenty for *Ephraim*. David Bromwich places his criticism into just this register, asserting that “only camp-followers or pedants would pretend to judge” the poem by its argument and complaining instead that the poem's second volume reveals a diminished negative capability in the poet: “in *Mirabell* there is a panic rush and waste This urgency is akin to that of the tabloids, with the same profusion of uppercase lettering” (53; 54). Merrill himself betrays some anxiety in this regard within the poem, as JM expresses an unironic frustration that he

. . . cannot spare those twenty

Years in a cool dark place that *Ephraim* took

In order to be palatable wine. (261)

Lurie more bluntly states that the Ouija messages in *Mirabell* and *Scripts* are often “beneath the level of good prose” (63). Even Helen Vendler, who lauds Merrill as “one of our indispensable poets” (205), considers the trilogy's middle section to be “typographically unnerving” and marked by “a sheer willingness to bore” (221; 230). Anyone who has spent much time amid *Sandover*'s shifting styles and doctrines, and particularly those of *Mirabell*, can surely appreciate the perspectives of these critics.

Yet the trilogy, including its middle book, also rewards a reader who is patient with its generic and stylistic slipperiness. Moffett calls *Sandover* “Merrill's grandest achievement” (153) and adds that “the verse of the trilogy's hundreds of pages consistently outdazzles anything the critics can think to say about it” (159). Likewise, Stephen Yenser asserts that *Sandover* is “immediately recognizable as a landmark in American literature” and that “it is one of the most ambitious, original, and variously brilliant works written by an American” (3; 217). Critics such as these who esteem Merrill's epic do so because they see a poetic function in its stylistic and cosmological inconsistencies. Moffett helps resolve the tension between *Sandover*'s identity as a visionary epic and its polyphony of tonal registers by distinguishing between the poem's “message” and its “meaning” (161). Lynn Keller takes this idea further in asserting that “much of the epic's liveliness derives from the radical difference, and the resulting tension, between the two” (134). In other words, the poem proclaims a coherent lesson about the dangers of atomic energy, which the bat-angels themselves unwisely unleashed. At the same time, however, the poem regularly directs its attention to JM, the shifting nature of the revelation he and DJ receive, and his creative process in crafting a poem about it. Thus the meaning of the poem involves transformation and process, in contrast to the clear and objective message it delivers. Keller concludes, “Keeping in mind the personal and self-reflexive aspects of the drama that sound as muted undertones in the pronounced message, we appreciate the epic's machinery as most essentially a means of self-knowledge” (137). The self posited by the poem is “multiple, ambiguous, fluid” but ultimately not supernatural (137). Thus to readers like Keller, Merrill

exhibits a postmodernist's embrace of the unsettled, fluid, and paradoxical aspects of reality.

Yet if this is so, why does the poem insist so strongly on following its predecessors in the genre of visionary epic? A vision that yields no revelation is a contradiction in terms.⁵ The defining trait of the vision is a divine or cosmic authority backing its content, a trait which could not exist if each tier of Dante's vision, or each diagram of Yeats' were to crumble away and be replaced by the next, which would then crumble in its turn. And while the Ouija board "can stand, we might say, for language itself" (Vendler 220-21), why did the real Merrill and Jackson devote so many hours to its use? Surely their involvement was something literal as well as metaphorical. The poem itself indicates the price of this involvement. When DJ remarks on how the Ouija board takes up an increasingly large space in their lives, weakening their ties to community and friends, JM refers to another heroic quest to postulate the necessity of this process:

Remember Sam and Frodo in their hot
Waterless desolation overshot
By evil zombies. They of course come through
—It's what, in any Quest, the heroes do—
But at the cost of being set apart,
Emptied, diminished. Tolkien knew this. Art—
The tale that all but shapes itself—survives
By feeding on its personages' lives. (218)

This "stripping process," as Merrill terms it in the following line, is part of the logic of the quest: the heroes gain salvation for their land at some personal cost. We can see just what the *Sandover* mediums are losing in DJ's glum remark about the effects of their growing Ouija board habit:

. . . Isn't it like a door
Shutting us off from living? I've no zest
For anything else, can't even watch TV.
This town's full of good friends we hardly see. (217)

The heroes achieve higher knowledge at the cost of the comforts of communal life and friendship, suffering rejection ("Tom's analytic cool" and "Alison's shrewd / Silence") or influencing others in unforeseen, negative ways ("Milton's ghastly on the spot / Conversion, complete with rival spirit / And breakdown") (87).

In this respect the trilogy comfortably fits the pattern of the quest, but the salvation that JM and DJ attain is harder to pinpoint. Ostensibly, it is salvation for humanity from the destructive powers of nature, from God Biology's exasperated undoing of his third creation, as he had already destroyed the centaurs and chastised the bat-angels for their sin of meddling with the atom. The celestial powers repeatedly emphasize this danger. The bat-angels use their own painful history as a warning:

WE USE WORDS WHEN WE SPEAK WORDS CANNOT EXPRESS SUCH POWER

SUCH GODLY PRODUCTION WE TOO WERE OBLITERATED
 WE TRIFLED & F E L L NEGATIVE ENERGY THE BLACK HOLE
 WAS BORNE WE B U R N YET THERE IS MERCY & HAVING SUFFERD
 IT IS OUR DUTY TO WARN MAN AGAINST THE CHAOS ONCE
 WORSHIPT BY US . . . (113)

Before the bat-angels, the centaurs fell into the same error, feeding uranium to their winged servants only to be deposed and made slaves to the servants' vastly enhanced power. And now that human beings have appropriated atomic power for their own destructive uses, God B is contemplating a change of course in the divine plan. The bat-angels explain:

. . . GOD B USES HIS ATOMIC
 POWER AS BOTH BENEVOLENT (SUN) & CHASTISING (BOMBS)
 USES IT AS HIS ONE AGENT TO CREATE & DESTROY.
 MAN'S & THE CENTAURS' TAKING OF IT A PROMETHEAN
 OUTRAGE: IS GOD CLONING THE USURPATION? (213)

The bat-angels cannot be sure about God B's plan due to their intermediate position in the hierarchy, above the bureaucracy but below the good angels, God B, and Nature. But the danger they postulate, the "usurpation" of humanity's place as God B's favored children, is precisely the sort of threat that should motivate even reluctant heroes to undertake a quest for salvation.

In many ways the poem continues to follow the trope of quest and redemption. In particular, JM in his role as Scribe is charged with educating humanity into changing its ways: God B decrees that "The innate / Role of the Scribe must now be to / Supplant religion" (178). Yet the text reflects a variety of notions about the Scribe's true purpose. The bat-angel 40076 initially commands him to write:

UNHEEDFULL ONE 3 OF YOUR YEARES MORE WE WANT WE MUST HAVE
 POEMS OF SCIENCE THE WEORK FINISHT IS BUT A PROLOGUE
 ABSOLUTES ARE NOW NEEDED YOU MUST MAKE A GOD OF SCIENCE
 TELL OF POWER MANS IGNORANCE FEARES THE POWER WE ARE
 THAT FEAR STOPS PARADISE WE SPEAK FROM WITHIN THE ATOM (113)

Here, in contrast to the communications of the witty and fully human Ephraim readers have known to this point, the misspellings and authoritarian tone bespeak an alien consciousness beyond human comprehension. Auden (WHA) later comments that "THEY THINK IN FLASHING TRIGONOMETRIES" (136). This alien quality creates an atmosphere of menace, and 40076's command seems to delineate the task which JM and DJ must complete to fulfill their roles as heroic questers.

Yet the tone and content of the command pull in opposite directions: 40076 demands only the removal of fear through knowledge, not a cessation of meddling with the atom. JM is tasked to become, not a Jeremiah inveighing against the sin of atomic power, nor even the prophet of a new Gospel of the atom, but a revitalizer of humanity. Mirabell clarifies the role of the Scribe in Book 7:

THE SCRIBE ISSUES FROM THE BURNT PAGES OF THEOLOGY
 NOT TO CHANGE THE SOUL, FOR THOSE MISGUIDEDLY BURNT PAGES
 STILL SERVE AS WARNING, BUT TO RENOVATE THE HOUSE OF MAN.
 THE BODY & ITS PSYCHE ARE YR AUDITORIUM
 JM (239)

Mirabell goes on to explain that the "NEW HOUSE GODLET" will be "REASON RUN THROUGH THE FIRES OF MAN'S CLONED SOUL" and that "METAPHOR IS THE RITUAL OF THIS NEW REASON" (239). In other words, poetry itself, and not any specific message, will be the salvation humanity requires. This poetic sacrament (which, Mirabell says, joins music and science as the "3 / MAJOR FAITHS") will bring God B's light into the world, thereby displacing religion in mediating between the human and the divine. WHA elsewhere confirms the obsolescence of traditional religion, decrying "THE DREARY DREARY DEAD BANG WRONG / CHURCH" (128). Thus, JB's role as Scribe changes over the course of *Mirabell*: he is charged to create poems of science, but the value of those poems turns out to be located in the act of poetic creation, not in their specific content or the poems' persuasive function toward their readers. Science, then, functions as part of a new mythology that updates "THE XTIAN MYTHS" that had been thought to "COME CLOSEST TO THESE EARTHY TRUTHS" about the universe and humanity's place in it (187). The Scribe's relation to science is not that of rhetor to message but rather of artist to palette. In this sense we can take many of the text's stranger revelations as something other than literal messages.⁶⁾

While the reader is thus relieved from the burden of assimilating and reconciling all of the text's many pronouncements, a reading in which they are mere playthings of the artist's unconscious is equally untenable. In fact, it is precisely a tension between belief and incredulity that the poem thrusts upon the reader, and such a tension is likewise evoked by the Scribe's paradoxical relationship to the forces of reason and chaos. The Scribe is defined as the vessel of reason, yet the feelings that feed his poetic craft are relegated to the realm of chaos. This bifurcation, in its psychological and ontological aspects, drives the trilogy's second and third books, as the specter of chaos repeatedly looms before the poet only to fade away at the moment of contact.

The poem's connection between light and reason is clear and consistent, but the relation between chaos and feeling remains elusive. Mirabell proclaims that "NOW AT A FLIPPED SWITCH / GOD B'S LIGHT FLOODS THE SCRIBE" (239). This light is nothing other than abstract intelligence. At the end of *Mirabell* the angel Michael defines God as "THE ACCUMULATED INTELLIGENCE IN CELLS SINCE THE DEATH OF THE FIRST DISTANT CELL" and proclaims that he and the other angels "RESIDE IN THAT INTELLIGENCE" (276). Michael himself as the angel of light most fully represents that aspect of God B. As Moffat comments, "Michael represents the sensitive, perceptive intelligence that does not investigate or evaluate ideas but ignores them or takes them in entire" (209). The abstract, pure reason that Michael and God B embody is counterpoised by Chaos. The bat-angels explain that "2 GODS / GOVERN BIOLOGY AND CHAOS WHICH EMPLOYS FEELING" (113). The bat-angels worshiped chaos and suffered a devastating penalty: "OUR IMAGE IS LITERALLY BLACKEND /

ON THE RUIND ALTARS WHERE OUR FEELING WENT UP IN F L A M E" (113). This rather ambiguous statement becomes clearer when the bats aver that "WE LEFT THE WORK OF CHAOS WHEN WE SHED OUR FEELINGS" (115). Feeling, presumably the realm of poetry, and certainly the realm of James Merrill's poetic endeavor, is thus presented as a dangerous, fiery force, one that the poem associates with the sinister phenomena of atomic energy and antimatter. Mirabell explains the bat-angels' duties in regard to this latter menace:

THE MATTER WHICH IS NOT WAS EVER OURS
 TO GUARD AGAINST. ITS POWERS
 ARE MAGNETIZED BY FOREIGN BEACONS, BLACK
 HANDS TESTING THE GREENHOUSE PANE BY PANE.
 CLING TO YOUR UNION: 5 THRU THE DARK HOURS
 WE KEEP WATCH WE PRESS BACK. (161)

As this passage suggests, the bat-angels play a Stevensian role of "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (Stevens 36) or in this case against the anti-reality represented by the raging feelings of Chaos. As the vessel of God B's light, JM is ostensibly opposed to the forces of feeling—which should nonetheless be the materials out of which he composes his poetry.

This paradox about Chaos's simultaneously destructive and creative nature runs throughout the text, but as the reader approaches to grasp, comprehend, and unravel it, the paradox slides away, receding to another textual and ontological realm. We can see this metaphysical elusiveness most clearly in the changing role of the bat-angels within the text. They first appear in section U of *Ephraim*, barging into the midst of a cozy discussion between JM, DJ, Ephraim, Maria, Maya, and Wallace Stevens, demonstrating fearful power over all of the participants.⁷ They command DJ to place his hand on the board's edge and mysteriously make "[t]hat very palm, in no time, creased, red, sore, / As if it had been trod on for attention" (73). The spirits of the dead are likewise discomfited by these new apparitions:

Maya: GEE THEY PUT THE WHAMMY ON US
 Maria: JUNTA Stevens: WHERE'S MY HAT
 E: A DOOR WAS SHUT THE MIRROR WENT BLACK (73)

In *Mirabell*, the authoritarian bat-angels initially play an aggressive role, asserting their superior rank over the mere human souls such as Ephraim, Maria and WHA. Their claim to status outstripping the nine-tiered bureaucracy of human souls is underscored poetically by their distinctive fourteen-syllable meter.

WE ARE ETERNITY WE ARE OO BEYOND THE NINE
 THOSE STAGES ARE OUR LAB & YR DEAD FRIENDS OUR WORKERS WHO
 ALAS WILL MISS THE EARTHLY ETERNITY WHEN IT COMES (116)

While JM and DJ cannot perceive these newly arrived taskmasters, the souls of the dead find them frightening and repulsive. Ephraim, for instance, describes them in terms of the cruelly efficient soldiers who caused his final human death:

. . . WELL THEY HAVE THE AIR
 OF CERTAIN BLACKROBED SOLDIERS OF TIBERIUS
 WHEN WE SAW THEM ON THE TERRACES
 A SHRIEK & A SPLASH SOON FOLLOWED LOVE ME PLEASE (118)

Maria, less cowed than Ephraim but nonetheless distressed, describes the newcomers as being "QUITE LIKE BATS / HUGE SQUEAKING ONES WITH LITTLE HOT RED EYES" (117). Contact with their atomic fire is painful for the spirits, who cluster protectively around JM and DJ during the Ouija sessions (190). WHA comments that "THEY GLOW LIKE FRANKLIN STOVES / IN REDEYED MEMORY OF THEIR ORDEAL." Maria echoes this observation when she departs between sessions with the wry remark, "OFF GOES / MAMAN TO CHANGE INTO SOMETHING LESS SCORCHED" (131). The bat-angels thus overpower the other characters, in terms of both their innate energies and their rank above the bureaucracy of human souls.

This superiority, however, soon disappears. As early as book 1.6, when JM requests Mirabell to flesh out his messages with specific detail, the bat-angel suddenly adopts an obsequious manner that nonplusses JM:

HOW SHD I SPEAK COMMAND ME O S C R I B E
 The cup, so saying, executes a kind
 Of creeping kowtow I instinctively
 Recoil from. Superhuman powers like these
 We want as mentors, not as servants, please! (122)

In this way the dictator of the revelations becomes subservient to the Scribe and Hand⁸⁾ whose nominal role is to receive and disseminate the messages from above. This inversion of statuses deepens when one of the "eternal" bat-angels begins to be changed by his contact with the human pair. By book 3.3 Mirabell confesses that he has come to love JM and DJ, that he has been permitted to experience feelings. Although it seems to be a reversion to the bat-angels' service to the work of chaos, this opening of a new realm of experience leads to a dramatic and positive change for Mirabell, announced rather bluntly by Maria: "MES ENFANTS HE HAS TURNED INTO A PEACOCK" (157). In book 4.6 Mirabell is gushing about "HOW VITAL / HOW TRANSFORMING IS OUR RED SPACE" (177). By the end of the section, Mirabell has become fast friends with the humans, and their relationship that started with the ominous name "BEZELBOB" (115) is now marked by a mutuality that cancels out all of the hierarchies of perception and consciousness. In the past, the bat-angels' human interlocutors had, unlike JM and DJ, forsaken mutuality in demanding "THE FEATHER OF PROOF" (258). When JM admits that he has desired that feather, though he knew better than to request it, Mirabell hints at its cost:

WELL WE HAVE GIVEN FEATHERS B4, OR LEFT THEM BEHIND
 IN OUR HASTE TO LEAVE & LEFT ALSO MANY A MIRROR
 SHATTERD & MIND WRECKD DULLD WIT THE CHEAP NOTORIETY
 BUT WE & YOU WE & YOU MOVE IN OUR FIELD TOGETHER (258)

This voice sounds nothing like the bat-angels who made violent displays of power and warned

of retribution against humankind's Promethean meddling with the atom. JM and DJ have received the abruptly intruding higher powers, recorded their messages, and through simple amiable openness transformed one of them into a creature of kindly feeling. In terms of *Mirabell* alone, JM and DJ's quest to reconcile the forces of reason and chaos might be regarded as complete.

When we consider the whole of *Sandover*, however, the fiery threat presented by the bat-angels is not resolved. Instead, the menace is merely displaced to a higher order of beings, the angels who tutor JM and DJ in *Scripts*. While three of the angels—Michael, Emmanuel, and Raphael—are benign beings who govern the elements of air, water, and earth respectively, their “shy brother” Gabriel, the angel of fire and death, is a different story. Gabriel is the being who executed God B's command to destroy his earlier experiments with the centaurs and bat-angels in the Greenhouse. He first appears as a grotesque “SHEET OF FLAME” filled with thousands of writhing figures (318). In contrast to his playful brothers, Gabriel is emotionally distant from human beings, calling himself God B's “SENIOR SON” and “NEITHER FRIEND NOR ENEMY, A NEUTRAL ELEMENT” (316). Thus Gabriel, like the bat-angels, is portrayed as a horrifying and alien force. Now he will judge human beings and seems prepared to destroy them if they are found wanting:

CHILDREN, I WHO SIT ON A BLACK THRONE AT MY FATHER'S RIGHT,
I BEHIND EACH ATOM A SHADOW ATOM, CHILDREN,
CONVINCE ME THAT YOUR RACE IS NOT YET RUN.

(Sforzando) BROTHERS HOLD YR TONGUES! LET THEM! (329)

This intimidating presence follows the pattern laid by the bat-angels. While Gabriel never demonstrates the subservient attitude that *Mirabell* adopted, he soon develops an emotional relationship with the mediums and the human race they represent. As with the bat angels, Gabriel seems to lose his alien or neutral quality and to mirror the emotions of the people with whom he interacts. The third lesson in the “Yes” section of *Scripts* begins with WHA's falling on his knees and begging Gabriel to “O SPARE, SPARE OUR WORLD!” (328). At the lesson's end, Gabriel echoes this behavior by falling on his knees and imploring the humans to give him reasons for mercy (330-31). Likewise, soon after proclaiming his indifference to humanity, Gabriel confesses, “I, OH I HAVE KNOWN FEELINGS!” (330), a development that reprises *Mirabell*'s regaining his feelings through contact with JM and DJ. Gabriel even takes on a protective role, accusing Michael of harming humans by leading them into a false pride through his power of reason. The humans wonder whether the tears Gabriel sheds are genuine, but in the sixth lesson of the “No” section, Gabriel's remarks on the value of the Scribe reveal his true affection for humanity:

GOD NEEDS MORE (& MORE COMPLEX) CONTACT WITH HIS CHILD,
THAT EACH MAY KNOW THE OTHER'S GOOD WILL.

Fond amusement blazing from his eyes. (464, emphasis in original)

Although the degree of mutuality is far less, Gabriel emerges and recedes as a threat in a manner that echoes that of the bat-angels. The bat angels themselves were preceded by

Ephraim, who toyed with the mediums—"Was he a devil? His reply MY POOR / INNOCENTS left the issue hanging fire"—at the trilogy's beginning (9). And just as JM and DJ rise above Mirabell's level when they begin to work with the angels, they rise above the level of the angels when they, and not the angels, are able to hear God B's song in the last lesson of the "Yes" section in *Scripts*.

Thus, *Sandover* follows not a linear structure of quest and redemption but a cycle in which quasi-demonic beings associated with the element of fire emerge threateningly, mirror the human protagonists, and recede benevolently into the background. Indeed, this pattern continues by associating destructive chaos with both Mother Nature and a mysterious force known as "the Monitor." First, Nature's destructive potential troubles George Cotzias, who is one of the pupils in the Sandover classroom and who in his last life as a scientist succumbed to cancer despite receiving radiation treatments. Cotzias traces the source of danger from Gabriel to his mother:

. . . GABRIEL IS HER SPOILED DARLING,
SHE A 'PERMISSIVE' MAW. MY RESEARCH HAS HAIRS
I LOST STANDING ON END! (416)

The classmates discuss the possible links between Nature, Gabriel, and the Monitor, but Mother Nature soon turns out to be a clearly benevolent force. In the penultimate lesson of the "No" section of *Scripts*, just the place where we might expect a negative force to manifest, she exclaims, "BUT LET ME CRY A LAST RESOUNDING YES / TO MAN, MAN IN HIS BLESSEDNESS" (489).

The Monitor, however, is a more mysterious and threatening figure. In the second lesson of the "&" section, WHA reveals its existence:

IN THE BEGINNING GOD
WAS GIVEN, TO SHAPE HIS WORLD, A TWO-EDGED GIFT.
HIS BROTHERS OF THE PANTHEON ALLOWED
MATERIALS, BUT WITH THE PROVISIO: 'GO
BUILD, YOUNGEST BROTHER, ONLY TAKE THIS ONE,
OUR M O N I T O R, TO DWELL WITHIN YOUR BALL.
FOR OUR WILL MUST EVER BE DONE. (392)

WHA, who will be reborn in mineral form, has had a vision of the earth's inner structure in which he "HEARD AT ITS HEART THE MONITOR'S RAGING WILL" (393). It is George Cotzias and Robert Morse, however, who eventually realize that the Monitor must be stronger than Gabriel and equal to God or Nature, questioning whether the song the humans hear at the end of "Yes" is actually God B's or the Monitor's (447). JM, in turn, wonders whether the song was "of the Black God? God A / For Adversary?" George's reply inverts Mirabell's earlier comment about resisting the "BLACK / HANDS TESTING THE GREENHOUSE PANE BY PANE":

. . . OR MASTER? OR "CREDITOR"
WHO LENT BRAIN-MATTER ITS PROVERBIAL GRAY?
AND PRESSES NOW AGAINST THE WHITE OF MIND. (167; 447)

After the following lesson the speculation grows even darker: God B and the Monitor may not even be cosmic twins, but the Monitor may in fact be a slightly greater power, able to imbue certain types of positive matter with negative energy. In such a view, the Monitor lurks within the earth, “PART OF THE GREENHOUSE, FOR (THO MATTER HOLDS) / THESE FORKED TONGUES FLICKER FROM ITS OILS & GOLDS” (453). God B would have to strain himself to maintain matter’s existence against this more powerful foe. JM considers whether “[t]he Greenhouse from the start had been / An act of resistance?” (453). This power dynamic leads George to speculate on the oxymoronic possibility of “GOD AS PROMETHEUS?” (453). If humanity continues to mine the earth for the precious substances embodying the Monitor, the result could be the nullification of matter itself:

NOW THAT MAN TAPS THIS 2ND POWER, ONE WELL
TOO MANY & PUFF! Puff? THE WHOLE FRAIL EGGSHELL
SIMPLY IMPLoding AS THE MONITOR’S
BLACK FILLS THE VACUUM MOTHER N ABHORS (453)

This precarious balance between two equivalent yet marginally unequal forces is very much the scenario that Gabriel presents to the classroom through the diagrams he has JM draw in the eighth lesson of the “No” section. A stick-figure person, reminiscent of an hourglass, stands on a convex surface, with a mirror image of the person (“a shadow . . . the downward enigma . . . the upward volatile force”) extending below that surface (475). When Gabriel finishes his presentation, his voice gives way to stage directions that hint at an important image for Merrill, a fire screen:

POET, YOU WISELY MADE US STAND ON RISING GROUND, FOR
BENEATH US, MORTALS, SHADES AND GODS, IS THE CAPPD
VOLCANO.
‘IT’: CHILD’S PLAY? OR A DEADLY GAME

Fire fighting itself—fire its own screen— (475, emphasis in original)

The phrase “fire its own screen” evokes Merrill’s 1969 poem “Mornings in a New House,” which depicts the speaker warming himself before a fireplace covered by a crewel-work fire screen made by his mother. As Yenser notes, the phrase “fire screen” in this earlier poem has a self-inverting slipperiness: “The inside has become the outside, and we have come full circle in a wink. Fire screen—screen of fire—screen of fire” (163, emphasis in original). This same sort of inversion occurs in *Sandover*: the Monitor and God B are mirrored opposites, though not perfectly equal in power, and either one of them always threatens to intrude on the domain of the other. Immediately after the fire-screen reference, Michael hints at this principle in the inverted phrasing of his comment that humans have always known “THIS ENIGMA, THIS IT, THIS EVENLY BALANCED X, THIS ANTIMATTER & ITS MONITOR GOD” (476). Michael proceeds to destabilize the definition he has just given: “NOW WE KNOW HIM: IT. YET NOT OUR ENEMY, NOT AS EASY AS THAT” (476). This refusal to place God B and the Monitor into any pair of static categories indicates that mutual interchange is a central characteristic of the two entities.

Apparently, the search to comprehend chaos and its origin can never lead to final answers in the *Sandover* universe. Or rather an inhering instability is the best answer the characters can reach. In this regard, the poem remains inconsistent with the quest tradition, which requires, if nothing else, a coherent metaphysical framework within which a linear narrative can develop and be brought to a resolution. It is therefore appropriate that the Monitor's shadow God B likewise leaves an ambiguous final message:

The cup . . . crosses itself? Inscribes a stark
Twinbladed axe
Upon the block, sideways? Is it the mark
That cancels, or the letter-writer's kiss? (493)

God B sends his Scribe a sigil that embodies meanings of resurrection and execution, rejection and affectionate contact. God B appears uninterested in clarifying this ambiguity, and his injunction to JM (that his poetry should imbue the figure of the Ouija board with "BOTH PAUSE AND HOPE") embodies the same doubleness (493).

With the relative positions of creative and destructive forces eternally in doubt, the poet's role cannot be to convey a simple and unified message of doom or of succor. Indeed, the poet must reconcile himself to a world in which such metaphysical certainties are unavailable. The alternative which Merrill develops is to locate himself as an artist in the unfolding of process within which nominal opposites can coexist or even overlap. As Blasing puts it, "Merrill's postmodern international trade is not backed by bullion . . . Without a metaphysical 'gold standard' the world is 'opaque *and* transparent' – 'cheerful *and* awful' . . . and poems, like lives, are constantly shifting puzzles of losses and finds" (198, emphasis in original)⁹. But while Blasing, like Kelly, observes how contraries coexist in Merrill's work, it is too easy to wrap Merrill up as neatly postmodern. In fact, *Sandover* seemingly anticipates and resists Blasing's "gold standard" comment. The final revelation of the poem involves Michael, who tells the mediums that he has been communicating with them for years in the guise of Ephraim, whose final human life was in fact an incarnation of Michael. The angel and his human pupils debate whether this information should be revealed in the poem. When JM decides to include it in the epilogue, Michael concedes:

. . . IF YOU WISH IT SO,
IF YOUR NATURE IS SO GODLY THAT YOU SHARE ALL YOUR SECRETS,
WHY THEN, GIVE IT AWAY, THIS GOLD THAT BACKS YOUR CURRENCY (551)

Michael asserts a spiritual authority for the Ouija revelations, one that JM implicitly upholds by choosing to reveal his Ouija quest to the world. Mirabell hints at a similar perspective when he tells JM, who is seeking to understand and define him, "OR MAKE OF ME THE PROCESS SOMEWHERE / OPERATING BETWEEN TREE & PULP & PAGE & POEM" (173). We could read this as the reduction of spirit to creative process, but we could conversely read it as the infusion of that process with a mysterious divine spirit. Here we might note that Mirabell's name can be derived from the letters in "Merrill," along with the letters "ab," which, when mirrored, form

“abba,” which is both an esoteric name of God and Merrill’s favorite stanza form (478). Thus, the peacock’s name evokes the poet’s identity as charged with a doubly poetic and sacred energy. We should not overemphasize these statements and assume that the gold standard is absolute for Merrill. Rather, his poem juxtaposes metaphysical certainty with an ungrounded self-referentiality. The poem delineates a visionary quest even as it cycles through an endless loop of provisionality and self-reference.

Merrill himself cagily avoids answering questions about the metaphysical status of the revelations. When asked about the reason why he introduced the Ouija material into his poetry, for instance, he responded as follows:

Well, don’t you think there comes a time when everyone, not just a poet, wants to get beyond the Self? To reach, if you like, the “god” within you? The board, in however clumsy or absurd a way, allows for precisely that. Or if it’s still *yourself* that you’re drawing upon, then that self is much stranger and freer and more far-seeing than the one you thought you knew. (McClatchy 290, emphasis in original)

A “strange” postmodern self, or the divine afflatus? Merrill remains coy. And this double perspective seems central to his artistic self-concept. When Helen Vendler asked him how “real” the poem’s mythology seems to him, Merrill replied, “Literally, not very—except in recurrent euphoric hours when it’s altogether too beautiful not to be true. Imaginatively real? I would hope so But the point remained, to be always of two minds” (12).

The generic ambiguities in *Sandover*, no doubt a reflection of the poet’s “two minds,” become easier to accept if we view them as complementary but essentially distinct elements in the text. JM and DJ’s long, slow rapprochement with the celestial beings is one dimension of meaning in the text, while the cyclical retreat of chaos with the resulting focus on process forms a second dimension. An epic scale allows the visionary aspect of the poem sufficient scope to develop over time, even as the self-referential aspect repeatedly questions the coherence of that linear axis. As Yenser observes, Merrill’s poetry includes dialectical patterns where characters turn into each other and finally become the poet himself:

The process appears at a different level in the *Sandover* trilogy at large, which habitually revisits its earlier incidents and figures and discovers in them its later ones. There, one often has the impression, as in dialectic, whether Hegel’s or Dante’s, of “a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed.” (10, quoting Northrop Frye)

This transforming process operates on two levels in *Sandover*. First, the mediums meet and get to know a variety of elevated beings, a quest of ascendance that culminates in receiving a message from God B in the final lesson of *Scripts*. Simultaneously, the poem enacts a cyclical pattern that shifts the locus of chaos, a force at once destructive and evolutionary, from Ephraim to Mirabell, and on to Gabriel and his Mother Nature, and finally to the dyad of the Monitor and God B. And this flow of meaning coalesces in the poem’s final scene, when JM

connects the physical and spirit worlds ("Both rooms are waiting") as he reads his poem to both the assembled luminaries of the literary world in the Sandover ballroom and to his recently bereaved friend, the writer Vassilis Vassilikos, in his Athens living room (559).¹⁰ JM the character and James Merrill the writer mirror each other as the character utters the first word of the poet's book, which the reader has now finished. And so this Ouroboros of a poem thrusts its tail into its mouth, denying any end to the forward flow of change.¹¹

The reader, too, is pulled into this flow through the process of memory. The "Admittedly," with which the book ends will draw the reader back to the place and time where he or she encountered that word at the book's beginning, whereupon any number of changes transpiring since that time might call themselves to the reader's attention. The poem invites this sort of self-attention not only through its ending but also through its evocation and exaggeration of myth, its destabilization of its own dogmas, and its relentless punning. This self-reflexive awareness, and not any transcendent truth, is the heroic condition into which the poem attempts to lead both its characters and its readers. Merrill expresses this sentiment in response to a question about the viability of heroism in contemporary American literature:

Oh, heroism's possible, all right, and the high tone hasn't deserted some of us. Trouble is, our heroes more and more turn up as artists or invalids or both—the sort that won't be accepted as heroic except by fellow artists (or other sufferers). Sir Edmund Hillary will "do" of course, but I don't gasp at his achievement the way I do at Proust's. . . . And Proust is subtle enough to persuade us that the real feat has been one not of style but of memory, therefore within even the common man's power to duplicate. It's not the prevailing low tone so much as the imaginative laziness. We don't see life as an adventure. (McClatchy 311)

While Merrill's technical brilliance is the first thing that stands out in his work, here the poet connects the real heroism of life not to exquisite poetic forms but to the basic and universal human faculties of memory and imagination. *Sandover's* final scene places JM in a position demanding the exercise of these two powers. He faces two equally intimidating audiences—in the ghostly ballroom sit the luminaries of Western literature, while in his own living room sits a human being wounded by the world's cold disregard for meaning and order. To these audiences he must speak. Here Gwiazda, positing a sort of literary apotheosis as the culmination of the poem, suggests that we can assume that JM's poetry will be well received (436). But success and failure, or the attainment of status, are not the issue. JM's place is our own place as well: we too must confront the specters of our cultural history and the anxieties of influence, even as we strive to make sense of a world marred by the inrush of chaotic forces.

In this sense, the individual as the locus of creative and destructive energies becomes the true destination of the heroic quest in *Sandover*. Despite its extravagant occultism, the poem remains attached to a cosmology that is primarily materialistic and anti-mystical. As we learn, the radiation released by atomic blasts will destroy not just the bodies of the victims but their souls as well (55). This specter of absolute loss is mitigated somewhat by the story of Maria, whose soul was seemingly destroyed by radiation only to prove invulnerable thanks to her

status as one of the Greenhouse's five immortal souls (465-67). Still, for all of the attention his work gives to Plato, who turns out to be Maria's true identity, Merrill shuns any kind of idealism that might relegate the ordinary human world to peripheral significance. On the contrary, God B himself proves to be the provisional phenomenon, at first posited to depend on human beings for his existence (275-76), and then depicted as a "youngest brother" in a galactic pantheon who place their younger sibling under the vigilance of the Monitor (392). In both scenarios he remains a fallible being who has made mistakes in the management of his first creatures. Never does he appear as a perfect being worthy of human worship. Accordingly, the relationship between the mediums and all of the elevated beings is not directed toward a mystical union or transcendence of self. In section Q, Ephraim makes one speech about the power of devotion, but his gloss of this term ("DEVOTION TO EACH OTHER TO WORK TO / REPRODUCTION TO AN IDEAL") affirms the individual's discrete existence, and Ephraim himself chooses not to gaze upward at an ultimate Source:

. . . ON THE FAIRLY LIVELY GROUND OF MY LIFE I
 HAVE BUILT THIS HIGH LOOKOUT BUT FIND TO MY SURPRISE THAT
 I AM WISEST WHEN I LOOK STRAIGHT DOWN AT THE PRECIOUS
 GROUND I KNEW. (59; 60)

Further, the bulk of *Ephraim*, and indeed of the whole epic, is dedicated to accomplishing the work at hand "AT THE SALON LEVEL" (72). The poem never makes the content of this work perfectly clear or consistent because it values the act of engagement over any specific result or distinction that would shape a heroic end to its characters' quests.

To Merrill, heroism is nothing other than the exercise of two essential powers: memory in its broadest cultural sense, and imagination as it is fed by the hidden fires of the unconscious. The trilogy's final scene—which conjoins the celestial Sandover ballroom and the Athens living room, Merrill's literary forebears and his family home—exists at the juncture of these forces. JM, whose "heart pounds," heroically opens himself to both worlds at the crucial moment of his poetry reading (556). Yet the concluding scene cannot be appreciated as an isolated event: *Sandover* could not convey the magnitude of JM's achievement without its epic scale and gestures to the quest tradition.

When Mark Twain painted a ridiculously literal view of the afterlife in *Captain Stormfield*, he wanted to shake readers out of a complacent acceptance of popular notions about heaven. But his satire on human short-sightedness in paradise is not purely theological in intent, as it invites readers to reflect on the real-world consequences of dogmatic cultural judgments and the cult of celebrity that they encourage. James Merrill, through a radically different form and tone, also sketches myths of the next world to exert a similar influence on his readers' attitude toward their daily lives. The story of JM and DJ's encounter with higher beings invites us to "see life as an adventure" as Merrill believed we ought (McClatchy 311). At the same time, we recognize the elusiveness of ultimate truths in the characters' own recurring doubts and in the ascending tiers of celestial authority. We therefore can turn only within ourselves to discover

whatever "stranger and freer" self we might possess.

To Merrill, human life takes on meaning in proportion to the effort we invest in understanding our past, in both personal and cultural senses, and in forging a space in the present where we can exercise our powers of memory and imagination. Heroism thus involves a supreme openness, both to the past and to one's own dynamic consciousness. While the poem does not present an unbroken movement of its characters toward faith, success, or realization, it does suggest a broad pattern in which they reflect increasingly greater degrees of this openness, as a skeptical JM and a fearful DJ gradually develop warm, mutual relationships with beings such as Ephraim, Mirabell, and the angels. Indeed, at the end of the poem JM, and by extension Merrill himself, practices this very openness by forgoing his quarrel with Vladimir Nabokov. After snubbing Nabokov's repeated attempts to join the Ouija conversation, JM invites him to his reading and humbly requests him "[t]o point out which effects are overdone" in JM's poem (546). Nabokov replies with a few lines poetry of his own that sparkle with contradiction and double meanings:

SO TRUE, 'EFFECTS' OBSESS US HERE. THE LIVING
ARE BOMBARDED & BENUMBED BY SMELLS,
FEVERS & COLORS, DOORBELLS & DUMB BELLS,
THE HUSH OF PASSION'S LOUD I AM'S,
THE CRUSH OF NEWS IN TELEGRAMS (546)

Many readers, besieged by a world over-rich with sensation and meaning, might quail at the thought of opening themselves to the cultural and sensory contexts of their living. Their hesitation might deepen when they reflect that the world does not promise them any sort of absolute meaning in reward for such an effort. Even so, *The Changing Light at Sandover* seeks to hearten them by tracing the path of heroic openness in the face of an uncertain universe.

Notes

- 1) *The Changing Light at Sandover* includes *The Book of Ephraim*, originally published in *Divine Comedies* (1976), *Mirabell's Book of Numbers*, originally published as *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978), *Scripts for the Pageant*, originally published under the same title in 1980, and *Coda: The Higher Keys*, which was added when *Sandover* was first published in 1982. *Voices from Sandover*, a brief dramatic adaptation of the four poems was added in 1988 but is not addressed by this paper. *Sandover's* length and complexity render concise summary impossible. See Moffett for a detailed introduction to the text. Polito also provides a helpful index to the poem. For convenience I will refer to the individual books of the trilogy as *Ephraim*, *Mirabell*, and *Scripts*.
- 2) Merrill also includes Richard Wagner as a prophet of the myths of northern Europe.
- 3) Merrill and Jackson spent countless hours at the Ouija board, starting in 1955 and continuing intermittently through the early 1980s (Lurie 52, 134). The James Merrill papers held at Washington University include approximately 1.5 linear feet of Ouija material. Some of the transcripts used in the composition of *The Book of Ephraim* have been made available online: <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/jamesmerrillarchive/ouijatranscripts>. Merrill used the Ouija transcripts largely verbatim in the poem, adjusting their form only to fit his poetic structure.
- 4) For a discussion of Merrill's probable motives in slighting Nabokov, see Trousdale.

- 5) For readings that emphasize the mythological aspects of the text see Materer and Smith.
- 6) Perhaps the most troublesome of these is WHA's explanation in *Scripts* of the reason why he must be reborn into mineral, not human, form. WHA, we learn, had a lifelong habit of sucking on pencil leads, turning him into "a walking / nonconducting leaden casket" which somehow collected radioactivity that ate away his soul (303-4). Many readers would feel such explanations implausible at best, and even fatal to the work's claims to legitimacy at worst. We should note, however, that the Scribe and Hand often register such objections themselves. In this case, DJ protests that "they don't use lead— / Graphite in pencils" (303). WHA, in turn, is not fazed by this criticism, blithely remarking "LET THE FACT REMAIN / (OR FABLE!) THAT I SIPPED IT GRAIN BY GRAIN" (303). In this way the poem leads readers from a cognition of revealed truth to a rejection of that truth and the revelation supporting it, only to then leave the reader floating in a middle space between true and false, revelation and nonsense. This ambiguity is of a piece with the unresolved relation between reason and chaos I discuss later.
- 7) Ephraim does hint at their existence in section P, mentioning a race of "MEN B4 MANKIND" (56).
- 8) These terms refer to JM and DJ respectively.
- 9) Blasing's quotations refer to J.D. McClatchy's interview with Merrill. See McClatchy 309.
- 10) The grief-stricken Vassilikos has suddenly appeared at Merrill's home in Athens, and, refusing food, drink, and sleep, installed himself in the living room where the Ouija session is being held.
- 11) The revelation that Ephraim, JM and DJ's first spirit guide, was in fact an avatar of Michael, whom Gabriel calls the "SLY BROTHER," reinforces this intra-textual circularity by urging the reader to return to the beginning and reconsider Ephraim's sly humor and waggish pronouncements (330; 550).

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