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# From love to grief to gaiety

**How a poor little rich boy became a great poet**

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**James Merrill:**  
**Life and Art.** By  
Langdon Hammer.  
*Knopf; 912 pages;*  
*\$40.*

WHEN James Merrill was a student at Amherst College, falling in love with an older poet, Kimon Friar, he wrote in his diary about the ambition that this new love produced: “I shall write, be brilliant, be great.” Merrill,



**Hero of the interior life**

who would grow into one of the great American poets of the 20th century, spent his life practising a strange kind of alchemy, as Langdon Hammer shows in his new biography: he turned love and memory, both short-lived and lifelong, into poetry that would endure.

Alchemist that he was, Merrill certainly did not need more gold. He was the son of Charles Merrill, the louche and bullish co-founder of Merrill Lynch, and his second wife, Hellen Ingram, a glamorous, overbearing mother who provided Merrill with a lifetime of “passionate, tragic scenes”. In his palatial childhood home, called the Orchard, the boy

chafed at his life of distant, distracted parents and the daily round of ceremonious play-dates and paid caretakers.

In poetry, Merrill found a way to change the splendour of his exterior life—the gilded columns of the Orchard, season tickets to the opera and silk kimonos from Japan—into the revelations about his teeming inner world that filled books like the Pulitzer prize-winning “Divine Comedies” (1976). He became, as Mr Hammer writes, “a hero of the interior life”. But Merrill wrote, too, out of a need to be healed, even saved. As he claimed hopefully in a late poem: “Art. It cures affliction.”

This is the first full biography of Merrill, and it is unlikely to be surpassed any time soon. After nearly two decades of research, Mr Hammer, the chair of Yale’s English department, has produced a gorgeously written and elegantly comprehensive study of the tumult and passion of Merrill’s “life and art”. He opens up what has sometimes been derided as a “mandarin, private sensibility”, showing instead the vital, loving and lonely heart that beats inside each poem.

In a life that circled the globe—from Southampton, New York, to Stonington, Connecticut, via Athens and Japan—Merrill dispensed his fortune to support his friends, slept with more men than his decorous biographer dares tally and wrote poems in tones “from love to grief to gaiety”. He led “double lives”: an industrious dandy, a promiscuous formalist and much more besides.

Mr Hammer’s lively telling reveals Merrill’s passions and foibles, like the “parallel intoxication” of taking “The Sex Cure” in Greece and occult conversations on the Ouija board, both with his longtime partner David Jackson. Did Merrill really believe in the séances that helped him produce the epic “The Changing Light at Sandover”? It seems that he often did—and with the board, Mr Hammer writes, he “renewed poetry’s ancient task of soliciting speech from the gods”.

Merrill’s sexuality was never an easy subject for him, as with many other gay men of his generation who lived in and out of the closet. The book bracingly describes his death from Aids-related complications in 1995, after years of keeping his HIV-positive diagnosis a secret from all but his most trusted friends.

Mr Hammer treats this difficult topic with grace and fairness. At other times he is too ready to defend his subject, whom he calls, “on balance...virtuous [and] endlessly interesting”. He does little to make more than an implicit case for expanding Merrill’s readers beyond those who already find him “interesting”. A biography of more than 900 pages may intimidate rather than welcome audiences who are unfamiliar with the poetry.

At the end of the day, it is Merrill himself who provides the best invitation into his life and art. In the poem “A Tenancy”, he writes: “If I am host at last/It is of little more than my own past./May others be at home in it.”

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