



## CHRISTOPHER MERRILL AND THE MOUNTAIN

*Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain.* Random House, New York, 2005. Hardcover, 280 pp., \$24.95.

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When some of the top civil servants of the later Roman Empire grew disillusioned, they sojourned with pioneer anchorites along the Nile Valley below Thebes, sometimes staying there. When Czeslaw Milosz moved to America from France ten years after leaving diplomatic service to Communist Poland, he corresponded with Brother Louis, a.k.a. Thomas Merton, and then visited him at Gethsemane in Kentucky. The best novel about the twentieth century, he maintained, would cast Merton *in situ* there as its central character.

Stilling the mind, and training the heart-mind: although early Western monasticism devised ways to do exactly those arduous things, such megawatt inventions have remained isolated in the life of the Church. By contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy furthered a mystical theology, included in its liturgy a reference to Thomas's "beautiful doubt," and emphasized transfiguration, accenting Mount Moriah more than Golgotha. Merrill encountered Orthodoxy in his travels as journalist and culture tracker through the Balkans. After returning to America and publishing his second, longer book on the Balkan Wars—*Only the Nails Remain* (1999)—he recognized that the devastation had not only ground him down but had also strained his family life. In three pilgrimages to the millennium-old warehouse of Orthodox monasticism, the *Hagion Oros* or Holy Mountain on the Mount Athos peninsula in Greece, he took the final leg of his Balkan journey, as it were inwardly. The committed poet and chronicler became a latter-day third-cousin to Arsenius, the imperial tutor of senatorial rank and favorite of Theodosius who chucked it all and sailed for the Thebiad. Two of the poets he had carried in his Balkans kit, Saint-John Perse and Hölderlin, a diplomat in exile and a burnt-through internal exile, already lit the way to perspective acquired under duress. Behind this move stands *The Old Bridge*, whose close meditates on responsibility and hazardous reconstruction; it collected his first reportage and reflections in 1995. His edition of Tomaž Šalamun's poetry, translated by him and twelve other poets, and his fine translations of *Anxious Moments* and *The City and the Child* by Slovene poet and cultural theorist Aleš Debeljak, appeared between 1994 and 1999. Along with Richard Jackson, Merrill has built the main bridge to Slovenian poetry in



English, making room for Debeljak, Šalamun, and Dane Zajc in the English language—for what Joseph Brodsky, with reference to Zajc, described as “major literature from a small country,” an already wounded country further damaged early in the Third Balkan War, the first of the cousins of Job in that long conflict. Merrill has sought a latter-day Thebiad—“obeying the impulse that in the fourth century sent Egyptians into the desert”—because he too had been wounded in his way. And savingly so: a point-walker for my literary generation, first for having made this commitment and then for having emerged from it deepened, he looked to take the genuine next step, which meant inner responsibility and reconstruction. He did so when the Mountain, long in decline, was enjoying a resurgence of vocations, including some from the West. And he sought perspective there.

In Greek *eidos* is not only image but also perspective. *Agalma* and *eikon* are transformative images, sculpted and painted to abiding conventions and varied by the spirit of the maker. The image of Merrill’s work in *Only the Nails Remain* and *Things of the Hidden God*, over the span of perhaps ten years, turns out to compose a diptych. In one panel he journeys for friendship and also for hire, through an inferno stoked by transatlantic criminal negligence, on a visitor’s pass which carried no Dantescan immunity: Merrill was shot at several times. This he calls his “walk in the sun.” The other panel grows from his pilgrimages, not to Westernized Buddhism but to the aging greenhouse of Eastern Orthodoxy dedicated to the Virgin Mother, where his climb is toward a “waiting in patience,” in Simone Weil’s phrase. A forty-day hike on one of these pilgrimages presents the paradigm: an inward circling and stilling, as if toward a Last Supper with himself. Like mute Cratylus, medicine can only point at health, and language can only gesture toward gnosis. On his final page he writes, “I cannot describe what I have experienced of the Mystery here, but I know it has changed me.” That change, not the particulars of Orthodoxy for those readers who cannot follow our point-walker here, is the point.

While reading *Things of the Hidden God*, I recalled episodes in three other books. Eric Newby encounters a mentally simple Italian mountain hermit during World War II, in the narrative of his trek as an escaped prisoner of war, *Love and War in the Appenines* (1971). A comparable encounter, above a battle in a valley below, occurs in philosopher J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959), the episode from his time as an officer in the Italian campaign. Both episodes suddenly deposit their narrators in a contemplative perspective; the encounters are accidental, by way of solitaries who likewise supply accidental approximations of what the Eastern Church has called the holy fool. The perspective supplied to both



narrators, one a fugitive and the other a combatant, is wholly unlooked-for. Perhaps they come to mind because they represent what literature usually gives us: Wordsworth's blind London beggar, Jorge Semprun's Shoah survivor jammed close to him on the Metro. As for the third episode, however, it came to a man bent on seeking. Set on Mount Athos, it centers Father Jean-Yves Le Loup's introduction to his *Being Still: Reflections on an Ancient Mystical Tradition* (1990). A monk with weirdly luminous eyes signals the traveler to wait, then disappears for more than an hour, "leaving me facing the sea, facing my thoughts." At last he returns with cool water and a pot of jam. The effect of this simple, spaciouly framed, silent action never left Le Loup: "That day I entered Christianity by its main portal, a pot of jam, the Infinite in a routine gesture." Perspective, drenching this episode, turns it into *eikon*. Merrill had encountered much, perhaps too much, in the Balkans yet still sought a framework of meaning larger than what his literary mess-kit (most notably Saint-John Perse and Hölderlin) had helped him to carry. These psychic processes, their intestinal anamnesis or deep remembrance, *take their time*—a fact which down-to-dirt spiritual practice always remembers.

Nowhere does Merrill busy us with his qualifications as a penitent, but he nicely implies them. Unlike Father Le Loup he must work into practices as old as Evagrius Ponticus on the purification of the mind, suggesting their impact short of a full *précis*. Evagrius names eight toxins, at least three of which dogged Merrill when he arrived on the Mountain: the anger that infected his family life (*Orgé*), the depression which had eaten at him periodically during and after the war (*Lupé* and *Akedia*), and touches of both vanity and sexual excitement (*Kenodoxia* and *Porneia*). Old labels, sturdy agents, strong affiliates: yet strong also was Merrill's cradle for practice while on the Mountain, *peripeteia* or walking—hard, sometimes dangerous, occasionally with access to clarity and joy. His writing of the book itself, as a travelogue amplified into testament, adapts his procedure in *Only the Nails Remain*: a circumstantial and anecdotal record which interrupts itself with *petits essais* (astute historical and geographical insets, compact estimates of a writer's oeuvre, portraits of others and himself). This choice suggests that *Only the Nails Remain*, in Merrill's rear-view mirror, resolved to an inferno whose purgatory emerges partly veiled in *Things of the Hidden God*, preparing him for still further purification. Manifest indications of change—to a converted perspective on meaning—do appear, but remain proportional to the compassion which Merrill can show to himself. This kind of record, a tapestry of genres which points beyond itself, may well imitate the hesychastic prayer that Merrill practices: in this book a long-settling discord honors



the oneness that has no parts, akin to the formula in St. Basil the Great: “in works of art the likeness is dependent on its original form.... The power is not divided, nor the glory separated.”

It is worth underscoring this phenomenology for two reasons. First, it is classic, as old as the *Oros*, while the process is renovation itself, as serious as his earlier commitment to stand with his Balkan friends through their losses. Merrill’s personal housecleaning, intersecting with collective abdications, becomes a representative task—a point worth circling in violet and red. His new standpoint is not common among the literati—the likes of Georges Bernanos does not wait to greet him at Iowa City’s airport—and it bears witness to a straight-on galvanic resurrection of National Socialist policy which the transatlantic elites did their best to redefine away. It is startling to hear a contemporary historian, expert in the collective dynamics of post-WWarII recollection and amnesia calmly assert that “if many Europeans had managed to ignore for decades the fate of their Jewish neighbors, this was not because they were consumed with guilt and repressing unbearable memories, it was because—except in the minds of a handful of senior Nazis—World War II was not about the Jews. Even for Nazis the extermination of Jews was part of a more ambitious project of racial cleansing and resettlement.”<sup>1</sup> Startling, because the Third Balkan War set that “project” walking again, within our hearing, Merrill heard it, paid attention, and paid a price for the effort, while “we” did not. In 1968, the year of his death, Thomas Merton wrote in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* about such acceding, such *acedia*, that deploring it is not enough because “the only thing stopping us from living humanly is our own deeply ingrained habit of delusion, a habit which some of us stubbornly continue to associate with original sin.” Merrill’s involution on the Mountain is directly proportional to the authority—in his case an author’s authority—of his breakout from shared delusion.

Second therefore and quite naturally, the literary form which Merrill retools between the two books—travelogue organized in panels with interludes—becomes a serial assessment of other writers, including his literary exemplars. Merrill notes that his literary apprenticeship “was predicated on one of William Blake’s ‘Proverbs of Hell’: ‘If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.’ The same holds for marriage and faith.” This reflection concludes a paragraph on Abraham’s mad trust in the *Akedah* command, and Paul’s opening provocation to the church at Corinth about the apparent madness and foolishness of the gospel proclamation. In this dimension, then, his book is about traditional literary effort—about model writers surveyed while he pilgrimages under the rubrics of penitence,



purification, and prayer—but it is also about proclaimers of divine foolishness, even about literal *inscription* of the Christ in life. With both kinds of inscription in view, his inner ground for writing anything at all alters. This last gambit—an Athonite monk's description of the *zografos* task of "writing life"—would, if taken to heart by Merrill in future, make the book his threshold to an endeavor in line with Hopkins or Herbert's.

In fact his account is studded with testimonies from several quarters about threshold awareness. The English cellarer at Grigoriou, who is Merrill's age and had worked as a video image-jockey in London, alludes to the dire necessity of cleansed perceptions—another of Blake's great themes: "People go to bed at night punch-drunk. They can't *see* anymore." Paraphrasing the same monk, Merrill adds, "The earmark of an encounter with a holy man is that you may not appreciate the nature of the gift bestowed upon you until long after, if at all. I remembered the parting words of the guestmaster at Iveron, after my first night on Athos: 'Be fruitful, and write many poems.' I had done nothing of the sort." The threshold he implies for himself here seems clearly marked, and so I take his glance at the watch, with regard to a psychic process that takes a long time, to tip the wink in apotropaic acknowledgement of that truth. It would be upper-case Foolish to count on the outcome, as of course in faith he must, yet it would also be lower-case foolish to say so.

And it would be foolish not to lay out the issue regardless of whether he ever steps up to it, because it is a matter of faith to so lay it out. By doing so he brings us the nutriment, which may work upon us even if we do not appreciate it. Such is the under-sense of his own proclamation—much as, in his closing pages, he stuffs his coat under a bench for some future traveler on the Mountain. Likewise he reports immediately after this encounter with the cellarer the fabulous legends of his name saint, Christopher, quite straight-facedly—not naively, but Foolishly. Thereby implying, as he does with similar materials at several other points, that these hagiographic stories, like the icons themselves, preserve a strange abstraction, a compacted simplicity, so as to cleanse and reorganize perception. His informant for the legends is a lame older monk, also named Christopher—"unlettered, an old fool for Christ" (and indeed marked by the lameness of the archetypal craftsman). The Englishman, by contrast, knows that he has a lot of deep conditioning to undo, and Merrill likens him to St. Basil in retirement at Pontus "(Although I have left the distractions of the city, . . . I have not yet succeeded in forsaking myself"). This undoing—what Merrill applies to his own Balkan experience as "untelling"—is holographic with the English monk's estimate of his own job: "the last days were at hand, whether



mankind died out in a month or three centuries from now. The war in the Balkans, the fires, global warming, plague—anything could trigger the end,” and so the Englishman is glad for the chance to scrub down. To cleanse the threshold of perception. To do what the species desperately needs to do but calamitously may not. *The war in the Balkans*... Merrill’s post-Balkans narrative here, allowing each figure to emerge, whether living or legendary, by simply reporting and only separately reflecting, permits his style alternately to turn iconic—non-interfering, charitable—and then consciously analytic and reflective. Not so curiously, each mode indicates depth of a kind, the Foolish and the framed. The tension he thereby sustains, mutedly polyphonic—attuned in *Only the Nails Remain* but refined here—may already anticipate a new direction for his work. In the longish poem “Luck” at the end of *Watchfire*, collected in 1994, he had been feeling out the ground for an exit, an opening in some kind of perimeter: the very word *luck*, from German *Lücke* for exit or outcome, points there. The alternations in that poem—amplified by programmatic shifts of viewpoint in a more recent longish poem “Where the Smoke Comes From” in *Brilliant Water* (2001)—seem to me the territory he has been pacing in order to get somewhere else. Between the sonnets by Aleš Debeljak in *The City and the Child* (akin to sonnets by Andreas Gryphius during the Thirty Years’ War) and the quasi-novelistic stance and shifts of these poems, some opening awaits him, for which this style of maintaining local tension in *Things of the Hidden God* may provide radar.

Athos itself, after all, supplies one pole in such a tension, not styled but experienced. The dictum from Japan’s medieval Buddhist master Eihei Dogen—“Find a hill and enlighten it”—offers a nice template for Western pilgrimages to Mount Athos. Inner disturbance and search for a way through greater than luck’s compel Merrill to go through ego-death to rebirth—to orient himself on the mysterious core guidance system, self-regulating and ageless, primordial yet unconfined by time and space, which Hindu seers called the *ātman* and Jung, following them, called the uppercase Self. Which often presents itself in dreams as a mountain or world-axis, the mountain sending the ego a snapshot of itself. Mount Athos was archaic Greek several ages before it was Orthodox Christian. Walking it and then writing it with close intent recapitulates that body of collective time while beginning a life-writing which takes its own sweet time. *To meditate like a mountain*, the initial tactic among several on Mount Athos reported by Father Le Loup, corresponds to the Buddhist first foundation of mindfulness, bodily awareness and stabilization within it—for a novice, typically a task of several weeks. The trekking and then the writing, Merrill discovers, slow

him to Spirit's drip-grind speed. (Certain monks who size him up give him more than a passing grade, whereas Le Loup's Father Seraphim would scan a candidate at the door for long minutes and then snap, "You! He hasn't descended beneath your chin!")

Styling over against writing anew: Merrill wishes to listen to language "as intently as a penitent prays to God." He moves me to reflect that Hopkins's phrase "the freshness deep down things," by omitting *in* sends the ear scurrying to find that it rests equally with *things* and their *deep down* qualifier. The inner dimension roves between substance and quality, and by moving shares our own inquiring life. Likewise I notice that for ego to *follow* the non-ego, to follow the Way, to follow the Way as Mountain, is also to *succeed* while climbing, and that the climb is both *on* and *into*. (Find/follow a hill and *en*-lighten it: OE *inlihtan*.) All this implies psychic progression, the paradoxical co-inherence of goal and traveler (*The Kingdom*, an old metaphor, is both *within* and *at hand*). The goal, then, does not lie wholly or even mostly outside the soul's own life, much as the coming of that goal, the *parousia*, does not lie outside the living present. (Outrage from the galleries, but then there is Merrill's keynote from St. Isaac of Syria: "Flee from sin, dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the stairs by which to ascend.") If I follow *in* onward, then the beyond comes within, and grammar leverages my metaphysical projections back in as well, with any awaited end-time back into the ever-present. Merrill's poem "Luck" ended with an opening to Rome, but the signal came from Orthodoxy's accent on transfiguration. *The freshness deep down mountains*.

Living with the *OED* has persuaded Geoffrey Hill "that sematology is a theological dimension: the use of language is inseparable from that 'terrible aboriginal calamity' in which, according to Newman, the human race is implicated" (*Style and Faith*, 2003, chapter one). *Ab-original*, from the very source, *implicated* or folded into: another deep-downer, the *symbolon* of the Fall. *Implicated*, wrapped up in, no way out, bad *luck!* Funny religion? The Fall gets the back of the hand from many who volubly go on to testify to its psychological reality; the Fall and Orthodoxy's deification—transfiguration *on* and *in* as process—together frame the dynamics for the West's most durable practice-metaphor. Hill and Merrill post themselves at the two ends of one listening device, Merrill waiting for "luck" but hearing of an opening on the Way: grammar must be symbolic, admitting as it does the unknown into its operations. In the short interlude devoted to Czeslaw Milosz in his final section, Merrill cites the one passage from his work, the coda to *From the Rising of the Sun*, which one might relate broadly to the mystery of transfiguration, namely the restoration or *apokatastasis* of all vanished things

(from Acts 3): “so believed: St. Gregory of Nyssa, / Johannes Scotus Erigena, Ruysbroeck, and William Blake.” If one modestly sets metaphysics aside and turns this “reverse movement” *in* on the soul’s powers of attention and change, then at a minimum it affirms a condensed *sense* of existing. Orthodox spirit in Merrill’s accounting, and his observations on his calling as writer, meet somewhere in the zone whose large symbol is restoration. The poets whom Merrill knows well through friendship and translation—Debeljak and Šalamun, for instance—do not show up among the writers featured in *Things of the Hidden God*: Herbert and Donne, Dostoyevsky, Eliot, Milosz, Elytis, Bishop, Brodsky, and Wagoner, the last two his vivid teachers. Perse and Hölderlin, as noted, are also absent, and the apostle of strenuously bare “reality,” Stevens, enters only briefly, glimpsed as a convert to Catholicism during his last illness. This change of literary key between the two books shows Merrill’s narrative method in the process of shifting. A revised mode of listening, with his panels of portraiture, reflection, and reportage, has him now finally reject any tendency to approximate Dostoyevsky’s brand of polyphony (Bakhtin’s term), with which “his novel balances, uneasily, the modern idea that in uncertainty lies our salvation with the ancient promise that the healing word of Christ will save us from the certainty of death.” The nearly ten-page *petit essai* on Russia and Dostoyevsky in the Purification section is one of the book’s gems of assessment, in part because it sets off Merrill’s own pungent remark about the difference between reading and being read eternally, or, later in that section, the book’s signature sentence: “Now I am a pilgrim praying for light instead of ink, mindful of the desert father’s saying about a believer who practices the virtues and yet refuses to be transformed.”

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Merrill’s *point de repère*, the Mountain peninsula, moves me to reflect on the site of his several pilgrimages—their *situation* in a representative sense, and a geography of consciousness which is no one’s exclusive property.

As witnesses to the West’s allowance of Muslim genocide inside Europe, we have cause to recall two unwitting literary heralds: E. A. Robinson after World War I and Charles Williams after World War II, in their Arthurian poems. Yes, *Arthurian*: these poems, far from antiquarian, indirectly respond to the West’s ongoing tendency to compensate its failures with resorts to a crusade mentality. Medieval Europe’s Arthurian poems graphed a double failure of nerve—the one political, the other rooted in marriage—during the West’s counterthrust against Muslim advance. The Bush regime’s ideol-



ogy, and the protection it gives to General Boykin types, may seem stumblebum apocalypics from the Fundy mind, yet they actualize a fantasy which has persistently split evil from good in the banner-hoisting mode, this time in blind incitement of Arab nations already humiliated by the overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953 and the long-standing U.S.-led backing of Israeli policy. The fantasy abides because it justifies long-running collective refusals to look into the mirror. Like good witch-doctors, Robinson and Williams pointed to the corroded silver backing in that mirror: the crusade era's preciently diagnostic allegories of failing Western nerve.

Enter Merrill after his walk through the Balkan abattoir, trekking East to Orthodoxy for ritual purification from miasma. His trek reactivates morale that countervails the monstrous variety now tripping the wires of a "Christian"-Muslim face-off. Arthurian canaries-in-the-mine-shaft are behind us now; what continues might be augured by St. John-Perse and Hölderlin from Merrill's initial travel kit, their two horizons haunted by an archaic Greek spirit, scanning forward through the Christ.

Athos derives its name from an etiological myth of foundation. The titan Athos in combat, the chief rival of Poseidon, heaves a rocky mass at Zeus and misses; the Olympian revolution in consciousness led by Zeus reorganizes order "from above," subduing the titanic fury of the primordial world set-up. From our perspective, the Olympian regime—rife with ploy and counter-plot and promoting incest and murder in a culture of honor and shame—though it has fired so much genius and civic animus since the fifteenth century, graphs a regression for consciousness just now. And if that be so, then what of Jerusalem? For even within the bowels of divine history in Judaism and Christianity another titanic development occurs. Both a primordial violence and the scandal of abused and suffering innocence—manifesting cosmically as well as from *deus sabbaoth* or the god of armies—tear at the pages of *Job* and the *Revelation* of John of Patmos. The answer that comes to Job—to the millions of Job figures alive at any historical moment—occurs first in Job's own book, and then in the Christian mystery. That answer appallingly declares, first in *Job*, that any questions put directly to the home office will never meet with a reply in kind. And yet...the divine Presence comes to no one else in that story except the crushed wreck of the just man himself—a profound and "strange honor" reserved for him and his myriad sufferers through time, as Daniel Berrigan writes of it. The second answer, coming through Jesus' destiny, restates Job's excruciating destiny *within* the divine reality itself. The "strange honor" shown to Job thereby stands compounded: in that hologram for *both* Prometheus and Job, for the Greek and Hebraic outcries against traduced justice, the punishment



reserved for criminals and rebel slaves co-inheres with the Presence. Even Nietzsche the pastor's son who abominated this "religion of slaves" pitched into this mystery as co-sufferer because of his singular psychic size—into which Jaspers and Jung peered with heat-resistant goggles before Nietzsche became the possession of interpretation theory. Jung's heretical reading of Job overlaps directly with Berrigan's reading; toward those who suffer *in extremis*, the divine response, the divine nature as we can make it out, begins to *evolve*.

In the structure of Mount Athos, then, the passage from Titanic to Zeusian violence rests beneath Orthodoxy's devotion to Christ's incarnation through Mary, while Patmos's understory of visionary influx (*Mos* or *Mousa*, the muses) rests beneath echoes of Javistic violence and outcries for justice going unanswered by a Hidden God. With the twisty synclines and anticlines of Western spirit, one peers into a psychic hologram, not only into the historicizings which urgent fantasy always fuels.

With God's initial evolution, which Isaiah later calls the *deus absconditus* or Hidden God, most of our contemporaries simply get off the train, along with Elihu and the barbershop trio of Job's counselors, and for that matter *ha-Satan* too: everybody vamoosed, not there for the Presence when it shows up, all cleared off the site. Meanwhile the fearful Fundies in every religion of the Book clutch at prophecy as condemnation and vindication, at text as knife and bludgeon, politicians of the publicly bended knee—all such too off-site, yattering downwind of the wreck on his dung-heap whom they once, for a flicker of the heart, somehow perceived, but whom they now condemn or marshal as pretext. Religion in that false frame is always the permanent possibility of regression, a catastrophic backsliding to lithic simplicity, the thrown stone of primordial Athos.

Whiffs of that factor shadowily emigrate to Merrill's Athos, when he wonders who might be in the helicopter which suddenly lifts off near the Vatopedi monastery: "A politician? A war criminal?" Indeed Slobodan Milosevič had visited Chilandri on Athos—and had been detested there, though the same monks who did so told Merrill that they would give asylum to Karadžić and Mladić. And several other monks whom he meets hate Jews, the Albanian Kosovars, and other contingents of the devil. All of the national splinters of Orthodoxy populate the Mountain—Serbian, Russian, Greek—and so the inveterate animosities of projected splitting thrive there all too humanly. This shadow, which declines to go the distance with Job, is the flip-side of devout purification. And that way lies the pitfall in puristic splittings from evil: it will return via the back door and cut off its host from both life and responsibility. Yet Merrill, eyes wide to this factor on Athos,

returned there because it offered a genuine ground for purification next to his own Protestant America, at its worst given either to the aridly respectable or to a carnival of buncombe. “What Orthodoxy offers is light,” he summarizes, as elsewhere he writes, “What God offers is transfiguration,” both with the Eastern Church’s more inward bent. An English monk at Grigoriou ties back that accent to the pressures of history, saying, “Remember that Orthodoxy was squeezed between the popes and Muslims, who wanted to destroy it. That’s why we adhered to inwardness, which was our only defense. That’s how we preserve the apostolic line.” Thus too Orthodoxy’s support for Merrill’s movement to get straight with both his Balkan walk in the sun and its deformation of his personal relations. Stillness, focusing, the “unmixed attention” that prayer becomes (Weil’s phrase), the apophatic focus on divine energies rather than a putative essence (*theos*, he points out, stems from a verb that variously means burning, running, seeing), the iconic abstraction in images establishing the hesychast’s “passion-free” plane (Merrill finds his earlier work on Georgia O’Keefe’s method of abstraction a preparation for iconology), and Merrill’s realization that the paradoxical virgin *and* mother condenses the profound symbolic leverage which the Protestant revolt threw overboard along with icons—all these disciplines *untell* the story of destruction through which he had waded.

The furnace of creative-destructive contradiction into which Javeh bids Job peer curiously parallels the purification to which Orthodoxy invites Merrill: such fire generates inner light by undoing what has been seen. A contrast obtains here between Hemingway’s post-WWI stilling of trauma in “The Big Two-Hearted River” and Merrill’s subtler *metanoia*. Dispensed with, what he calls his “education in irony;” gone too his reliance on art as the main line for shipments of light from another reality (he reproves no less than Saul Bellow in that regard). Still present as an undertone, a mild shudder, is some of the rational mind’s protest—John Ashbery as spokesman this time—that “religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing.” That reflection seems unrelated to Merrill’s own nerve-net once it has been tempered by his walk in the sun, supported as that is from afar by *Job*. When the Presence honors that righteous wretch with an epiphany—the epiphany which antedates all those which came to the major prophets, and which has as its sole cousin the epiphany to Moses—the fire he is seeing, the burning he is confronted with, the running wind from which the Presence speaks, are enigmatic verbs, Balkan or English, for the direst of purifications and the strangely greatest of blessings.

Jung and Berrigan converge in their readings of *Job*, then, for a momentous reason, and the evolution behind that reason I read, over Merrill’s

shoulder, in Athos and Patmos. Mount Athos as a futile guided missile rests first as an epochal benchmark, a war memorial for the new Olympian order, and then as the *Hagion Oros* dedicated to Mary *Theotokos*. That is, it first symbolizes archaic Greek mind's move toward more differentiated order, and thereafter it situates the paradoxical, virgin-mothering movement toward sacrificial mystery within God which still carries its harrowing answer to Job. Patmos likewise first of all symbolizes an ordering of primordial energies in the Greek mind—the shazams of inspiration—to become in turn the seat of prophecy that compensates for martyrdom, widespread tribulation, and oppression by a global imperial tyranny. Destabilizing as John's apocalypse may remain in the crude grasp of fundamentalists, it is keyed none the less to the last battle of individual *psychic* transformation, the ongoing intestinal process which blazes forth darkly in *Job*. On Athos the last battle is already history, as the mythical suppression of titanic psychology. On Patmos a foreseen last battle, augured in the present, mythically promises a future resolution, a metastatic twist as Eric Voegelin might say, which ecstatically compresses toward wind-up the intolerably endless walk by Job in the sun. A raging projection only, an ornate spasm of magma from the oppressed heart? Oscar Milosz in *Les Arcanes*, translated into English by Czeslaw Milosz, identifies Patmos as “the only Situated Place,” the place of revelatory vision, in line with the muse-etymology of inspiration. Let the elder Milosz sharpen our psychic geography of the two places, and thereby add to those vast surveys of the Mediterranean *arkhē* laid down by Hölderlin and Saint-John Perse. In both sites an archaic Greek substrate supports the phase of consciousness in which the Judaic-Christian West still wrestles with itself on a twin platform: on the island it metastatically projects onto world history the psychic transformation that is driven by the divine mystery of suffering, while on the Mountain it implants a laboratory for arduous individual purification and transformation. As a writer Merrill begins now to move toward Patmos, while as civic witness to Western breakdown he turns around, or converts. The writer already on the way of the muses becomes a man on the Way.

This dual consolidation takes up two responsibilities: the responsibility for one's own interior chaos after immersion in civic destruction, which brings home the other responsibility carried by the writer's vocation. Simone Weil described this job provocatively before World War Two: about writers she proposed that *they especially* were *directly responsible* for the demoralization of Europe on the verge—a claim that will shock the writing guild even now. Merrill attests apropos of Czeslaw Milosz that “I subscribe to the notion that writers are responsible for their words, now and



in the future” (citing with regret the anti-Christian overtone in his pages on Serbian aggression). He also affirms the fact that what he has been doing, ever since visiting the Orthodox monastery of Zographou in Bulgaria during the war, is *inscribing* Christ’s life in his own—that is, what one of the Athonite monks calls a *zografos*, one who “writes life.” But Merrill lugging his St. John-Perse with him to read late at night as he coursed through the Balkans, and Merrill comparing notes with his Balkan colleagues about their own literary refuges in the storm, already was on the verge of acknowledging Weil’s provocative assertion. Whether he would fully do so now, or not, does not alter the fact that he has begun a consolidation—of the two responsibilities, for both inner turn and writerly re-grounding, which in his own terms comprise an untelling and a livelier inscription. The Patmos-Athos archetypes of *situation* sketch a dynamic that only seems to be double, until it is compacted by integration, any climb *on* the mountain becoming what the Miwok of Northern California, neighbors of Mount Tamalpais, call climbing *into* the mountain.

If Merrill was a point-walker for my generation in the 1990s, he remains one now but in fuller profile. Without laying on him too heavily the mantle of exemplar—unfair to anyone when the emergency is so general—none the less I might say that one who has seen what he has, in the Balkans and in Western policy, is no stranger to agonized Job. Anyone who has carried literary vocation as he has, long and earnestly across several genres and national borders, is no stranger to the potential dead-ends of poetics, aesthetics, and ambition. His last supper with himself is bringing both plates to the table in a manner that bears reflection by the writing guild, and by those outside it who depend on it for actual light in our thickening miasma.

#### Notes

1. Tony Judt, “From the House of the Dead: On Modern European Memory.” *The New York Review of Books* LII.15, 6 October 2005, p.12.

