A prime source of the political anxiety inspired by the rejection of theoretical piety is the fear that, Being having been revealed as a text, the special authority enjoyed by agreements reached through discourse governed by universal rational procedures is lost. Those who in the name of reason would instrumentalize and objectify have lost their moorings; but so too have those for whom reason signifies openness, contestability, and continuous revision and who therefore insist that the call for the democratization of society can be uttered in the name of reason. In The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Jürgen Habermas argues that underlying these two senses of reason is a distinction between two aspects of language: the serious and the fictive (pp. 185–210, 294–326). In serious discourse, what is said is uttered in the understanding that the speaker may be called upon at any time to defend his or her views or proposals with rational arguments; in Habermas’s terms, a statement’s “validity claims” may be “redeemed.” In fictive discourse, these expectations are “bracketed,” so that the aesthetic, self-referential, playful aspects of signification may predominate. Against deconstruction, which questions the coherence of the opposition between the serious and the fictive (or between what he also terms the “action-coordinating” and “world-disclosive” aspects of discourse), Habermas argues that this distinc-
tion is no arbitrary theoretical construct nor a habitual, traditional linguistic practice (pp. 198–204). Rather, it isolates attitudes and idealizations participants in communicative action necessarily hold when they enter into relations with one another (p. 198).

Governed by the expectation of rational defensibility and the ideal of universal argumentative norms, serious, action-coordinating discourse makes of communication a problem-solving instrumentality capable of coordinating action because of the “binding illocutionary force” with which it connects participants to one another. Seriousness, for Habermas, is the norm; the expectation of redeemability structures and informs everyday, ordinary communication. Fiction, then, must be thought of not simply as a deviation from the ordinary, an extraordinary and specially demarcated lifting of the constraints and expectations governing normal communication, but as a deviation that is “parasitic” upon those very constraints because they are necessary for the establishment of the realities that fictional citations only mime. The poets and novelists whose fictions tempt us to redescribe familiar experience in new terms and who, at the limit, are said to invent entirely new perspectives from which to judge and value our experience, are far from being Shelleyan “unacknowledged legislators” of the sort monumentalized in Nietzsche’s “metaphysics for artists.” In fact, they must ultimately prove their worth in terms of the continuous “learning processes” and “ongoing test[s]” of ordinary serious language; for its perspective, just because it is not merely local but appeals to norms that transcend any particular context, remains decisive (pp. 195–210).

Against this Habermasian argument, deconstructionists point to the way in which the allegedly serious, literal discourses of everyday life are in fact permeated with symbolic, fictional constructs and conventional, ritualized meanings. If the communication of a meaning demands linguistic convention, then all communication is play-acting, all meaning fictional, all reason “mere” convention. Reversing the traditional (indeed, Platonic) hierarchy that Habermas defends, in the Derridean optic, the serious turns out to be a special case of the fictive, an especially well-accepted, believable, satisfying fiction: “illusions,” in Nietzsche’s words, “which we have forgotten are illusions.” Here, the extraordinary fiction is not the result of
bracketing the expectation that validity claims can be redeemed; rather, it is the shock of the new, that which not only departs from everyday consensual reality but also compels solely in virtue of the depth and originality of its vision.

The problem Habermas finds in this view strikes at the prime source of political anxiety surrounding the claims of deconstruction, namely, that such a “leveling” of the distinction between serious and fictive discourse assimilates political and moral judgment to aesthetics, “to ‘the Yes and No of the palate’, as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil” (p. 96). If discourse is fictive, it cannot be serious; if it is not serious, it cannot be political. Therefore, if the postphilosophical abandonment of rational foundations carries the day, genuinely political discourse is ruled out because in place of the seriousness of binding illocutionary force we have only the light, irresponsible play of “illusion, deception, optics, the necessity of the perspectival and of error” (p. 95). We are faced, then, with an opposition in which superficiality, irresponsibility, and playfulness are ranged against the serious business of constructing binding agreements (binding because they are true) that are taken seriously inasmuch as they are at all times open to criticism and revision on the basis of further reflection and experience. Worlds can be poetically disclosed only at the cost of restraining oneself from entering into serious political enterprises; political action occurs only under the sway of the ordinary, the literal, the everyday.

Habermas inveighs against Derrida’s blurring of this distinction in large measure because, were the poetic, world-disclosive aspect of language to become dominant, then rational, deliberative politics would be superseded by “the transsubjective will to power . . . manifested in the ebb and flow of an anonymous process of subjugation” (p. 95). That is, the critical dimension of reason—its insistence on openness, that everything be subject to universal argumentative norms—would be lost to the project of democratization. In this opposition between action-coordinating and world-disclosing discourse, the place and function of theoretical judgment is clear to Habermas: On the side of action-coordination, it mediates between the various specialized, expert serious discourses. It translates among them, and in virtue of its single-minded concern with consistency
and argumentative force, it insists on the testing and demonstration of the worth of various competing claims to attention. It ensures that the competing claims of diverse communicative practices be ultimately answerable to the paradoxically noncoercive force of argumentation rather than to the “qualities of texts in general” (p. 190).5

The question, then, becomes How might one think of the contestability of political claims, visions, proposals, or agreements without relying on the foundation of a critical idea (that everything be subject to revision based on rational argumentation) as its essential possibility condition? In this chapter, I read postwar American literature to explore the possibility that the qualities of openness, revision, contestability, and questionableness cut across Habermas’s distinction between the serious and the fictive. Such qualities can also characterize fiction, which, in the hands of such writers as William S. Burroughs and James Merrill, fails to respect the bracketing of validity claims that Habermas insists it must nor to rely on a “pious” appeal to a theoretical or critical foundation or framework for evaluation and adjudication. Nor is this a matter of asserting that the fictive, the nonserious, is really dominant in all discourse.6 It is to say, rather, that for these writers, distinguishing between the serious and the nonserious, the real and the fictive, the authoritative and the nonsensical, is problematic and uncertain. It is facing up to that uncertainty that leads them to articulate strategies of interpretation and modes of judgment adequate to the demands imposed by such indeterminacy. Burroughs and Merrill, I suggest, invent ways of offering and contesting strong political judgments which operate entirely outside the framework of the Habermasian distinction between the serious and the fictive and his image of the theorist as a stand-in or interpreter mediating various specialized discourses and subjecting all to the demands of logical consistency.

2

It is difficult to imagine two writers more unlike one another: Merrill the aesthete, struggling always to distance himself, through sheer stylistic mastery, from a linguistic adventure that becomes ever more
disturbingly “real,” and Burroughs the avowed antiaesthete who would philosophize, if he must, not with Nietzsche’s hammer but a Ruger .357 magnum. There is a remarkable thematic resemblance, however, in their work of the late 1970s and 1980s. Both create audacious, sweeping, visionary texts that formulate provocative diagnoses of a global political crisis seen from a distinctively American point of view. The late twentieth century, for Burroughs and Merrill alike, can be understood as the general corruption of the human species, to be remedied by means of a severe biologic purge. Both writers, the aesthetic commitments dividing them notwithstanding, strive to enact a dramatic departure from the ideologies of literary modernism and its cultivation of a private symbolic order to supplement the insufficiencies of a publicly unintelligible world. And the visions of Burroughs and Merrill both are as disturbing as they are aggressively nonsensical, challenging Enlightened, reasonable, scientific civilization in ways that seem alternately ridiculous (asking us to entertain the possibility of ghosts, flying saucers, and time travel) and obnoxious (attacking democracy and lamenting the worthlessness of the masses).

More important than any thematic similarities, however, is the way in which Burroughs, the public “literary outlaw,” and Merrill, the master of the strictures of poetic grammar, have foregrounded the resources of fiction—in particular, narrative devices—for the purpose of articulating a vision of cosmic order and social decline in which distinctions between the fictive and the real, the metaphorical and the literal, become irrelevant. To be sure, their late twentieth-century visions of other worlds or coming worlds arrive in the wake of a long and privileged history of poetic representations of apocalypse and rebirth, but dominant aesthetic ideologies placed the latter’s source in a foundation outside language itself, whether in God, nature, or the imagination. The absence of such a foundational appeal for Burroughs and Merrill means that their judgments about the meaning and prospects of contemporary Western civilization apparently find no ground on which to stand. Such judgments must rest, these writers tell us, on the productivity and inventiveness of language alone—language bereft of transcendental authority, idealizing assumptions, or reliable argumentative procedures. Burroughs
and Merrill are by no means equally successful if measured by this project, but their respective failures and successes have something to teach us, I believe, about the prospects and dangers of a posttheoretical political discourse.

Writers on postmodernity have noted striking similarities between the deconstruction of metaphysics and what they perceive to be kindred strategies at work in such postwar American fiction as the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and William S. Burroughs, among others. Both the theory and the fiction of the postwar period, as Charles Russell points out, eschew the modernist dream of inventing a radical alternative to the existing social order. They also share an awareness—sometimes celebratory and sometimes critical, but rarely elegiac or nostalgic—that a writer in the late twentieth century no longer has recourse to a privileged standpoint from which to judge or transcend the existing order and its dominant cultural codes. Like much postwar literary theory, political theory, and philosophy, postmodern fiction cultivates a sensibility that, though critical of the established order, has abandoned the heroic oppositional impulses of modernism that drove a Pound (or a Marx) to project countercultures of their own and to posit the subjectivity of the artist (or the theorist) as a resource adequate to the threats posed by technology, the state, and mass culture.

Postwar theory and fiction are alike in their skepticism toward modernist claims about the privileged status of the theoretical gaze or the privileged position of the writer. Yet it is also true that they often resort to critical strategies traditionally dependent on such figures in order to unmask the illusory plenitude of contemporary culture, exposing it as a locus of hidden forces and controls, whose dreary sameness of power is concealed by an apparently flexible cultural system. Burroughs's work, in particular, is explicitly dedicated to "subverting" dominant ideologies by exposing their role in strategies of control and administration in ways that align him with the unmasking strategies discussed in Chapter 2. Indeed, a reading of his work contributes to enumerating the limits of unmasking by showing how postmodern subversion, as Burroughs practices it, is itself entangled in the culture of the authorities it seeks to overturn, and in ways that seriously compromise his critical intentions. More impor-
tant for our immediate purposes, however, Burroughs's subversions depend on breaking down received distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, and his work is therefore an apt point of departure for an attempt to complicate the Habermasian distinction just outlined.

For Burroughs, the world in which we live, the public world in which our ideals, motives, loves, and hates are recognized and discussed and acted out, is a world of manipulated needs that serve mainly to keep those who satisfy them in power. Though formidable, their power is far from absolute; for they too are manipulated by need, namely, their need to control and dominate. Burroughs relies on many images to communicate this vision of modern power: the master metaphor of addiction or “the algebra of need”; the character of the “vampire,” who draws on the vitality of others to live, necessitating a constant search for new victims when the old have been exhausted; and the virus, whose artificial reproduction eventually consumes the host on which it feeds. The ultimate virus, the most pervasive and deeply rooted form of addiction to artificial pleasures that sap the vitality of those dependent on them, is language itself, whose ability to create fictions detached from reality opens up multifarious possibilities of control and seduction. Discourse, in the form of “word lines controlling thought feeling and apparent sensory impressions,” lodges itself in the human host and reproduces its scripts, argumentative routines, and programs in ways that entangle the individual subject in a world it can neither master nor effectively negotiate.8 As the host of a language virus, the individual body becomes a mere “flesh script” or “soft machine,” a grid of received discourses obsessively realized through desires and needs.

These “word lines,” devised in the “Reality Studio,” constitute a “Garden of Delights” in which images of happiness, satisfaction, and the exercise of powers substitute for the real things.9 The key to control in Burroughs's world is the ability of power to make individuals dependent on certain configurations of words, images, and pleasures to the point where they become predictable and hence manipulable automatons. Their dependence on linguistically fixed images and meanings puts individuals at the mercy of exploiters who manufacture such images to gratify their own need to manipulate and control. In such a manner, agents of domination exploit the capacity of
words—as arbitrary, conventional signs that generate meaning as an effect of internal processes rather than through standing for real experiences—to depart from reality and create fictions of satisfaction and fulfillment. The rogues’ gallery of Burroughsian characters—gangsters, conmen, pushers—have in common the theme of controlling others by mastering the art of producing vivid and convincing representations. They achieve this control in part by relying on the naïve, metaphysical urge to believe that when language appears most meaningful, it is because it has successfully established a referential relationship to the world. Thus there is a kind of Althusserian “teeth-gritting harmony” among the capacity of language to fabricate meaning and pleasure, the tendency for subjects to become dependent on this, and the need of some to exploit this dependence to experience the pleasure of domination.

Much of Burroughs’s early work is animated by a kind of Beat metaphysics that attempts to abandon language altogether in favor of direct, intuitively legitimated communication in which distortion is impossible because representation itself has been abandoned. In this sense, Burroughs is a metaphysician, sharing with the tradition the conviction that representation is dangerous and must be scrutinized with care and, if possible, transcended. “What I look for in any relationship,” Burroughs says, “is contact on the nonverbal level of intuition and feeling, that is, telepathic contact.” 10 “When communication finally becomes total and conscious,” he adds, “words will no longer be necessary.” 11 It is easy to find in Burroughs elements of the classic Western myth, analyzed by Jacques Derrida in Of Grammatology, of the fall of language from direct pictorial mimesis into symbolic representation and the possibility of distortion. As Burroughs puts it in The Job (1970), “Universal literacy with a concomitant control of word and image is now the instrument of control. An essential feature of the Western control machine is to make language as non-pictorial as possible, to separate words as far as possible from objects or observable processes.” 12

A good deal of the desperate violence of Burroughs’s early work may be attributable to this radical devaluation of language, which, if utterly stripped of its illusory claims to referentiality, would seem to be no more and no less than an arbitrary constraint (the mo-
ment of the “naked lunch,” when the system appears for exactly what it is, fueled by an unstoppable urge to dominate and control) and would cease to obscure the richer world of simultaneity beneath the word lines’ fictional linearity. This devaluation of language is to be achieved by randomizing the predominant “scripts” through such methods as the cut-up, “dicing texts with scissors and reassembling the fragments arbitrarily in order to neutralize their power and more generally to liberate man from the traumas of early verbalization.” The cut-up, however, is only the instrument of a larger goal: disrupting the conventional narrative structures responsible for the illusions of temporality, causality, stable character or identity, with the additional help of such tactics as not attributing conversation to characters and refusing to explain transitions from one place or time to another.

From this perspective, Burroughs’s eventual moves toward more conventional narration suggest a reconciliation with language. Several writers have noted Burroughs’s shift away from the sheer destruction of narrative form toward an attempt to narrativize the West’s privileged self-understanding as one fiction among others. But one should not overestimate the return to traditional narrative technique by underestimating the extent to which he relied on such techniques in the early work. Just as Burroughs does not completely embrace traditional narrative conventions even in the later work, he had not completely abandoned them in the earlier. Rather, all his work relies on an implied plot or plots that the reader may adumbrate and appeal to in order to explain the various levels of discourse and events one finds throughout the novels.

The basic plot of the early work, or rather the figure of the basic plot, is the “Nova Conspiracy,” in which alien criminals live parasitically off earthlings by addicting them to needs, above all to the need for power and meaning—language. These “Nova Criminals” are sought after by the Nova Police, who, however, cannot confront the criminals directly for fear that they would destroy the world to make their escape. Instead the police must fight them through insidious, clandestine means. The Nova Criminals rely overwhelmingly on divisive ideological manipulation through the state and industry, both of which rely on the mass media. This control is to be dis-
rupted, as we have already discussed, by exposing the image-world of apparent freedom and happiness created by the Nova Criminals’ “Reality Studio” as a nexus of control, enslavement, and dependence. Although the basic plot is never completely or coherently elaborated, Burroughs’s practice as a writer thus becomes meaningful in terms of this narrative, which is developed enough for the reader to rely on it to make sense of Burroughs’s work as a whole.

Burroughs’s work organizes, I think, two sources of tension. On the one hand, much of the force of Burroughs’s condemnations derives its power from the way in which he insists on calling individuals to account, emphasizing not general cultural tendencies but acts of brutality that stronger souls would shun. On the other hand, however, Burroughs charges Western civilization as a whole with stupidity, displaying individual inadequacies as the result of a perverse culture for which nobody is responsible—an argumentative turn that drains his initial gambit of some of its power. More seriously, Burroughs attacks those who will do anything to satisfy the needs they are addicted to; this, he suggests, is fundamentally what is responsible for the moral, social, and political chaos of modernity. At the same time, Burroughs opposes to the Reality Studio’s regime of truth, meaning, and reference the slogan “Nothing is True—Everything is Permitted.” Again, this blunts the force of his own critique: if everything is permitted, what is really wrong with the algebra of need, the society of addiction?

At times, Burroughs suggests that the algebra of need is wrong because it violates or perverts individuality: “We oppose . . . the use of such knowledge [of domination through addiction and image] to control, coerce, debase, exploit or annihilate the individuality of another human creature.” Yet this reason cannot satisfy Burroughs, for whom the concept of a definite, bounded, located, and embodied self is increasingly problematic. He notes his suspicion of his own “self” as a host of control and limitation: “I prefer not to use my own words, I don’t like my own words because my own words are prerecorded. . . . My words are prerecorded for me as yours are prerecorded for you.” This recognition then renders ambiguous the notion of a struggle against power, inasmuch as among the things individuals must resist are their “own” desires, capacities, and goals.
As Charles Russell puts it, “Burroughs . . . suggests that to struggle against social control means to battle against one’s prior identification with it—and, even more distressingly, that to actively oppose the enemy insures that one remains defined by them; for as long as one is obsessed by fighting the opposition, one is not free of it. In Burroughs’ novels, the greatest danger is thus to allow oneself to become rigidly defined by something external to oneself, for then one’s identity is restricted and vulnerable.”

Especially in his later work, however, Burroughs becomes wary even of the opposition between oneself and what is external to oneself. Burroughs often suspects that there is no preexisting, true self that will emerge once the “ ersatz bullshit” of the Reality Studio is unmasked as such; that the problem is not one of distinguishing the external from the authentic but rather of accepting the chaos of fictions that is the self and resisting the blandishments of final or definitive self-descriptions. Thus, again, the cut-up method, in which the writer’s own sensibility is frustrated by the introduction of the aleatory into the process of composition. As his work developed, Burroughs supplemented such techniques, as I have said, with a return to narrative in which the world-creating character of narrative invention is foregrounded through both the use of abrupt, unexplained transitions from one plot line to another and a focus on the persona of the writer, storyteller, historian, or journalist. Burroughs’s strategy in this regard is based on a claim about the nature of authority and its undoing that resembles, in essential respects, de Man’s in The Resistance to Theory: authority depends on the fiction of reference or meaning, and authority can be undone, therefore, by exploding such fictions, not by producing a new myth or reality—telling yet another story—but by making clear the fictitious character of reality as a narrative process and so making language useless for purposes of domination (pp. 10–11). But this is an uneasy solution at best, because it still relies on the tacit assumption that, once all our organized and mystified fictions have been unmasked as such, some other (and presumably better) principle or value might naturally make itself felt. To the extent that such metaphysical optimism is itself a fiction, Burroughs’s subversion of conventional narrative
might well fuel the drive for more authoritative—more intense, more vivid, more “real”—fictions, a dynamic whose political significance is neither good nor evil but strictly incalculable.

Burroughs’s writing, early and late, embodies central concerns of postwar American fiction: paranoia, conspiracy, apocalypse, and an unrelieved suspicion of all public representations and discourses. Like his Beat colleagues, Burroughs has cultivated an identity of a “literary outlaw,” an identity that associates authenticity with extremism, risk, adventure, and moral ambiguity. For Burroughs, this identity takes two not entirely distinct forms: involvement in the drug world, where the postwar imperatives of “conformity” and “responsibility” are chemically revalued in favor of an approach to literary invention which abandons authorial intention for postintentional synchronicity, that is, the cut-up method. As he put it in a 1966 interview, The declarative sentence “is one of the great errors of Western thought, the whole either-or proposition. . . . I feel the Aristotelian construct is one of the great shackles of Western civilization. Cut-ups are a movement towards breaking this down.” But if the problem is Western metaphysics (“the whole either-or proposition”) itself, the writer’s task is immense indeed, encompassing a transfiguration of Western perceptions of agency and identity and overturning “responsible” cause-and-effect explanatory narrative through the ecstasy of the synchronous and its logic of displacement. Such a transfiguration, as we have seen, is not only a moral or individual concern but a political one. It has to do with the character of our shared world, and demands, in addition to a form of opposition or subversion, the articulation of new criteria for judging the order bequeathed to us by the “Aristotelian” civilization Burroughs rejects. The trilogy written during the 1980s—Cities of the Red Night (1981), The Place of Dead Roads (1983), and The Western Lands (1987)—confirms this assessment by extending Burroughs’s criticism of “the whole either-or proposition” to a sweeping refiguration of the his-
tory and destiny of the West, imagined now in the persona of a writer-narrator who would escape Western civilization not by dissolving its logic but by creating for it a new account of itself.

In *Cities of the Red Night*, the narrator attempts to escape the temporalized destiny of Western history by insisting on the reality of multiple histories, stitching together eighteenth-century adventurers, twentieth-century private eyes, and warring, ultimately self-destructing city-states, existing one hundred thousand years in the past and obsessed with the technology of reincarnation. In the end, only the narrator is left, a disembodied figure of pseudoutopian hope hidden in the resources of language. In *The Place of Dead Roads*, gunslinger Kim Carsons explores the peak experiences of violence, danger, and extremism, governed by an ethical code of devotion to the preservation of individual authenticity in a world that will tolerate this value only as an essentially fugitive experience. The only decisive way out of such a world, we learn, is through cloning and mutation—the biologic transformation of the human animal into a creature capable of infinite self-transfiguration, something that may be achieved, perhaps, with the help of a deadly virus, for which the only “cure” is humanity’s evolution into something nonhuman.

This pop-Nietzschean (or Darwinian) theme is carried over into the final novel in the trilogy, where it is combined with the story of the search for the ancient Egyptian “Western Lands,” for immortality—for the chosen, pharaonic few. Much of *The Western Lands*, in fact, reads like a rehearsal of Nietzsche’s reassessment of rank and severity in the context of a Christian, equalizing culture. For Nietzsche, the “terrible consequence” of Western culture is that “everyone believes he has a right to every problem.”

The idea that one omnipotent God is interested in every human being leads to the idea that immortality—that is, escape from the modern Western conflation of logic and history—is an achievement that should be on everyone’s agenda, with the result that the highest values (in this case, timelessness) are degraded into ritual and routine. All that immortality demands now is a simple contract, properly signed by man and appropriately countersigned by God in script legible to everyone. Nietzsche has a different idea: “I teach: that there are higher and lower men, and that a single individual can under certain cir-
cumstances justify the existence of whole millennia—that is, a full, rich, great, whole human being in relation to countless fragmentary men” (sec. 997). Such as Napoleon, for example.

Like Nietzsche, Burroughs considers that monotheism represents a hatred for distinction, contingency, and the unexpected, an attempt to trade the extraordinary for security: “The OGU is a pre-recorded universe of which He is the recorder. It’s a flat, thermodynamic universe, since it has no friction by definition.” Although the literal political implications of these judgments are not edifying to contemplate, we may take the point of Nietzsche’s and Burroughs’s reassertion of rank and severity to be that the appeal of such a culture is precisely that it represents the achievement of immortality as a task demanding an immense labor for its fulfillment, a labor that cannot be derived from nor guaranteed by any deity, method, or formula for social harmony. “The road to the Western Lands is the most dangerous of all roads. . . . To know the road exists violates the human covenant” (p. 180). Seeking the Western Lands, then, is an unprecedented project each time it is undertaken and demands above all else a break with common, mainstream ideas of authority, certainty, and utility.

If the road to the Western Lands is so dangerous, why does the central figure of Burroughs’s epic, the “old writer,” seek it? The answer, of course (and here again we observe Burroughs silently reading Nietzsche) is that the present stage of Western civilization is intolerable because it has eliminated any reason to live; the nuclear holocaust we fear is simply the possibility of literalizing what is already the metaphorical truth that society and culture are already dead. “What happened here? Nothing happened. Cause of death: totally uninteresting. They could not create event. They died from the total lack of any reason to remain alive” (p. 180). Contemporary civilization copes with the pointlessness of modernity by constructing the illusory appearance of life in the form of a dominant “fixed image” or identity maintained by a “vampiric” civilizing process in which dominant figures utilize more “life” than they generate in order to preserve their identities against time and decay (pp. 157–58). Throughout, the main symbol of the civilization of the “fixed image” are the British, wedded to their identity and unable to change even when circumstances demand it. But they represent in extreme
for what is true of contemporary life generally (pp. 160–66). Indeed, for Burroughs, the ultimate fixed image—the central trope, as it were, for the master trope—is nothing other than monotheism in its essentially Christian form: the idea that all can achieve salvation by following one simple, easily understood rule.

Escape from the certain death this civilization has in store for its adherents must take the form, then, of breaking with monotheism, and to think this break, Burroughs turns to the mythology of ancient Egypt. Rather than one center of power which articulates and enforces one easily comprehended rule, there are many vectors of power—an unknown number, in fact—and many rules, none too intelligible. One thing, however, is clear: surviving the Land of the Dead and attaining immortal life in the Western Lands depends on establishing a relationship with one’s “Ka,” the fifth soul in Egyptian mythology, the “double” whose fate is linked with that of the subject and who may therefore provide guidance but no guarantees. The conflict of cosmic powers with ambiguous and overlapping authority means, then, contrary to Christian monotheism, that most are doomed but that a very few might prevail:

The Magical Universe, MU, is a universe of many gods, often in conflict. So the paradox of an all-powerful, all-knowing God who permits suffering, evil and death, does not arise.

“What happened, Osiris? We got a famine here.”

“Well, you can’t win ’em all. Hustling myself.”

“Can’t you give us immortality?”

“I can get you an extension, maybe. Take you as far as the Duad. You’ll have to make it from there on your own. Most of them don’t. Figure about one in a million. And, biologically speaking, that’s very good odds.” (P. 113)

“Biologically speaking”—the powers that Burroughs’s escape artist must negotiate are as much physical as spiritual: the biologic and cosmologic worlds are both governed by the same nonlogic of “the Long Chance, the impossible odds”:

He is the God of the Second Chance and the Last Chance, God of single combat, of the knife fighter, the swordsman, the gunfighter, God
of the explorer, the first traveler on unknown roads, the first to use an untried craft or weapon, to take a blind step in the dark, to stand alone where no man has ever stood before . . . God of Mutation and Change, God of hope in hopeless conditions, he brings a smell of the sea, of vast open places, a smell of courage and purpose . . . a smell of silence confronting the outcome. (Pp. 114–15) 26

By the same token, Burroughs expresses contempt for the attempt to artificially increase the odds, as Burroughs understands modernity’s will to organizational efficiency through technology and rationality. Thus his assessment of Hassan i Sabbah’s assassins, who, despite the fact that capture means certain death, refuse the possibility of escape: “To modern political operatives, this is romantic hogwash. You gonna throw away an agent you spent years training? Yes, because he was trained for one target, one kill. The modern operative, then, is doing something very different from the messengers of HIS [i.e., Hassan i Sabbah]. Modern agents are protecting and expanding political aggregates” (p. 192). The value Burroughs places on the absolute singularity of the event or project, and his rejection of the attempt to elude chance and contingency through causality and calculation, both echo Nietzsche’s amor fati as explicated by Gilles Deleuze:

The bad player counts on several throws of the dice, on a great number of throws. In this way he makes use of causality and probability to produce a combination that he sees as desirable. He posits this combination itself as an end to be obtained, hidden behind causality. . . . To abolish chance by holding it in the grip of causality and finality, to count on the repetition of throws rather than affirming chance, to anticipate a result instead of affirming necessity—these are all the operations of a bad player. 27

As Deleuze explains, there is a “double affirmation” at work in the throw of the dice: a first, when the dice are thrown and all possible combinations are affirmed, and a second, when a particular combination results. Man, for Deleuze’s Nietzsche, is a bad gambler because he plays only on the condition of having an infinite number of turns, thus guaranteeing that eventually the desired combination is
achieved. Man affirms chance only in the throw, insisting on selecting again and again until the result meshes with his desires and expectations. Burroughs and Nietzsche agree that the sovereign, eternal god of monotheistic religions is the image of Man in this sense: “Heavy as the pyramids, immeasurably impacted, the One God can wait.” 28

The good player — Übermensch — affirms both the throw of the dice and the result, including the unexpected result that takes us beyond what we want and away from ourselves: “That the universe has no purpose, that it has no end to hope for any more than it has causes to be known — this is the certainty necessary to play well. The dice throw fails because chance has not been affirmed enough in one throw.” 29

This, according to Deleuze, is truly tragic thought: the traditional interpretation of tragedy as failure reflects only the slavish, resentful, metaphysical perspective, whereas an appreciation of “Dionysus” reveals the essential innocence of unexpected and unmastered happenings. Like Nietzsche’s and Deleuze’s Dionysus, Burroughs’s god of chance “demands more of his followers than any other”: “Do not evoke him unless you are ready to take the impossible chances, the longest odds. Chance demands total courage and dedication. He has no time for welchers and pikers and vacillators.” 10

The late twentieth century is precisely the place of the last chance — the freak success, the unlikely victory. It is a place representable in mythological or biologic terms as a population of “remains, kept operational by borrowed power overdrawn on the Energy Bank . . . physical bodies powered by bum life checks” (p. 150, ellipses his), or as an evolutionary backwater where all potentially viable mutations are immediately swallowed up by the larger, biologically inactive population. Thus Burroughs’s NOs, “natural outlaws dedicated to breaking the so-called natural laws of the universe foisted upon us by physicists, chemists, mathematicians, [and] biologists” (p. 30). The aim of the NOs is to turn evolution toward the genesis of a creature capable of discarding earth and its temporal traps in favor of a disembodied life in space. “Only those who can leave behind everything they ever believed in can hope to escape,” and chief among these beliefs is the idea that humanity’s fate is linked to its body; instead, it will achieve immortality by abandoning the body (as a natural product of evolutionary history) and building an entirely artificial world
in space, not time (p. 116). Indeed it is the natural outlaw who discovers the greatest barrier to space: "the monumental fraud of cause and effect," which he replaces by "the more pregnant concept of synchronicity," namely, the receptivity toward relations, events, ideas, and inventions beyond the order of intentions, plans, and values (p. 30). This in fact is the old writer's Ka: whatever enables him to escape himself; and these resources are discovered, precisely, through the act of writing, which can proceed along lines other than strict temporal succession. The Burroughsian writer, then, is the political thinker par excellence, the only figure possessed of the resources enabling one both to state, in general terms, the Western predicament ("the monumental fraud of cause and effect") and to articulate a generally applicable alternative ("the more pregnant concept of synchronicity").

To this point, I have discussed Burroughs's book as if it were narrated in a temporally orthodox manner, but it is not, and as the comments above suggest, the fact that it is not is very much to the point. Images of a degraded species, biologic mutation, escape into space, and the old writer's desperate attachment to these stories in his attempt to imagine for himself a fate different than the one prepared for him by his civilization do not compose part of a master narrative or plot but are juxtaposed against one another, as the ethic of synchronicity would demand. Consequently, the status of any given image is always in question: at one moment, biologic evolution stands as a metaphor for cultural evolution; at another, discourses of cultural evolution are offered as ways of imagining a biologic transformation. At some points, emigration into space is offered literally as a possible way out of the Land of the Dead; at others it remains a figure of speech. This ambiguity is maintained with almost perfect rigor throughout, underwriting the question pertaining to the claims that might be made for Burroughs's grand vision: Is Burroughs serious? His apparently straightforward answer—the admonition "not [to] take anything too seriously [but to] remember also that frivolity is even
more fatal” (p. 163)—cannot resolve these doubts, but it does suggest that the question is badly posed. Burroughs’s speculation about the nature of our civilization’s predicament is serious and frivolous, because, he seems to believe, such speculation can only be carried out in a discourse that combines both registers. The frivolous, non-serious character of fiction, according to the traditional concept that Habermas endorses, is not so much rejected by Burroughs as taken up by him as a pose or device. It is a mask licensing his more radical, outré speculations, allowing him the poetic license needed, for example, to disregard the fraud of cause and effect. But as Burroughs repeatedly suggests, the extent to which fictions are simply frivolous or nonserious is difficult to decide; for from his perspective, it is always within the terms of various fictional discourses that we attempt to make these distinctions.

Consider, for example, Burroughs’s discussion of the Egyptian animal gods. These gods, he tells us, which take the form of combinations of various animals (including humans), have a basis in fact: “I venture to suggest that at some time and place the animal Gods actually existed, and that their existence gave rise to belief in them. At this point the monolithic One God concept set out to crush a biologic revolution that could have broken down the lines established between the species, thus precipitating unimaginable chaos, horror, joy and terror, unknown fears and ecstasies, wild vertigos of extreme experience, immeasurable gain and loss, hideous dead ends” (p. 112). On the one hand, Egyptian mythology provides an image of Burroughs’s call to transcend the limits of time and evolve into entirely different creatures, a fantasy he renders in other terms as the exploits of the NOs, who will rededicate our evolutionary heritage and retool us for life in space. On the other hand, Burroughs claims in his own voice that the gods were believed in because they were real: the metaphor of the animal gods was based on the literal fact of an approaching “biologic revolution.” At the same time, the biologic revolution serves as a metaphor for cultural transformation, especially for the work of the writer as Burroughs sees it: the attempt to write “our own Western Lands,” to invent a “land of dreams” that is not “solid” and that does not exist in time. The insistence that immortality find a literal, solid form was “the error of the mummies.
They made spirit solid. When you do this, it ceases to be spirit. We will make ourselves less solid.” This, Burroughs tells us, is what art and indeed all creative thought is directed toward (p. 165). But if Egyptian gods and biologic revolution serve at times as metaphors for literary invention (which is itself a figure for cultural transformation and renewal), writing itself is also a figure for life as preparation for the literalization of Burroughs’s fantasies of our “biologic and spiritual destiny in space” (pp. 58–59).

Or consider “the Big Picture,” Burroughs’s central conspiracy story in the novel, the tale of Joe the Dead (a character who appeared earlier in The Place of Dead Roads), the NO who leads a secret group of evolutionary biologists planning to modify themselves for life in space, abandon Earth, and destroy the remaining population. On the one hand, the idea of a group of individuals who isolate themselves from the general population as a prelude to biologic revolution thematizes Burroughs’s interpretation of the implications of the “punctual” theory of evolution, namely, the doctrine that evolutionary transformations occur rapidly through small groups of mutating organisms (p. 56). But on the other hand, as we have seen, the question of whether biologic revolution has a metaphorical or literal status in his work cannot be resolved, which casts similarly ambiguous light on the fiction of Joe the Dead. The “Big Picture involves escape from the planet by a chosen few. The jumping-off place is Wellington, New Zealand. After that, an extermination program will be activated. Needless to say, Big Picture is a highly sensitive project. Even to suspect the existence of Big Picture is unwholesome” (p. 51). Yet Burroughs is here suspecting the existence of Big Picture in public, violating his own advice, a gesture that is synecdochic for his conspiracy narratives and the genre as a whole: if the conspiracy really existed, the last thing one would do is publicize it.

Further on, Burroughs provides a reason for the need for conspiracy narrative as a public discourse: it is the terrain he knows best, and “when dealing with an adversary the strategy is to inveigle him or her into your territory” (p. 138). This might serve as the hermeneutic clue to Burroughs’s narrative strategy in the book as a whole, which involves inveigling the reader into the terrain of synchronicity: “Imagine that you are dead and see your whole life spread out
in a spatial panorama, a vast maze of rooms, streets, landscapes, not sequentially arranged but arranged in shifting associational patterns. Your attic room in St. Louis opens into a New York loft, from which you step into a Tangier street. Everyone you know is there” (p. 138). But the status of Burroughs’s synchronous universe—whether writing practice, project of cultural transformation, biologic revolution, terrorist conspiracy—remains undecidable.

Or rather, almost undecidable. It is true that Burroughs appropriates an ideological concept of literature as fiction in order to indulge in otherwise proscribed political fantasies. At the same time, he is suggesting that fiction is a concept that actually comprehends language as such; it is a medium of mutation such that writing, as both real act and fictional play, becomes the political act par excellence. But it is also the case that he is not quite as good as his word. Through various textual stratagems, Burroughs both reintroduces sources of metaphysical comfort he officially rejects and betrays ideological commitments he cannot acknowledge.

In the first place, Burroughs’s celebration of synchronicity and its abandonment of the logical certainty and rootedness afforded by the fraud of cause and effect is mitigated by his attraction to images of order, organization, and rigorous chains of command and by the dreamlike clarity such images offer. The account of the Big Picture is full of such language, the attractiveness of which is evident in Burroughs’s lovingly detailed accounts of the sharp clarity of the relationship of leader to follower as the conspiracy unfolds. It is equally evident in Burroughs’s description of the elaborate hierarchy of souls attempting to make their way over the road to the Western Lands: “Neph is letting his far-seer scouts get too far ahead. Some call them spirit guides or helpers. It is their function to reconnoiter an area so that one knows what to expect, and to alert headquarters with regard to dangers, conditions, enemies and allies to be contacted or avoided. They are bringing him instead general considerations on the area . . . valuable and interesting, but not precisely applicable in present time” (p. 156, ellipses his). The Leninist-style organization has a role to play, it seems, even after death, where tight precision and the reliable calibration of social relations are to be valued even more than before.

Furthermore, the tone of Burroughs’s writing is often openly nos-
talgic, suggesting that the dream of a world beyond the Land of the Dead is fueled by a yearning for the prewar world of the nonadministered society: “The old-time bank robbers, the burglars who bought jewelry-store insurance inventories and knew exactly what they were looking for, the pickpockets trained from early childhood—they say the best ones come from Columbia—where are they now? The Murphy Men, the hype artists, the Big Store? Gone, all gone” (p. 32). This nostalgia for a world of “self-made men” who, in virtue of having rejected the standards and rewards of respectable society, enjoyed the freedom to invent and reinvent their lives as they lived them, suggests that Burroughs’s dream of escape into space through accelerated evolution relies upon the equally nostalgic notion: the quintessentially American notion of freedom as the discovery of empty space, a place of innocence outside history where the fundamentally new and original may at last emerge. To the extent that this is the case, ideology plays a more powerful role in Burroughs’s fantasies than he otherwise cares to admit.

Finally, Burroughs’s attitude toward language and the practice of the writer betrays the view that literary invention is authorized by a plenitude existing outside language. I have already suggested that Burroughs often treats the practice of writing oneself out of Western civilization as a preparatory act for a genuine transfiguration of culture and society. To this extent he might be seen as maintaining, despite his sympathy for polytheism, the Christian doctrine of life on this earth as a preparation for the life to come. Burroughs, one senses, would really like to be out in space, mutating, and he resorts to writing as the only available supplement for this accomplishment. More fundamentally, Burroughs’s antipathy to time (to the culture of the One God, the God who has all the time in the world and before whom, therefore, everything ultimately must perish through having been already anticipated) entails a disdain toward writing itself as an irreducibly temporal medium. Leaving time entails leaving the word; but Burroughs can only articulate the need to stop articulating. Hence the air of bad conscience about Burroughs’s books: writing is still something that happens in lieu of action.

This problem is symbolized by Burroughs’s obsessive use of ellipses, which represent not simple pauses but active attempts to stop
temporalizing, ineluctably deferring speech so as to point to something beyond it—namely, the pure presence or simultaneity of space. Yet as the ellipses themselves demonstrate, the articulation of space occurs through the temporal unfolding of discourse, as evidenced also by Burroughs’s retrieval of past forms (such as Egyptian gods) to think through a current crisis. This, in turn, is a difficulty that may be traced directly to Burroughs’s central quarrel with Western civilization: the problem with the “Aristotelian construct,” fundamentally, is its inaccuracy. “Reality” just is synchronous and unpredictable, whereas the declarative sentence moving ahead determinably through time makes it appear as if one event follows another in an orderly manner. Burroughs might attempt to write in ways that undermine the Aristotelian construct, but not without declaring something, and finally, as we have seen, not without becoming inveigled into this construct’s seductive images of lucidity, order, control, and a plenitude beyond mere writing as fiction. The Western Lands ends when the old writer reaches “the end of words, the end of what can be done with words” (p. 258); one cannot write oneself out of history, after all. That Burroughs speaks of what can be done with words betrays a lingering instrumentalizing view of the task of the writer.

Burroughs’s critique of metaphysics contains metaphysical motifs, then, and gives expression to metaphysical desires. His blurring of the distinction between serious and nonserious discourse is in tension with his resort to unmasking strategies, and it is the latter that ultimately predominate. The critique of the “either-or proposition” rests on the claim that it conceals a more fundamental order: the liberating truths of space and eternity as opposed to the oppressive lies of time and causality. Space, the absence of the constraints imposed by time and causality, is the realm where everything is possible and hence permitted. But Burroughs cannot think the leap from the time of language to that of space except in forms that indict themselves as temporalized narratives. He therefore resorts to nostalgia: for the truly marginalized outlaws, for premodern civilization, and even for the future. Yet the nostalgic yearning to escape time is, as Heidegger teaches, the most metaphysical desire there is. And to avoid finally coming to terms with the limits of postmodern subversion, as prac-
ticed by contemporary literary theory, Burroughs must finally re-sort to fantasies of enemies, monsters, and other power addicts who serve as focuses of evil and whose ritual elimination might enable a new becoming to take place. In this sense, Burroughs continues the obsession with locating “responsibility for evil” which William E. Connolly has identified as a central trope of Western moralists and their critics; and he offers an ironic reversal of the “political demonology”—the creation of monsters who threaten our freedom—that Michael Rogin has located at the center of American political culture. In his conviction that the political is entirely absorbed by the undoing of authority and that, once all public power has been thoroughly delegitimated, life, in its “pregnant” synchronicity, will take care of itself, Burroughs, and the practices of postmodern subversion he masterfully exemplifies, remain decisively within the tradition.

5

Only a god can save us.

—Heidegger

THIS IS NO AGE FOR EASY REVELATION.

—The Changing Light at Sandover

The Changing Light at Sandover is commonly described as a departure from James Merrill’s previously exclusive concern with private, subjective, or aesthetic experiences in favor of larger spiritual, metaphysical, and even political subjects. As David Lehman writes in his introduction to a collection of essays on Merrill, “Without sacrificing grace and nuance, . . . [Merrill’s poetry from Divine Comedies onward] took on an unmistakably public character, a willingness to engage the world at its most problematic and least tractable. ‘Can humanity save itself from destruction?’ This . . . is the central question articulated by [Sandover].” While acknowledging the emergence of this public voice in Merrill’s writing, however, most commentators have chosen either to avoid confronting its political
content or to relegate its politics to a secondary, derivative status. Helen Vendler, for example, finds in *The Book of Ephraim* (the first of the three long poems and one coda that comprise *Sandover*), and even (though to a lesser extent) in *Mirabell’s Books of Number* (the second) primarily “the unpopular . . . [lessons] of middle age.” She sees both poems’ significance mainly in aesthetic and existential terms: a record of the changing meaning of love, companionship, and memory as one ages; of the need to totalize the fragmentary memories that crowd the mind as it contemplates death. Judith Moffett, who reads *Ephraim* as the jewel in the crown of Merrill’s poems of “progression through time from the passionate and transitory toward the domestic,” acknowledges that the later episodes of the trilogy cannot be understood only on an exclusively personal register, but she seems at a loss in the face of the blatantly antidemocratic and illiberal implications of the poem’s political vision, registering her unease and pointing out that it is shared by the poet.

Given the manifest political content of the poem, such reactions are understandable, and commentators who do take Merrill’s political imagination seriously are often quite harsh. David Bromwich sees the poem as a monumental projection of Merrill’s “aesthetic bigotry,” through whose lens human action is reduced to moves in a vast, impersonal game. Robert von Hallberg chastises him for his inability to empathize with the lower classes, arguing that Merrill’s penchant for periphrasis, or “loaded silences,” serves as a badge of class identity and superiority, “situat[ing] his writing in relation to patterns of usage which confirm social relations,” in particular, his “skeptical view of that American idée fixe, the democratic or classless society.” Merrill’s neoaristocratic sensibility, his “power to ignore,” as Hallberg puts it, is figured in high-camp style as a cultivated distance from colloquial usage and a self-appointed right to judge, to discern, and to establish standards of taste which may be intuitively grasped by one’s peers but not publicly, explicitly articulated. This tendency would seem to reach almost fanatical proportions in the cosmology of *Sandover*, in which earthly paradise is figured as a hierarchical society, underwritten by the gods themselves, made up of rare and perfected “soul densities” devoted to great accomplishments in art and culture. In such readings, either Merrill is unpolitical or his political sensibility is embarrassing.
Moreover, his revelations about reincarnation, or about severe cosmic powers dedicated to "thinning" and perfecting the human race, are domesticated as frankly metaphorical: the "fiction of reincarnation" becomes a figure for the shifting, irregular character of quotidian life; the figures of political order are the fantasies of an elitist, or marginalized, upper-class aesthete. In any case, neither their political nor their theoretical meaning is to be taken seriously; that is, they are not to impede an appreciation of the aesthetic or stylistic achievements of the poem. In these interpretations, Merrill remains, even as his work takes on undeniably political themes, America's most insistently apolitical poet, dedicated, if anything, to privatizing the public rather than the reverse (fabricating an exquisitely crafted "private" self for public consumption, as in the Romantic and high-modernist traditions). The disdain for liberal democracy expressed in *Sandovery* (and elsewhere) can thus be seen as inessential, an extension of an archetypal aesthetic anti-Americanism that begins as a disgust for the vulgarity of popular culture and ends in reaction against the democratic state that makes the dominance of such a culture possible.

In this view, American liberal democracy and popular culture are not so much good or bad as, ideally, irrelevant, and spiritual survival in such a society depends on acquiring the power to ignore them. In Merrill's poetry, as Charles Berger puts it, "One gets the sense . . . that America itself is peripheral. It is all too easy to forget that the events of *Mirabell* transpire during the Bicentennial summer of 1976." For Berger, *Mirabell* is nonetheless aptly characterized as "conservative" in that it embodies a "conserving act of retrieval"—the retrieval and conservation, that is, of spiritual experiences that cannot be accommodated within a modern, essentially materialistic ontological framework. Such conservation, of course, must not be confused with political conservatism. Rather, Merrill's "retrieval" is best understood as a Heideggerian *violent* (*gewaltsam*) appropriation of discursive materials, a "saving" that inevitably transforms, often beyond recognition, what it preserves. It is also for this reason, perhaps, and not only because of his aesthetic mistrust of politics or American popular culture, that Merrill appears to Berger as "the least explicitly 'American' of our major contemporary poets." Indeed, the personalities with whom Merrill converses (with the help of his col-
laborator at the Ouija board, David Jackson), despite his (and their own) oft-expressed elitism, have no such aversions:

WE MY BOY DRAW FROM 2
SORTS OF READER: ONE ON HIS KNEES TO ART
THE OTHER FACEDOWN OVER A COMIC BOOK.
OUR STYLISH HIJINKS WON'T AMUSE THE LATTER
& THE FORMER WILL DISCOUNT OUR URGENT MATTER

(Transcripts from sessions at the Ouija board appear in the poem in uppercase letters; Merrill's commentary and narration appear in lowercase.)

The search for a text drawing upon these “2 SORTS OF READER” might be thought of as the exemplary American cultural trope: as Stanley Cavell argues, what defines American culture is not a shared canon or a common code but a “lack of assured commonality.” Given this “ability to move between high and low, caring about each also from the vantage of the other,” Merrill’s unwillingness to indulge in explicitly “American” poetry may only reflect a typically American lack of assurance about how to do so, a reluctance to acknowledge that any cultural emblem can embody an essence or totality of American culture.40 It is odd that so many of Merrill’s American readers have been willing to make good the spirits’ prediction regarding how the poem will be received, keeping the “URGENT MATTER” at arm’s length by assigning to it a primarily metaphorical or psychological status.

Merrill, of course, has often enough confirmed his distance from public life. If we look closely at those instances in which he intimates his distaste for it, however, we find that his suspicion of politics cannot be subsumed under such polar oppositions as the worldly and the poetic, the sublime and the mundane. Consider, for example, “18 West 11th Street,” a gloss on a current event that Merrill, in a departure from principle, graces with an explanatory note.41 The poem, he tell us, concerns “a house in Manhattan, our home until I was five, carelessly exploded by the ‘Weathermen’—young, bomb-making activists—in 1970” (p. 253). For Merrill, the house had en-
joyed iconic status, as a monument to his attempt to piece together in poetry the fragments of his “broken home”; after the assault by antiwar activists, it is irretrievably caught up in public discourses and images. The act of “saving” or “conserving,” always problematic for Merrill, becomes problematic in a newly disturbing way.

The destruction of his childhood home crudely literalizes and, as it were, publicly disseminates Merrill’s carefully constructed metaphor; his “broken home” is no longer his private property. An initial reading of the poem suggests a stark contrast between the intrusions of a vulgar outside world and the poet’s attempt to redeem the sources of his private pain. Yet Merrill does much more than simply register this sense of violation; he suggests that the line between the public and private, as between the literal and figural, is permeable and unreliable:

A mastermind
Kept track above the mantel. The cold caught,
One birthday in its shallows, racked
The weak frame, glazed with sleet
Overstuffed aunt and walnut uncle. Book
You could not read. Some utterly

Longed-for present meeting other eyes’
Blue arsenal of homemade elegies,
Duds every one. The deed

Diffused. Your breakfast Mirror put
Late to bed, a fever
Flash through the veins of linotype:

NIX ON PEACE BID PROPHET STONED
FIVE FEARED DEAD IN BOMBED DWELLING
—Bulletin-pocked columns, molten font

“18 West 11th Street” turns on a series of oppositions contrasting the uncanniness of personal experience and the difficulties confronting the individual who attempts to craft a language to illuminate it, with the jagged prose in which the activists’ blunderings are por-
trayed, “word by numbskull word,” in the newspapers. It goes on to offer a series of images of shock, disruption, and dislocation at the way in which this family home, the encoding of which had become Merrill’s personal project, has been thrown into another history, a greater disorder:

The night she left (“One day you’ll understand”)  
You stood under the fruitless tree. The streetlight  
Cast false green fires about, a tragic  

Carpet of shadows of blossoms, shadows of leaves.  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 
The ruin. The young linden opposite  
Shocked leafless. Item: the March dawn.  

Shards of a blackened witness still in place.  
The charred ice-sculpture garden  
Beams fell upon. The cold blue searching beams.  

Merrill speaks of the disorder of the attempt to restore order by extinguishing the fire: “black / Fumes massing once more . . . Sea serpent / Hoses recoil, the siren drowns in choking / Wind,” the “Drunken backdrop of debris, airquake, / Flame in bloom.” All this is enough to call into question the viability of Merrill’s attempt of “forty-odd years” to deal with the “Original vacancy” of his broken home. But a sense of futility and anger yields to a certain kinship with the perpetrators. “Dear premises,” he writes, blurring his efforts with theirs, “Vainly exploded, vainly dwelt upon.” If the bomb makers were living according to an ideological fiction, punishing the world for failing to conform to their conviction of what it ought to have been, so, too, Merrill’s poetic struggle, his attempt to undermine the premises that made possible his mourning for an illusory plenitude of the unbroken home, depended on the fiction of a carefully guarded private self protected from outside, especially public, influences. Merrill’s ability to read the Weather Underground’s appropriation of his poetic materials confirms the slipperiness of public and private meanings.

In this sense, “18 West 11th Street” is something of a preamble to
Sandover: it allegorizes the moment at which, and the way in which, the poet addresses the political public sphere, showing that even poetic mastery cannot preserve the meanings Merrill painstakingly articulates; and it suggests that both private and public are threatened by the lack of a language capable of negotiating the relationship between them, by the “Bulletin-pocked columns” and “molten font” that determine the limits of what can be publicly expressed, transmitted, and preserved. But whereas some critics could interpret “18 West 11th Street” in the conventionally metaphysical terms of a timeless human condition, a hopeless longing for the return of that which never was, the lessons learned in Sandover, despite their occult source, refer not to eternal truths but to the particular historical moment we face in the late twentieth century. Where earlier mediums used the Ouija board to escape their time-bound world for one of enduring (if evanescent) presence, Merrill’s adventure moves in the opposite direction: enriching his cultivation of personal authenticity with a vivid historical appreciation of the distinctiveness of our moment, its crises and opportunities.

If Merrill’s work cannot be dismissed as simply Hermetic and elitist, then, the suggestion that he dismisses the political is equally unhelpful. Instead, his work calls both popular culture generally, and the political public sphere more specifically, into question and, I suggest, subjects them to a penetrating critique that contributes to the most central political discussions of modernity. Rather than domesticating his politics by dismissing it as metaphorical, or being embarrassed by it because it questions certain premises of liberal democracy, we should place Merrill’s political theory in relation to the problematic it embraces. That problematic, I suggest, is the crisis in liberal democracy owing to the latter’s complicity with a nihilistic technological imperative, as diagnosed by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Arendt. Sandover’s contribution to this problematic is to invent and enact terms and discursive strategies to detach strong political, moral, ethical, and aesthetic judgments from the equally nihilistic imperative of truth as correctness, representation, fidelity to a natural order, and the search for foundations generally and thus to bring to the foreground the question of the narrative practice of political theory from a postphilosophical perspective.42
Communication with the dead—that has to be learned.

—Hannah Arendt

To put writing in the service of escape from dominant codes of temporality and causality, of natural laws now seen as the ultimate constraint on action and imagination, is a powerful theme of Cold War American fiction, as we saw in the discussion of Burroughs. Yet no amount of invention or reinterpretation of narrative convention can alter the fact that writing is a temporally determined activity, and such reinterpretation will necessarily be marked by what it intends to erase, namely—in Burroughs’s case—the temporality, the irreducible materiality, of writing itself. Burroughs’s resentment against time fuels his nostalgia for better, more interesting times; and this nostalgia fuels his desire for a violent purge of the “Land of the Dead,” as he characterizes contemporary Western civilization. Merrill’s not entirely unrelated attempt to link the act of writing to the discovery of new images of order and new forms of judgment avoids this danger by beginning with a commitment to no specific project or ideology but with sheer écriture, defined, however, in the most common, elementary, and material terms:

Silence. Then a grave, deliberate Glissando of the cup to rainbow’s end: 


DJ. What’s all this?
JM. Looks like the alphabet.
Gabr. THE NEW MATERIALS, YOUNG POET, FOR A NEW FAITH:
ITS ARCHITECTURE, THE FLAT WHITE PRINTED PAGE TO WHICH WILL COME WISER WORSHIPPERS IN TIME

(In Sandover, “DJ” refers to David Jackson and “JM” to James Merrill.) In this passage from the third part of Sandover, Scripts for the Pageant, the Angel Gabriel, having presided over Gautama Buddha and Jesus as they tell of the exhaustion of religion and its failure to check the danger humankind poses not only to itself but to the entire
cosmos, suggests what the “powers” with whom JM and DJ converse have in mind as the next strategy for containing the destructive impulses that human nature seems to conduct. Gabriel is one of many personalities contacted through the Ouija board, which consists of nothing more than a smooth surface displaying the elements of writing: the letters of the alphabet, the ten numbers, and a “Yes” and “No.” The board is operated by placing one’s fingers on an inverted cup, whose movements are then followed and indicated letters transcribed.

This game, which Merrill and Jackson began to play during the 1950s, enacts in the most literal sense the meditation on textuality begun by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s: the return, from the realm of pure philosophical “ideas” or literary “imagination,” to the materiality and productivity of writing, its motions, currents, and elements. In defining what might count as a form of writing that succeeded in remaining at a distance from (though admittedly parasitic upon) the binary oppositions of metaphysical thought (among which alphabetic writing itself, in opposition to both iconic writing and speech, is included), Derrida insists on the literally marginal status of such a writing. A criticism of metaphysics must take the form of a “fourth text,” distinguishable from introductions, prefaces, or conclusions that serve to anticipate or recapitulate “the Book” that is never completed; it must, that is, keep to the form of marginal comments on all such texts. Although the fourth text would not be “beyond” the other three in the sense of grounding itself in some independent source of authority or meaning, it would undermine them by, in Derrida’s words, “fictionalizing” them, or more fully, it would “imprint upon” (imprimer) these texts “a movement of fiction.” Annotating the book, then, is a way of laying hands on the oppositions of metaphysics, of getting one’s fingers on them, just as JM and DJ finger the constituents of writing through the Ouija board and await the results of the cup’s movements.

This fingering, handling, and motion is, we might say, the essence of the fictional itself, even etymologically, as the fashioning, forming, or molding of given raw materials. Merrill and Jackson fictionalize the alphabet and follow the lessons thus revealed. Gabriel indicates an essential lesson with his reference to the alphabet as the next
locus of worship and devotion: Such “marginal” Derridean practices are the surest route to the essence of Being itself. The “sources” of power and value are the inventive capacities of writing divorced from any notion of an extralinguistic reference or resource—including, above all, the sovereign imagination of the poet and the sovereign reason of the scientist.

The instrument of divine revelation, the Ouija board, is democratic, even American, in the extreme; approaching the Other World requires no rigorous training beyond literacy, and little spiritual discipline: JM and DJ worry when their informants ask them to stop drinking and smoking for a time. Although the medium seems democratic, however, the order this work of fiction reveals to them is emphatically not: the Other World is unambiguously hierarchical. The immediate significance of the vision of a hierarchical order linking This World with the Other is not, however, political, but existential, as the self is revealed to be not autonomous or private, but relational. The first glimpse of this relational self takes the form of the revelation, given by Ephraim, a Greek slave of the first century c.e., that any given, current, subjective identity is but one term in a complex system of events and identities constituting the universe or Being as a whole:

on Earth
We're each the representative of a patron
—Are there that many patrons? yes o yes
These secular guardian angels fume and fuss
For what must seem eternity over us.

(P. 9)

Far from private egos working out the terms of their existence according to their individual inclinations, our subjectivities are established on the basis of a “powerful memory or affinity” with others, including the dead (p. 24). As the poem unfolds and more voices of the dead are heard, it transpires that Plato, Wallace Stevens, and Merrill, as well as Rimbaud and T. S. Eliot, for example, are linked in a powerful series of representation, lineage, and patronage. The fates of the patrons are linked to those of the representatives: the former move up the “nine stages” of heaven to the
extent that their representatives are able to gain a foothold on the lowest stage—a scheme that foreshadows more dramatic accounts of natural-supernatural connections later in the poem. As a patron advances, he achieves “a degree of peace from representation,” which Merrill characterizes as “a motto for . . . Autocracy,” anticipating the chilling vision of order that is to come (p. 10).

The political import of Merrill’s understanding of how the self is constituted through a relational matrix of other voices, subjects, and lives, and his figuring of this as reincarnation or immortality, becomes clearer if we situate Sandover in terms of Hannah Arendt’s discussion of how the ancient Greek distinction between immortal gods and mortal humans mirrored a distinction among human beings themselves. For the ancients, on Arendt’s reading, the closest that humankind could come to immortality was by leaving a trace that would be remembered and discussed. Only the best would want or achieve this kind of immortality, the rest being content with whatever fleeting pleasures nature offers them, appearing and disappearing without a trace and without remembrance. Distinguishing between the eternal (that which persists unchanged, timeless, such as a god or a natural law that governs the universe) and the immortal (that which lives on and which therefore has a history that is to some extent open), Arendt offers the act of writing as the most accessible symbol of this desire for human immortality: the writer, by attempting to leave traces of his or her thought and self, signals a commitment to the immortal as opposed to the eternal. For Arendt, “immortality” is purchased at the price of contingency, openness, and unpredictability; for the fate of one’s written traces—how they will be received, judged, interpreted, and used—is never fully under one’s intentional control. Or, to put it still another way, we might say that the only immortal self is a public self necessarily exposed to the hazards and unpredictability of the public sphere—for traces can “live on” only to the extent that they are available to be appropriated. In a sense, then, the public sphere is coextensive with that of Derridean écriture. As Arendt puts it, “If . . . we define the political in the sense of the polis, its end or raison d’etre would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. This is the realm where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible
in words that can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which can be talked about, remembered, and turned into stories. . . . Whatever occurs in this space is political by definition.”

As this passage suggests, Arendt insists on the theatrical or performative quality of the discursive events that take place in the public sphere, the essential noninstrumentality of political action. In order for virtuosity to appear and persist, it must become tangible and public, and all that is tangible and public remains open to the contingencies of further action, interpretation, and appropriation. For Arendt, then, the only durable identity human beings can possess is dependent on the preservation and transmission of words and deeds. The irony is that this identity, because public, is never identical with our “private” self, is not under our personal control, and cannot be reduced to an individual project, because the significance of what is said and done is determined by others as well as ourselves, and by contexts and circumstances we are wholly unable to anticipate. This necessary openness to the contingency of the public world is a constant theme of Sandover; which, as it were, virtually writes the political (in Arendt’s sense) into the nature of things. In Sandover it takes the form of the insistence that the Other World is not one of eternal, unchanging laws guided by an accessible, intelligible, centered god but rather an immortal world of contrasting and conflicting forces whose history is open and the outcome of whose struggles remains always undecided. The immortality revealed in Sandover, then, is precisely not the survival after bodily death of an individuated ego but the deconstruction of the ego and its dispersal among the mix of voices, deeds, and memories from which a public self is generated.

To be sure, Ephraim’s earliest revelations suggest an eternal sphere reached by those patrons who achieve Stage Nine in the cosmic hierarchy, at which point their senses have returned and they no longer must watch over their earthly representatives, but his account is subsequently undermined by more authoritative voices in Mirabel and Scripts, where we learn that the hierarchy described in Ephraim is only a very small component of a much more complex state of affairs. Something of this complexity begins to come through in Mirabel, when JM and DJ are suddenly confronted with grave and urgent voices, the “dark angels” or fallen, negative powers (not human
souls and hence not part of Ephraim’s system of representation and patronage). From a civilization “B4 MANKIND,” whose existence had been hinted at in Ephraim but who were not heard from there directly, they are now feverishly at work attempting to “clone” a new human nature and thereby prevent the impending collapse of civilization. This task they attempt with the help of powers and practices far beyond what the beings in Ephraim’s “BUREAUCRACY OF SOULS” are aware of.

These dark angels insist that JM use his poetic skills to communicate a message of the utmost importance:

UNHEEDFUL ONE 3 OF YOUR YEARES MORE WE WANT WE MUST HAVE POEMS OF SCIENCE THE WORK FINISHT IS BUT A PROLOGUE ABSOLUTES ARE NOW NEEDED YOU MUST MAKE GOD OF SCIENCE TELL OF POWER MANS IGNORANCE FEARES THE POWER WE ARE THAT FEAR STOPS PARADISE

(P. 113)

The urgency conveyed by the voices is explained by the fact that humanity’s problems are no longer its own; the development of modern Western civilization threatens the entire cosmos. Again, this much had already transpired in Ephraim:

NO SOULS CAME FROM HIROSHIMA U KNOW EARTH WORE A STRANGE NEW ZONE OF ENERGY Caused by? SMASHED ATOMS OF THE DEAD MY DEARS

(P. 55)

Humanity’s increasing command over atomic power threatens not only the planet’s current inhabitants, then, but the entire cosmic order, which relies on an influx of new souls in order to fuel the mechanism of promotion through the nine stages of heaven:

Wait—he couldn’t be pretending yes That when the flood ebbed, or the fire burned low, Heaven, the world no longer at its feet, Itself would up and vanish? even so

(P. 56)
The gravity of this threat becomes evident when we reflect that "Heaven" has been rendered in *Sandover* not as an eternal sphere of enduring, self-identical subjects but as the continually evolving, continually reappropriated and reappropriating voices, articulations, and energies of *all* who have lived and left traces of their experiences and actions. What is threatened with destruction is not so much heaven, as conventionally understood, but the world as human action. The threat at issue here is not only that of nuclear holocaust but the whole array of processes, forms of life, and assumptions associated with modernity, including the technological drive to master nature, mass "democracy," overpopulation and the depletion of resources, and pollution. Much of the second and third parts of *Sandover* are in fact taken up with conflicting and complementary versions and elaborations of the origins and meaning of Western modernity.

The picture that emerges from *Mirabell* is one of successive attempts, by "God Biology" (who is also, we learn, "history" and perhaps the "Earth itself"), to construct a viable civilization. Mirabell himself is (among other things) the trace of one such failed attempt, in which artificially evolved, intelligent beings outgrew their masters (whom they enslaved) and created a civilization in the sky which then perished owing to its members' distraction and carelessness—and, it is hinted, their access to nuclear energy. God Biology's next attempt was humanity, which, however, was problematic owing to the very qualities—curiosity, a zeal to survive, resistance to the given world and an insistence upon reinventing it anew—that make humans fascinating. God Biology does not create humanity ex nihilo but fictionally, through the modification and perfection of elements already present. The "Basic soul" fabricated in the "Research Lab" by the dark angels, and introduced into an ape child, causes the species to mutate rapidly:

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A SERVICEABLE SOUL. IT GUARDED MAN & ESTABLISHED HIM AS A SPECIES APART PROUD UNABLE TO REVERT
.......
THEY SUBJECTED THEIR FRIGHTEND
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FOREBEARS & CHANGED WITH EACH GENERATION, LEAVING BEHIND THE SOULLESS HORDES.

(P. 236)

Originally nomadic and sparse, each individual human could be spared one high-quality soul, a gift from God Biology to ensure survival under difficult conditions. But when the human species abandoned nomadism and began to create cities, the resulting population explosion meant that there were fewer and fewer souls to go around, leading to a degradation of the species as a whole. God Biology attempted various expedients, such as religion, the state, and technology, to control, temper, or placate humanity’s drive to mastery and independence. The emergence of rulers, for example, was God Biology’s response to urbanization and the subsequent degradation of subjectivity:

PRIOR TO
AKHNATON HAD BEEN ONLY CHANCE FRESHNESS & WIT WE DEALT IN STRONG SOUL INTENSITIES BUT AS THESE GREW URBANIZED & BASIC SURVIVAL INTELLIGENCE BEGAN TURNING INTO ACQUISITIONAL CHANNELS, TOOLS INTO WEAPONS, A NEED AROSE FOR CLONING THE RULERS. WE REINFORCED AS WITH THUNDER & LIGHTNING THE PROCESS WHEREBY A MERE MAN BECAME GOD SO AROSE ASSYRIA AND EGYPT

(P. 179)

After the failure of religion and politics, humanity was given mastery over the machine to remedy the effects of overpopulation: “MAN . . . GETS CLEVERER WITH HIS TOOLS, / CONTRIVING NEARLY PERFECT SUBSTITUTES FOR GOD’S NATURAL / POWERS” (p. 464). But “NEW DISCOVERIES CREATE NEW PROBLEMS” (p. 182):

THRU TYPES
LIKE DICKENS & ZOLA THE DREAD MACHINE BECAME MAN’S FRIEND.
TODAY HOWEVER, FACED WITH NUCLEAR DISASTER, HOW IS MAN NOT TO DESPAIR? YR 6 YEARS AGO CAME WEEPING TO US ‘THEY IN ANGUISH’

(P. 183)
All these attempts—religion, the state, technology—have backfired, and the population continues to increase to the point where animal soul “densities” are currently being used for most humans:

DAILY NEED 5

MILLION SOULS (DENSITY 1:20,000) & HAVE NOT
HALF THAT NUMBER QUALITY FAILS EVEN WITH PLAGUE & WAR
TO DEFUSE POP EXPLO, EVEN WITH THOSE SUICIDES WE
MORE AND MORE APPLAUD (O YES THEY ARE A GREAT BOON TO US
WHEN OF RETURNING LAB SOULS WHOSE INTENSEST WORK IS DONE)
WE HAVE IN THE PAST HALF CENTURY HAD TO RESORT TO
SOULS OF DOMESTIC ANIMALS MOST RECENTLY THE RAT.
BY 2050 THESE TOO WILL BE EXHAUSTED & THEN?
WILDER STRAINS MOUNTAIN CATS & FOREST MONKEYS

(Pp. 145-46)

The resulting vision, of course, is that of a strictly divided world in which most humans rise very little above an animal level, while a few are cloned with the better densities (a select group that includes the “FIVE IMMORTALS,” Akhnaton, Homer, Montezuma, Nefertiti, and Plato, whose souls recycle endlessly, as well as others whose soul densities are doled out bit by bit, and still others whose souls have been perfected at Stage Nine). Those few are responsible for the “v work” that makes civilization possible by creating culture worth preserving. “THE MASSES WE NEED / NEVER CONSIDER”; for “THEY REMAIN IN AN ANIMAL STATE” (p. 188). The role of modern politics is brutally simple: to thin humanity’s ranks through war and famine and thus prepare the way for a new order of more resilient souls:

MILK TO CREAM TO BUTTER WE ONLY WISH TO PURIFY
CERTAIN RANCID ELEMENTS FROM THIS ELITE BUTTER WORLD.
THE HITLERS THE PERONS & FRANCOS THE STALINS & THE
LITTLE BROTHER-LIKE AUTHORITIES ARE NEEDED EVEN
ALAS INEVITABLE

(P. 188)

The distinction between the elite soul densities who perform “V Work” and the animal souls who merely live and die without a trace is
also rendered as the distinction between cultural and biologic evolution, or between individuals concerned only with reproduction and domesticity as opposed to those whose lives center around cultural achievement. Although this seems stark (many readers of Sandover have been frankly offended by it), the distinction plays in Merrill’s poem essentially the same role as the one Arendt assigns to her distinction between action and labor, namely, action (political action) that enables the construction of a durable (if thereby contingent) identity, and action (social action) that has no end beyond that of sheer reproduction. For Mirabell, the massed animal souls are little more evolved than our simian ancestors:

WHEN BY CANDLELIGHT YOU MEET & TALK DO U
EVER THINK OF THE TWO BASIC APECHILDREN WHO IN PRE
CARNIVOROUS PRE IN FACT FIRE DAYS MET FOR ONLY
ONE REASON WHICH THEN, SAD TO SAY, OFTEN RAN DOWN A LEG?

JM and DJ speculate that their receptivity to the voices stems from the childlessness of their homosexual marriage: “Are we more usable than Yeats or Hugo, / Doters on women, who then went ahead / To doctor everything their voices said?” (p. 154). Their imposed alienation from the sphere of domestic reproduction prevents them from convincing themselves that biologic traces will suffice, placing them squarely in the field of action and therefore making them fully aware of the necessity of the preservation of the public sphere: “THE
CHILDLESSNESS WE SHARE . . . TURNS US / OUTWARD TO THE LESSONS
& THE MYSTERIES,” as it did “AKHN & NEF,” who “AFTER PRODUCING
5 STILLBORN MONSTERS / . . . SAW THEIR LOVE DOOMED TO GIVE BIRTH
TO IDEAS ALONE” (pp. 216, 225). Mirabell confirms this rigid distinction between the production of bodies and the work of culture:

LOVE OF ONE MAN FOR ANOTHER OR LOVE BETWEEN WOMEN
IS A NEW DEVELOPMENT OF THE PAST 4000 YEARS
ENCOURAGING SUCH MIND VALUES AS PRODUCE THE BLOSSOMS
OF POETRY & MUSIC, THOSE 2 PRINCIPAL LIGHTS OF
GOD BIOLOGY. LESSER ARTS NEEDED NO EXEGETES:
ARCHITECTURE  SCULPTURE  THE MOSAICS & PAINTINGS THAT
Actions observed and discussed, then, traces left in public—and at the limit, traces invented and preserved only through the necessarily public, intersubjective medium of language, as opposed even to the more “material” enterprises of painting and sculpture—and not sheer reproduction, are what matter:

SO WHAT IS MOST REWARDING OF MAN’S WORK? HIS CULTURE & THIS? HIS ENTIRE LIFE—FABRIC WOVEN OF LANGUAGE.

THINK AGAIN OF THAT LEAP FROM THE HALTING PATH TO WATER OVER FALLEN ROPY VINES TO THE GREAT JETFLIGHTS ABOVE YR LANDSCAPED MINDS

Although provocative, this elitism enables Merrill to avoid confusions that might otherwise be engendered by Sandover’s deep politicization of the cosmos, and again, a comparison with Arendt is illuminating. Arendt could distinguish between thinking, which is private, and writing, which is irreducibly public because it involves a commitment to leaving a trace, a distinction that authorizes a rigorous separation of the public and private spheres. Merrill’s voices, however, insist that thinking is itself possible only owing to the accessibility of traces—an insight that moves him away from Arendt and toward Derrida but also threatens to collapse Merrill’s kinds of judgments and distinctions into a generalized écriture that exceeds or escapes all such devices. What is at stake in Sandover is not a metaphysical distinction between thinking and writing but a practical distinction between the cultivation of identities that can be preserved,
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transmitted, developed, and transfigured (the realm of the immortal, or heaven) and the reproduction of fixed identities that cannot be recovered after their deaths.

7

The elitism of Sandover's voices bears comparison with Nietzsche's reassertion of rank and severity in the context of a critique of democracy. Democracy, for Nietzsche, is the modern political expression of the "slave morality" diagnosed and criticized in On the Genealogy of Morals: an insistence on equality grounded in the idea of the essential evil and depravity of power, an evaluation that, carried to extremes, results ultimately in the disparagement of life itself in favor of an other-worldly realm of purity. Of the many consequences Nietzsche draws from this interpretation of the demand for equality, one is especially relevant for an understanding of the political theory of Sandover: slave morality is nihilistic because it affirms that which cannot be, namely, the fiction of an eternal world of timeless and enduring truths; and it engenders a subjectivity addicted to such fictions, unable to act without them. Liberal democracy, in this sense, is not the empowerment of the people but the generalization of powerlessness; or rather, democracy is the ideology that renders meaningful, and hence tolerable, a society of organized powerlessness. Those who suffer from powerlessness in this sense—that is, from the inability to posit values, an inability to fabricate narratives that would give sense, direction, and coherency to their lives—are therefore exploitable by figures who offer interpretations that render such a condition meaningful. This, according to Nietzsche, is the function of the "ascetic ideal," according to which powerlessness is a privilege: "The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse . . . and the ascetic ideal offered man meaning! . . . In it, suffering was interpreted, the tremendous void seemed to have been filled" (bk. 3, sec. 28). The meaning, of course, is slave morality: that the weak who suffer from powerlessness and an inability to do anything in the world, the "ordinary people," are in fact privileged because they, having avoided the corruptions of worldly power, will inherit
the kingdom of heaven; their suffering in this world is expiation for earlier sins and pushes them ever closer to heaven. Platonic dialectic, Christian virtue, scientific objectivity, and democratic equality are so many versions of the ascetic idea that salvation depends on the renunciation of power. Similarly, Mirabell criticizes the public discourses of modern democracy for the way in which they institutionalize powerlessness and mediocrity by fabricating for them a seductive and satisfying meaning:

**POLITICIANS HAVE LED MAN DOWN A ROAD WHERE HE BELIEVES ALL IS FOR ALL THIS IS THE FOOL’S PARADISE ALL WILL BE FOR ALL ONLY WHEN ALL IS UNDERSTOOD**

(P. 247)

Democratic ideology allows humanity to imagine that its most banal pursuits somehow fulfill a grand design with profound significance: "**IMAGINING ONLY THAT THE GAP MUST BE FILLED, HE Responds TO NATURE’S . . . SIGNAL: REPRODUCE!**" (p. 248).

For Nietzsche, “Europe’s democratic movement” yields a nihilistic culture, a pastiche of forms, masks, costumes, and identities that do not cohere into a meaningful identity or cultural project: “**Modernity** . . . the abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever . . . the impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply.” The clashing “impressions” that Nietzsche speaks of here derive from the immense variety of cultural systems that the nineteenth century’s obsession with exotic cultures (and with Europe’s exotic origins) makes available to the modern historical subject, for whom the present is therefore relative and derivative. In the face of a Christian, equalizing culture that parades “empowerment” to disguise the institutionalization of mediocrity, Nietzsche, with Merrill’s informants, “teach[es] that there are higher and lower men,” or, in the dark angels’ words, that “**ABSOLUTES ARE NOW NEEDED.**” But such teachings must be seen in the context of Nietzsche’s “perspectivism,” or the view that all such judgments are embedded in particular forms of life or practices and that the Western attempt to construct a metalanguage with which to judge Being as such has disastrous consequences. The aristocratic stress on rank
and distinction, accordingly, is not "truer" than Christian equality but rather, more useful in addressing certain limitations of the latter.

More fundamental is the strategy of the perspectivist as opposed to the thinker of ascetic ideals, the theorist: whereas the latter is skilled in making rapid inferences, correct deductions, and rigorous distinctions, the perspectivist is adept at coming to terms with the nuances of competing outlooks and sensibilities, at shifting from one perspective to another, and at fabricating new perspectives on the basis of the cultural materials available to the modern subject. In this way, the perspectivist combats the lure of a nihilism that would will the void to cope with modernity's chaos and confusion. Merrill's informants agree: the "EVIL" that is growing in modernity is "THE VOID CALL IT IN MAN A WILL TO NOTHINGNESS" (p. 120). They also affirm a perspectivist rather than a Platonic approach to the "V work" that "holds back" these negative forces. Their maxim "ALL WILL BE USED... NOTHING IS EVER EVER LOST" (pp. 116–17) is confirmed by the powers' and shades' tales of tempering the human drive for mastery with qualities of the plant and mineral worlds and by the revelations as a whole, which draw upon and employ all cultural sources irrespective of their origins: Near and Far Eastern mythology, aristocratic politics, Western science (and science fiction), twentieth-century aesthetics, high culture, and popular imagery. God Biology, Michael and Gabriel, and the dark angels are nothing if not pragmatic.

Modernity's will to nothingness, in Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's doctrine, is the completion of metaphysics. To say, as Nietzsche does, that man would rather will the void than be void of will is to establish, in Heidegger's phrase, "the will to will"—sheer, empty instrumentality—as the final aim and meaning of Being. Far from ensuring human freedom, however, the way in which humanity achieves autonomy—constituting all that makes up its world as means to ends willed by humans—results in a world that, owing to its elimination of contingency, traps the human in a routinized and prefabricated technological identity. As Aristotle's definition of the slave as a tool suggests, the transformation of humanity into an instrument through the human attempt to achieve dominance and independence by instrumentalizing the world means the triumph of slave
morality. In Nietzsche’s words, modernity constitutes the individual as a “handy, multi-purpose” subject of “mechanical activity,” where action has meaning “only from the point of view of the whole, for the sake of the whole.”

Yet “the point of view of the whole” possesses at best an ironic meaning, given that “the thousand-fold atrophy of all individuals [into mere functions]” implies that in modernity, the “what-for? and for-whom? are lacking” (sec. 69). Far from producing smooth efficiency, the transfiguration of human culture into raw information, functions, and resources generates anarchy: “The past of every form and way of life, of cultures that formerly lay right next to each other or on top of the other, now flows into us ‘modern souls’; thanks to this mixture, our instincts now run back everywhere; we ourselves are a kind of chaos.”

Merrill’s informants too stress the chaotic consequences of humanity’s identification of freedom and growth with independence and domination, the will to control and master nature or, as they phrase it, his “resistance” to Being and insistence upon controlling it for his own endlessly expanding needs (p. 408), “playing so freely with our atoms,” “carelessly plung[ing] into the watchworks of our genetic cell,” ending in nuclear pollution from which “nothing of use survives” (p. 455). Instead, they imagine a world where humanity negotiates with, listens to, and speaks with the forces and elements of nature. Like the Nietzsche of *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Gay Science*, and like Heidegger after the *Kehre*, they see the growth of chaos as linked to the technological successes of the will to truth and mastery, and against chaos they prescribe not more control but a “thinning” of the will to control. The postscientific civilization that emerges is less attuned to control and autonomy and more to openness to the richness of Being:

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TIME WILL STOP
AND LONG FRUITFUL SPACES BE GIVEN HIM TO LEARN THROUGH
SONG AND POETRY
OF HIS OLD HELPLESS FEELINGS & WEARY PAST

THE RESISTANCE? NONE. HE WILL, YES, SWIM & GLIDE,
A SIMPLER, LESS WILFUL BEING. DULLER TOO?
```
A less willful being, his autonomy reduced, the world in which man lives no longer appears as the exclusive product of his own sensibility; with “no accident,” human life will be more determined and deterministic. But in return, man enjoys an expanded sense of the richness of the histories, memories, and relationships that determine him and that determine humanity’s Being as Becoming. JM learns this lesson in the most direct way when he is given to understand that his own actions will generate meanings far beyond those he intends. In Ephraim, there are hints that the powers have taken an interest in JM and DJ for some time, and it transpires in Mirabel that much of what JM writes conveys meanings he cannot yet comprehend. Mirabel urges JM to see in this something to celebrate rather than deplore:

I’d set
My whole heart, after Ephraim, on returning
To private life, to my own words. Instead,
Here I go again, a vehicle
In this cosmic carpool. Mirabell once said
He taps my word banks. I’d be happier
If I were tapping his. Or thought I were.

YR SCRUPLES DEAR BOY ARE INCONSEQUENT
THINK WHAT A MINOR
PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART
COMPARED TO THOSE GREAT GIVENS
IS NOT ARCADIA TO DWELL AMONG
GREENWOOD PERSPECTIVES OF THE MOTHER TONGUE
ROOTSYSTEMS UNDERFOOT WHILE OVERHEAD
THE SUN GOD SANG AND SHADES OF MEANING SPREAD

In any case, as JM had already affirmed, “What to say? / Our lives led to this. It’s the price we pay” (p. 218). Humanity persists, if at all, as
other, as “the return of difference,” in Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal recurrence—the only possible persistence for publicly constituted, and therefore irreducibly open and appropriable, selves. In reality—that is, in public—our lives are not only what we make of them or would make of them; and the planning, calculating, sovereign individual of both scientific reason and liberal political theory cannot be considered as fundamental.

The reference to *The Will to Power* is appropriate because one of Sandover’s lessons is that the immortal world is preserved by power, not Christian (or other) morality: “Power itself,” not “plain old virtue,” is what matters in the “Cosmic Mind”; power, or “the helium of publicity,” “kicks upstairs those who possess it, / The good and bad alike” (p. 54). Indeed, as the revelations proceed through *Mirabell* and *Scripts*, with greater and greater “powers” speaking directly to JM and DJ, the very texture of Being is revealed as an array of impersonal (though invariably personified) forces whose coexistence must be continually re-negotiated. Michael and Gabriel, two archangels who, guided by God Biology, direct the dark angels in their transfiguration of human nature, emerge as equally necessary, interdependent forces of creation and destruction. Gabriel conducts the world-destroying forces of antimatter, “The Black beyond black . . . Eater of energies” (p. 440), which are periodically harnessed to eliminate various of God Biology’s misbegotten creations, and which may yet be turned on humanity—not to eliminate the entire species, to be sure, but as part of a violent thinning process:

> They wash their hands of us?
> Of people? After going to such lengths—
> **WE TOO ONCE DOTTED FONDLY (EH CONFRE?)**
> **ON EARLY WORKS WE RATHER SQUIRM AT NOW**
> **JM: We’ve threatened—therefore we must go—**
> **Earth and sea and air. JIMMY NO NO**
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> **THE KEY**
> **WORD IS ALPHA** Yes, yes—“Brave New World”.
> **MY BOY U GOT IT WHAT OF THE OMEGAS?**
> **3 BILLION OF EM UP IN SMOKE POOR BEGGARS?**

(Pp. 441–42)
The “key word” in this passage refers to postscientific man who will succeed a human nature and society overly burdened with the chaotic, impulsive animal soul densities, driven by the will to reproduce and control but living without purpose, in “time without god or nature running wild / in the bad dreams and braincells of its child” (p. 440). Gabriel offers a Machiavellian justification for the horror and trauma that such a transfiguration may require:

WHEN NEXT WE MEET TO STROLL THE GROUNDS OF OUR WORLD, TWO SCIENTISTS ADMIRING THEIR HANDIWORK, APPROVED BY GOD, YOU AS ONE OF THIS NEW GENERATION, AN ALPHA MAN, WILL TELL ME WAS I KIND OR NOT

(P. 439)

Michael, in contrast, personifies creative, generative forces associated with the sun. But there are dozens of other powers, including Nature as an integrative, shaping power; Psyche; and the dark angels of the Research Lab who clone soul densities but who are also associated with the negative electrical charge of the atom, antimatter, and Chaos itself. As the stories of creation and destruction, success and failure, on the part of God Biology and his minions are elaborated, the Christian opposition between worldly power and heavenly truth is displaced by the realization that power must be met by power, force by force; but the apparent one-dimensionality of this conclusion is offset by the multiplicity, plurality, and continual development and readjustment of powers and forces. Personifications are qualified as mere metaphors: “adam & eve,” we are told, “are images / for developments in the very nature of matter,” and the dark angels insist that their existence is one of abstract concepts and mathematical formulas (p. 115); but these too are rendered not as disembodied ideas but as drives at work in matter itself:

SHALL WE BEGIN OUR HISTORY THE FALL WE ARE KNOWN AS THE BAD ANGELS . . .
I SPEAK OF COURSE IN SYMBOLS
PUT SIMPLY THE ATOM IS L SIDED ITS POSITIVE SIDE GOOD ITS NEGATIVE AH WHAT TO SAY
Merrill’s account is simultaneously about the rise and fall of civilizations and their unpredictable destinies and about of relationships that inhere in matter at both subatomic and cosmic levels. And at the same time as personifications and qualities are seen as abstract forces, raw natural elements are seen to embody specific forms of intelligence. In fact, natural elements are presented as evolving, through the intervention of the Research Lab, in the direction of intelligence, as the souls of some of the poem’s personalities, such as W. H. Auden, are reborn as minerals or elements:

I’LL SHIFT THRU VEINS OF METAL
GETTING THE FEEL OF IT, THEN SURFACING
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 
THEN INTO
THE WORLD  A CLIFF? A BEACH? OUR WORK BEGINS:
COVERING THE SINS OF MULTITUDE
WE MARCH WE GRAINS OF SAND! Creating famine.
Time’s latest cover story tells it all—
“Nature’s Revenge: The Creeping Deserts”. INDEED
(P. 507)

Other souls, such as that of scientist George Cotzias, are shattered and distributed among various human beings in laboratories around the world, to frustrate or encourage scientific research. The vision that emerges toward the climax of the poem is thus one of a world saturated with meaning, intelligence, and significance, in which oppositions such as self versus other, animal versus human, or even animal versus mineral (and of course life versus death) are displaced in favor of a world of flux, becoming, and transfiguration that generates and finally supersedes all such distinctions. The world given in Sandover is one of constantly developing, constantly conflicting forces and powers whose negotiation requires, on the part of beings who would live in it, active and continual care, vigilance,
and concern. Merrill’s vision here thus recuperates and conserves the acute sensibility toward power and its centrality in human experience that Sheldon S. Wolin finds in the ancient Near Eastern creation myths.\textsuperscript{52} In Genesis, for example, as Wolin interprets it, the powers available to Yahweh must be ranged also against the powers of his creation, Man, who ultimately forces Yahweh to grant some scope and legitimacy to his drive for power. For Wolin, Genesis and other such myths testify to a “pagan” understanding of power that has been obscured by Christianity and by scientific civilization’s devaluation of myth; modern discourses of power tend both to sanitize power and to denude it of its specificity, its open and contingent character. In Merrill, however, this sensibility is reinvented and preserved, although thematically Sandover represents a correction of Genesis: whereas in the latter, Man is given dominion over everything on Earth, in Merrill’s vision the scope of humanity’s power is to be drastically curtailed.

Merrill’s discovery of immortality as the negotiation and renegotiation of an always already voiced, already textualized universe recapitulates Heidegger’s insight in \textit{Being and Time} that “fundamental ontology” is inevitably hermeneutic, and Merrill’s qualification of human “resistance” (the will to domination and independence) in favor of a more nuanced openness to Being accords with Heidegger’s turn away from subjectivity toward Being itself. According to Heidegger, the phenomenological return to the things themselves can only mean an understanding of Being as interpretation or textuality: “\textit{Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible,}” Heidegger writes, adding, “The phenomenology of Dasein is a \textit{hermeneutic} in the primordial signification of this word.”\textsuperscript{53} We may take Heidegger as meaning here that since Dasein’s Being appears as a finite, “thrown” projection, the “thing” itself to be investigated is, precisely, interpretation. Because Being “as a whole” is never fully present to Dasein, but always only particular beings or entities, Being is a hermeneutic process in which Dasein projects a Whole on the basis of particular existential experiences and then interprets the meaning of particular experiences on the basis of an understanding of the meaning of Being as a whole, in a continuous, circular process.

Being, then, for Heidegger and Merrill, is not enduring presence
but interpretation, an insight that Sandover confirms not merely as a matter of doctrine but by way of the texture of the revelation itself. The informants’ accounts are not delivered dogmatically but instead take the form of seminars or investigations, with personalities of various levels of authority and experience offering a variety of facts and interpretations. Their accounts are then questioned, amplified, and reconstructed by voices of souls between lives, mentors of JM and DJ such as Auden, Cotzias, Maria Mitzotakis, and others. So seriously do these voices undermine the “authoritative” accounts of the powers that it becomes clear at one point in Mirabell that the powers are not telling the entire story. By the end of the middle section of Scripts, where JM’s and DJ’s mentors vainly attempt to fix clear and distinct identities on the voices the two have heard, it becomes almost impossible to credit any version, especially as the possibility is raised of stronger, unnamed dark forces whose presence is known but whose effects are incalculable. Such ambiguities are confirmed in the poem’s coda, The Higher Keys, where Ephraim is revealed to be Michael, and throughout the poem, as more authoritative voices qualify earlier revelations, only to be themselves qualified as the poem goes on. Although we eventually hear the presumably authoritative voice of God Biology, it transpires that he is only one of a Pantheon, about whom we know little except that he was given Nature to shape only on the condition that he admit the presence of another force, the “Monitor.” The scope of God Biology’s power, then, though vast, is not absolute, and the extent of the forces of the Monitor, though known to exist, are unspecified. Contact with the Other World, far from offering metaphysical comfort, shatters the comforting modern ideologies of technology, progress, and certainty. Even toward the final revelations of Scripts, Nature’s “LAST RESOUNDING YES / TO MAN, MAN IN HIS BLESSEDNESS,” which DJ hopes to interpret as having settled the question in favor of humanity (p. 489), cannot silence Auden’s doubts:

Nature said Yes to man—the question’s settled.
SHE SAYS DEAR BOY EXACTLY WHAT SHE MEANS
LOOK IT UP “A last resounding Yes.”
LAST? The fête was ending. JM: Or
Because man won’t be hearing Yes much more?

AH SHE SETS MEANING SPINNING LIKE A COIN.

(P. 492)

In such ways, all putative foundational or master tropes are relativized, but, more profoundly, the rational pride that would reject any claim to truth lacking in official Enlightenment credentials is itself revealed as one more revisionist trope, useful for certain forms of life but damaging, perhaps deadly, to others. Philip Kuberski describes this aspect of Merrill’s work as follows: “Merrill’s revelations . . . occur in the transpositions of keys, letters, numbers, selves, and atoms. In this exchange of figures and myth, doubt is itself subject to doubt, skepticism to skepticism. The divisive model of reality is replaced by a musical elaboration of relations, so that the baroque and the artificial—the impossible—are no less real than the realistic and low-keyed.” By subjecting doubt to doubt, Merrill avoids entrapment in what Michael Roth calls “the ironist’s cage,” the deadening, all-embracing skepticism that rules out strong moral or political judgments by reducing reality to “mere” fiction.

JM’s and DJ’s engagement with their powers and shades begins as a mere board game—the most banal of fictions—but gradually becomes more real than “real life,” taking over their imaginations to the extent that they feel the loss of friends less because they can communicate with them through the Ouija board. When, owing to the game becoming too real and JM and DJ becoming overly dependent on it, JM asks his former psychiatrist for advice, they find that the latter’s Freudian explanation cannot compete, in imaginative power, with Ephraim’s revelations. Less important than Ephraim’s status—symptom, revelation, hallucination—is what his existence in their lives sustains:

The question

Of who or what we took Ephraim to be,
And of what truths (if any) we considered
Him spokesman, had arisen from the start.

As through smoked glass, we charily observed,
Either that his memory was spotty
Or that his lights and darks were a projection
Of what already burned, at some obscure
Level or another, in our skulls.

Ephraim’s revelations—we had them
For comfort, thrills and chills, “material.”
He didn’t cavil. He was the revelation
(Or if we had created him, then we were).
The point—one twinkling point by now of thousands—
Was never to forgo, in favor of
Plain dull proof, the marvelous nightly pudding.

(Pp. 30–31)

The point here, again, is the Nietzschean insight that an imagi-
native perspective generates effects of power in virtue of offering
an interpretation of reality that orders, ranks, directs, and so sug-
gests possibilities for action, so that the question is not only one of
literal truth but of the generative potential of the revelation in ques-
tion. “Composition,” in this sense, as JM puts it, is “a cleaner use for
power” (p. 81). Neither ingenuously accepting of the politico-
physical diagnoses he encounters nor glibly contemptuous of them,
Merrill, in learning to negotiate the movement of fiction he both
initiates and is caught in, offers a vision of how to cope with what
Nietzsche calls “this life—your eternal life.”

The systematic ambiguity and openness of Sandover’s revelations
applies most fundamentally to questions concerning the status of
the poem as a whole: it is irreducibly a blend of fact and fiction, if
only because the transcripts from the Ouija board originate in real
experiences while the texts they generate are at the same time fic-
tional, that is, they concern personalities and events whose existence
is imaginary. Returning to Habermas’s distinction, JM and DJ never
fully bracket their demand that their informants demonstrate the va-
lidity of what they say; far from relaxing the demand that validity
claims be redeemed, formulating the latter are among JM’s and DJ’s most urgent tasks. But they also heed what Sandover’s Auden insists on, that “FACT IS IS IS FABLE” (p. 263): proof is in some sense moot; for the personalities they encounter generate effects in their lives regardless of the partners’ understanding of their validity or reality. An essential lesson of the poem is the need to create and maintain in existence this sphere that is both real and apparent, fact and fiction—the importance, as Mirabell, Michael, and Gabriel put it, of “belief” or “idea” as against “thought.” Thought’s demand for clear and distinct proofs, naturalistic explanations, and in general for seriousness as opposed to fiction risks concealing the generative capacity of the ideas that are neither serious nor nonserious but simply revealed. According to Mirabell, the “FEATHER OF PROOF” is a literalism of “CHEAP NOTORIETY,” appealing only to “DULL WIT” (p. 258), and the demand for a full and complete proof is simply the formalization of the modern’s attempt, in Nietzsche’s words, to “resist . . . taking anything deeply,” keeping all at arm’s length.

In Scripts, Gabriel expands on this theme by linking thought or reflection to humanity’s destructive impulses:

I PROMOTE THOUGHT, AGGRESSION,
DREAD, AS THROUGH WOOD & COAL & OIL & ATOMS AND YES,
LIVES
I GO UP IN FLAME

(P. 344)

The stress on the corrosive effect of thought on “THE NATURE OF IDEAS” suggests Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Platonic dialectic and its hostility to appearance and illusion, a dialectic that ultimately ends in objective thought’s self-destruction as the will to truth turns on itself and is exposed as one more illusion (p. 343). Thought, in this sense, enables humanity to dominate the world and secures its independence from it, but its discrediting of “values” threatens also, in Max Weber’s terms, to disenchant the world and thus rob humanity’s independence of its raison d’être. According to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the drive to objectify nature and render it calculable reflects a deeper dread of nature and the need to be inde-
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pendent of it, a theme that, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, allows them to link reason with myth (pp. 3-42). Merrill's practice in *Sandover*, in contrast, seeks to temper the instrumental rationality of thought with openness to revelatory ideas, an attitude distinguished from myth *and* reason by virtue of its willingness to engage nature's otherness rather than fear or fight against it.

For Merrill, then, Being is revealed as Becoming, a world of strife and balance, negotiation and evolution. It is for this reason that the direct, "natural" language that Merrill first thought to use to tell the story of his experiences with the Ouija board would in fact have betrayed the truths yielded by that experience; for naturalistic fiction conceals the political truth of the embeddedness of immortality in publicity, contingency, and transformation:

Admittedly I err by undertaking
This in its present form. The baldest prose
Reportage was called for, that would reach
The widest public in the shortest time.
Time, it had transpired, was of the essence.
Time, the very attar of the Rose,
Was running out. We, though, were ancient foes,
I and the deadline. Also my subject matter
Gave me pause—so intimate, so novel.
Best after all to do it as a novel?

(P. 3)

The baldest prose reportage and the kind of novel JM abandons embody the most fateful characteristic Arendt attributes to modernity, namely, the replacement of experience by fiction. Ideology and the atomization of individuals combine, as Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to form a "fictitious world," one that replaces the real world constituted in a genuine public sphere. Such a fiction departs from the world in that it presents events as inevitable, ordered, and necessary; it tells a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end implicit in the beginning; it seems to consist of particular experiences that follow from some general principles; and above all, it conceals the radical contingency of political life, in which purposes
are transmuted into unanticipated projects and acts take on meanings their agents could not have intended or predicted.

In Arendt’s sense of these terms—and this, paradoxically, is the chief reason why the novel, or plain reportage, was finally unsuitable to convey the poem’s meaning—the world Merrill reveals is as far removed from fiction as can be, although Arendt’s fiction is here very close to Habermasian seriousness as the concern for consistency and rationality. As a poet, that is, as a witness to and reporter of events in speech and deed, Merrill neither brackets the question of validity nor appeals to a theoretical foundation. Instead, both alternatives are eclipsed by an entirely unexpected project that emerges not because communication has respected quasi-transcendental norms or critical ideas embedded in language, but in virtue of the fortunate accidents of linguistic revelation itself: the imperative to articulate the value of, and preserve, the contingent revelations of meaning of publicly accessible utterances. In the next, concluding chapter, I explore how that understanding might modify our conception of the practice of political theory through a reading of Arendt’s *On Revolution.*