

SOME RESPONSES TO ANTICIPATED QUESTIONS

“Days of 1973”—a play on the titles of several Merrill poems (“Days of 1964,” “Days of 1935,” “Days of 1971”) and of the Greek poet Cavafy’s before him—has been adapted from the unpublished memoir of my 28-year friendship with the poet, to be entitled *Unlikely Friends*. It was possible to work this part of the memoir into an article because there were no letters in it, and because the few letters alluded to, which reached me just before and just after the events of that week in 1973, were easy to paraphrase.

The executors of the Merrill Estate intend to bring out an edition of letters selected from Jimmy’s immense correspondence; pending that, they have permitted, and intend to permit, very little quotation from it. Since my memoir quotes from hundreds of Jimmy’s letters to me, reproducing the entire letter in several cases, there’s no possibility that my manuscript will be allowed to appear until a Selected Letters has preceded it. The task of editing such a volume is staggering to contemplate. As of a year ago, the work of selection hadn’t yet begun.

The usual workaround in such cases is to paraphrase on a grander scale than I’ve done here, but that approach is both impractical and undesirable in this case. Impractical because for many years our friendship was carried on almost entirely by correspondence, as we were only rarely together in the same place for more than a day or two. Undesirable because I feel very strongly that, particularly in this context, Jimmy must be allowed to speak for himself.

While I was spending most of 2010 and half of 2011 writing the memoir, the library at Washington University, which owns the copyright on all the unpublished material in their Merrill archive, kept assuring me that they and only they had the authority to grant permission for Jimmy’s letters to me to be reproduced in my book. Their legal people had carefully gone over all the documents, I was told, and had made that definite determination. And for all I know they may be right; but the executors vehemently disagree, and the librarians have not shown themselves willing to defend their claim against the claim of the Estate. Nor did their lawyers ever respond to my several pleas for a letter to give to potential publishers, which would account for Wash U’s conviction that their claim is valid. Without such a statement (or in many cases even with one) it seems no press will touch a manuscript guaranteed to cause them so much fuss and bother.

These are responses to questions and comments I hear again and again. If yours is different, please feel welcome to contact me via my website: www.judithmoffett.com.