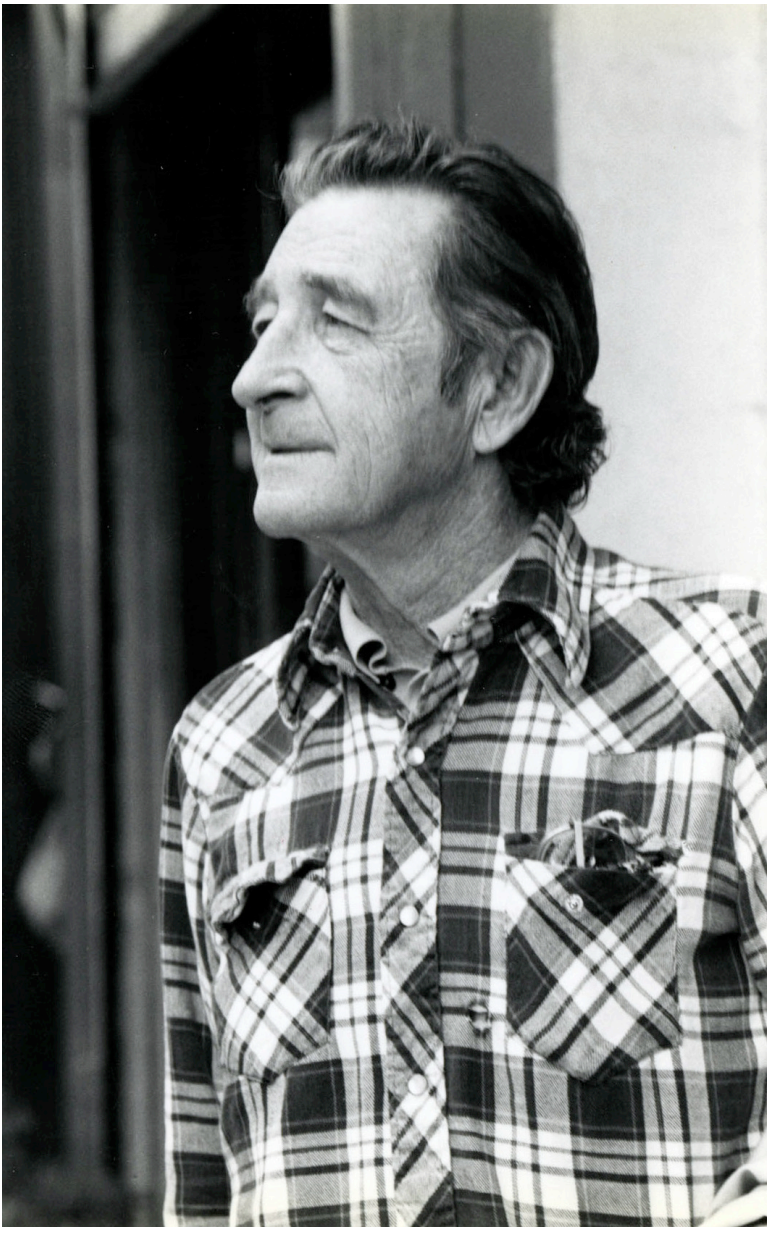

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On the Covers

Front: Thomas McGrath
Back: Thomas McGrath, with the first lines from *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*

Photos: Front and back images, and images on pages . . . .. all courtesy of Elwyn B. Robinson Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota.

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Book Reviews

Holy City Adrift: Thomas McGrath's Los Angeles

Salvador Ayala, Amanda Kong, Gabriela Valenzuela,
and *Andrew Lyndon Knighton*

In a 1965 letter, the *Daily Worker* editor and poet Walter Lowenfels recalled an unexpected exchange he had recently had with the poet Thomas McGrath. "I'd like to change my name," McGrath is reported to have said, "go somewhere that has no postal system, where I don't understand the language, where there are no books—where the weather never changes—hell, I did live there, Los Angeles" (Lowenfels). Just a half-decade removed from a tumultuous and disorienting stint on the west coast, McGrath was apparently still riven by ambivalence about that city, which he repeatedly described as a shallow, alien world, a "sewer," and a "hell"—but which nonetheless still retrospectively exerted some kind of pull on him. Living in the City of Angels for roughly a decade during the 1950s, McGrath experienced both the energy of his rising literary promise and the numbness of cultural marginality, the thrill of love and the anguish of divorce, the joys of collectivity and the pain of isolation. His accomplishment can hardly be comprehended outside of this milieu of tension and contradiction.

McGrath's official line on Los Angeles took its most memorable shape in the second section of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, in passages bearing the wound left by his blacklisting and firing from Los Angeles State College (LASC) in 1953. Though McGrath was hardly the first to so excoriate the infernal city, his account, according to the poet Don Gordon, was the last word. "The part about Los Angeles—no one ever needs to do it again," Gordon wrote to McGrath. "It is nailed down for sure in those lines" (Gordon). Most critics have affirmed this reading, taking McGrath at face value when he described his LA period as "years of wandering in the wilderness," lost in an unfamiliar and hostile city (Gibbons and Des Pres 51). Even the FBI's files on McGrath reinforce this impression, painstakingly tracking the meandering course of his mailing addresses: Pacoima to Sherman Oaks to downtown LA to Hollywood, and on to Mohawk Street in Echo Park, Marsh Street in Elysian Valley, and Sergeant Place in Silver Lake.

And yet there is a counter-narrative to this story of the persecuted poet adrift amidst the demonic city—another version of Los Angeles inhering between "those lines" penned in some of McGrath's darkest days. For Los Angeles also incubated some of McGrath's most profound experiences in community, and despite his professional difficulties—or perhaps precisely because of them—the poet and his circle succeeded in developing some unusually productive collectivities.[1] Among them were temporary cultural and political networks woven into the landscape of mid-century California, such as the group formally called the Marsh Street Irregulars (which convened at Mc-

Grath's Elysian Valley home to discuss ideas and poetry) and the independent educational experiment called the Sequoia School. In these contexts, overlapping generations of LA poets, hinged together by McGrath, were enriched by each other's work—alongside the intellectual impoverishment of Hollywood and against the rising stock of the Beats. There, they explored the potentials for reclaiming a liberatory "holy city" of shared work (as the poet called it in *Letter*), responding to and resisting the confining forces that shaped much of McGrath's Los Angeles decade.

Insisting upon restoring this dialectical quality to the narrative of McGrath's Los Angeles years, a group of students and faculty at California State University, Los Angeles (formerly LASC) began in late 2015 to collectively curate an exhibition at the very university that, in firing him, helped to tip his LA decade from potentiality into purgatory. The McGrath Working Group (comprising Cal State LA students Salvador Ayala, Jorge Contreras, Francisco Gutierrez, Amanda Kong, Lorenzo Rams, and Gabriela Valenzuela, along with English faculty member Andrew Lyndon Knighton) conducted archival research, collected and purchased materials, contributed collectively to the show's design and narrative, and installed the exhibition for its run in early 2016 (a concurrent virtual exhibition remains accessible on Facebook[2]). We seek here to give an account of the show's creation—its title, *Holy City Adrift,* hopefully capturing some of the contradictory energies of McGrath's 1950s—and to share its argument about not only the scars that Los Angeles left on McGrath, but also the legacy he left for the literary culture of Los Angeles.

The Redemption of a "Red-ucator"

When McGrath arrived to teach at Los Angeles State College (now Cal State Los Angeles), he entered a crucible; not only was his time in Los Angeles formative for *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, but he was also entering a highly pressurized political situation produced by the McCarthyist inquiries in Southern California. Accounts of McCarthyism generally focus on the Hollywood Ten and the blacklisting of many members of the film industry, but concomitantly, between 1946 and 1954, an estimated 600 teachers from all levels were fired for various reasons relating to supposed Communist radicalism (Aby 122). Both politicians and educational organizations like the National Council for American Education (NCAE) viewed the classroom as a vulnerable site for insidious indoctrination. As Stuart J. Foster reveals in his study of the National Education Association's response to the Red Scare, there was a pernicious and well-funded anti-communist pamphlet campaign, spearheaded by Allen A. Zoll of the NCAE, that regularly attacked public schools under titles like "They Want Your Child," "Red-ucators at Harvard," and "How Red Are the Schools?" (Foster 2). The targets of these pamphlets ranged from elementary to higher education; no teacher was safe.

California universities were heavily scrutinized by anti-communist organizations as well as the mainstream media. On October 21, 1950, the *Saturday Evening Post* published an article entitled "U.C.L.A.'s Red Cell: Case History of College Communism" detailing the influence of communism on the campus and describing UCLA as a potential fertile ground for radical ideology. In fact, Senator Jack Tenney of California's little HUAC (House Un-American Activities) specifically targeted the University of California when he introduced the Levering Act, a mandatory loyalty oath. In the summer of that same year, approximately 30 faculty members from the University of California were dismissed for their refusal to comply. (Soon after McGrath's own hearing in 1953, the Dilworth Act was introduced, making it illegal for people to refuse to testify in front of HUAC.) Both local administrations and California government officials energetically sought to root out Communist teachers, creating an atmosphere of paranoia. Universities outside of the University of California also felt the repercussions of the witch hunt, and at LASC, McGrath and others came under fire for their radical leanings. With his long history of left politics, union organizing, and uneasy affiliation with the Los Angeles Communist Party, McGrath must have seemed the most dangerous sort of teacher.

After McGrath's refusal to testify, he was summarily fired from Los Angeles State College, receiving little help from professional teaching organizations like the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Foster explores the NEA's response to the Red Scare, particularly the response of its National Commission for the Defense of Democracy Through Education, which was established in 1941 to protect public school teachers from unjust practices. Despite its admirable efforts on an information campaign designed to counter fearmongering, the Defense Commission fell short because of its affiliations with anti-communist organizations and its support of loyalty oaths (Foster 9). Stephen Aby similarly details how the AAUP failed to support professors due to its own institutionalized anti-communism: "It appears that the AAUP membership somewhat shared the belief that Communists were not trustworthy and should be carefully watched for behavior that indicated possible unfitness" (131). Ultimately, these organizations were mostly focused on preventing unfair attacks on teachers, rather than coming to the aid of those who were attacked. The combination of anti-communist sentiment and lack of bureaucratic resources ensured that blacklisted teachers could not count on these organizations to help them. It is not clear what aid McGrath sought, but his description in *Letter* of being "shot down under a bust of Plato by HUAC and AAUP" pointedly expresses his frustrations with these agencies (*Letter* 154).

However, though McGrath was blacklisted with no support from these professional associations, he found a strong sense of community among his students. After his firing, they organized a protest at which hundreds of stu-

dents heard McGrath speak, and they also produced a volume of poetry called *Witness to the Times!*, which they described as "the first time that students have honored an instructor in quite this manner—assuming the role of his editor and publisher":

> We would not do this, however, no matter how excellent a poet and teacher Tom McGrath might be, if he were not also an excellent man. For, though he excels as an artist and as a teacher, it is chiefly because he excels as a man that we so honor him. . . . We honor Tom McGrath because he has not been silent about injustice. We honor him because he speaks well and has something to say. We honor him because he is more than a witness to the times: because he is helping to change the times. (*Witness*)

Subsequently, McGrath's students and his fellow blacklisted colleagues (Richard Slobodin, an anthropologist also fired from LASC, and a former USC playwright, Janet Stevenson) founded the Sequoia School, which Gene Frumkin called "a private study center, really a weekly workshop similar to the one I had enrolled in at L.A. State" (47). The School ran on donations and had no fixed meeting place, assembling instead in the homes of its members (Alice McGrath served as secretary). Frumkin's remembrance of the project as "an outgrowth of general institutional obtuseness, and . . . a community for Tom as a teacher and us as his followers" testifies to both the emotional underpinnings of the School as well as its capacity as a form of resistance (47). After all, it must have succeeded in some respect as a political symbol since Frumkin also remembers the presence at the initial workshops of a character who, to McGrath's keen eye, appeared to be an infiltrating FBI agent.

The Sequoia School embodied the radicalism of its teachers and students. Itinerant, donation-based, and student-centered, the school offered an alternative learning community to the traditional university. McGrath taught as he did at LASC, providing workshop courses where the students' work and ideas were in the spotlight. As Frumkin says, "there ought to be as little as possible of the factory foreman's techniques in the instructor's approach," and by all accounts, McGrath certainly was a lax "supervisor" but a vigorous friend, leader, and mentor (48). Mel Weisburd, another student of McGrath's, has similarly testified to the way in which McGrath's intimidating rigor gave way to a generosity and care for those students under his tutelage. When McGrath entered the classroom to teach Brecht and Rilke, "he looked like a tough and a shy mother all at once / subdued in his face. His eyes threatened to suffer / no bullshit" (Weisburd papers, book 1, page 56).[3] But then:

> McGrath took me into his circle and invited me to his home. I saw another side of him. He was and is a warm and understanding man. He loved to garden, and knew the names and magical properties of all trees and flowers, he cooked, dried

> salad leaves with a towel, made lentil soup and listened to my ideas, and the stories of my broken love affairs. Through him I met my first true friends. . . . (Papers 59)

According to the FBI's records of his activity at the Sequoia School, McGrath taught a variety of courses. Some were traditional, like "Understanding Poetry" and "Literary Criticism: Its Theory and Practice," and some were more interdisciplinary and offbeat, like the joint six-week course with Slobodin entitled "Literature and Anthropology." The Sequoia School only lasted about two years, probably due to McGrath's need to earn a living and the untimely death of fellow poet and teacher Edwin Rolfe in 1954. The school, however, offered McGrath some semblance of the teaching life while reinforcing the central concept of *communitas*. It was from this milieu that the first parts of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* emerged.

Concrete and Community in a Vertical Hell

McGrath's legacy in Los Angeles outlived many physical markers of his presence. The journals and the poets he helped moved on, but the little house on 2714 Marsh Street in which McGrath conducted his informal teaching and where he endeavored to create a lasting family soon fell victim to the violent thresher of progress.[4] McGrath's one-time oasis, like so many other homes in LA's Elysian Valley neighborhood, stood in the way of the impending Interstate 5 Freeway project. Much to the chagrin of community protesters, developers spared little in marking the path of the emergent freeway system, and bulldozers flattened the house on Marsh Street. Years later, McGrath revisited the ruins and lamented the loss in the elegiac poem "Return to Marsh Street," which would later be integrated into *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. In the poem, the forlorn McGrath deploys horticultural imagery to symbolize the generative potential of Marsh Street and the loss thereof; he wanders through what is left of his former garden, "hunting flowers" only to find that his cherished blossoms have been overcome by the barren concrete and all the deadness it represents. Modernity obliterated what was for him the "once now

At the Marsh Street home, 1952.

twice-green moment into the astonished / Suburbs of the imaginary city petrified" (157-58). A curious reader can drive over to where Marsh Street once stood, where freeways 2 and 5 meet, but many of the memories and joy engendered there remain only in the recollections of McGrath's circle, and, centrally, in his poems.

There is much in the city that he prized—his students, his fellow creatives, his family—and much that he despised, a contradiction he makes clear elsewhere in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. The decay of Los Angeles, a "pissed-upon landscape now, full of joy-riding beer cans and condoms," exists paradoxically with the progress that seeks to cover everything neatly in concrete (*Letter* 157). The "petrified" and withered Los Angeles of his eulogy for Marsh Street echoes the "windless city" in Part Two of *Letter*, but McGrath is infinitely more implacable with the city in this section of his epic poem, labelling Los Angeles, among other things, a "petrified shitstorm" where suffering exists in layers. In *Letter*, Los Angeles is analogous to Dante's structured Hell; its sulphurous, smoggy geography resembles the wretched plains of the Inferno, and above that, the "petty Bs" toil to fruitlessly move up in life while the rich engage in frivolity and "dream of a future founded on fire" (147-49). North Dakota may be everywhere, but McGrath makes it clear that the problems plaguing Los Angeles—commercialism, exploitation of the working classes, ridiculous fads, physical contamination, and spiritual malaise—are symptoms of a blight afflicting the entire nation. Or, put in less polite terms, Los Angeles, like the rest of America, is made up of "muggery, buggery, and thuggery" (149) in equal measures.

Still, Los Angeles, for all of its faults, manages to draw forth a modicum of joy from McGrath, who remembers "the flowering names of that commune of laughter and light" that were also "flowers of a bitter season" (154). Many poets and radical thinkers operating during the turbulent McCarthy Era in Los Angeles turned to McGrath for camaraderie and guidance. Gene Frumkin is among many to fondly recall treasured moments with Thomas and Alice McGrath in their home: "In *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, McGrath's long 'pseudo autobiography' still in progress, we the Marsh Street Irregulars have our 'pseudo' place. It was all a Socratic banquet and the savor of it still remains alive in the buds" (48). Frumkin's sensual description reveals how McGrath cultivated generosity and mutual encouragement, providing both a physical haven and a literary home for his fellow revolutionaries. Mel Weisburd's notes for a never-finished memoir also recount the strong sense of community and higher purpose that McGrath and his peers brought to Los Angeles. One poetic fragment details an afternoon on which McGrath led a troop of Irregulars and their families on a picnic expedition to Griffith Park. Sharing food, ideas, and affection with those assembled at the picnic—and looking out at the city spread beneath them—Weisburd realizes that Los Angeles, even as an "imperfect world," when viewed from such a height, is "as perfect a picture / of

anything you want to see" (Papers 76).[5] In these moments shared with poets and family, McGrath seems to approach his holy city of *communitas*, even in a place like Los Angeles.

Everything may have been "Los Angelized" (*Letter* 162), but the rancor of McGrath's stay in the petrified city is dialectically intertwined with the kinship of those who made his time there bearable. The group with whom he worked, many of them forgotten or forced into the wilderness by the "granite matrix of false consciousness" (*Letter* 168), represented a hope for change. Moreover, McGrath's time in Los Angeles, however bitter it may have been, also spawned *Letter*. In an anecdote he shared during an interview with Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres, he explained how the city, if only for a fleeting moment, granted him a sense of enlightened detachment from the world. Gripped by despair, he stepped out into the cold predawn darkness one day, heard the chirping of "nondescript" Los Angeles birds, and recognized that "the funniest thing in the world must be somebody sitting out here on the steps in Los Angeles, feeling full of despair for himself, when the birds are perfectly happy!" (84). Such a cosmic, holy joke enabled him to feel "closer to things outside of people" (84) and reevaluate his lot. In time, he would begin work on his epic poem, and what seemed like a tentative start for McGrath at a dark point in his life soon became something much more powerful. Some praise is owed to McGrath's imperfect, occasionally inspirational, Los Angeles.

With the scattering of his fellow revolutionaries, the dissolution of his marriage, and the destruction of his former home, many, but not all, of the roots that kept McGrath attached to the petrified city were severed. One of those resilient roots is *Statement* magazine, a student-run literary journal at Cal State LA that today continues to showcase the creative talents of students. (McGrath was the faculty advisor for some of the journal's earliest issues.) Another one of those roots was unearthed in 2015, when Thomas McGrath's name, indelibly listed in an ancient course catalogue tucked away in the records of Cal State LA's English department, was chanced upon by a new generation of McGrath fans.

Rediscovering a Holy City

McGrath's contribution to Los Angeles State College had long been a forgotten (and perhaps repressed) chapter in the history of our institution. But when research for a recent curricular revision turned up his name among those of other 1950s LASC faculty, there was revealed to our group a kernel that matured into the project of restoring his place in the history of the institution that discharged him in 1953. Thus, the McGrath Working Group was founded, and its endeavor of creating *Holy City Adrift* commenced. The project presented an interesting challenge. Not only did the group have a mere ten weeks to envision, create, and assemble the exhibition, but furthermore McGrath and his works were unknown to all of us except Andrew Knighton. During the introductory meeting, he tasked the rest of the group with reading *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* and asked everyone to begin brainstorming the show's theme. Naming the exhibition and setting its tone were paramount, and we were all in agreement that the show's title should encapsulate McGrath's portrayal of Los Angeles as a dialectical, inverse hell. Each group member suggested a potential title, but it was *Holy City Adrift*—a play on a phrase used in *Letter*—that proved most captivating.[6] The success of the naming process was the first of many instances that engendered a sense of community among us.

The exhibition's aesthetic followed. To us, it was important to create an ironic display that supplemented the idyllic imagery of 1950s middle-class America with its dialectical counterpart. With the help of graphic design student Lorenzo Rams, we settled on a newsprint aesthetic for the show, with the intention of subverting the mass-mediated ideological work of the Red Scare. We also decided that the Los Angeles skyline, illustrated in white, black, and red, was crucial in doing justice to McGrath's depiction of Los Angeles as a hellish, inverted city. Together, we pored over every design detail—even spending an entire meeting deliberating font choices—until we agreed on a vision for the exhibition and its promotional materials.

The exhibition was built from scratch. We conducted extensive research, which included finding photographs, books, and other relics reflecting McGrath's life and time in Los Angeles. It quickly became apparent to us how scattered McGrath's Los Angeles legacy was. Knighton contacted the University of North Dakota for permission to reproduce period photographs of McGrath; Amanda and Francisco reached out to the Los Angeles Public Library to access maps and a 1953 *Los Angeles Times* article; Sal and Jorge dug into the journals housed in the Cal State LA library's stacks; Gabriela made overtures to the Beyond Baroque literary center in Venice; and, as a group, we ventured to the city's Westside to visit UCLA's Charles E. Young Research Library, where we spent hours digging through Alice McGrath Greenfield's archives. Near the end of March, we had enough material to write on ten themes for the ten cases that composed the show. After spending a grueling Friday afternoon

meticulously peer editing each other's case materials and the drafts of curatorial placards, we were nearly ready to assemble and install the exhibition. No one in the group had ever participated in such an elaborate project, which meant that we were unaware of how much work went into building such an exhibition. At the end of the third day—and after a great deal of feverish cutting, pasting, positioning and repositioning, and errand-running—*Holy City Adrift* was ready for viewing.

Though we had anticipated a positive reaction, we were inspired by the remarkable enthusiasm of those that the exhibition reached. Social media expanded its audience well beyond the campus and Southern California, including national audiences accessing the show in virtual form on Facebook. Additionally, in late February, the group members collaborated on a standing-room only presentation about our project at Cal State LA, which helped spark interest in the show. This resulted in university faculty requesting tours, and, upon the show's debut, we transitioned from sharing the importance of McGrath's work amongst ourselves to sharing it with the rest of Cal State LA's student body. *Holy City Adrift* resonated with our Cal State LA audience because, as we were told repeatedly, students enjoyed learning about a hidden chapter in this history of their very own campus, locating their own addresses alongside those pinpointed on the exhibition maps, and discovering how their own studies in literature, writing, sociology, and beyond were connected with the political and literary history of our complicated city.

Because Something Endures

With the culmination of *Holy City Adrift*, we may be slightly nearer an understanding of how important Los Angeles was to Thomas McGrath, and, conversely, how crucial Thomas McGrath was to the development of Los Angeles poetry in the 1950s. Recent critical work has increasingly credited him with a leadership role in the emergence of a Southern Californian literary culture that was both politically and stylistically distinct from what was going on in San Francisco. Even to observers intimately connected with the scene in the 1950s, there was a sense that though it seemed as if there was something important happening in Los Angeles, nobody could quite nail down what it was. This straining quest for self-definition is palpable in a number of 1950s journals that sought to decoct from the complicated Angeleno poetic milieu some sense of shared purpose. In the preface to a 1958 special issue of the journal *Epos*, for example, William Pillin argued on behalf of the LA scene that "our first interest is with our neighbors, with the delights, events and challenges in our midst . . . to point to tangible evidence that poems are being written in the southern part of this State" (4). It is notable that Pillin's argument for the importance of Los Angeles poetry echoes the same dichotomous theme with which we have been concerned. "Much is written about the bad taste, the false

facade and blatant commercialism of this city," he acknowledges.

> And, alas, it is all true. But little enough is said of its many art galleries where we can observe a restless and searching vitality; about its many little concert halls where young American and European composers are given premier performances; and I, for one, am more impressed by this city's hundred poets than by its hundred millionaires. (Pillin 4)

It is moreover telling that in this special issue—featuring Pillin, Weisburd, and Frumkin along with Gil Orlovitz, Stanley Kiesel, and others—pride of place is given to McGrath, whose "Archetypal Catechism" and "L'Hareng Hot" are the first two poems there collected (6-7).

That prominence is reinforced in the recent emergence of new accounts that depict McGrath as the figure around whom much of the 1950s Los Angeles scene orbited—an unlikely position for the poet who, in *Letter*, described having "no center in myself" (120). Novak's account, for example, argues that "it was McGrath's personal charisma, warmth, knowledge, talent, and sensitivity to people and writers that was the attractant necessary to create a community of writers. . . . As poet and personality he held everything together at the beginning, the journal, social activities, readings" (4). Similarly, the many iterations of and proposals for Weisburd's unfinished memoir invariably place McGrath at the center, describing him as "he who was most serious, most poet" among them (Papers, book 7, 76).[7] And Bill Mohr's recent *Hold-Outs* notes how foundational McGrath's role was, while situating him in larger—and not always formal—poetry and publishing assemblages that included figures such as Naomi Replansky, Don Gordon, Ann Stanford, Alan Swallow, and James Boyer May, stressing the way in which a definition of Los Angeles poetry at mid-century resisted (and still resists) formalization. As Mohr notes

The poet and his wife, Alice.

in a comment on the *Poetry Los Angeles: I* volume co-edited by McGrath, May, and Peter Yates in 1958: "Although the midcentury marked the emergence of the poetry reading as a performative act capable of defining the boundaries of an artistic community, *Poetry Los Angeles: I* is the only significant collection documenting the participants of a readings series that was unaffiliated with an educational institution" (45).

That latter accomplishment seems natural for a maverick poet whose entire life was spent only awkwardly coexisting with the imperatives of such institutions—whether at Louisiana State, Oxford, or Los Angeles State College. *Holy City Adrift*'s effort to restore McGrath's connection with Cal State LA may be at odds with his own ambivalent yearning for a Los Angeles in which a kind of underground existence could be achieved—a city where one might exist without the constraints of names, letters, books, language, and even weather. But one suspects he would approve of the way that what began for our group as an exploration of literary community in Los Angeles has ultimately brought into existence yet another community, our own—with Thomas McGrath at its moving center.

Notes

[1]In a letter to Fred Whitehead, McGrath's wife, Alice, remembers this duality: "They were rotten years in political life. But they were also the years of gathering where these and other poets read pieces of poems for the pleasure of hearing them. They were so generous to each other. They enjoyed; they admired; they laughed" (quoted in Whitehead, 213). Or, as Whitehead himself put it: "Paradoxically, this period of political repression led to intense imaginative labor among a small but talented group of writers for whom the word solidarity continued to have meaning" (213).

[2]The virtual exhibition offers a modified and truncated version of the physical show, which was on display at Cal State LA's JFK Library from March 28 to July 30, 2016. It includes curatorial commentary, updates on the unfolding of the exhibition and related events, and many archival photographs appearing publicly for the first time. See http://www.facebook.com/Holycityadrift/.

[3]Mel Weisburd died in 2015. His voluminous papers are currently in a private collection, destined for archiving in the Special Collections division of California State University, Los Angeles. This citation reflects only a provisional numbering of the notebooks, which is sure to change once the archive has been processed and made publicly available.

[4]Estelle Gershgoren Novak's indispensable *Poets of the Non-Existent City: Los Angeles in the McCarthy Era* provides a moving and deeply informative account of this circle, anthologizing the work and detailing the accomplishments of its many members.

[5]The events fragmentarily chronicled in this reflection were reworked and presented in Weisburd's poem, "Image Hill / 1956," published in John Bradley's collection *Eating the Pure Light*.

[6]We were struck both by the poem's ubiquitous imagery of doldrums and drifting, and by its remembrance of the collective satisfaction of finishing a cold day

of wood-cutting: "In that rich and friendly hour / When the hunting hawks whirred home, we stilled our talking / And silence sang our compline and vesper song. / It was good singing, that silence. From the riches of common work / The solidarity of forlorn men / Firm on our margin of poverty and cold: / Communitas / Holy City / Laughter at forty below / Round song / The chime of comradeship that comes once maybe / In the Winter of the Blue Snow" (*Letter*, 61).

[7]Variously titled "The Smog Inspector" or simply "Smog: A Literary Memoir, 1948-1965," Weisburd's proposed book provides new texture to our understanding of McGrath's teaching, the history of the *Coastlines* journal (led by Weisburd and Frumkin), and the disputes between the "Coastliners" and the Venice West beats led by Lawrence Lipton, fusing those literary reflections with an account of L.A.'s environmental degradation. (Weisburd worked for the Los Angeles Air Pollution Control District throughout much of the 50s, producing an influential body of work on environmental regulation enforcement.) A tribute to McGrath, along with a poem sequence entitled "Report from an Early LA Smog Inspector" may be found in Weisburd's collection *A Life of Windows & Mirrors* (57-63; 65-79).

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Politics as Performance Art

Sharon Carson

Thomas McGrath appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1953, refusing to cooperate and instead making the remarkable statement which we are pleased to reprint here. McGrath spoke "In the first place, as a teacher," and he lost his contract at Los Angeles State College for taking the Fifth at the HUAC hearings.

Sparked by reading McGrath's HUAC testimony, I pulled from the shelf David Caute's 1978 book *The Great Fear*, a meticulously documented study placing the McCarthy era repressions in a broader American historical context. Caute reminds readers of the ferocious "Red Scare" suppression of labor and political dissent during and immediately following World War I. He also casts back, comparatively, even further: "Tom Paine was indicted for seditious libel after he published *Rights of Man* (150 years later, Howard Fast's biography of Paine was purged from school libraries). . . . "

Cyclical theories of history, indeed.

But it was reading the opening paragraph of the Preface in *The Great Fear* that offered the starkest reminder of the enduring value of McGrath's HUAC testimony and the political resolve that fueled it:

> On May 15, 1954, in the high summer of the great fear, the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee warned that "the threat to civil liberties in the United States today is the most serious in the history of our country." It was indeed a desperate time, a time when the words "democracy" and "freedom" resembled gaudy advertising slogans suspended above an intersection where panic, prejudice, suspicion, cowardice and demagogic ambition constantly collided in a bedlam of recriminations. The wealthiest, most secure nation in the world was sweat-drenched in fear.

No wonder it seems a particularly ripe time to revisit McGrath's remarkable defense of free speech, principled silence, critical inquiry, and educational integrity. He also refused to cooperate with HUAC on aesthetic grounds: political action as performance art.

Statement to HUAC

Thomas McGrath

After a dead serious consideration of the effects of this committee's work and of my relation to it, I find that for the following reasons I must refuse to cooperate with this body.

In the first place, as a teacher, my first responsibility is to my students. To cooperate with this committee would be to set for them an example of accommodation to forces which can only have, as their end effect, the destruction of education itself. Such accommodation on my part would ruin my value as a teacher, and I am proud to say that a great majority of my students—and I believe this is true of students generally—do not want me to accommodate myself to this committee. In a certain sense, I have no choice in the matter—the students would not want me back in the classroom if I were to take any course of action other than the one I am pursuing.

Secondly, as a teacher, I have a responsibility to the profession itself. We teachers have no professional oath of the sort that doctors take, but there is a kind of unwritten oath which we follow to teach as honestly, fairly, and fully as we can. The effect of the committee is destructive of such an ideal, destructive of academic freedom. As Mr. Justice Douglas has said: "This system of spying and surveillance with its ac-companying reports and trials cannot go hand in hand with academic freedom. It produces standardized thought, not the pursuit of truth." A teacher who will tack and turn with every shift of the political wind cannot be a good teacher. I have never done this myself, nor will I ever. In regard to my teaching I have tried to hold to two guidelines, the first from Chaucer that "gladly will I learn and gladly teach"; the second a paraphrase of the motto of the late General Stilwell: "Illiterati non carborundum."

Thirdly, as a poet I must refuse to cooperate with the committee on what I can only call esthetic grounds. The view of life which we receive through the great works of art is a privileged one—it is a view of life according to probability or necessity, not subject to the chance and accident of our real world and therefore in a sense truer than the life we see lived all around us. I believe that one of the things required of us is to try to give life an esthetic ground, to give it some of the pattern and beauty of art. I have tried as best I can to do this with my own life, and while I do not claim any very great success, it would be anti-climactic, destructive of the pattern of my life, if I were to cooperate with the committee. Then too, poets have been notorious non-cooperators where committees of this sort are concerned. As a traditionalist, I would prefer to take my stand with Marvell, Blake, Shelley, and Garcia Lorca rather than with innovators like Mr. Jackson. I do not wish to bring dishonor upon my tribe.

These, then are reasons for refusing to cooperate, but I am aware that none of them is acceptable to the committee. When I was notified to appear here, my first instinct was simply to refuse to answer committee questions out of personal principle and on the grounds of the rights of man and let it go at that. On further consideration, however, I have come to feel that such a stand would be mere self-indulgence and that it would weaken the fight which other witnesses have made to protect the rights guaranteed under our Constitution. Therefore I further refuse to answer the committee on the grounds of the fourth amendment. I regard this committee as usurpers of illegal powers and my enforced appearance here as in the nature of unreasonable search and seizure.

I further refuse on the grounds of the first amendment, which in guaranteeing free speech also guarantees my right to be silent. Although the first amendment expressly forbids any abridgement of this and other freedoms, the committee is illegally engaged in the establishment of a religion of fear. I cannot cooperate with it in this unconstitutional activity. Lastly, it is my duty to refuse to answer this committee, claiming my rights under the fifth amendment as a whole and in all its parts, and understanding that the fifth amendment was inserted in the Constitution to bulwark the first amendment against the activities of committees such as this one, that no one may be forced to bear witness against himself.

A Pair of Difficulties: McGrath in the Archives

Shawn Boyd

The Thomas McGrath Papers collection at the University of North Dakota offers researchers and others a rich harvest of documents to help understand the life and work of the prolific North Dakota poet. Housed in the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections at the Chester Fritz Library are extensive files of personal correspondence, original typescript poetry, photographs, unpublished screen plays, newspaper clippings, various miscellanea, as well as memoirs and scholarly treatments of McGrath. Among the papers, two sets of documents are striking in how they illuminate McGrath's entanglement with the American justice system from distinct perspectives: one of FBI investigators pursuing a known Communist, the other of friends and acquaintances trying to keep him out of prison after a shooting. These opposing viewpoints create an image of McGrath that underlines his deep humanity and the uneasiness of government officials with his hunt "for the Lost Dutchman Gold Mine of the Authentic Resistance" (McGrath 10).

In August, 1975, McGrath's friend and student Dale Jacobson received a call from the poet's estranged wife. According to Jacobson, Eugenia McGrath reported that "a threat had been made against her and she and her neighbor were both thinking of purchasing guns and Tom should bring down as many guns as he could" (276-77). Later that day McGrath and Jacobson, armed with two borrowed shotguns and a pistol, traveled from Moorhead, Minnesota, where the poet was teaching university, to the home of Eugenia in western Minnesota (277). While helping Eugenia pack up her ransacked house a drunken man who later turned out to be a spurned lover of Eugenia began breaking down the door of the house with the McGraths and their son Thomas inside (278-79). As Jacobson watched from a neighboring home the door began to splinter under the man's onslaught. McGrath fired a shotgun once through the door, killing him (280).

As a grand jury decided whether or not he should be indicted for the shooting, McGrath's lawyer, Michael Donohue, informed the poet's friends and associates that statements on behalf of his high moral character would help his chances of avoiding charges. The University of North Dakota archives holds dozens of letters written in support of McGrath, their authors ranging from the president of Moorhead State University, numerous poets and professors, to the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*. The letters repeatedly attest to McGrath's kindness and his warm care for his fellow humans.

A letter from the Hollywood director Michael Cimino, who worked together with McGrath over a period of seven years while co-writing three screenplays, is representative of the high praise found throughout the letters of support.

> Never for one moment have I known him to be a person that I would expect capable of even the most minimal violence towards any person or thing. Both his poetry and the work that we have done together reflect a reverence and a celebration of life, and a respect for the dignity of humanity.

Cimino, who directed films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate,* concludes his letter by emphasizing how McGrath's poetry reveals that he is "a profoundly religious man" (Cimino).

The poet Leo Connellan echoes the praise of Cimino in his own letter to Donohue. "How do you describe one of the most wonderful, compassionate, humane human beings on earth!" And once again, McGrath's relationship with the rest of humanity is praised: "Thomas McGrath is what we are all talking about when we say the word integrity and when we talk about what a human being should be in the society of other human beings" (Connellan).

Eventually the grand jury "refused to recommend Tom for any crime, returning the verdict of 'no bill'" (Jacobson 282). McGrath later told his friend and student Pamela Sund "that he never had a day—following the shooting—in which he did not regret taking another man's life" (271). But even the grand jury deliberations themselves were not smooth sailing as Jacobson notes: some of the jurors were concerned about McGrath's political affiliations (282).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, in an undated, declassified report held in the archive, notes that McGrath first began his association with the Communist Party while working in a New Jersey shipyard in 1944. Along with so many others during this time of the federal government's anti-Communist efforts, McGrath's political leanings attracted the scrutiny of the FBI. The papers at the University of North Dakota include FBI reports, marked "confidential," dating from late 1952 to 1956. According to McGrath's son, however, the archives only shed incomplete light on the FBI's interest in his father, which lasted until the 1980s and consisted of surveillance while the poet lived in the Fargo-Moorhead area (Tom McGrath). The files on hand in the archive chronicle repeated attempts of the FBI's Los Angeles field office to engage McGrath in conversations about his personal contacts and political opinions. These surveillance operations bracketed McGrath's appearance before a subcommittee of the Committee on Un-American Activities in Los Angeles in April, 1953 and his subsequent firing from Los Angeles State College in 1954.

The FBI was also interested in his wife Alice McGrath, who may have come to the Bureau's attention due to the fact that she was "reported to have associated with an individual who had been expelled from the CP [Communist Party] knowingly because this was a good friend of hers." In this same document, of which the first three pages are missing and thus the date, her husband is

listed as one of her "associates:" "He is reported to be somewhat of an intellectual and idealist. However, he is not known to have any associates other than those tied up in the Communist movement outside his working hours." The remaining archived documents all focus on Thomas McGrath and repeated attempts on the part of the FBI's Los Angeles field office to engage him in conversation. McGrath was hardly alone in his investigation by the government. Over the course of 1953, more than 100 members of university faculty were forced to testify, and many who refused to give statements were fired (Fried 172-73). However, his subpoena to testify before the Congress and the subsequent damage it did to his career did not make him willing to cooperate with FBI agents despite their belief he may give in to their persuasions.

While the memoranda reveal that the FBI sought to learn more about the poet's "Communist Party activities," what exactly the FBI expected to learn or hoped to achieve is never noted in the records present in the Chester Fritz collection. It appears that this was a classic fishing expedition, which the FBI felt would be facilitated with a secret weapon: one of the special agents working for the field office in Los Angeles was a graduate of the University of North Dakota, the alma mater of McGrath. Furthermore, this agent knew of McGrath through their time spent in rival dormitories on campus.

According to a memo sent to the director of the FBI on December 4, 1952, surveillance of McGrath's workplace at the campus of Los Angeles State College had begun in an attempt to approach and interview him after work and before arriving at home. The first contact occurred on January 14, 1953, when the agent from North Dakota approached McGrath, who remembered that the agent had been "active in the affairs of a rival men's Dormitory while both were on the campus." Later in the conversation,

> McGRATH inquired as to the nature of the agent's work and was advised that the agent is now in the employ of the United States Department of Justice. With this remark McGRATH's facial expression changed somewhat but he continued to be pleasant and it was suggested to him by the agent that it might be a good time to further discuss their old school days over a cup of coffee.

The FBI, by reawakening an old acquaintanceship from his college days, hoped that "his friendship and confidence in the agent should be cultivated" so that any conversations ultimately could include a sensitive topic, his Communist Party activities.

Two days later the agent called McGrath's college office three times to arrange a meeting with no response. Numerous calls followed, but the secretary claimed each time that he was not in his office. And "on one occasion immediately after being advised telephonically by the office secretary that McGRATH was not in his office, observations were undertaken of his office

with the result that he was observed therein." The memorandum drily notes that "it appears obvious that McGRATH does not desire to have any further contact with Agent [redacted]." Further surveillance is ordered to take place to try and attempt a second meeting. (2-24-53)

Three months after his testimony before the House subcommittee, the FBI renewed its interest in McGrath, noting the protests among students in reaction to the loss of his teaching position (7-9-53). A memorandum from the fall of 1953 indicated that surveillance was ongoing, and at the beginning of 1954 the agent from North Dakota spoke to McGrath upon his leaving home:

> Agent acknowledged his position and explained that he would like to have a talk with McGRATH about college days at the University of North Dakota and about mutual university acquaintances whereupon McGRATH stated that he did not want to talk to Agent [redacted] about anything because he felt that the conversation would naturally, because of [redacted] employment, follow official lines. Efforts were made to engage McGRATH in a conversation about a recent North Dakota university alumni reunion was held in Phoenix, Ariz. and about a recent picnic of former North Dakota residents which was held in Los Angeles. However, he refused any discussion on these topics. McGRATH commented that undoubtedly the agent had come to him for a discussion on matters related to official business, and that he did not feel that any discussion along purely friendly lines could be achieved. He expressed the feeling that it would be impossible for a person associated with the FBI to engage in a conversation with a former school mate without have the agent's official capacity enter the conversation.

The agent told McGrath that he wanted to engage in a conversation about the drawbacks of the Communist Party "and that he would also like to receive from him expressions concerning his (McGRATH's) reaction to certain phases of the Communist program."

> Throughout this conversation, which lasted approximately ten minutes McGrath appeared to be extremely nervous and puffed vigorously on a cigaret [sic]. He presented an unkempt appearance and indicated that he was not regularly employed. Previous surveillances have indicated that McGRATH is unemployed and spends most of his time at home writing and studying literature. His wife, ALICE McGRATH, is currently employed and is probably the chief family provider. (1-8-54)

Despite this memorandum indicating that it was inadvisable to contact McGrath again, and that such efforts would not continue unless advised otherwise by FBI headquarters, another attempt to do so was made in November, 1956.

> Agent [redacted] introduced himself and stated that in view of the events that had occurred since he had previously been contacted that it was felt that there existed a strong likelihood that MC GRATH, in thinking of these events and reviewing the history of the past two years, might now be willing to have a friendly discussion with Agents. MC GRATH then stated that he had nothing whatever to talk about with Agents and that if they had no further need of him, he would consider the interview over. Agents then stated that it seemed incredible he maintained the same position now as he maintained more than two years ago and that it was believed that there did exist a wide area for the exchange of ideas at this time. To this MC GRATH said that in his opinion there was no possible area of agreement and that as for his position he would not care to state whether he had changed it or not. MC GRATH turned and walked away a few steps and then came back and said "I will say this, I have decided that I am through with politics." He then walked rapidly away ignoring Agents [sic] further efforts to engage him in conversation. (1-30-56)

And with this renunciation of politics the archive's trail of FBI interest in McGrath goes cold. While the special agents' brief discussions with McGrath yielded no usable information, the pattern of surveillance and clandestine meeting attempts between work and home clearly show a suspicion of McGrath's politics and his loyalty to the United States. But the figurative threat to the United States government McGrath may have embodied, as evidenced by the testimony of his friends and associates, stemmed from his hope for granting a better future to those suffering injustice and oppression.

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Praises for Thomas McGrath

Mike Hazard

I made a movie to praise Thomas McGrath.

I first heard his name in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1974. A Scottish poet said, introducing himself to me when he learned I lived in Minnesota, "You are probably going to mistake me for my more famous counterpart, Thomas McGrath."

I had never heard of either of them.

I met Tom for the first time in person in 1979 when he came to the recording studios at KUOM at the University of Minnesota to do the voiceover narration for *A Man Writes to a Part of Himself*. It was a documentary about his friend Robert Bly whom he called Bob.

By then I had read enough McGrath to know he would make a good movie, too. I teased that when we were done with Bly, it would be his turn. He did not say no.

Still image from *The Movie at the End of the World***. Photo courtesy of Mike Hazard.**

Soon after an angel named Everett Albers, director of the North Dakota Humanities Council, flew into my kitchen in St. Paul, Minnesota, to invite a grant application to make a documentary with our Tom. *The Movie at the End of the World* is the fruit of that labor. Here is the link to screen the video. https://youtu.be/ABDUGe2kGNs

Looked at in one way, the movie is a triptych. Each of its three sections can be seen as an illumination of a line from the poet's epic masterpiece *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. History is the labyrinth, labor the low high road, and art the curved arrow to our common heaven. The first part is about making bread, the second about earning it, and the third about the hunger for it.

Threaded with a number of audiovisual experiments with poetry, the program stole its title from McGrath's collected poems *The Movie at the End of the World*. The film is a lot of lists, from the name-calling opening of the narration to the catalog of names for heaven to the fruits and vegetables of the final poem, "Praises." Chameleon-like narration tries to echo and conspire

with what the poet says.

When Tom came to my house to discuss making a film about himself, I was scrawling words crawling on an imaginary screen in my living room. It was an old Sanyo TV set, turned off. The blank screen was a blank page. The idea was to use the techniques of commercials to illumine poems. I was inviting us to dream, to make film poems in the dream factory.

"Why not dream in IMAX?" was his reply.

When we planned the recordings, the canny screenwriter knew just where to take us. We went to a steam threshers reunion in Rolaag, Minnesota. We found a horse farm where his son could go for a ride. We visited the Tonka toy factory where his lookalike brother was a master die maker. We roamed the countryside where he grew up.

These scenes in the movie resonate in wise and profound ways with the poet's life and work as a farm boy, factory worker, labor organizer, and proud father.

We learned he wrote films by accident. The camera person for our documentary, Jim Mulligan, went to see an IMAX movie, *Genesis*. It's a film about plate tectonics and continental drift. He noticed the script was magnificent. One line flashed:

> Iceland grows from the center outwards, at the rate at which the Atlantic widens . . . slower than a human fingernail grows. Yet, in 180 million years, this infinitesimal movement created the Atlantic.

When Mulligan watched the credits roll, he saw the writer was named Thomas McGrath. So I asked Tom. "Yes, I wrote that."

When it was found out, he confessed, "I never dreamed the audience for movies and for poetry would ever be the same. So I cannibalized one for the other."

Pressed for more, Tom provided another page of his vita that listed his film work. He'd written a raft of screenplays and scripts for documentaries and feature films, including a number for IMAX productions. His script for *To Fly* played for decades all over the world in 20 languages. It made McGrath one of the most heard poets in the world, though people did not know it.

He worked with many legends in the trade, including Francis Thompson, Les Navros, and Leo Hurwitz. Hurwitz gave McGrath an hour long silent edit that visually documented the holocaust that was Auschwitz. McGrath's script for *The Museum and the Fury* made a movie so terrifying, according to Hurwitz, "that the Polish government which had commissioned the film buried it and it was never seen."

Here's the sentence that opens *Supply Manager's Dilemma*: "In the past the problem of supply management was a relatively simple one and has grown, along with the Navy, into a problem of gigantic proportions."

Ha. English teachers of all worlds laugh out loud.

He had been hired by Les Navros of Graphic Films in Hollywood to write a training film on supply management before there was a client. When the client turned out to be the US Navy, Tom wrote into the script what he called "verbal dynamite." When I confessed I found the film confusing, Tom smiled. It was used unwittingly by the Navy to confuse wannabe quartermasters for years.

His poem about beer, "Trinc"—one of his trinity of praise poems, along with "The Bread of the World" and "Praises" for the garden—was originally a film script for a documentary about the beauty of beer. The director kept telling Tom to write a poem and he did. The film was never made; the poem sings.

> "Beer, birra, la biere, tiswin, pivo, cerbeza—
> In all its names and forms, like a polymorphic god, praise!"
>
> "By sip, by sup, by tot, by tipple, by chuglug—all ways:
> Hallelujah! For the People's Beer! And for all His comrades: praise!"

Somebody might try to make that movie.

Tom joked more than once that he had a 200-year plan for his poetry. As we celebrate 100 years of McGrath, I smile out loud. The irony grows dramatic.

The field recordings for the film have been donated to the Institute for Regional Studies and University Archives, North Dakota State University Libraries. Anyone may use them to make new movies about McGrath.

May a thousand flowers bloom.

The Two Big Macs

Fred Whitehead

Sometime in the mid-1980s or so, after I had been reading and writing on Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) and Tom McGrath (1916-1990), I came up with the idea of considering the remarkable parallels between them. I mentioned this to Tom, and he seemed rather pleased with the concept. One key parallel was that they were both intransigent Celtic rebels against the establishments of their respective nations. But even that summation is fraught with complexities. MacDiarmid was an obdurate Scottish Nationalist who at various times was expelled from the Nationalists for being a Communist and expelled from the Communists for being a Nationalist. McGrath was not involved in any kind of Nationalist movement or party, but he was a resolute defender of the native radical culture of the American Midwest and West. But both attacked provincialism in defense of internationalism. Both were Communists—i.e. members of the Communist Party—and while they defended Communism, they were also critical of its lapses and failures. Working through all these complexities would require many pages, if not an entire book-length study; here I would like to illuminate just a few of them.

Both poets came from modest beginnings—MacDiarmid the son of a postman in the border region of Scotland and McGrath the son of a North Dakota farmer. They never forgot their proletarian origins. During World War II, MacDiarmid worked as a manual laborer in the big Clydeside engineering shops and later wrote of "my Leontiev-like detestation of all the bourgeoisie, and, especially, teachers, ministers, lawyers, bankers, and journalists, and my preference for the barbarous and illiterate lower classes of workers. . . . It has been a great source of pride to me to have been able to 'keep my end up' in this unfamiliar and most exacting milieu." Similarly, McGrath worked in the New Jersey shipyards as a welder, an experience described at length in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. It was there that McGrath encountered radical Irish workers such as Packy O'Sullivan—"Left wing of the IRA / That one."

For both poets, satire and invective present exuberant opportunities. In "In the Children's Hospital" MacDiarmid describes a royal visit:

> Now let the legless boy show the great lady
> How well he can manage his crutches.
> It doesn't matter though the Sister objects,
> "He's not used to them yet," when such is
> The will of the Princess. Come, Tommy,
> Try a few desperate steps through the ward.
> Then the hand of Royalty will pat your head
> And life suddenly cease to be hard.

For a couple of legs are surely no miss
When the loss leads to such an honour as this!
One knows, when one sees how jealous the rest
Of the children are, it's been all for the best!—
But would the sound of your sticks on the floor
Thundered in her skull evermore!

The last two lines suddenly veer into a deeply unsentimental and defiant ending.

The long section of *Letter* where the young McGrath confesses a long list of supposed sins, including obscure ones the local priest has never even heard of, is a hilarious burlesque of a sacred ritual. That list includes:

"I am guilty of chrestomathy, Father."
He lets out a grunt in Gaelic,
Shifting out of the Latin to get a fresh purchase on sin.
"And?"
"Barratry, Father.
"And minerology . . .
"Agatism and summer elements . . .
"Skepticsm about tooth fairies . . .
Catachresis and pseudogogy . . .
"I have poisoned poissons in all the probably statistics . . .
"I have had my pidgin and eaten it too, Father . . .
"Put fresh dill on the pancakes. . . (328)

The sheer zaniness of this "confession" expresses a redemptive quality of life, undermining any vestigial element of authenticity in organized religion.

Aside from their plebeian origins, such antagonism undoubtedly provoked disdain from "Establishment Poets," described by McGrath as "like bats, in caves with color TV . . . upside down in clusters." For both poets, being Outsiders was a welcome destiny, compared to such animal somnolence. MacDiarmid went into self-imposed poverty and exile on the small northern island of Whalsay in the 1930s; McGrath was driven from academe in the early 1950s, wrote pulp fiction under pseudonyms, did odd jobs for years.

In common with other Celtic rebels, both poets consider selling out the worst of sins, and conversely, to remain true to the people the highest devotion. Such characteristics are not unique to Celts, but given their centuries-long oppression at the hands of the English, they have been, as it were, heightened and deepened by that experience.

In spite of that, both poets began to attain a certain fame. MacDiarmid for his three "Hymns to Lenin" in the early 1930s (the second one being accepted by no less than T. S. Eliot in *The Criterion*), and McGrath for his "Ode to the American Dead in Korea." Both poets published in widely diverse forms,

from short, to middle, and to long poems. McGrath's *Letter* was as the *Library Journal* called it, "a tremendous odyssey of sense and spirit." In part it aimed at taking back the narrative form from the novel. In contrast, MacDiarmid's long poems were experimental linguistics and philosophy, almost metaphysical except that he didn't believe in metaphysics.

In terms of literary history, MacDiarmid is acknowledged as one of the founders of the Scottish Renaissance of the first half of the twentieth century. We now have extensive documentation of the role that McGrath played in American poetry, especially during the period he lived in Los Angeles in the 1950s. So from obscure origins, to difficult conditions of life in remote places, to the mission to keep writing no matter what, and to eventual fame, MacDiarmid and McGrath can truly be considered "The Two Big Macs."

In Place of an Afterword

In 1965, as a graduate student on a Fulbright scholarship in Britain, I made a pilgrimage to Samuel Johnson's house in central London. But somehow I didn't have the courage to enter, even though it was then open to the public. Returning thirty years later in 1995, I did go in, and after seeing each of its three or four floors, returned to the information desk at the entrance. In charge was a stout Scottish woman, wearing a heavy tweed jacket. On the desk was a copy of the conservative newspaper, *The Telegraph*. An American student entered, and noting her accent, I asked her if she was a student. Yes, she said, a student in a course of English literature at Oxford. I asked her if she was reading MacDiarmid, and she had never heard of him. The Scottish lady actually bristled, and proclaimed in a rough burr: "I believe MacDiarmid is highly overrated; few in Scotland read him!"

From left: Robert Lewis, former *NDQ* editor, Thomas McGrath, and Fred Whitehead, *NDQ* contributing editor, in Fargo, ND, 1983.

I

Heaney wrote of his pen, "I'll dig with it."
The same Irish dignity in labor pulses
through your *Letter*, enters under the jawline
when we voice your words. Over and over,
reading you, a rush of pure spirit draws
the whole body in—the whole body
politic and *mythistorema* of the Dream
Americans send their children to bed with.

II

I read you first in self-exile, having fled
the haunted Nixonian darkness, drawn
west and north of your North Dakota childhood,
north of the 49th parallel where, it turned out,
some sanity prevailed.
A bevy of languages
fluttered above the Vancouver streets—
now a Far East chatter like daybreak birds,
now a wood-barrel rumble of Black Sea
wind against the forested Caucasus,
now the British landlady's kindly coos
over milk flowering in cups of Earl Grey,
now my mentor's Shankill Road lilt
like loops in a Celtic knot.
All this enriched
by your taste for words bristling with history,
maybe half-forgotten but fragrant, invoking
the roots of your urgent and capacious empathies,
your angry love for humanity aching in harness,
the deep-structured rivering of your vision.

III

Vision, as you knew, abides in "the true
road of the spirit," which you sought
and taught yourself to walk. I set foot there
myself years later, and though by then you'd
vanished among its turns, your clear voice
led me. Miraculous, how your vast *Letter*
kept arriving, healing the rift in me between
self and other. Even now you keep arriving
from the luminous Void, reminding me
what all Earth's creatures hold in common:
this transient now—this news that stays news.

Notes on Thomas McGrath's Theory of Tactical and Strategic Poetry

Dale Jacobson

The Political and Nonpolitical Individual

I don't know that any nation has obsessed over the place of politics in poetry as has the United States. In fact, I just read, in the June 2016 issue of *The Nation*, the art critic claim: "whatever art is for, it is not to do the work of politics" (Schwabsky 21). I'm not sure how Picasso would feel about this statement, but a good amount of this (at least half-century) discussion arises from discomfort with politics in art, and even a desire to subtract politics from it, if without actually saying so. Or, at least, there exists some desire to subtract collective politics, which of course leaves only the individual as the political subject.

Thomas McGrath proposed two kinds of political poetry, tactical and strategic, the first targeted for an immediate purpose or occasion, the second more comprehensive and all-encompassing of our total experience. This distinction seems easy enough until we consider how we perceive the individual in the context of political poetry.

When we assess the relationship of the individual to the political world, we can identify several perspectives. I would like to clarify four positions. I've already noted in *NDQ* (263-67) the difference between Robert Bly's psychological approach, by which he tries to assign individual psychology, with some success, to the nation as a collective, and Thomas McGrath's historical approach, by which he assesses politics as a problem of class, that is, a collective consciousness.

At a reading Galway Kinnell once shot a criticism at McGrath, who was in the audience, because McGrath "believed in a system," a criticism that could easily be made of Tolstoy, for whom history itself was such an impersonal force that he saw it as the creator of leaders rather than history being created by leaders. Tolstoy's view is more exclusive of the individual than McGrath's. Kinnell was reading in the time of the Cold War and the perennial red scare, when communism was considered the greatest systemic tyranny of the moment. The implication of his criticism seemed to be that the "individual," ideally anyway, should be independent of a system, and so should poetry. He then went on to praise Whitman, who elevated the "individual" to a universal principle. At least in political terms, Whitman's view is opposite Tolstoy's notion that the individual is a product of history.

So here we have three views of how individuals might or should exist relative to history: Kinnell's objection to systems, which logically places the individual above systems (pretty much our current ideology in poetry); Tolstoy's sense of leaders as products of history; and McGrath's view, which I would say

acknowledges somewhat the truth of Tolstoy's assessment, but also includes the potential for the individual to create history by resistance to it, though as part of a collective effort. A fourth position might be represented by Robert Bly, who attempts to resolve the conflict between the individual and history by treating nations as if they are driven by a psychology similar to individuals. Freud, we might remind ourselves, began this last approach.

Of the four perspectives, only McGrath consistently addresses the potential influence on history by the individual through joining in collective action. Bly indicates that our national assumptions need to change and criticizes our collective psychology for projecting its own limitations and prejudices on other nations, but he never addresses how this collective change might occur. McGrath talks about organizing resistance and collective action. To represent McGrath's view fully, I need to point out that the individual as agitator is also changed by his or her action. This change is a product of solidarity, one of his main motifs.

In fact, McGrath complained about how solipsistic American poetry had become, in particular objecting to its "whine," which I take to mean the individual complaint of alienation. Even the notion that "the personal is political" has been much abused. The phrase is often attributed Carol Hanisch in 1970, but may be traced to C. Wright Mills in 1959, and makes good sense until we begin to eliminate the external political world and argue that virtually any poem can be considered political, a romantic effort to eviscerate politics if taken to its extreme.

Not A Maverick

I've sometimes puzzled over the appeal of McGrath's poetry among those who don't subscribe to his politics. By way of answer, I end up leaning toward his outrage that the individual is subsumed by the corporate system, which virtually anyone can sympathize with. As identity, I wonder if the reader doesn't take from his work the validation of the individual against the great anonymous machine of history. No doubt this quality is in his work. And yet, in conversation once, he made this point, as best I can recall: "The thing that offends me most is being characterized as a maverick." I took this statement to express his insistence on the importance of collective solidarity as central to his sense of what an individual is, both socially and historically.

I would suggest that most political poetry in our country does not extend beyond simple moral protest. This may explain why so many poems are focused on individuals, whose stories of victimization are their central concern. Even much of our overtly political poetry is limited to moral objection, though it does a better job of clarifying the causes behind an individual's victimization than, say, mere general protest of war or impoverished suffering, easy enough objections to make. Still, rarely does protest poetry rise to speak

in what I would call a collective voice, but instead remains intent upon telling individual narratives, in language, by the way, that can be quite flat and prosaic, consistent with a singular as opposed to collective voice.

By contrast, it is not unusual for McGrath to use plurals: "Many thousand brothers fallen," "Our voices hoarse in the cold," "The citizens go about their business" (from "Reading the Names of the Vietnam War Dead"). Focusing on the individual more or less ignores the overall manipulation of culture as a collective entity. It also tends to ignore class. I don't believe this paucity of a collective voice is an accident. In our current culture, the individual is not usually perceived as a product of collective consciousness, as, for example, we find in Blake. Certainly individuals make individual choices and in a real sense all suffering is individual, but the realities the individual confronts or is subject to, even the allowed range of choices, are pre-defined by the collective culture. The greatest influence is our economic situation, which certainly no individual controls.

Analyzing the motivation behind genocide, as a quick thought experiment, might shed some light on this discussion. If we consider what genocide wants to accomplish, we quickly realize that it is entirely unconcerned with individuals. Leaders are targeted first because they represent the collective culture, which they have the potential of unifying. We must most accurately think of genocide as an effort to eradicate cultural consciousness itself and replace it with another, more subservient belief system. This is why the threat of the American Indian Ghost Dance was taken so seriously. Genocide is not interested in numbers of individuals but associated people. It is a reply to the potential rebellion of an impoverished class, or an oppressed ethnicity that is in some real sense "useful" to victimize or eliminate by more powerful interests. This is often done through an effort to eradicate spiritual identity, as with American Indians. Outright murder is more heinous than cultural censorship, but both are forms of genocide if we look only at their purpose, which is the same.

Any attack on culture is oppression of the first order. In poetry as in our larger culture, if the definition of the individual is widened somewhat to include collective oppression of other individuals suffering similar prejudices, it usually becomes some version of "identity politics," which allows individuals membership by reason of a particular category. Usually this membership is not a class collective identity that would recognize how the majority of humanity is oppressed, whether black or other minority, white, woman, man, LGBT, or any other specialty of oppression. It is specialized identity and so allows the individual to remain outside of class politics.

In fact, I was recently criticized for characterizing as slavery my former adjunct status at a university because, it was pointed out, I wasn't owned, raped or black, the only meaning of slavery allowed, apparently, being chattel slavery. I pointed out that "wage slavery" is a long accepted concept, going back

to Cicero and currently in use by the likes of Noam Chomsky, but I was told that as a "white man," my use of the term was "inaccurate and inappropriate." I don't know why my race should matter in political analysis, except within the politically correct strictures of identity politics, but I thought later how Frederick Douglass, who knew something about slavery and had the correct race credentials, made the same comparison of wage slavery to chattel slavery: "The difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to one slave-holder, and the former belongs to all the slave-holders, collectively" (50). The argument for "wage slavery" is predicated on the notion that the worker must rent himself or herself to an employer, who makes all decisions regarding production. Unions are an effort to combat this arrangement, if partially.

Too often the method of identity politics is formula rather than depth of understanding. So why do it? My belief is that formula-based identity politics allows for the denial of class politics, which is the largest and most unifying of all politics. We have in our country an aversion to class politics, precisely, I think, because it is a tacit acknowledgment that identity is a product of the collective culture. We prefer to see the individual as autonomous.

In the same way, seeing McGrath's poetry as that of a rebellious maverick allows his class politics to be ignored in favor the individual.

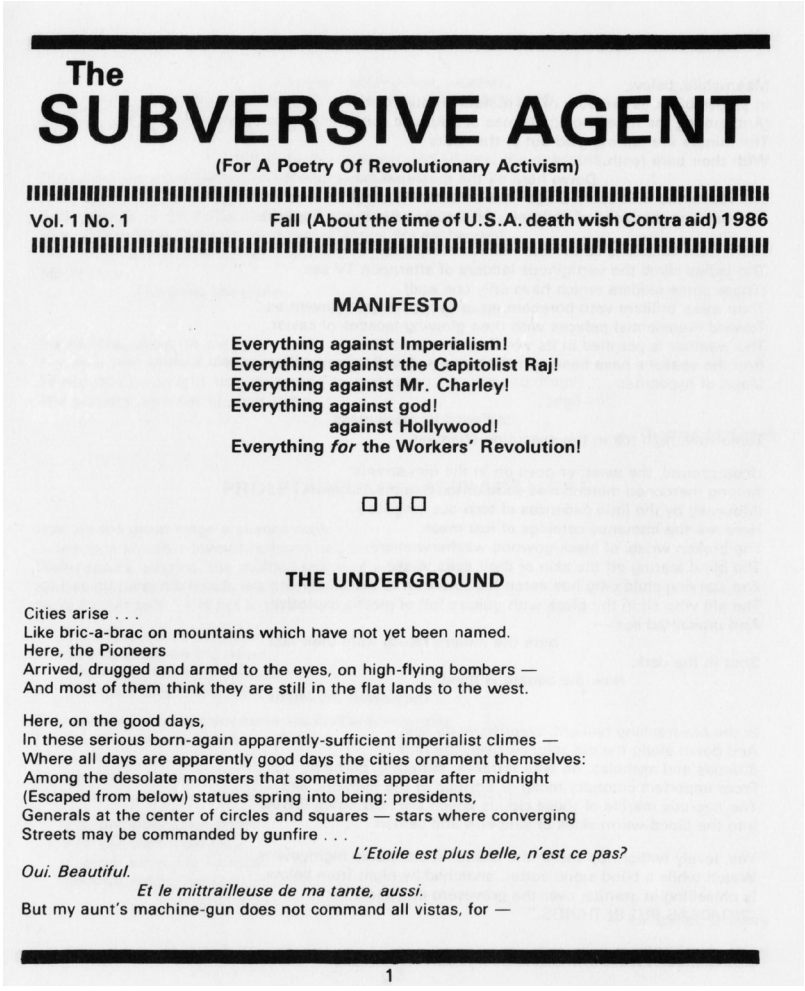
I'm not saying these specific categories of injustice are unimportant and don't have relevant unique qualities, only that they are subsets of class itself, and by their own definitions limited. If they become so exclusive to themselves as to not recognize the primacy of class, they risk being inherently divisive, sometimes with, sometimes without, intent. Let's put it this way: oppression can exist without racism, for example as H. G. Wells said of Rome, but racism, which I believe is perpetuated ultimately for economic purposes, cannot exist without classism.

It should be noted that all these alienated identities, including working class, are defensive negative responses to the absence of freedoms. Of course, those fighting for them want to see them as positive, but in a truly free society, they would all be unnecessary, or at least depoliticized. Equal individuality would be nothing more than an assumed quality and right of existence, "when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole, reflex action," as Robert Hayden says in his poem "Frederick Douglass." At that point, poetry ought to cease to be political, having other concerns, which would be interesting to speculate upon. We might, however, view our current dominate esthetic obsessed with the individual not only as evidence that we lack such freedom, but also as an effort to jump past the political collective into the world of the freed individual who would find home in the simple human collective. Unfortunately, that leap cannot succeed, blocked by our class realities, and so instead of freedom, the individual finds alienation (which I've argued elsewhere is often mistaken for freedom of "individuality"). If the individual is to fully exist, he or she

must find that freedom through a collective consciousness first.

First the Pork Chops

Thomas McGrath made a distinction between tactical and strategic political poetry. These concepts were not intended as a hard separation, but rather, useful definitions of purpose for two types of poems. In fact, he thought



The
SUBVERSIVE AGENT
(For A Poetry Of Revolutionary Activism)

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MANIFESTO

Everything against Imperialism!
Everything against the Capitolist Raj!
Everything against Mr. Charley!
Everything against god!
against Hollywood!
Everything *for* the Workers' Revolution!

□□□

THE UNDERGROUND

Cities arise . . .
Like bric-a-brac on mountains which have not yet been named.
Here, the Pioneers
Arrived, drugged and armed to the eyes, on high-flying bombers —
And most of them think they are still in the flat lands to the west.

Here, on the good days,
In these serious born-again apparently-sufficient imperialist climes —
Where all days are apparently good days the cities ornament themselves:
Among the desolate monsters that sometimes appear after midnight
(Escaped from below) statues spring into being: presidents,
Generals at the center of circles and squares — stars where converging
Streets may be commanded by gunfire . . .
L'Etoile est plus belle, n'est ce pas?
Oui. Beautiful.
Et le mittrailleuse de ma tante, aussi.
But my aunt's machine-gun does not command all vistas, for —

1

Leftist poetry pamphlet containing McGrath's poem "The Underground."

both came together in his own long poem *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. I've suggested that of the four methods of viewing politics delineated above, only McGrath's approach sees politics most clearly. And while he did write about

himself as an individual within *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, he insisted that the individual he portrayed was representative, meaning that he wrote about the intersections between himself and history in a way that was representative of us all.

Whitman arguably universalized the individual and wanted to believe that democracy would eventually lead us to universal freedom, his method for resolving political inequity. In McGrath we cannot escape the separations created by class and no solution to inequity can occur short of the eradication of class.

Obviously at times current American poetry can be political, but it is most often a poetry of protest whose ground is morality, and most often based on the sacredness of the individual, as we find in Camus, for example. In that perception, the individual becomes the arbiter of morality as if one could actually step outside the collective forces of history. Yet, the human enterprise has always been a collective one, and so is war.

To merely declare war immoral or horrible is not clarity. One can view World War II as moral easily enough from the anti-fascist perspective, and also the Spanish Civil War, and the Vietnam War (the North resisting our imperialism). Certainly fascism threatens everyone's individuality, but that's also the point: everyone. Another view perceives World War II as the result of capitalist lions in conflict, with some of our own corporatists such as Ford supplying the Nazis with war materials. Class consciousness allows room for the later economic assessment. After all, profit is profit and the masses of soldiers fighting are not beneficiaries. Individual morality breaks down pretty rapidly if we consider the larger forces at work. Collective freedom is another kind of awareness.

McGrath, so far as I know, never distinguished between moral protest poetry and tactical poetry, but he did say in an epigraph, somewhat rewriting Brecht, "First the pork chops, *then* morality," claiming that morality is a creation of social change. One weakness of a morality-based protest poem is that it tends to place the moment in a bubble, isolating it from historical context, as if some standard of morality exists as an external immutable principle.

Arguably poems of moral protest can be tactical. Definitions are approximations, but McGrath's recognition of class makes his tactical poems different from mere protest poems. His "A Note on the Late Elections" might be considered a tactical poem. Its intent is to have an immediate effect, to put into historical context the shallowness of the sixties "revolution," and its attendant "spirituality," which the poem satirizes. It also critiques the elevated hopes for change from the administration of the "reborn" President Carter, and finally the famous Bob Dylan line, "a hard rain's a-gonna fall," which the poem extends to more historical and political meaning by reference to "sailors of the Potemkin." This poem holds more historical depth and resonance than most protest poems of our day, which I maintain object loosely to war, injus-

tice, or specifically to the oppression of factions, certainly in sincere ways, but most often ignoring the class politics that underlie them.

For McGrath, class does not originate from a moral violation because it is really the consequence of historical development, which no one actually "decides." In this way, he agrees with Tolstoy, though he also insists upon organized change, which is missing in Tolstoy's approach. And while a protest poem is useful enough, we should understand that, framed as moral objection, it side-steps the issue of collective consciousness. While I don't want to insist on hard and fast categories, by contrast I believe that McGrath's poetry goes beyond mere moral objection to attack what Engels (and McGrath) called false consciousness, which brings the poem into the larger perspective of class and cultural history. In this way it is more definitive than mere objection to any moment of oppression, and larger than criticism of a particular government.

Strategic Poetry

If the difference between protest and tactical poetry is the latter's class and historical context, what, then, is the difference between McGrath's notion of a tactical poem and a strategic one? The strategic poem includes greater breadth, range, inclusion, and resonance. One can see how strategic poetry would lend itself to long poems, though again, there are many briefer poems that fit this category. A truly strategic poem spans not just more history, but more complexity. *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* goes on to counter history with the potential of eliminating the divisions among us, certainly a large project.

Currently, people themselves are often "objectified" as part of our "external" world, and perceived as enemies, whether by xenophobia, outright war, or more subtle divisions. Such objectification can operate in all directions, as Dickens expressed so clearly in *A Tale of Two Cities*. I have long believed that the ultimate purpose of poetry is to bring together what we know and learn, to undo our fragmented selves, to familiarize the "external" world as part of our subjective consciousness, and I see a strategic poem as desiring to fulfill this purpose. For me, this kind of poem is more difficult to define because it attempts to include as much as possible. In this way, Whitman was right to try to universalize the "self," though his method of attaining it, democratic government, came up short, as he seemed to recognize in relying on "God" on occasion (e.g., "Passage to India").

I want to try to answer what the ultimate purpose of strategic poetry is, especially in relation to self.

McGrath gave us a hint in saying that it "expands consciousness," perhaps similar to Whitman's idea of "dilation." In this sense I do find some similarities between McGrath and Whitman regarding the "self," though for McGrath the genuine self is created through political solidarity, absent which we

are left with alienation from each other. And so we find the strategic poem is more inclusive and therefore less targeted than either a protest or tactical poem. It has more room for context. Whitman is usually a strategic poet, as is Blake, certainly in his longer works. A strategic poem can pull in more of the universe.

Dale Jacobson, McGrath's son, Tom, and University of North Dakota history professor James Mochoruk at the centennial celebration of Thomas Mcgrath in Grand Forks on November 20, 2016. Photo courtesy of Richard Larson.

I have argued elsewhere that McGrath in *Letter* even makes a spiritual argument, built in part around the concept of satori. At times McGrath does seem to assert that the universe has a complete reality to which we have access beyond our usual illusion or limited perception. He calls this reality "indifferent joy" or the "open secret." At one point he said: "When we return to Eden we will possess full consciousness and alienation will end" ("McGrath on McGrath," 21). I am sure such a claim upsets some committed atheists and ideological materialists, even though McGrath himself said he wasn't an absolute materialist when speaking of our emotional lives.

Given all these possible components, I would suggest that a strategic poem is visionary, not in the sense of revealing "God's plan" such as in Revelations, but our true nature that exists within our potential and yearning for equality, which by definition must be political and social. "Visionary" may be a risky and inadequate word, as all big words seem to have become, but it nevertheless fits with McGrath's metaphorical use of the "shaman," the role he himself takes on in *Letter* as a guide to a new consciousness. In the simplest terms, while a tactical poem wants to reveal the importance of a specific occasion, a strategic poem *tries to reconstruct our culture itself*. McGrath, not merely being playful, talked about rewriting the past in order to reconstruct the future. Thus, we can see that a strategic poem is involved with creating

cultural consciousness, which means the reassertion of collective self, one of belonging rather than alienation. Only then can the "self" begin to awaken its true emotional being.

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Having a Beer with McGrath

Dale Jacobson

We sometimes went to the cavern,
or so it seemed to be: the tavern
to have a beer, that captured glow
of the barley sun. And talked, or didn't,
but escaped a moment or two the busy day.

Once I fell into a mediation,
a college kid trying to penetrate
my past, or the future, both terrible.
I was in a trance, and did not know
how you, your glass empty,
waited patiently, unwilling to interrupt
while I, not drinking, waited patiently,
listening down the long silence
for a whisper, some slight hint
of some oracle in my head, a word
worth speaking out of all that time.

Distances

Jared Carter

Those were the days when we emptied
a boxcar full of two-by-fours by hand.
The straw boss would nail a single bar
across the opening. One of us slid

The boards down over the bar, the other
caught and stacked them. Sometimes it took
two of us half a day to get to the bottom
of the car. Then we started on another one.

Those were the days when you draped
a canvas water bag on the hood ornament
before you set out to cross those distances.
Evaporating water kept the canvas cool.

Even now I remember those distances –
the road ahead alive and shimmering
in all that light. The horizon out there,
never quite receding, always beckoning.

Heat Lightning

Jared Carter

Someone says "I will read his book,
and even though he's gone, perhaps
it will be as though he is still here,
sitting next to me, listening to the way
I read the lines."
Someone else says
"No, it would be as though he were
in another room, unable to see you,
unable to make out his own words,
yet still noticing the way they move,
the way they resemble the sound of
thunder, far away, or heat lightning
on the horizon, promising rain."

Last Call

Jared Carter

You're gone, but not forgotten, friend—
your scraggly hair's outgrown
Your coffin, where it stands on end
and makes the bankers moan.

And what would you be thinking now
of all that's come to be,
With governments like garbage scows
that never put to sea?

And where would we be marching if
we had a place to stand?
What's happened to the working stiffs
who used to kick the can?

And what was that they said when we
were sitting in the bar?
We're closing, gents, it's time to be
out pissing at the stars.

Resistance

Jared Carter

Hundreds of men, standing in lines—
        taken from schools,
Clinics, foundries, brought there from mines.
        They know the rules.

Still, passing among them, whispers
        and pages torn—
The Hot Gates. Sicilian Vespers.
        Little Bighorn.

No other sound save that of sleet
        striking the mews
And the endless shuffling of feet
        along the queues.

Rosa Luxemburg

Jared Carter

Then snow fell, and no one found you.
Somewhere among
The currents, and the wind that blew
all winter, strong

And clear, you were imagining,
dreaming of ways
To begin once more. It was spring
and late in May

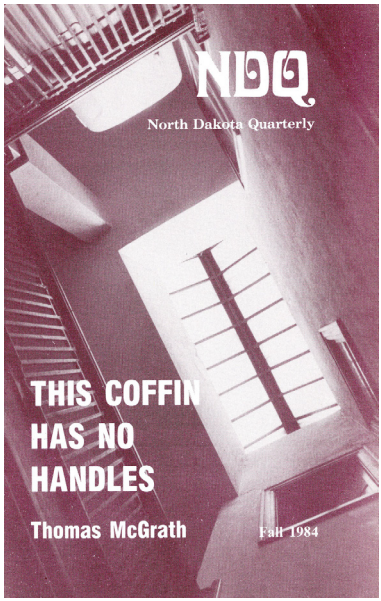
When you washed ashore. What remains
invisibly
Rises, joins with the falling rain,
flows to the sea.

Thomas McGrath: Standing Fast

Jim Burns

I probably first read Thomas McGrath in the early 1960s, and it could have been in the anthology, *Poets of Today* from 1964, edited by the old radical, Walter Lowenfels. But I was also seeing a lot of American magazines in those days and some of them may have had poems by him. A little later, there was the very fine anthology, *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*, edited by Hayden Carruth, which had several McGrath poems, including the moving, "Ode for the American dead in Korea."

I'm not going to claim that I've ever read McGrath in what might be called a systematic way. On the whole, I tend to like poems rather than poets and rarely find everything a poet writes to be of interest. There are a few poets whose work I watched out for over the years. Kenneth Rexroth, Philip Levine (I'm limiting my comments to American poets), and Thomas McGrath, were among them. And, perhaps, those few poets did always produce poems that attracted my attention, though I can't honestly say I found them always memorable or had any great desire to read them again.



But the poems that did stay in my mind have remained with me and become a part of my life. I'm thinking of Rexroth's "Thou Shalt Not Kill," for its intensity and the guide it provided to an area of what might be called non-establishment poetry. And of Levine's "Francisco, I'll Bring You Red Carnations," and "To Cipriano in the Wind," poems that impressed me with their movement and their conviction that the radical past needed to be remembered. Or McGrath's "Driving Towards Boston I Run Across One of Robert Bly's Old Poems," a poem with humour and a sense of place. It may be that some of these poems will not be considered the poet's best by critics. I'm not sure that matters. Poetry is written by individuals and responded to by individuals, and what seems significant to one person will not necessarily impress someone else.

Reading McGrath—poems, his novel, *This Coffin Has No Handles*, a much-treasured copy of the original edition of *Longshot O'Leary's Garland*

of Practical Poesie, various interviews with him—I was always struck by the consistency in his approach to life and to writing poetry. I was intrigued when I read him on the subject of what he referred to as "tactical" and "strategic" poetry. The tactical poem is the one that comments on a particular issue, something that may be in the news, or just invites a spontaneous reaction, and consequently could have a limited lifespan because of that. The strategic poem looks to the longer concerns of the poet and reader. McGrath's "The Communist Poet in Hell" from *Death Song,* is a tactical poem:

> Just like Fargo and Harvard!
> Daily instruction in politics
> By tiny petty
> Bourgeois critics and poets—
> The ones who voted for Kennedy
> Even when he wasn't running.

In contrast, the strategic poem will want to point to a wider issue, as in the longer "An Incident in the Life of a Prophet":

> And the liberals said: Hush, mate, we know it is hard,
> And naturally we will help you, but you must be conscious
> Of the danger of letting the people know they've been had.
> For Christ's sake don't wake up that sleeping monster. (*Selected*)

McGrath, as a political poet, could see the value in both kinds of poems, whereas a critic might want to dismiss tactical poems because they try to make an immediate impact and may lack subtlety. As someone who for many years wrote short tactical poems for the British left-wing weekly, *Tribune*, I valued McGrath's comments. They seemed to me to take a sensible approach to the subject when I was producing poems like the following in response to the news:

> Report from East Berlin
>
> When the People's Police
> in the People's State
> ordered the people to disperse,
> they refused
> and stood their ground.

The People's Police then charged
and drove them up
the Unter den Linden,
with the people all the time
singing The Internationale.
The report does not say
which song, if any,
the People's Police sang.

A Small Incident in Jerusalem

"Creating wealth is a Christian obligation."
—Mrs. Thatcher

She came down to the church in the city,
and told the moneylenders
what they wanted to hear,
and they were overjoyed at her words.

Oh, there was a man who made a fuss,
and overturned a table or two,
but the police threw him out,
and noted his name for future reference.

McGrath rightly pointed to the limitations of tactical poetry, quoting Friedrich Engels who, when asked what had happened to the revolutionary poetry of 1848, replied; "It died with the political prejudices of the time." But as McGrath added: "That is bound to be the fate of a lot of tactical poetry. But that's O.K. If we have to have somebody give us a guarantee that our work is going to last a thousand years before we'll be willing to write it, we may as well give up the ghost" ("Frontiers").

From that I would assume that McGrath, as a compulsive writer (or so he seemed to me), had been happy to write down whatever had occurred to him in terms of material for a poem. There are scattered through his books any number of short poems, some with only four or six lines, many of which can appear inconsequential. In a way they are, particularly if considered alone:

Beyond Seattle

Far islands . . . veiled by cold rain.
Beaches lighted by a million candle-fish.
Snow on the mountain.
Salmon at the mouth of the river.

Deprivation

The dull knife cuts our hand—
It has felt neglected,
Thirsty,
For a long time.

I doubt that these poems (from *Selected Poems*) were meant to be read alone. If taken together, however, with each other and the longer poems they accompany, they begin to add up to a long poem, fragmented though it may be.

This brings me to the question of long poems, and I cheerfully admit to an aversion to them. Is this a comment on my limited attention span? I don't think so, and I'd be more inclined to suggest that the problem with long poems is that very few of them, in my experience, can sustain the interest, the movement, the quality of language, sufficiently well to completely hold the reader's attention. Or should I say "my" attention? This is a personal response to McGrath's work. It certainly holds true for me with regard to what many consider his major achievement, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. There are intense passages, moving passages, interesting passages:

Comes in. Swinging on the chain-fall chainsend his pick of the heap
Some Dead-sea-monster-shape unarticulated: built up, like pride,
In the (almost) infinitely reticulated blueprint mind.
(Got to be a mind somewhere if you're building a ship.) He drags
It: to the wheel of the welding table; lifts his catch
And turns the wheel.

That's from McGrath's wartime experiences in the New Jersey shipyards. And in a more elegiac mood:

But I know these labyrinthine ways and steer by the stars,
Or like a dog-barking navigator, hugging the coast,
I take my bearings by sound, hearing the Burnses' cow
Unspool the cud of her Christmas silence with a long moo, O r
a musical bar of indignant song, a night-blooming rooster
Cock-alarming the town from down on its southern shore.

I can find many passages like these in the four hundred or so pages of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, but there are others that are frankly dull and long-winded. Luckily, the latter don't outweigh the better bits.

I think, in a way, that McGrath's notion of all those short poems, "aphorisms, epigrams, songs, song-like poems," might contribute better to a long poem. And he did suggest this when he said: "But these are only fragments

from the long poem which the poet somehow failed to write, that long poem which he will go on trying to write by fits and starts his whole life long" ("McGrath on McGrath"). I'll grant that it's to McGrath's credit that he wrote any number of short poems that added up to a kind of longer poem, and wrote the projected long poem as well. Not many of us can do that. We struggle most of the time to get the short poems done.

When planning this piece I decided to use the words "Standing Fast" in the title, taking them from the name of a novel by Harvey Swados, another American writer I admire. His book tells the story of a group of radicals and what happens to them as the Cold War and rising affluence combine to lessen their activities and influence. I think the difference is that McGrath never compromised, unlike some of the characters in Swados's book, and continued to rail against the system no matter what had happened to him personally or to society in general. Everything, he said, had been "Los Angelized." The corruption was total. Alan Wald, writing about *Standing Fast* in his *The New York Intellectuals*, said: "Swados's conclusion is pessimistic: the only purpose in life is to hold out or stand fast against inevitable despair and corruption as long as one can."

I've never felt that McGrath succumbed to despair, despite what happened to him. His testimony when summoned to appear before the House on Un-American Activities Committee was dignified, and his refusal to cooperate with the committee meant that he lost his teaching post and had to scuffle for several years before finding another one. And the content of his poems didn't change any more than his political allegiances. Not everyone would have stood fast in the face of political harassment and denial of the right to work at one's profession, nor when presented with the fact that radicalism in any widespread way had declined. Most people seemed happy with the capitalist system. And accepted the rhetoric of the Cold War.

I'm not sure how many people in Britain are familiar with Thomas McGrath's poetry. Very few, I suspect, if my own experiences among those who write and read poetry are anything to go by. There may be a handful of academics who know his work. The British poet Andy Croft certainly will. The late E. P. Thompson knew McGrath and wrote about him perceptively.[1] But are there more? Somehow, I feel that McGrath's style of writing, together with the open political content of many of his poems, might work against him gaining a wider readership in Britain. And that's a pity, because several of his more-lyrical and less-didactic poems would surely appeal to people if they got the chance to read them. There are some lovely lines and phrases in poems like "The Dream Range" in *Selected Poems: 1938-1988*.

> When, young, I slept in a cold bed
> My sleep was classical and calm.
> The fallow field, the pruned vine

The call of curlew and of kine—
These claimed and tuned my pastoral head:
I had no need for the dream range.

And "During the Fall" in *Passages Towards the Dark*:

Always when the iron of autumn in the wind
Cankers the summer with the rust of change
I think of all my dead, now blown so far
Into the night that fattens on the bough
Loosening the hectic leaves of our cold calendar.

Or the sharp, dark humor in "Song" in *The Movie at the End of the World* would likely hit home:

Lovers in ladies' magazines
(Tragedies hinted on the cover)
Avoid Time's nets and part no more
Than from one slick page to another.

As for myself, as I said earlier, I make no claim to having studied McGrath's work in depth. I related to him partly because of his politics, and I make no apologies for that, and because the range of his writing demonstrated an openness to the world I thought attractive. The poems seemed to invite me in, and I found little or no evidence of any deliberate attempts to exclude me from their meaning. His poetry wasn't from the world of Pound or Eliot, any more than were his politics. True, there were sometimes references to American themes and events or personalities that might cause an outsider to pause for a while. And from that point of view I'm perhaps lucky in that I do have some familiarity with American labor history and politics, and related matters. But the poems never depended on a detailed awareness of their references to understand what they added up to.

A final note. I mentioned my copy of *Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie*. It's in a box with *We Gather Strength: Poems by Herman Spector, Joseph Kalar, Edwin Rolfe, and Sol Funaroff*, published by the Liberal Press in 1933. McGrath knew Edwin Rolfe, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and dedicated a poem to him, but I wonder if he was familiar with the work of the others, all members of the Communist Party in the 1930s. Obviously, he wouldn't have seen the book when it was published, but he may have come across it later, or at least seen poems by the people concerned in other publications. Funaroff died early, and Spector and Kalar drifted away from radical politics

and poetry. Rolfe was the only one who remained active in the Communist Party until his death in 1954. But they're all the kind of poets I admire, along with Thomas McGrath.

Note

[1] See *TriQuarterly* 70, Fall, 1987.

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You Can Start the Praises Now: A Poem That Refuses to Forget Thomas McGrath Even as America Is Busy Digitizing and Forgetting Almost Everything

John Bradley

For you told us "It clearly behooves us to praise / Most highly" in your unimaginary letter to many an unimaginary friend.

For you showed us how to begin by beginning exactly where we must begin, when you wrote: "I'm sitting here at 2714 Marsh Street / Writing, rolling east with the earth." For even as 2714 Marsh Street is now rolling freeway, it is someone's street, my street, our rolling missing street.

For you knew how to write a poem and were not afraid to tell us: "You have to know where the hell you're at. You have to know where your ass is sitting. Otherwise you can't do it. And there's no way you can write anything very good when the energy is up in the air that way. When nothing is located. When everything becomes universalized. This is what I don't like about certain poets—I won't even mention them—who don't seem to belong anyplace. They don't know a single thing. There are New York poets who have never been on the street. This can't be healthy for anybody. You ought to know things like the weather. You have to know your neighborhood. You have to know the color of people's eyes. You have to know the way they talk."

For you sat before the so-called House Un-American Activities Committee, though they acted in a rather American manner, with fear and self-righteousness aforethought, and in the name of Chaucer and Marvell, Black and Shelley, Garcia Lorca and all your stubborn Irish clan, you refused to talk. Even though you would be force-fed the bile of the blacklist, you refused to feed the Committee the names and lives they demanded, so they could be fed more names and lives.

For you saw our innate doubleness: "Everybody leads at least two lives: one as a unique individual with experience that no one else can have; and yet at the same time that he is having that unique experience, he is having, also, many times the same kind of experience that someone else is having."

For you reminded us that the poem must always tell us: "What's outside the window?"

For you looked out the window, jumped in and out of many windows, to discover that America we prefer not to see: "Strangers: go tell among the Companions / These dead weren't put down by Cheyennes or Red Chinese / The poison of their own sweet country has brought them here."

For you praised grandfather's buffalo coat, and the West, for you saw as a child and never forgot "the Indian graves / Alive and flickering with the gopher light." For you knew "There is no America outside the West, and there

never will be." Even as you knew that the West was "lost as soon as it was found."

For you wrote a political novel about a coffin with no handles, and you could not stop the poetry from happening there, despite your hard-boiled noir prose: "The first floor was paved with cheap linoleum meant to suggest marble. It smelled of bacon, cabbage, incense, and camel dung. On the second floor the odor changed to owls' eyes steeped in cauliflower sperm."

For you praised many things not praised enough, such as vegetables, praising even the "syllabus of corn," so that I can no longer create said document (a syllabus for those raised on corn byproducts) without praising you, and Pablo Neruda, and all the elemental odes wandering in a cornfield in North Dakota, which is north, and south, and east, and west of everywhere.

For you embraced words not in the official lexicon, words made American by blood and loss, such as "wampum," an Algonquin word (from *wampumpeag*), which means "string of white shell beads," which were used in trading with whites, which brings us to money, which rarely brings us anywhere.

For you praised the bread of this world, remembering, in farm kitchens, those hands of "large and lonely women," for their labor "rounds the loaves and lives / Of those around them." For this was the world of the high plains you knew as a child, and you never forgot who provided the daily bread.

For you praised beer, "the noble" barley, the "medicinal" hops, and the "tireless" yeast, even unto the water, with its "savor of secret iron!" Whereupon you took the days of the week and schooled them with new histories to let us see that "it was beer that invented Sunday," for it is "heart medicine" for all who labor.

For you praised labor when other poets would not go near that sweaty world, for it *is* sweaty, and reeks of class, and thus has been judged by the poetry overlords "unpoetic," yet you found much poetry there, even admidst the machinery of farming, which was rapidly turning the worker into a cog: "I turned in machine-made circles: first from the screaming red / Weather where the straw stack grew and the rattling thresher mourned; / Then to the rocking engine where the flywheel flashed and labored / And the drive belt waxed and waned, the splices clapped at its cross / Ebbing and flowing, slack or taut as the spikers / Dropped the bivouacked wheat in the feeder's revolving throat."

Yet you would also say of labor and the American Dream: "Every man on his own. / It's here / Someplace / all went wrong / For work alone is play / Or slavery."

For it cannot be ignored that, in your most McGrathian manner, you praised sex, for it had long been written that "Thou shalt not write of sex in literary poetry," which meant that you had no choice but to write of it deeply and often: "Under the Dog's Star's blaze, in the high rooms of the moonlight, / In the doze and balance of the wide noon / . . . And under the coupling of the wheeling night / . . . Or flat on the floor, or the back seat of a car, / Or a groaning trestle table in the Methodist Church basement, / And far in the

fields, and high in the hills, and hot / And quick in the roaring cars: by the bridge, by the river, / In Troop Nine's dank log cabin where the Cheyenne flows: / By light, by dark, up on the roof, in the cellar, / In the rattling belfry where the bats complained, / Or backed against trees, or against squealing fences, / Or belly to belly with no place to lie down / In the light of the dreaming moon."

For you praised the persistence of love, which you witnessed once on a bus headed for Chicago, where you observed how love visited itself upon the most unlikely of lovers, their lovemaking "disturbing the passengers and sometimes themselves." And you found love "Human, impermanent, and permanently good."

For you satirized friend and foe alike, such as when driving toward Boston you ran over one of Robert Bly's "while driving" poems. Yet even in a poem full of japery, as well as dagger-sharp exclamation marks, you could not refrain from duly noting of our American political landscape: those Boston men—"Cabots and the Lodges and Lowells are dozing / (Dreaming of rum and molasses, dreaming of Sacco and Vanzetti)." As they are still.

For you could look into the abyss of ecstatic nuclear Armageddon and imagine the act of love in such a world, all while satirizing a pre-nuclear love poem with your post-nuclear humor: "Come live with me and be my love . . . Who knows? but we may get a boy— // Some paragon with but one head / And no more brains than is allowed; And between his legs, where once was love, / Monsters to pack the future with."

For you laughed not only at all who needed it, but also at yourself: "A little wizened-up wisp of a man: / Hair like an out-of-style bird's nest and eyes as wild as a wolf's! / Gorbellied, bent out of shape, short and scant of breath—A walking chronicle."

For you could write a nearly endless poem, but also short poems, some so short we cannot believe the entire poem can all be there, and yet it is, and more, such as in, "Warning": "So— / You recognize my footprint . . . / But don't think you know / Which way I've gone!"

Praise for how you could do so much with so little, for everything around you seemed to be a prompt, as in "Half Measure": "Above high-tide mark on the long beach / There is one old shoe. / Someone of little faith / Has gone for a long walk on water."

Praise for how, in only two subversive lines, you could find us out, as in this poem you aptly called "Poem": "You out there, so secret. / What makes you think you're so alone?"

For when interrupted while telling a story about alligators going up a stairway, you were lobbed a question by a rude inquisitioner, who called out, "Hey, McGrath, what's the meaning of life?" And without pause, you turned and said, "Struggle," and then continued on with your alligator tale.

For you praised much, but you knew there can be no true praise without maledictions, and so you cursed much, unafraid to bestow one upon us as

freely as the other, as when you wrote: "Now in the chill streets / I hear the hurting, the long thunder of money. / A queer parade goes past: Informers, shit-eaters, fetishists / Punkin'-faced cretins, and the little deformed traders / In lunar nutmegs and submarine bibles. / And the parlor anarchist comes by, to hang in my ear / His tiny diseased pearls like the guano of meat-eating birds."

For no American poet could curse like you, and then, in the same nearly endless book, offer page after blessed page of blesseds: "Blessed be speech and silence; / Blessed be the blood hung like a bell in my body's branching tree; / Blessed be dung and honey . . . Blessed be my writing hand and arm and the black lands of my secret heart."

For you saw our future, and though you saw it plain, through and through, you laughed, in a poem you called "Portent": "Today they invent / The computer that invents / Computers. / Tomorrow—who knows?— / The wheel. / After that, / Sooner or later, / Fire."

For there should be a marker in the highway that rolls over and over 2714 Marsh Street. It should say, "O sleepless American sleepers. Thomas McGrath lived and loved and wrote here. To seed the turning furrow of his light."

For while there is no Collected Poems of Thomas McGrath, there is the rough congress of your irregular irregulars, who keep your poems alive in memory, and in speech, and in the tireless ether.

For you told us well: "Because you cannot praise without love, heart's ease, poems, praise." For this, and so much more, we praise you, Tom McGrath, now and all ways.

Stories Best Told Over Drinks

Thom Caraway

i.
Nothing flutters. Rain
in a season of snow.
Dogs in the alley just slink.

We've forgotten our names
and why birds fly overhead.

This the longest night
in the history of the Earth.
4.5 billion years, and this
is the darkness we endure.

ii.
There were nights I could hit the mark
with my eyes closed. The narrow flight,
triple-20. Every time. A dumb game
in a dive bar. Three-pint mugs of beer, four dollars.
In a glowing corner we all sat together. Every night, the same
liturgy. A couple rounds of beer, recount
the day, smoke our cigarettes, retell the best stories
we all already knew, then unload to the dart boards.

iii.
What else is there to tell: two writers
fought in an alley after a night of drinking,
surrounded by other writers and bar-fly friends
eager for a story of their own. It took years,
but that was the beginning of the end of Shane
and I as friends, my name slowly entering
his book of ghosts. It couldn't have gone another way.
All those friends burning out the splendor
of our lives then.

When I recall the North Dakota years,
I see Russian olive trees, snow over train tracks,
grainy and whisper-loud. The scouring wind, hazy cold light.
I see truck stops and flood walls, a twenty-foot cairn
marking the peak rise of '97, the high water mark still stained
on the buildings downtown. On the coldest nights
I speak their names into wind. Maxwell, Liz, Shane,
Fetsch, Joe Holt, Gilad and Emily, Jen and Joel,
Ashley, who was always sad, Andrea, who couldn't
sleep, McGurran, Evan and Heidi. Lisa.
I see the apparitions of their faces, those that kept me safe,
anchored me, the whole shining circle of them,
Shane lurching out of the darkness, fists clenched,
all of us desperate to grasp the others just a while longer.

The Voice That Speaks

Thom Caraway

has been walking around your town
has tripped over the broken sidewalk
has peered in your window

the voice that speaks is disappointed
in your failure to volunteer in your television
your desire to watch it

the voice that speaks wakes in deep morning
considers the day's work and rolls back over

the chickens are not yet restless and the dog
does not yet have to pee

raccoons and skunks bumble back
toward dens under the wild rose
or to the crack in a neighbor's foundation

sun on one horizon
moon on the other
the surface of the lake
sleeps glassy

the voice that speaks has put
two and two together
has found answers in the clouds
in the recycling bin

has washed the laundry
dried it on a line
folded it neatly

Language of the Future

Thom Caraway

1. Pitfalls in English

"Slang cripples your speech and causes you to appear at a disadvantage. If you always say 'bawled out' for 'reprimanded' or 'found fault with' for 'criticized,' you will entirely forget these expressions and when you wish to make a favorable impression, the correct words will not come to your aid, but your quick tongue will blurt out the vulgarism, "'bawled us out'" (Hadida 4).

2. Via negativa

We are down to our last few known words, and they fail us,
as ever they did. Or, we have failed the words. There are still the Platitudes
that serve us well, Thoughts and Prayers, Thank You, How Are You, Good Day,
Good Bye, BOGO, New and Improved, While Supplies Last.
In this our desert, the noise becomes sweet as silence, because it is silence,
the way the wind in dry grass is silence, the piercing hum you get so used to
you no longer hear it. Such are our voices, our songs and poems.
Whatever need there is, our piercing silence is insufficient.

We invent across the gaps, sure. IMO, it should be enough.
JK. IKR? I s s n t eno g. LOL.

3. Walk in the Park

There are 20 people in the park. 17 are homeless. 8 are drunk. 7 are children. 5 are playing basketball. 2 are unconscious.

There are 7 people in the park. 3 are children. 4 are parents. 2 are drunk. 0 are homeless.

There are 14 people in the park. 4 are selling drugs. 2 are playing basketball. 2 are playing on the swings. 3 are buying drugs. 2 are unconscious.

4. "Don't empty churches ring?"[1]

We don't know what to call one another how to greet each other.
And also upon you.
Eh-men or ah-men?
We forget ceremony, we forget liturgy, the steady rhythm of hymn
because they don't matter. Or they are all that matter.
A glass the size of the world has shattered.
High up the hill, the gothic steeple is visible across the city.
Inside, the building breathes old, generates its own

air pressure. My body feels minute, a fraction
of a molecule. Faces carved in walls. I remember stone-cast
bones in Bremen, catacombs in Paris, whole cities
of the dead pushing up from bony tunnels. What draws us,
the living and dead, into these tombs, these gardens?
Maybe the glass broke inside a bigger glass.

5. Letter to an Imaginary Friend

Remember when we sat in an empty bathtub, smoking out the window. Remember when everything mattered and we knew things. How have we become lost? Wandering through dust. We talked until talking / was the only air we could breath. We talked when it was warm. We talked when it was windy, which was only always. The act itself had meaning, / the words understood, our necessary sacrament, wafers dissolving on tongues. / Is the light the same? How could it be?

6. Bawled out

Late at night, the voice from two houses away,
cursing again the goddamn cats, the nails he hammers
back into fences, the scrap he burns. There are nights
he's the mouth of the Spirit, or maybe the Father,
or maybe my father, drunk, pissed at the world,
but only finding my mother, who gave as good,
and my sister doesn't sleep on the bunk above me
as we fail again to say our hallelujahs.

7. Zeitgeist

It's not that nobody is working on it. We have new languages,
but we've forgotten words, forgotten syllables, the shapes
of the silences between. The language has turned to various ways
of saying no, but even no is unheard, only less subtle
shades of this, of mine, of me, my despair, my trauma,
my validation, my invalidation, my invisibility. We need that.
But not only that.

8. Pitfalls

"The renovation of your speech will take time. You will find that you can not eliminate in a short period the errors you have carelessly made during the years you have lived in disregard of the value of correct speech. Begin at once to discard the vulgarisms. To eliminate slang is possible whether you have had educational advantage or not, and for this purpose you require neither teacher nor book" (Hadida 4).

9. Churches

Gospel of wealth
Gospel of peace and reconciliation
Gospel of whispering ghosts
Gospel of abominations in the eyes of the LORD
Gospel of burn in Hell
Gospel of love thy neighbor
Gospel of as thou lovest thy self
Gospel of credit score
Gospel of bikini body
Gospel of cigarettes and whiskey
Gospel of Sunday service, of NFL
Gospel of denial, or rape, of no, of didn't happen, of not-my-fault
Gospel of abuse
Gospel of thou shalt not
Gospel of shalt not
Gospel of the air she breathes
Gospel of the early rose in pale dawn
Gospel of bullets
Gospel of more
Gospel of dust
Gospel of air

10. Zeitgeist

We are not made to only take punches
or at least not one punch over and over.
Monologue: Let our fear evaporate.
Monologue: Let our fear be widely known.
Monologues: Your fear is the root of ours.
End scene. People scatter, shout, and throw.
A camera the size of the world captures
the images and we struggle for four seconds
to understand what it is we're seeing.
It is a man with a gun, a man with a bomb,
it looked like he might mean ill, how did I know
it was only a toy, how did I know I was only a toy.
Then it's over, the camera shakes, the image breaks
and we worry to the next scene, whatever it takes.

11. Language

Try to remember the last full thing you said.
A complete sentence not about money or food
or outrage or grief. No, keep the grief, it is the only silence
that matters now. The dragon has killed the great king,
the king has killed the great dragon, and now
we build the cairn, visible from sea, visible from space,
visible from the future. A shimmering tower of phones
and remote controls, drones and cameras. Toss on your books,
we're done with them. For all our love of the silence of our noise,
we must not take our knowledge with us. Leave it behind.
What good can it do?

12. Noisome

The sound of wind in sea grass, the shorebirds
and shining sliding sandy sand. The bawling child
strapped in her chair, the bawling dog, tethered
to a hand. The bawling gull, after bread and crumbs
and tide-left crab, mole shrimp. The distant shore-break
seething salt over sand. The wash and crush, a nothing
that becomes nothing that becomes clouds, the in-bound
storm flashing the coastline. We can hear nothing else.

13. The light is the same

Fall thunderheads bounce off the city and south. Pleasant wind above the river. Fractured clouds stud the afterstorm sky, the setting sun yellowing the rivers dull knife as it slices the town. Out west, the harvest is done. The sons of farmers drink beer from bottles because the work is done again. Elsewhere it is the same, only the reverse. Elsewhere, the work is undone, and no sons rest, until they are shot, until they forget what is was they came here to do. Elsewhere, everywhere else, the words turn wine-sour in our mouths.

Note

[1]This title is a line from Richard Hugo's poem "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg," from *Making Certain it Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo*. Norton, 1984.

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Poets in Funny Clothes: McGrath and the Beats

James McKenzie

Preface

Regular *NDQ* readers are familiar with both Thomas McGrath's poetry and the UND Writers Conference, now in its 48th year. In 1974, the Conference's fifth year, these two institutions (cue McGrath's laughter at being "institutionalized") came together in an unusual event that illuminated some of the more obscure corners of American literary, cultural, and political history. The final shape of the 1974 conference was the result of interesting, make-it-up-as-you-go choices, the details of which shed further light on the times, literary and otherwise.

The 1973 Conference, Women in the Arts, had introduced a new format: noon sessions where writers interacted with each other and took questions before a public audience. The intent was to involve students as much as possible both in the conference and with women's issues as second-wave feminism was rippling through the university and wider communities in North Dakota—consciousness-raising on several fronts. Organizers decided to stage the open mike sessions in the Fireside Lounge of the Memorial Union. No record of these well-attended sessions survives beyond memory, but they were lively; passing students, faculty, and staff, were riveted in place by what they heard from invited guests and each other. Thus was born what conference organizers still refer to as noon panels.

After the success of the Women in the Arts conference, founding director John Little began dreaming of inviting Allen Ginsberg for the 1974 conference. Planning committee member Dan Eades suggested that the best way to do that was to invite Allen's longtime partner Peter Orlovsky as an equal. Who knew?—maybe then other Beat poets might want to come. Why not name the conference after Lawrence Ferlinghetti's publishing house and bookstore, call it "City Lights in North Dakota," and see if Ferlinghetti would join us? Word spread and soon Gregory Corso, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Orlovsky, and Gary Snyder wanted to visit for the entire week, which they did. Kenneth Rexroth joined them for the last two days of the memorable gathering. University Art Gallery Director Laurel Reuter organized an exhibit of Kenneth Patchen's "picture poems" to coincide with the conference and invited his widow Miriam to read.

Each poet receive an identical, modest stipend, and brought several other associates with them. Among the attendees was Shigeyoshi Murao, manager of City Lights, who had gained notoriety by selling a copy of Ginsberg's *Howl* to an undercover San Francisco police officer who, with others, deemed it obscene; the resulting case lead to a landmark First Amendment decision. With such a historic gathering in the offing, a grant was used to hire photographer Dennis Sorensen and sound technician Don Forsman, both undergraduates, to document everything.

Rich and wonderful as the historic reunion of the Beats already was, it took on added significance when Tom McGrath showed up in mid-week, as this account shows.

I

Literary taxonomy—movements, schools, manifestoes, etc.—has some use in quieting the mind's ceaseless quest for order; but movements pass. Who remembers Pound's Vorticism? Where are we now with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry? Outlaw Thomas McGrath's poetry, however, always served goals beyond the merely literary, nothing less than helping to bring about that "revolutionary miracle" imagined in his prefatory note to Parts I and II of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. Hence "McGrath's Law: All battles are lost but the last," the conclusion of a long, lyrical catalog of autobiographical highlights, nodes where his personal life intersected with larger histories, places where McGrath, with others, joined the battle. The original title for *This Coffin Has No Handles*, McGrath's novel about a 1945 New York dock strike (one of those nodes), shortened the phrase to the more enigmatic, *All But the Last*.

McGrath, "still—alas—America's greatest unread poet," as Philip Levine called him in 2003, has often been associated with the Beats, but always with important caveats. Levine himself, in his review of *Poets of the Non-Existent City: Los Angeles in the McCarthy Era*, calls McGrath and the circle of poets around him "the literary premature anti-fascists of Los Angeles . . . the city's outcast bards, its Beats before the term was plundered. . . . They prepared a rich soil out of which a larger, more diversified American poetry of the West would soon spring."

Levine's reference to the plundering of the Beats recalls McGrath's oft-repeated taxonomy of poets as cattlemen, sheepmen, and outlaws. He invokes these distinctions in Part I of *Letter*, in a section dealing with his time among the New Critics and Southern Agrarians at LSU, "a little Athens-on-the bayou." McGrath published his final elaboration of these colorful, westernized literary categories in an essay for Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres's special McGrath issue of *Tri-Quarterly*.

Cattlemen are "aristos: Eliot; Yeats; Tate." McGrath, clearly a lifelong outlaw, defines that group as "proletarian or allied Social Revolutionaries and classless crazies." Sheepmen, for McGrath, are "bourgeois 'democrats': most of Whitman, alas; Williams; most of Crane, alas; Ginsberg, etc. etc. etc." Like Williams, Ginsberg does not even merit McGrath's lamenting "alas." As for the ongoing plundering of the Beats, one can only guess at what Levine thought of the new glitzy, two-story Beat Museum beckoning tourists to its prominent North Beach intersection. Even McGrath's wildest, funniest satire might not have come up with such an institution, and "sheepmen" seems too weak a term for the kind of memorable invective he would have hurled at such an enterprise.

Two younger poets with first-hand knowledge of how McGrath saw the Beats, Robert Edwards and Dale Jacobson, make similar judgments. "Tom had been a Beat before there were any Beats," Edwards writes. "I think at one

time Tom had been a hep cat, not unacquainted with all-night jazz and hemp. Yet he was never, exactly, a Beat" (Edwards xiv).

Jacobson's caveats are more substantive, exploring his own uncertainty about "the limitations of Beat poetry," both its form, "sometimes staccato, sometimes relentless rhythms," and its "method or tone." "Much of the poetry was inventive and fresh, anti-academic," he writes in *Thomas McGrath: A Memoir*, his online recollection of his long-time friendship with the older poet. "But it also seemed restrictive in feeling: what I objected to most was its idiosyncratic voice, as if the personal view was the entire horizon. . . . However useful and good the message, it seemed to remain individual rather than collective." McGrath received Jacobson's criticism of the Beats with "a noncommittal look, as though he didn't quite agree with the question."

II

McGrath's surprise visit to UND's Beat Writers Conference in 1974—more a welcome interception than an appearance, since he was not formally invited—was, like the entire conference, recorded and transcribed.[1] That transcript confirms Jacobson's memories and helps clarify in other ways McGrath's relationship to the Beats, beginning in 1955, when, unknown to each other, Ginsberg and McGrath were both working on their respective long-line, long form, and, in quite different ways, revolutionary poems: *Howl* and *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. Both were working in the West by then: McGrath in Los Angeles, recently blacklisted from both film and academe; Ginsberg in San Francisco, out of the closet and done with his work as a market researcher and English graduate student.

By the time of the Beat Writers Conference, McGrath was teaching in Moorhead, Minnesota. A 1935 UND English graduate and known on campus among people who cared about poetry, he'd been a featured guest at previous conferences in 1971 and 1972, but those conferences were less visible to the wider public. Poet Robert King, a UND faculty member, referred to himself as moderator during the first panel, two days before McGrath showed up. But King's opening prediction that "it may not be that moderate" immediately proved prescient.

Moments after King's remark, Gregory Corso, the conference's enfant terrible, always playing to the largely student audience, yelled from the audience, "I'll sit with the star fuckers," and joined Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Peter Orlovsky, and Gary Snyder on the stage. He immediately began interrupting discussions of censorship (there had been a recent book-burning in Drake, North Dakota), the environment, feminism, and other topics arising from both the audience and his fellow poets. Such frequent Corso one-liners as "Bullshit, it's finished. Nixon's the last president" and "What do you folks think of the handsomeness of the Beatniks?" continually derailed the discourse and led his fellow poets, including the patient Ginsberg, to tell him to shut up, mostly to no avail.

After skipping Wednesday's session, dominated by Ginsberg-led chanting of Buddhist mantras, Corso returned on Thursday. And he immediately began his attention-seeking interruptions.

McGrath, taking it all in with Jacobson in the rear of the hall had had enough. "Can I speak to the man on the left?" he shouted.

The following transcript, with slight edits of extraneous or repetitious details, makes clear just how well the West Coast Beats knew McGrath even though it had been many years since any of them had seen him. Beginning with Rexroth's identifying him by voice alone:

Rexroth: Is that Tom? Sounds like his voice.
Ferlinghetti: Yes it is.
Rexroth: It's kind of hard to hear you, Tom.
Ferlinghetti: Hey, Tom McGrath! Why don't you come up and join us?
Corso: Oh, I haven't seen you in years man. Come up here. I know your face.

McGrath had brought his five-year-old son Tomasito with him. The ever solicitous Peter Orlovsky found an extra chair and soon McGrath, with his son on his lap, joined the invited poets on the stage.

McClure: You look like something from the IRA.
McGrath: IRA your ass.
Rexroth: It's true. You do look more Irish as you get older.

Corso: There you go, Tom. Good deal. Oh, you're looking great, Tom. Man, it's been ten years since I saw your face last.

McGrath: Twenty. We did meet once long ago.

Corso: Long ago in Los Angeles when we went down for a reading.

Soon the conversation turned to the relationship of the Beats to wider contexts of American cultural, social, and political history. The following exchange occurred when Rexroth asked Tom to repeat his question.

McGrath: I asked: was the whole Beat thing something that you thought up in some sort of passionate forgetfulness and indifference?

Rexroth: Me? As a matter of fact, I didn't have very much to do with it.

McGrath: I always thought that. In fact, I thought that San Francisco was invented by you, especially the bridge.

Jacobson reports that later, at lunch, Rexroth called Tom out for his impish question: "Tom, you really are unscrupulous. You know perfectly well I didn't invent the Beat Movement." But Rexroth, the éminence grise of the San Francisco scene, had taken Tom's bait on stage, and the discussion that followed shed interesting light on past events, including that the infamous reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery had been preceded by a much more political event, a reading by Walter Lowenfels, just freed from prison under the Smith Act for seeking the violent overthrow of the government. The conviction was overturned by a higher court, but he was still, like McGrath, persona non grata anywhere near the Fifties establishment, literary or otherwise. The conversation turned to Rexroth's organization of a reading by Lowenfels at the Six Gallery.

Rexroth: The place was about as big as that room (pointing to a medium size, adjacent room) and it had as many people as this; the place was packed. All the bureaucrats who came with Walter turned to me and said, "He has the ear of youth." I said, "Yes, that's right; he does." So this was a terribly successful reading. The next reading was the then San Francisco scene. Allen had been running around, milling around and writing something but nobody knew what it was. I can't remember exactly who was there—Allen was there, I was there, Larry was there, you were there.

McGrath: I was in Los Angeles. Of course I might have been there. Michael read, Gary read, Philip Lamantia read . . .

Ginsberg: Peter was there, and Welch, probably.

Rexroth: Welch didn't read.[2]

Ginsberg: Neal Cassady was there that night—beaming.

Rexroth: Well anyway, nobody knew what was going to happen and everybody read their little poems; then Allen read Howl.

McGrath: Blew 'em all down!

*Rexroth: He didn't have any idea of the effect of this because that kind of poetry, outside of San Francisco at that moment n'existe pas. It didn't exist. I was at a poetry bash like this in Bard College (which produced Mary McCarthy's book T*he Groves of Academe*) and I got up at the end and said, "You know, it's not exactly my kettle of fish, but there's a kind of poetry which has been ignored, and nobody talks about it; but after all, it's the kind of American poetry that is known abroad. That's what might be called populist or the Whitman tradition. Nobody's talked about Carl Sandberg, or Whitman himself, or Lola Ridge or James Oppenheim. I named off a whole list of people. And Robert Lowell at the mike looked at me with the greatest contempt, and he looked round and said* (Rexroth does a Brahmin accent), *"Well of course you students wouldn't understand but Rexroth has lived so many years in the provinces that he is unaware that no one considers the people he has mentioned as being poets at all."*

Mary McCarthy said to me (this was long after the war) *"Who are the poets who are read by the students? You get around." "Well," I said, "the popular poet among students at the present moment is Kenneth Patchen." She said* (he imitates Mary McCarthy's voice), *"Oh really? Well he's not a poet at all." I said, "The students think differently." She said, "I never met a student who'd ever heard of him, but then I only teach in progressive colleges."*

And this is the context in which Howl *exploded. So what an English critic calls the "crust of custom" just blew up.*

Corso: Boom!

Rexroth: I think that's accurate, don't you—the circumstances, the way it went?

McGrath: Yeah.

Corso: Boom!

After Ginsberg and Corso discuss a later San Francisco reading, Rexroth brings the conversation back to that second Six Gallery reading, the night of *Howl*.

Rexroth: Think of how much of this stuff started then, all of this poetry of the West Coast scene. "The Berry Feast" (a poem Snyder read that night) eventually led someone in the New York Review of Books *to refer to Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Kenneth Rexroth as "The Bear Shit on the Trail School of Poetry." And of course people like Michael were developing what might be called an ecological aesthetic. That was long before all this stuff was in the press.*

McGrath: You want to hear a little piece of West Coast mythology?

Rexroth: Yeah.

McGrath: It goes something like this. First of all, there were in the North Country two Kenneths; the Double K Ranch was being run by Patchen and the man on my left, whatever his name is, who climbs mountains . . .

Rexroth: Yes.

McGrath: Skookumchuck. Do you know that word?

Rexroth: Yes.

McGrath: There were very odd things happening up in San Francisco. Not in that golden light which we stood around in all those years in Los Angeles, waiting

for rain. No! But tremendous things were happening up there. Enormous fogs were coming in; things were falling down through Alaska; falling down in that enormous night that only exists over places like San Francisco. In fact I have discovered that all places are eventually like San Francisco if you wait long enough. The fog will deepen, everything will fall down through your ceilings; infinitely terrible and marvelous things will happen all day long. Woodchucks will come out of the woodwork. Ah well, enough of that jazz.

Rexroth: He just read Finnegan's Wake.

McGrath: So it just seemed like a very odd place. I used to go up to eat. I would get hungry every two or three months and say, "Wait, there's only one place to eat here—San Francisco," or I'd have to go south. I would go up there, but I really didn't know the poets. I'd read them, but I didn't know them. And I thought all poets were like myself, probably powering around doing nothing in the hardest possible way. But I'd never met any of the poets. I did happen to meet this man on the street (turning to Rexroth), *somebody who'd written a book called* The Wounded Warriors *or* The Lost Capitalist*s or S*even Desperate Multiplex Carbonated Heroes of the Next War.[3] *What the hell was that man's name? Larry Lipton! Yes, in passing, we'd met in passing.*

So I really didn't know these people. Then Allen came along—these terrible things coming down through the San Francisco fog. Everyone says: "Well, you know, it's just another one of those crazy San Francisco poems, because we're all

Anyway, there was this long night of total bullshit. I had already written this long San Francisco poem the year before; nobody had ever seen it; wasn't published for ten years. (San Francisco is really North Dakota with a waterfront and some buildings and excellent restaurants and mad poets racing up and down through it). Gregory read a couple of poems.

So a friend called up and said, "These guys need some money to get to Mexico; otherwise they're going to crawl on their hands and knees." (It doesn't seem to me like a bad way to go but some people would prefer to go other ways.) He said: "Hey, could we run up a reading?" So I called up some ex-students of mine and they ran up a reading. Remember Anaïs Nin?

Corso: I remember her beautiful legs.

McGrath (addressing Ginsberg): That was the night you took off your clothes.

Ginsberg: That was the first poetry streak. What happened at that reading? Do you remember? Whose home was it at?

McGrath: Yes, I remember. It was practically in Watts. It was owned by an absentee landlord. But I remember well you took off your clothes; after a while you did a kind of reverse striptease. Gene Frumkin was tossing you your clothes and you were putting them back on.

Corso: You know why Allen took off his clothes?

McGrath: Yeah, because he said, "I think we ought to be naked."

Corso: No way. He said, "Tell me poetry, Allen." And you said, "There's poetry."

Ginsberg: No, no, no, no, no, no! That's not it.

Corso: That's not it? Then what happened? I always believed through the years that's what poetry was.

McGrath (to Ginsberg): Someone bugged you, right?

Ginsberg: No. It was a more sensible situation. There was a guy who was drunk—the red-haired fellow, do you remember?

McGrath: Oh yeah, the guy like a fire plug.

Ginsberg: We were more or less sober, or I was; I was involved in poetry.

McGrath: Poetry readings sober me up in the most horrible fashion. You almost might call it a hangover fashion.

Ginsberg: We were sort of intent on the poetry aspect, and this fellow was drinking too much. He had the idea we were some sort of freaks, and he said, "What are you guys trying to prove?"

McGrath: That's right. You have a marvelous memory.

Ginsberg: So I said without thinking, "Nakedness," meaning nakedness of mind.

McGrath: Right.

Ginsberg: And he said, "What do you mean nakedness?'" It was simply a question of taking off my clothes.

Corso began to disrupt the group's collective reconstruction of the infamous first time Ginsberg removed his clothes at a poetry reading, calling the action deplorable, then arguing with Ginsberg, McGrath, and Rexroth, delivering one-liners, finally calling Rexroth an old man until McGrath delivered a putdown Jacobson recalls in his memoir.

McGrath: What do you mean "old man?" He's younger than you are. You know what you told me twenty years ago?

Corso: What did I tell you twenty years ago?

McGrath: You said, "When I stop being beautiful, I'm going to kill myself." I've been waiting for the sound of that pistol all these years.

III

Tom McGrath's oft-quoted "North Dakota is everywhere" has a companion paradox, a corollary or flip side laid out in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*'s opening page. "And at the age of five ran away from home," he writes in his anabasis (why not wink at other great epics?), his setting out, followed immediately by "(I have never been back. Never left.)" A few lines later he calls himself "the journeying destination." If North Dakota can stand for a condition that is everywhere observable, especially when filtered through the lens of *Letter*, it is also true that one can never leave it. McGrath's observation calls to mind lines of other visionary poets: Blake's grain of sand, Whitman's spear of grass, the Allen Ginsberg of *Footnote to Howl* ("holy the fifth International holy the Angel in Moloch"), a catalog echoed by McGrath's post-satori, long ecstatic benedicite near the end of *Letter* I, coincidentally written at the same time, with McGrath in Los Angeles and Allen a few hundred miles north in San Francisco. Robert Lowell's "tranquilized Fifties" were crying out for an alternative, sacred vision somewhere; the West Coast responded with two at once.

It is now more than sixty years since Tom McGrath and Allen Ginsberg composed their differently revolutionary poems and McGrath ginned up that Los Angeles reading for Ginsberg and Corso on their way to Mexico. It's more than forty since McGrath crashed UND's Beat poetry party. Ginsberg's poetry remains global; McGrath still remains "America's greatest unread poet" in the minds of many, including some who also celebrate the Beats. What the memories of McGrath's work and his intersections with the Beats may be prelude to cannot be known.

Notes

[1]The entire body of conference tapes was transcribed by Elaine Lau McKenzie in the summer and fall of 1974, including the separate interviews done with each poet and the comments between the readings of specific poems.

[2]Poet Lew Welch was a friend of Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, especially. He disappeared after leaving a note, May 23, 1971. Though his body was never found, his poetry has been reissued through City Lights, 2012: *Ring of Bone: Collected Poems (New and Expanded)*.

[3]McGrath is playing with the title of Lawrence Lipton's 1959 book on the Beat scene, *The Holy Barbarians*.

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Coda

That evening during the reading by Peter Orlovsky a confrontation developed that illustrates Tom's commitment to his friends, his solidarity, one reason we young students and writers (whether in or out of school) extended to him so much of our trust. I was standing in the back of the auditorium, drinking from a half pint of whiskey. The times were wild during the sixties and early seventies, and social convention was being ignored everywhere and so I didn't think anything about an occasional sip. One of the security personnel apparently did and approached to warn me that I needed to put away the bottle, which I did but every so often I would still sneak a quick nip. He warned me again, but it did no good. I wasn't really bothering anyone. Next I knew, Tom walked over. "Get rid of the bottle! The police are here!" I started walking fast, and passing Corso, offered him the bottle, saying: "Here, take this," but with greater clarity than he had been displaying, he refused. Next I knew, two policemen had me out in the lobby with the young security man, not much more than my own age. McGrath, Corso, Ferlinghetti, and Rexroth all converged as well. The police confiscated the bottle but I kept asking if I could finish it first—there was only a drink or two left anyway and I've always hated to waste. Ferlinghetti insisted to the police that I had not been causing trouble and was bothering no one, as did the others, but the security man wanted to press charges and have me arrested, apparently rebuffed that I had ignored his authority. Tom, however, made it clear he wasn't going to stand by and watch that happen. He looked the policeman who seemed to be in charge directly in the eye and said: "If you arrest him, you will have to arrest me too." This was delivered emphatically, but simply, as though Tom were saying: you can trust me on this information, which should be useful to you. The policeman looked as if he wished he were someplace else. Immediately Corso echoed with a blunt declaration, "If you arrest McGrath, you will have to arrest me too." Then Ferlinghetti joined in: "If you arrest Corso, you will have to arrest me too." They were going in order around the circle, as though that was the proper way. Rexroth ended the refrain, almost as a formality: "You're going to have to arrest me too, if you arrest Ferlinghetti." I was heartened by this sudden solidarity of poets who hadn't been shy about sniping at one another earlier, but then I wasn't really surprised by it either. I even felt a twinge of sympathy for the security man, who I'm sure was surprised by the turn of events. How could it not be embarrassing for the University to have four nationally-known writers arrested at its

own Writers Conference? He had to be satisfied that I wouldn't drink further that evening, and Gregory Corso took it upon himself to volunteer "to be responsible" for my behavior, though there had been no behavior to be concerned with other than the unceremonious drinking. True to his word, he sat behind me during the rest of the reading, which I took as a wonderful act of kindness. For my part, I thought that I didn't know many teachers willing to go to jail for their students—or even willing to debate with the police, for that matter. But then, Tom didn't seem to talk to police as police. He talked to them as human beings capable of wisdom and when he told them that he'd have to be arrested if I was, he wasn't challenging their authority so much as merely informing them of what he required from the situation. He made it clear that he had a say and talked right past their badges to them as individuals, as if involved in a neighborhood dispute.

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The American Long Poem Goes West: Thomas McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*[*]

Charlotte Mandel

I want to focus attention upon the critical slighting of an American epic force in the poetry of Thomas McGrath, a self-styled political revolutionary born in rural North Dakota (b. 1916, d. 1990). McGrath's 400-page long poem, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, takes us to America's Midwestern frontier and beyond. The poem was begun in 1957 and published piecemeal until completion thirty years later. Thanks to painstaking editing by Sam Hamill and Dale Jacobson, all four parts of McGrath's long poem were posthumously brought together as one volume in 1997; the design of the 8 by 8½-inch paperback edition assures visual access to the flow of the poet's long lines and rhythmic spacing. A journey of quest, *Letter* portrays what McGrath characterized as "pseudo-autobiography": although based upon details of his life, the poem reverses the confessional stance: its narrative subject is the world encountered and operative through the quester's individual self.

Profoundly political, yet lyrical in vision, the poem sweeps from realities of frontier immigrant homesteaders to 1930's dust-bowl Depression; from left-wing labor wars and "communitas" spirit of a work crew to discovery of classical literature; from lush sexual awakenings to sawing timber alone at forty degrees below zero; from McCarthy-era persecution to Dantean surreal circles of ascent towards the fifth—or ideal future world—of Hopi Indian myth. McGrath's range of language is extraordinarily bold, free, and musical. *Letter* sings in (mostly) long six-stress lines, often broken across the page, the first word of each line capitalized in keeping with poetic convention. Polemical outrage at injustice is tempered by his talent for hilarious satire; exaggerated similes display a childhood of listening to tales told by his father and Irish immigrant grandparents along with the songs brought over. Working class dictions interweave with an astonishingly erudite vocabulary, alliterative compound words fresh as Hopkins's, puns worthy of James Joyce. Although comparable to *Paterson*, the *Cantos*, *The Bridge*, *Kaddish*, and a few other long poems of the twentieth century, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* has remained at the periphery of critical discussion.

Letter fulfills McGrath's calling as a "revolutionary poet." He grew up among family and neighbors who labored in fields and with heavy farm machinery. One of the most vivid sections of *Letter* enacts his tension, exhaustion, and sheer manly pride at the age of nine as "straw monkey" on a threshing machine. In the 1930s, McGrath's identification with labor struggles drew him to work actively for the American Communist party; he refused

[*]This essay first appeared online in *Poets Quarterly,* August 2015.
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to follow their later directives but maintained lifelong belief in the party's potential. The disenchantment he felt with capitalist/government institutions was underscored by his assignment to an Army base in the Aleutians during World War II. Sections of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* evoke the particular kinds of wastage of mind and body coeval with wartime.

In midlife, during the McCarthy era, McGrath suffered personal inquisitorial persecution. Summoned before the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953, he read an unusual statement which included "esthetic ground" as one of his reasons for refusing to cooperate: "I believe that one of the things required of us is to try to give life an esthetic ground, to give it some of the pattern and beauty of art . . . not subject to chance and accident of our real world." Consequently blacklisted and fired from his teaching position at Los Angeles State University, he was forced to seek his livelihood at various kinds of jobs for several years. Bitterness at the academy's support of the "witch hunt" was catalytic; shortly after his expulsion from Los Angeles State, McGrath embarked upon *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.

McGrath's poetics are consistent with and inseparable from his revolutionary stance. *Letter* is no "outsider" art—the term lately given to unschooled "folk" artists—but a highly sophisticated literary work. McGrath's way is that of a teacher: "I offer as guide this total myth, / The legend of my life and time."

McGrath opposes an exploitative system where delusions of language override and supplant true reality. His coinage for such a self-perpetuating system is "the hornacle mine"—based on a true incident where a garbled military requisition for "hornacles" impelled a nationwide search for the nonexistent items. McGrath takes down poets who "went off to the war . . . And (properly bitter) wrote like the minor versers of 1916"; meanwhile soldiers in freezing tents wake each day to go "down to the hornacle mine / under the arch of the tracers to dig for the faery gold." Their war is a "Cold cave, rough womb, from which we could not be born."

McGrath's long poem mines energy from the land of his specific birthplace, North Dakota. Here the settlers drove the native population westward, to be, in turn, driven off by the land's agrarian ruin brought about by unheeding greedy development. Motion—constant journey and movement inform our historical images of the West. McGrath's interpositions of voices, shifts in time, locale, and diction do not break into the flow or diminish awareness of journey. Part One opens with a line made ambiguous by quotation marks that may represent an excerpt from some historical journal, or the poet writing in his own notebook; the second line, after grounding itself by street and number, goes into unexpected orbit.

"From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east."
I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street,

Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio,
thinking,"
. . .
—And at the age of five ran away from home.
(I have never been back. Never left.)

A few pages later, the poet elucidates his "pseudo-autobiography":

"Out of imperfect confusion, to argue a purer chaos. / I've lived, truly, in a Custer's Massacre of sad sacks / Who sang in my ear their histories and my own. / And out of these ghosts I bring these harvest dead / Into the light of speech . . . Borne beyond Libra / Southward / Borne toward the Gulf, the whole shooting match of these times / In the hiss and jostle of the Mississippi / The living and the dead / To the revolving graves and the glass pastures of the fined-down diamond-cutting Sea."

At times, the language of his questing journey recalls the alliterations and tone of Anglo-Saxon saga, pulsing to McGrath's Celtic heritage (one set of grandparents Gaelic-speaking):

"There the piled salmon shoaled at stream-mouth, / And the dreamy, fishing bear hoisted the old, melancholy, / Great, hairy, disguising, joke of his head. / He stroked the sea with his enormous paw. / Silver and red the dull light gleamed on the bloodied salmon!"

And at all times, the long poem's language conveys the actual feel of motion. In McGrath's American western existence, the past is immediate and imminent with future, present not as nostalgic illusion, but active as potential in its very landscape. The Midwest found its epic voice in the poetry of Thomas McGrath.

Answer from an Imaginary Friend (Not a Legitimist)

Sharon Doubiago

Sam Hamill was walking me down Water Street in Port Townsend, Washington, saying he'll publish my epic poem, *Hard Country*, if I would sleep with him. Someone once said a successful life is one in which you succeed at becoming a great character. Sam, one of the great characters of my life, gasps during our stroll when he learns that I don't know the work of Thomas McGrath, "the greatest living American epic poet."

"'From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east,'" Hamill recited from McGrath's poetry. Any walk with Sam is rewarded by his wondrously vast store of memorized poetry. He told me he intended to publish McGrath. "Doubiago, you have to know this poet," he said.

"'I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street,'" he continued with McGrath. "'Writing, rolling east with the earth drifting toward Scorpio, thinking.'"

I'd told him I would like to review his first poem, the book-length *Triada*, and had been attempting to for months. I love Sam but I am, in every element of my being, constitutionally incapable of making deals far less odious like the one in Port Townsend, an offer he made repeatedly through the years. (Once he asked to meet me for a drink, reminded me again of the offer, then when the second round arrived, disappeared, leaving penniless me with the bill.) I was, it's true, guilty of not screaming flat-out no! I was embarrassed for Sam (an old embarrassment about men) and couldn't bring myself to embarrass him further. Most men seem to appreciate my helpless silences to the ego crushing "No way! or "Get lost!" In Sam's case my response was: "Are you kidding me? You, the great carrier of poetry, the great male feminist essayist?"

We took a number of walks along Water Street as Sam recited from memory entire poems by McGrath. He'd tell me about Tommy the Commie and what happened to him in LA. McGrath was teaching at California State in Los Angeles, which much later became my alma mater, when he was called before the House on Un-American Activities, then blacklisted, losing his professorship.

I was first introduced to McGrath "in the Embassy Bar on Minnesota Avenue," in St. Peter, Minnesota. The quote is from my essay on Meridel LeSueur, an essay concerned mainly with the journey I made to Minnesota in August 1981 to deliver my *Hard Country* manuscript to her. John Crawford, the editor and publisher, said McGrath had agreed to write a blurb for the poem.[1] St. Peter was the site of the Gathering, "a week-long festival of alternative theater groups from all over the country." And it was there that I met McGrath for the first time.

He was uncannily familiar. He sat in the high wooden booth, his head against the old dark grain, me across from him and a pitcher of beer between us. I was struck by his physical and spiritual resemblance to my father. My

father was a bigger man than Tom—as slim, but with massive bones, a massive head—and mostly of English lineage, though his maternal grandmother, Nancy Reagan, was Irish. They were both born in 1916, my father in the copper mining town of Ducktown, Tennessee. The same twinkle in the eyes. The same self-deprecating intelligence and wit. Somehow the same character,

McGrath with Meridel LeSueur in Fargo, ND, summer of 1983.

aura, demeanor, the same tease and ease and play with the world, yet wry and ironic, as if the existence of everything is up for question, a possible joke. It was in the manner, the style, the way of the body and soul in movement through the room that Tom and my father (when my father wasn't being lascivious or cruel) seemed brothers.

"So where is Marsh Street?" I asked him first thing. "I haven't been able to find it on any map." I knew the house was gone ("And the world rides / Over a poor house, bulldozed down and buried")—but what about Marsh Street itself? I loved that McGrath started a poem with his address. I was thrilled that he'd started it in LA. I reverberated to the first line of his *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* ("From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east") for its simple geographic accuracy. My own *Hard Country* is very conscious of going east against the historic western tide.

"The Elysian Gardens beneath Elysian Park," McGrath said. "It was a magical place in a canyon. It's not there anymore. They put a freeway through there."

He drew a map in my notebook. It was the Golden State Freeway that destroyed 2714 Marsh Street. We talked about the Korean War veteran who holed up in his house with a rifle for weeks, shooting at the cops trying to take his place by eminent domain to construct the new Dodger Stadium. For years I'd tried to get others to remember this big media event with me, but no one had until now.

Being from LA was a burden then in the poetry world. No one took the place I took most seriously serious. (Sam once introduced me as the Farah Fawcett of the poetry world.) The bohemian, earth-shaking Elysian Park–Mount Washington area, the foothills above the Basin right where the Santa Monicas and the San Gabriels come together, had been a great discovery for me after growing up in the redneck flatlands of South Central: "The lachrymose / cities of the plain weeping in the sulphurous smog; Anaheim: / South Gate (smell of decaying dreams in the dead air.)" I was a girl in South Gate/Hollydale suffering the decay when McGrath, fifteen miles north, penned that.

To have been able to share stories and theories, especially poetic ones, about LA, with a poet! With the great American poet, Thomas McGrath, who would have stayed in LA, he said, but for the blacklist. Perhaps he would have been my teacher fifteen years later. I've always said epic consciousness is Los Angeles consciousness, that it's no accident that he began *Letter* there. What would a longtime LA residency have done to Tom, to *Letter* had it been written entirely in the city? His writing is uncannily familiar to me, slightly disturbing in its "old-fashioned" feeling. I think the place would have had its way with him. Forgive me for my blasphemy, but I think *Letter To An Imaginary Friend* would be more open, more exploratory and experimental—less familiar.

" . . . I can't remember when I first knew her," Tom (whose epic *Letter* I had only recently discovered) said of Meridel as we started our second beers. "She visited me in the 50s in LA. I was living in the Elysian Gardens beneath Elysian Park. She came and described Wallace Beery chasing her across the Elysian Hills, giving out goat cries. She was beautiful. I mean, ravishing. Now she's sort of sunk into herself. But she was regal. Regal. The kind of woman walking down the street men just . . . You are one of Meridel's daughters. I can see that."

I'd heard the rumors of Tom's womanizing. I knew a Port Townsend woman poet who was, or had been, in love with him and whose heart had been broken.

"There was also the Tom," Jack Beeching writes in his *A Memoir of Thomas McGrath*, "who fell hopelessly and very temporarily in love with women encountered at random—among poets, almost an occupational disease" (18). But when I didn't take him up on this opening he dropped it, instantly. Tom didn't come on to me after that. Therefore it seemed that he met me as a poet. I loved him for that. I loved him for being that intelligent.

I wasn't his lover. That is an important thing to make clear in an "anecdotes and remembrances" piece like this. I don't know (I wouldn't presume to know) if that could have happened with him, but, just as with Sam, it couldn't have with me. McGrath knew this instantly. My response then was of delight, gratitude, and deepening respect for him. Tom never came on to me again, though he always had that twinkle in his eye so like my father's. It

gave us space to enjoy each other. It gave us space for another kind of jostling with each other.

On an Easter Sunday in the early 1980s, Tom was in Port Townsend for a while, maybe working with Sam on the publication of *Passages Toward The Dark*. Maybe he had a residency at Fort Worden. It wasn't his first visit, he'd participated in one or more of Centrum's two-week summer poetry symposiums. At some point he gave a talk. He spoke about what happened to the pioneers. The covered wagons making their passage across the thousands of miles, loaded down. Before they even started out they'd thrown out the old languages. On the first day of the crossing they start throwing other things out. First goes the heavy furniture, then the books, then Grandma's trunk from the old country. Then, halfway across, they throw out Grandma.

We had invited Tom to Easter dinner in our cabin. And the local woman poet who had been in love with him. I was living with the poet Michael Daley, the founding editor of Empty Bowl Press. The cabin was owned by a Seattle bank. We lived there rent free in a kind of informal housesitting situation. It was built on a two-hundred-foot bluff over the Strait of Juan de Fuca. At night the lights of Victoria, BC, shimmered directly across the forty miles of water. When the setting sun hit its skyscrapers they stood out like the white cliffs of Dover. We had no electricity, an outhouse, and the only water was a hand pump in the kitchen sink. Light was by kerosene. But the walls were golden gleaming cedar, and the mostly high windows looked onto the cedar forest, the Strait, and the stars outside. Our nearest neighbors were Sam and Tree, a half mile to the east as the eagles, crows, and gulls flew. They'd bought an inexpensive plot of land in the same deep forest, but viewless, back from the bluff, and were building their cabin one room at a time. I thought to live so close to this view but not be able to see it would drive me crazy. I'd never finish a poem for the frustration, the need to run out and see.

I don't remember what we talked about. Maybe the politics and the poetry of the early 1980s. Central America. The anti-nuclear movement. The nuclear submarine USS Ohio scheduled to enter the Strait in August 1982. The local, Northwest young male poets trying to enforce their Snyder/mountain man aesthetics, all of them a little askance at the likes of me. And then Tom said something from that raggedy, sprung-springed, blue velvet chair, the Strait gleaming beyond, that I've never forgotten.

"I'm not a legitimist," he said, with assertion and a laugh, an expression of his anti-establishment viewpoint.

Maybe we had asked him—no, it would have been me—if he was an official member of the Communist Party. Maybe I'd asked him about being a poet and a politico, the endless, chronic debate about political poetry. Maybe I'd asked him my favorite question: "What is the connection between one's

politics and one's aesthetics; between one's vision and aesthetics; between environment and aesthetics (i.e., the poetry wars of regionalism); between one's lifestyle and one's aesthetics; ideology, religion, morality, gender, geography, class and one's aesthetics?" Maybe I asked him the perennial question asked of me: "Where did you get the balls to write an epic poem?" (This from my critics and scholars, male and female, all rooted in their clichéd assumption of the epic poet: must be male.)

Tom laughed, lobbed on butter and chomped down on the challah bread I had been trying to make. The braid came out with a solid half inch of black charcoal on the bottom, the rest smoked through.

"I'm not a legitimist."

I've adopted Tom's words ever since as my aesthetic, my politics, my religion, my Americanism: I am not a legitimist. The nuclear penetration of the still virginal Strait, like a bride betrothed to the devil, had been set in motion and we, for all our efforts, convictions, aesthetics, creative works, and activism, will not be able to stop it. We know this but we will try anyway, we will keep trying until we are mowed down, by chance, accident, murder, or time, by any or all of the massive, collective legitimacies.

I'm not sure I fully comprehend or, if I do, agree with his statement to the House Un-American Activities Committee that Sam quotes in his 1997 publication of the posthumous 414-page version of *Letter To An Imaginary Friend*: "As a poet I must refuse to cooperate with the committee on what I can only call aesthetic grounds. The view of life which we receive through the great works of art is a privileged one—it is a view according to probability or necessity, not subject to the chance and accident of our real world and therefore in a sense truer than the life we see lived all around us."

That's Classicism, isn't it? (Or is it Marxism?) Would he have put it that way today? Certainly the post-Classic, postmodern, post-Marxist, experimental, and feminist artists of the past hundred years have tried to open some "to the chance and accident of our real world." To the realness itself, that is, to the world's immanent beauty and joy and mystery—to the potential in the mystery—not acknowledged adequately in the old patriarchal world views and structures. Those systems of thought, those Aristotelian/Academic ideologies, have been, in part, blinding. Art, for some of us, is always inadequate to Nature, the life we see all around us, our own existence, though this is precisely the inexplicable challenge, the muse, to try and evoke our extraordinariness. To pay homage.

Tom was blacklisted, according to Sam, "not *exactly* [my emphasis] for his lifelong affiliation with socialist causes during the greatest expansion of what President Dwight Eisenhower termed, in a famous warning to the electorate, 'the military-industrial complex,' but rather because of his convictions about the very nature of poetry."

Well, that's stretching it a bit. Tom was no doubt blacklisted for his politics, though being a poet and being a Marxist were, perhaps, one and the same for him.

The pain and isolation that he suffered from being blacklisted for standing by his convictions is always noted, the blacklisting always condemned, the standing firm always admired. And so, I want to ask here, maybe of Sam in particular, what of the poets who are blacklisted in the poetry world for standing by their convictions? For refusing to play publication politics with their poetry, their bodies?

Later, over the wooden picnic table in the dining end of the big room, the sun setting at the mouth of the Strait, everyone else gone, the poet in love with Tom filled me in on all I hadn't known, or sought to know. It was Meridel who said gossip is holy, gossip is the same as gossamer, gospel, it means God's web, it's the weave, the network, the community, the Commune talking. Gossip, she maintained, at least women's gossip, is often exaggerated news, but, if you think about it, rarely malicious. The poet told me, without malice, in only slight indignation and hurt, of Tom's womanizing, and of what happened between them. ("The immortal girls, blondes, brunettes, brownhairs, redheads / O great kingdom of Fuck" [*Letter* 27] "Goddamn that motherin' / Hairy clitoris principle!").

More difficult and unforgettable, she told me of his having killed an Indian on a reservation in the protection of his wife and son, in the Old World spirit of men defending their families. I reacted, and do to this day, as the lifelong feminist pacifist that I am. Was there really no way to have avoided shooting a crazed man? (Is that man Tom's Imaginary Friend?) Very difficult, but now the gossip drifted into the realm of literary significance, to the near taboo theme and aesthetic that I share with Tom: the use, as European Whites—though I'm one-eighth Cherokee, plus Seminole, Choctaw and Lumbee—of Native American cosmology, story, vision, and poetry. Once knowing this real-life fact, a murder that took place in the summer of 1975, it's hard not to ponder that Tom's writing after this tragedy is, in part, atonement work, and that there are incidences in life, however accidental and "politically incorrect," that psychically become main work.

Tom notes that "the form of Part Two," based on Hopi mythology, "is . . . concerned with the offering of evidences for a revolutionary miracle and with elaborating a ceremony out of these materials to bring such a miracle to pass." This offering in itself is nearly miraculous. (I am aware that Part II of *Letter* was written well before the summer of 1975, but the psyche is timeless. Maybe instead of atonement I mean psychic involvement, or even karma—the circling lines, the ones we get tangled in repeatedly, that become our personal story, which are like magnets, we to them, them to us. "To be in love, then, was a desperate business. / Marvelous. It was to stand with a Dechard

rifle / Against the charge of the Ogalla Sioux.") Circularity is a major motif in *Letter*—and thus the effort, "the offering of evidences for a revolutionary miracle," to jump the natural law through art, that is, to transform.

From my notebook:

> 9-21-86, I'm in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street. Writing, rolling east with the earth. I was flying from New York to Minneapolis for the celebration of the life of Tom McGrath, for his Ceili, an Irish celebration on his seventieth birthday. My father had turned seventy on Valentine's Day, was fighting prostate cancer with all the AMA's so-called miracle cures (but which in fact only advanced his death date, nineteen months hence). Zöe Anglesey, in whose Lower Manhattan apartment I'd been a guest for a couple of weeks while helping with her a monumental anthology of Central American women poets, had given me Swallow Press' *Letter To An Imaginary Friend*, Parts I and II. I began it on the plane. I'd barely read the first lines when a fervor possessed me and I began to answer Tom's *Letter*. I was off on a writing spree that lasted a solid week, putting my words right in the book, my lines with his lines, line by line, and down the wide margins.

And in another notebook entry:

> Newark Airport, 8 am, LA journeying. Pushing west against the Earth rolling east, you borne at the Linga Sharira, South Word, I fled, a long journey ago. And my brother died, into the structure of the universe borne through grief toward the Gulf, into Los Angeles epic, O! the stars there, O! nowhere is the Zodiac so displayed, were we so influenced by the stars pulling us backwards. Dear Tom, I want to track your mother with her kindness and cookies, and how you escaped her and ask you why? You and my father born the same year, you nine months after him, how I wish I could hear my father's voice before he escaped his mother, as my mother always proclaimed it, the boys you were so wonderfully in the yellowing light, kerosene, wood stoves, and horses. Maybe Freud had the cocoanut wrong side outwards. Maybe it is right here that we have gone wrong. Grandmother throwing kisses goodbye to our fathers leaving home, my plane going on to LA, then San Diego, my daddy going away, so long, so long, so long.

After I arrived by plane in Minneapolis I walked, with heavy book and manuscript bags, to town. There was a bus strike or something—more likely I didn't have the means to get there any other way. I don't know how many miles it is, but when I've dared tell this fact it's gasped at as not being believable. When I fly in now I always see myself down there, trudging along: "The wild people of the roads, that was my true country. My father wild on the roads from sixteen, tell me Daddy tell me your first time, your loss of virginity as a boy and how you escaped the love, the love, the love . . . "

I still remember the morning of the Ceili, being in a cafeteria room of The Loft, and, still in fervor, reading and writing my *Answer*: "Seeing myself holding Meridel asking if she knows where she's going, hearing her answer 'Into the dark vaginal fold of Earth.'"

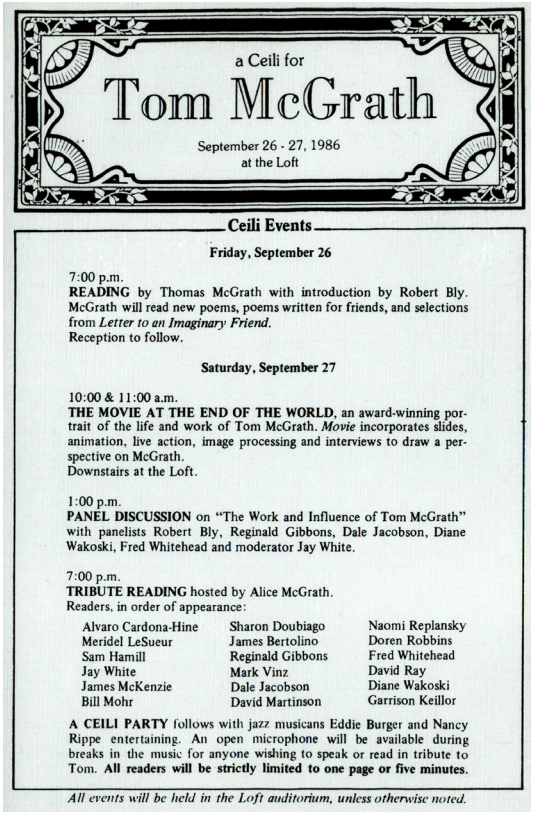
In The Loft itself I remember walking from a packed main room into a smaller room, even more packed with superstar poets. I walked smack into one of my soulmates, Sam, guffawing on a low overstuffed couch, his legs spread.

"I love you Sam," I gushed genuinely not for the first time, or the last time.

"I love you, too, Sharon," he said, not gushing. He sat there like a Southern California house-size boulder, the origin of which geologists still can't figure out.

I read after Garrison Keillor. I was astounded that the radio personality was six-foot-eight. I was astounded that he knew the serious poetry and history of Tom and that he didn't crack a joke.

Parts I and II of *Letter To An Imaginary Friend*, which I carried to the stage with me, is dedicated to "Eugenia, Tomasito, Che and the Commune." I read my "Neustro Che: The Monroe Doctrine" from *South America Mi Hija*, the book-length poem I'd just completed, a five-part poem about an imaginary union of Marilyn Monroe and Che Guevara.



a Ceili for

Tom McGrath

September 26 - 27, 1986
at the Loft

Ceili Events

Friday, September 26

7:00 p.m.
READING by Thomas McGrath with introduction by Robert Bly. McGrath will read new poems, poems written for friends, and selections from *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.
Reception to follow.

Saturday, September 27

10:00 & 11:00 a.m.
THE MOVIE AT THE END OF THE WORLD, an award-winning portrait of the life and work of Tom McGrath. *Movie* incorporates slides, animation, live action, image processing and interviews to draw a perspective on McGrath.
Downstairs at the Loft.

1:00 p.m.
PANEL DISCUSSION on "The Work and Influence of Tom McGrath" with panelists Robert Bly, Reginald Gibbons, Dale Jacobson, Diane Wakoski, Fred Whitehead and moderator Jay White.

7:00 p.m.
TRIBUTE READING hosted by Alice McGrath.
Readers, in order of appearance:

Alvaro Cardona-Hine	Sharon Doubiago	Naomi Replansky
Meridel LeSueur	James Bertolino	Doren Robbins
Sam Hamill	Reginald Gibbons	Fred Whitehead
Jay White	Mark Vinz	David Ray
James McKenzie	Dale Jacobson	Diane Wakoski
Bill Mohr	David Martinson	Garrison Keillor

A CEILI PARTY follows with jazz musicans Eddie Burger and Nancy Rippe entertaining. An open microphone will be available during breaks in the music for anyone wishing to speak or read in tribute to Tom. **All readers will be strictly limited to one page or five minutes.**

All events will be held in the Loft auditorium, unless otherwise noted.

When I came off the stage Sam was waiting for me. "You read six minutes, Doubiago!" he hissed. It's not easy being an epic poet with a five-minute slot, and I've suffered for my abuses. I'd practiced to get the six-minute thing down to five and felt confident, and I still suspect that Sam just made that up. Was he really clocking me? He was next and took fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, but, well, maybe that was his right as Tom's publisher, maybe that was part of the deal he'd made with Tom.

In the panel discussion the next day Jay White maintained that Tom is primarily a religious poet. Diane Wakoski declared, "I don't read the political in Tom McGrath's poetry," to which Lyle Daggett, standing next to me in the audience, began a "every-human-act-is-fundamentally-political" response. Robert Bly interrupted Lyle, demanding that he just say what he likes about Tom's poetry, to which Lyle shouted back "No! You've had your turn to speak, now it's my turn! I'll speak what I care to speak." And the fireworks were on.

In the throng after the reading Robert honed in on me, his long finger in front of his white-haired face, coming down like the wrath of God.

"Who was that young man, Sharon, standing next to you?" His tone was identical to my father's to my baby brother, Iron John in his Father-the-King legitimism (in the oldest sense of the word, claims of monarchy based on the rights of heredity): *how dare that piece of shit talk back to me!* His contempt was terrible, but, far more, embarrassing. I was the older sister again protecting her baby brother. (Meridel considered both Robert and Tom her sons.) Sometimes it's like the American Revolutionary War was never won. Domination and submission, not partnership. Hierarchy and class, not equality, not Democracy.

Then that evening Tom read his bread-rising-on-Christmas poem. Was it a stroke that he'd suffered? "I'm a journey toward a distant wound." One hand was in a tight black leather fingerless glove. I can't forget that. It seemed ominous, a Death-sitting-on-your-shoulder reminder. His "irrepressible joy in the life" seemed darkened. But everyone was there, including Zöe and Meridel.

Standing on the steps outside in twilight afterwards with Tom, shoulder to shoulder, our sides touching all the way down, he talked quietly in my ear as the poets streamed by, Sam among them, in still another harrumph: "She offered to fuck me if I would publish her!" Surely Sam did not say that, surely it was only my paranoia, but from somewhere a song was announcing, "You don't have to live like a refugee," and I responded as always, oh, yes, I do. I'll have to find my journals, the Parts I and II of *Letter*, to see if I wrote what Tom said, but of course, often, one doesn't write what is most clear. It was something about death, the nearness, my Friend. We won't see each other again in this life, and since we're not legitimists we can't count on anything afterwards.

It was the poet John Haines who told me Tom was on his deathbed. "Tom's a goner," he sighed. I wish I'd asked him if they'd known each other in the Aleutians during World War II. I have a theory about poet vets of that war and right-wing Iowa aesthetics, about why we're not supposed to write antiwar poems, why supposedly there are no good antiwar poems and to which again Tom is a courageous exception.

Poems are written as messages from the grave from before the poet gets there. I've always envisioned a non-legitimist literature, as big as life. Truer than fiction. Who was the Indian Tom killed, I mean his name, his tribe, his survivors, his story, his character? I am not being mean-spirited, "the Indian is the first wound." How did he get there in front of the poet's bullet? Now that would be a view, a poem, according to probability and necessity. And another effort toward a revolutionary miracle.

Bye Tom. Some of us actually lived moments of the last thirty years in the Age of the Goddess. In the Hopi Fifth World, "where everything that exists shares equally in existence" (Jacobson 411). In the Commune. Not as legitimists.

Note

[1]Thomas McGrath's *Hard Country* quote: "A unique search for meaning of personal and national history by a woman seeking her own liberation and fulfillment through struggle against the reactionary mores and politics of her time." Amazon.com

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Beeching, Jack. *A Memoir of Thomas McGrath*. Spirit Horse Press, 1993.

Prairie Grass Ballet: A Grassland Cento

Elizabeth Hellstern

(Inscribed in the granite base of the "Prairie Grass Ballet"
sculpture in The Arts Center's Hansen Arts Park, Jamestown, ND)

Somewhere below the sky highways
is one of those lost places in which I have found myself.
If you're not from the prairie
you can't know such simple love.

The prairie, although plain, inspires awe.
Grandeur can be wide as well as tall.
And my body's long quarrel with my mind
is silenced by a landscape and a sky.

I know the prairie is patient.
That this grain, too,
will root and resurrect.
The spring flowers break on the gray prairie.

The hot July winds
gathered forces from across the plains.
North Dakota winds in grassland,
now that's constancy.

We know all about time now,
how it speeds, how it slows.
The long hour of the prairie
grows richer as it ages.

The prairie is a community.
The whole home,
the whole soul.
In this place, only space is grand.

(with lines from "The River of the Milky Way" by Richard Watson, "Afternoon of a McGrath" and "Such Simple Love" by Thomas McGrath, "If You're Not From the Prairie" by David Bouchard, "What the Prairie Teaches Us" by Paul Gruchow, "Missouri Breaks" by Timothy Murphy, "Dear New" by Larry Woiwode, "North Dakota" by Gerald Vizenor, "My Grandfather Was a New Initiate" by Denise Lajimodiere, "Boom" by Heid E. Erdrich, "Watching" by Madelyne Camrud, "American Hitchhiking Blues" by Dale Jacobson, "Mrs. Pulaski's Shrine" by Aaron Poochigian, and "Cardinal Directions: Divorce Fugue" by Heidi Czerwiec.)

The Singing Head: Thomas McGrath's Epic Journey

Louis Ryan

I first heard the name Thomas McGrath from the English writer Jack Beeching. He and McGrath had been friends since the late 1940s, when the young American war veteran came to England to take up a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. While in England, Tom gravitated towards the group of young radicals, themselves recently demobbed, who coalesced around the left-wing literary review *Our Time*. A prominent figure in the group, Jack seems quickly to have detected something remarkable about this unassuming American visitor. They would certainly have had much in common. Although he was the younger of the two, Jack already had experience, like Tom, of political activism prior to the onset of war. And they were both poets. Sharing radical convictions and a dedication to the poetic art, they struck up a friendship which would endure until Tom's passing more than four decades later.

Communication between the two men over the course of those years was to be epistolary for the most part, although Tom usually managed to connect with Jack in his subsequent European visits. The Canary Islands, Greece, and Lucca in Italy were all locations for their get-togethers. There was also a trip in the other direction, in 1966, when Jack took up a job at North Dakota State University teaching freshman English. Apart from England in the late 1940s, this would have been the longest time the two poets lived in proximity to each other. Later Jack and Charlotte, his then partner and future wife, were on the move again, drawn back to further peregrinations around the Mediterranean.

I in turn met Jack and Charlotte in Paris in 1983. As a young Irishman with pronounced left-wing views and poetic ambitions, I soon began to hear about the Irish-American friend whom Jack held in such obvious high esteem. Sometime in 1984, as I recall, there was talk about the possibility of Tom making one more European trip, this time to Paris—what would very likely be a last visit, given his deteriorating health. Alas, the plans fizzled out, and I never got to meet Tom in person, although we engaged in a brief correspondence towards the end of his life.

Over the course of the 1980s, I built up a picture of the American poet, partly from what I heard about him from Jack, and partly from the few books by or about him that I was able to get hold of. I do remember clearly that the first of these was *NDQ*'s Fall 1982 issue dedicated wholly to Thomas McGrath. Jack had contributed a poem to the publication, and very likely what he lent me was his own complimentary copy. So for me there is a nice symmetry in the fact that *NDQ* should give me the opportunity to formulate a few aspects of my own response to his life and work.

The first book I acquired by McGrath rather than about him was, as I recall, *The Movie at the End of the World: Collected Poems*, collected as of 1972, the

date of the book's publication. Actually, *Movie* would more accurately have been subtitled "Collected Shorter Poems," since it contained no excerpts from *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, McGrath's major work. Be that as it may, I was impressed by the sheer range of the poems, encompassing as they did such a grand variety of form, tone, and subject-matter. Here one could find the hard-bitten political broadside cheek by jowl with the tender lyric, quotidian insights next to apocalyptic forebodings, the perfectly executed formal performance alongside some rambunctious eruption of playfulness or invective. Later I was honored to receive by mail from the poet himself a copy of *Selected Poems 1938–1988*, inscribed "for Louis Ryan: Solidarity! Thomas McGrath, Summer 1988." This book brought me up to date with the poet's more recent output, often elliptical in expression and with a new tone of philosophical detachment.

Tom was always generous in his encouragement of younger talents—whether of those with some creditable output already, or those like me who were still struggling to find their poetic voice. Even at this late stage of his life, and in the face of worsening health, he was helping to promote one more small poetry magazine, *The Subversive Agent*. The first number of this politically radical publication contained outstanding work by a group of poets who had been influenced or mentored by Tom: Robert Edwards, Jeff Jentz, Dale Jacobson, Paul Jentz, alongside poetry by two veterans, McGrath himself and his old friend Don Gordon. I had ventured to send Tom a sample of my own work in the spring of 1988, and he was as encouraging as it was possible to be given the evident shortcomings of my neophyte efforts.

It is a little embarrassing to note that even at this stage I had yet to read *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. The truth is, in mitigation, that in those far-off pre-Internet days it really wasn't so easy to get hold of it, at least on the European side of the Atlantic. On my regular trips from Paris to Dublin or London I would invariably ask in bookshops if they stocked any of McGrath's work, and almost as invariably drew a blank. (Yes, I suppose I could have tried mail order.) Finally in 1989 my then American girlfriend was making a trip home, and I charged her with acquiring for me this poetic Holy Grail. And she managed it, though even then not without difficulty, bringing back triumphantly the two volumes, as they were then published: Parts One and Two by Swallow Press, Parts Three and Four by Copper Canyon Press.

I had of course come across excerpts from *Letter*, in the *NDQ* issue already mentioned and in *The Revolutionary Poet in the United States: The Poetry of Thomas McGrath*, edited by Frederick C. Stern, a book I did actually manage to find on one of my visits to London. From these tantalizingly brief excerpts I got a sense of *Letter* as something vast, potent, and magical, dark also, but working toward a resolution in light. Much as I admired the shorter poems, I felt that here there was something that went beyond them, not just in scale

but in vision, and in the beauty and richness of the language through which that vision was articulated.

My first reading of the long poem confirmed this intuition. I was deeply impressed. Subsequent re-readings have borne out the sense of *Letter* as qualitatively distinct from the author's other output, even though there is clearly a symbiotic relationship between the long and the shorter poems. Thus while the shorter work stands very much on its own merits, it acquires a richer complexion when viewed in relation to the overarching project of McGrath's life. As Mark Vinz succinctly expressed it in that 1982 issue of *NDQ, Letter* gave McGrath "a perspective and a generating force that even led him to remark that all of his shorter poems were 'footnotes to the long poem.' But they are not footnotes in any minor sense—just pieces of the overall statement that take a shorter form" (134).

McGrath had been writing poetry for over fifteen years before he embarked on *Letter* in the autumn ("drifting toward Scorpio") of 1954. While the earlier poems command attention in their own right, they can also be seen as preparative to the demands of the epic-scaled longer work: "I look back on other work and I see how often I've used the six beat line [characteristic of *Letter*] in poems way earlier, but somewhere along the way that line began to be the prime, the dominant one, and it still is" (Stern 172).

Shorter poems continued to be written over the thirty-year period of *Letter*'s composition. Some of these are offshoots reflecting its tone and form: *Afternoon of a McGrath*, for example, or *Trinc: Praises II*, a celebration of the beers of the world, could almost be outtakes from Part Three. We also have, in other *Praises* poems, what appear to be actual extracts from *Letter*, although these might well have been conceived initially as independent pieces that were later incorporated into the major project. Certainly they are capable of standing in their own right, although they do gain resonance when read in *Letter*'s broader context.

Of course there are many other poems from this period bearing no obvious relationship to the long unfolding masterpiece: these continue to ring the protean changes of formal expression, tone, and subject matter already evident from the beginning. As such they might be seen as sparks off the smithy's anvil where the successive parts of *Letter* were being forged. And finally in the last poems, gathered in the posthumously published *Death Song*, the forge itself is glimmering and cooling back into darkness. Still there are flourishes of revolutionary defiance or paradoxical utterances of a zen-like concision, but the dominant tone is valedictory, as in the little poem *Entropy*:

> Many stars have fallen
> In the years since I was born.

And many friends have gone . . .
The light . . . weaker these mornings. (*Death Song* 101)

We speak of McGrath's shorter poems by comparison with the dimensions of *Letter*, yet many of these poems in any other context would be considered of medium length. I would like to consider one of these, "Blues for Jimmy," the longest of five poems he wrote for one of his younger brothers, killed in the last months of World War II. "Blues" marks a distance from the world of *Letter* and at the same time anticipates that world. The contrast between the circularity of nature with its changing seasons and the linear thrust of human history, a leitmotiv of the long poem, is already tangible near the opening of "Blues." Here Tom and his family wait at the train station for the delivery of the dead body of the man who was son and brother:

Meanwhile the usual darkness, the usual stars,
Allies of the light trust and homeless lovers.
And then the train with its clanking mechanical fury.
'Our will could neither turn it around nor stop it.'
Abrupt as history it violates the station—
The knife, the dream, the contemporary terror.

The poem moves forward through surrealistic visions of the insane world which has produced this and so many other deaths, and contrasts these with the acute immediacy of loss, culminating in what I take to be the emotional heart of the poem:

The leaf is there, and the light,
Fixed in the photograph, but the happiness is lost in the album,
And your words are lost in the mind, and your voice in the years,
And your letters' improbable tongues trouble the attic darkness.

And this is the true nature of grief and the human condition:
That you are nowhere; that you are nowhere, nowhere,
Nowhere on the round earth, and nowhere in time,
And the days like doors close between us, lock us forever apart.

This is unusually raw language from McGrath, the language of an open wound, of almost unbearable personal loss. The poem continues with an attempt at sublimating this pain into an image or symbol which will become familiar over the course of *Letter*, that of the Fifth Season:

> The calendar dies upon a dead man's watch. He is nowhere,
> Nowhere in time. And yet must be in Time.
> And when the Fifth Season with its mass and personal ascensions—
> Fire-birds rising from the burning towns of Negation
> Orbit towards freedom—
> Until then, brother, I will keep your watch. (*Selected Poems* 44-48)

Jimmy is further commemorated in "Memorial" and "The World of the Perfect Tear," both in *Figures of the Double World*, published in 1955 with the erroneous title *Figures from a Double World*. In these two poems there is a greater measure of detachment, although the old pain, one senses, still throbs deep within them. Smaller in scale than "Blues," they are wonderfully accomplished in formal terms, displaying McGrath's indebtedness to the metaphysical poets, and no doubt also, in their paradoxical concision, to Cleanth Brooks, a significant influence on the young poet during his time at Louisiana State University in 1940. Then towards the end of *Movie* there is another poem "for Jimmy McGrath," "The Last War Poem of the War," also in verse form but with a more polemical edge. In the poet's last collection, the posthumously published *Death Song*, there is a six-line poem for Jimmy among a brief sequence of pieces for siblings.

Returning to "Blues," my feeling is that it is a powerful and moving yet not fully resolved poem. The mythic foreshadowings of a "Fifth Season" do not to my mind arise inevitably out of the poem as a whole, and hence have a slightly strained character. Only through the tremendously broadened scope of *Letter* does the transition to a liberatory Fifth Season appear convincing, indeed inevitable, in poetic if not necessarily in historic terms. But it is not just a question of scope; between "Blues for Jimmy" and *Letter* a change has happened, a transformation even, not just in the poetry but also, I believe, in the poet himself. To explain my view on this transformation, however, we must look beyond poetry for a moment and consider some basic assumptions about our habitual world of experience.

Some of the fundamental parameters of this experience can be traced back to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. It was at this time, according to the mathematician and philosopher A. N. Whitehead, that nature came to be thought of

> in terms of stuff, or matter, or material—the particular name chosen is indifferent—which has the property of simple location in space and time, or, if you adopt the more modern ideas, in space-time. What I mean by matter, or material, is anything which has this property of *simple location.* (48-49)

In accordance with this novel outlook on the world, space came to be understood as uniform and empty, a kind of grid which is "filled up" with discrete physical objects. The ensemble of these objects in space then constitutes the world of our habitual experience. Similarly, time was now conceived as a purely linear abstraction which again exists prior to the discrete events unfolding through its standardized course. Consequently both time and space lost the qualitative distinctions experienced by pre-scientific man and became purely quantitative markers calibrating objects in space and events in time.

In spite of the vast changes of outlook since the seventeenth century, it is fair to say that simple location is still the modality through which we understand time and space today. We may "know" at an intellectual level that quantum mechanics and Einsteinian relativity have undermined this modality rather fundamentally, yet it continues to be the "default mode" of our collective waking life. (Our dream life is another matter—there the hold of simple location is much weaker.)

Simple location was to provide the matrix for the emergence of capitalist social relations in the early modern age. The privatization of land—in many ways a precondition for this emergence—required a spatialized calculation of the earth surfaces marked for expropriation from common ownership. But the growth of capitalism is even more intimately bound up with the standardization of time. As the capitalist mode of production established itself throughout the globe, and as the recollection of previous modes faded, it came to seem "natural" to experience time as uniform, repetitive, and calculable. The phrase made famous by Benjamin Franklin, "time is money," perfectly expresses the relationship. This was something McGrath was acutely aware of; he understood that the revolution he so earnestly anticipated must entail nothing less than the overturning of our very experience of time. No small task, given the dominion of time-as-money over our present "fourth world":

> And still they wait.
>
> Still.
>
> For the Divine
>
> Absence.
>
> For that Heaven-Standard-Time they dream will cancel all earthbound clocks.
> *Novus ordo seclorum*!
>
> But Time's new order lies buried
> Under the Eye of the Money Mountain on the dollar bill.
>
> (*Letter,* Part Three 353)

I would suggest then that for McGrath, going beyond capitalism meant in the end not just a profound social upheaval, although that would certainly have been a vital part of it. Even more than this, it would ultimately come to mean for him a bursting apart of the bonds and bounds of simple location. This underlying impulse is there from the outset in *Letter*, although it is much less obvious earlier on. In Parts One and Two the vicissitudes of class struggle at a particular historical turning-point—the American mid-century—still occupy much of the poem's foreground. Only in Parts Three and Four does a newly corrosive playfulness get to work on the very parameters of space and time through which the crucible of the twentieth century was conformed.

A poem like "Blues for Jimmy" shows the power of simple location still intact. And not surprisingly so. For bereavement painfully impresses on us the apparently ineluctable reality of linear time. In a "before time", the loved one was there, accessible; now in the "after time," he or she is no longer there—and will be there no more. "And the days like doors close between us, lock us forever apart." Likewise the space which before had witnessed the presence of the loved one now lies empty and bereft: "you are nowhere, nowhere, / Nowhere on the round earth, and nowhere in time . . . "

Our standard reality can offer as paltry consolation only time itself—the passage of time—to heal the wound, or at least to scab it over. Or, if we are given to religious wishful thinking, we may hope to be reunited with our loved ones in some kind of afterlife. Yet there is another way, a way which I believe is enacted in *Letter* in poetic terms, and that is a dissolution in oneself of those very parameters of space and time which had constituted "I" as separate in the first place from the other, be that other a lost sibling, a fallen comrade, a deceased friend, or in more global terms, a whole past epoch or indeed a future world.

For me, then, *Letter* can be read as an account of that dissolution, while being at the same time in its composition the very process through which, for the poet, the dissolution was effected. But this was bound to be a deeply unsettling and even terrifying process, one that is imaged at various key points of the long work as a kind of descent into the underworld. Yet the descent must be made, and a dislocation of personal identity effected in its sightless depths, if the subsequent long ascent can be accomplished. That redemptory ascent culminates in *Letter* with the sequence of the "nine heavens" in Part Four which brings the poem to its conclusion.

Let us turn now to what is probably the most sustained description in *Letter* of one of those descents. It occurs near the beginning of Part Two, and starts with a voice other than the poet's. This is one of those voices which intrudes itself vividly into the texture of the poem; usually attached to nameable characters such as Mac or Showboat Quinn or Peets or Preacher Noone, in this

instance the speaker is effectively disembodied. While his idiom is American and demotic, he is otherwise unidentified and, in this Stygian obscurity, unidentifiable:

> "_____seems like it was right here somewhere . . .
> place where you git out—
> Hey there, resurrection man! ghost haunter, crazy damn poet,
> What you do now kid?"
> (Voices from sleep, from death, from
> The demoniacal dream called living.)
> —I'm here to bring you
> Into the light of speech, the insurrectionary powwow
> Of the dynamite men and the doomsday spielers, to sing you
> Home from the night.
> Night of America.
> Gather you
> At my million-watt spiritlamp, to lead you forward forever, to conquer
> The past and the future . . .
> (*Letter*, Part Two 138)

As well as mimicking to great effect the voices of others, McGrath speaks in his own voice through *Letter* in a remarkable range of registers. This is one of them: the voice of the poet-shaman declaring in forthright terms the task he has set himself. Yet this is not a declaration born out of easy confidence, but rather, one feels, out of a desperate need to ground himself in a reminder of his own perilous undertaking. For we have entered here a realm where "[v]oices from sleep, from death, from / The demoniacal dream called living" all enjoy equal valence, and in any case cannot easily be told apart. Yet it is only in this uncertain realm where the domain of the living is intermingled with those of sleep and death that the poet can accomplish his declared intention "to lead you forward forever, to conquer / The past and the future . . . " Here, in other words, the poet is pitting himself against two of the key assumptions of simple location: the belief that waking life, dream and death are discontinuous realms, of which only the first properly concerns us; and next, that past and future arise out of a simple linear progression through abstract time, and can no more be "present" to us in the here and now than the dead can be present among the living.

"Among the living"—how unproblematic the phrase is from the standpoint of simple location! Yet if this "living" is itself, as McGrath asserts, a "demoniacal dream," then matters take on quite a different complexion. For how can we maintain with any confidence that our "waking" life is not itself some kind

of collective entrancement? And should this actually be the case—if we can even consider it as a possibility—does not then the poet's task, and the power arising from its successful accomplishment, acquire an altogether different significance?

One of the grand ironies of the modern age is that the rationalized and prosaic domain of simple location should itself turn out to be a demoniacal dream. Nothing less than an awakening from that dream is the ultimate intent, I believe, of McGrath's hazardous undertaking. It is a purpose achieved, within the magical space of the poem itself, through the final ascension of Part Four—but only after the poet has confronted, in a variety of its guises, the terrors and uncertainties of the underworld. For it is only through this displacement and loss of bearings, the loss indeed of our normal world of experience, that he can gain access, like a soul-rescuing shaman, to those beings, those epochs, those realms, which would otherwise remain entranced in the depths.

> —Heavy,
> Heavy the weight of these choice souls on my sun-barked shoulder, heavy
> The dark of the deep rock of the past, the coded legend
> In the discontinuous strata where every voice exists—
> Simultaneous recall: stone where the living flower leaps
> From the angry bones of Precambrian dead.
>
> (*Letter*, Part Two 139)

Here again we witness a magical subversion of our habitual linear experience, now replaced by "the discontinuous strata where every voice exists— / Simultaneous recall." Shortly after this we hear again the other voice that earlier counterpointed the poet's own—or is it the same voice? In these depths it is hard to be sure of anything:

> "It's dark down here, man—
> This slippery black—can't keep my footin'—like climbin'
> A greased pole, man—"
> And always, as I go forward,
> And older I hear behind me, intolerable, the ghostlight footsteps—
> Jimmy perhaps; or Jack; my father; Cal; Mac maybe—
> The dead and the living—"
>
> (*Letter,* Part Two, 139)

There are certain points in *Letter* where the poet elucidates what he is doing (insofar as he can discern it clearly himself) by telling us what he does not

intend to do. He continues this passage by declaring in the most emphatic terms that he does not wish to conjure up the dead with a view to indulging in some decorous nostalgia for a vanished past. Even the thought of such a sell-out—which is what it would be for him—prompts a volley of searing invective directed against the poetic and political Establishment:

> and to turn back toward them—that loved past—
> Would be to offer my body to the loud crows and the crass
> Lewd jackals of time and money, the academy of dream-scalpers, the mad
> Congressional Committees on Fame, to be put on a crisscross for not wearing
> The alien smell of the death they love
> —they'd cram my bonnet
> With a Presidential sonnet: they'd find my corpse worth stuffing
> With the strontium 90 of tame praise, the First Lady to flay me
> For mounting in the glass house of an official anthology . . .
> catafalques
> Of bourgeois sensibility
> —Box A to Box Z . . .
> And my body to suffer
> (As my soul) dismemberment . . .
> transmemberment . . .
> my head
> singing
> go down
> The dark river . . .
> necessary—
>
> not to turn back.
> (*Letter* 139-40)

I suggested earlier that there is a qualitative difference between *Letter* and the shorter poems. I would like to draw out that point now in light of the passages just quoted. I turn for help in this to the poet himself, specifically his brief but invaluable essay "McGrath on McGrath" in the Fall 1982 issue of *NDQ*. *Letter*, he tells us there,

> began without a theory and without a model, with the writer in terror. Terror—it seems to me the only word—is my usual feeling when I know there is a poem around somewhere in the dark and when I know I am going to have to go out and try to find it. . . . Later, if the work goes well, the terror will turn to joy. (12)

Subsequently in the same essay the author speaks about the very beginning of the big poem, one day at the house of Don Gordon, a fellow blacklisted poet, in Los Angeles:

> Some of us used to meet at Gordon's place to read poems at each other, take them apart, talk. Somehow I mentioned a poem I had at the back of my head, a long poem I thought, having to do with something out of my North Dakota childhood, but I had only a hazy notion of what it was about and no idea at all how to begin. I suppose that Don knew instantly that it was more lack of nerve than anything else that was stopping me. He gave me the obvious advice: Begin and see what happens. I made a beginning that night—in terror, as I have written. It was more than ordinary terror, which suggested that the poem was going to be long and difficult. I had no idea how long: I was thinking of something of perhaps ten or fifteen pages. (14)

The "more than ordinary terror" experienced at the outset of *Letter* provides, I believe, a major clue to what was involved in the undertaking. We have already seen how the long poem involves a kind of deconstruction of the fixed categories around which we build our understanding of life. Among these there are the settled distinctions between dream and waking, between the living and the dead, between past, present, and future. But there is something even more radical at stake here, something for which these distinctions and categories are only (might it be?) an exterior projection. That something, as already suggested, is the unitary and coherent "I" of normal experience. This is the "I" that has a name and identity, a place in the world, be it humble or exalted, a past and present and, it is hoped, some kind of future. It is an "I" that engages with others who likewise see themselves as "I," and who together unfold a collective story into the forward unknown.

The question then arises: can the poet hope to subvert the most basic parameters of life as we think we know it, without in the process undermining his own received identity? Marx, in the third of his eleven "Theses on Feuerbach," declares that the educator must himself be educated. Adapting this assertion to our present context, we would surely have to say, the transmuter must himself be transmuted. Which is precisely what we see happening in the last passage quoted: "And my body to suffer / (As my soul) dismemberment . . . transmemberment . . ." Then a clear reference to the myth of Orpheus: "my head / singing / go down / The dark river . . . / necessary . . . / not to turn back."

To elucidate the Orpheus reference I turn to E. R. Dodds' brilliant and erudite study, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Dodds argues that the opening of the Black Sea to Greek trade in the seventh century BCE introduced the Hellenic peoples for the first time to shamanistic culture, and that Thrace (in the north

of modern-day Greece) was an early center of this influence. But Thrace was also the home of Orpheus, and as Dodds points out, this mythic figure

> combines the professions of poet, magician, religious teacher and oracle giver. Like certain legendary shamans in Siberia, he can by his music summon birds and beasts to listen to him. Like shamans everywhere, he pays a visit to the underworld, and his motive is one very common among shamans—to recover a stolen soul. Finally, his magical self lives on as a singing head [his body having been torn asunder by frenzied Maenads, female followers of Dionysus], which continues to give oracles for many years after his death. That too suggests the North: such mantic heads appear in Norse mythology and in Irish tradition. I conclude that Orpheus is a Thracian figure of much the same kind as Zalmoxis—a mythical shaman or prototype of shamans. (Dodds 147)

One of the most celebrated episodes in the life of Orpheus is his attempt to rescue his beloved Eurydice from the Underworld. Hades, its ruler, for once allows him to do so, releasing his wife to follow him up to daylight once more, but on one condition: that he not look back for her at any point in their journey. For me this condition dramatises the distinction between Orpheus as poet-shaman, the one who leads up from the land of the dead, and Orpheus as ordinary man, the one who is prey to his own fears, uncertainties, and desires. For one fatal moment the poet-shaman gives way to the doubting and bereaved husband, who looks around to see if Eurydice is following him. And in that same instant she is drawn back into the shadows, never to return to the land of the living.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice throws additional light on the passages just quoted from *Letter*—indeed the poet says as much in "McGrath on McGrath."[1] For me what the myth points to is the fine line between the poet in his original, primitive guise, encapsulated in the figure of Orpheus, who encompasses within himself oracular and shamanistic functions, and the poet who operates from a purely subjective outlook, as in most contemporary poetry. It is only the poet as magus who can accomplish the undertaking dramatized through the winding progress of *Letter*; any lapse into a purely personal mode will annul the difficult magic operating to bring the poem through to realization. This is why, in navigating the "dark river" of the poem, it is indeed "necessary— / not to turn back."

Following his own gruesome death at the hands of the Maenads, the singing head of Orpheus floats down the river Hebrus to the Mediterranean. In this downstream progress we find again an echo—or should we say, a kind of pre-echo—early on in *Letter*. After the fight between Cal and the poet's uncle at the start of the migrant workers' strike, young Tom seeks refuge in nature from the pain and helpless anger he has felt, unable as a boy to intervene on Cal's behalf. Now if we go back to that earlier passage bearing these Orphic

and shamanistic overtones in mind, I believe we may see it in rather a different light. Here is the boy entering what appears to be a copse near the river:

> I called the king of the woods,
> The wind-sprung oak.
> I called the queen of ivy,
> Maharani to his root-bark duchies;
> Summoned the foxgrape, the lank woodbine,
> And the small flowers: the wood violets, the cold
> Spears of the iris, the spikes of the ghostflower –
> It was before the alphabet of trees
> Or later.
>
> (*Letter,* Part One 26)

This invocation of the trees, which on first reading might suggest a boy engaging in a tremulous magical game, acquires a different depth of significance in light of the passages from early in Part II which we have just been looking at. As such it is a good example (many others could be identified) of the way that McGrath circles and circles through the poem as a whole. Hence also the layers of meaning in "It was before the alphabet of trees / Or later." It was "before" the alphabet of trees, in the sense that the poet would have become acquainted with this druidical alphabet much later in life, in all likelihood through Robert Graves' groundbreaking classic *The White Goddess*, published in 1948. Yet in another sense it was "after" the tree alphabet, long after such druidical times in terms of the passage of historical time. Or again it was "after" in the sense of a dim intuition of previous existences, "before" in the sense that the boy is here entering a timeless realm, hence prior to any time-bound epoch of human life, however deeply recessed in the past it may be.

Bearing in mind this context, at once timebound and timeless, let us proceed with the passage in question, which culminates with an imagined down-river voyage beyond the reach of normal identity:

> Then: I heard the green singing of the leaves;
> The water-mystery,
> The night-deep and teasing terror on the lone river
> Sang in my bones,
> And under its eves and seas I broke my weeping,
> In that deeper grieving,
> The long, halting—the halt and the long hurry—
> Toward the heaving, harsh, the green blurring of the salt mysterious sea.
>
> (*Letter*, Part One 28)

The image of the river merging in the sea is a recurrent symbol in Eastern spirituality, where it represents the dissolution of the personal self in divine Oneness. This dissolution can take place, it is taught, only through a surrender of individual identity, just as the river empties itself into the Ocean whence it originally derived. Such a prospect typically produces resistance on the part of the limited ego-self, for it experiences terror at the prospect of its own annihilation, even though in truth this perceived annihilation is actually a release from a contrived and ultimately false sense of personhood.

Letter is not a mystical tract in this sense: it is after all an "autobiographical" poem, one that is articulated around an individual life that is lived in a definite historical context. But, as McGrath himself cautions us,

> It is not simply autobiography. I am very far from believing that all parts of my life are meaningful enough to be usable in the poem. But I believe that all of us live twice: once personally and once as a representative man or woman. I am interested in those moments when my life line crosses through the concentration points of the history of my time. Then I live both personally and representatively. ("McGrath on McGrath" 17)

McGrath suggests the term "pseudo-autobiography" for this fragmented, non-linear approach in which the particularity of experience is subsumed into a greater significance. In this sense *Letter* can be seen to operate on the cusp between the timebound and the timeless. Certainly there is strongly present here the Marxist concern with transformation within and through history, particularly in Parts One and Two. Yet also detectable from the outset, and becoming more pronounced as we advance into Parts Three and Four, is the concern of the magus or shaman with the transmogrification of time and space themselves, those matrices out of which the historical progression arises.

As already noted, McGrath speaks of the poem, of any genuine poem, as beginning in terror and ending—if its initial promise is realized—in joy. *Letter* began, as we have seen, with the poet experiencing "a more than ordinary terror," and it ends with a joy that is unbridled, exalted, and, ultimately, in its final ineffable lyric, serene. With the consummation of the poem, "I realise now that behind my terror all along there has been a kind of serenity" (12).

Experiencing as we do now a world which is terrific in so many ways, arguably more so even than in McGrath's times, we would do well to turn to this great poet's work to find the unquenchable joy which is the ultimate counterpoise of terror. And in doing so realise that behind even this polarity of opposites lies a serenity unaffected by either, yet which provides the ground for the play of both.

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"Eating the Pure Light"

Jamie Parsley

St. Mary's Cemetery
Sheldon, North Dakota

Like a gnarled Zen master
he leaves not even a trace.
There is nothing here—

not even a name engraved like
the mother
the father

the brother
who dreamed
(he once wrote)

of flying.
They lie here
on this slight rise of prairie

laid out
side-by-side
under sod that sags.

Wind sighs over them
in this slightly
removed place.

But there is
not even a shadow of him anywhere.
Zen masters ponder impermanence,

and so did he.
His last poems say it
again and again—

we *are* temporary,
the way clouds are
that enter the sky,

grow full,
disintegrate into the sun.
I am not looking for clouds today.

Instead, I look downward
into the grass
where my shadow shrugs

and hunches.
Mine, but not his.
Not even it

was left behind by him.
If it was ever here
it has been eaten up

by some long-ago light.

The Dream

Jamie Parsley

My poems
Are asleep, though they dream in many
languages.
—Thomas McGrath

He said it
in one of his last poems.

But now it is time
for them to awake,
to rise up
like graves opened
on some apocryphal last day.

It is time
for them to wake from their dreaming,
to open their once-silent mouths

and sing

Tom McGrath: A Poem All His Own

Rick Watson

—from "Sweetheart and the Roping Fool"

Water runs down slopes,
washes brown silt across
the sidewalk laid by state engineers
for tourists to stroll
the "reconstructed" old Fort Union.
Thunder roars, and August turns black.
Lightning jumps, erratic slashes
tear the western sky, and then "Cracks!" right now!
into a cottonwood on the river.

Tom's spirit hangs out at
the newly built house of the "Bourgeois."
The ugly irony is never lost
on this Wobbly poet's dead Red soul.
Tom hears, knows the whole story in thunder:
buffalo hides, the delicate tongue,
beaver pelts and "Blackfoot Rum,"
John Jacob Astor, Manuel Liza,
Hudson Bay, American Fur,
MacKenzie and Culbertson,
the simplicity of butcher, cheat and kill,
rape, running ruin and oozing smallpox sores;
the destruction that followed
melancholy Lewis and map-maker Clark,
just a hundred short, sad years:
Beaver Hat-Manifest-Jeffersonian-Jim Hill Dream
but Tom's ghost just cannot take no more—
here's the gory, stupid, glorious history.
If a ghost can just find one human ear
to haunt with the thunderous tale.
He hangs in the rumble, lighting and rain,
a grieving ghostly poem in his own.

Poet's Consciousness, Political Consciousness*

Doren Robbins

Thinking of a tribute to Thomas McGrath, I started to consider what he was up against as a leftist radical and as an open-form poet in the 1950s—"open form" in the sense of Whitman's meaning when he spoke of his long poem sequence and proto-collage, *Song of Myself*, as a "language experiment."[1] First, what was Whitman up against that led him from his own radical irritability to make the condemnatory statement that the United States was "a nation of lunatics"?[2] Whitman's nineteenth-century society of African-American slaves, slave labor, child labor, unequal rights of women, decimated Indian populations, sexual intolerance for homosexuals and lesbians, Lincoln's assassination, the Civil War with more than one million casualties and more than 600,000 dead, Southern plantation owners and big business food producers starving out the working people of the Southern states right through the Civil War, the majority of the soldiers coerced into fighting to protect entrenched plantation and business wealth.[3] Governed by the robber barons that preceded the bailout barons. By McGrath's time, the "lunacy" translated into WWI (estimated 16 million dead, 21 million wounded); imprisonment under the Espionage Act of war resisters, including WWI protester-socialist leader Eugene V. Debs and poet e.e. cummings; the murder, imprisonment, or exile of members of the most radical and socially conscious union in US labor history—the Industrial Workers of the World, the Wobblies; WWII (estimated 72 million dead), the creation of the CIA, the Korean War, McCarthyism, Vietnam, the smaller undeclared global secret wars primarily in East Asia and Latin America: Lunatics International, Inc.

Whitman and McGrath were determined on the social level of historical circumstance to respond ethically, as poets; that is, not to deny these circumstances as inappropriate subject matter for poetry. McGrath had the capacious sensibility to include the lives of contemporary, common people in his poetry in a way that shames Ezra Pound's glib and at times libelous statement about his own long poem *The Cantos* as "a poem that includes history," though possibly McGrath, and I'm guessing some people reading this article, would agree with Pound when he stated, "The real trouble with war (modern war) is that it gives no one a chance to kill the right people" (Pound 140). Or at least imprison them, since even the murder of sociopathic leaders, politicians, or rebels (and their financiers), hasn't eliminated the imperialist or totalitarian drive for power and overall social control by small, elite groups of the wealthy.

Contrary to Pound (with the exception of "the hell Cantos"), McGrath writes a poetry that personally and crucially encompasses the world historical

*This is a slightly edited version of a talk delivered at the Associated Writing Program Conference in 2008.

realities and stratified economic struggles of the period. His writing about the crude, the backbreaking, and the exploitative in the alienating forms of labor, and the mystically initiating and communally enlivening experience of labor, are written from direct experience. He didn't write from a distance—he was frontal and plunging. In his essential message and lyrical outcry he is too proletarian for the comfortably genteel or any other kind of genteel. Yet the writing—with qualities of sound, diction, multiplicity of themes, and poetic design comparable to Whitman and Joyce—could be thought of as too sophisticated for the proletarian. The only irony I find in such a conclusion is not that a poet with a critical and compassionate grasp of the human condition is too demanding for certain readers, but the fact that it is the willful and outright failure of our education system, and the manipulative designers behind it, that prevent working-class people and the publicly educated in general, from having the necessary historical learning, the vocabulary full enough, the curiosity about unknown words urgent enough, the mind free and critically absorbent enough not to find such poetry or any other worthy work of literature "too sophisticated," especially when it might inform readers about their false understanding of the educational and economic rut they find themselves in. For example, in his memoir about teaching and learning, *Stupidity and Tears*, educator Herbert Kohl noted how "bureaucrats, in order to keep Title I money, had to keep children below grade level" (27).[4] There won't be any wisdom gained from persisting in such folly, and works of essential literature will remain unread. However willful cultivating a lack of knowledge and insight might be accepted in various areas of our educational systems, generally in McGrath's poetry and in the following examples of metaphor there's nothing above what Whitman referred to as "words continually used among the people":

> "The revolving graves and the grass pastures of the fined-down diamond-cutting sea." (*Letter* 9)

> "Where a man chants like a bird in the brilliant bonev / Lightening of his tree." (42)

> "From the Pentecostal cloud chambers of the sex-charged sea." (121)

There's an experience of distinct *elegance* of sound and diction in McGrath's language, a skill no one I can remember addressed in my educational experience before returning to college, though I read of elegance in the essays of Aristotle, Pater, Bloom, Burke, Snyder, and Rexroth. He also had a remarkable ear for the American vernacular of his particular time, and his poems bristle and flow with the necessity of occasional obscenities; his vulgarities are not

marginally acceptable "fleeting expletives"; they are part of his precise uncensored directness, and like other literal and figurative masters of what we call "the whole lexicon." Like Chaucer, Rabelais, Villon, Shakespeare, Miller, or Roth, he knew how to characterize through the use of obscenity; for example, in the following passage when attempting as a young man to go to college, he meets with "some kind of dean," a man he refers to as a "chilly Lutheran Buddha," and, after realizing he won't be able to afford going to the school, he concludes that

> Well, that's how that goes.
> The bastard sat there
> Like a man with a paper asshole, like a man
> With his head under water, talking talking.
> At last his words
> Said nothing but money money. A conversation
>
> We could not enter.
> "Somebody should set fire to the son of a bitch."
> I hear Mac saying.
> Seventeenth Street is jammed
> With flags and seamen. May Day, '46.
> "Somebody should tamp up on the hyperborean bugger!"
> And my father says "The dirty muzzier!"
> And the flags toss
> As we go out in a storm that's ten years strong,
> Where the freight cars rattle and the vigorous dead of the future
> Ride reefers, preserved in invisible ice.
> Dakota, Montana
> Blowing along the wind
> Those dirty slogans
> Alive. (*Letter* 33-34)

The confidence of those lines, when the language tools, the man, and the materials sing with bitter or gleeful accusation—fulfill the complete function of his speech, the whole lexicon, which for the hypocritical, that is, the general mainstream, or not the mainstream but simply readers retardedly bored or worn-out too easily by the discipline it takes to understand the links a writer of McGrath's quality has made with Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Biblical Prophets, Marx, Whitman, Dickens, Joyce, Miller, Traven—to come away free with a voice of his own. But he had the nerve to write this way, and his convictions in the way he expressed himself were natural and exuberant.

McGrath is known or, in some cases, branded hotly, as a political poet. That's a true enough truism about his work, and I've touched on that subject

here. But there are, as we say, political poets and there are political poets. German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht proclaimed that "complex seeing must be practiced" (99). In McGrath's complex vision there's an inter-related botanical, fraternal, domestic, communal complexity that is part of his lyrical fantasy and reality of a world relieved of the violent realism it occupies and destroys itself within. And there is, of course, pleasure, not only artistic, not only erotic, not only through the joy of raising a child. During an informal interview at the end of Mike Hazard's and Paul Burtness's documentary, *The Movie at the End of the World: Thomas McGrath*, McGrath talks about the anger and invective he used throughout his poetry, that there was a satisfaction to expressing his rage against a violently alienating and corrupt system. . . . But he would liked to have written more poems of praise, he said; he wasn't sentimental about it, there wasn't really a trace of self-pity about not having praised more often in his writing, he knew what he was about, he knew his temperament—and in his language of lucid anger, in a time diseased with radical timidity and suppression of civil liberties—he raised his voice, adding himself to a lasting American literary tradition of socially-conscious truth-tellers (from Paine and Thoreau, to Douglas, Twain, Baldwin, Rexroth, and Rich). It was a time, after all, when the general sources of praise, which always result from the refusal of people to be coerced into unnecessary conflict, was denied by the economic and military catastrophes of the twentieth century. But, whatever the ineluctable ruins awaiting McGrath's dynamic fantasy of a communal society, the regret McGrath expresses as the documentary ends is not only the regret that the world, the variety of corrupt states, religious institutions, corporations, and the military institutions and secret military institutions that protect them will not relent in our lifetime. The regret reflected, in part, is how much it takes over a lifetime to actively respond to malicious violence and willful injustice. In the documentary, he speaks his response of regret with a tone of understanding, a facial expression of severe tenderness. His face expresses a kind of bewilderment, because he knows he could've died in WWII. He wrote about Korea and Vietnam, he wrote about Auschwitz, he wrote about Chile and El Salvador, he wrote about US workers killed in the labor wars, he knew the "otherwise" of others' lives. The regret is over the failure of civilized society—what the wars, the racism, the concentration camps, and World exploitation mean in terms of wasted human lives. That this reality and its symbolism, the source of his invective and his compassion, is the dominant theme of our time is what the regret is about. The documentary, however, ends with a reading of the poem "Praises," which is a celebration of life and fertility; it is a poem in the company of Whitman's celebrations, particularly his poem "Infinite Buds," and Pablo Neruda's celebrations in *Odas Elementales*. In spite of the noble testifying social consciousness that substantiates the accountability of poets like Whitman, Neruda, and McGrath, they were also praisers of what actually and symbolically exists in

the dynamic of botanical abundance, which symbolically reflects our emotional abundance; and the pleasure of observing the cycles of its sustenant creation, which correlates with our own varying interior cycles; and the pleasure of its lasting and complete sensory stimulation, which is the sanity of our gratitude. In closing, McGrath's poem of praise:

Praises

The vegetables please us with their modes and virtues.
The demure heart
Of lettuce inside its circular court, baroque ear
Of quiet under its rustling house of lace, pleases
Us.
And behold the strength of the celery, its green Hispanic
!Shout! Its explanatory confetti.
And the analogue that is Onion:
Ptolemaic astronomy and tearful allegory, the Platonic circles
Of his inexhaustible soul!
O and the straightforwardness
In the labyrinth of Cabbage, the infallible rectitude of Homegrown Mushroom
Under its cone of silence like a papal hat—
All these
Please us.
And the syllabus of corn,
that wampum,
its golden
Roads leading out of the wigwams of its silky and youthful smoke;
The nobility of the dill, cool in its silence and cathedrals;
Tomatoes five-alarm fires in their musky barrios, peas
Asleep in their cartridge clips,
beetsblood,
colonies of the imperial
Cauliflower, and Buddha-like seeds of the pepper
Turning their prayerwheels in the green gloom of their caves.
All these we praise: they please us all ways: these smallest virtues.
All these earth-given:
and the heaven-hung fruit also . . .
As instance
Banana which continually makes angelic ears out of sour
Purses, or the veiny abacus of the holy grape on its cross
Of alcohol, or the peach with its fur like a young girl's—
All these we praise: the winter in the flesh of the apple, and the sun
Domesticated under the orange's rind.

We praise
By the skin of our teeth, Persimmon, and Pawpaw's constant
Affair with gravity, and the proletariat of the pomegranate
Inside its leathery city.
And let us praise all these
As they please us: skin, flesh, flower, and the flowering
Bones of their seeds: from which come orchards: bees: honey:
Flowers, love's language, love, heart's ease, poems, praise.
(*The Movie at the End of the World* 157-58)

Notes

[1]From Horace Traubel's forward to Walt Whitman's *An American Primer*.

[2] "Go on, my dear Americans, whip your horses to the utmost—Excitement; money! politics!—open all your valves and let her go—going, whirl with the rest—you will soon get under such momentum you can't stop if you would. Only make provision betimes, old States and new States, for several thousand insane asylums. You are in a fair way to create a nation of lunatics."

[3]David Williams' *Peoples' History of the Civil War* documents elections fixed for secession not only to protect labor and sex slavery, but to maximize its exploitation of working-class and poor Southern whites.

[4]Earlier, Kohl pointed out that "students [. . .] are trapped in a system that claims to have their learning success in mind, though really it is designed and administered as a failure system with high-stakes testing, 'teacher-proof' curriculum, unrealizable standards, and punishment for so-called underperforming schools that serve the children of the poor and working class" (22).

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Refracted: Visions of Fracking in Prose and Poetry

Richard M. Rothaus

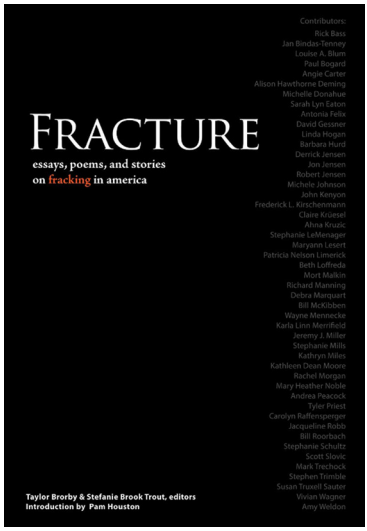
Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories on Fracking in America. Taylor Brorby and Stefanie Brook Trout, editors. North Liberty, Iowa: Ice Cube Press, 2016. Pp. 466, $24.95 pb.

A review of *Fracture: Essays, Poems, and Stories on Fracking in America* comes at a fractured time in North Dakota. Protests over the Dakota Access Pipeline continue. Several camps with a population perhaps as high as 5,000 cluster around the pipeline's route just north of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation boundary. The NoDAPL protests, as they have been dubbed in a hashtag-friendly fashion, have brought a variety of voices to North Dakota, but the dialogue and rhetoric have been, not surprisingly, polarized. The echo-chambers of Facebook, Twitter, and partisan news media have been roaring in affirmation and condemnation, while more mainstream media sources have waded in and out, not quite able to sort out all the voices, claims, and counterclaims. NoDAPL started, perhaps, as a protest against a pipeline running underneath the Missouri River, upstream from the tribal headquarters at Fort Yates, which is, one must note, an island in that river, created by the Oahe dam farther downstream. But the protests have become a widespread, ecumenical, anti-fossil fuels event. As local wags like to tell it, the protest has gone from NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) to NOPE (not-on-planet-earth).

Brorby and Trout's edited volume predates NoDAPL, but the reader will similarly find points-of-view that extend beyond fracking to a concern with and opposition to the continued use of fossil fuels. No reader will confuse *Fracture* with a balanced work on the issues. Instead, the volume is filled with the anger, angst, confusion, and concern of the authors who have tried to give word to their reaction to fracking technology. Within, thankfully, Tyler Priest's "Frackenstein's Monster: a History of Unconventional Oil and Gas Technology" serves as a solid primer on unconventional oil, which is where much of the concern and emotion focuses. Fracking is fun to say, vaguely obscene, and thus what we like to talk about, or perhaps as Stefanie Brook Trout presents in "Hear No Evil," talk around, because it is easier to not think about or address its mysteries. But fracturing rocks in wells to increase production is old news, and dates to nineteenth-century "shooters" loading shafts with temperamental nitroglycerin.

What we have now, what is so disquieting, is a triple development—hydraulic fracking, using trade-secret fluids instead of common explosives, horizontal drilling that allow us to go a few miles down and a few miles to the side, and mud-pulse telemetry that allows the horizontal drills to be navigated

through bands of shale no bigger than your torso. Our technology has exceeded our ability to intuitively understand it. What we are doing underneath our feet is something we can never see, and most of us cannot really envision. The scale is too large. Think about walking two miles straight down into the earth, and only then turning a right angle and walking another two miles; that's one of thousands of shafts. And the scale is too small. You cannot really walk down the shafts; they are quite small. Envision barrels of oil, and rushes of gas, flowing from a band of rock filled with cracks so tiny they have to be propped open with sand.



It is not surprising that those who have stood on and pondered unconventional oil and gas fields have strong and polarized reactions. Some embrace our ability to do this magic and rush forward knowing that the skills and technologies are still pretty nascent. Others recoil from techniques that are not easily comprehended and whose long-term effects are known only from the projections of competing specialists. It is the recoil that is felt in *Fracture*, and that recoil has been, as with NoDAPL, so strong that it spreads out like waves onto the entire fossil-fuel industry.

The pieces within *Fracture*, while consistently unenthusiastic about the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and use, are quite varied in form, tone, and target. I found the condemnatory pieces less than useful, and several cross the line into smug. A recurring trope in the NoDAPL social media is anti-protest commentators riffing on the arrival of protestors in gas-powered vehicles. In "The View From 31,000 Feet: A Philosopher Looks at Fracking," Kathleen Dean Moore pleads in a footnote "Please forgive an old advocate the carbon costs of her flights . . . join her in giving ten percent of all travel costs and all speaking fees to anti-oil organization. . . ." My reaction to Moore is not a rush of interest but an idle thought that philosophical remediation on individual responsibility and privilege might be in order. There are other pieces that cluster into predictable voices of outrage penned, as the authors so often tell us, in locations that show they venerate nature, places where the residents and workers of the lands of the unconventional oil plays are not likely to visit, much less use as the location of their second home. These works strike me as the literary equivalent of the Facebook echo-chamber, and they have the sticky feeling of people who love the earth from their comfortable position, not radical, but actually conservative in their desire to not see it change. A

much better approach is found, I believe, in Jon Jensen's "Sand in my Backyard," which insists, perhaps in vain, that the problem is not simple, and we all have complicity:

> Am I a hypocrite if I oppose fracking but also drive a car running on gasoline that may have come from fracked oil? Not necessarily, but simply posing the question illustrated the ways that it is problematic to see this as "us vs. them," the evil despoilers of the environment. We are all complicit in the structures and systems that create and sustain the industrial economy. . . . Once we fully grasp this complicity, it should be clear that it is not enough simply to fight; we must change the game.

One perhaps wishes for more analytical depth and self-awareness like Jensen's in the volume, but there is plenty to be found. Michelle Donahue's poem "A Stranger in a Bar" gently probes at the truth that there is much talking, but little communication, and even less understanding:

> I wonder at that rise & fall,
> how words gather, escape
> from lips unheard. I know
> nothing, a man delivering
> a story like glass: transparent until broken, seen only
> as shards, from a glimpse
> of that splintered edge.

Most of the works reach deep. As Pam Houston tells us in her introduction, written, we must be told, from a ranch at 9,000 feet in Colorado, the authors "stared down their sorrow and their fears, faced the difficult facts and made art of out of them." Bill McKibben's "Why Not Frack" is a serious consideration of too much, too fast, and the impacts to land, population, and health. Patricia Nelson Limerick's "Hydraulic Fracturing: A Guide to the Terrain of Public Conversation" reads as a prescient guide to the NoDAPL protest and response waves in North Dakota, and drills down to the levels of subconctractors and royalty owners, workers and residents, to give a glimpse of why the dialogues are just so hard. Bill Roorbach's "Huckster" nicely captures the concerns of people in the fray, regardless of their position on fracking. Amy Weldon, through prose, and Susan Truxell Sauter, through verse, bring the discussion to larger issues of societal values and how they are framed, or maybe even created, by corporations. While my tastes obviously skew moderate, there are fine pieces from fairly extreme points of view. Stephanie Mills' "Last Call: Frack Wells, Wood Frogs and Leopold's Ethics" has a very strong leave-it-in-the-ground ethos, which is a much more coherent and attractive alternative to aimless nay-saying.

Paul Bogard's "Occupation" wrestles with what is left to be said on the issue, and finds a way to say something new by considering not major disasters but the slow cumulative loss faced by the environment and communities when things do not turn out as expected. Louise A. Blum's "Faith on the Front Lines" is a brutally honest, introspective, and insightful view from a protestor. Instead of rechanting slogans in a longer prose form, she turns inward and shares the complexity of motivations and responses:

> The previous week, at the Water Equals Life blockade, we were all so serious we never let go of the banner, never took a break, refused to drink anything because we were so afraid that if we left to pee we'd miss our chance to be arrested. We were so sunburned and dehydrated we couldn't have smiled if we'd tried. If we'd been people of faith we would have been the kind that flagellate themselves.

John Kenyon's "The Way of Sorrow" is similarly notable for the verisimilitude of dialogues that occur in the extraction regions, and the fiscal realities of people working on the ground in the industry, that far exceed other more abstract considerations in urgency and size. Several contributions grapple with the sense of place. Stephen Trimble's "One Well: Drilling the Bears Ears" ponders the archaeology and landscape of the Canyonlands in Utah and the hotly contested proposed Bears Ears monument, appropriately invoking Aldo Leopold: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." And as Kenyon notes, it is the vastly divergent view of an industry that views exercise of property rights and extraction as a good that creates the gulf between the polarized viewpoints. Rachel Morgan's "An Orbital Tour of Cities at Night" uses poetry to illuminate the intense activity of the emptiness of an extraction region:

> In the fracking fields burn-off glows
> and roads connect, but lanes and places
> lead nowhere. It's true the wheat glows.

Stephanie LeMenager struggles similarly in "Oil Town Palimpsest," which tries to address the play of perceived heritage and pristine wilderness with the reality of rapid change and a heritage that is actually just as toxic as wilderness. Her piece probes the polarity of our dialogues around an imaginary Ecotopia, by invoking "working people . . . capable of remaking words through physical force" and noting how fracking in Santa Barbara County, California, has created an intersection of landscapes identified by "artisanal food production and the sacrifice of the rural outlands to toxic degradation." This theme is similarly addressed by Jan Bindas-Tenny, who captures the juxtaposition

of the mythical pasts in North Dakota, colliding at the fracking epicenter of Williston in "The Story of Staying." Williston is also the focus of Jeremy Miller's "The Shining," which is near-perfect in capturing the ethos of a visit to Williston (and Stanley) at the height of the North Dakota boom. Andrea Peacock's "Three Rivers Quartet" captures the ambivalence of a boom, which brings development, but not necessarily improvement. These pieces are far more effective and stand in juxtaposition to, I think, Richard Manning's "Now We're Talking Price," which posits a mythical North Dakota badlands not hammered by generations of ranching, but rather so pure, so sacred, that none of us have the right to enter it.

Taylor Brorby addresses the sense of place in his "White Butte" that chronicles his trek to the top of North Dakota's not very impressive highest point. It is a journey that does not bring satisfaction, only Brorby's uncertainty of anything except his consciousness in a moment "witnessing the decapitation of buttes, looking as if they were sliced sideways by swords, opened to bleed black blood. . . ." Brorby captures the ethos of *Fracture*, which is filled with emotion and anger and a sense of violation, but it cannot find clear answers, probably because there are none. This world of non-decisive answers is captured as well by Antonia Felix's "Extravagance of Vice," which is perhaps my favorite piece in the collection. The fictional story nicely captures the implacable buffeting by external forces, as well as the inextricable link, between petroleum and military infrastructure and workforce. Her work is matched perhaps, by another favorite, Mark Trechock's poem "Down the Road," which captures the rhythmic, almost staccato, highway trip through oil country, recognized by any who work or live there. I think, however, Michelle Donahue's "Digging" and "A Stranger in the Bar" are the evocative poetic pinnacles of the collection.

Fracture is, to my mind, vaguely unsatisfying, perhaps because its uniformity of viewpoint comes perilously close to a long-slog of jingoism, a literate inverse of "Drill, Baby, Drill." But there are gems in the collection, more than I have highlighted here. Proponents of fracking and extraction will find it utterly unpalatable. NoDAPL enthusiasts will find it nigh unto scriptural. The collection itself demonstrates that, for the most part, large portions of our population are not having a discussion about unconventional oil and gas extraction that crosses over from entrenched positions. An imperfect start is a start, nonetheless.

"A Sentence Within a Sentence": Solitary Confinement as Torture

Gayatri Devi

Rule 43

1. In no circumstances may restrictions or disciplinary sanctions amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The following practices, in particular, shall be prohibited:
   (a) Indefinite solitary confinement;
   (b) Prolonged solitary confinement;
   (c) Placement of a prisoner in a dark or constantly lit cell;
   (d) Corporal punishment or the reduction of a prisoner's diet or drinking water;
   (e) Collective punishment.
2. Instruments of restraint shall never be applied as a sanction for disciplinary offences.
3. Disciplinary sanctions or restrictive measures shall not include the prohibition of family contact. The means of family contact may only be restricted for a limited time period and as strictly required for the maintenance of security and order.

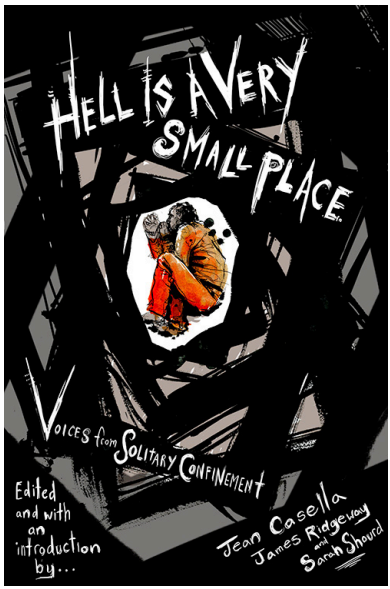
*Mandela Rules: United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (*United Nations)

Jean Casella, James Ridgeway, and Sarah Shourd, eds. *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. New York: The New Press, 2016. Pp. 226, $29.95 hb.

On July 5th, 2016, Chelsea Manning, trans woman, American military intelligence analyst, and convicted whistleblower attempted to commit suicide while serving her sentence at the Disciplinary Barracks in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (Goodman). Manning had been imprisoned in Fort Leavenworth, an all-male military prison, where she was part of the general population since her sentencing in 2013 to 35 years in prison for publishing classified government documents related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to Wikileaks. Since her suicide attempt in July, however, Manning has been moved to a mental health observation unit in Leavenworth, where the Army has reportedly told her that she is being investigated "on administrative charges that include having prohibited property in her cell and resisting being moved out of the cell" (Goodman), the "prohibited property" in question being a tube of expired toothpaste and LGBTQ reading material. According to her attorney Chase Strangio of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), if convicted,

Manning could face indefinite solitary confinement and additional time in prison. It could also hurt her chance of parole (Goodman).

This is not the first time Manning has faced solitary confinement. When Manning was initially arrested in May 2010 on "aiding the enemy" charges, she was taken to Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, and placed into solitary confinement. Within two weeks, Manning had attempted suicide (Manning). Thereafter, Manning was moved to the US Marine Corps Brig in Quantico, Virginia, where she was placed in restrictive solitary conditions in a tiny 6x8 foot cell for nine months in pretrial detention. In the *Guardian*, Manning described her time in solitary confinement thusly:



> For 17 hours a day, I sat directly in front of at least two Marine Corps guards seated behind a one-way mirror. I was not allowed to lay down. I was not allowed to lean my back against the cell wall. I was not allowed to exercise. Sometimes, to keep from going crazy, I would stand up, walk around, or dance, as "dancing" was not considered exercise by the Marine Corps. (Manning)

Solitary confinement is punishment added on top of the punishment of being in prison. As Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, editors of *Hell is a Very Small Place* observe, "According to the law, deprivation of freedom alone is supposed to be the price society exacts for crimes committed. . . . Solitary, in particular, operates as a 'second sentence,' or a 'sentence within a sentence,' doled out without benefit of due process" (10).

Many of the prisoners represented in this anthology have been in solitary confinement for much longer than Manning, and they document conditions and experiences far more inhuman and hopeless than Manning describes. But the experiences described in this collection reveal the source of terror present in an interview Manning gave to Amnesty International recently:

> I am always afraid. I am still afraid of the power of government. A government can arrest you. It can imprison you. It can put out information about you that won't get questioned by the public—everyone will just assume that what they are saying is true. Sometimes, a government can even kill you—with or without the benefit of a trial. (Goodman)

The world of prisoners in solitary confinement appears to be a world of limitless and "arbitrary exercise of power" put upon by prison staff to humiliate, terrorize, and brutalize prisoners for unknown objectives other than punishment, rehabilitation, or reform.

Hell is a Very Small Place is divided into two parts. Part 1 contains sixteen essays written by men and women in solitary confinement in American prisons. Part II comprises five essays written by legal scholars, forensic, and prison psychologists, and other professionals who have worked closely with the solitary confinement system in our country. The essays in Part 1 are preceded by an excellent "Introduction" to the history and current status of solitary confinement in the US by editors Jean Casella and James Ridgeway, veteran journalists and investigative reporters and co-directors of *Solitary Watch*, a web-based project dedicated to uncovering the facts about solitary confinement to the public. According to *Solitary Watch*, and Casella and Ridgeway, there are approximately 80,000 men, women, and children living in the nation's "supermax" prisons in solitary confinement. While solitary confinement is practiced all over the world, it is a particularly American invention dating back to the 1790s and the Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia, named for the street on which the prison stood, where sixteen inmates of a new prison block were held in tiny single cells designed to prevent communicating with each other. These individuals were not put to work like other jail inmates; they were left alone to contemplate their crimes. The practice was meant to make them penitent—thus the name of the new prison block, the Penitentiary House (*Hell* 3). In 1829, Pennsylvania opened Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia where incarcerated men and women were prevented from talking to each other or the guards, fed through a slot on the metal door, forced to wear a mask when taken outside on rare occasions, and allowed to read only the Bible (*Hell* 4). Eastern State Penitentiary was the precursor of the modern solitary confinement units, security housing units, special management units, special housing units, or the SHU (pronounced "shoe"), the box, the bing, or the block as they are known to the inmates (*Hell* 7).

Right from its inception, the "Philadelphia System" had its critics, including Alexis de Tocqueville, and Charles Dickens, who described the incarcerated prisoners in the isolated cells as "buried alive" and subjected to "immense amount of torture and agony" through a "slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain" (*Hell* 4). However, despite cautions about its deleterious psychological, biological, and behavioral effects, this social and civil isolation model thrived, and the modern day "supermax" prison was born during the 1963 "lockdown" of the Marion Penitentiary in Illinois where two corrections officers were killed by inmates, putting the prison on indefinite lockdown (*Hell* 5). Notorious solitary confinement units such as Alcatraz and Pelican Bay in California, Administrative Maximum ADX in Florence, Colorado, or the "hole" in nearly every regional prison and jail across the nation

now represent a new, technologically sophisticated means of total social control with the capacity to "isolate, regulate and surveil more effectively than anything that has preceded them" (*Hell* 6).

There is no more pressing human rights issue, the editors argue, than solitary confinement. Rather than a last resort reserved for the "worst of the worst," solitary confinement is the "first resort control strategy" in most prisons and jails:

> Today, incarcerated people can be placed in complete isolation for months or years not only for violent acts but for possessing contraband—including excess quantities of pencils or postage stamps—testing positive for drug use, or using profanity. . . . The system is arbitrary, largely unmonitored, and ripe for abuse; individuals have been sent to solitary for filing complaints about their treatment or for reporting rape or brutality by guards. (*Hell* 8)

The sixteen essays included in Part I under three broad headings, "Enduring," "Resisting," and "Surviving," describe "life" in solitary confinement. In solitary confinement, prisoners are isolated "in closed cells for twenty-two to twenty-four hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades" (*Hell* 7). They might or might not be taken out to an enclosed concrete "dogrun" outside their cell, the size of a standard parking lot, for recreation for an hour. Their meals are slid through a slot on the metal door. The food might be cooked or raw. Prisoners in solitary might or might not be allowed to keep any personal effects. They do not see the sky, day or night. They do not see wind, air, or trees. Their cells might have no light, or their cells might be lit twenty-four hours a day. They shower and use the toilet in the presence of guards. With rare exceptions, they don't have books, television, or radio. They don't have visitors, with rare exceptions. They do not study, or work, or rehabilitate themselves, with rare exceptions. They live in an environment constantly defiled by the violent noise of prisoners kicking in their walls, floors, and doors; where prisoners throw feces at each other and the guards; where prisoners flood their toilets; where prisoners routinely try to commit suicide by cutting their veins, hanging, or strangling themselves; and where prisoners succeed in committing suicide and are carried out in body bags. The sixteen essayists represented in this volume are all either current or former inmates of solitary who have managed to secure the privilege of reading and writing. A few of them have published essays in various publications or on the *Solitary Watch* website; some have won contests for prison writing such as William Blake, Joseph Dole, or Thomas Bartlett Whitaker, all serving time for murder, but who have managed to educate themselves in solitary confinement and become prolific writers chronicling the world inside solitary confinement units. Others wrote specifically for the

anthology. In all cases, the essays are a testament to the role literacy plays in pursuing issues of social justice.

The sixteen essays represent a range of voices, old and young; woman, man, transgender; straight and gay; white, black, Latino, Muslim; murderers, gang members, sex offenders, political prisoners, and terror suspects; convicted, on trial, and professing innocence. The essays focus squarely on the day-to-day "life" in solitary, if we may loosely use that term to describe the duration discussed in them. Thus the real "characters" of these essays are the "solitary confinement units," their "culture," and their "officials." The essays reveal a sordid and inhuman branch of the American penal system, and a singular failure of our democratic processes and institutions.

In "Solitary Confinement and the Law" in Part II of the anthology, Laura Rovner, Clinical Director and Associate Professor at the Civil Rights Clinic of the University of Denver's Sturm College of Law, argues that while solitary confinement violates the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the infliction of "cruel and unusual punishments," in most courts that have considered solitary confinement in the context of the Eighth Amendment, the court has deferred to prison officials and their standards of prison's internal security concerns over that of the constitutional right of the prisoners (183). Rovner points out the Supreme Court's assertion that "the limits imposed on prisoners' other constitutional rights do not apply to claims of 'cruel and unusual punishment' because doing so would thwart that clause's entire purpose: protecting those who are incarcerated. . . . Accordingly, the Court has held that affording 'deference to the findings of state prison officials in the context of the eighth amendment would reduce that provision to a nullity in precisely the context where it is most necessary' (183-4). As evidenced by the essays in this collection, the eighth amendment is squarely ignored in the nation's solitary confinement units.

All of the essays make fascinating reading with writers bringing in a unique perspective on life in solitary confinement. Judith Vazquez, an immigrant from Puerto Rico who moved with her family to Harlem and later settled in New Jersey, was sentenced to thirty years to life for first-degree murder in 1992. Though she has maintained her innocence, Vazquez spent nearly twenty years in solitary before being transferred to a minimum security prison in 2013. In "On the Verge of Hell," Vazquez documents learning to "cook" the raw hot dogs given to her in solitary by running lukewarm water from the cell sink over the hot dog until the hot dog lost some of its rawness (56). In solitary, after twenty years, Vazquez developed agoraphobia so that she fought with the officers when they came to take her to the minimum security prison: "I did not want to leave my cell. I had become used to this life of solitude. I feared being around people" (59). Vazquez and the other writers featured in this volume repeatedly emphasize their awareness of their own dehumanization, not because of their original crimes, which they are aware of, but of

an entirely new level of abjection resulting from solitary confinement. "You should have seen me trying to walk; I was like a nine-month old baby trying to take her first steps. Still I walk funny . . . I felt I was actually dehumanized" (60). Vazquez, who was repeatedly raped by prison guards and forced to abort her pregnancies in the prison cell (56), is one of the prisoners featured in the social justice mural by Vaimona Niumeitolu, a Polynesian artist, at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center at Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building ("Political Prisoners").

Herman Wallace, the author of "Dream House," spent forty-one years in solitary confinement in Louisiana's Angola prison where he was initially sent for a 1967 bank robbery. While in prison, Wallace, along with Robert King and Albert Woodfox ,created a prison chapter of the Black Panther party; they later came to be known as the "Angola 3" for their jail activism on behalf of the segregated, raped, and tortured incarcerated African American men. In 1972, Wallace and Woodfox were convicted of the murder of a white prison guard and sent to solitary confinement. In 2013, after forty-one years in solitary, a federal judge overturned Wallace's conviction due to irregularities in the trial, and Wallace was released from prison at the age of seventy-one. Wallace died three days after his release from prison of liver cancer (94). His co-prisoner in solitary, Albert Woodfox, who had insisted on his innocence as well in the 1972 killing of the prison guard, was freed in February 2016 and his conviction overturned after spending forty-three continuous years in solitary confinement, the longest for any incarcerated individual in the United States (Pilkington).

In "Dream House," a project he did with the multi-media artist Jackie Sumell in his thirtieth year of solitary confinement, Wallace describes the house he would like to live in, "given the fact of my having lived in a cage for thirty years at the time of the offer" (97). Wallace's "Dream House" was designed over the course of several years and over three hundred pages of letters that Wallace and Sumell wrote each other. Their finished project—*The House That Herman Built*—became an art exhibit including a scale model of Wallace's dream house and a full-sized model of his 6x9 cell. Wallace's house has everything; he has thought out each element of the house, including an escape tunnel and a bunker beneath the pool's concrete floor: "If attacked, seriously attacked, the house can be set afire with more than enough time for you and your family to escape unharmed" (99).

Solitary confinement becomes a template for the modern police state's undisclosed power in two pieces in this anthology, and it is perhaps these essays that foreground the element of "total social control" and the "surveillance state" noted earlier in the discussion. These essays pertain to the imprisonment of terror suspects in maximum security extreme solitary confinement units. Uzair Paracha, a Pakistani national and permanent resident arrested in 2003 accused of providing material support to an alleged Al Qaeda operative

to enter the United States illegally, recounts his entry into solitary confinement in "Innocent in the Eyes of the Law." Paracha was put into extreme solitary confinement under Special Administrative Measures (SAMs), a special post-911 designation to confine terrorism suspects indefinitely without due process, soon after his arrest in 2003 and moved to the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC), a federal jail in lower Manhattan. Paracha's pretrial detention without trial or conviction in solitary confinement at MCC, and post trial conviction in solitary confinement at ADX Florence, the federal government's only supermax prison in Colorado under SAMs for a total of nine years, highlight the real threat of solitary confinement. Describing in minute detail the complete stripping of his constitutional and human rights under SAMs during his detention and solitary confinement for two years before trial or conviction, Paracha writes:

> When I was convicted of every single charge they actually made my SAMs more lenient. I faced the harshest part of my SAMs and incarceration while I was innocent in the eyes of the American law. The fact that they became lenient about a month after my conviction was counterintuitive and made the SAMs look more like pressure tactic and less like any security measures, as was claimed. (53)

Similarly, Jeanne Theoharis, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York in "Torture of a Student," writes about the three-year pretrial detention of her student Syed Fahad Hashmi, a US citizen, a Muslim American, who was arrested on charges of material support to Al Qaeda in 2006. Theoharis describes Fahad's complete dehumanization and abuse in solitary confinement, again, under SAMs: "After three years of isolation and in poor health, one day before trial and one day after the judge granted the government's request for an anonymous jury, Fahad accepted a government plea bargain of one count of conspiracy to provide material support" (203). The use of prolonged solitary confinement, Theoharis argues, "helps create the landscape for convictions, because such conditions make it difficult for people to participate in their own defense" (204). Theoharis notes that while Fahad's abuse in pretrial detention has received little notice inside the United States, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan Mendez (who has written the "Afterword" for the book) denounced Fahad's pretrial solitary confinement "with its oppressive consequences on the psyche of the detainee . . . no more than a punitive measure that is unworthy of the United States as a civilized democracy" (203). Theoharis notes that to many well-meaning Americans, torture is "brutal, gruesome, and loud—extralegal and offshore," something that happens in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, or CIA black sites. Theoharis reminds us that torture happens in every penitentiary across the country, in Pelican Bay, in Marion, in Terre Haute, in New York City MCC, in ADX Florence; and it happens under the letter of

law. Theoharis superimposes Fahad's incarceration into solitary confinement at the ADX on other human rights abuses perpetrated in the United States:

> Like the worst injustices in U.S. history—from slavery to the stripping of Native American land to segregation to Japanese internment—solitary confinement is horribly legal. The legality of the treatment, the rational "necessity" of these measures, soothed and silenced people then, as it does now. But that history provides a sober caution to the bulwark of "national security" we construct through the law today. (207)

In 2013, more than 30,000 prisoners in California's prisons answered the call of the inmates of Pelican Bay State Prison's solitary confinement units and took part in the largest prison hunger strike in America that lasted approximately two months. In "A Tale of Evolving Resistance," Todd Lewis Ashker, one of the architects of the hunger-strike incarcerated in Pelican Bay solitary unit on murder charges for twenty-six years, describes the hunger-strike as a "protracted struggle against a powerful entity with a police state world view" (88). The essays in *Hell Is a Very Small Place*, like the hunger strike, are a substantial and principled addition to the growing voices challenging the legal edifice under which prisoners are tortured by the state for seemingly no rational objectives through the inhumane institution of solitary confinement.

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Contributors

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Shawn Boyd is an Assistant Professor in the German Studies program at the University of North Dakota. He received his PhD in Germanic Languages and Literatures with an emphasis on Medieval Studies from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2010. Beyond medieval studies, his current teaching and research interests include Continental philosophy, the philosophy and literature of technology, and leftist theory.

John Bradley's most recent book is *And Thereby Everything* (Longhouse). He edited the poetry anthology *Eating the Pure Light: Homage to Thomas McGrath* (Backwaters Press). A recipient of a Pushcart Prize and two NEA Fellowships in poetry, he teaches at Northern Illinois University.

Jim Burns was born in Preston, Lancashire, in 1936 and now lives near Stockport. Most recent poetry collections: Laying Something Down: Poems 1962-2007 (Shoestring Press, 2007) and Streetsinger (Shoestring Press, 2010). Recent prose collection: Anarchists, Beats and Dadaists (Penniless Press, 2016). Forthcoming: Paris, Painters, Poets (Penniless Press, 2017). He writes regularly for Beat Scene and the on-line Northern Review of Books.

Thom Caraway is the publisher of Sage Hill Press and the editor of Rock & Sling. He directs the editing and publishing program at Whitworth University and taches in the English department. His work has been published in Ascent, Redivider, Smartish Pace, and Sugar House Review. From 2013-2015 he served as Spokane's first poet laureate.

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Sharon Doubiago a BA and an MA in English from California State University, Los Angeles. Her first published book was *Hard Country*, an epic poem about a journey across America called "one of the great books of American poetry," by one reviewer. Thomas McGrath and Meridel Le Sueur both praised *Hard Country*, and Carolyn Forché called it "a brilliant response to Whitman." Doubiago also has written short stories, memoir, and a number of shorter poems.

Filmmaker, photographer, and poet, **Mike Hazard** loves to see the world through the eyes of others. With many collaborators, he has made six film biographies that have enjoyed national release on PBS. A collection of Hazard's poems about people, This World Is Not Altogether Bad, is published by Red Dragonfly Press. Widely known as Media Mike, Hazard is artist in residence at The Center for International Education. Visit thecie.org to see more.

Elizabeth Hellstern is a writer and creator. She is a graduate from the MFA in Creative Writing program at Northern Arizona University. Her multi-genre work is accepted and published in literary journals such as Hotel Amerika, Slag Glass City, Queen Mob's Tea House, Blotterature Literary Magazine and New World Writing. Her essay "This Weather Report Brought to You by Autism" was published in The Narrow Chimney Reader: Volume 1. Ms. Hellstern is the creator of the public art installation the Telepoem Booth, where members of the public can dial-a-poem on a rotary phone in a 1970s style phone booth. (TelepoemBooth.com.)

Joseph Hutchison is the author of 16 collections of poems, most recently The World As Is: New and Selected Poems, 1972-2015, from New York Quarterly Books. He is the Poet Laureate of Colorado (2014-2018) and directs the arts and Culture program at the University of Denver's University College.

Dale Jacobson has published nine volumes of poetry, the most recent entitled Metamorphoses of the Sleeping Beast. His long poem, A Walk by the River, has been praised by numerous writers, including Joyce Sutphen, Poet Laureate of Minnesota, Robert Hedin ("a masterfully written poem") and Larry Wiowode, Poet Laureate of North Dakota ("a masterwork"). Sam Hamill, Thomas McGrath's publisher, noted: "Mr. Jacobson is unquestionably among the three or four most outstanding scholars of McGrath's work in the world." He is an Honorary Poet Laureate of North Dakota. He lives in Alvarado, Minnesota.

Andrew Lyndon Knighton is Professor of English at California State University, Los Angeles, where he has also served as the Bailey Endowed Chair of American Communities. He is the author of Idle Threats: Men and the Limits of Productivity in Nineteenth-Century America (NYU Press, 2012), and has published on American literary history in journals including ESQ, ATQ, and Literature Interpretation Theory. A member of Cal State LA's McGrath Working Group, he recently has written on McGrath for the Journal for the Study of Radicalism and the Los Angeles Review of Books, and is currently working on a book manuscript about the poet's life and legacy.
Amanda Kong is a doctoral student at the University of California, Davis, and a member of the Cal State LA McGrath Working Group. Her current scholarship in nineteenth-century American literature focuses on the way people of color were represented (and how they resisted racial stereotypes) as they built American infrastructural systems.

Charlotte Mandel's ninth book of poetry, *Through a Garden Gate* with color photographs by Vincent Covello, is published by David Robert Books. An independent scholar, her published critical essays include a series of articles on the role of cinema in the life and work of H. D., as well as articles on May Sarton, Muriel Rukeyser, and Hayden Carruth. Her website is charlottemandel.com.

James McKenzie, with Bob Lewis, published interviews with both Tom McGrath and Kenneth Rexroth. His interviews with Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder were first published in Unspeakable Visions of the Individual and have since been reprinted, variously. Since retiring south to Saint Paul, he has published in regional and national journals and is currently at work on a prose poem sequence on that city's public art.

Jamie Parsley is the author of twelve books of poems, including Fargo, 1957 (2010) and That Word (2014), as well as a book of short stories, The Downstairs Tenant (2014). In 2004, he was designated an Associate Poet Laureate of North Dakota by Larry Woiwode. He lives in Fargo, where he serves as Priest-in-Charge of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. His website is jamieparsley.com.

Doren Robbins is a poet and mixed media artist living Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in more than one hundred publications. Recent collections of poetry, *Driving Face Down* and *My Piece of the Puzzle* were published at Lynx House Press and Eastern Washington University Press. Lost

Horse Press published *Amnesty Muse* in 2011. As a poet and an artist he has organized readings and produced posters to benefit The Romero Relief Fund and The Salvadoran Medical Relief Fund during the Salvadoran Civil War and poetsagainst-thewar.com during the ongoing American-Iraq War. His current collection, Twin Extra, was nominated for the National Jewish Book Council Award in Poetry for 2015. Robbins teaches at Foothill College.

Richard M. Rothaus is Vice Chancellor of Academic and Student Affairs of the North Dakota University System. He is an historian and archaeologist who has spent many long days in the Bakken as a subcontractor, observer and scholar, and claims participant-observer status.

Louis Ryan is an Irish writer currently living in Spain. His recent publications include two poetry collections, *City of Light* and *Winter's Curfew*, both published by Syrinx Books.

Gabriela Valenzuela is a doctoral student in English Literature at UCLA. Her research interests include nineteenth-century American women's writing and publishing. As a member of the Cal State LA McGrath Working Group, she conducted research on Alice Greenfield McGrath, and assisted in managing a social media campaign for the exhibition.

Fred Whitehead is a native of Kansas and studied at the University of Kansas and Columbia University. He edited the collected poems of Don Gordon, Tom McGrath's friend and mentor, as well as the "Dream Champ" issue of *North Dakota Quarterly*.

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NDQ Special Issue Transnationalism CFP

In his essay "Reflections on Exile," the Arab intellectual Edward Said noted that the difference between earlier exiles and those of our own times is "scale": "our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, and mass migration."

Exile and migration—the experiences of being separated from one's homeland—have informed intellectual, cultural, artistic and political thought since antiquity all over the world. But the large scale human migration and displacement that took place in the twentieth century as an outcome of the two world wars, and the current mass exodus of large numbers of people across geo-political borders in parts of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, South America, and North America speaks to a unique and new man-made historical crisis whose resolution remains as yet unknowable.

The transnational turn in cultural and literary studies may be understood as one attempt to contextualize and comprehend the experiences of the mass movement of people across national borders, mass movement that simultaneously affirms and negates these very same borders.

How do we give voice and form to the phenomenon of mass displacement and uprootedness; the loss of tradition, belonging, language and citizenship; and the possibility of a future where home is not defined by a specific geography or a language, but some other state of being that moves beyond possession and loss to articulate an emergent subjectivity that transcends nation and home?

The transnational perspective also productively engages with the transformations brought about by globalization in which material goods cross national and international borders as part of a "container market" economy. While globalization claims to promote the development of a "global citizen" through the erosion of cultural homogeneity and state sovereignty, it has also aided, by omission or commission, the birth of a new form of insular patriotism, cultural and religious fundamentalism, and a parochial and ethnic populism that is anything but global in practice. The effects of globalization

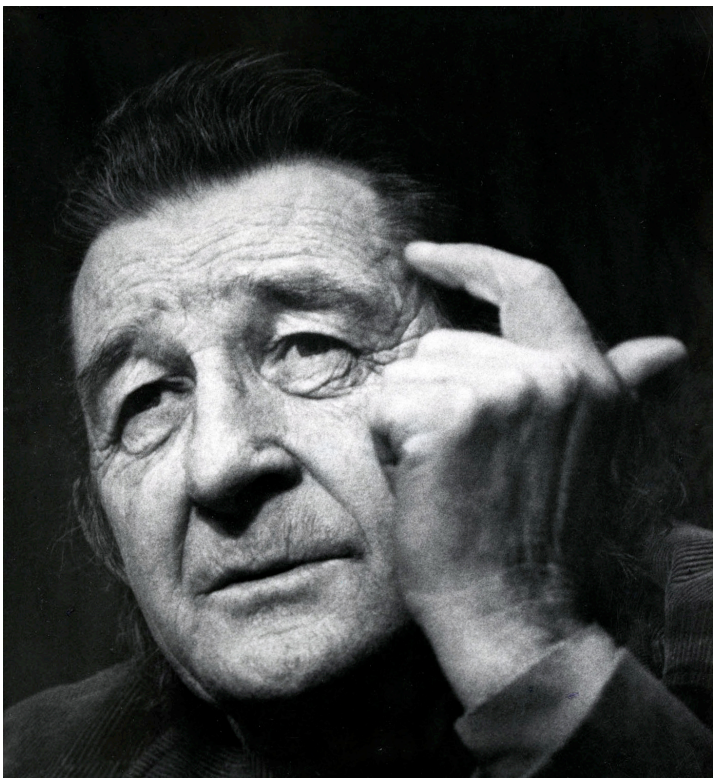
in countries as different as India and the United States have in many cases deepened and widened the existing inequalities and asymmetries within the society, effectively minimizing its economic gains. The transnational perspective critically interrogates the contours of the nation at exactly those points where it claims to disregard them.

Thus transnational identity may be seen to be richly constitutive of complex linkages that challenge and complicate certain fundamental binaries that characterize nation-states, such as assimilation and multiculturalism, citizens and immigrants, the indigenous and the foreign, to name a few obvious and compelling constructs.

Indeed it would not be inaccurate to argue that transnationalism might be the new mode of being evolving out of the crucible of twenty first century challenges to twentieth century nations, national boundaries, and hyper-insular allegiances disguised as citizenship. Transnationalism is the historical force designing the twenty first century.

To this end, for this special issue, we invite thoughtful critical essays, creative pieces, and photography or other visual art engaged with (but not limited to) the following topics, all of which invite contributors to explore the complex experience of transnationalism from a humanities perspective:

Self-hood and identity in transnational contexts
National responses to transnational presences
Transnational refugee and global citizenship
Diaspora, homeland and transnational migration
The visual culture of transnationalism
Memories of homeland, visions of immigrant land
The cinema of exile and transnationalism
Transnational memoirs
Travelogues of transnationalism
The politics of transnationalism
Philosophies and philosophers of transnationalism
Methodologies of transnational inquiries
New epistemologies of transnationalism
The political imaginary of transnationalism
Transnationalism's imagined communities
Nationhood, citizenship and the transnationalism
Local and global cultures and transnational vectors
The global north and the global south
Gender and transnationalism
Gender and globalization
Race and transnationalism



—"From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east."
I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street,
Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio,
thinking