

PART ONE:

North Dakota is Everywhere:

An Analysis of Thomas McGrath's Long Poem, *Letter to An Imaginary Friend*

Introduction

Before I present a brief outline of the dissertation, I believe, since not all readers are familiar with his life and work, that it would be beneficial to provide a brief introduction to Thomas McGrath and his poetry. In the main, McGrath is remarkable for using lyric poetry in service of something other than himself. Much, if not most, of contemporary American poetry may be characterized (some might say plagued) by the lyric; i.e., short first-person poems, whose audience T. S. Eliot defined as “the poet speaking to him [or her] self, or to no one.” Bookstore poetry shelves are sighing under the weight of personal pronoun poems engaged in defining or redefining the self, making public private confessions or otherwise serving as self-help. It's no wonder then that readers usually look elsewhere--to other mediums--for something that will speak to them.

The West Indian poet, Derek Walcott, speaking at the University of Minnesota in 1989, made the observation that American poets seem unable to undertake an epic assessment of their country, of writing poems which must, by the very nature of their form, move beyond what is merely personal to a larger context: an historical perspective and thereby a political one. But right in our very midst, in his long poem, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, the poet, Thomas McGrath, accomplished exactly what Walcott was talking about. *Letter* begins as a semi-autobiographical poem in the lyric mode, but, over 10,000 lines later, it has surveyed our nation's political history. The poetry becomes epic

by lifting into an ambitious narrative of our country's capitalist genesis, spiritual enervation, and possible spiritual renewal.

By not mentioning McGrath's work, Walcott indicated an oversight made by American literary canon-makers located on the coasts: the failure to include in their assessments and anthologies overtly political poetry. McGrath's poetry is absent from current contemporary poetry anthologies despite the fact that he has done some of our country's most powerful speaking beyond the self.

The primary reason for McGrath's exclusion from popular or teaching anthologies like the *Norton* may be because he *is* a political poet; that is, a poet with political convictions who is not afraid to express them in his work or to be openly critical of the U.S. government or of capitalism. Alan C. Golding, in *Canons*, notes that when controversial poets *are* included in teaching anthologies (those most widely distributed for use in the classroom), the anthology editors usually choose to represent such poets with their least controversial or political work (302). If such is the case, then it is possible there just isn't anything politically neutral or "safe" about McGrath's major poems.

McGrath paid the price for his political convictions; he was blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), Senator Joe McCarthy's (and Nixon's) infamous 1950's witch hunt. When he was called before the Committee, McGrath refused to testify by saying, among other things, that "Poets have been notorious non-cooperators where committees of this sort are concerned . . . As a poet and a teacher I do not wish to bring dishonor upon my tribe" (*Statement* 862). Because of the stand he took, McGrath lost his teaching job at Los Angeles State College and his career

moonlighting as a scriptwriter was suspended indefinitely. Before this incident, McGrath had been gaining a reputation for doing powerful screenwriting, including the narration for *The Museum and the Fury*, a film about the holocaust commissioned by the Polish Government. The film's maker, Leo Hurowitz, said that it "Scared the hell out of so many that it was probably never shown in Poland." Only in later years did McGrath return to film scripting. He wrote the narration for *Genesis*, shown around the country, including the Omni Theater of the St. Paul Science Museum, and two scripts for Michael Cimino which were never produced after *Heaven's Gate* flopped at the box office. No doubt the effect HUAC had on him confirmed McGrath's opinion that the "Land of the Free" is more a slogan than an actuality. But instead of becoming embittered, McGrath became driven to expose the puppet masters who pull our strings.

Another strike against McGrath's inclusion in anthologies, or his receiving widespread critical notice, may be because he is a North Dakota/Minnesota writer. This seems to make him, in the eyes of the East and West coasts, a regionalist. It is still a mystery why New York-based writers, for example, are exempt from this distinction. This kind of regional prejudice is so widespread that Rand-McNally recently sanctioned geographical amnesia by planning to delete the Dakotas from its travel atlas.

Region or place, particularly the place one comes from, should be important to a writer--but being a poet of place does not necessarily equal poetry of limited scope. As McGrath says in *Letter*, "North Dakota is / Everywhere," meaning that North Dakota is a representative condition, that no region of our country is immune from class struggle.

McGrath became aware of labor unrest firsthand, and early in his life. Born on the McGrath family farmstead near Sheldon, North Dakota, in 1916, McGrath was

politicized before he reached his teens. Cal, an itinerant thresher and a member of the Wobblies, the Industrial Workers of the World, a socialist labor group, attempted to organize a labor strike on one of the thresher rigs working the McGrath farm and was physically beaten by McGrath's uncle. That incident left an indelible imprint upon young Tom, soon to be a poet, McGrath: "He [Cal] was gone where my love / Nor my partisanship could reach him." So began McGrath's long empathetic journey in concert with workers everywhere.

McGrath's poet's progress was a search for books, the old masters and any new poetry that he "could get his hands on," as he searched through his small town library's limited stacks. It also involved conscription into other orders: Catholicism, educational systems, and the military. After attending the University of North Dakota and Louisiana State University, McGrath served World War II in the Air Force in the Aleutian Islands, a stony archipelago where "little grew and even less happened." He returned from the war to take up a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford, after which he "jangled about" and wound up in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Alan Swallow had published McGrath's poems and perhaps for a moment it seemed as if McGrath was on his way to becoming known for his poetry-- "A thing that chose me, I didn't choose it"--until he was blacklisted and couldn't find work except in a machine shop, honorable work but not that which gave full shrift to his talents. Given the lack of widespread appreciation for his true work, in some ways it seems as if McGrath as a poet is still being shunted aside.

This is not to suggest that McGrath's writing went totally unnoticed or without honor, however. He won numerous awards, among them an Amy Lowell Traveling fellowship, a Guggenheim fellowship, two Bush Foundation fellowships, a National

Foundation for the Arts individual and Senior fellowship, the Lenore Marshall/*Nation* award for *Selected Poems* and the Shelley Memorial award. Yet, despite these honors, McGrath's poetry has not received the critical or readerly attention that it deserves. It remains a sad fact that while McGrath was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, he received neither; citations which would have brought his work, at least for that year, to the forefront of American letters.

Despite the praises or dispraises McGrath incurred in this age of super-hype and hyper-hype, professional spin doctors and fadists posing as revolutionaries, where the best-selling book of poetry the year he was nominated for national awards was by the actor and political conservative, Jimmy Stewart, McGrath remained a remarkably consistent poet: he never altered his distinctive style and thematic breadth to take on the poetic vogue of the moment. At the same time he made poems, as a writer of the first order, that range from the epic *Letter* to celebratory statements like "Praises," to gem-compact, Zen-like koans like "The Need for Dictionaries II": "What is named / Is known. / By its disguises" (*Passages* 69). Or "A Theory":

As Thucydides said, / What is history? / Greeks! /
Murdering / Greeks. (87)

McGrath in *Letter*, and his many other books, has long spoke against capitalism's pressure on us to conform to the marketplace, to develop greed as a virtue. In "The Buffalo Coat" McGrath suggests that the near extinction of the buffalo created a winter of the spirit in which none of us may be able to keep warm; a capitalist world which seems to view holiness as a commodity like any other:

. . . And between the new macadam and the Scalp Act

They got him by the short hair: had him clipped
Who was once wild--and all five senses wild--
Printing the wild with his hoof's inflated script
Before the times was money in the bank,
Before it was a crime to be so mild.

But history is a fact, and moves on feet
Sharper than his, toward wallows deeper than.
And the myth that covered all his moving parts,
Grandfather's time had turned into a coat;
And what kept warm then, in the true world's cold
Is old and cold in a world his death began. (*New and Selected* 82)

The conversion of the buffalo from the first people's--the Indians'--sacred symbol into a commodity for the colonizers is an historic fact. The buffalo coat becomes a profane symbol of consumerist excess, and capitalism, through its disregard for anything other than what can be put to utilitarian use, becomes a means for making the world "old and cold" by deadly limiting the human spirit.

McGrath, who died in 1990, would no doubt have had plenty to say about the current state of world politics. But the fact remains that his work is a legacy of revolutionary expression that, sadly, seems appropriate regardless of the year or the political weather. No doubt McGrath would have been the first to relegate himself to a literary footnote if the world suddenly became fair to workers everywhere and God was put back in her heaven. Instead, McGrath lives on, speaking to us from beyond time the

same way great poets from any age have ever done, when the song is forever greater than the self. Never a fan of institutions, and given his irreverence, no doubt if he could manage it, Tom would have a wisecrack to make about his current residence--or he might refer us to "Afternoon of a McGrath," a poem he wrote after visiting the town of McGrath, Minnesota. One in which our invention, our ability to have children, to create communities and to confront history, makes us maintain a hopefulness beyond all hope, far beyond ourselves:

This morning there was one McGrath in Aitken County.

Now

There are three: the town, Tomasito, and myself.

And at this rate of growth

The country will remain alive at least ten minutes longer . . .

This town, which carries our name into the rising night,

Is one of those lost places in which I have found myself

Often . . . though they always had other names--and sometimes I did.

What could I expect to find in a place where the lakes hold only

Private water? A walk or a wake away from the Dead

Sea of Mille Lacs where all class-struggle is ethnic?

Place

Where each grave plot is bespoke and the loudest talk is on tombstones?

Did I think to push open a gate and enter a century of sleep

Where only myself is awake? But that's just the world I live in

Outside the township limits . . .

And that's McGrath. I will never forget it, now, Tomasito--

Our ghosts are here forever now because you were here

With this snow and this bar and that dog--see: what you have invented!

And so I will put this poem under a stone somewhere

On a road I will never walk on again, as I have done

Another time.

Or put it with our hidden wishing stone

To remember us by "forever": now: as the town disappears

Into the blizzard . . .

and all the McGraths drift into

That snow, that permanent white where all our colors fade.

The night is closing down. But I'd like McGrath to continue

Beyond this winter and those to come--though THAT beyond

Is beyond all hope.

So let me stop: here: then . . .

--drifting

Into the universe and past all stars: toward those

Dark holes in space I must recognize as home. (*Letter to Tomasito* 28)

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Thomas McGrath is a logical choice for the critical component of my dissertation; he was my mentor for many years, and we were also friends. I first met McGrath as his student in 1976, at Moorhead State University where I now teach. Many courses and many years later, we remained in close association until his death in 1990.

Serving often as his secretary, I knew many of his shorter poems well after converting them from hand-written manuscript into typed versions. His masterwork, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, I had avoided due to its length, density, and political ferocity. Only after Tom died did I come to read and admire it. I fear that many potential readers may have my initial response to *Letter* as their own. That is why this part of my dissertation is devoted to examining McGrath's *Letter* as a worthwhile long poem, one which bears historical and poetical witness to the demise of Native Americans as they were colonized by white settlers.

In this politically correct atmosphere, McGrath walks a poetic tightrope as, by virtue of *his* race, he was linked to the colonizers, and yet, by virtue of his common sense, has to speak in his poetry of the wrong done the Native Americans, a wrong that McGrath terms the United State's "national wound." He is right, of course, in recognizing that the United States had its own holocaust regarding its aboriginals. But his empathy also extends to the plight of the outright or secondary usurpers of Native lands--the American farmer. Considering that many Indian "management" policies sought to turn them into farmers, it is cold ironic comfort, in McGrath's view, that what happened to the Indians happened to those who won their lands when harsh economic and climatic conditions forced the farmers from their fields.

My analysis of McGrath's work includes familiarity with all of his poetry, but focuses almost exclusively on *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, his masterwork. I have also surveyed the extant criticism of his work, and secondary sources--poets, writers, and critics with whom McGrath engaged in developing, refining, and extending his poetics. To cite a few examples: 1) McGrath regarded America's massacre of the Indians as America's "original sin." Consequently, I have examined such representative works as McNickle's *The Surrounded*, Lamé Deer's *Seeker of Visions*, and DeLoria's *Died for Your Sins*, and other such works which provide insight into Native American experiences with and views on American Colonial expansion and empire; 2) Because McGrath appropriates the Hopi katchina as a crucial symbol in *Letter*, I have read closely Frank Water's *Book of the Hopi*, which McGrath acknowledged as the primary source for his understanding of katchinas; 3) Since McGrath was an avowed--vulgar at that--Marxist, I have examined works by Marx, Engels, Raymond Williams, and many others; 4) Finally, I have rounded up the usual poetic suspects who figure most prominently--as he expressed in conversations to me--in McGrath's developing his poetics: Eliot, Auden, Whitman, Wordsworth, W. C. Williams, and a host of others.

The dissertation is organized into two parts. Part One, the analytical part of the dissertation, is an examination of Thomas McGrath's *Letter to An Imaginary Friend*. Part Two, the creative part of the dissertation, is a book of my poems.

Part One is organized into three chapters which I synopsise, briefly, below.

Chapter One. Thomas McGrath as a Neo-Romantic. This chapter will seek to establish McGrath as a poet who strives to recover the best aspects of romanticism by renewing them in the modern era. In particular, I will focus on the Romantic's emphasis

on the imagination's primacy, nature as it leads to a natural theology, poetry as a means of effecting a populist poetics, and the romantic/transcendental tendency to look toward other cultures for philosophical and spiritual inspiration.

Chapter Two. Recovering Native American World Views: Tom McGrath Updates Walt Whitman. Since the poet McGrath has most often been compared to is Whitman, this chapter will examine their similarities/dissimilarities. Both poets seem to have regarded themselves as Orphic bards, offering their pseudo-autobiographical selves in service to the masses. Both, as spokespersons for the disenfranchised, differ greatly in their rationales. Why does Whitman retain canonical stature while McGrath has not achieved the same?

Chapter Three. Restoring Faith: Thomas McGrath's Vision of Spirituality in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. This chapter examines McGrath's attempt to recover Native American Spirituality. McGrath, in *Letter*, borrows heavily from Hopi symbology, cosmology, and cosmogony--why? And to what effect? This section questions why McGrath, a North Dakotan, takes as a solution to the ills of the Twentieth Century a civilization of which he has no firsthand knowledge. An Irish Catholic by birthright, a Marxist by choice, and an adopter of Hopi beliefs almost by happenstance, how does McGrath synthesize these widely varied, and often contradictory, beliefs?

Part Two, *Stone Boat*.

In this book of my own poems, divided into four sections, I will explore a wide range of responses not only to my own life, but to my studies in poetry, my relation to McGrath and my study of his work, but also that of other poets and artists. McGrath is a primary influence here, but also the work of many other poets, for example: Andrew

Hudgins, Michael Dennis Browne, Pablo Neruda, Robinson Jeffers, C. K. Williams, W. C. Williams. Frost, Eliot, among many others. A more complete introduction to this part appears right before Part Two.

Chapter One

Thomas McGrath as a Neo-Romantic Poet

I. Background

Few writers would be more chagrined than Thomas McGrath at the attempt to connect him with a poetic tradition. McGrath regarded himself as a revolutionary in rebellion against any vestige of conformity, as being “to the left of anything out there.” Though McGrath described himself as a Marxist, his politics were nevertheless subordinate to his theological concerns. McGrath was a theologian and a moralist, speaking from the vantage point of a post-frontier American, who creates a new synthesis, a sacramentalism, out of elements of Romanticism, Catholicism, and Native American beliefs, while at the same time aligning himself against the oppressive and alienating forces of industrialism. In these, and other important ways, McGrath can be regarded as the 20th century son of a number of Romantic figures--both English and American--including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman.

My goal in this chapter is to show how Thomas McGrath can and should be considered a Romantic poet based on the congruence between certain primary Romantic concepts and his written work--specifically his long poem *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, but also statements he makes in essays and interviews. I aim to prove that McGrath participates in the primary Romantic project: reestablishing a spiritual connectedness with the supernatural by “taking from the past not its dogmatic myth but the ground of life beneath it” (Langbaum 14). It is important to see that McGrath, as a Romantic

writer, both acknowledges and works against alienation--not only that brought about by technology and mechanized industry, but also the alienation inherent in language as it relates to the archetypal distinction between subject and object represented by the Fall. I intend to show how McGrath developed his ideology as a result of his direct experience--as opposed to an inherited dogma--which led him to choose the traditionally Romantic precepts of nature and the imagination as avenues for transcending oppressive forces.

There is no doubt that McGrath's work, and that of many other radical writers in America, has been repressed. Whatever the debatable merits of McGrath's work as a political poet, the fact remains that he is part of a substantial group of American artists whose work was repressed as a result of McCarthyism. On that count alone, as Cary Nelson argues in *Repression and Recovery*, McGrath may be recovered.

But McGrath has other qualities to recommend him besides his radical politics (if, indeed, they do). Particularly, he is of interest as an American poet born into that pivotal Twentieth-century generation which experienced this country both before and after TV, K-Mart, condominiums, and the Bomb.

Certainly the effect that the existence of atomic weaponry has had on our individual and collective outlook is comparable to the myth evoked by the Fall. The post-bomb, like the post-lapsarian world, requires a radical reordering of consciousness. Its existence can be likened to the same fall from grace that the mythic first Fall represents: the post-bomb, post-lapsarian world makes what existed before it seem almost a paradise. Perhaps nostalgia for the pre-bomb era may yet assume the same archetypal status as Eden, especially if our world ever experiences a nuclear winter. The same can be said for the Romantics' reaction to the industrial revolution and their

insistence upon reinvolvement with nature as an antidote to the objectification of the individual as a result of increasingly industrialized mass labor.

If one accepts, as Terry Eagleton argues in *Literary Theory*, a reciprocal relationship between imaginative creation and politics, then a link is certainly forged between McGrath and the Romantic tradition. McGrath's combining poetry with politics, given Eagleton's definition of Romanticism as "a political force" (19), puts him in the Romantic camp--or at least on its outskirts.

In connecting McGrath to the Romantic movement, I have as my aim not merely validating McGrath's poetry or politics by linking him to a canonized literary tradition--if such a thing could be accomplished--but to show that the Romantic movement is a vital and crucial attempt to change the world for the better. If, as I will argue, Romanticism is an unfinished project, one in which we are still actively involved, then linking McGrath to that tradition means that his work still has life for readers. Romanticism, rather than being a dead literary movement, may yet bring the individual and Eden together. As Robert Langbaum argues:

Time, two world wars and universal social upheaval have removed us even farther from the traditional past; while the spread of technological culture has given science an increasing dominion over our lives. To bridge the increased gap between knowledge and value we ought to require, if our reasoning thus far has been correct, an even more extreme and articulated Romanticism. (Langbaum 28)

McGrath, at the very least, mounts a sustained argument in *Letter* that increased technology and extreme material wealth for the few has led to extreme mechanization

and disvalue of the many. The majority of the work force lives routinized lives in service to an economic system, capitalism, which maximizes wealth and power for a slim minority.

II. Romantic Antecedents

Critical definition of the movement casts the Romantic attitude as, overall, a stance against the Enlightenment. The Romantics, beginning with Blake, sought to militate against Newtonian rationalism and the dangerous implications of the scientific world-view. Blake, for example, railed against Sir Joshua Reynolds's insistence, in *The Seventh Discourse*, that in art verisimilitude is the key to truth, "one needs to be as true as a mathematical demonstration." Blake replies, [this is] "a plain Confession that he Thinks Mind and Imagination not to be above the Mortal and Perishing Nature. Such is the end of Epicurean and Newtonian Philosophy. It is atheism." Instead, the Romantic focuses on feelings and the imagination as manifested by the character of a deeply feeling mind which, Wordsworth claims, seeks empathy and community as the "rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love . . . the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and all time" (Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*; Perkins 429).

The Romantic movement, therefore, can be seen as a revolutionary act of literary imagining which sought, at the very least, to restore a balance between the tyranny of scientific rationality and objectivity, and the individual, subjective, apprehension of experience as it leads to empathy for others. Its aim was not to provide fanciful

entertainments, but rather to imagine the world in a new way, one which would value noumenon more highly than phenomenon, the human condition over the industrial revolution. In this regard, to be a Romantic is to be a revolutionary.

Most of the Romantic poets were involved in social protest, and their literary work reflected their political concerns. The Romantic literary imagination, far from having as its aim the production of escapist novelties, offered an image of non-alienated labor, and served as the faculty for reintegrating the self with a spiritual presence that was being denied by rationalist or empiricist ideologies enslaved to fact. In this regard, Romanticism seeks to recover the soul by reasserting individual rights, communal social action, and the possibility of a mystical apprehension of the world.

Furthermore, the theological component in McGrath's work is an important reason why he should be considered a Romantic poet: he shares the overarching Romantic concern with reincorporating the mystical presence of spirituality into the world. Near the end of *Letter*, a spiritual guide tells the poet, who is in the middle of a Utopian dream: "Remember four things: body; and soul; spirit; / And the dirt from handling the world under our fingernails" (III & IV; 108). McGrath's new mythos sounds much like an earlier one, Jefferson's: "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit of substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth" (*Writings* 290). This is also why McGrath can be considered, along with the rest of the Romantics, as a moralist and a theologian, who has as his grand aim to recover a spiritual connection with

the world by revitalizing a mythos--in this case, the spiritual connection to the land--that has become dogmatized or otherwise deadened.

This is the goal of Langbaum's "even more extreme and articulated Romanticism": to create a new mythos by rescuing from beneath the ruins of the established tradition the vital essence of the old myths--the ground of life beneath them--that have been atrophied by the very processes that made them "official." To revive the fundamental continuity of which the old myth was an expression, the synthesizing faculty of the imagination must be brought to bear, to express again the old myth in new terms. For the Romantic, the new mythos is created out of imaginative insights into the past, nature, and the self with the goal of writing what Shelley called "the most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution": poetry. Such a challenge is not undertaken for personal gain, fame, or adulation, but as a higher, political calling, as an empathetic agent of communal change. As Shelley put it: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (*Defence of Poetry* 1146).

III. Romanticism Begins at Home

To a great degree, Langbaum's call for a more intense Romanticism is being realized in the current emphasis on the literary modes of memoir, autobiography, creative nonfiction and the authenticity of cultural expression. The primary goal of such writing is often to reject the official tradition--whatever is taken whole cloth as an ideology without reevaluation and imaginative synthesis--and, through acts of memory and

imagination, create a new mythos with the emphasis on the subjective valuing of experience rather than its purely objective content.

According to Langbaum, the crucial element in the development of a new mythos--that which makes it authentic--is that it be *chosen*, "and that makes it a Romantic construction rather than a dogmatic inheritance" (20). The Romantic fights fire with fire, uses the empiricism of subjective experience against the Newtonian empiricism of objective experiment: "Like the scientist's hypothesis, the Romanticist's formulation is evolved out of experience and is continually tested against experience. . . . The process of experience is for the Romanticist a process of self-realization, of a constantly expanding discovery of the self through discoveries of its imprint on the external world" (22, 25).

McGrath's reliance upon autobiographical elements of his experience is one of the key characteristics of his work that distinguishes him as belonging to the Romantic tradition. Like Whitman, Wordsworth, Emerson, and other Romantic writers, McGrath relies on evidence from his own life experiences to lead him to a reexamination of the status quo, and a positive reformulation of values based on enlightened sympathy for the disaffected. In all of these writers, inherited dogma is rejected in favor of a newly synthesized relationship to the social order.

Consider the following passage from *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* as an example of how McGrath developed his politics as a direct result of his experiences:

That was the year, too, of the labor trouble on the rigs--

The first, or the last, maybe. I heard the talk.

It was dull. Then one day--windy--

And the blood ran out of his mouth and onto his shoulder.

Then I heard the quiet and that I was crying--

They had shut down the engine.

The last of the bundle-teams

Was coming in at a gallop.

Crying and cursing

Yelled at the crew: "Can't you jump the son-of-a-bitch!

Cal! Cal! get up"

But he didn't get up.

None of them moved.

Raging at my uncle I ran.

Got slapped,

Ran sobbing straight to the engine.

I don't know what I intended. To start the thing maybe,

To run her straight down the belt and into the feeder

Like a vast iron bundle.

I jammed the drive-lever over, lashed back on the throttle,

And the drive belt popped and jumped and the thresher groaned,

The beaters clutched at the air, knives flashed,

And I wrestled the clutch. (I & II; 18-19)

There is certainly no dogma in the preceding passage; only work and strife and what Wordsworth calls

the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in moments of tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (Preface 432)

Here, McGrath creates a record of his early, firsthand witnessing of labor alienation. He does so in the Wordsworthian fashion of recalling events for a poem to purposely further a social cause. Just as Wordsworth sided with the alienated, crippled, and marginalized in *Lyrical Ballads*, McGrath, in *Letter*, sides with much the same types of people and does so, like Wordsworth, as a result of his direct experience. Cal, a labor organizer and threshing rig worker, tried to organize the other itinerant laborers on McGrath's uncle's farm, which led to the fight McGrath so vividly describes. It is important to note that McGrath sides with Cal instead of with his uncle, where we might expect his affections to lie. While it is likely that McGrath's family, like many others in North Dakota at that time--the 1930s--regularly discussed socialist politics, McGrath, moving from this decision point, creates a synthesis of various ideologies. This synthesis, which I describe more fully in Chapter Three, accomplishes the Romantic project of reinvigorating that which has solidified into dogma. The passage I have quoted here from *Letter* serves to illustrate the Romanticist's focus on discovering the self through its imprint on the external world. This passage is the pivot point of self experience from which McGrath moves to recapture, on a much larger scale, the image of non-alienated labor. In true Romantic fashion, this individual autobiographical moment serves as the basis for forming an empathetic, community-focused ideology.

Later, after the boy has left his uncle's farm and headed for home, he sees some of the same strife and struggle in "the little war" that is nature, but also a unity from which he now feels estranged:

Later, climbing the coulee hills in the sandy dusk,
After sundown in the long northern twilight,
The night hawk circling where the ragamuffin crows
Steered for the cloudy wood;
In that dead calm, in that flat light,
(The water darkening where the cattle stood to their knees)
I heard the singing of the little clan.
Comfort of crickets and a thrum of frogs.
Sleepy rustle of birds.

In the dusk the bats hustled.
The hawk wheeled and whirled on the tall perch of the air;
Whirled, fell
Down a long cliff of light, sliding from the day into dusk.
Something squealed in the brake.
The crickets were silent.
The cattle lifted their blank and unregardant
Gaze to the hills.
Then, up the long slope of air on his stony, unwavering wing
The hawk plunged upward into a shower of light.

The crickets sang. The frogs
Were weaving their tweeds in the river shallows.

Hawk swoop.

Silence.

Singing.

The formal calls of a round-dance.

This riddling of the river-mystery I could not read. (I & II; 21-22)

Not only does this passage present the Romantic sense of nature as a reference point and index to the ineffable, but also shows something of what Wordsworth defines as the central purpose of poetry, “to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement.” The struggle that the boy witnessed between Cal and his uncle begins to reverberate with nature, which is not portrayed as an idyll because it, too, includes strife, but it has a unity, a formal structure, the “round-dance” which is part of the mystery the boy cannot “read,” but nevertheless has intimations of.

Though there is a degree of estrangement here, there is also an exultant feeling. In the best Romantic sense, the human mixes with the natural, and the mood marks the moment as mystical. Something important has happened: a formal feeling has set in and the poetic line slows to mark it. This is like Whitman’s satori, or what Wordsworth calls “spots of time” that:

. . . retain

A renovating virtue, whence, depressed

By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,

.....

. . . our minds

Are nourished and invisibly repaired;

.....

. . . Such moments

Are scattered everywhere, taking their date

From our first childhood. (*Prelude* 12: 208-12, 214-15, 223-25)

The autobiographical self has, Wordsworth asserts, a storehouse of healing moments from one's past that can be recalled in the present and the future as a way to ameliorate our world weariness. In McGrath's recreation of the events after the fight with Cal, he again avoids dogma while mixing feelings and ideas (in a Wordsworthian sense) that exhibit the dialectical relationship that the Romantics have with nature. While the mood is that of exultation and glory, the boy, having just witnessed the fight, the breakdown of community, has no reason to feel that way other than through the healing powers nature confers upon him, or which he ascribes to nature. This dialectic points out the difference between the beauty of raw nature and its separateness from human subjectivity; how humans belong to nature and yet are estranged from it; how the subject--the person--and the natural object reverberate in dialectical appropriation and oscillation. Both in and out of nature, at times more intensely than other times, we do not merely mirror nature. Because we, as opposed to other living organisms, can separate ourselves from nature,

we can *choose* a course contrary to natural law, choose cooperation over combat, community over survival of the fittest.

Nature is not only a system which we are part of and act in opposition to, but a means of recovering ourselves by opening it as a door to, at least momentarily, the infinite. As Emerson has put it so eloquently and famously:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, no disgrace, no calamity . . . Which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (24)

The following passage from *Letter* shows McGrath not only glorying in the transcendent aspect of nature shows him combining nature and feeling in a typically Romantic synthesis:

Green permission . . .

Dusk of the brass whistle . . .

Gooseberry dark.

Green moonlight of willow.

Ironwood, basswood and the horny elm.

June berry; box-elder; thick in the thorny brake

The black choke cherry, the high broken ash and the slick

White bark of poplar.

I called the king of the woods,
The wind-sprung oak.

I called the queen of ivy,
Maharani to his rut-barked 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.

Runeless I stood in the green rain
Of the leaves.

Waiting.

Nothing.

Echo of distant horns.

Then
Under the hush and whisper of the wood,
I heard the echoes of the little war.
A fox barked in the hills; and a red hawk boomed
Down on the darkening flats in a feathery splash of hunger.
Silence and waiting.

The rivery rustle
Of a hunting mink.

Upstream in the chuckling shallows

A beaver spanked the water where, in its time,
The dam would be where my brother, now in his diapers,
Would trap for the beaver's grandsons.

I could not

See in that green dark.

I went downstream

Below the crossing where I'd swum the midnight river
On my way home from a move.

I put my clothes,

Stinking with sweat and dusty (I thought:

How the dust had jumped from Cal's shirt!)

I put them on the broken stump.

I dived from the hummock where the cut-bank crumbled.

Under the river the silence was humming, singing:

Night-song.

In the arrest and glaucous light

Delicate, snake-like, the water-weed waved and retracted.

The water sang. The blood in my ears whistled.

I roared up out of the river into the last of the sunlight.

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. (I & II; 20-21)

I quote here at length because the early parts of *Letter* serve to establish McGrath's relationship with work and nature based on his experience, and also because they help to define, to a large degree, the mythos of nature and community as transcendent--a mythos which McGrath spends the rest of his long poem (and life) trying to recover.

By the time of the stock market crash of 1929, McGrath was 13 years old, and living on his parents' farm near Sheldon, North Dakota. The dustbowl years of the 1930s saw farm failures and foreclosures and the end of the swapped labor that in early times had forestalled the loneliness that went along with living on the prairie. To many, no doubt McGrath among them, as farms failed and farming became a more mechanized and therefore a less communal occupation, the twentieth-century prairie seemed even more lonely than it ever had: a vast emptiness that mocked the "generous wish" of Jeffersonian democracy and the agrarian dream:

Those were the last years of the Agrarian City
City of swapped labor
Communitas

Circle of warmth and work

Frontier's end and the last wood-chopping bee

The last collectivity stamping its feet in the cold. (I & II; 45)

For many, the end of the American frontier signaled the failure of the American Adam to establish the new Eden--though Whitman's dream still rang in their ears:

America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past . . . counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future. Nor is that hope unwarranted. Today, ahead, though dimly yet, we see, in vistas, a copious, sane, gigantic offspring. For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than the results to come. Sole among nationalities, these States have assumed the task to put in forms of lasting power and practicality, on areas of amplitude rivaling the operations of the physical kosmos, the moral political speculations of ages, long, long deferr'd, the democratic republican principle, and the theory of development and perfection by voluntary standards, and self reliance.

(Selected 460)

Whitman here clearly defines the American mythos and details the dream that McGrath seeks to recover: but McGrath has the advantage of historical hindsight, aware that "the future never arrived" (I & II; 206). The manifest unfreedoms of capitalism, nationalism, rationalism, Catholicism, all the false myths, religious and political, have betrayed Whitman's dream. McGrath, then, argues in *Letter* that what is needed are new myths--or the revitalization of old ones. To offer one's self as a myth-maker is a heroic act,

especially since a revolutionary myth, one which enables current orders to be overthrown, is a sacrifice. McGrath makes the myth out of his own “life and times,” and thus becomes symbolic of every man’s life in these times. He is a hero in that the myth he creates has as its goal social reordering that will make the world not as the capitalist juggernaut Whitman foresaw and delighted in, but one in which the natural will be reintegrated with the spiritual. *Letter* should be regarded as the record of a journey back to wholeness, to the revitalization of Whitman’s promise.

It is essential to the Romantic world view that the past not only be rejected but that the imagination re-enable the world to dream again, with all the hope and grand feeling evoked in such a statement. That is why Thomas Carlyle, for example, speaking in the guise of Professor Teufelsdröckh, castigates Voltaire for criticizing without also making a positive reformulation of the dead official tradition that is essential to the Romantic enterprise:

shut thy sweet voice; for the task appointed thee seems finished.

Sufficiently hast thou demonstrated this proposition: That the mythos of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth . . . But what next? Wilt thou help us to embody the divine spirit of that Religion in a new Mythos, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing may live? What! thou hast no faculty in that kind? Only a torch for burning, no hammer for building? Take our thanks, then, and--thysself away. (193-94)

This is the war McGrath wages: to reject pure rationalism in favor of a mythic, autobiographical self as the vehicle for bridging our empirical understanding and spiritual apprehension of the world.

McGrath seeks to employ nature as a means to a deeper understanding of our connection to the numinous. Thus he formulates, via the synthesizing properties of the imagination, a new mythos that resurrects the deadness of past dogma into a new relationship with the infinite. As McGrath, in adopting a messianic posture, puts it:

My purpose (as I keep saying) is nothing less
Than the interpositioning of a fence of ghosts (living and dead)
Between the atomic sewing machines of bourgeois ideology
(Net where we strangle) and the Naked Man of the Round Dance . . .
“To perform instantaneous insurrectionary lobotomies for removing
The man-eating spinning wheels from the heads of our native
capitalists.”

To elaborate the iconic dynamite of the authentic class struggle
In other words to change the world

--Nothing less.

It's hard and I'm

Scared . . . (I & II; 108)

Here McGrath goes to the extreme to accept Carlyle's challenge to Voltaire by undertaking the primary Romantic project of a religious quest. His aim, in creating a new mythos, is to recover hope by using the synthesizing faculty of the imagination to make the relative “our index to the absolute” (Langbaum 3). Romanticism, in its ongoing war

against alienation, must concern itself with the Fall as the primary archetype for the alienation of the Western mind, and as the genesis of the dialectical properties of language.

IV. The Double-edged Sword of Language

For an American Romantic writer, the Fall is doubly pertinent as an archetype for alienation--especially considering the myth of the new Adam in the new Eden of the New World, America. The Fall persists as a Romantic concern--if not *the* Romantic concern--because it casts language, paradoxically, as our primary alienator from the absolute. Language, because it is predicated on distinctions between subject and object, creates a relational gap between nature and us; the subject must be separate from the object in order to name it. Only in God are the subject and object fully integrated; only in God is the moral judgment of consciousness still operant.

The Biblical John, with the lawyerly ear of a linguist, in his retelling of the Book of Genesis, emphasizes God as incorporating both subject and object, a paradoxical state of being that we cannot apprehend rationally: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Humankind, with its distinctions between subject and object, can produce only a shadow morality, tied to strife and desire.

Terence Des Pres notes that McGrath, in his creation of a new mythos, "manages materialism (Marxism) and sacramentalism (Roman Catholic) side by side as if they composed a doctrinal continuum that they surely don't" (152). McGrath presents his case for such a confabulation in this way:

History, that is class struggle, begins with alienation and exile when we were cast out of “Eden.” History is alienation as it appears to consciousness. It is the sense of division, of duality . . . What we feel now is the pain of duality and conflict: Man vs. the World (which is men struggling with themselves, nature and other men). In the beginning was the world. But in the transcendence subject and object will become the Word: Mannature. Then love must change its form--when the Flesh is made Word--and death, for the unalienated will have to be reinvented. (*North Dakota Quarterly* 50, 21).

When Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, they were not only alienated from nature because they were now distinct from it but also because they had gained the godly knowledge of good and evil, of the moral distinctions and value judgments inherent in language. Because Adam and Eve’s Fall damned language to having a moral component, they were punished in kind: shame came into being because it now had a name. It is the word that signifies the gulf between us and the sublime.

In the post-lapsarian world our curse, our original sin, is language and its endless distinctions arising from the alienation of the subject from the object, which serves to create a Babel of concepts, putting more distance between us and God (or between world and spirit). The endless distinctions between self and selves, the individual and the community, humans and animals, between the signifier and the signified, the doer and the deed, the writer and the critic, serve as the basis for a persistent Babel, an endless deconstruction in which meaning is forever indeterminate.

Such is the human condition after the Fall, and the reason why rationalism is incapable of recovering our relationship to the One, the spiritual, the absolute. That is why the Romantic viewpoint emphasizes feelings and the imaginative faculty as routes to the absolute--or at least glimpses or intimations of it. Though judgment comes along with speech--and art--the suspension of Keats's "irritable reaching after fact" can lead to the sublime experience of an object. The imagination, with its ability to synthesize concepts into new relations, can give us an approximation of the original apprehension of nature that Eden represents. In this regard, poetry can be considered a meta-language which strives to make the indeterminable properties of language a virtue rather than a curse by helping us resist a dogmatic formalization of our relationship to "reality." As the linguist Roman Jakobson puts it:

It is necessary to make a point of the fact that sign does not fall together with object. Because, besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (A is A-I), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (A is not A-I). The reason this antimony is essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out. (378)

In pointing out the dialectical quality of language, Jakobson suggests that language has no meaning without its attached moral or value judgments--without concepts. But he also implies that dogmatic concepts, like fixed traditions, lead to a dead-end. In this way he restates the Romantic principle of reformulating fixed concepts to give them new life.

However, in the act of naming things, McGrath argues, we also, for a time, own them:

Language is, perhaps, only a moment of the growth of what became consciousness and will go beyond it, but it is our machine for separating ourselves from the world in order to create it (as Adam did by naming the beasts). In creating the world we also *appropriate it*. (NDQ 50, 18).

Considering such dogmatic solidifications of language, the twin prisons of rationality and pragmatism, it is no wonder then that Kant links the sublime to the failure of cognition; when cognition fails in the face of the infinite universe--a magnitude that defies comprehension--then the desire of the subject to appropriate the object in the act of naming it is thwarted, and we experience intimations of the sublime, or as Whitman would say, Kosmos. In this way, rational apprehension gives way to feeling, to a reaching through words toward what is beyond words, what John implies the paradox of God is. Kant's concept of magnitude finds its Romantic expression in both the infinite and the infinitely finite. The mystical and transcendent apprehension of the infinite can proceed from the dissolution of the distinction between subject and object.

The concept that the subject appropriates the object and that the more fully the object is appropriated the more it serves as a door to the infinite is expressed by Wordsworth in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." He remarks in his headnote to the poem that "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature" (331). In so doing, Wordsworth describes the persistence of the prelapsarian state where subject and object have no distinctions but are fused into pure,

untroubled being/beinglessness, or the soul. Wordsworth is quick to point out that “though the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there to contradict it, and the fall of Man presents an analogy in its favor” (331). Wordsworth, of course, like other Romantics, finds these intimations in nature: “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (“Ode” 202-03). No doubt these thoughts are too deep for tears because they travel to that immortal place beyond character and its personal tragedies that are marked by tears--beyond the ego.

It can be considered a triumph of Romanticism, and a primary reason why the tradition persists, that it makes a virtue of relativism especially since language, in the post-lapsarian sense, with its endless distinctions, means that we have fallen away forever from truth. We name and are named and the endless cycle of definition persists. Language desires the firm fruit of its knowing and grasps only air instead. However, while Romanticism, in a sense, accepts relativism as the condition resulting from the Fall, it does not take relativism as precluding a deeper, mystical connectedness with the infinite:

The question of relativism does not after all apply to God or a hypothetical ultimate reality; it applies to a *knowable* reality. Browning says *human* institutions and judgments are relative, but that their fallibility throws us back on instincts which at their deepest connect with an absolute reality that can be felt though not known. (Langbaum 3)

Besides, relativism leads directly to the Romantic emphasis on the individual imagination as a means of forging our own relationship with the absolute based not on dogma but experience.

V. The Crucifix as Christ Objectified

For McGrath, who was raised a Catholic, one of the main problems that *Letter* must deal with is the hardening into a dogmatic institution which has rendered his received religion into a reason-numbing opiate. Historical Christianity, one of the world's greatest revolutions to establish or recognize a loving, merciful God has, over time, decayed. As Emerson says, "The true Christianity,--a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man,--is lost. None believeth in the soul of man, but only in some man or person old and departed" (*Selections* 112) Both Emerson, McGrath, (and Martin Luther), are struck the same way, that the paraphernalia of Christianity has supplanted its initial vital revolutionary principles. To paraphrase Emerson, the idioms of language and rhetoric have usurped Faith; and churches are not built on His principles, but on tropes (*Selected* 105). As I have tried to show in the previous section, for the Romantic, miracles, through the cosmic gap between subject and object, become "one with the blooming clover and the falling rain" (*Selections* 105).

McGrath, however, sees the Romantic focus on phenomenon as leading to noumenon perverted when Keats's concept of negative capability--especially as it is translated by William Carlos Williams--is taken to an extreme: "As the Williams tradition runs down . . . the object becomes All, becomes the One. Things are hypostasized and so anything is as good as anything else and a beer can equals the Mona Lisa" (*NDQ* 50).

This fetishism of objects is the reason why McGrath rejects his inherited Catholicism, with its emphasis on the word made flesh, as a dead system of beliefs because it has

hypostasized Christ. McGrath, looking at a crucifix, mocks the object supplantation of the real Christ: "Lift up our / Eyes / where Christ on his wooden rocket is ready to ascend!" (III & IV; 7). Here, McGrath, in true Romantic fashion, rejects Catholicism as dogma because it is a world view that he has not chosen but inherited. In this regard, McGrath is not a blasphemer but firmly in the camp of Emerson, who says:

Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion . . . It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus . . . Accept the injurious impositions of our early cathetical instruction . . . and you shalt not be a man even. You shall not own the world; you shall not dare and live after the infinite law that is in you . . . but you must subordinate your nature to Christ's nature; you must accept our interpretations, and take his portrait as the vulgar draw it. (106)

True to the Romantic mission, McGrath does not merely reject Catholicism, but searches out the ground beneath it to resurrect a new mythos. McGrath digs deeper than one might expect, unearthing a tradition that, it can be argued, is older than Christianity, parallels Genesis in its cosmology, and is thoroughly American--that of the Hopi Indian. The Hopi tradition, as described by Frank Waters in *Book of the Hopi*, will be untenable to those who do not hold a Romanticist's world view. Waters writes:

The Hopi view of the universe as an inseparably interrelated field or continuum will not be quite palatable to those who tacitly accept the role of man as a rational entity created to stand apart from nature in order to control its politically ordered cosmology with an imperialistic

mechanization . . . This will make its profound sense of wholeness no less wonderful to others, who see their own culture uneasily reflecting the cataclysmic split between the spiritual and the material, the conscious and unconscious. (xi)

In his willingness to reject old traditions in favor of vital new ones, or even more ancient ones--Hopi--McGrath forges another link between himself and the Romantics: their making a virtue out of nonconformity, concerning which, Emerson says, "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" (149). McGrath echoes him: "I think that one of the great things in this world is diversity. Difference among all of us. The curse, the absolute curse of the world, is this *business* of all of us being like everyone else. Wouldn't that be just the most monstrous thing in the world? Conformity is an absolute monster, and should be strangled at all costs" (*NDQ* 56, 18-19).

Both writers suffered penalties as a result of their unorthodox ideologies. Emerson's "Divinity School Address" in effect made him an outlaw from the Unitarian Church, and McGrath's political affiliations made him an outlaw for a time in these United States when he was blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. But the more important point is that both writers exhibit the Romantic emphasis on the development of the individual mind in relation and opposition to received dogma--that dialectical process--that makes self-reliance a virtue.

To read McGrath is to experience nonconformity in action and, in particular, to experience language as insubordination and delight, as a political act. In *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, here's young Tom in the confessional trying to earn himself a harder

penance (and also, perhaps, sending-up the confessional poets and their heavily subjective world view):

. . . it is sin I can smell

Around me now as the confessional rises again in its shaft . . .

.....

Yes, I do know sin,

For haven't I felt the whole universe recoil at my touch? And my mother weep for my damned ways?

At my approach

The Sensitive Plant contracts its ten thousand feathery fingers
Into a green fist.

.....

“Have you ever

Taken the lord's name in vain?”

“Yes.”

“How often?”

“Always.”

“Always?”

“Always in vain I mean, Father.

It never helped.”

(III & IV; 46-48)

When the boy receives only the standard “Three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys” (48)

he calls:

. . . upon all the words

In the dictionary of damnation and not a damned one will come.

I pray for the gift of tongues and suddenly I am showered

With all the unknown words I have ever heard or read.

“I am guilty of chrestomathy, Father.”

“And?”

“Barratry, Father.

.....

“Catachresis and pseudogogy . . .” (III; 46-50)

The boy continues listing what are for him meaningless words--but since he's rarely heard others use them, they must detail sins. The list goes on in all of its alphabetical acrobatics and institutional insolence until the boy gets exactly what he deserves--“Three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys!”

VI. Language as a Vehicle for Synthesis and Subversion

In his use of language, McGrath displays a lexicographic lust, a revolutionary ferociousness and a flat-out love for it. He speaks the King's English, the pauper's English, Wild Bill Hickock's lingo and the slang that crawls across the surface of our dictionaries before it worms its way in. In his diction as in his politics McGrath is a populist, crusading for individuality, inclusion and diversity. This connects McGrath to the language of the common people to a degree that Wordsworth did not consider for his *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth proposed that the poet should “choose incidents and situations from *common* life,” described in a “selection of language really used by men,

and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (424). McGrath’s poetry places him in Wordsworth’s camp when it comes to choosing diction really used by men; however, just as Wordsworth stakes out “low and rustic” life as the territory for his poetry, McGrath was born into such a life, on a North Dakota farmstead.

Consequently, McGrath not only knows firsthand the farmers’ argot, but, in a sense, he goes Wordsworth one better by combining many versions of the “language really used by men” into a new construct, one which combines multiple types of language usage to level class distinctions.

This points to one of the ways in which McGrath’s writing is problematic. Certainly a reader might question McGrath’s use of multiple levels of language. If McGrath, like Whitman, is viewed (and perhaps viewed himself) as a proletarian bard, then why did he not speak in the most widely comprehensible language? As Terrence Des Pres describes it, McGrath’s complex language “is an amalgam of field-hand grit and Oxbridge nicety seasoned with working-class dialect from the 1930’s and 40’s” (152). It is highly subversive to do as McGrath has done; instead of bringing the language of the “common people” to the intellectuals as Wordsworth did, McGrath reverses that process by bringing the language of the intelligensia down to the level of the “common folk” and, by mixing it with diction ranging from the barnyard to the Pentagon, levels class distinctions. As Eagleton puts it, the idea of “ordinary language” is itself a class distinction:

Though ‘ordinary language’ is a concept beloved of some Oxford philosophers, the ordinary language of Oxford philosophers has little in

common with the ordinary language of Glaswegian dockers . . . The idea that there is a single ‘normal’ language, a common currency shared by all members of society, is an illusion. Any actual language consists of a highly complex range of discourses, differentiated according to class, region, gender, status and so on, which can by no means be neatly unified into a single homogeneous linguistic community. (5)

It is certainly not McGrath’s aim to confuse his readers or to prove himself a poet because he knows the language of that priesthood in the mechanical and obfuscatory fashion that Wordsworth deplored. To attest to this, McGrath has advised any reader who doesn’t understand a particular word in his poem to “keep reading, the next line will make it clear” (*Poetry East* 46).

Perhaps McGrath’s greatest contribution to poetry, the difference that he has made to the language, is his synthesizing not only wide varieties of diction, but multiple voices and a cast of characters that range from slapstick comedy to high seriousness. McGrath’s refusal to be entirely serious--even in the face of the life and death subjects of which he often treats--ties his work to that of a particularly American outlook, “of the hard-pressed but irrepressibly optimistic masses” (Des Pres 179).

McGrath proposes humor as evidence of hope. In that regard he is linked to Whitman, whose “religious feeling in ‘Song of Myself’ is counterpoised by a humor that takes the form of slangy and mischievous impudence or drawling Yankee self-ridicule” (Cowley, *Leaves* xv); to Twain; to James Russell Lowell in *The Bigelow Papers*, and to a host of other American writers who make humor and hyperbole part of the new American mythos. But, mainly, McGrath’s humor is linked to the Romantic goal of a positive

reformulation of defunct values via the synthesizing faculty of the imagination. In McGrath's humor one finds the Romantic figure of the nonconformist, and the particularly American emphasis on using humor as a weapon against despair.

The ongoing Romantic project for recovering hope is desperately needed-- particularly in light of Arnold's description of what he claims, in his famous "Preface" to *Poems* (1853), is wrong with modern poetry: its "representations [deal] in situations in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done" (Norton Anth. Vol 2. 1381). Like other American Romantics, particularly Emerson and Whitman, McGrath is concerned with nature--but with the particular difference that his vantage point is from the post-frontier landscape. Though McGrath engages in the Romantic project of recovering nature, never before has nature suffered so much that it needs to recover from. For Emerson and Whitman the American wilderness held limitless promise. For McGrath, the project is to recover that promise through the synthesis of a new Romantic mythos. To accomplish this transformation, McGrath offers a mythic, autobiographical, and messianic self, saying, "I offer as a guide this total myth, / The legend of my life and time" (211).

The solution McGrath offers is suggested in what Eliot said of Joyce, what any close reader of *Letter* could think that Eliot is talking about McGrath:

Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him . . . It is simply a way of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history. . .

Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.

(Langbaum 11)

In true Romantic fashion, McGrath comes full circle in *Letter* to the Romantic idea of finding the God in nature when he says, very near the end of the poem: “The spirits are alive in the natural world--in wood and water / In the grass underfoot, in the names and colors of winds and directions-- / Are they entering again the arts and artifacts of men?” (III & IV; 108). In the final analysis, McGrath the nonconformist would probably find little delight at being placed in the Romantic tradition; however, his rejection of dogmatic myths in favor of an imaginatively synthesized new mythos to recover human value in the wake of modern alienation puts him squarely among them. McGrath, most likely, would have preferred that I say “roundly” among them, because the round-dance is one of his favorite symbols, one which emphasizes harmony and continuance for ourselves in nature. He much preferred the circle over the straight line of manifest destiny that marks our journey forever away from Eden. McGrath the Romantic proposes that it might not be too late to circle back.

Chapter Two

Recovering Native American World Views:

Tom McGrath Updates Walt Whitman

Any poet, like McGrath, who seeks an epic assessment of America through poetry needs to reckon somehow with Walt Whitman. Whitman stands on the expanding United States' eastern shore, facing west, a great colossus--or egomaniac--exhorting the settlers, in "Pioneers! O Pioneers," to

. . . get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your
sharp-edged axes?
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing
deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin
soil upheaving

(*Leaves* [Norton ed.] 2-3, 23-27)

Whitman is nothing if not a rampant capitalist proselytizer and captain of manifest destiny. Whitman claims that "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (*Leaves* [1855 ed.] 5). And, as Malcolm Cowley says in his introduction to an original edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman sees himself as "the greatest champion America ever could know" (xxviii). Whitman saw his writing *Leaves*--expanded to 365 chapters or psalms, one to be read on each day of the year--as "The Great Construction of the New Bible" (xxviii). Apparently, as evidenced by his many writings lauding

American economic industriousness, and the sentiments he expresses in such poems as “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” about this moral rectitude of America’s westward expansion, such events were copacetic with his new religion.

My goal in this chapter is to examine what destiny Whitman, with religious fervor, projects for America, and for its literature. Certainly for Whitman the two are inextricably linked; for him literature informs, or even creates, the national spirit. I seek to revise the way Whitman was cast as the good gray poet “first in the esteem of men and women” (xxvii), in terms of whom he excludes from the United States’ great democratic project, specifically the Native Americans. Furthermore, I am intent on examining how Thomas McGrath, in his epic poem *Letter to An Imaginary Friend--his Leaves*, if you will--rights Whitman’s wrongs by looking to Native American beliefs for poetic inspiration and historical revision of U. S. history.

Whitman, appropriately for a capitalistic prophet, foresees a fine American future:

I count with such absolute certainty on the great future of the United States . . . that I have always invoked that future, and surrounded myself with it, before or while singing my songs. (“Preface” [1876 ed.] 527)

He sounds as if the American future, all that great future to come, is an intoxicating inspiration. Then, as if to forestall criticism that he is drunk on optimism, Whitman defends his dreaming:

Of men or states, few realize how much they live in the future. . . . All ages, all Nations and states, have been such prophecies. But any former ones with prophecy so broad, so clear, as our times, our lands--as those of the West? (527)

While Whitman's dream, seen from the perfect hindsight of history, might seem a naive fantasy to some, it nevertheless displays what has come to be regarded by many Americans as a particular brand of American optimism.

For the cynic, Whitman's dream is patently unrealizable in its political naiveté; however, for a poet of McGrath's powers and convictions, we are lost without its human potential for unalienated communities. McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* serves as the record of the poet's representative struggle to recover the hope of individual freedoms promised for all in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, but denied to many on the basis of their race, religion, or politics whenever it was convenient to the aims of westward expansionism. McGrath asserts that the American Dream was predicated on what became a nightmare for Native Americans and signifies America's original sin, the exploitation and betrayal of its indigenous peoples. Considering that we gained our national freedom by taking theirs, the American dream can never be sanitized by nostalgia. The forty acres and a mule promised by the Homestead Act were only there for the having because the land had been taken from the Native Americans.

America, so well and long celebrated by Whitman as the land of inclusion, was only made possible through acts of exclusion. The Indian removal policies of the 1820s and 30s invited Native Americans to exclude themselves from the fledgling democracy, or otherwise to be assimilated into it by accepting cultural obliteration. Jefferson's "progressivist scheme" for transforming the "noble savages" (Sheehan 125) from collaborative hunters into individual farmers by, in effect, handing them hoes and having them assume their places on the developing nationwide township grid, was not an idea

entirely untenable to Whitman's appreciation for Jefferson's ardent commercial expansionism. Whitman celebrated the idea of "beating up the wilderness into fertile" farms, but also cautioned that society, "with unprecedented material advancement . . . is canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten" (467).

For Whitman, the hope of developing an American soul to counteract rampant American materialism rested in the development of an original, American literature: "Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance (in some respects the sole reliance), of American democracy" (463).

Whitman was certainly not ignorant of what was happening to the Indians, but he did not do much in his writings to further American democracy's moral conscience in their regard. McGrath thus updates Whitman, as a poet as fully conscious as Whitman of the damage inflicted on the American soul by unchecked materialism, and as much a believer as Whitman in the power of literature to lay a moral groundwork for healing the wounds in the national soul. McGrath, certainly, sees the country from the opposite end of Whitman's projections--from the West, after Manifest Destiny has wreaked its havoc.

McGrath, in this sense, picks up where Whitman left off in his very last poem, "A Thought of Columbus," only at the opposite shore. But whereas Whitman reverts at last to the nostalgic possibility Columbus evokes, and celebrates him: "Soul plaudits! acclamations! reverent echoes!" (582), McGrath begins his long poem at the opposite shore, in Los Angeles, where there is no more New World to get to, and materialism, having run its course, leaves him the stark task of assessing its damage.

Despite the multiple failures of America to truly become the land of inclusion, Whitman's vision of the nation as a collection of individuals voluntarily working toward

material and spiritual perfection persists. Many writers still turn to him for an America that promises the freshness of a beautiful, collective dream, a vision of possibility renewed like hope. For instance, Patricia Hampl, in “The Mayflower Moment: Reading Whitman During the Vietnam War,” claims that she read him “ahistorically, as if “Democratic Vistas” had not been written in 1871 but yesterday,” because she finds in her reading of him a “national self” that offers a vision of America as “unlimited possibility, unwritten history” (308). Similarly, June Jordan, in “For the Sake of a People’s Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us,” calls Whitman a “weird white father calling aloud for a democratic spirit, an American, a democratic idea that could morally constrain and coordinate the material body of U.S.A. affluence and piratical outreach” (195). In her reading of him, Jordan celebrates Whitman as the great poet of moral and communal possibility, and awareness.

Whitman has also been often celebrated as the great “Kosmic” poet of inclusion, writing beyond the skin of himself to include as many outcasts as he can, making every face in the multitudes his own, if only for a moment, before they are swept away on the great American river of commerce. So great is Whitman’s place as the good gray poet of America, the great originator, that Roy Harvey Pearce, in *The Continuity of American Poetry*, claims “that all American poetry since Whitman is, in essence, if not in substance, a series of arguments with Whitman” (57). Perhaps, however, it is more the case that all American poetry since Whitman is a series of arguments and *agreements* with Whitman. Few American poets besides McGrath and Whitman have proven themselves capable of assessing our national character on an epic scale. Des Pres calls McGrath “as close to Whitman as anyone since Whitman himself” (Des Pres 151);

Hayden Carruth calls McGrath's "rolling control of the long line . . . Whitmanesque" (*Poetry East* 92); and, as Galway Kinnell has pointed out, one of the earliest poets in this century to "retrieve Whitman's music" is Tom McGrath (*Measure* 216). However, in addition to being musically connected to Whitman, McGrath has engaged in some of the most powerful arguing and agreeing with Whitman's definition of what it means or should mean to be an American and where the materials--or, more precisely, the *conscience*--should come from to meet Whitman's challenge to develop a truly American, consciousness-changing literature.

Both writers turn to the West, what Whitman calls the "dominion-heart" of America, the center of the non-European New World, as a wellspring from which American culture should be drawn. Whitman writes:

I should demand a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture rooms, but with an eye toward practical life, the west, the working-men, the facts of farms and jack-planes and engineers, and of the broad range of the women also of the middle and working strata.

McGrath, too, finds the locus of equality and our national hopes in the American West.

McGrath quotes William Eastlake on the West as being central to American consciousness:

We cannot forget the West. There is no American outside the West, and there never will be. It is the dream, and that dream is the only hope. No, we cannot forget the West. Where all the races meet in a place of beauty,

not in a place of blood. The land cannot grant amnesty. (“On McGrath”
22)

McGrath, though, is quick to qualify Eastlake’s optimism:

That meeting in a place of beauty rather than in a place of blood has to be
in ‘the dream.’ The time has surely not arrived yet. It won’t be arrived at
either until we come to terms with the ‘extermination of the Indian,’ until
we understand the exploitation and rip-offs that have been practiced
against the working class as well . . . All this great ‘West’ is a place of
wounds. All of America is such a place, but the East has paved over them.
(23)

For these writers, the way we make and remake the populist myth of the West, seeking to
recover it as the hallmark of American possibility that Hampl rediscovers in “Democratic
Vistas,” is through a wholly American or “New World” literature. Jordan, in celebrating
Whitman, paraphrases him when she says,

New World does not mean New England. New World means non-
European; it means new, it means big, it means heterogeneous, it means
unknown, it means free, it means an end of feudalism, caste, privilege, and
the violence of power. It means wild in the sense that a tree growing away
from the earth enacts a wild event. (195)

There is no mystery in Jordan’s choice of a tree as a natural symbol, an organic
metaphor for freedom and transcendence. By employing it, she calls up Transcendental
and Romantic writers’ celebration of nature as the least mediated pathway to a connected
soulfulness, all the mute gospels nature offers as testament to the human need to

transcend the limits and degradations of “unchecked materialism.” Whitman sounds vitriolic, and blasphemes Shakespeare, when he calls loudly for a literature that constructs itself from wholly American materials:

The great poems, Shakespeare included, are poisonous to the pride and dignity of the common people, the lifeblood of democracy. The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands, ultra marine, have had their births in courts, and bask'd and grow in castle sunshine; all smells of princes' favors . . . Do you call these genteel little creatures American poets? Do you term that perpetual, pisatreen, paste-pot work, American art, American dream, taste, verse? We see the sons and daughters of the New World, ignorant of its genius, not yet inaugurating the *native*, the universal, and the near, still importing the distant, the partial, the dead . . . We see shreds of Hebrews, Romans, Greeks; but where on her own soil, do we see, in any faithful, highest proud, expression, America herself? I sometimes question whether she has a corner in her own house. (*Selected*, “Democratic Vistas” 502; italics mine)

In this passage one hears the acid wash in Whitman's voice as he wishes to cleanse

American literature of European influence that it might discover its own genius.

Whitman's use of the term “native” in his exhortations to develop a uniquely American literature is especially revealing because it indicates a widespread failing throughout the American Romantic's argument over what should constitute the “soul” of New World literature. More specifically, Whitman refers to the exclusion of Native American world

views as part of American Literature's lack of a spiritual backbone. Like Emerson and other Transcendentalists, he calls loudly for

a new literature, perhaps a new metaphysics, certainly a new poetry which are to be the only sure and worthy supports and expressions of the American Democracy. Nature, true Nature, and the true idea of Nature, long absent, must, above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems, and the test of all high literary and esthetic compositions. (*Selected*, "Democratic Vistas" 507)

In this passage Whitman echoes the Romantic aesthetic concerns that still persist: what is "true Nature," and how does that term apply to human beings? Jefferson, like Rousseau, likes the idea of the "noble savage," yet how does one grant nobility and at the same time avoid the imperialism implicit in such an act of definition?

American Transcendentalists, like their counterparts, the English Romantics, hinted at a solution to this moral and aesthetic dilemma by turning toward nature as an index to the numinous, or, in Emerson's terms, an "over-soul," in which all meet in a place of beauty. However, at the same time that these writers were searching for uniquely American inspirational verse, they were also importing German Romanticism and Oriental Mysticism as the means to restore nature as a doorway to transcendence, a world view already held by indigenous Native American tribes. In the following excerpt from an 1883 letter written in response to a request for a poem commemorating Santa Fe, New Mexico's, 333rd anniversary of the city's settlement by the Spanish, Whitman reveals that he was aware of the fate awaiting Native American tribes, as he echoes the argument this chapter advances:

As to our aboriginal or Indian population . . . I know it seems to be agreed that they must gradually dwindle as time rolls on, and in a few generations more leave only a reminiscence, a blank. As America, from its many far back sources and current supplies, develops, adapts, entwines, faithfully identifies its own--are we to see it cheerfully accepting and using all the contributions of foreign lands from the whole outside globe and then rejecting the ones distinctively its own--the autochthonic ones? (553-554)

Whitman, as he himself noted in "An Indian Bureau Reminiscence," worked for "several months (until Mr. Harlan turned me out for having written *Leaves of Grass*), in the Interior Department at Washington, in the Indian Bureau" as a clerk. There, he saw in "aboriginal visitors . . . the most wonderful proofs of what nature can produce . . . some of the young fellows were, as I have said, magnificent and beautiful *animals*" (*Collected Writing* 577-578; emphasis mine). It is perhaps a bit easy, and would be sensational, to cast Whitman as a villain, especially when he so often describes natives here and in other passages as "specimens" and in this instance lamentably links the word "animal" to races which we know so well were treated like animals. It would also be too easy to dismiss Whitman as a benevolent racist were we not to take into account the focus that natural history, theology, and philology had among the literati in America--particularly when it was still regarded as the New World, before the frontier was closed. The very title of Whitman's *Specimen Days* belies the observation that the New World was truly new, with wonders waiting to be discovered, collected, categorized, and described. Whitman no doubt endures because he celebrated what he found, and was not appalled by what he

found, even if he used terms to describe his observations that we may find offensive today.

One must also acknowledge that Whitman's ability to fully celebrate and empathize with Native Americans was constrained by language difficulties. In his brief account of his days at the Indian Bureau, Whitman several times describes dealings between then Indian Commissioner, Dole, and the native delegations as being translated "in scraps." There is no evidence that Whitman knew any Indian dialects, and no doubt he makes his judgment on the basis of the discrepancy between the length of what the native speakers said, and the hesitancy and brevity of the translator's translation.

So where lies Whitman's fault or lack?

Certainly "Democratic Vistas," and the rest of Whitman's work, in hindsight, fails to do exactly what he himself admitted was needed: to incorporate America's autochthonic roots as part of its literary genesis. There is some mention of Native Americans in Whitman's writing, but he portrays them without depth. In "The Sleepers," for instance, Whitman's mother feeds a "red squaw," feels love for her, and is distressed when she departs, but the portrayal never rises above the iconographic (*Leaves of Grass* [1855 Edition] 111). Whitman's most ambitious depiction of Native Americans occurs in the embarrassing romance "The Half-Breed," in which he tells the tale of the "not very bright" hunchbacked half-breed, Boddo, and his plot against Arrow-Tip, the chief of an unnamed tribe. In addition to depicting Boddo, the offspring of a white father and a Native American mother, as physically, mentally, and morally deficient, Whitman casts the chief in iconographic terms, saying of Arrow-tip, "What wondrous power those rude savages have over the expressions of their features!" (74). Bizarrely, perhaps,

considering Whitman's sympathy for Indians, he lauds Custer instead of the Native warriors in "A Death Sonnet for Custer," later retitled "From Far Dakota's Canons." In the poem, Whitman sounds a "trumpet-note for heroes," particularly General Custer, "a lightning flash" of hope "in dark days" (*Leaves: Variorum Edition*, III; 653-54).

Betsy Erikkila, writing in *Whitman the Political Poet*, tries to rescue Whitman by making him seem neglectful at least, and prophetic at best, when she addresses his treatment of Native Americans in his writing:

The Indians. After having suppressed in his previous poems the fact of the dead bodies of the Indians on which America was founded, Whitman wrote no fewer than three Indian poems in the final decade of his life . . . The poems appear to be merely topical, but coming as they do . . . when the stage was being set for the final massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, they signal the ways in which the dead bodies of the Indians would rise out of the very ground of America, demanding to be reckoned with in any future dream. (317)

It is exactly on this account that McGrath, born 24 years after Whitman's death, and writing with the benefit of a post-frontier perspective, and only recently available ethnographies such as Frank Water's *The Book of the Hopi*, updates Whitman. As Thomas Matchie puts it,

McGrath has certainly used his own growing consciousness to reflect events of the 20th century, much as Whitman did in the 19th. One ought to keep in mind . . . that McGrath's involvement with Indian culture also served to disconnect him radically from the poetry of his predecessor. (8)

In *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, McGrath revitalizes Whitman's American Dream by revising the relationship between humans and nature according to Native American world views--particularly those of the Hopi. The Hopi world view, it can be argued, is older than Christianity, parallels Genesis in its cosmology, and is thoroughly American. So ancient are the Hopi settlements in Arizona that the "Oraibi village on the present Hopi reservation can vie with Acoma in New Mexico for the honor of being the oldest continuously inhabited village on the North American continent" (Kaiser 5). McGrath, born in 1916, in the twilight of the American frontier, makes it clear in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* that the recovery of Whitman's populism and optimism requires that America heal the soul sickness--the wound--it suffered when it usurped Indian lands. McGrath says it explicitly: "The Indian is the first Wound" (I & II; 191). McGrath mounts a rescue mission to recover the spiritualism of the aboriginal American past as an antidote to the state of affairs which Native Americans are not alone in regarding as the nightmare of American history.

For McGrath, it is as if the dream Whitman proposes in "Democratic Vistas" has not been deferred as much as it has been perverted and turned into a nightmare. Still the dream persists:

Midnights, looking out where that river,
No more than a ditch but deep and black in the moonlit snow,
Flowed out of the Glimmerglass . . .

(Cooper's river.)

And flowed back.

Into romance: the deep, heroic and dishonest past

Of the national myth of the frontier spirit and the free West--
Of, nightmare, nightmare, dream and despair and dream!

(III & IV; 36)

What McGrath tries to do in *Letter* is to return us to the dream of an original or native relationship with nature, thus restoring its beauty and mystery, which might be termed the essence of song:

This is the first home we long for

our first loss

The magisterial prophets that are the deep Wilderness Roads

Of longing and separation

from the green secret . . .

of woods

By leaf-colored waters of little rivers before the first bird sang,

By nights cloudy with moths, mask-like eyes in their wings . . .

(III & IV; 95)

Like other American Romantics, particularly Emerson and Whitman, McGrath is concerned with nature as a spiritual force, but his vantage point is different because he is grounded in the post-frontier landscape. Though McGrath engages in the now traditionally Romantic project of recovering nature, never before has nature had so much to recover from. For Emerson, Whitman, and other transcendental writers, the American wilderness held limitless promise; for McGrath, the project is to recover that promise through the synthesis of a new Romanticism. He says, "I offer as a guide this total myth, / The legend of my life and time" (211).

McGrath's "total myth" relies on the poet, in Whitmanesque fashion, asserting himself as the mythic hero of his poem. *Letter* serves as a record for the poet's journey through the shattered hall of mirrors of the past to become a shamanistic figure who leads us "over the river" and into the Edenic Hopi "Fifth World." This fifth world is brought on by the Hopi Kachina--of which the poem is a part. In "A Note on Parts Three and Four" McGrath explains:

The Kachina for the Hopi is a "God," a deified spirit of great power. According to the Hopi, we now live in *Tuwaqachi*, the Fourth World, but we will soon enter *Saquashouh*, the Fifth World--a much better one. The new world will be signaled by a blue star. Kachinas are also doll figures which are made to symbolize spirit powers. The Blue Star Kachina will help these powers to bring in the new world. All of us should help to make this Kachina. I think of the making of my poem as such an action. In a small way, the poem *is* the Kachina. (unpaginated)

In *Letter*, McGrath serves as the shaman--an Orphic, Christ-like "resurrection man," a trickster, or possibly a Hopi *Pahanna*, or elder white brother (Kaiser 84), who dances us back to the first American wound so that we can reopen it, so that healing can begin. Whitman located America's main defect among the Civil War wounded. McGrath, instead, goes to what seems to be the source of our moral despair, the crack in the American soul that will never heal until we acknowledge it, do some hard penance, and make retribution for the land that we walk on as if we have always owned it--though we know quite well where it came from. If Christian and Hopi myth is founded on a god-figure taking on the responsibility of representing the people in an act of atonement and

retribution, then, in McGrath's theology, in which he combines Catholic sacramentalism with Marxist materialism and Hopi mythology, we all share the responsibility for helping each other move toward completing that sacrifice, making real that redemption. Only through expanding our understanding of Whitmanesque "comradeship" and, more importantly, tribal inclusiveness, can we form a community to make a better world, one suggested by the Fifth World of the Hopi. In this way, McGrath synthesizes a new and vital connection between materialism and sacramentalism, what Whitman wanted all along, "a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States" (*Selected* 463).

This new moral stance, where McGrath leaves his readers at the end of *Letter*, on the brink of the Hopi Fifth World, is Edenic in that it reestablishes our essential relationship with nature, so that nature is given back its voice, its ability to speak to us apart from the lone human voice intoning its deathly lyricism, alone in its disconnected, existential desert. As McGrath says:

Nature is the ground of our existence . . . without nature . . . a whole dimension of one's life is missing . . . I believe there is something very deep in us that needs this kind of thing--we need to be able to find ourselves, at times, in this most ancient order of Things, because it tends to give us perspective. (Vinz 34)

What McGrath seeks to recover--or *uncover*--in *Letter* is, like Whitman, not merely his own personal history, which he "can never lose," but also the larger, representative, moral, intellectual, and political value of a poetry that can that make a difference beyond the self-healing of lyricism:

It is not *my* past that I mourn--that I can never lose--
(Nor my future, which is assured, and in which I sing more cold
And passionate still as the passing years swing over my deadheading
Mortal part
heart at home on the wind
borne
In the blood of strangers . . .
carried
forward forever this song . . .)
--No, but the past of this place and the place itself and what
Was: the Possible; that is: the future that never arrived . . .

(I & II; 206)

McGrath seeks to make it clear that his is not merely a nostalgic mission to recover the past for himself only, but, in his echoes of Whitman, for a much larger community. In this way McGrath represents the Emersonian poetic ideal (descended from Wordsworth) as the representative man, interested not merely in his own wealth but that of the “common wealth” (Emerson 223).

However, McGrath at this point does not represent Emerson’s concept of the poet as the complete man standing among partial men, but rather a person who is as incomplete as all of those separated from Whitman’s dream by the modern condition of alienation. As McGrath puts it, “All of us live twice at the same time--once uniquely and once representatively. I am interested in those moments when my unique personal life interacts with something bigger, when my small brief moment has a part in ‘fabricating

the legend” (“On McGrath” 25). *Letter* should be regarded as the record of a journey back to wholeness, to the revitalization of Whitman’s promise.

In McGrath’s *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, readers will find an original, subversive American voice that, like Whitman’s, strives to recover the idea of America as new synthesis arising from the foundations of community in an older order. However, unlike Whitman, McGrath finds the possibility for spiritual connectedness residing not in Eastern mysticism but right at home, in Native American world views.

Chapter Three

Restoring Faith:

Thomas McGrath's Vision of Spirituality in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*

In *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, Thomas McGrath strives to synthesize the contradictory doctrines of Marxist materialism, Christian sacramentalism, and Hopi religious beliefs by becoming “the resurrection man” who seeks to recover the American West as a symbol of hope, moral responsibility, and peaceful, coequal communities.

As I surveyed in Chapter Two, the American West persists, for many writers, as a place where the United States lost its moral compass. But still, somehow, it may be found there. The gigantic perspectives of Western landscapes, the particularly individual myths of self and truth, reliance, heroism, and fortune which the West as frontier represents, persist. The concept of a frontier as an opportunity for discovering and renewal, as a place and an ideology for Americans and others, finds an eternal cognate in the American Western frontier. Especially when past frontier lands, like the Dakotas, revert to frontier status as the population falls below the line, that statistically, redefines a county as frontier.

The American West, post-pioneer, post-drive-in movie, is still raw enough for recovering historical promise. Dotted with Indian reservations, and those without casinos still looking like assimilation war zones, the West will not let go of us, and we will not let go of it. Country Western music, even at its goofiest, shows us up as cowboys and cowgirls tuned to the basics: life, love, liberty, and a place of our own.

McGrath, fully aware of this dream, knows what grounds we walk upon. The West is both a shiny promise and a lie. The East, corridor of commerce, doesn't show the wounds the way the West does. As I've already noted and is worth recalling, McGrath characterized the West as "a place of wounds. *All of America* is such a place, but the East has paved over them" (NDQ 50: 24).

Indeed it has. The East, with its densely settled seaboard, clearly displays the Marxist premise that the city is a machine serving capitalism as "a means of agglomerating population, centralizing means of production, and concentrating property in a few hands" (Marx, *Manifesto* 85). History is suppressed in the process; if you pave over your past, you cover up evidence of class struggle. That is why McGrath focuses on the West, where wagon tracks are still grooved in the ground outside St. Louis, scoring Wyoming and other wide open states that have not been turned into parking lots.

Letter serves as a record of the poet's progress, a journey the poem's speaker, invoking an image of the crucifixion, says is directed "toward a distant, perfect, wound." This speaker, as an Orphic, Christ-like, or shamanistic figure, must "descend to ascend," to deliver the West from the sin that persists: in the Eden of the New World the usurpation of Native American lands is the United States' original sin. To accomplish this resurrection, the poet, in Dantesque fashion, descends into the "hell" of modern industrialism to lead humankind up and out of this darkness into the light of spiritual communion in an agrarian communal existence.

In its penultimate movement, the "Christmas Section," the poem deconstructs what it construes as the dogmatic sacramentalism of Christmas by destabilizing the narrative time frame and mixing disparate ideologies and poetic modes. As a child

participating in his family's Christmas ritual on their North Dakota farmstead, the poet leaps from the family Christmas tree "into heaven." This fantastic scene propels the poet into a Joycean stream of consciousness in which "pagan Indian" mythologies are recombined with Catholicism and Marxism to form a visionary world view, one based on renewed hope for the human race. The adult poet, now too old to live "to see the promised land" that future generations shall have, has nevertheless, like Moses, led us there.

McGrath records this mythic, pseudo-autobiographical journey, in *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*. The poem begins in Los Angeles, a place so far west that "--'From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east'" (I & II; 1). Here, amid smog-bound, urban sprawl, the poet begins thinking and dreaming back in time to the pioneers and western expansionism, and wonders "what end that journey was toward" (1). He implies that whatever it was that the pioneers sought as their journey's end, it certainly wasn't Los Angeles: "--But I am its end," he decides, "I am where I have been and where / I am going. The journeying destination--" (1). And so he begins his long poetic journey to examine the particulars of his life as an index to the condition of the American dream. Mimicking the mind's processes, the poem freely and often crosses past, present, and future time zones. The poet assesses the human condition, searching for a way, finally, to repair the damage done to it by whatever suppresses rather than promotes freedom and cooperation. McGrath seeks to make it clear to his readers that his is not merely a nostalgic mission to recover the past for only himself. His goal is to resurrect the communal:

And perhaps the commune must fail in the filth of the American night--

Fail for a time . . .

But all time is redeemed by the single man--

Who remembers and resurrects.

And I remember. (I & II; 119)

Memory for McGrath, is the primary necessity for reordering consciousness, for not repeating history--so, conversely, to go forward he must first go back.

Traveling into his own representative past, the poet as representative person in the Emersonian sense looks for “those moments when my life line crosses through the concentration points of the history of my time” (Vinz 2). He finds himself in memory as a youth back on the North Dakota family farmstead near Sheldon. It is threshing time; but what was once, like barn-raising, a prime example of communally shared labor and cooperation, has become a small example of the Marxist principle of controlling the means of production negatively affecting labor relations.² It is the boy’s introduction to labor strife. Instead of the community cooperating on the harvest, much of the work is done by itinerant laborers who plan on striking for higher wages. Together, the composite, multi-temporal poet-man, and the boy in the living past, witness a labor strike on the family farm. This passage, so important in *Letter* (and quoted in full in Chapter One) becomes a watershed moment for McGrath who, speaking here in the poem in the voice of his younger self, is distraught at what has happened to Cal, and implores the rest of the threshing crew, ““Can’t you jump the son-of-a-bitch”” (meaning his uncle). McGrath calls to Cal, “Cal! Cal! get up! / But he didn’t get up.” And, as importantly, regarding the rest of the workers, “None of them moved” to lend Cal their support (I & II; 19).

The experience is a traumatic moment for the speaker and galvanizes him politically--particularly because none of the other workers comes to Cal's aid. The scene becomes a parable for what happens when workers abandon solidarity, especially during a strike, to focus on their own safety and individual well-being instead of the community's. The moment sums up one of the poem's prime arguments: that what was once a shared communal experience--the harvest--has, through individual ownership and unfair labor practices, become a means of alienating the community. In classical Marxist terms, the poet begins to see, regarding community, that "Economic alienation--where the fruit of labor goes to the employer, swells his capital, and increases his very great powers--is the original sin in Marx" (Giardi 42).

Most North Dakota farmers though, in the 1920s, the time of the threshing strike in *Letter*, didn't have "great powers" even if they could afford to hire itinerant farm laborers to help at harvest time. The farmers themselves, on another level, struggled separately within the capitalistic system to preserve themselves, to survive the widespread bank foreclosures of farms in the depression years.³ This happens against the backdrop of the "Indian graves" the poet passes many times in his poem. Finally he links the two:

And what's here--on the little bluff

Over the little river? A way station, merely;

A half-way house for the Indian dead--alphabetic

Boneyard . . .

It was here the Sioux had a camp on the long trail

Cutting the loops of the rivers from beyond the Missouri and Mandan

East: toward Big Stone Lake and beyond to the Pipestone Quarry,
The place of peace.

A backwoods road of a trail, no tribal
Superhighway; for small bands only. Coming and going
They pitched camp here a blink of an eye ago.
It's all gone now--nothing to show for it.

Skulls

Under the permanent snow of time no wind will lift
Nor shift . . .

--these drifting bones have entered the rock forever . . .

And all done in the wink of an eye! Why my grandmother saw them--
And saw the last one perhaps: ascending the little river
On the spring high water in a battered canoe.

Stole one of her chickens

(Herself in the ark of the soddy with the rifle cocked but not arguing)
Took the stolen bird and disappeared into history.

And my father, a boy at Fort Ransom, saw them each spring and fall--
Teepees strung on the fallow field where he herded cattle.
Made friends and swapped ponies with a boy his own age--
And in the last Indian scare spent a week in the old fort:
All the soddies abandoned, then.

Wounded Knee--

The last fight--must have been at that time.

And now

All: finished.

South Dakota has stolen the holy

Bones of Sitting Bull to make a tourist attraction! (I & II; 189-190)

This situation also leads McGrath to reassess the enduring vision of the pioneers as American heroes:

From Indians we learned a toughness and a strength; and we gained
A freedom: by taking theirs: but a real freedom: born
From the wild and open land our grandfathers heroically stole.
But we took a wound at Indian hands: a part of our soul scabbed over:
We learned the pious and patriotic act of extermination
And no uneasy conscience where the man's skin was the wrong
Color; or his vowels shaped wrong; or his haircut; or his country
possessed of
Oil; or holding the wrong place on the map--whatever
The master race wants it will find good reasons for having.
(I & II; 190)

The "wound" in the American soul is "scabbed over," but not properly healed--it needs to be reopened before it *can* be healed. Humane interests, McGrath argues, deserve primacy over the fervor which propels nationalistic concerns. If a nation adopts "otherness" as an index to defining itself, there is grave danger that the next other who needs to be

eliminated in the name of progress might be the very citizenry which diminished the first other, in America's case the Native American. Who, McGrath asks, will be the next other?

Speaking in an interview, McGrath links the usurpation of Native American lands with that of the farmer's losing theirs to the banks:

Here's the thing. The land had been taken away from the Indians really in my father's lifetime. Also in his lifetime, the banks were taking the land away from the farmers. There was this very strange kind of thing that he [McGrath's father] was well aware of and that some of the older people that I knew had a sense of also, of how fast this had happened, a sense of bewilderment. On the one hand, here the Indians had lost the land in their own lifetime, and now the settlers are suddenly being pushed off the land themselves. (Stern 151)

The farmer's "bewilderment" echoes that of the Native Americans who could not understand why the whites needed so much land, why the terms of the treaties kept changing.

McGrath's perception of these losses and inequities led him to declare that "North Dakota *is* / Everywhere" (I & II; 105), meaning that North Dakota, far from being an isolated western outpost, is representative of the inequities suffered everywhere by the working class. North Dakota, too, has a rich history of promoting the populist spirit. In 1916, the year of McGrath's birth, the state elected the gubernatorial candidate supported by the Non-Partisan League, which worked toward the public ownership of vital facilities. The league came to control the state legislature and established a public granary

system in an effort to get farmers fair crop prices. The Great Depression, the definitive learning experience for McGrath's generation, made politics relative to economics a topic of widespread, and heated discussion: "The talk flickered like fires. / The gist of it was, it was a bad world and we were the boys to change it. / And it *was* a bad world; and we might have" (I & II; 51). It is no surprise then, that McGrath, as the poem traces his development, becomes a Marxist-socialist, a union organizer, after first being educated at Moorhead State College, the University of North Dakota, and Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, and after a stint in the Aleutian Islands during World War II. The war he perceives as another opportunity for opportunists: "Out of the iron thirties and into the Garden of War profiteers. / Once it was: *All of us or no one!* Now it's *I'll get mine!*" (I & II; 146).

Alongside his growing political consciousness, the poet also traces his disaffection with his inherited religion, Catholicism. Increasingly, McGrath sees Catholicism and Christianity as another thorn in the side of the working class, another way it is kept down through false consciousness. Marx, of course, thought religion to be the opiate of the people. McGrath sees the wealthy capitalists as using religion as their shield, the same way that manifest destiny sanctioned western expansionism as a means of bringing religion to the Indians:

morality

fink-size

Automatic rosaries with live Christs on them and cross-shaped purloined

Two-car swimming pools full of holy water. . .

From here God goes

Uphill.

Level to Level.

Instant exhalation of money--up!

To Cadillac country.

Here, in the hush of the long green,

The leather priests of the hieratic dollar enclave to bless

The lush-working washing machines of the Protestant Ethic ecumenical

Laundries: to steam the blood from the bills--O see O see how

Labor His Sublime Negation streams in the firmament!

Don't does all here; whatever is mean is clean. (I & II; 113)

By linking Christianity with capitalistic excess and injustice, McGrath points to them as the causes of the national wound he journeys toward, the sins committed against Native Americans:

Our history begins with the first wound: with Indian blood

Coloring the water of the original springs--earlier, even:

Europe: the indentured . . .

And the local colorist *still* going back:

To the Past: to HEADwaters and HEARTlands (he thinks):

To camp out in the American Dream (beside still waters!):

To atomic cookouts: "Bring your own nigger or *be* one!" (remember?)

To the false Past . . .

Which we must restructure if we're to create

The commune

and the round dance . . .

Kachina . . .

the Fifth Season . . .

The National Past has its houses, but their fires have long gone out!

(III & IV; 36-37)

The problem with Christ in McGrath's poetics is that the brave initial act of a free personality hardened as it became institutionalized by the Church into an artifact, into a possibility limited by its objectification. This fetishism of objects is a primary reason McGrath rejects his inherited Catholicism, with its emphasis on the word made flesh, as a dead system of beliefs because it has hypostasized Christ. McGrath irreverently mocks the Christ as fetish, and calls the crucifix a "wooden rocket" (III & IV; 7). Here McGrath is not a blasphemer but firmly in the camp of Emerson, who, in terms that seem to presage Marx, rails against the shackling ideological superstructure arising from the control over material production of Jesus as a material object, as if possessing a crucifix truly signified one's holiness.⁴ Once God is made word is made flesh it can be solidified into dogma, bought and sold into a kind of spiritual slavery, become a thing that is *owned*. Emerson says,

By this eastern monarchy of a Christianity, which indolence and fear have built, the friend of man is made the injurer of man. The manner in which his name is surrounded with expressions which sallies of admiration and love, but now are petrified into official titles, kills all generous sympathy and liking. All who hear me, feel that the language that describes Christ to

Europe and America is not the style of friendship and enthusiasm to a good and noble heart, but is appropriated and formal--paints a demigod Osiris or Apollo. (*Selections* 106)

McGrath says that “Catholicism is a big thing in the poem because I was raised that way and I went through that whole business. And also because there are certain parallels between early Christianity and . . . revolution, communism” (Gibbons 62-63). He would no doubt agree, concerning Jesus as a revolutionary, that there is no revolutionary class struggle without free personalities capable of raising themselves above the factual level of their class and of realizing its revolutionary, universally human potentialities. That is why McGrath in *Letter* seeks to manage and reconcile the dual longings of Marxist materialism and Catholic sacramentalism, “side by side as if they composed a doctrinal continuum that they surely don’t except in his special usage” (Des Pres 152). His methods involve standing the current religious and political orders on their ears. Certainly the same can be reasonably said for Jesus’s impact on the institutions of his time, and the effect other holy and politically active free personalities have had on their times and tribes. As McGrath notes, Jesus as a revolutionary figure of humble birth found a place in the working class struggle:

The old Wobblies [a nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World, a labor-rights organization] talked about Old Fellow Worker, you know?-- Jerusalem Slim, who was the all-time Olympic water walker and gandy dancer. They weren’t religious at all, but they saw in the figure of Christ, in that myth, something that they recognized as being close [to their politics] . . . I felt that same link that the Wobblies had with Christ as a

revolutionary, as opposed to what he'd been *made* into . . . That was what they saw in Christ. A kind of an opposition which somehow wasn't working in the way it ought to, within the religions, the going religions around there. (Gibbons 63)

Native Americans have long suffered at the hands of capitalists and missionaries who attempted to convert them to economic systems and Christian beliefs that were paramount in causing their near extinction, and decimating their cultures. D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded*, set in the 1920s, one of the first Native American-authored novels, captures the painful social and spiritual disintegration Native Americans suffered as a result of their being forced to adopt white ways.⁵ The adoption was a decidedly one-way affair, with there being little interest on the whites' part in Indian cultures other than collecting artifacts--including skeletal remains--for display in museums, or putting them in wild west shows, or in capture narratives or movies which emphasized their "savage ways." When Native Americans did adopt Christian beliefs for their own ceremonies, the resulting rites were outlawed, and in the case of the ghost dance, led to one of the great "national wounds," Wounded Knee, that McGrath wants to reopen in *Letter* because it has never been properly healed. Perhaps the white Christian's hypocrisy has never been better exposed than by John Daylight, a Sioux living in Chicago, who responded in the *Chicago Tribune*, in 1890, to a vicious editorial attack on the ghost dance religion a few months before the massacre at Wounded Knee:

You say "If the United States Army would kill a thousand or so of the dancing Indians there would be no more trouble." I judge you are a 'Christian' and are disposed to do all in your power to advocate the cause

of Christ. You are doubtless a worshipper of the white man's Savior, but are unwilling that the Indians should have a Messiah of their own. The Indians have never taken kindly to the religion preached and practiced by the whites. Do you know why this is the case? Because the Good Father of all has given us a better religion--a religion that is adapted to our wants. You say if we are good and obey the Ten Commandments and never sin anymore, we will be permitted eventually to sit upon a white rock, and sing praises to God forevermore, and look down upon our heathen fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters who are howling in hell. It won't do. The code of morals as preached by the white race will not compare with the morals of Indians. We pay no lawyers or preachers, but we have not a tenth of the crime you have. If our Messiah does come, we shall not try to force you into our belief. We will never burn innocent women at the stake or pull men to pieces with horses because they refuse to join in our ghost dances. You white people had a Messiah, and if history is to be believed nearly every nation has had one . . . You are anxious to get hold of our Messiah so you can put him in irons. This you may do--in fact, you may crucify him as you did that other one, but you cannot convert the Indians to the Christian religion until you contaminate them with the blood of white men. The white man's heaven is repulsive to the Indian nature, and if the white man's hell suits you, why, you keep it, I think there will be rogues enough to fill it . . . (Rosentiel 109-110)

Daylight points out that many different cultures have long revered such figures as

contraries, poets, priests, prophets, saints, shamans, tricksters, and other such representatives of revolutions in consciousness because they enable communities to re-imagine and reinvent themselves in light of the way extreme acts by such free personalities make possible new perspectives. In this regard, McGrath is not out to deny Catholicism as much as he seeks to re-deify it, by bringing heaven down to earth, and elevating earth to heaven.⁶

While Marxism and Catholicism might seem diametrically opposed, the former Godless, and the latter a “religion of unfreedom . . . one that places God outside the world, related to man as the master is to the serf” (MacIntyre 12-13), McGrath, in “managing them side by side,” views them as the classical elements in a Hegelian dialectic--first the thesis (Catholicism), then the Antithesis (Marxism), resulting in a synthesis, a new relationship between the two. He discovers this synthesis in Hopi cosmogony and cosmology.⁷ In adopting the sacred beliefs of a Native American people, McGrath begins to come full-circle in the course of his poem, from a youth conscience-struck by the Indian graveyards he passes daily, to linking them to the struggles of the farmers who usurped their lands, to seeing in Native beliefs a way to make a better world: to take a step back to go forward.

The reasons McGrath chose Hopi beliefs as a palliative to the state of the world are complex and open to question. The Hopi, like Christians, believe that there is a better world to come, and that the transformation from one world to another will be apocalyptic. Like Christians, the Hopi believe that the transformation will come about as prophesied; however, unlike Christians, the Hopi see the earth as the ground for this transformation. For them, humankind will never leave the earth for a heaven, but the earth itself will evolve toward a better state. In this way, for McGrath, Hopi beliefs form a synthesis

between the warring beliefs of Marxism and Catholicism: there will be earth and heaven too. In that regard Hopi cosmology is Utopian in the same way as Marxism, but contrary to Marxism, it proposes spirits who intervene, mitigate, between the spiritual and the material worlds.

These spirits in Hopi ceremonies are known as kachinas, of which there are hundreds of kinds representing a wide range of forces. Frank Waters, in his seminal *Book of the Hopi*, describes them as “spirits sent to give help and guidance . . . taking the form of ordinary people” (67). Moreover, “A Kachina is a spirit of any kind--a star, mountain, plant, animal, or invisible force. So also is the man who impersonates the spirit during ceremonies” (63). Almost all Hopi ceremonies contain appearances by kachinas. The importance of kachinas for the Hopi is so great that “they are both indispensable for the well-being of the Hopi and indivisible from the souls of the dead” (Quinn 41).

During ceremonies the kachinas emerge from a hole in the top of the underground kiva, which represents the emergence of the Hopi people from the earth in the Hopi origin myth, to dance for the people’s renewal, to reinforce adhering to the Hopi way of life, and to carry the people’s prayers to the Gods. When a Hopi dies, the people pray that he or she will return as a kachina to help the people.

The Hopi believe that humankind now occupies the Fourth World, the previous three worlds having been destroyed by apocalypse because, as Dan Katchhongva explains in *Native American Prophecies*, “Some people forgot or ignored the Great Spirit’s laws and . . . became materialistic, inventing many things for their own gain, and not sharing things as they did in the past” (Peterson 159). In many Hopi retellings of their

cosmology, this instance of selfishness, of turning away from the solidarity and sacredness of Hopi life, is a kind of original sin for the Hopi.

The Fifth World, as Waters retells it, will come when all Hopi ceremonialism ends on the occasion of the arrival of Sasquasohuh, the Blue Star Kachina (a blue star is one that is far off and invisible). To signal the beginning of the Fifth World, the Blue Star Kachina will “remove his mask during a dance in the plaza before uninitiated children. Then Oraibi [a primary Hopi center] will be rejuvenated with its faith and ceremonies, marking the start of a new cycle of Hopi life” (Waters 333).

It is impossible to survey here all the complexities of Hopi ceremonial life, but it is important to note that Hopi ceremonialism is irreducible from all facets of Hopi life. As Hough says, “If we could pick the threads of religion from the warp and woof of Hopi life there would not be much left” (71). Everything in Hopi life, including work, is done in relation to the sacred. This is measured in opposition to the way most whites view work as an act in which material is manipulated for practical benefit, as when a farmer plants and harvests a field. In the same way that church is separated from state, work, too, is separated. But for the Hopi there is no such dichotomy between the practical and the religious: “Their lives are lived in a continuum in which the practicality of an activity is seen in terms of its religious, not its material dimension” (Loftin xviii). Homer Cooyama, in *Hopi Voices*, explains that “Hopis are a peaceful people. That has to do with their religion. If a man doesn’t have a religion he’s like a wild animal, ready to chew you up” (35).

In addition to their deeply religious and peaceful nature--the word Hopi itself means “peace”--the Hopi are communal in their economics. Eggan notes that “there are

practically no generally recognized class demarcations [among the Hopi]” (15). For many years, the Hopi resisted instituting a tribal constitution and council until pressured to do so by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, preferring instead to settle disputes by mutual discussion and concession among the elders and the community.

One can see, based on the Hopi traditional way of life as a deeply religious, peaceful agrarian community, in which emphasis is placed on human evolution within the world toward goodness, how it would appeal to McGrath, and seem the ideal synthesis of Marxist materialism and Catholic sacramentalism. For the Hopi our current Fourth World, “the present one, the full expression of man’s ruthless materialism and imperialistic will” (Waters 26), will, like the other capitalistic world views propose, need to be transcended; however, unlike Catholic heaven which souls reach by leaving the earth, in the Hopi view spirit is recycled through the world, and contrary to Marxist atheism, religious belief will become reinvigorated, as humans reenter an essential sacred interrelationship with all living things.

Before examining how McGrath poses this synthesis in his poem, it is worth asking the question if it is acceptable for him to appropriate Hopi world views for his poem. As I have discussed, Native Americans, despite heroic resistance, have had little choice but to have white culture forced upon them, usually to disastrous ends; however, as capitalism continues to lead to ecological, economic, spiritual, and cultural crises throughout the world, many people are searching for ways to “envisage societies from the standpoint of their openness to the future, of the possibilities inherent in them, [which] runs counter to the spirit of an age in which the future is always conceived of as a larger edition of the present” (MacIntyre 142). Perhaps it is time for a reverse exchange, where

Native Americans talk and whites listen. As Vine Deloria Jr. once argued in *God is Red*, “For the white man even to exist, he must adopt a total Indian way of life” (197). The Hopi themselves, no strangers to white encroachment and the pressures of assimilation, have opened their ceremonies to outsiders: “Anglos and other visitors have traditionally been invited to view many of their ceremonials . . . because the Hopi dance and pray for everyone” (Peterson 166).

Besides, McGrath proposes his poem as a small effort to bring about the Hopi prophecy of the Fifth World, seeing the arrival of the Blue Star Kachina “as a revolutionary act to create a revolutionary society. All of us should help to make this kachina. I think of the making of my poem as such a social-revolutionary action. In a small way, the poem *is* the Kachina” (A Note on Parts III & IV).

In Parts III and IV of *Letter* the poem’s project is to begin construction of a new heaven, one that is not only for the correct and elect, but also for the radicals, the mavericks--as McGrath calls them, “The Live-o’s”--who have not fallen asleep under the influence of religion as opiate. Equally important, McGrath, in a way commensurate with the Hopi, seeks to reinstate Nature as a transcendent index to spiritual apprehension of the universe. McGrath contends that Catholics view themselves as becoming separate from nature as a result of the Fall away from Eden.

The Old Biblical myth gives Adam (and offspring) “dominion” over nature. But to have it, the pagan deities had to be demonized or destroyed. Then we had power over the world: it became “dead nature”--so and so many board feet, and so and so much profit and loss. One project of the poem is to “angelize” these (and other) demons. That means: to return us

to a view which all primitives, anyone who has spent time in the woods or anyone simply in his/her right mind has always had: that Nature is just as alive as we are. (unpaginated)

If class structure serves as a Dantesque analog for circles of hell, McGrath wants to reconnect that helix with the spiral staircase to heaven, so that heaven and hell are no longer states separated by life, but of the here and now, a continuum negotiated by reaching higher states of consciousness which means awareness, increasing consciousness of the heavenly possibility of communal interrelationship and equality, awake to the possibility of heaven or utopia on earth achieved through the greater love community can represent.

In much the same way that Jesus chastised the money changers in the temple, McGrath in *Letter* is angry at manifest injustice, roguery, unrewarded labor and undeserved pain, at the emphasis on the material at the expense of the spiritual, at the violence so routinely brought down on the defenseless and poor, and at the powerlessness of generations of laborers and workers whose lives brought them neither ease nor plenty, but raised others to wealth. This, for McGrath, is the center of the wound in the American soul: class architecture consigns the poor who have built a heaven on earth for the upper-class to a kind of living hell. The project *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* undertakes is to deliver “an apocalyptic vision of a quest upward through layered heavens in search of a realm of human harmony, fraternal shared labor, and love” (Gibbons 12).

In *Letter*, McGrath attempts to rebuild, or at the very least remodel, heaven. Reginald Gibbons, in a lithe analogy, likens the poem to building a skyscraper: “The poem reduces its architecture in each succeeding part, as if building upward a stepped

skyscraper, airy and daring; and at the same time it has intensified its linguistic energies, as if illuminating each higher part of the building more fiercely, till it reaches at the apex the top of an aspen tree growing there, from which the poet-narrator-shaman” (12) tiptoes to “the topmost branch” of the tree and, “with the world spread out below / Far-off and tiny as a miniature map (and himself smaller / Than the angel at the top of our Christmas tree)” leaps “into heaven” (III & IV; 89).

With this leap from the commercial cross of a kind of Christmas tree, the poet begins his progress through Nine Heavens, the first of them the primeval “lunar underworld”; the Second “the first home we long for”--Edenic nature; the Third the beginning of strife in nature built of necessity; the Fourth an aboriginal human relationship with nature; the Fifth the Catholic heaven of institutionalized religion built on the triumphalism of war; the Sixth is the fruits of the Fifth Heaven McGrath depicts as

Quiet: here . . .

(except for the scratching of quill pens)

And white . . .

the whiteness of unlined paper . . .

The Elect sit

On Bob Cratchit stools entering debits and credits

In white ledgers . . .

white ink on white paper . . .

only

The Elect can read . . .

white hands

cold

in cold rooms

Warmed only by the ghost of Calvin . . .

white collars

On their white necks and white cuffs at the wrists . . . (III & IV; 99-100)

This is a Heaven in which spiritual economics echoes its roots in class distinctions.

McGrath depicts the Sixth Heaven as being ruthlessly based on accounting principles, a heaven which serves as a class barrier to keep out the unwanted by means of economic barriers. This Heaven is, in its overwhelming whiteness, neither unsullied by the dirt of honest labor nor open to those who are not among the chosen, who have no value here.

McGrath calls it the

Cash nexus!

--And the end of all idyllic order!

Profit, loss, yield, price, markup, toll--

Value, expense, charge, disbursement, amortization . . .

Money and number, number and money, number, number . . .

And the law:

TO HIM WHO HATH IT SHALL BE GIVEN--

To him who HATH NOT: it SHALL be taken away.

These scribblers have misread the law

have changed its meaning

To money and number and *so* have bled the whole world white:

Lilywhite

snowwhite

Protestant white:

ALL quality

Blown away in the wind of profit and loss . . .

And now there is only the wind of Number

rising

rising

From the quill pens to computers. (III & IV; 101)

In this hellish vision of the Sixth Heaven, the upper-class whites keep score according to the material value of people and things. Everything *is* a thing. These “heavenly” accounts are tallied on the basis of class and value, “Translating all the peoples into the saved or damned” (III & IV; 100); and, to further emphasize the binary economies of spiritual salvation as a thing that is saved for and eventually earned, but also patently denied to those who are not part of the system, McGrath depicts these accountants as dividing

ALL workers into gainfully employed or the damned redundant . . .

.....

ALL the poor divided into worthy or soupline low-lives;

ALL the “natives” into scalp-price Hostiles or reservation charges;

ALL animals into fur-bearing or goddamn varmints . . . ((III & IV; 100)

Certainly, the charges of mechanistic application McGrath levels here at the church’s triumphalism find parallels in Communistic misapplication of Marxist ideology.

While the church stands indicted for a certain “triumphalism” based on pseudo-rationalization and intellectual duplicities leading to placidity and ineffectualness, but nevertheless based on an avowedly mysterious transcendent faith, the same can be said for the dogmatism of certain Communist leaders and theoreticians, their blind faith, their uncritical “authority-quoting” attitude toward their own principles, their condescending and over-critical attitude toward other philosophical positions when Marxism is avowedly based on an unmysterious, empirical, dynamic, dialectically open-ended attitude towards reality and truth.

Free personalities are crucial in freeing any system of belief from solidification into dogma. It is interesting that ethnographers have noted difficulty in pigeonholing Hopi descriptions of their cosmology. Like McGrath’s insistence on synthesizing world views which promote class equality and hope for fair communal relationships, the Hopi continue to revise their cosmology to take into account new relationships. For example, after contact with the Mormons, the Hopi emergence myth was revised to have the Mormons emerging with the Hopi (Quinn 22).

If Marxism can be considered to assess a knowable, unmysterious reality, then McGrath cannot be considered a Marxist only because of his intimations of immortality: “The spirits are alive in the natural world--in wood and water / In the grass underfoot, in the names and colors of winds and directions” (III & IV; 108). Here, near the very end of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, McGrath sounds positively Romantic in his evocation of the ineffable, in his seeking to return to a natural theology. He also echoes Hopi beliefs. As Albert Yava in *Hopi Voices* explains, “All these stories we tell about men changing into bears or deer, and then changing back, you can look at them as primitive ideas if you

want to, but they really express our certainty that the dividing line between humans and animals is very slim, and that we are here to share what has been given us” (Courlander 142).

In the Ninth Heaven, after the Seventh Heaven of hedonistic ecstasy, and the Eighth Heaven of apocalyptic collapse, “The All-World Burn-Out” (III & IV; 106), where all is returned to pure potential “and the world goes on,” the poet sees the angels, demons, and prime elements dance together “--With bird, beast, / Water and flower and the flowering earth of the Republic of Freedom!” (III & IV; 110). In his rendering of this Ninth Heaven, McGrath goes back to the beginning of the Christian mythos as the locus for the reordering of consciousness by reunifying it with nature.

Language gives us perception and orientation--which includes the possibility of lying signposts, false consciousness. Through language we appropriate the world and our selves, existence creating essence in a process that can never be complete. History, that is class struggle, begins with alienation and exiles when we were cast out of “Eden.” History is alienation as it appears to consciousness. It is the sense of division, of duality, which the fig leaves symbolized, the pain of being incomplete.

When we return to Eden we will possess full consciousness and alienation will end. (*NDQ* 21)

Here McGrath evokes the Hopi concept of death as one’s passing into the spirit world, which is not separate from this world but active in its affairs. For the Hopi there are other worlds than this one of ours: “There is an infinity of worlds. And spirit, which is God, inhabits the infinity, even down to its minutest member” (Waters 166). In his insistence

on restoring an aboriginal relationship with nature, McGrath is anachronistic in the best sense, going back in time to again go forward. At bedrock, McGrath is against jettisoning ways of forming community simply on the basis that they do not represent the Western notion of progress. This is not to imply that McGrath's ideology is naive or reductionist, though it is tinged by utopia (and what dream is not?). After all, the repeated refrain throughout *Letter* is "Out of imperfect confusion to argue a purer chaos." Thomas McGrath is under no illusion that *Letter to An Imaginary Friend* will solve the world's ills, but in his synthesis of these three seemingly incompatible world views he suggests a basis for recovering and deepening community based on the materials and spirit already deeply among us.

Notes

1. Emerson argued that those who should be considered representative of humanity should be selected on the basis of their contributions to all humanity.
2. See Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*.
3. *The WPA Guide to 1930s North Dakota*, published by the State Historical Society of North Dakota, includes a great deal of material about the Great Depression in North Dakota, and also covers the development of the Non-Partisan League in the state.
4. McGrath, in discussing the properties of language, said that “Language is, perhaps, only a moment of the growth of what became consciousness and will go beyond it, but it is our machine for separating ourselves from the world in order to create it (as Adam did by naming the beasts). In creating the world we also *appropriate* it” (NDQ 50: 18). This suggests multiple levels of appropriation--language itself, and then ideologies as they are represented, like Christ by the crucifix, as objects.
5. Jack Weatherford, in *Indian Givers* and *Native Roots* argue thoroughly and convincingly that white settlers adopted significant components of Native American beliefs and customs. However, I believe that in the main, the popular American consciousness focuses on the “thanksgiving gifts” of Indians to the white settlers. It is at once a beautiful and bizarre myth: on one hand, it shows the Indian as generous and humorous, and in hindsight naive, needful of economic instruction, as complicit in the doctrine of manifest destiny which would decimate them. Thence is the “good Indian” who helped the settlers, and then the “bad Indian” who would not help anymore. Once again, irony cuts against Native Americans, who were doomed

either way, and whose contributions are still relegated mainly to museums--hence the need for Weatherford's anthropology.

6. McGrath would have disagreed. He has said that he doesn't believe in supreme beings; but I believe that his adoption of Native American religions presupposes also adopting their belief in some overarching spirit. The concept of bringing heaven down to earth is, of course, a Marxist tenet, but McGrath's linking it to Hopi belief that all the material world is inherently spiritual, reinforces a spiritual world view though McGrath has denied this in some interviews (see Gibbons *The Life and the Poem*).
7. McGrath would have disputed this assertion. In Gibbons, McGrath asserts that Marxism is not only the second but also the third term of his dialectic.

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