3

HERMES

Sentence of the Gods, MM's lifelong project, his life-text as (epic, human-cosmic) world-text, in its projected grammatical totality represents a single "sentence" uttered by the gods; the life force of the text is the ongoing construction of the sentence and also its carrying-out, for this is the singular book that Morrison, in effect, has "sentenced" himself to write. But while the seven stages of a single work (the **Sentence**) point then allegorically toward the sentence as projected or expanded totality, the quintessential sentence spoken by the gods is the one composed only of their own names—as if perhaps they, or the one god who encompasses and combines and speaks through them, were enunciating his/her/their various identities. For each name represents a separate "Book" of the entire utterance: SOL, LUNA, ARES, HERMES, HERA APHRODITE, EL. And thus the **Sentence** becomes also a self-reflection and self-repetition (as in prayer and mantra). Here a certain (seriously playful) postmodernist motif might suggest itself. One could think too of Nietzsche's *amor fati*: fate or sentence as joyous affirmation of human existence, as (divine) self-becoming or self-engendering through continual self-expressing or self-"announcing."

In the order of divine names (the divine words of the **Sentence**), if we take SOL and LUNA as two separate stages; then Hermes is the fourth of seven and takes the central position:[1] as divine messenger (Mercury) this god travels not just between the other gods but between worlds (underworld, human world, divine world), interpenetrating in both directions and thus completing the ontological or topocosmic hierarchy. In Morrison's nomocosmic map Hermes stands just "above" Aphrodite; though Hermaphrodite is their son, Hermes can also be seen as having (in his/her "middle position") androgynous qualities. The E of the book of *Engendering* is the first E (reading from left to right) of HERMES and stands just above, in the detailed design of this map, APHRODITE's P: this P, for *Possibly*, represents ("entitles" the book of) "possibility." Hermes-in-the-middle embodies on several levels openness (to the future, to the nexus of possibilities). This is why he can be the divine messenger, herald, announcer.

To this hermetic function of announcing Heidegger traces *hermeneuein*, "to interpret"—hermeneutics or textual interpretation is closely tied to Heidegger's sense of truth as *aletheia*, "unconcealing," the revealing or announcing of the text's truth. But this truth can only be carried in words: as avatar of the Egyptian god Thoth, Hermes was also the inventor of writing, the art of written signs, along with other magical arts. The messenger god who travels between gods, even between human/divine worlds, also creates writing, is the god of writing. This suggests that Hermes (in one of his several manifestations) can be the author as well, the one who stands behind this whole mythic

narrative of gods, and who thus takes the middle place in that self-reflexive "sentence" of gods' names. To see Hermes as the (hermetically concealed or "sealed") author would be one way to explain why he would need to announce his messages not just directly through oracular speech but also somehow indirectly (as by the delay of concealment) through the written word (Word, Logos). If God as Author creates the world-text in the act of "speaking" it (*legein*, *logos*), the hermetic message of the messenger-god within this text then becomes (self-reflexively) the Logos, the Son as totality of its "writing." That is, this phono-logocentric creation is not (as Derrida points out) immediately self-present; rather it is inevitably deferred or delayed in the form of writing, as the magical (hermetic, self-concealing) power of writing. And yet (paradoxically perhaps) writing is also the "exterior"; an expression of Plato's *hypomnesis* or "external memory" (as opposed to his *anamnesis*, the divine "recollection" of the spoken Logos), writing is manifested in/as the *signs* that cover the world's surfaces.[2]

The mythic Hermes of ancient Greek texts is, arguably unlike Apollo, associated with divination as well as prophecy. If prophecy depends upon the prophet's own hearing of inner-divine voices and/or seeing of scenes from the future—Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* sees scenes and hears voices—then divination is the reading of "natural signs" (bird flight in the sky, embers in a fire, markings on bones and inner organs of animals) by a diviner (Calchas in Homer, Tiresias in Homer and Sophocles). For Hermes with his *caducea* (intertwined snakes) was associated with Delphyne, forerunner of Apollo at the site (cave) of the Delphic oracle: this Pythoness (snake-goddess) was connected to the inner earth through the power of the omphalos or earth-umbilical, attuned to the oracular earth-voice. But the hiddenness of an inner voice deep within the earth's body suggests not self-present and audible speech but the (Derridean) deferral or delay of writing, of (written) signs which, while completely natural, empirical, within-the-world (like bird-flight and the guts of animals), nonetheless await our (readerly) interpretation or divination in order to "make sense." Thus while Hermes "announces" his messages he also does not announce them; he leaves them strewn all around us as signs in/of our everyday world, signs that are invisible inasmuch as we take them for granted, yet which become opaque, cryptic and mysterious when we take them literally, that is, as "signs"—and try to "read" them.

The (visual, written) signs that permeate Morrison's *Engendering* (1990) are quite literally present, indeed blinking at us from the book's opening paragraph: "A yellow light at Classen; full moon over Eufaula; Elm to pick up Robin. . . . Corner, Elm and Boyd, flashing reds. . . . Stop at Sunshine. . . . Red letters, yellow ground: 'FOOD [smiley face] BEER [smiley face] ETC.'" We get divinatory or premonitory signs balanced in an abstract pattern ("Caution," "Stop," "Danger" over against the "smiley face"), warning signs and auspicious

ones interplayed by their common colors (red and yellow, where yellow in the middle place also "grounds" the traffic signal); abstract (geometrical) mediation is also suggested by the "Elm . . . Corner, Elm and Boyd" (here juxtaposed with the "extreme" of "flashing reds"). But the (literal) signs seen (without, in one sense, being completely "read") by the speaker, subject, empirical perceiver ("seer") driving in his car are interspersed with his actions, and/or his thoughts about what he must do, or is now doing: "to pick up Robin . . . stop at Sunshine." We begin, Joyce-like, *in medias res*; we have "no author" but merely the empirical and fragmented moments of consciousness (perceptions and thoughts, themselves interspersed) of the "narrator."

Confucius

But if Joyce grounds his text in certain correlations with an epic (and mythic) narrative, Morrison's opening scene here is cut, interspliced with lines from the opening of Confucius' *Lun Yu* 論語 (*Analects*):

> A yellow light at Classen; full moon over Eufaula; Elm to pick up Robin. ***That friends.*** Corner, Elm and Boyd, flashing reds. ***Should come to one.*** Stop at Sunshine. ***From far away.*** Red letters, yellow ground: "FOOD [smiley face] BEER [smiley face] ETC." ***Is this not, after all, delightful?*** Down Main, yellows flashing, flashing reds at Classen. Red "McDonald's," yellow arches, American flag in dark. (1)

The "moral wisdom" of Confucius, that is, his teaching to his students or disciples—the whole *Lun Yu* is set in the form of teacher-student dialogue—interplays in various ways, including ironic ones, with the narrative action. The narrator is "picking up Robin," and Confucius observes how pleasant it is to be visited by "friends from far away"—which seems (at least at first) more like a common sense and perhaps redundant observation than an utterance of profound wisdom. The further irony here lies in the distance (from the immediate reality) of this disembodied voice of an omniscient philosophical speaker or "author"—as if we were picking up a friend at the corner and heard a voice from the sky uttering these words as a kind of (seemingly irrelevant) comment on the "scene" being observed far below. Viewed in this light we might compare it to the Homeric juxtaposition of divine and human worlds: the gods look down ironically (and in a sense self-parodically) on the human action. But to have as intertext a discursive-philosophical text (discourse) gives a slightly different force to the transcendent level here—that is, to the transcendent/immanent duality—than we would get if the intertext were an epic-mythopoetic narrative. The latter situation might more easily yield parody, as in Homer, where the gods' everyday life "parallels" that of the human heroes; the break between Morrison's *in situ* narrative and classical Chinese philosophical

discourse is sharper—although the discourse of both Confucius and Lao Tzu (whose *Tao Te Ching* 道德經 serves as intertext for Part 2 of *Engendering*) in fact expresses "philosophical wisdom" often in mystical-paradoxical terms and thus is tied back, as sacred-religious discourse, in a certain sense to the (western) mythopoetic tradition.

The central Confucian theme is the moralistic *hsüeh* 學 "learning." In his opening scene—"picking up Robin"—Morrison has rearranged the order of the first two phrases of the *Lun Yu*, whose Book 1, Chapter 1 reads (Legge's translation, 137): "The Master said, 'Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters? Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?'" The apparent discontinuity or arbitrary order of phrases within chapters (as well as chapters within books) of the *Lun Yu*, which fits well the "ordering" of Morrison's narrative text here—the seeming randomness of spontaneously emerging perceptions and events—is thus reinforced by the author's own rearrangement (in his citations) of the order of both chapters and books. In the second paragraph of *Engendering* we get the *Lun Yu*'s first phrase, which Morrison renders: "To learn at due times, to repeat what one has learnt, is that not after all a pleasure?" Again it is embedded within a context of immediately perceived signs:

> Orange VW, open road, orange parking light on right (Robin driving). White beams on black asphalt. Yellow flashing traffic light, roadside markers black and white. Passing Franklin: broken yellow center line, roadside grass illuminated green. "Aladdin Carpet Cleaning." "164th Street," reflective white on green. Black cross, yellow diamond (intersection sign). "The latest thing in velvet painting"—Robin—is "laser reproductions." Stop at red; blue shield; enter I-240. "That's GM." Yellow "Trucks Entering"; black trees massing (right); white of cars oncoming (left). Large "STOP"; corner station red and blue. "Kerr-McGee's still holding on to their 127.9." Robin slowing, turning right. "Everyone else is 115." Veering into "Moore Industrial Catering Lot." "CHOW MOBILE," R.'s camera set on hood. ***To learn at due times.*** "First thing in th' mornin'." ***To repeat.*** "Is start it up." ***What one has learnt.*** "'Cuz if it won't start." ***Is that not after all.*** "You're in trouble." ***A pleasure?*** "KEBC goin' strong" (radio). (1)

Thus again we get the flux of sense impressions as abstract painting, with its pattern of raw geometrical shapes and colors, sometimes self-referential—"Black cross, yellow diamond (intersection sign)"—repeated with variation—"Yellow 'Trucks Entering'; black trees massing"—with their divinatory or premonitory or obscured mystical associations. Certain ironic contrasts within the context of *in situ* narrative may already signal the East/West theme. For instance we have the (stylistically self-reflexive) contrast between traditional Chinese ("velvet painting") and western high-tech ("laser reproductions") means of artistic representation. The "CHOW MOBILE" goes a step further by signaling the specific point of interplay between *in situ* text and intertext:

"chow," from Cantonese, is English slang for "food," tied here to the "Industrial Catering Lot," but the "MOBILE" ties it to "automobiles." Thus finally we get the ironic juxtaposition with Confucius: the "repetition" of studying/learning contrasts with that of a car engine turning over "in th' mornin' . . . 'Cuz if it won't start . . . You're in trouble."

The country bumpkin tone, with its suggestion of intellectual simplicity, reflects the crucial Confucian notion of learning as merely *mechanical* repetition: just as the engine dies when it fails to turn over, so our mind "dies" when it fails to enact the necessary repetition of (continuous) learning. If we "die," we cannot *use* our mind/engine. "Simplicity," after all, is the essence of wisdom for both Confucius and Lao Tzu, who share their radically pragmatic bent with Thoreau. Confucian learning is again being taken quite seriously. To translate the *hsi* 習 as "repetition" comes really closer to the original sense than Legge's "application." Brooks (145) glosses it: "Here, learning is its own end . . . rote memorization and repetition: not 'putting into practice' but the musician's 'practice' . . . [or] 'rehearse' . . . "; "To learn and in due time rehearse it," he translates, giving us the negative sense of a mechanical "rote memorization" yet also, with "learning is its own end," a positive Arnoldian sense of learning for its own sake, rather than for some practical "application." (Thus the sort of "pragmatism" that we are talking about here might need to be qualified.) Legge himself comments: "*Hsi* is the rapid and frequent motion of the wings of a bird in flying, used for 'to repeat,' 'to practice'" (138); the image of bird-flight suggests organic (living) rather than mechanical (dead) motion. And, in Confucius' opening line, "*Hsüeh êrh shih hsi*" 學而時習 "Learn by time repeat," we begin after all with *hsüeh* (learn, study) itself, on which Legge comments (137-138): "*Hsüeh* in the old commentators is explained by *sung* 誦 'to read chantingly,' 'to discuss.' Chu Hsi interprets it by *hsiao* 效 'to imitate' . . ." (Thus *hsiao-fa* 效法 is "follow the principle" or "imitate the law," *kung-hsiao* 功效 is "function" or "efficacy.") Here "read chantingly" (as in *nien ching* 唸經 "reciting scriptures") gives spiritual wings (spiritual efficacy) to a merely mechanical "imitation." Of course, learning "by heart" and reciting aloud from memory was the technique (praxis) of presenting not just sacred-discursive texts (like the Bible) but also mythopoetic ones (like Homer's epic poems).

But in contrast to the spoken-and-written repetition(s) of a "classic text" we have Morrison's "realistic" *in situ* writing. This too is (like speech) a form of repetition—a repetition (in thought and then in spoken/written language) of one's perceptions. And embedded within the realistic writing of the narrative is realistic writing as foregrounded theme. In a wider self-reflexive move enacted by his "plot," and adding, with the juxtaposed intertext, to the rich interplay of meanings (including ironic and self-parodic ones), the main "speaker" of Morrison's narrative is (like the author) a university teacher of English writing who emphasizes the technique of *in situ* writing—sitting under a tree or in a

restaurant and spontaneously writing down what you experience, moment-to-moment. At one point in the first or Confucian part of *Engendering* the teacher is having a relaxed writing-*cum*-conversation session with his students in a restaurant, a setting or dynamic that imitates (as teacher-student conversation) that of the "original" *Lun Yu* and (as teacher-student writing) that of the *Lun Yu* as "text." But—self-referentiality again—this Town Tavern (as dynamic and setting) is the topic here being written about:

> ***Said the Master***: "Dear Sheila, Once again I find myself in The Town Tavern." ***"How transcendent."*** Steam in blown wisps, brown coffee, over-head light reflections in it. Stacey in khakis, concerned look. ***"Is the moral power."*** Stacey's Allen in brown cap, khaki shirt over white tee shirt, a dozen pens/pencils in shirt pocket. ***"Of the Middle Use!"*** Sugar dispenser on yellow-glow deep-grained pine table. ***"That it is but rarely found."*** Light off Allen's glasses. ***"Among the common people."*** He suspiciously eyeing author. ***"Is a fact long admitted."*** . . . "What are you all writing up so fast in here?"—white-haired woman next to author talking to youth gaggle. . . . "You know what they're doin'?"—Barbara. "They're writin' a paper about The Town Tavern." "Upon entering I feel some strong positive force. It is almost as if I can feel the waves of intellectual energy that are being produced." "Some people"—Stacey, by way of explanation to new arrivals—"need inspiration." Patrick stylishly mopping countertop. . . . "Most of my best papers are written right here. . . ." ***Said Han Ch'iu:*** Strong woodsman-hippie in jeans, plaid shirt, leaning with both hands on Stacey, waitress Mary's table. ***"It is not that your Way."*** Fly on Los Alamos Mary's letter to Sheila, author brushing it aside. ***"Does not commend itself."*** Vicki arrival, white soft smock, shaking out water from curly locks. ***"But rather that it demands a power."*** Sky grey, rain stopped. ***"That I do not possess."*** There's not much to do"—Vicki. ***Said the Master:*** Patrick whistling, eye on Barbara filling glasses with crushed ice. Cook in corduroy tam behind Heinz gallon tomato can, plastic basket with jellies for toast. ***"He whose strength gives out."*** Appearance of Laura, pen, money envelope in hand, ready to pay Kim. ***"Collapses during the course of the journey (the Way)."*** Paula talking; looking about; wondering at author/instructor's observation. ***"But you deliberately draw the line."*** Leans left-handed over notebook, glances back to gather information. (15-16)

However we interpret the intertextual juxtaposition here, we must feel the great distance (thus "transcendence") of the interposed philosophical voice—whose seeming arbitrariness is in part a function of its temporal distance as (ancient) *written* text. We might then want to contrast the ordinary everydayness of the students' conversation, and, by extension, of their description of The Town Tavern (the "scene" of their writing) as we project it—as well as of the author's empirical descriptions of this scene (the actual Town Tavern)—with the written/spoken voice of the (true) "Master" here, that is, with the (true) Tao of knowing, thinking, acting, *writing*. If this is also a Tao of writing, then perhaps it is a power that the students are not yet in full possession of, and one that presumably the teacher wants to teach them—if it can be taught. ("Your

Way . . . demands a power . . . that I do not possess.") One might know and not be able to teach, but one might also not know. If the "transcendent power of the Middle Use" (*chung yung* 中庸 "moderation") is "rarely found among common people," then can we be certain that this ultimately *pragmatic* Tao is found among teachers, even among sages like Confucius? Must the teacher really be "wiser"—a better writer—than the student?

Brooks and Legge both appear to leave open the question of the relative degrees of wisdom/power of Confucius and Han Ch'iu in the above passage. Here is Brooks' reading (34) of Confucius' cryptic final response ("But you deliberately draw the line"): "The Master crisply retorts that, not having tried and failed, Ch'iu has no idea if his strength is sufficient; his *will* is weak . . . [But] [t]he obligation to use oneself up in pursuit of a goal . . . is typical of moral extremism; it will be mitigated by the concept of the moral middle." (The latter, he tells us, is found in 1:16: "The Master said, Shih goes too far, Shang does not go far enough. . . . To go too far is as bad as not to go far enough," Brooks 73). Legge on the other hand reads Confucius, in his "drawing the line" response at 6:10, as encouraging Ch'iu (188): "'Give over in the middle of the way,' i.e. they go as long and as far as they can, and are pursuing when they stop." (That is, they themselves decide when to quit and thus, in a sense, are still going . . . in thought or "will.") The (Confucian and Morrisonian) emphasis on a Middle Way (Use)—"The transcendent moral power of the Middle Use"—may suggest that there is no "absolute" principle or power here that the highest sage himself might possess; this Middle Way is not a moral force of moderation but an on-going creative process whose meaning lies (as for Hegel and Whitman) in the process itself. Thus in the context of this writing class, on-going (*in situ*, experimental and spontaneous) "writing" becomes a praxis of self-discovery (or self-creation, self-engendering). There is, after all, no final and ultimately "correct" description (in speech or writing) of The Town Tavern or of the tables where they all sit or of a "plastic basket with jellies for toast"; there is rather an infinite number of possible descriptions or approximations, suggesting that the simplest and most "abstract" (in the painterly sense) description will be best. "Less is more."[3]

Lao Tzu

My turn to a more formally "philosophical" reflection on the Tao of Confucius is, I would suggest, implicit within and invited by Morrison's text. It also opens the way for the move to Lao Tzu in Part 2 of *Engendering*—where we would assume the Taoist Tao to be something less obviously "pedagogical," *if* we were reading Confucius morally and pedagogically. Lao Tzu after all says things that seem (on the surface at least) to directly controvert the *Lun Yu* in his *Tao Te Ching*: "Do *Hsüeh* (study, learning), every day increase; do *Tao*, every day

reduce"; "Once the Tao began to decline, *Te* appeared." (*Te* is "virtue" but also "power" as in Waley's translation, or something like Plato's *arête*, "proper excellence.") The Taoist intertext in the opening passage of Part 2 (p. 61) makes the (also Socratic) distinction between "fine-sounding" (or "literary") language and (philosophically) "true" language:[4]

> ***Truthful words are not fine-sounding.*** "And you thought Christmas was over." Sooner Fashion Mall. ***Fine-sounding words, not truthful.*** "Ring in the New Year with January's In-Sidewalk Sale." ***The good man doesn't argue.*** "Something for the whole family." ***The man who argues isn't good.*** Baby World, Bed and Bath, Buckle and Knife. ***Much learning means little wisdom.***

The following interpolated lines from Lao Tzu—"Nor does the sage hoard, Instead he lives for other people. . . . And thereby himself grows richer. . . . He gives to other people. . . . And thereby himself has greater abundance . . ."—further develop the ironic interplay with the *in situ* narrative of Christmas shopping (is Christmas really "over"?) but also tie back to the Taoist theme of not arguing, not contending, simply "going with the flow." This is again one sense in which "much learning means little wisdom": learning means arguing with "fine words" (or making "fine distinctions" on the smooth surface of the Taoist "uncarved block"); in Lao Tzu's (as in Jesus') teachings the "weak overcomes the strong" through spiritual development (or faith) rather than through the analytic discriminations of reason.[5] But on a deeper reading of the *Lun Yu*—which has also been compared to Christian philosophy—we may consider the *hsüeh*-"learning" of the *jen* 仁 ("humane") person not as a purely rational, mechanical and thus "dead" repetition but as something organic and alive (beating birds' wings); the "learning" rejected by Lao Tzu need not be equated with the "learning" of the *Lun Yu*.

All this bears upon the relationship between the two parts of *Engendering*, its second an extension and fuller working out of its first. Specifically the self-reflexive theme of text as (author's own) *in situ* writing is further developed, with less focus now on the university students (Confucian pedagogical motif)—although more young children (including the author's own) appear, perhaps suggesting the Taoist notion of remaining or becoming again a child—and greater focus on the self-conscious (Taoist) persona of the author himself:

> "I'm interested"—third interrupter—"in knowing what you're writing about." "Oh, just a book about Norman [Oklahoma]." "Well, I could tell you a lot about Norman." Yes, I'm sure you could." Enormous purples; multi-colored beiges; magentas . . . (107) Water-tower-under author situation view (Lindsay/Classen). Ten p.m. cool-down. Rabbit through-grass-hop-across. Distant cheers." Author VW re-ascent, Lindsay-Classen right turn. Headlights in rear-view mirror, dashboard red hazard ("blink-blink") signal ("blink-blink"). Flashing yellow caution light. "Coors" pink neon window sign; blue "Budweiser" glow. (110-111)

This repeats with variation the opening passage and *locus* of Part 1—"Classen," an axial route in the book's "geography," with its glowing lights and signs immediately perceived (by an invisible and anonymous "author," whose presence now nonetheless more fully intrudes or penetrates into the text). The following passage on page 111 gives us an important sense of "giving birth" or "engendering," one which at least partially intersects with Lao Tzu's sense, and a fuller (authorial self-)reflection on creative writing:

> Re-attention: Noble-Purcell declining traffic. ***To give birth.*** Up-creeping, onward-coming Normanward cars. ***To nourish***. Simultaneous eastward ramp mount. ***To give birth.*** Down-ramp sedan appearance, taillight (author head turn) gradual disappearance. ***Without taking possession.*** "Thuck-a-thump" truck by-passage, one headlight visible (author's perspective). "Exit" sign re-illumination. ***Without appropriation.*** Pass-by re-obscurance. ***To be chief among men.*** Yellow light on notebook page. ***Without exercising authority.*** Auto procession. ***This is the Mystic Virtue.*** Auto recession. ***Horse-racing.*** Author seated in grass, writing by headlight beam of parked, idling orange VW. ***Hunting***. State Highway 9 westward-facing. ***And Chasing.*** Cop-car arrival concern. ***Madden the minds of man.*** Green sign, silver border (uneven illumination):
>
> I-35 4
> Chickasha 31
>
> Car passage, exhaust-fume waftage, motion of roadside grass stalks. Into-car cop-car-concern exorcism. Red-pen steady manipulation. ***Rare***. Chinese diary page. ***Valuable goods.*** Western frigate faintly-thereon-printed. ***Keep their owners.*** Full-sailed. ***Awake at night.*** In timeless time. ***Thus the sage provides for the belly.*** Written words. ***And not for the eye.*** Emerging in time. ***Hence***. Surpassing frigate. ***He rejects the one.*** Words too in timeless time. ***And accepts the other.*** Diary nearing completion. (111-112)

Here we note once again the detached ("omniscient") narrator's tendency to record his perceptions with the greatest abstraction by reducing verbs to nouns ("Down-ramp sedan appearance, taillight gradual disappearance")—a variation on the philosophical abstraction or pure universalizing objectivity of the sage's discourse. We also note a certain "rhythmic" tendency in Morrison's text, the tendency of narrative portions to shorten toward the end of a passage so that the number of intertextual "breaks" increases, creating a staccato-like effect, the rapid building-to-climax. The back-and-forth exchange here becomes overtly one of East-West interface: the "surpassing . . . western frigate" is superimposed upon the "Chinese diary page," as if perhaps the Chinese text were after all the "background" written upon by the western (Orientalizing) author. The "background" of the Chinese intertext is then in a certain way associated with that other ever-present background of/in *Engendering*, the surface of (self-parodic) late capitalist "signs" (""Coors' pink neon window sign"), emblems of a civilization fully absorbed in "pleasures of the eye" as well as, perhaps, those of the belly (for the way to the belly is through the eye). This

surface marked with overtly serious, socio-political (yet actually ironic and self-parodying) signs ("SLOWDOWN SEEN IN STATE OIL-RELATED BUSINESS . . . WEATHER DOES SOME DAMAGE . . . HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDS IN DANGER?" [108]) is also one in which the author's own (atomic-empirical and thus "abstract") thoughts and actions would seem to be embedded. That is, we can read the narrator's own thoughts (his empirical stream of consciousness) as being played against both backgrounds, those of (abstracted) real world "signs" and of gnomic Chinese philosophical utterances. But while the latter are usually more obviously metaphysical and ethical than political, we note here the crude pragmatism of Lao Tzu's "political" philosophy: the sage/ruler keeps the people content ("provides for the belly" rather than the "eye") so they won't think, or desire, too much. Ironically, then, in this passage, the overtly pragmatic political thinking of the sage plays against the author-speaker's metaphysical-aesthetic reflection on literary art, on written words emerging both "in time" and "in timeless time," as well as against his intermittent fear that a policeman will come and put an end to (his early-Joycean reverie on, epiphanic moment of) art and/or metaphysics.

Of course ultimately these thoughts, and these written words (whether merely "fine-sounding" like the words of advertisements or "truthful" in some ultimate metaphysical sense) are all themselves "signs" as well within the larger text. That is, the abstract reflections of the Chinese sage (and perhaps more subtly even the narrator's own perceptions/reflections) begin to reveal themselves to be just as mundane, as spatio-temporally specific and as culturally, politically, socio-economically embedded as the "Coors" and "Budweiser," "I-35" and "Chickasha" signs. For Morrison's intertextual paralleling is also a trans-textual leveling: on the one hand "Coors," "I-35" and "Chickasha" may sound like the unknowable names or sounds of a foreign language (Chinese, Amerindian) and/or of a mystical incantation (possessed of divinatory power); on the other why should we read the words of the ancient sage any differently than we read "Coors" or "Budweiser" or (the hypothetical Confucian moral injunction) "No Parking"? In one striking passage we get Lao Tzu's gnomic sentences juxtaposed with graffiti on the walls (and indeed the signs) of a Laundromat—the wider (already deflated) symbolism of this *locus* having perhaps something to do with (the possibility of) cleanliness, spiritual purification:

> West Gray Automatic Laundry. "I hate laundry days"—overweight turquoise top, bra-apparatus showing; cerulean blue stretch pants, white gold-dusted slipperettes. "And I don't have any quarters." "I have some"—author. . . . Notice: . . . "Check Washers and Dryers for Oil or Pens. . . . We are not responsible." . . . Inked in: "Not even responsible for getting the damn things fixed." Felt-tip pen: "Sonia was here—call me—364-5284." . . . Letters on wall in red lipstick: "HEROIN." ***Then the people of the world.*** Aldry dryer bank, #9

> open: ***Are glad.*** "Select heat." ***To uphold him.*** "Low, low, low!" in black magic marker. ***Forever.*** "Your [*sic*] not lost—graffito—if you don't care where you are." ***Because he does not contend.*** Another hand: "Loneliness is like death and taxes." ***No one.*** "Everyone succumbs sooner or later." ***In the world.*** Graffito: ***Can contend.*** "This dryer has a hole in it." ***Against him.*** "And it eats people's clothes." . . . . ***Then.*** $1 Bill Changer. ***And then only.*** Illiterate scrawl: "This machine gives only one quater [*sic*]." ***Emerges.*** Yellow crayon: "padratannaloves." ***The Grand Harmony.*** "Open 24 hrs"—reading backwards through window. (75-76)

The transcendence of "Oriental wisdom," of Christ, the Buddha, Shiva (or Padratanna) and/or of the Chinese sage, is parodied and deflated through its inevitable embedment within the world; and yet its radical immanence, its being stretched among too many mindless details, its very "hiddenness" or indeed "disappearance" here within the world is also its strength. (Thus it is the animal's guts that ancient seers want to "read.") The transcendent power of immanence is, as Professor Morrison well knows, a theme especially of Asian philosophy/religion; the unique point of both Confucius and Lao Tzu is the emphasis on a this-worldly pragmatism that transcends rational thought, the "knack" of being human, of living in harmony with the world (with the "background" in which one is already embedded), of enjoying life. Thus by reading Morrison's text on "another level"—or perhaps simply by taking its (postmodernist) playfulness more "seriously"—we will discover the theme, already implicit within the embedded and embedding texts of both Confucius and Lao Tzu, of Tao as that which is hidden, unknown or unknowable and therefore the source of great spiritual power and understanding:

> "The selection of the Isa Upanishad . . . Is an example of Hindu beliefs . . . for becoming a complete person." ***When the Way ceased to prevail.*** "It explains the blending of knowledge and." ***He was straight as an arrow.*** "Not-knowledge." ***A gentleman indeed was Yu.*** "To achieve your self." ***When the Way prevailed.*** "The Self is your ruler." ***In his land.*** "Your God." ***He served the State.*** "Or what controls you." ***But when the Way ceased to prevail.*** "The selections seemed to be related to Christianity." ***He knew how to hide it.*** "And are somewhat of a 'Hindu Ten Commandments.'" ***In the folds of his dress.*** (53)

After all, an important purpose of *Engendering* is to teach us Chinese philosophy by embedding it in the real world and thereby making it more interesting, more immediately relevant. Sometimes the phrases from the two Chinese sages seem to blaze out at us in a way they don't when we read them in their normal, "unbroken" context—a technique which might owe something to that of Pound in the *Cantos*, with its startling juxtapositions, its combination of several languages (including Chinese characters) as well as its explicitly pedagogical intent. Thus we are getting here the "selections" from sacred-philosophical classics chosen for us by the author-teacher. This would then be a kind of mimesis of Confucius' own "practice"—*hsüeh*-learning as the theme of

his entire philosophy. And yet, paradoxically, the central "message" being taught might just be that the message itself is hidden within the dross (or dress) of material reality: we can only find it by not-finding, only know it by not knowing, teach it by not teaching (Lao Tzu's *wu wei* 無爲 "inaction").[6] The way to teach writing might just be to let students sit in a restaurant and write down what they see, all that is going on around them, without thinking about it.

Said Confucius, speaking of the Way: "The common people . . . can be made to follow it . . . They cannot . . . be made to understand it . . ." (37); this leaves open the possibility that the *chün-tzu* 君子 "superior man" or sage follows and also understands but also the possibility that the sage (Fingarette's reading of the *Lun Yu*) and even the common man (Taoism) understands by following, that is, that one only need follow the Tao, that understanding it need imply nothing more. When Ch'iu confesses to the Master that "your Way demands a power that I do not possess"—a power to understand or simply follow?—and the Master replies that "Giving up halfway, you yourself draw the line," it can, as we have seen, mean (at least on Legge's reading) that there is no "absolute" or "end-point" here, the only understanding is in the process of following, of working out, of *hsüeh*-practicing/repeating. To understand simply by following or doing—a view which we might want to set in some relation to Plato's mystical claim that "To know the good is to do the good"—is a kind of radical pragmatism which has its analogue in interpretive theory: for the reader of a text (e.g., Morrison's), there is no "understanding" beyond simply the reading-through (practice, repetition, rehearsal) of that text.

Ritual and Attunement

To view Confucius in this way—which makes him a close neighbor of Lao Tzu—is to take seriously the notion of *li* 禮 "propriety" or "ritual." Ritual behavior is the repetition of more-or-less arbitrary acts (bowing or shaking hands, saying "*Ni hao ma?"* or "How are you?") to achieve social solidarity and harmony; the sacred dimension of such apparently secular social rituals (emphasized by Fingarette) becomes clearer when we see them in relation to more obviously sacred ceremonies: (ancient) sacrifice and augury, marriages, funerals. *Lun Yu* 1.9: "Let there be a careful attention to perform the funeral rites to parents, and let them be followed when long gone with the ceremonies of sacrifice;—then the virtue of the people will resume its proper excellence" (Legge 141). And yet the "true meaning" of this ritualized society, this whole pre-established system, structure or text remains hidden, a mystery, as does the true meaning of the "great sacrifice" itself. *Lun Yu* 3.11: "Someone asked the meaning of the great sacrifice. The Master said, 'I do not know. He who knew its meaning would find it as easy to govern the kingdom as to look at this';—

pointing to his palm" (Legge 158-159). This looks like a variation on Lao Tzu's notion of *wu-wei*: the sage-king rules by doing (ordering) nothing for then "everything orders itself" (*Tao Te Ching* 3).

But only if the order of the whole (*tien-hsia* 天下 "heaven-under," "empire") has been "pre-set" will everything order itself. Here "repetition" is relevant in another way: the customs, beliefs, festivals of a given society in effect are ways of "pre-setting the clock." Thus in some contemporary cultures Christmas "automatically" produces a series of (seemingly arbitrary and repeated) ritual actions—setting evergreen trees in the living room, hanging stockings from the fireplace, giving gifts. In ancient China the king's power or virtue was to keep heaven, earth and man in the proper alignment or "attunement" ("pre-setting"); one way of doing this was to pre-set the "locus" of things by (arbitrarily, it will seem) facing south.[7] *Lun Yu* 6.1: "Yung might be made to face south." (Yung is being praised, since "The Chinese ruler faced south," Brooks 31). It is as if the king or emperor becomes himself the "center" that holds all else in its proper place (order), in its proper orbit around him, so that to rule he need do nothing more than "follow" this praxis (ritual), just as his people need do nothing more than "follow" (obey) him. *Lun Yu* 2.1: "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it" (Legge 145).[8]

But then *hsüeh*-study/learning, though a mindless repetition, is nonetheless organic and alive (Legge's *hsi*-"practice" as a "beating of a bird's wings") and as such it becomes the central ritual act of Confucianism: if everyone (at least the *chün-tzu*, "gentleman") learns/knows by repeating/following (the texts that are read), we will have the "power" of community, commonality. *Engendering* can be read as a "ritual" or "ritualistic" pedagogical text in this sense—which also sets it in a certain relation to Homer's poems, chanted or *re*cited from memory (that is, read until "learned by rote" and then "read" again before a communal audience), to Buddhist sutras and other forms of ritual, sacred or magical "incantation." The gnomic phrases of Chinese sages, ritually enacted through repetition/chanting —and Legge, we recall, ties *hsüeh* to *sung* which means "to read chantingly," "to discuss"—so that they penetrate into the reader's deep mind, are in themselves (and not only for westerners, though also, in an important sense, especially for westerners) virtually impossible to "understand." Yet this is their very point: they are signs, hidden meanings, traces of the sacred and transcendent, and in this way (or Way) variations on the everyday signs of stores, laundromats and highways, the arbitrary "ritual" of traffic signals in which the author embeds them. "Variations" because we do after all think we understand beer ads or traffic signs/signals and "take them for granted"—they are all part of our pre-set culture and society, pointing back in a sense toward some central, hidden, unknown star that "orders" them or gives them meaning. The utterances of ancient Chinese sages, on the other hand, we may think we

cannot understand—as (like Ch'iu) we "lack the power to understand"—and yet (without knowing it, by mere habit, like starting to move when the light turns green) we are already following them.

If signs are incomprehensible or mysterious in their obscurity, their being hidden, ritual actions are so in their arbitrariness: the Chinese emperor "sets the empire" by facing south; Japanese bow, whereas Americans shake hands. But this arbitrariness may extend beyond the level of mere social (culturally relative) convention to that of gods seen as blind forces of nature, to notions of one's incomprehensible "fate." Since *Engendering* is embedded within the HERMES sequence and the latter within the more encompassing **Sentence of the Gods**, we might see this **Sentence** both as the central, underlying, all-pervasive "sign" that "speaks" (in remaining silent) and as the central ritual that "pre-sets" the whole or "sets it in motion" (by remaining motionless). Perhaps all the Morrisonian books or words or signs point back toward this encompassing **Sentence** that mysteriously speaks/is spoken, moves/is moved by them, itself something cryptic and hidden, invisible beneath or behind the forms of its own expression and activity. Myth itself in essence is a ritualistic enactment (and ritual the stuff of myth); on what might be a Nietzschean "reading" the radical immanence of that which most transcends is (like the Greek gods as blind forces of nature and fate) its own unsurpassed randomness and arbitrariness, an unconditioned contingency that we can "see" or "understand" only as a sign. The proto-scientific art of divination, after all—the "reading of cracks that appear on the inner surfaces of tortoise shells when they are burned (Shang Dynasty China), of the patterns of bird flight in the sky (ancient Greece)—is an art of interpreting randomness and forming order out of chaos. For in this quintessential hermeneutic—the art of reading a world-text that is "cracked"—interpretation is the ultimate art of "arbitrariness," and thus the reader has considerable power.

> ***In the usages of ritual***. Yale Industrial Service Chevy van on scene. ***It is harmony that is prized.*** . . . Heavy cumulus mass on humid horizon, single electric tower standing against it. . . . ***The Way of the Former Kings from this received its beauty.*** . . . NCR boxes piled six tall. ***Matters both small and great depend upon it.*** 2:48 p.m., wall clock glass concentrating pink overhead fluorescent tubes into tiny bright dots. ***If things go amiss, he who knows the harmony will be able to attune them.*** Temperature fronting 104, home trip imminent. ***But if harmony itself.*** "First we have to wash the truck"—Robin. ***Is not modulated by ritual.*** "One more stop on the way." ***Things will go amiss.*** Motel construction site. (9-10)

Notes

1. However, Morrison claims that he tends to take SOLUNA together as the first stage; the "center" of the **Sentence** then really occurs "between" HERMES and HERA. Yet the author particularly thinks of *Her*, the first book of HERA, as the center and "cosmogonic epitome"; this makes sense given the fact that the *Her* of HERA repeats the initial HER in HERMES and especially given the cosmogonic force of the "female." See the further discussion of this matter in Chapter 4 on HERA.

2. Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy" (*Dissemination*) distinguishes the self-reflexive circularity and thus (supposed) "innerness" of Platonic recollection (*anamnesis*)—which Plato uses to ground his theory of transcendent *eidos* (ideas, forms) and *logos*—from the "mere external repetition" of external memory (*hypomnesis*), that is, of writing. One must say "supposed innerness" given Derrida's deconstructive point here: whereas Plato *thinks* his Logos-speech (self-presence of meaning and truth) is "prior to" mere "writing," in fact (in his view) everything is writing (*écriture*, "textuality")—even the meaning of the *logos* is deferred, not present-to-itself.

3. A popular catch phrase in 1970s-80s U.S.A., derived from a formula used to characterize Minimal Art. (This author has actually used it occasionally, when teaching English writing, to emphasize the notion that in journalistic or even academic writing the most important thing is to *communicate* one's ideas as simply and directly as possible to the reader; that is, in general, to use as simple and unadorned a style as possible. Of course, this is easier said than done.)

4. Socrates opens his speech in his own defense in Plato's *Apology* by saying that, unlike his accusers, he is a simple man who cannot speak eloquently—"unless by eloquence you mean the truth." This is a cut at the Sophists, who get paid for teaching rhetoric—the art of persuading other people of anything, even of what you know is not true (e.g. that O.J. Simpson is innocent). The Sophists assumed there is no absolute standard of truth, goodness, etc. (subjectivity and relativity prevail), whereas Socrates and especially his student Plato assumed, on the contrary, that there must be such a standard.

5. We most likely think of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew*: "The meek shall inherit the earth."

6. Lao Tzu Chapter 2: "The sage teaches without words and acts by not acting." The Taoist reading of Poe's "Purloined Letter" suggests that what we cannot see, what is most hidden from us is "right under our noses" (perhaps *is* our nose, or better yet, our eyes); it is what is closest or already *within* us. This is one reading of the first line of the *Tao Te Ching*: "The Way that can be spoken (of) is not the constant Way," because the rational, objectified (for human knowledge) "Way which can be spoken of" is necessarily distanced from us.

7. "Attunement to" has the passive-active sense of "alignment with"—all the kingdom is aligned with/ attuned to the king—but also could suggest an opening into a Serresian reading inasmuch as Serres (e.g. in *Genesis*) speaks of the "tuning in" of all sounds/languages/meanings out of dark-chaotic background noise (to be followed by dissipation back into background noise). That is, the term "attunement" might suggest one approach to a "theoretical synthesis" here. For Heidegger in *Being and Time*, "mood" (e.g. the mood of radical boredom, of sensing the nothingness behind things) is *Bestimmung*, "attunement" in German.

8. But how could we possibly compare this conception of a system that "self-orders" through a kind of (ritualistic, ultimately arbitrary) pre-set "attunement," that is, through the assumption of a particular position or "orientation" by the center or core (king), with the chaos-theory model according to which random (atomic) flows self-order through repetition and then (through excessive order) decay into disorder? The former, "self-attunement" model sounds more like the model of a single atom (with its nucleus and orbital "alignment" of electrons), molecule or molecular structure; the notion of "alignment" suggests the spontaneous self-ordering (perhaps in quantum-leap steps) of crystalline patterns as well as electromagnetic fields. This is perhaps a

"field" model (Tao as field) as against the Serresian "flow" model (Tao as flow). (And "fields" by definition are, in their arbitrariness, "deterministic" in a way that random flows are not.) At the end of Chapter 2 (on ARES) I suggested a possible reading of Morrison's textual-temporal surface-interaction technique in terms of Sun Tzu's military strategy by which the successful army, in a defensive posture, "feigns chaos on the surface" in order to absorb the enemy into its core. It seems that this could fit the Serresian model of blank chaos—hyper-order as actual disorder is now *Gestalt*-switched to become (hyper-)order as feigned disorder—and also fit the "arbitrary attunement" model, if we picture the king who "arbitrarily faces south" as "feigning disorder" in the apparent randomness (arbitrariness) of this act, and yet as thereby "aligning the kingdom." Thus it may be that the Sun Tzu model could be a fruitful one to explore further. See the discussion of a tentative Serresian interpretation of the "flow" of the whole **Sentence** (in Chapters 4 and 6). On the question of whether such flow is reversible and in turn of whether a verbal work of art such as Morrison's **Sentence of the Gods** is "reversible," see Serres again: "Music transports the universal before meaning. Music has only a blank meaning. It is the universal language, nearly undetermined. Music is an un-differentiated language. [...] The rhythm beats, reversible, the struggle against irreversible time" (*Genesis* 41). If verbal, unlike musical or visual art, is not, strictly speaking, reversible (except in the extreme instance of the palindrome), Morrison nonetheless has staked a claim for his work that it is in some sense reversible. We might note that in doing so he is following the Sanskrit poet Dandin, who wrote a poem so as to imitate, reading in one direction, *Mahabharata*, in the opposite direction, *Ramayana*. As with Dandin's interest in universal inclusiveness, perhaps Morrison's notion of "reversibility" is related to the universal aspect of the **Sentence**.