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EL

Discourse and Cosmology in *Excelling* and *Life*

EL ('Ilu in Babylonian, 'Ilah in Arabic) was one of the original names or honorific titles for the Hebrew God, whose "name that could not be spoken" was Yahweh or YHWH.[1] In the Old Testament we get El or its variant forms, Elohim and Eloah, 225 times; Genesis begins: "In the beginning Elohim created Heaven and Earth […]." Elohim is said to be a plural form of Eloah, or a plural derivative of El, and while some scholars argue that as a plural term ("the gods") Elohim refers back to earlier Hebrew polytheism, most believe this sense of multiplicity serves to intensify, praise and glorify: El is "the highest," "the strong and mighty one." EL, the final stage of Morrison's **Sentence of the Gods**, consists of the books *Excelling* and *Life*; *Excelling* is about his trip to mainland China, while *Life* is a collection of interviews and descriptive pieces done in India (Bangalore), Thailand (Pattaya), the Philippines (White Beach), Korea, Macau, Burma, Jeju-do and (most recently) Vietnam; other interviews have been conducted in various American and European locales.

A key consideration with EL is that it can be read not only as the final book of the **Sentence** but also as the first in a reversed order that begins with EL (or rather LE, "Life Excelling […]" and ends with SOL (LOS, "Light O Sleep")[2]—and we note here the appropriateness of beginning with Life and ending with Sleep, as well as the "logic" of moving in the other direction. In terms of the Serresian interpretation of Morrison's work that I outlined in the opening chapter on SOLUNA and have intermittently returned to we can see the whole **Sentence** as moving from the dark-chaotic state of raw disorder through increasing self-order into the hyper-order (hyper-repetition) of redundancy, which as blank chaos marks the return or dissipation back (in)to chaos. This means that we have a flow from the dark chaos of SOLUNA to the blank chaos of EL, and thence back again in the reverse direction; or (as Serres and non-linear dynamics also entail) one could just as well begin from blank chaos and then finally come back to it, since dark and blank chaos can also be read as *Gestalt*-switched, virtual images of one another. (In fact, for Prigogine and classical chaos theory the direction-of-flow in the state of dark chaos is not just spatially but even *temporally reversible*—"quantum relativity" seems to have entered into the picture here—and the same would hold for Serresian blank chaos, but not of course for the median state of order.) Either way, then, we would want to correlate the maximum "order" (sensible, communicative order and "direction," as opposed to the nonsense of pre-order and hyper-order) with the central stage, HERMES, and the important stage, HERA, and above all with the book *Her*, that "cosmological epitome" of the entire divine utterance: the tightly-controlled, classical, rational "order" of *Her*'s crown of sonnets and the detached, observational, scientific contemplativeness of *All*, may seem to justify such a reading.[3]

Of course, whereas this model may describe the most general "pattern of flow" in the **Sentence**, there are inevitably many minor, localized "areas of turbulence" along the way, disruptions of disorder and/or order, flows toward increasing order and/or disorder:[4] for instance, we have the "formed randomness" of the found texts (*texts trouvés*) in the book of *A*, the speculation on the dissolving and forming of distant galaxies in the night sky in *All*, both of which could be seen as an interplay, on very different levels of discourse, of order and disorder. Indeed, the main point of this chaos-theory interpretation is that Morrison is constantly and self-consciously interplaying order/disorder throughout all his books and stages (sequences); the correlation of SOLUNA with dark chaos and EL with blank chaos is clearly more arbitrary, thus somewhat tenuous, but I am suggesting it as *one way* of attempting to elucidate (or if it is too "blank" then to "darken") this vast and chaotic (yet simultaneously orderly) chunk of language, this linguistic "thing confusedly formed" (*wu hun ch'eng* 物混成), as Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching* 25 "calls" the Tao 道—an expression that catches well the double sense of order (as formed thing) and chaos (as confusedly formed thing).[5]

Right after the English title *Excelling*, at the beginning of Morrison's travelogue-narrative set in the People's Republic of China, we get the Chinese characters *Chung Kuo* (中國), Middle Kingdom, for China. However, written vertically on the page in traditional Chinese fashion, the two graphs are upside down (國中), perhaps signifying the reversibility of this whole work, now that we are (almost) at one end of it, and by extension (or expansion) the ultimate randomness (a key poststructuralist insight) of *langue* itself—of any given language-system (Chinese, English, French) but also of that macro-*langue* (macro-cosmic *langue*) which would comprise all human languages on the planet earth. Serres sees the emergence of all sounds/meanings/languages out of "background noise" (think of the meaningful sounds of radio stations being "tuned in" out of static on the radio) as being analogous to the emergence of any ordered system, especially natural systems like a rock, plant, human body or (perhaps) human society, out of (dark) disorder and its dissolution, ultimately, back into disorder (see his *Genesis*, for example). In *The Parasite* Serres notes that formal logic is based on tautologies like "A = A" and thus is already redundant, the sign of a hyper-order—tied by him here to the super-efficiency of the communications systems, or signals, and thus potentially destructive violence of late-capitalist, high-tech societies, e.g. of "Microsoft, Inc." or of American armed forces in Iraq—that threatens to push us into a state of blank chaos, terminal equilibrium, "information death." But how could we look at the "synchronic" (timeless or time-flattened) system of *langue* (on the Saussurian, structuralist, poststructuralist model) in the "diachronic" terms that Serres' theory seems to assume or imply? Perhaps the breaking-down of the synchrony/diachrony distinction is one function of that quantum-relativistic

conception of *langue* itself as "thing confusedly formed," which Morrison (I would like to suggest, however speculatively) is moving toward in **Sentence of the Gods**.[6]

Of *Excelling* itself, suffice it to say that this reader's main impression is one of extreme commotion, perhaps a "Brownian motion" of the molecular parts, the characters and places, above all the "signs." Here the author/narrator, traveling in and through China, is often getting on and off ferries and trains, riding in cars, buses or taxis, passing through doors or gateways into inner courtyards (sometimes reminiscent of the frame-designs found in *Divine* though generally not developed in such detail due to the ever-present push of "time's wingèd chariot"), going up and down stairs. Conjoined with this sense of constant movement through an immediate, often urban, extremely "empirical" world of perceptual surfaces is the highly mundane, quotidian, practical, newly-developed-modern-industrial, high-technological, "western," commercialized sense or aura of this world, this environment. The combined effect is (to a certain degree) the disappearance of "China" from the equation, or at least what "we" (especially non-Chinese readers) had expected China to be. In terms of my Serresian reading, then, this is indeed "blank chaos," the hyper-redundancy of a late-capitalist high-tech commercialized postmodernism which, as Baudrillard says of "postmodern society" in general, has become "mere simulacra," "surfaces" lacking any real depth or meaning, including (at least with the "China" presented here) "cultural meaning." Baudrillard's simulacra-reading means in a sense that "all is advertising"—poststructuralists like Derrida and Foucault have been saying since the early '70s that "all is interpretation," that there is "no original text," "the original is a copy" as Derrida puts it—and/or, and this is a more '90s idea, a "Matrix" idea, that "all is virtual reality." If the rational, meaningful sounds/meanings of human language have been self-ordered out of background noise, then the hyperbolic expansion of "surface marks" (surface writing)—the hyper-repetitions of the signs on Shanghai's banks and other tall buildings, of the advertising slogans on the sides of its public buses, the electromagnetically-charged film titles and actors' names on its movie marquees, the calculated code-words in the programs and commercials appearing on its madly proliferating TVs and on the Internet that permeates everywhere in the world (and even into interstellar space)—the overflowing hyper-redundancy of these marks/scripts/signs—signals that we are nearing or have already arrived in a state of blank chaos, terminal equilibrium and perhaps (through the very excess of information itself) information death.

EL and the **Sentence** ends (and/or begins) with *Life*, an extremely diverse, flattened-out work, not quite "scattered" in the manner of the "found texts" of *A* (which are actually, and inevitably, to a degree aesthetically formed and arranged by the author), to which nonetheless it may be compared (as in "A

Life"), but rather a wide-ranging series of in situ studies of various South and Southeast Asian venues, several of them consisting of interviews and many containing passages of interview-style (or "reportorial") dialogue, with intertexts drawn from articles and books principally about science. Countries explored include India (Bangalore), Thailand (Pattaya), Burma (Myanmar), China (Macau), Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines and South Korea. While briefly mentioning and quoting from a few of these mostly quite short pieces, due to the limits of space I will focus on *A Visit to Vietnam*. One of the longer textual components of *Life* and also the most recent thing that Morrison has written—which especially qualifies it, I would suggest, given our ever-ongoing acceleration into a largely indeterminate future, to embody the end (and/or) beginning of EL and the **Sentence**. *Vietnam* begins:

> "Once you are with us, you will come back for more" (Hanoi ad). **When I started writing Perl** (Larry Wall**), I'd actually been steeped in enough postmodernism to know that that's what I wanted to do.** "Perfume Pagoda" (another ad). **Because you can't actually do something postmodern.** "New Style, 40 Hang Bac Street." **You can only do something cool.** A red flag, a large yellow star at its center. **Something that turns out to *be* postmodern.** "Long (Dragon) Gallery." **Hmm. Do I really believe that?** "Export—tous pays." **I dunno.** "Fred Souvenir." **You may find this hard to believe.** "Vietnam Railway." **But I didn't actually set out to write a postmodern talk.** "Et-Pumpkin." **I was just going to say how postmodern Perl is.** "Prince 79 Hotel." **Anyway, thanks to you all for coming.** "Prince" in green, "79" in red. **I was hoping that the title of my talk.** "Bamboo Hotel." **Would scare away.** "Vietcombank ATM." **Anyone who shouldn't be here.** Its metallic, yellow face intaglioed into a wicker screen beside the hotel's entrance. […] At "World Music CD Shop" a black saxophonist leans backwards in silhouette against a large pale yellow sun. "Golden Buffalo Travel." In the act of writing author is offered a half-peeled orange that is sitting atop a basketful of unpeeled oranges. **The Modern period.** By a woman in conical straw hat who is balancing two baskets suspended by twine from her *don ganh* (shoulder pole). **Is the period that refuses to die.** A second woman offers *you-tiao* (oil fried bread sticks), both *vendeuses* smiling […]. **Today's world is a rather odd mix of the Modern and the postmodern.** On the sidewalk, at an intersection, a professional bicycle repairman scrapes at an inner tube preparatory to patching it. **Oddly, this is not just because the Modern refuses to die. […] But also because the postmodern refuses to kill the Modern.** Hanoi seems to have all but relinquished its anti-American sentiment. **But then the postmodern refuses to kill anything completely.** Author's reception thus far has been uniformly polite, often friendly. **Deconstruction, you see, is simultaneously Modern and postmodern.** We turn in the direction of the lake. **Being both reductionistic and holistic.** Café Sinh To Hoa Qua has just opened its tiny single room for business. [The pages of *A Visit to Vietnam* are not numbered.]

In *Life* Morrison is trying to catch the simultaneous forces of disintegration and fusion, above all the "overflow" of a chaotic multiplicity of things (i.e. of life), and he cannot hide his exuberance in the process of catching it. Here one can almost hear, in the background, Ginsberg reading from *Howl* in San

Francisco in the mid '50s and someone (was that Kerouac?) on sax, cut to overlay of the U.S. army captain sent back to Saigon in the mid '60s to seek Colonel Kurtz and going nuts in his hotel room at the opening of *Apocalypse Now*, yet everything has changed, and we are suddenly in January of the year 2005—except for the fact that countries like Vietnam are in certain respects "still in the '50s" (and/or the '80s). This passage is set within the ever-present socio-cultural context of Vietnam's rapid post-war (and especially since the '90s) development, which involves its absorption of pop western culture, that is, of (post)modern western (American) culture, where the term "(post-) modern" now takes on a double meaning, the artistic and more generally cultural sense it has for western intellectuals and its sense of socio-economic "(post)modernization." Here Larry Wall, the computer guru, continues his hip description of "postmodernism":

> **Modernism tore a lot of things apart, but especially the household.** A toothless old man on a bicycle stops to sell a map of Hanoi to author, who is looking for the city's lake. **The interesting thing to me is that post-modernism is propagating the dysfunction.** *Red Dzao people in their brilliant blue robes at the marketplace.* **Because it actually finds its meaning in dysfunction.** *Almost all minority groups (except the Hoa and the Khmer) live in midland and mountainous regions.* As the toothless old man points, author turns to glimpse the lake itself. **Postmodernism is really a result of Modernism.** Author takes seat on bench at lakeside only to be accosted by a postcard seller with overpriced wares. […] **But the problem with reductionism is that, once you've divided your universe into enough pieces.** *"H'mong girls in springtime," delicate cherry branches blossoming behind them.* **You can't keep track of them any more.** *"H'mong girls at the Love Market."* To get a fair price author must bargain for fifteen minutes. **The human mind can only keep track of seven objects at a time.** *"Black H'mong youngsters" in their black leggings and huge silver earrings.* **The Modernists lost track of something: they forgot what's important about Literature.** *Each of the 54 ethnic minorities in Viet Nam has its own language.* The word that's sweeping U.S. high-school playgrounds and college campuses is "crunk," a blend of "crazy" and "drunk." *Up to 24 ethnic groups have their own scripts.* A hard drinker, loud but not yet a "crunk," is a "daunch." *Including the Thai, Mong, Tay and Nung.* "Wheels," as they were once called, are now "whips." *Of which eight are used in daily life and taught at schools.* An ordinary car is a "ride," while a large passenger car out of style is not a "whip" but a "scraper." *Namely the Thai, Hoa, Khmer, Cham, Ede, Tay-Nung, Co Ho and Lao scripts.* "Good-looking," male or female, is "bangin'" and the latest term for "cool" is "tight."

In this interplay of discourses or (record) "tracks" ("The human mind can only keep track of seven objects at a time"), of cultures, cultural ages and even artistic and literary traditions (*"H'mong girls in springtime," delicate cherry branches blossoming behind them*), the cut to the underlined riff on current American teenage slang is striking. Slang is after all (in all cultures, languages, dialects), an ever-emerging new "form" of discourse, one that is ever-being-generated through the force of *langue*-genesis or *logo-gony*. Absorption of West into East but simultaneously (as Morrison's travels can testify) of East into West; so many

different levels ("stages") of development existing at the same time and increasingly (as technology shrinks the world) in the same space; so many languages or discourses (from the most technical French metaphysical "jargon" to current American slang, from English and Mandarin to the numerous minority languages or dialects in South America, Africa, China, Vietnam): Morrison is a (largely silent) witness, an observer (watcher and listener) who is trying to catch the tensions, the simultaneous disruptions and integrations, the spontaneous overflow.

Yet one of the most significant tensions or differences remains the cultural difference itself—between East and West, between Vietnam and America; this is the difference (their own non-western difference) that developing countries are trying to overcome or assimilate, with mixed results. When we think of America/Vietnam in terms of tension and difference we are likely to think first of the Vietnam War, which (whether or not we wish to regard it as essentially America's occupation of Vietnam) followed upon Vietnam's many years as a French colony and its war with the French. Later in *Vietnam* and again through a striking (in this case surreal) "break" in the discourse, reminiscent of the interposed French-historical passages (chapters) in *Revolution*, we suddenly find ourselves in the midst of a wartime scene taken from Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. The author is touring (with "Odyssey Tours") the North Vietnamese region of Hanoi-Halong-Haiphong, when suddenly the voice of "tour-guide" intertext changes from that of a North Vietnamese in the year 2005 to that of a wartime westerner, one who has experienced the tragedy of Vietnam, and who reminisces about the time when the French were still dominant.

> **I began […] by explaining the situation in the north, in Tonkin.** Urban imagery still prevailing: "Samsung," "Esso, "Computer Games." **Where the French in those days were hanging on to the delta of the Red River, which contained Hanoi and the only northern port, Haiphong** (Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*). But giving way to narrow three-story suburban houses […]. *En 2004 la ville devrait compter 50.000 nouveau-nés dont 2.500 seront le troisième enfant.* **Here most of the rice was grown. […] And when it was ready the battle began.** Four blue-suited workmen in yellow hard hats stand together in a green field to inspect a tall pole strung with electric lines. Narrow gauge train tracks have begun to parallel our course. […] Roadside buildings are growing sparser […]. A sign for LG Electronics Vietnam reads "Life's Good!" **"That's the north," I said. […] "The French may hold, poor devils, if the Chinese don't come to help the Vietminh."** (We have paused in a courtyard filled with many other buses, scruffy European tourists cutting in line to buy coffee, to stock up on souvenirs.) **"A war of jungle and mountain and marsh . . . Paddy fields where you wade shoulder-high, and the enemy simply disappears."** Stacked beside huts. **"But you can rot in the damp of Hanoi."** Gradually the frequency of roadside houses increases, these new residences interspersed among flat fields of vegetables, brown clods being broken up for planting, paddies already irrigated. **"They don't throw bombs there."** Bicycles cross the four-lane expressway to get from one side to the other in villages divided in half by the otherwise inaccessible expressway. **"God knows why."** A train heading for

> Hanoi approaches and passes. **"You could call it a regular war."** Its boxcars in unpredictable colors. **"And here in the South?" he asked.** Its engine in red, white and blue, as we in turn pass a road marker reading "Haiphong / 22 km." **"The French control the main roads until seven in the evening," I replied. […]** "Welcome to Hai Phong," says a large blue billboard **[…] "After sunset they maintain control of the watch towers."** We pass a huge corrugated building with letters proclaiming it a "Joint Venture Steel Plant." **"Along with the towns—or parts of them."** "Hoguam Fabric Manufacturing," "Nomura-Haiphong Industrial Zone," "Taiwan Taifong Paper Company." **"This doesn't mean you're safe."** At the outskirts of Hai Phong the expressway ends. We turn north onto a two-lane road, heading toward Ha Long City. Internet cafés, tea stalls, motorbike repair shops, beauty parlors line the way. Schools begin to appear. Then suddenly all gives way once more to open fields […] **"Otherwise there wouldn't be iron grilles in front of the restaurants."** We mount a high bridge for an overview of a landscape of water buffalo, women in conical hats, rice paddies, a cemetery. *Ce phénomène résulte de causes naturelles.* Quickly we traverse several villages. In the marketplace of one, women wearing dark blue jackets and black pants huddle to converse, their wide straw hats almost touching one another. **As we returned the sun had begun to decline.** Before long the scene fills with tiny mountains, arranged as if for a class in oriental landscape painting, the various geological types represented […]. **The Black River was no longer black. […] The Red River, only gold. […] Down we went again, away from the gnarled and fissured forest toward the river, flattening out over the neglected rice fields, aimed like a bullet at one small sampan on the yellow stream.** At all their rocky feet lie paddies, some smoke-filled, as farmers clear and burn debris. **The cannon gave a single burst of tracer.** A woman in a white smock and a red woolen cap is breaking up clods with a hoe. **The sampan blew apart in a shower of sparks.** Behind her rises a miniature mountain like a rocky loaf of bread in a painting by the Yuan literatus Chao Meng-fu. **We didn't even wait to see our victims struggling to survive but climbed and made for home.** Some of the mountains are being quarried. *Ces femmes sont nées pour l'essentiel après les années de la guerre.* We pass a fourteen-year-old boy on a bicycle, a pig strapped on behind its seat, slaughtered, singed and cut open**. I thought again as I had thought when I saw the dead child at Phat Diem, "I hate war."** As we swerve across the centerline to pass them—pig and boy—an oncoming orange truck flashes its lights at us. **There'd been something so shocking in our sudden fortuitous choice of a prey—we'd just happened to be passing, only one burst was required.** A woman in a red hat and black leather jacket crosses the road on her bike. **There was no one to return our fire.** Turns and heads in the same direction that we are headed.

This wartime scene, from a work that will become a part of *Life*, reminds us not only of the pervasive war-as-philosophical-dialectic theme in ARES (most obviously in *Revolution*) but also of those poems near the beginning of *Sleep* (ostensibly the opening book of the **Sentence**), *A Warfilm Is a Peacefilm*. In all three cases we could take as background-text (or subtext) the Achilles' shield passages of the epitomic *Her* sonnets, with their "recapitulation" of the great tragedy (or tragic-comedy) of human existence: that inescapable juxtaposition, hopeless confusion and entanglement, ultimate "sameness" of war and peace, of violent chaos, destruction, misery, death on the one hand, peaceful harmony,

love, happiness, life on the other. (And yet, as *Vietnam*'s final words tell us, "life must go on"—even if, as Nietzsche says, "life is war.") That is, we must take the metaphor of "war"—in *Sleep*, in *Revolution*, in *Her* (Achilles' shield), in *Life* (*Vietnam*)—in its widest sense, as the idea of difference: not only on the level of individual argument or even on that of a more "encompassing" philosophical dialectic (e.g. Hegel) but on a cosmological level as well: Nietzsche's world/cosmos as will to power or interplay of active and reactive forces, the universe's forces of explosive outward acceleration and "disintegration" (whether formulated by Einstein's cosmological constant or theories of "positive vacuum energy") that counterbalance gravitational forces of deceleration, collapse, integration (the force of Newtonian gravity).

But staying for the moment on the level of conflict between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, this problematic has been set in *Vietnam* within the context of a (perhaps imperialistic) western "postmodern" economy, culture and lifestyle *versus* a still-developing non-western world with quite different (traditional) values (Iraq comes to mind here), a world that is torn between the lust to be absorbed or assimilated by the late-capitalized West and the longing to conserve its original values. In this "dialogue" between "East" and "West" (in the most reductionist sense of these terms), which Morrison catches in micro-cultural, micro-economic or microcosmic form in the interviews that occur at various points in *Life*, what is most at stake is the ability of the polarized or warring parties to seek a common ground, a "peace." That the burden in this larger cross-cultural dialogue rests primarily on the shoulders of the West is clear even when the dialogue is projected onto a metaphysical plane, as in Levinas' ethics of the "other" when we take "other" as "the East." Toward the end of *Vietnam*, juxtaposed with the empirical travelogue-narrative, we get as intertext a commentary on Levinas' postmodern ethics.[7] Basically Levinas is saying that western metaphysics traditionally focuses on Being and thus on oneness and sameness, bringing the "other" (e.g. non-being, death, war, a foreign culture or religion, that which we cannot understand) into "oneself," appropriating it into the "I" (the self-identity foregrounded in western metaphysics at least since Plato). However, we (especially in/of the West) must maintain (unlike Socrates) a radical openness to the other (the foreigner, our interlocutor), not appropriate him into ourselves but let him remain fully as other, which means we must begin not from the position of Being but from Other-than-Being, not from the self but from the non-self or other-than-self:

> Author has wandered into a neighborhood where many practical things are for sale. ***Socrates' teaching, Levinas argues, centered on the "primacy of the same": "to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me."*** Hardware, paint, motorbikes. ***(We think, for example, of Socrates' proof of recollection in his dialogue, the* Meno.)*** On a street corner, in open air, a woman has ranged an enormous display of paints and paint-related products. ***This is the "mediation characteristic of western philosophy," which involves somewhere a great***

'betrayal'" of "the Other" into "the same." ND-Col Spray, in a dozen colors; Expo High Gloss Enamel; Durotex Wall Paint, in plastic buckets. ***For things the betrayal represents a "surrender" into use by human beings (the rock becomes a useful site to extract ore, the tree a source of timber).*** Bottles of thinner, half full, a third full, two-thirds full. ***Ontology, the comprehension of the Other by the same, "promotes freedom" [...]. If there is nothing outside me, I am free and without limits. [...] But the assumption that "there is nothing outside me," nothing other, stems from the form of western thought as that ontology which takes the "I" as its starting point.*** At the display's other end sits the woman's sixteen-year-old son, his centrally parted hair died reddish orange. ***Freedom rooted in the "I" opposes that justice which takes the "other person" as the starting point.*** He is holding a tiny new cell phone in both hands. ***This is clearest in Levinas' critique of Heidegger:*** To key in a number. ***If freedom denotes the mode of staying [...] the same in the midst of the other, knowledge (where the existent hands itself over through the medium of impersonal being) contains the ultimate sense of freedom.*** Claw hammers, ball-peen hammers, sledge hammers. ***It would be opposed to justice, which involves obligations with regard to an existent that refuses to give itself, the Other.*** L-braces, metal rings and hinges, plastic grommets, wooden drawer knobs. ***In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being, Heidegger affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics. [...] This means that the "I" thinks that it is not delimited in any way, insofar as everything it knows is part of itself. [...] It is totally free. [...]*** The merchandise on offer continues: ***Knowledge is freedom***. Plastering hods, saw blades, wire brushes. ***Moreover, this leads to what Levinas calls the "conceptualization [and] suppression or possession of the Other." [...] This means that western thought, which begins with ontology, is a "philosophy of power . . . a philosophy of injustice." [...]*** We pass a cabinet-maker's shop; a store filled with Buddhist images, ceramics and other ornaments; a shop selling metal sinks and other commercial cooking equipment; a store next to it full of metal hat racks, grates and baffles; a shop selling tape measures and sandpaper, rollers to perforate a surface, band saws and files. ***Deleuze and Guattari.*** Two pretty girls. ***Opposed to Levinas in many ways.*** Sit at its entrance, both atop upturned paint buckets. ***Are "participants in what might be described as the advent of a 'postmodern ethics.'"*** One is leafing through a slick newspaper-size fashion magazine. ***"Posed in the light of the dissolution of both the rational, judging subject and the contract-based, liberal accounts of the individual's allegiance to the social community."*** The other, along with their younger brother, stands to examine, silently, the contents of author's notebook.

The discourse on Levinas and Heidegger is very illuminating, especially given the centrality of Levinas' notion of *au dela de l'être*, "otherwise than being" in current discussions of (the need for a) postmodern ethics; it is obviously something we would want to "take very seriously." And yet, we notice how the extremely practical, down-to-earth intertext (the street market scene in Vietnam, an American man dealing with Vietnamese people in "real life") also ironizes the abstract philosophical discourse in a certain way, suggesting perhaps that this is all very nice but can such "theories" actually help people

understand (deal with, get along with) one another better? Going one step beyond this, the author may also be suggesting that, just as the empirical narrative about the westerner gazing at goods for sale on a Saigon street could seem so unremittingly, numbingly mundane as to be "mindless"—especially to one (e.g. a philosopher) who has no interest in such "practical things"—so to (and especially to the ordinary person, the non-philosopher who is just trying to survive, to "get on with his life") the philosophical discourse will seem like mindless or nonsensical jargon, a kind of chanted "mantra" perhaps.[8] (Of course, people who lack a certain bent of mind combined with a certain, rather specialized and probably expensive training, that is to say most people, could hardly understand the philosophical discourse.[9]) This does not mean the latter is "wrong"—we could never say a philosophical position is absolutely "wrong" in the same way that an empirical statement ("This is a paint brush") can be wrong[10]—but simply that ultimately the abstract statement has no more "meaning" or "value" than the mundane practical one—as when we measure both, for instance, against any number of other, "intermediary" discourses (now a sort of linguistic or discursive relativity comes into play), and especially if we measure both against a wide enough discursive frame (people speaking in all the languages of the world, including all dialects and forms of slang, simultaneously about an indefinitely large range of random topics), spatial frame (e.g. this galaxy) or temporal one (e.g. the next one million years).

This brings us back to the problem that no matter how "seriously" we take the planet's very pressing issues of war, peace, cultural difference and cross-cultural communication, in a sense even *these* issues are contained within a wider "field," an ultimately relativistic field, that of the cosmos. But the Serresian feature that I want to correlate with the stage of EL, as the end-point (and beginning-point) of the **Sentence**'s flow, is that of blank chaos or hyper-repetition, absolute redundancy. If the cosmos is (so far as we know) the largest (most far-reaching) "physical" entity, the widest or most encompassing "text" would be, in Serresian terms, a dark-chaotic and/or blank-chaotic one—that is, a text that contains, as described above, the voices of "people speaking in all languages of the world, including all dialects and forms of slang, simultaneously about an indefinitely large range of random topics." This is in effect the "background noise" of the human language(s) spoken on earth (as opposed to a hypothetical cosmic background noise that would be far more encompassing), the widest frame of reference for human meanings, the "linguistic" frame—and pre-linguistic? The Kristevan semiotic *khora* as well as symbolic, representational language?)—in and against which all human meanings must finally be identified and measured. Morrison's technique of intertextual juxtapositions and radical "discourse breaks" continually points us "back" toward such a frame. This is arguably his most original and most powerful formal strategy, and (as they say about self-reflexive postmodern fiction beginning from the

1950s and 1960s, but really from Rabelais, Cervantes and Sterne), since "content is form," it also becomes the very content or "idea" (central and guiding theme) of the **Sentence**.

Thus there is a very good reason why Morrison often gives a dominant role to the (late-capitalized, virtually-realized) "surfaces" of contemporary societies in various cultures, to the hyper-commercialized signs and slogans, the "writing on the wall" that surrounds us everywhere—even in the form of graffiti (as on the wall of a Norman, Oklahoma Laundromat in *Engendering*). Given the ongoing "invasion" of the whole contemporary world by capital-driven information technology, the accelerating pervasiveness of "postmodernism," of "our" Baudrillardian postmodern society of simulacra, mere surfaces, virtual reality, we have already reached (in socio-cultural terms) a state of Serresian blank chaos. Increasingly advertising advertises itself, communication communicates itself, meanings mean themselves; but when all is absolutely self-evident, as in the tautologies of formal logic ("A = A") or maximally efficient "dialogues" in which there is no longer any background noise to interrupt A-B communication, then all is also nonsensical. Hence it is hard to distinguish the "final" stage of blank chaos, terminal equilibrium and information death from the "initial" one of dark chaos, pure randomness, background noise. A passage in *Vietnam* also parodies postmodernism (a "condition" that, as some of the other passages make clear, Vietnamese intellectuals and university students have already taken very much "to heart") on precisely the grounds that finally it becomes discourse talking about itself, an A-A dialogue, a monomaniacal monologue:

> ***"[P]ostmodernism [...] became a name not only for the way in which new attitudes and practices had evolved, in particular with regard to society and culture. To architecture and to literature. To patterns of economic and political organization. But also for the characteristic discourse in which such things were discussed. "Postmodernism" named all those writers who gave houseroom to the postmodern hypothesis and all the writing they did about it. In this period it did not seem possible even to discuss the existence of the postmodern without being drawn into its discourse. Genealogies of specific postmodernisms in politics, society and the arts were followed by genealogies of the discourse of postmodernism, such as Hans Bertens'* The Idea of the Postmodern *(1995). By the middle of the 1990s a third stage had evolved, as the "post-" idea had achieved a kind of autonomy from its objects. At this point the argument about whether there really was such a thing as postmodernism, which had driven earlier discussions of the subject, started to evaporate. Since the mere fact that there was discourse at all about the subject was now sufficient proof for many of the existence of postmodernism. But as idiom rather than actuality. Postmodernism became the name for the very activity of writing about postmodernism. In 1997 John Frow declared roundly that the word "postmodern" "can be taken as nothing more and nothing less than a genre***

> ***of theoretical writing." The postmodern became a kind of data-cloud, a fog of discourse that showed up on the radar even more conspicuously than what it was supposed to be about. Thus postmodernism had passed from the stage of accumulation. Into its more autonomous phase. No longer a form of cultural barometer. Postmodernism had itself become a climate. (Incidentally, how one capitalized or hyphenated—"post-modern," "Post-Modern," postmodern," or "Postmodern"—seemed to matter a great deal.) Having expanded its range and dominion hugely during the first period of separate accumulation in the 1970s and the syncretistic period of the 1980s, in the 1990s the postmodern began to slow its rate of expansion. During this decade, slowly but inexorably, postmodernism ceased to be a condition of things in the world. Whether in the world of art, culture, economics, politics, religion or war. It became instead a philosophical disposition, an all-too-recognizable (and increasingly dismissible) style of thought and talk, scorned by people of common sense. By this time "postmodernism" had also entered the popular lexicon to signify a loose, sometimes dangerously loose, relativism. Now, its dominant associations were with postcolonialism, multiculturalism and identity politics. So, whereas postmodernism had expanded its reach in academic discussion, in popular discourse it had shrunk to a casual term of abuse. Postmodernism had become autonomous from its objects. So far I have been discussing postmodernism as though it were a merely descriptive project. An attempt simply to take the measure of the new prevailing conditions in art, society and culture. But, from the beginning, it has always been more than a merely cartographic enterprise. Postmodernism is also. A project, an effort at renewal and transformation.***
> [French and English "empirical" intertexts removed]

The tendency for theoretical discourse not only to become a "jargon" that in various ways repeats what others have said before (and anyway, "now it can all be downloaded from the Internet") is reinforced by its tendency to *repeat itself* (as the above passage does to a certain degree), to be redundant within its particular (microcosmic) text as well as within context or the background framework of a larger (macrocosmic) inter-text. Nonetheless, a very interesting (and perhaps even unexpected) point appears just at the end of the passage: "***So far I have been discussing postmodernism as though it were a merely descriptive project. [...] But, from the beginning, it has always been more than a merely cartographic enterprise. Postmodernism is also a* project, *an effort at renewal and transformation."*** This is, I would suggest, just one of numerous ways in which one could raise the point that Serresian blank chaos (at whatever level of reality, including human-socio-cultural on planet earth and physical in the cosmos) may revert to the initial dark chaotic state, which then can begin the process (in a different way from "before" no doubt) of self-ordering (that is, re-ordering itself) once again . . . , until it finally arrives at some sort of terminal state from which (hopefully) it may again revert.

One astrophysical scenario in which the universe does *not* revert is the entropic scenario according to which, at some widely expanded/dispersed state, it remains frozen in a state of maximum disorganization, having spent all heat-energy and thus existing "eternally" at a temperature of absolute zero. But current astrophysical (cosmological) theory seems to combine, as we saw in Chapter 4 (HERA), the dominant sense that the (or at least "our") whole universe keeps "exploding out" at an accelerating rate with the various possibilities of/for deceleration and collapse that now appear in M theory (string theory, which will no doubt continue to be modified). The future direction of events, the "plot" of the cosmic narrative—and/or, in a manner of speaking, of the Morrisonian **Sentence**—will depend on the magnitude of the (positive or negative) vacuum energy values, within the whole "landscape," of all its particular valleys or folds at a given time. After all, there are many universes (stages, books, texts, passages), and some of them could still be collapsing, or even moving in an ongoing dark-blank-dark chaotic cycle of exhaustion, renewal and exhaustion, even if "ours" is not doing so. ("So there's hope after all.") But we are still left wondering: how do we know which of these tiny folds is, represents (metonymically or metaphorically), embodies *our* universe? And: while reading a text as "vast" as the **Sentence**, combining so many disparate forms of (dis)order, how do we know *where we are* now?

Morrison gives us an interesting slant on this last question, if he doesn't exactly answer it, by turning at the end of his *Visit to Vietnam* to biogenetics. (The science discourse is interspliced with a description of ordinary evening TV in Saigon.) Interestingly enough, just as "narrative theory" has been used in recent biological and psychological descriptions of certain cognitive functions of the human brain, so terms like "book," "chapter," "paragraph" and "word" are used here, in close connection with mathematical magnitudes that remind us that the human body, and brain within it, are microcosms, that is, are just as "vast" as the macrocosm. (And quantum mechanics, we recall, moves in the "opposite" direction from that of relativity theory, toward the subatomic and subnuclear; of course, the two "directions" are finally "collapsed"; M theory is seeking a theoretical framework that can encompass both.)

> Late each evening the official Vietnamese television channel shows a series of videos, performances of popular songs […] **The human body contains approximately 100 trillion *cells*.** Featuring, that is, competent and attractive, but not star-quality vocalists. **Inside each cell there is a black blob called a *nucleus*.** This evening the first video has been choreographed along a river: **Inside the nucleus are two complete sets of the human *genome*.** With willowy branches, bamboo sampan and Champa columns. **One set of the genome comes from the mother, one from the father.** A female actress and a male singer perform for the bedtime audience. **In principle, each set includes the same 30,000-80,000 genes on the same 23 *chromosomes*. […] In practice, there are often small and subtle differences between paternal and maternal versions of each gene, differences that account for blue eyes or**

brown, for example. When we breed, we pass on one complete set, but only after swapping bits of the paternal and maternal chromosomes, in a procedure known as *recombination*. Imagine that the genome is a book: Now the camera pulls back, so that we may study her costumed elegance. **That the *chromosomes* constitute 23 chapters. […] Each chapter contains several thousand stories, called *genes*. […] Each story is made up of paragraphs, called *exons*, which are interrupted by advertisements called *introns*. […] Each paragraph is made up of words, called *codons*. […] Each word is written in letters called *bases*. There are one billion words in the book, which makes it longer than 800 bibles. If I read the genome out to you at the rate of one word per second for eight hours a day, it would take me a century.** She is posing as a peasant girl. **If I wrote out the human genome, one letter per millimeter, my text would be as long as the Mekong River.** In a long pink robe. **It is a gigantic document, an immense book, a recipe of extravagant length.** On her arm she carries a pannier of grain. **And it all fits inside the microscopic nucleus of a tiny cell that in turn could fit easily upon the head of a pin.** The third segment of today's program is equally sensuous. **The human brain is a far more impressive machine than the genome.** But it shows us architectural facades instead of attractive faces. **If you like quantitative measurement, it has trillions of synapses instead of billions of bases. And it weighs kilograms instead of micrograms.** A tracking camera, mounted no doubt on a truck, studies these five-story houses, probably in an upper-middle-class Saigon neighborhood. **Or if you prefer geometry, it is an analogue, three-dimensional (rather than a digital, one-dimensional) machine. If you prefer thermodynamics, it generates large quantities of heat as it works, like a steam engine. For biochemists, it requires many thousands of different proteins, neuro-transmitters and other chemicals, not just the four nucleotides of DNA. For the impatient, it literally changes while you watch, as synapses are altered to create memories. Whereas the genome changes more slowly than a glacier.** Three girls in long, formal pink dresses, daisies in their hair, stroll through a *field* of daisies, bearing shallow, rectangular baskets, which they *fill* with daisies as they sing. […] We cut to a view of her standing up to her waist in a flowery field. **For the lover of free will, the pruning of the neural networks in our brains, by the ruthless gardener called Experience, is vital to the proper functioning of the organ.** Three girls, who are neither beautiful nor otherwise seductive. **Whereas genomes play their messages in a predetermined way with comparatively little flexibility.** Nonetheless excite the sexual impulse by dancing as they sing in sheer green pants and orange, winged, loose-fitting blouses. **In every way, it seems, conscious, willed life has advantages over automatic gene-determined life.** There is nothing explicitly erotic in their gestures, their attire, or the melody and rhythm of the song, which is, however, *obsessive*. **As James Mark Baldwin realized, and as modern Artificial Intelligence nerds appreciate, this dichotomy, however, is false. The brain is created by genes. It is only as good as its innate design. The very fact that the gene is a machine designed to be modified by Experience is written into it.** Her pentatonic song has about it a hypnotic quality, though it is also somewhat irritating. **The mystery of how is one of the great challenges of modern biology.** Nonetheless, this song, like the others, if it be not too analytical to say so. **There can be no doubt that the human brain is the finest monument to the capacities of genes.** Serves a very public, very deliberate

> function in Vietnamese culture and civilization. **It is the mark of a great leader that he knows when to delegate.** Perhaps as a way of stimulating and controlling eroticism within the largely domestic context of bedtime TV programming. **A genome too knows when to delegate.** The vigor of a society must not be diminished, and Vietnam […] cannot afford to have its birthrate decline, for life must go on.

Finally, while we have not touched on other pieces in *Life*, several of which are or contain interviews (dialogues), or dealt with the overt dialogue-passages in *Vietnam*, I would like to note briefly one of Morrison's most radically "discourse-breaking" techniques. This is the appearance of the intertext *within a dialogue*—usually the intertext lines follow the actually spoken ones. Here is a randomly chosen and somewhat mundane example from the interview that opens *Korea 2004*:

> **MM:** Have you learned this language in school?
> **Ms. Sim:** Yes, and on TV. ***We have veered west and southwest [...].***
> **MM:** You should both relax now and have a seat […]. ***We have not, however, stopped at the Independence Hall of Korea.***
> **Ms. Woo and Ms. Sim:** [Silence] ***With its gargantuan statues* […].**
> **MM:** […] Ms. Woo, what kind of music do you like?
> **Ms. Woo:** I like the classic. ***Nor have we paused to pay our respects.***
> **MM:** […] Italian opera? ***Nor have we paid a visit* […].**
> **Ms. Woo:** Yes. […] ***If you have not experienced a Korean public bath.***
> **MM:** Ms. Sim, what do you like? ***Then take your time and immerse yourself.***

This is a simple example to give the basic idea. Here we know Morrison is himself remembering, in the non-bold, italic lines, and (from his brief introduction at the beginning) we also know that the bold-faced italic lines are quoted directly from the Korea National Tourism Organization Travel Guide. Thus here the more disruptive cases are when his "memory" lines come immediately after the spoken lines of another person, and when the travel guide lines appear in either "speaker position" though perhaps more radically so in the (again) "non-authorial" position. Even in this basic case (and some cases will be more abstract, more playful and complex) we have the penetration of narrative discourse into "speech" or dialogue-discourse. In Chapter 4 (HERA) we noted the "intersection" (a classical structural linguistics theme from Saussure and Jakobson) of metonymic-syntagmatic-horizontal narrative discourse with metaphorical-vertical lyric discourse that we get (in different ways) with both narrative (e.g. epic) and lyric poetry, where epic inevitably contains dialogues as well as lyric forms within it. But the intertext lines need not, obviously, be standard "empirical narrative" lines; they might be lines of poetry, lines from other people's dialogues, lines from books (as in this case) or from advertisements (which would also approximate this tour-guide case).

Here I want to stress an interpretation that foregrounds the dialogue as an actual human *encounter* (interaction), as the *event* of this encounter, rather than

merely as a "dialogue" (or linguistic, textual) "discourse." Thus Morrison's "breaking" of dialogue-discourse potentially has a further (more expanded) dimension. (And we may wonder: how many dimensions does the *langue*-cosmos have?) For we also get the sense here of intercrossing a human interaction (dialogue) with the larger textual interaction (intertextual dialogue) of *Life*, EL, the **Sentence**, now also seen as a (larger) intertextual or dialogic "event." After all, we *will* think of the events and characters of the whole **Sentence** as being spatio-temporally (or physically) *real*, since they are in fact real; they are almost all based on the author's direct (and very often recent at the time he records it) experience—this is one of the most obvious ways in which Morrison's epic as "travelogue-narrative" goes beyond the epics of Homer, Milton and to some degree even Pound (in the *Cantos*) or Williams (in *Paterson*). Thus we can picture the discourse of people (characters) in specific and explicit dialogues as being "intercrossed" with other discourses of the larger (encompassing, cosmic) "text" in a very physical (or again spatio-temporal) sense; the exploding (and/or contracting, condensing) "world" (cosmos/order, or chaos/disorder) can be seen as a textually interspliced or interwoven one in just this sense.

Let us then pursue this "physical event" reading of Morrison's dialogic technique by taking quite "literally" the notion that the mind or brain of a person/mind (e.g. one of the characters in the Korean dialogue above) could suddenly be "interrupted" by the radically unrelated "voices," here the intertext lines, as if they were already thinking these lines even though they do not speak them. What does this imply about the possible interconnections of the human body-brain with an encompassing textual world—and/or of the textual world with an encompassing human (and not just authorial) one? It may help us to reflect on this, if we first consider the fundamental nature of the "dialogue" as (literary and philosophical) genre[11] Two people talk to one another in what usually is a question-and-answer flow, and this is pre-eminently true with the Socratic dialogues of Plato, the dialectical mode of (western) philosophical (and later, scientific) thought: we approach the truth by asking the other what he thinks about x, how he will define x, or (in the essential case of speculation, reflection, "forming hypotheses") by asking ourselves what we think about x, how we would define or explain it, account for it. But what would it mean, in the course of such a philosophical or scientific *self-dialogue* (as opposed to a monologue), if an encompassing *langue*, linguistic space or world intervened randomly in our thinking, even entered into dialogue with us? A very traditional and pre-scientific view might be that this is after all a case of "divine inspiration" (Hermes' the messenger-god's gift, Apollo's gift, Cassandra and Tiresias' gift). A more contemporary view—which may come to the same thing—would perhaps be that such a state (literally "hearing voices") would be one of madness or (e.g. literary) creativity.

Yet Serres' theory, drawing as it does from information or communication theory, also gives us a more totally objective and also general way of approaching this question (which would not necessarily exclude any of the above possibilities). In Chapter 1 on SOLUNA we saw that in an A-B dialogue, maximum communication depends on a minimum amount of background noise (e.g. background "static" or garbled voices when one is talking on the phone) to interrupt the "signal," while on the other hand there must still be some (minimal degree of) noise or we enter that state of hyper-order in which a meaningful signal can no longer be communicated. This is because one way to look at "noise" is as the space between words in a sentence like "How are you?" The hyper-efficient signal "Howareyou"—which we are led to think of as indefinitely repeated, as in the string "Howareyouhowareyouhowareyou . . . ," so that we will no longer know at which (now *arbitrary*) point to break in and "begin"—becomes blank-chaotic nonsense, leading finally into a state of "information death" and terminal equilibrium.[12] Once we have reached this state, noise can serve as a force of *renewal*, "jump-starting" us (the "quantum leap" metaphor again occurs here) back into a pattern of meaningful communication; this is of course a variation on the model according to which blank chaos *Gestalt*-switches into a dark chaos which then is ready to commence self-ordering. Thus we might look at this disruption of the actual *dialogue* in Morrison's *Life* pamphlets as a "renewal" generated by extraneous, extra-textual noise—here defining text as the immediate dialogue, not the "big" or "cosmic text"), or extra-textual "voices"; that is, as the renewal of a dialogue that is already moving toward a nonsensical, blank-chaotic redundancy or (as indeed we see with the Korean dialogue quoted above) "mindlessness." Perhaps we could even see not just its explicit "dialogues" but also any number of subtexts/discourses within the **Sentence** as being constantly renewed or regenerated in just such a way. This would be one manner, in any event, to extend our Serresian reading in terms of flows of self-ordering, self-disordering, and (cosmogonic) self-regeneration.

Yet the still more originary mystery here may be that of the "question" itself. What does it mean to ask a question? While Heidegger says (*Being and Time*) that human being (*Dasein*) is the (kind or part of) Being that asks the *Seinsfrage*, the question of being, of what it means "to be," Kierkegaard (in his doctoral thesis on Socratic irony) distinguishes ironic questioning from speculative questioning. Ironic questioning, famously practiced by Socrates in his cross-examinations of those who thought they knew what they did not know, is a negative mode that sweeps away everything (the thought-structure or model of what we thought we knew) and leaves only "emptiness," a sense of "deflation" (which may have a certain comic effect); speculative questioning is a positive mode that creates, spins out new possibilities. Deleuze (*Difference and Repetition*), for whom the distinction is not so clear, emphasizes the speculative question as

a kind of dice-throw, a random explosion of possible meanings. Perhaps the closest connection between the human brain and the cosmos might be, after all, not the gene-text of the brain as a microcosmic code of the macrocosm (indefinitely expanded and repeated or recapitulated in it) but the fact that we are fundamentally "explosive" beings, as is the cosmos itself. Or are these two, as Lao Tzu says, "the same, though they come out with different names?" No doubt one way of characterizing **Sentence of the Gods** is that, like all great epics, it strives to describe the world's micro-texts in such exhaustive detail that a powerful explosive force is allowed to accumulate, the puzzling force of a question, of a moving beyond ourselves.

Notes

1. The Hebrew Yahweh is a very ancient, primitive god (God); identified with the Turko-Syrian YHWH, a sacred animal or "sacred organization," it was originally a sky-god associated (like Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus) with thunder and lightning as well as the mountains. It also is thought that among the sacred letters YHWH of this name-that-could-not-be-spoken, the Y was correlated in ancient times with El the Father; the H, with Asherah the mother (Rhea or Hera?); the W, with He the son (Hermes or Apollo?); and the final H, with Anath the daughter (Athena or Aphrodite?)

2. In Spanish "*el*" is masculine singular "the" and "*los*" is masculine plural "the"; in French "*le*" is masculine singular "the"; it would of course seem more natural (syntactically or syntagmatically speaking) to begin than to end a sentence with "the" (or, for that matter, with "a"). That the retrograde reading of the **Sentence** begins and ends with "the" gives to it a quasi-palindromic quality.

3. On the other hand, it might also be possible to take the two "end-stages," SOLUNA and EL, as embodiments of dark order, with the cosmogonic lady (*Her*) representing hyper-order or redundancy, perhaps *via* the infinite (or flattened, curved?) blankness of intergalactic space. However, given both the "postmodern excess" (overflow of meaning) of *Life* and the rational "scientism" of HERA as a whole, the first interpretation seems somewhat more "tempting."

4. This model of localized and unpredictable "disturbances" (flows toward expansion *or* contraction, increased order *or* disorder) within a larger pattern of flow toward increased over-all order and/or disorder indeed may seem to fit current astrophysical cosmology as expressed by the equations of M theory; see the discussion in Chapter 4.

5. While the Hebrews did not want (presume, dare) to name YHWH directly, it seems that Lao Tzu thought it to be linguistically or logically impossible to "name" the mysterious and all-pervading Tao; in the *Tao Te Ching* he says, "I do not know what to call it, so I'll just give it a provisional name, and call it 'Big' [*da*, 大]," and in Chapter 1 he says: 名可名, 非常名, *Ming ke ming, fei ch'ang Ming*, "The name that can be named is not the constant Name."

"Confusedly formed thing" is a description that could fit Hesiod's primordial chaotic flux or mixture, out of which emerges Earth (and from her Sky) as well as the ancient Chinese notion of "fertile void," or "positively charged," potentially pregnant, cosmogonic void. In a famous parable of the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu, Hun Tun (chaotic mixture, "soup"), personifying Chaos, is the Middle Sea; one day the North and South Seas pay him a visit and decide he needs "holes in his face" (for perception, perhaps by extension "rational order") like other humans; "each day they cut another hole in his face and on the seventh day Hun Tun died."

6. We may think this is already assumed or implied by Serres' theory; but he is beginning from a quite different model of "language" than that assumed by Saussure, Jakobson, Barthes, Lacan, Derrida *et al.*

7. Given Levinas' connections with the "mystical Jewish" (e.g. Kabalistic) tradition, to which the later Derrida (Levinas' student) to a certain degree also returns, the latter's presence within EL (taken as Elohim, Eloah, YHWH) seems especially fitting.

8. Perhaps the droning voice of the metaphysician is a sort of "heavenly mantra" played against the planetary "background noise" of the empirical narrative. (Yet finally both are fully "of the earth"; or is the empirical song, in its physical concreteness and solidity, finally more "cosmic" than the metaphysical one?)

9. I feel bound to confess that I am the "philosopher" in this little intertextual drama, as I find the "hardware" discourse actually harder to understand, at least in some respects (precisely because I don't know some of the terms), than the philosophical discourse (which is generally more "familiar" to me, its terms more familiar). Indeed I am sometimes amazed at the extent of

Morrison's "empirical" vocabulary, which apparently far surpasses my own. But this is precisely the vocabulary we need if we are going to "paint reality," catch all the lexically possible values within this life-world's quantum-relativistic-linguistic flux or "landscape."

10. On the other hand, we also cannot say that a philosophical position is absolutely right, whereas the empirical statement ("This is a hammer") can be right in a more indisputable sense. (Even though the hammer is now being used in another way, etc.)

11. Plato of course wrote his philosophy in the form of dialogues, thus giving western philosophy almost (though not quite) from its beginning a "dialectical" form. Like the science that grew out of it, philosophy was a kind of thinking that worked through questioning and attempting to answer (e.g. by forming hypotheses) one's own questions (as well as the other's questions). Yet Plato's dialogues were also known for their Socratic irony: Socrates could make fun of his interlocutor's attempts to define abstract terms like "virtue" by showing the absurdity of each of their attempted definitions, thus demonstrating the virtual impossibility of "defining" such a term. We should also remember that Plato took the idea of dialogue from the Greek drama of the 400s B.C., for in drama we also get the serious search for truth (Sophocles' *Oedipus*) as well as various forms of parody and comic buffoonery (Aristophanes). And drama had its origins in religious fertility festivals based on the ritual worshipping of Dionysus, god of wine: the dramatic chorus was originally a group of revelers praying or chanting to the gods; then a few members of the group started coming out in front to address the others in dialogue, and tragic and comic drama were born. Given the ostensibly (ultimately) "religious" meaning of **Sentence of the Gods** (however seriously we may actually take it as a religious work), one should bear in mind the sacred background of drama that lies behind Plato's Socratic dialogues, which constitute the ground of western rational thinking. Morrison in the *Life* interviews often uses Socratic and other forms of irony; some dialogues seem purposely light and comical, as if to suggest the overflowing energy of life in the manner of the comic dramatist Aristophanes (or the Renaissance novelist Rabelais). He also gives us "tragic" dialogues—perhaps the dialectical thrust of philosophy and science comes from tragic drama (a Nietzschean perspective)—in the sense that in his "dialogues" (particularly in the *Life* texts) as in real life and in the physical world/cosmos there is always a tug of war between understanding/not understanding, agreeing/not agreeing. (The pieces in *Life* are all essentially "cross-cultural" in just this sense.) Nietzsche, whose principal early book was *The Birth of Tragedy*, claimed that human life is "war," that the human individual (body, brain, personality), world/cosmos is an ongoing "will to power," an interplay of opposed, active and reactive forces. (Deleuze in *Nietzsche's Philosophy* emphasizes this reading.)

12. Indeed, as Serres points out the formal tautology "A = A (= A = A . . .)," tends to point in this same direction, toward a state that maximally-efficient, information-technology-based, late-capitalist, "postmodern" societies like the U.S.A. are arguably already entering into. See *The Parasite*, and see also White (in Hayles, 267-268): "Information [finally] is excluded in favor of information-free, wholly redundant messages. The system endless reiterates, endlessly ratifies itself. [...] Like any closed system, it can only run down. The achievement of redundancy—when everything that needs to be said has already been said—is analogous to entropic homogeneity when matter-energy settles into terminal equilibrium. In cultural systems, then, just as in physical systems, noise or chaos amounts to a force for renewal."