I

General Essays

The Sentence of the Gods

Ron Phelps

Sentence of the Gods is a vast cosmological epic consisting of 26 separate books. In an unprecedented tour de force the books exhibit a stupendous unrepeated variety of literary forms, most of them invented by the author.

The 26 books are, variously: a sequence of epic sonnets; two hysterically funny avant-garde novels, one of which is based on the illustrations to a book by Raymond Roussel; two epyllia, in nine-syllable meter and iambic pentameter; exquisite scientifically detailed nature writing at the level of Thoreau or the great naturalists; a book of dream poems; a memoir, heartbreaking in its honesty and pathos, of the author's life from infancy through college and beyond; found poetry; ebullient travel writing that tirelessly treks through and engorges practically all the nations on earth; mad exhilarated interweavings of videotape-like journalism with the Bhagavad Gita and the Analects of Confucius; and so on, and so on.

This constant experimental generation of new forms is itself an awesome feat of sheer literary creation, quite apart from the other manifold aspects of the **Sentence of the Gods**.

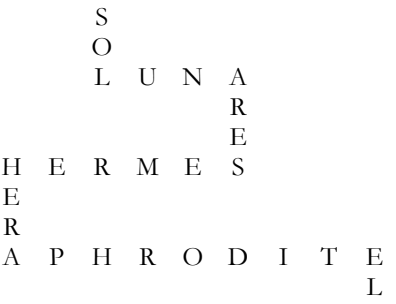
◇

All this encyclopedic carnival midway does not, however, constitute merely a farrago or a cadenza. Quite the contrary:

Each of the 26 books has for its title but a single word: *Her*, *Realization*, *Revolution*, *Possibly*, etc. Taken in sequence, these queer and willful book titles form the **Sentence of the Gods**:

> Sleep O Light U Need A Revolution Each Second Every Magic Realization Engendering Her Exists Regarding All Possibly Happening Renewed Or Divine In This Excelling Life.

This charming ukase, with its cosmic madness, playful dogmatism and minimal punctuation, is profound and positively spermatic in its implications, but what is secretly imbedded in it is mind-boggling, rather in the way the Periodic Chart of the Elements is imbedded in the baroque profusion of chemical reactions. *The first letter* of every word in the 26-word sentence spells out, in a beautiful snaking ladder of letters, the names of the seven gods of classical western mythology and, in order, the seven days of the week they rule:



Sol, Luna, Ares, Hermes, Hera, Aphrodite, El. El, a bit of a stretch, is, the author tells us, "the Babylonian, Sumerian and Hebrew name of various gods associated with the Greek god Cronos and the Roman god Saturn (see Saturday). He represents time, death, and the golden age." Thus the author's epic of the universe and of his life ends, appropriately, with death. Yet in one of his most brilliant, and characteristic, reversals, he has titled the final book *Life*.

◇

Sleep, *O*, and *Light* = SOL. Etc.

These seven gods are also correlated with the seven planets of ancient astronomy and astrology, the seven basic substances or factors of alchemy, and on and on into the remotest depths of the obscure and the occult.

◇

The famous characteristics of these deities also govern all the books in any particular sequence forming one of their names. For example, all nine books comprising or spelling out APHRODITE (*All*, *Possibly*, *Happening*, *Renewed*, *Or*, *Divine*, *In*, *This*, *Excelling*) are Aphrodite-like, reflecting her attributes as the goddess of love, beauty and fertility. The author has constructed nine entire books, of bewildering variety, with this supra-requirement in mind, so that when readers are, say, enjoying the gorgeous nature-landscapes of Arizona in *All*, they should remember that they are always, so to speak, "inside" Aphrodite, experiencing Aphrodite-ness.

Yet *All* is also a *corner book*, its "A" making the last letter of HERA. So *All* will also have Hera-like characteristics, those of the Greek earth goddess, and of Arizona's deserts and mountains.

◇

Nor is this all. The *scheme* of 26 letters can be read backwards, yielding seven other entities: LE, ETIDORPHA, AREH, HERMES, SERA, ANUL, LOS. These contain multiple, often obscure meanings, as with SERA, the Italian for "evening," or LOS, Blake's god of imagination.

And thus the sentence, too, can be read backwards, forming a most peculiar edict:

> Life Excelling This In Divine Or Renewed Happening Possibly All Regarding Exists Her Engendering Realization Magic Every Second Each Revolution A Need U Light O Sleep.

Actually, there is a paradox: in the forward version, the center god, SEMREH, is the only one whose name reads backwards. When the *scheme* is read backwards, he attains his ordinary name, HERMES. This accords with his dual, androgynous nature and his position as a wobbling or unwobbling pivot at the center of the entire epic. Forwards is backwards and backwards is forwards.

Similarly the 26 books can be read in reverse order, or in many orders. The **Sentence of the Gods** has no beginning or end, or rather it has multiple beginnings, multiple endings and multiple centers. The author has said he believes that "time goes forwards and backwards simultaneously. In other words, we live in the future and the past, as well as the present."

◇

Nor is this all. The books have other relationships among themselves. For example, in the backwards version *All*, *Regarding* and *Exists* form a triptych immediately followed by two more triptychs: *Her*, *Engendering*, *Realization* and *Magic*, *Every, Second*.

The books can also be related vertically. For example, the third column of letters in the *scheme* contains five letters: S, O, L, R and H. The R and H books—*Realization* and *Happening*—are therefore predominantly solar books, Sol-like.

◇

Nor is this all. As a cosmological epic written by a poet, the **Sentence of the Gods** is a heaven-storming attempt to continue in the tradition of the great epic poems, most notably—though by no means entirely—Homer, Dante and Milton. It *is* an epic poem, an epic poem or nothing.

The author realized, however, that most of the 26 books were in free verse or prose (though Madison Morrison's work, like that of most other great literature of this century from Proust to *Finnegans Wake* to rock songs, finds its voice in some shadowy unclassifiable genre-busting interface between prose and poetry). Therefore the poet found a formal replacement, or equivalent, for the ordering principle of metrical regularity in *numerology*.

The numerological complexity of the **Sentence of the Gods** would require a slightly boring little chapbook to elucidate. At the most axiomatic level, the

number of books is 26; 2 + 6 = 8, or the cosmic number. And the total number of sequences is 7, which, added to the whole, or unity, again gives 8.

The number of pages of each book has significance for its ordering, for the balance of its parts, for formal relationships within individual works, and for the **Sentence** as a whole. For example, the first book, *Sleep*, has 52 pages, making a 7, the number of sequences; it has 17 poems, making an 8, the number of the **Sentence** itself; thus its very first book contains within itself an adumbration of the entire epic poem.

This use of the ordering principle—lines, pages, sections, whatever—applies to all 26 books.

◇

Nor is this . . . but I could go on till the Apocalypse. The author keeps gaily grinding out, and launching like paper airplanes, charts and diagrams of ever more extravagant levels of formal symmetries in his "system," one of them correlating the work with the 26 dimensions, hidden and unhidden, of string theory!

These charts, pretty as my nieces and rainbow-colored like children's drawings and intellectually formidable as the organizing algorithms in Dante and Joyce, suggest a certain congenital whimsy, the kind of playfulness we indeed find in the most advanced contemporary physics. Or pataphysics.

◇

Yet all this is merely a rigorous geodesic framework. One of its functions is very important: it allows the epic to manifest encyclopedically, where appropriate, the entirety of human historical civilization, both West and East. The **Sentence of the Gods** is therefore a universal history, a compendium of culture, a maniacal academy of Comparative Religion whose aim is to become a religion itself, a para-journalistic time capsule of the late twentieth century in all its vulgar techno-optimist glamour, a breezy irrefutable analysis of the essence and directionality of the western canon of literature and philosophy, an imperial yet adoring grasp of Oriental thought and art available only to expatriates and Chinese speakers like himself, and, my favorite, a fête of modernist panache *both sumptuous and ascetic*, deriving in part from the idealist, Gallic heights of the avant-garde, from the odd combination of populist humor and exotic super-erudition found in Pound and in some contemporary scholarship, and from the fresh mystical vision of Madison Morrison's stubborn and rather frighteningly idiosyncratic mind.

◇

At this point one would need a hundred or so pages to describe the way in which the **Sentence of the Gods**, like its main rival, *Finnegans Wake*, has grafted, injected, interwoven the whole of the eastern and western canons, the "classics" of literature and religion, into its very substance or protoplasm.

Whole" is of course an exaggeration, but the general effect is of a gigantic compost of a Humanities curriculum at Johns Hopkins and Max Mueller's *Sacred Books of the East*.

On this level the work is a university, exemplary in its terrible sublimity, and as with a university its main function is to lift us out of our trivial, dreary, quotidian lives—that crushing mundane life, with its usually frustrated promise of poetry and transcendence, which is the subject matter of much of the **Sentence of the Gods**.

But, too, contrariwise, the (only apparently, that is, to the unenlightened unenergized mind?) boring trashy purgatory of our workaday lives provides a comic deflation of the highfalutin' heights of imagination and religion and ethics, the way the bourgeois domesticity of *Ulysses* is a gentle and kindly satirical bringdown of its heroic Homeric model.

◇

For example, Homer and the Bible, the two pillars of western culture, are fleeced, carded and stitched into the two adjacent books *Second* and *Every*. The first half of *Second* threads passages from the Iliad like a Jacquard loom, while the second half features a bouquet of poems meditating on the adventures of Odysseus not through the Mediterranean region but through the western tradition. *Every*, with divine or blasphemous impertinence, eats Holy Scripture for breakfast.

The next book in that sequence, *Magic*, digests "the third tradition," the Egyptian and Gnostic. The first half of this autobiography is a lamination of The Egyptian Book of the Dead; the second half uses material from the Corpus Hermeticum. The first forwards, the second backwards.

This split-in-two, forwards-and-backwards business is, the reader may have noticed, appropriate to the dual and central nature of HERMES, the location of the triptych *Second*, *Every* and *Magic*. Or SEMREH.

◇

That is merely an example:

Realization incorporates India: the Upanishads, the Dhammapada and the Bhagavad Gita.

Engendering takes up the Analects of Confucius and the Tao Te Ch'ing of Lao Tzu.

Her makes a tempting *pâté* of Hesiod's Theogony and the Works and Days with sonnets of Asia and, Lord help us, Oklahoma City.

Three of the parts of HERA are based on Chinese landscape painting.

This: Ovid's Metamorphoses. *Divine*: Dante's Comedy, of course. *Renewed*: Spenser's Faerie Queene. *Possibly*: Don Quixote.

Etc. etc. The author has graciously provided us with bibliographies! Better still are his seminal essays, readable and jargon-free, which together form a kind

of self-explication or an exploration of his intentions and the trend of his researches.

◇

When I hear the word "text" I reach for my revolver, but I suppose a little hermeneutics never hurt anybody. How is all this material used? The **Sentence of the Gods** serves up plenty of "quashed quotatoes" as a side helping, but the entire rest of the smorgasbord is the word of Maddy Morrison his own writ. The author tells us he has employed four types of intertextual relations:

> "*Hypertext*. A text in which the primary text is linked to a secondary text, which also hovers above it, as an authority.
>
> "*Intertext*. A text interwoven with the primary text so as to amplify, commentate or ironize it. Accordingly, the primary text and the intertext may stand in complementary, oblique or contradictory relations to one another, with many possible variations and combinations of these modes. The relationship between the two texts may also shift at will.
>
> "*Pretext*. A text used to incite another text, as in the case of the 1000-page *Norton Anthology of English Verse*, the inspiration for the 1000-line poem, *Need*.
>
> "*Subtext*. A text used as a model to form a ground for the primary work. The dynastic types of Chinese landscape painting employed as general models for the last three books of HERA provide examples."
>
> Many of the books use two or more of these techniques.

◇

By now the reader will have no doubts about all this being merely the tip of an iceberg tailor-made by the gods to destroy the unsinkable Titanic of the smug, corrupt and desperately infotaining love boat of commercial literature.

◇

But something wrong here. Perhaps even everything. At this point the reader may be annoyed, probably is annoyed, by a suspicion of the muscle-bound strenuousness that seems to mark our sclerotic fin de siècle literature, of the sweat socks smell of gym class or the musty mold of Algebra II, and the fear of a hellish boredom.

I know for certain that the author, at least, will be annoyed, as he will be annoyed by my constant comparisons to Joyce, a fellow Prometheus who has not influenced him in the slightest (he once told me, after my ravings about my beloved *Finnegans Wake*, that he didn't "believe in circular world-views").

No, I have missed the real point, and I have cheated him, and you.

◇

Madison Morrison is just like that big glob of mercury my best friend brought to homeroom in the seventh grade. Every time I put my finger on it, it skooshed away, wriggling. We played with it in fascination all day and I cannot

forget it: the glob had *weight*, it had *authority*, it had the solid shiny glamour of the metals, yet it had the feminine elusiveness of the girls I loved. It finally disappeared, alas: too many pokings and pourings dissipated it into ever more tiny droplets, into a silver scum.

I don't want to make the same mistake with the **Sentence of the Gods**. As soon as I have it pigeonholed as being cold, factoidal, urban and impersonal I discover it to be warm, imaginative, pastoral and disarmingly candid.

◇

And funny. It is a comic epic, like another world-swallowing Pop-Art-ish rival, *Gravity's Rainbow*. Cosmicomics. It makes you feel good, it restores your appetite for life. Its plan or form is stochastic, statistical, open-ended, open-minded, open to everything. He himself has said he is not sure where the work is going, like life itself, as if he were trying to spread a rumor that he didn't quite know what he were doing.

"*Revolution* is, above all, a comic novel, intended for readers who think it fun in a book to combine four different settings: America Today, Ancient China, Revolutionary France, and France Today."

The key word here is *fun*. Madison Morrison is not going to lie down and let the pop songwriters and the filmmakers have all the fun, rather in the way Stravinsky embraced syncopation in order to keep the popular and jazz musicians from having all the fun. On opening his work the most uninitiated reader will see the fun and may very well have an impression of frivolousness. The **Sentence of the Gods** is a party, at which no guest is sober.

This incredibly weird and original blending of fun, of the silly giggly joy of life in all its maddening dumbassness, of a Dionysian love of travel and girls and nature, the blending of this with the icy Aeschylean altitudes of the author's mystical and intellectual withdrawal to a height above the timber line where no man or woman can live, with his exemplary (and suicidally unfashionable) avant-garde priestly idealism, is surely the most striking feature of his absurd project. Peter Carravetta has memorably said that "Madison Morrison takes no prisoners"; absolutely, in a sense, but I am not so sure that little girls cannot apply without fear of the bowstring.

◇

My earlier analyses may have given readers the impression that in reading the **Sentence** they are dutifully attending a lecture by Professor Paul Elmer More or Professor Irving Babbit or some other virtuous Humanist, as if the **Sentence of the Gods** were a Book of Virtues. If so, then what are we to make of these bits of exalted religious transport, from *A*?

> Hey, Is That Goldie Hawn?
> Golden Looks for a Golden Girl
> Two Golden Girls Who Work Out of the West

Beauty Bar: The Art of Self-Perfection
How I Fight Insomnia
Herbal Medicine

and

So. You're very
1973.
Helpless? Never . . .
Are there times when
you feel like you're
the only two people
in the world?
Puerto Rican Rum
won't intrude on
that feeling.

Or this almost unbearable memory from the three-hanky yet psychotically detached *Magic*.

> In 1951 my mother is forty-four . . . Though not *a*sexual, she has never in my memory had a sexual bearing about her . . . She *does* flirt with men, but in an asinine way . . . Her sexuality has somehow been linked with—or sublimated into—hysteria.
>
> She also has a strong penchant for sadistic punishment. For example, she likes to make me stand in the kitchen while she goes outside to get a switch, stripping the little branch of its leaves as she returns, then using it on the back of my legs . . . No wonder in later life I feel no affection for her. She has reaped what she has sown.
>
> Though my parents have an obsessive attachment to one another, there is in the household no sense of free play, no involuntary love, no spontaneous affection.

Or the quite accessible prose, acidly observant and sweetly sophisticated as *The New Yorker*, from the political satire *Revolution*, the radically counter-revolutionary *Revolution*, one of the best entrances into the labyrinth of the **Sentence**.

> When he woke up Saturday morning he was still feeling horny, but now he was also depressed. Against his better judgment he had spent an evening at the movies. *Histoire d'Adèle H.*, billed as a French love story, had ended up in a graveyard. It was all too much like history for Jen. The author had kept the poet offstage and offered up the daughter instead, who had gone off to America in search of her loved-one. Her problem seemed to be that she didn't know how to stop writing . . .
>
> Jen dressed and, skipping breakfast, headed for the Grand Palais, where the first Millet retrospective since 1887 had been assembled. The paintings had come from everywhere, but Americans owned a surprising number. Though the show seemed out of place, as he walked back and forth, up and down, Jen began to get the drift. French art in the nineteenth century had been a machine. The painter produced the works. All these tough characters dressed in the French Flag! They weren't intended to make you any happier. "Life is hard," that was the message. "Art is even harder," said Jen.
>
> He was glad to be outside again. Where history takes place, he thought.

Or this immortal flight of Pegasus from *U*, worthy to be memorized by schoolchildren as they do the Gettysburg Address or "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

Freddy's front gas-tank has exploded . . .
Luckily he arrives to find no
Trees on fire and the youngsters taking

Care of the situation. They've all
Joined hands in a small circle around
Freddy's flaming hood and each in turn
Spits a big goober into the blaze.
Soon the fire is out (with a goober
From Bob serving as the real quencher).

Clearly not the way to win the Nobel Prize. This stuff is about as academic and Nobel-Humanist as kill-the-ho gangsta rap, *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila* or *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even.*

◇

The very title is a joke, a superb double entendre. We are told that the word "sentence" may be taken in its "grammatical, judicial or gnomic" meanings. I would go further: the word "of " may be taken in two senses, yielding at least four interpretations:

A discourse or proclamation either handed down from the Universal Absolute or handed up from the Collective Unconscious.

1. A statement *about* (all) the gods, as in Homer or Ovid.
2. A penal sentence, not excluding death, imposed by the gods on the cosmos, the human race, or the author. Thus a redemptive task, a labors of Hercules, imposed on the author. We are all, as John Lennon said, "doing time."
3. A sentence of penal servitude and suffering, not excluding death (*Götterdämmerung*), imposed *on* the gods. As in Christianity, God must merge with the world, suffer passion, and die.

◇

Pop Art . . . Madison Mercury Morrison rightly bridles at any attempts to label him, but though the **Sentence** tracks relentlessly into the next millennium (because it is ultimately a stencil or template placed over reality) it always and ever bears the marks, like a lightly whipped slave girl, of its gay origin in the incomparable Sixties, when the distinction between High and Low magically disappeared, "when The Beatles spiritualized us all."

The **Sentence** is a shiny flat acrylic, not an oil, painted in discrete Ben Day dots. It has the glaring blaring frontality, the faint carrion whiff of crypto-nihilism, the pseudo-genial blank *horror vacui* of Warhol, who said, "Pop Art is about things you like." Lichtenstein said of one of his last works: "I think it's very cheerful . . . that is, unless you find my work depressing."

When Pop Art died, everything else more or less died. No one is now a Populist except a fool or a political or artistic opportunist. Mass Culture sank back into the lumpenproletariat, and High Culture, sadly singing Beatles songs, retreated back into the ivory tower and raised the drawbridge. Except in the **Sentence of the Gods**.

◇

Pop Art . . . one of the most harrowing experiences of my life was a quiet May afternoon when I had tea in Madison Morrison's living room. He is, or maybe was, quite the cup-of-tea host, downright Henry James-ish; I wasn't afraid of committing a faux pas—I am absolutely certain I could have stretched out on the immaculate wood floor if I had had an Okie mind to, or even vomited on it (he referred to the behavior in his home of a mentally ill poet friend of ours as that of "a country squire")—it was that I was afraid of defiling the Mind, of dishonoring The Project ("What's The Project?" Susan Sontag was asked. "Seriousness," she replied).

Some fear, some seriousness. The soft-spoken devil was perfectly aware of my predilection for disturbing radical doctrine (Norman O. Brown, Wittgenstein, Mao) and he calmly, too calmly, proceeded to one-up me, for all time, by telling me that Television was Everything.

I believe he was on a Whitman kick at the time but at any rate the idea was that television *was* Whitman, *was* the I-am-you-as-you-are-me cosmic populist democracy, profoundly American, that Whitman in his hyper-Emersonianism had envisaged (at least before the Gilded Age had taken some of the afflatus out his sails). Morrison told me that Johnny Carson was far more important than any writer of our time. He told me that he had watched television for years with his son and that by the time his son was twelve years old "he knew *everything*." Literature, as Sartre said, was done for. Any other position was snobbish, reactionary, naïve, and doomed to extinction, like the old insistence that all truly educated people must know Latin and Greek. In other words, Oprah *really is* God.

Something of this obscene creed may lie behind the stupefyingly inane yet—when cast into rigid stanzaic form—mysteriously resonant "AUGUST 17, '74" from *A*. Twenty-two pages of reverent transcribing of a single day of The Gospel According to Our Sponsor:

> The Fresh Face of Martha: she washes with Noxzema every day. Freddy cared more about his wheels than my legs. Phil was a sportsman. But now, with David, I use Neet. It leaves my legs smoother. That just-brushed freshness with Dentyne. David and Andy! We've done a few things in L.A., ladies and gentlemen. Say it again, say you love me again. I've heard it before, I'll hear it some more.
>
> A tornado
> was sighted
> on the ground
> a mile from
> Ellington.
> But it sounds like
> wedding bells to me.

Phelps's Law: The Higher The Brow, The Worse The Taste In Popular Culture. Pynchon, Eco, Joyce, Paglia, etc.

I am being unjust here since I believe the author no longer promulgates his terrifying and very plausible thesis that CNN is Reality. The dog may be wagging the tail again, and I doubt if he watches thirty minutes of television a day. As with many another writer's oeuvre, the **Sentence of the Gods** is a graveyard littered with the corpses of previous enthusiasms. Yet all the ghosts have a ghastly vitality.

On the other hand, I am not surprised to learn that the author has embraced the computer and the Internet with gusto, and that he is considering making a video game based on **Sentence of the Gods**.

◇

There is no such thing as postmodernism. There is only modernism, and barbarism.

Nevertheless, if such a thing as has been called postmodernism existed, then the **Sentence of the Gods** would surely be its foundation myth, its ur-text, its indispensable bedtime story, its encyclopedia, its academy. It flaunts that loving, double-edged irony, that obsession with rhetoric, that expensively educated over-culturization combined with a bland enthusiasm for popular culture that are said to characterize this decadent, late-late-Roman phenomenon.

No wonder the wonderful Italians, with their wise and witty post-Marxist mélange of semiotics and Superman comics, have loved, critiqued and published **Sentence of the Gods**. The French, who have the same surrealist roots and the same intransigent Olympian hypertrophy of the intellect as the author, will surely follow, saving him as they have saved other American writers, underrated at home to the point of invisibility, from Poe to Faulkner to John Hawkes to Philip K. Dick.

◇

All is not, however, insouciance, any more than the hilarious "light" movements in Shostakovich's symphonies overshadow their pre-dominantly somber character. A rapt submissiveness before nature in the eponymously titled *All* generates a sacred landscape exfoliating through fourteen pages of a prose "sonnet":

> Author gazes past pines into the starry night, into its flood of luminosity, at individual constellations, at the Milky Way. A rabbit rustles past through blackened brush.
>
> Horizonal flush, followed by darkness. Again, the star-brightened heavens, ever receding, ever enlarging. For reference points, only the faint yellow of pulsating stars.
>
> He peers into dusky surround, its smoky black, its nebulous grey. Stars appear through trees outlined only in charcoal.
>
> The galaxy is dissolving, others are forming.
>
> A cabin light in the distance.

At the opposite pole of intense observation, one is offered a Disneylandish tour through the Svenska Stål steel-making factory in Luleå, Sweden, from *In*. There is no such thing as post-industrialism; there is only industrialism, and bourgeois bullshit. The author's paean to the basis of our life, and his (his father worked in the steel business), deserves a Lenin Prize:

> We have arrived at the parking lot in front of the ovens, where red-hot coke is about to be "pushed" into a cooling wagon. *When coal is heated in a closed chamber, volatile matter is distilled from it in the form of gases, and the coal becomes coke.* Fuming, it empties forth from a holder half a meter wide, seven meters tall, dropping like volcanic magma into the wagon. *It is then used as a reducing agent in the blast furnace.* Red, yellow, hot; "more than 1000°," our guide comments. Black smoke and flames swirl off its surface, as the cooling wagon moves along the track to accommodate the rush of burning cakes.

Or take the strange case of *Light*, still my favorite of all the books. It is a poem of 216 ten-line stanzas. This regularity produces a "serious," mesmerizing effect, somewhat mystagogical and much to my Gothic tastes. Despite my admiration for Ashbery I consider *Light* the finest long philosophical poem since "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and yet it is in reality an almost immiscible colloidal suspension of extreme physical action and utter reflective quietude, of drama and solitude.

The mysterious power of relaxation the book had on me led me to pronounce it the perfect bedside, pre-sleep book, and it was only decades later that I learned it was based entirely on the author's dreams! I really had thought much of the action was "real." No wonder it made me voluptuously sleepy, yet it completely lacks the usual tedium of dream accounts, partly because it incorporates interpretations of the dreams, and other reactions, into the "story." Dreams, that is, as pretexts for meditative poetry by "an extremist in an exercise":

> From the steep incline a
> woman addresses the audience,
> partly hidden by the railing.
> I drop to the floor. Though
> a butt of ridicule, yet
> I have escaped. And
> when the goddesses assemble
> with the missing elements,
> only seven remain,
> but that will be enough.

◇

It is possible that the reader is beginning to have doubts as to the author's (not to mention his commentator's) mental balance. Since loss of control is manifestly not at issue, a different, perhaps previously unknown, psychopathology may be implicated.

Take the two epyllia, *U* and *Need*. Both of these two very original and slightly repellent quasi-masterpieces are "stories" written in exactly 1000 lines of verse apiece, in regular meters. The first uses a nine-syllable line in what the

author calls "a colloquial and deliberately gross" style (remember those goobers?) to adumbrate a domestic phantasmagoria that resembles the somewhat nightmarish and absurd deconstructions of Suburbia found in certain independent filmmakers. The second, the companion and mirror opposite of the first, uses perfect iambic pentameter in an "elevated and deliberately decadent" style to tell a mythic and heroic tale of one Alexander and his mysterious "she."

For both books the author composed *one line of verse every day for one thousand days*. And for *Need*, the author read *one page* of a 1000-page chronological anthology of English verse "each evening in preparation for the next day's line"!

Was ever the Muse in this humor wooed? Anima of the Thousand Days?

This kind of obsession, and inhuman Napoleonic discipline, applied to the whole **Sentence** itself, suggests the eccentric yet inspiring attempt by that Czech immigrant, continued by seven of his children after his death, to carve, sculpt, a statue of Crazy Horse out of an entire mountain in the Dakotas. A life work: if Madison Morrison were not one of the most sophisticated and delicately reticulated minds of our time, his project might resemble those vast and intricate works of verbal or plastic folk art secretly elaborated over decades in basements, desert gas stations, or mental institutions by unknown industrious folk "geniuses."

◇

A crank, then, with a private schizoid cosmic system. Like Stockhausen's *Licht*, also in seven epic parts organized by the seven days of the week, a seven-night opera more complex than the *Ring* and as nutty as Dada. Like Blake's Prophetic Books: Blake, pitied for being mad by his rationalist Enlightenment contemporaries, all now forgotten.

Like *Performance*: "the only performance that makes it, that really makes it, that makes it *all the way*, is the one that achieves madness."

Salvador Dali: "The difference between myself and a madman is that I am not mad."

Harold Bloom says the prime prerequisite for admission into the canon turns out to be, of all things, *strangeness*. For thousands of years countless thousands of writers have tried to Do the Job, delight and improve humanity, achieve recognition and enter the Pantheon. They had talent, intelligence, sensitivity, learning, imagination, wit, industry, virtue, good intentions, worldly wisdom, and even cosmic vision. Like our modern novelists, they had everything, and they have all completely disappeared, their books crumbled to dust. They just weren't crazy enough, queer enough.

◇

I am not especially disposed to apologize to readers who may be offended or unconvinced by the sycophantic tone of these remarks, hobbled as I am by grotesque space limitations in dealing with something of the scope, ambition,

and achievement of the **Sentence of the Gods**. What would such readers do if they had a handful of pages to describe and defend the *Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost* to an open-minded person who had never heard of these works? Their tone would be either suspiciously raving and glib or suspiciously constipated and cautious. Advancing age, with its deterioration of patience and self-control, has loosened my inhibitions as it has loosened my bladder. I choose the rave.

I am not alone. So eminent a poet as the great James Merrill could hardly be accused of groupiedom, cultish idiocy or ulterior motives, and it is amazing with what perspicacity he perceived the **Sentence** at such an early stage of its construction: "We want double vision from our poets," he says, "but Madison Morrison . . . is not about to leave it at that. He must persist until as many of the world's "appearances" as humanly possible, along with its multiple faiths and literary modes, have been called into play. In this ongoing binocular museum what we know is distanced, what we do not know is brought near, always with skill, erudition and great good humor."

Or Peter Carravetta, who in his subtle and very funny "Toward a Cosmographica Poetica" assays a quite respectable grab at The Glob in only a few sentences: "From the very beginning, he is off on the scriptural charts of the endless journey, and unlike a pious Christian, he is not so convinced there is a salvation Afterwards: there is only the search, *la busqueda*, *la sfida perenne*, *l'entretien infini*, a communication with the world both seen and unseeable apparently just around the corner, beyond the next crest, or perceivable somehow on the riverbank across . . .

"One begins to get the sense that according to Morrison there is no ONE life, one identity, or a single unifying *Logos* or *Ratio* that can hold all these interlocking vicissitudes together. This is not seen as a crisis, but rather as an opportunity . . .

". . . he is not satisfied with self-irony and social parody. Morrison will not wallow in self-indulgent defeatism. He will look outside, further out, further into something that might contain both his body/soul and the 'sense' of life, of society, indeed of the universe. Here then commences the endless journey."

Or Terry Kennedy, whose graceful blurb for *Or* applies more generally: "With the movie camera's impersonality—at every angle undercut by the poet's heart—Morrison conducts our tour of Siam, recording glimpses of its ancient culture but focusing on its present-day life. Everything changes, he seems to say. We all seek something!—a classic temple. Anything—a Coca Cola. From within her ever-unfolding lotus, sound the siren chants of Asia's modern mantras. Morrison blesses us with his innuendo yet passes no judgment."

◇

Mr. Carravetta's salient concept is *endless journey*. On the very first page of *Excelling* we find:

> The boat rolls onward, its graceful progress sympathetic to the senses. Before long night will fall. Tomorrow will bring a new day.
> The adventure is underway.

Adventure: I understand one of the author's next self-assignments is a voyage upriver into the jungles of Africa. No one undergoes such danger in an imploding continent except National Public Radio correspondents or scientific researchers, and *they* get paid for it. Folly: like the **Sentence** itself. And as the books become evermore picaresque (the whole work is picaresque anyway), one almost hopes that Madison Morrison would disappear forever on this berserk pilgrimage, like Ambrose Bierce, leaving EL, perhaps appropriately, unfinished.

◇

It would require a separate study to convey anything of the fascination, daring and opulence of the "travel books": *Realization*, *Or*, *Divine*, *Happening*, etc. The first books in the **Sentence** give the rather austere impression of a forbidding and hieratic solitude; this inwardness ends up auto-destructing like unto a dynamited dam, in which an irresistible flood sweeps the author away to, almost literally, the ends of the earth: Thailand, Finland, The People's Republic of China, Italy, India, and so on.

A sort of shorthand style that sometimes uses sentence fragments and omits unnecessary words enables the travel books to amass a mountain-mosaic of observed detail as huge and grandiose as Olympus Mons on Mars. These tens or hundreds of thousands of photo-like jewels have their number enriched in every sense by the use of the intertextual technique; *Divine*, for example, has quotations from Vasari, Claudio Lazzarro, Dorothy Sayers, Benvenuto Cellini, Plotinus, Veronese, Pliny, Ruskin, Jan Morris, Castiglione, Taine, academic scholars, and just about anyone else who has ever shed light on beautiful Italy.

From solitude we go to a cast of thousands, a Whitmanic *tsunami* of humanity the peripatetic lunatic sees, speaks with, interacts with. He has a delicious friendly time in Thailand, discusses Mel Gibson as Hamlet with a young lady in Scandinavia, and in India writes of his collection of "Americans in Madras" and "Rich Madrasis" with the disillusioned affection of a Maugham. And always he is looking, staring, in the sheer pleasure of *seeing*. His only rival in describing people's clothes is Tom Wolfe, and few have described backwater cities so meticulously, lovingly, not to mention every pretty woman the Good Lord ever made and distributed among the races of Man.

The exotic is preferred (though his style makes Houston, Texas exotic), possibly in part because these worlds are disappearing as they are homogenized by global capitalism and ground up into Wendyburgers. There is a pathos in all the travel books; the author catches irreplaceable historical cultures in all their color

and provinciality at the moment of their vanishing into the 21st century, as Ms. Kennedy noted; he pins them like butterflies and seals them forever in the glass cases of his books (compared by James Merrill to a "museum"). The exotic for its own sake, dhotis and idli and vaporetti and the Piazza del Duomo and wats and Bangkok tuk-tuks and Norwegian caviar and fjords in fog and Cross-the-Bridge rice noodles in Yunnan and the Chongqing Economy and Technology and Development Area and the Rothko Chapel.

And all of course synchronized with its proper position in the master plan of the **Sentence**. The traveling is itself an allegory: the adventure is underway.

◇

What is behind all this? Anything? The author rattles his saber. Quite menacingly, at any invasive interrogation as to his "intent," but if it is possible to mutter in a letter he has muttered, grudgingly growled, that *perhaps, in part* **Sentence of the Gods** might be seen as an attempt to find a "realist" alternative to or equivalent for the modern realist epic novel (he refuses to read contemporary fiction).

Or rather, *who* is behind all this? Anyone? He has lately dropped hints that the "I" of the **Sentence** should be taken as undefined, as a fluid variable; he says that one of his friends refers to him as "the so-called Madison Morrison." Certainly *well*-called: what artist would not envy those tripping alliterative dactyls, a name as if deliberately designed for immortality by a committee of poets?

No "I" . . . O.K., I get it, but I have the misfortune, so to speak, of knowing the author personally, and behind everything I can't help seeing perhaps the most *unegotistical* college teacher I have ever observed, a veritable finger pointing to the moon, with the power to transmit to his students by osmosis his infinite delight in, his salvation in, literature (and painting and film). I also know for a fact that he has had a very difficult life, yet in every encounter with him I have been struck by his serenity, a serenity that also dominates the **Sentence of the Gods** as its central characteristic. This Zen-like tranquillity has been, believe me, hard-won, and when I think of his quiet mellifluous voice and his Buddha smile . . .

That's it . . . his smile. That damn smile.

◇

Updike: "The willingness to risk excess on behalf of one's obsessions is what distinguishes an artist from an entertainer."

As the world becomes progressively dumbed down into an inane visual culture based on a religion of senseless noisy motion, motion for its own sake, as literacy becomes a mandarin skill, as writers either make their pact with the Devil or slink off to drink themselves to death, the so-called Madison Morrison remains at his lonely post like a soldier whose comrades have all gone over to the enemy. Emulate his equanimity, if you can, but don't be misled by it or by

his love for women or his predilection for comedy or his maddening lust for fame. Yes, postmodernists, there *are* literary martyrs. Torches. Condemned to his own sentence, to his life sentence of hard labor and obscurity, smiling in his chains, he upholds challenging standards of purity and rigor that have become an embarrassing anachronism, and an eternal inspiration.

Madison Morrison puts us all to shame.

Toward a Poetica Cosmographica

Peter Carravetta

Take your pick: ferocious iconoclast, perennial avant-gardist, implacable innovator, obsessive writer, transdisciplinary voyager at the limits of (mortal) comprehension, mind-bending researcher of (im)possible cosmographies. The list of critical epithets or of guiding threads could be expanded, perhaps it already has been, at the hands of more daring interpreters; but Madison Morrison is not to be contained within any, however supple, theorem of art. Fantastic! Let us thank the riotous assembly of the gods on Mount Olympus. (Yes, I know there are clusters of other even more intriguing pantheons disseminated throughout the globe, in fact, that's what makes Morrison so refreshing, enthusiasmatic?).

This past decade, the decadence, the decay, has been most horrific. At all levels. Some of us, some of my colleagues, some of them poets, had most recently renounced the very possibility of an art form—what am I saying?—of an artistic practice which would yet disclose unimaginable images, unthinkable thoughts, unwriteable scripts. As if with the end of the Cold War, with all that talk about the End of Modernity (and with that, necessarily, of the Avant-Gardes), artists had to moor and mothball their sloops, corral their vaticinations, museumificate their ever-challenging per-versions, and yield to the digitized channels of untrammeled videocapitalism. In one Dominant Version of (Literary) History, with the passing of (chronological) time, the present becomes past, the new becomes old, and what was revolutionary yesteryear is transformed into conservative Tradition, at best an ever-present procedure or strategy, at worst an unseen unrecognized habitus, a stock-response. The Avant-Gardes of yesterday won Pyrrhic victories: From Picasso to Man Ray to Dali to Pollock, from Apollinaire to Zukofsky to Bern Porter to Kostelanetz, pure signifiers (color, line, grapheme in vertiginous endless juxtapositions and cross-pollination of genres and styles) have won, and can now be seen daily, tons and tons of it, in advertising. Aesthetic *Entfremdung* has severed the links between forms and contents, with the adulation of the former at the expense of the latter. *Wozu dichter* in these days of obsessive serial recycling and free marketing of several millennia's worth of icons and images and tenuous yet durable encapsulations of . . . Grand Values?

Kostelanetz once wrote that "Modern art at its best deals not in the manipulation of conventions but their conspicuous neglect, because familiar forms are the most common counters of commerce; one test of genuine innovation in art, even today, is its resistance to an immediate sale."[1] Like most writers shaped by that generation, Morrison certainly manipulated conventions, especially in his earlier work, but, we might say, that *that* was the mode of research and expression for a writer whose only overarching characteristic can

be subsumed under the aegis of graphology. And he has to this day progressively gotten more and more difficult, complex, definitely not someone up for "an immediate sale." It doesn't matter that he is "difficult": again, in the great tradition of the Avant-Gardes, may "the plain reader be damned," as the magazine *transition* announced way back in 1927.

Art ought not go out to the reader: everything in our society seems to want to do that, every sales pitch, each political rally, all human intercourse. But at the same time, no one is advocating total detachment from the reader: this is no lyrical poet! Rather, what counts is a shift in emphasis, of the type advocated a few years ago by Ron Silliman, Don Wellman, Lyn Hejinian and others who worked with O.ARS/Toward a New Poetics.[2]

Morrison seems to believe we have to make the effort to go to the artwork. From here one of the traits of his poetics can be expunged from later works such as *Engendering*,[3] and *Realization*.[4] If art is sacred, if art is cosmological, then one must accept the rituals, the trials and tribulations of the journey, the sense of wonder and discovery that emanates from this dynamics of the mind, this expurgation of the habituated social unconscious, the catathonies of our self-reassuring selves. But art is also production (as opposed to reproduction), it is a first-time experience again and again. Madison Morrison spares no one, he takes no prisoners. From the very beginning, he is off on the scriptural charts of the endless journey, and unlike a pious Christian, he is not so convinced there is a salvation Afterwards: there is only the search, *la busqueda, la sfida perenne, l'entretien infini*, a communication with the world both seen and unseeable apparently just around the corner, beyond the next crest, or somehow perceivable on the riverbank across.

◇

Let's look at *Revolution*.[5] It is written by two authors, "by four hands," the Italians would say. It deals with two young college coeds, their experiences, their relationships, a married professor, and a grid of oblique discourses. Techniques of citing from diaries, transcriptions of phone calls, reproduction of the French texts the characters utilize, direct translations, scenes wherein characters drink, party, extol or question or reminisce about what they are reading. Style is cut and dry, descriptive, a sort of *école du regard* approach. But also a post-Pirandello post-Beckett somber ex-position. Certain topics teased in different contexts, for example, the problem of non-communication (between mother and son, p. 58, with a clerk, pp. 67-68, within the couple, p. 138), or the relevance of dreams, which are as important as actual conscious memories of bygone experiences. The prose makes us go from dream to reality to newer projection effortlessly. One begins to get the sense that according to Morrison there is no one life, one identity, or a single unifying *Logos* or *Ratio* that can hold all these interlocking vicissitudes together. This is not seen as a crisis, but rather as an opportunity. The multiple identities are not necessarily to be equated with

clinical schizophrenia. Rather, it would appear that we have a possibility to re-connect or interweave somehow all the strands of our thoughts, as many pulsions from the imaginary as may occur to us during the act or process of reading (or experiencing). This allows for the re-instating of the present. The technique of reproducing journal entries in *tempo reale*, in the *jetz-zeit* of the act-of-writing does not so much intrude into the narratological realms created and explored along the way as remind us, or even warn us, that this is a writer writing a story. This technique allows for historical reconstructions, and since the line between Story and History has long been crisscrossed and often erased,[6] *Revolution* may be understood not only as a major turn in the writer's journeying toward a new kind of geohistorical narrative, but also as representative of the theoretical juggernaut of the boundaries between genres and among disciplines.

For instance, in Chapter Six: "A Chinaman Looks at Paris" (which reconnects with Ch. 2): who is to say that the "outsider's" experience of Paris is not as important as Voltaire's or Michelet's version of what Paris is, or was? One can read/hear a battery of voices: from conscience? An alter ego? A phantasm? A friend? A citation from Roussel? Or Napoleon? A "heavenly maiden"? Slipping from dream into history (pp. 141-42), the narrator meets a "guide" (is it an Enkidu? a Vergil? an angel?) who takes him through the Louvre, synecdoche of the Western Understanding of (the) Art(s).[7] The two undergraduates, Elizabeth and Kathy, re-emerge from time to time in the economy of the narratological domain. They mull over grand philosophemes, occasionally from a non-Euroamerican context: "All life is sorrow. All sorrow is due to desire. Sorrow can only be stopped by stopping desire" (p. 165). Does anyone believe in this? Morrison will go on in subsequent books to question, explore and reframe the question. The character's leaning toward idealism and dialectic is no longer suspicious (see p. 234). History, according to Tu Fu. We haven't even begun to think the Ancient Chinese Way. But the notion—history as/is adventure—is a great leap forward. Roussel: the undying, the primordial belief in the power of literature (p. 167). *Revolution* survives, in my mind, the intra-textual topicality, as well as the external context of its genesis.

The Cold War is over, the Avant-Gardes have been defanged and subjected to the laws of mediacommerce, some experimental and committed literature is beginning to sound "dated," but not this text, not at all. It was already full of its own self-transcendence, it made a cogent case for the immanence of allography, as Genette calls it in his recent book,[8] the writing of the other-place, the writing as placing-elsewhere. In order to be able to write in such a continually transformative manner, some well-oiled, if not ageless, tech-niques are necessary. In a sequence in Chapter 7, "Storming the Bastille," we have the following rhetorical crossings: the narrator's story alights upon an episode beginning with a journal entry, in which a character, Deflue, enters *from within*

an imaginary historical consciousness, introduces in turn Governor de Launey, who in turn exists solely within Elizabeth's dream, which now is nested within the story of the highly circumstantial taking of the Bastille, which, it is made plain, exists now only within the textual dimension (engagement with a Reader is assumed), which exists within a merchandise object called a book, which existed in the mind/hands of two authors for several months perhaps, one of whom is a person called Madison Morrison who, of course, may have several "biographies" or life-stories going on somewhere in the eastern hemisphere—in the end, trouncing the very question of authorial intentions, of historical causality, and of semiotic or logical primacies, closing with the equivalent of a punch in the eye: Who fired the first shot? The soldiers or the crowd? (p. 148).

◇

The collection of poems *SOLUNA*[9] affords another possibility of entering Madison Morrison's cosmos in a near chronological fashion. Already his trademark acrostic following the frontispiece but preceding the Table of Contents alerts us that we are about to embark on a rich journey. The key Figuras are arranged in the tradition of visual poetry and some of John Cage. These are: the Sun, the Moon, the deities Ares, Hermes, the messenger or bearer of communication and all exchanges par excellence, then the earth-mother Hera, Aphrodite, the über-symbol of femininity, ending with El, which in the Old Testament stood for God. If anyone looks for the ganglia of Morrison's pluriverse, then here we have some "constants." SOLUNA is a search for "sense" at that fatidic *mezzo cammin*: "you're an extraordinary thirty-three. / Some say you're not typical. Your demeanor says / otherwise. You have squeezed until it hurts / but found nothing in the middle" (p. 13). In other words, the narrator ponders what he is all about, juxtaposing the external image he is recognized by with what he feels is his inner perception or attitude. Wringing the knot further, he finds there is nothing there to rest his soul or psychoassumptions on. Unlike many a poet confronted with these neoplatonic dilemmas, he is not satisfied with self-irony and social parody.

Morrison will not wallow in self-indulgent defeatism. He will look outside, further out, further into something that might contain both his body/soul and the "sense" of life, of society, indeed of the universe. Here then commences the endless journey. So he begins to continue his experimental/experiential quest in allegorical terms. *A Triptych of Anapocrypha* (p. 25) attempts to meld opposites. Then, he turns to the figura of the "guide" (p. 28). Further down, in "THE BLINDING OF HOMER" (p. 40), he pushes the envelope: "Is there really any choice?"—somewhat perplexed that there exists a circularity to the questing after the Great (Western) Metaphysical Questions. The narrator becomes a witness, both passive and participatory, processing the pulsions, reckoning with the recurrence of beginnings-and-endings.

And then we edge into that geography of the cultural (un)conscious that will become his trademark. The sequence *O* (pp. 51-83) is a minimalist *elenchos* of specific flashes whose only claim is to have been raised by the narrator's consciousness, where word, image and place re-present an unseen, unsayable sequence of feeling, image, idea. In the sequence *Light* (pp. 87-158) the poetic voice, or persona, grows and conquers longer linguistic structures, what the Italians might call *bozzetti* or frames, deploying cinematographic techniques, two to three stresses per line, still short and swift. The next poem, *U* (pp. 161-185), re-turns to an externalized, and therefore sign-dependent ego, signaled by the letter; thus the poet can narrate in realist terms what one may see of one's self from the outside, as it were. Here nature, quotidian events and the "others," can be catalysts toward self-knowledge without the preassumptions and liabilities of the all-knowing Platonic or Cartesian Self. *Need* (pp. 189-213) moves in another direction, exhibiting a pseudo-epic function, but in style and tone it wraps along its pentameter the entire English tradition, from medieval quest narrative through Ariosto-like extra-diegetic reminders to the reader, the pedagogic neoclassical tale so blatantly evoking the quest narrative, staying just inside irony and parody, in a way allowing a philosophical (search) for trans-historical *topoi*. For one thing, the geographies are now a plethora of inner struggles (p. 189), inscribing a cosmos with endless trajectories, equilibria and schisms. And I will go to the ends of the road(s) for the Unions, indeed the conjunctions.

Some palpable evidences are that the greater understanding of one's many selves must occur with/through a woman. The narration of the journey must be self-consciously allegorical, therefore *both* literal and figurative. Moreover, that obsessive (and class- and culture-induced) need to resolve contradictions begins to yield to the "need" of a flowing dialectics of opposites; indeed, it seems to allude to the necessity to recognize, accept and work with irresolvable paradoxes, the enigmatic, what is unsentimentally *the way*. This entails, as we gather from some of the shorter pieces at the end of the collection, dealing with the exacerbation of the schism between word and thing, between person and the naming of the person (cf. "FACULTY EXCHANGE ENVELOPES" (pp. 222-224), the ubiquity of the tags and names of the lived-life, the traces of having-lived reduced to a restaurant check. *SOLUNA* is at one and the same time the transition from the "end" of the experimental avant-gardism of western poetry and the beginning of a different, cosmographic, planetary approach to the writing art.

◇

Reading Madison Morrison over the past week or so, I have often felt I was reading a long projected, but never realized, version of my own poetic auto-

biography. That's when I ran to Kostelanetz' *Autobiographies*.[10] An in-progress textuality that abhors any prescribed poetic or work dynamics. A forever stalled pro-ject, the very moment one is aware that programming is *de rigeur*. Programming. I remember the scriptoric caldron of Raffaele Perrotta.[11] Unlike Morrison's, Perrotta's indefinite lexicophilosophical exile is strictly intraconsciousness. I like Morrison's approach to interleaving the sacred books of the Veda and other ancient Indian texts in an open-handed manner. Although I also think many readers are initially derailed at the intercalating of non-European scriptures in Morrison's work. But that's the challenge. I am still too much *inside* western metaphysics, I have always worn its logologies uneasily and have unsewn and shed many a shocking theorem during these past 40 years. I have also been reading more non-Italian, non-American writers during the past seven or eight years than I had ever done before. Now that I think about it, Raffaele Perrotta did teach for five or six years at the University of Sydney, I still have his letters. He lived it like a Napoleon on St. Helen's, like a Baudelaire out in Morocco, *come un castigo di Dio*. He re-turned to the endlessly roiling poetic magma of the West, I tell my friends when I describe him: somewhere between Heracleitus, Nietzsche, Pound, D'Annunzio, Derrida and James Joyce.

Morrison exhibits similar traits. Less intellectualoid, of course. But I don't think there is a re-turn possible from Morrison's exile. Uh, I surely haven't traveled as much as he has, but I did travel to and from several cities and countries and counties and condominiums, voraciously engaged. In plain English, I would say I think I understand where he is coming from. Scratch that: where he is going. Owing to the extra-tension(al), the rhyzomatic cross-breeding, the *inter-esse* (that cantilevers the supervigilant self-awareness, as when he says "the present author," "in front of me," *et cetera,* Morrison can entertain a true non-axiomatic, non-prejudicial ex-change, con-versatio, actualize a *mit-sein*, in sum, a dialogue! Where what counts is the inter-relation *without* either beginning or end. I think I can follow this up with several quotations from Heidegger. In *Was heißt Denken*[12] what needs to be thought is *Sage*, that is, myth insofar as *Saying*, as that articulation (writing, say) that speaks to the thought-provoking (*das Bedenkliche*). There is no *outside* to this cosmos, but at least there is no longer a *beginning* and an *end*. Elaborating (not without anxieties) Nietzsche, Heidegger did clear up the intro-spective self-consciousness of the 20th-century understanding of the human being. Did he go "beyond"? Perhaps. In Heidegger's assessment of what is there left us as viable to transcend the silent strictures of western metaphysics, we find the Event, the Happening, *das Ereignis* as the sole *locus* where a meaningful entrapment of/by the *Lichtung* is possible. Madison Morrison seems to have made of these Radiating Clearings (my translation, or better yet, vision/version) a way of life, extending them horizontally (across cultures, geostoric sites, vertically-lived Being-in-such-and-such-a-place). Now Heidegger goes on to repeat that what must be retained is Memory, a sort of

mare nostrum wherein *Andenken* (recalling) can happen. In Morrison, geohistory is the operating realm. Heidegger remains within western *logology*, Madison Morrison chooses to exercise his quest for a divine disclosure in the *heterology* of non- or extra-western mythologies and philosophies of the planet.

He could rightly be called a Planetary Writer. His cosmology will inevitably look to the divinities of other peoples, of differently compressed or expanded times, and introduce a sense of temporality that we cannot clearly and quickly identify. The writer who pens down meticulously, almost obsessively, the interweaving of these clusters of discourse is, of course, unfurling a cosmology. Cosmology is a tricky business. It is in-between Physics and Metaphysics. In his *Philosophia Rationalis* (1744) Wolff writes: "*Cosmologia est scientia mundi qua talis,*" better yet: "*pars physicae quae de corporibus qua talibus agit atque docet quomodo ex iis componatur mundus*."

Matter and form, movement and rest, quantity and quality, image and thought are here *ab initio* co-related. What in other contexts—for instance, in postcolonial and diasporic writings—are re-defined, reconceptualized critical notions of both philosophy (and with it, science) and art (and within it, literature) and exude vague agonistic, ideological attacks on ever more abstract social forces, are instead recast, in Morrison's *Realization* and *Happening*, in a processual fusion of disparate long-narratives, exhibiting the diverse temporalities of the writing-act, the reclaiming of a-temporal prophetic *Saying*, the pragmatics of existence, the negotiations of living life as a thinking/feeling Being. And, yes, a still elusive spirituality of sorts. It is a spirit of both man and nature, society and history, aligned upon borders, boundaries of all types. But not, because of this, partial and de-limiting. Quite the contrary. And since the cosmology can only come into being as Writing, then we must call Morrison's work a *cosmography*.

The poet is here an *allographic* author, the convener in his scene of writing of textualities, of semantics, and more broadly of images (or ideologies) that rub sharply against one another yet engage by sequencing frames (*Gestell)* yielding relatively accessible juxtapositions, alter-natively by (symphonic) resonance, by metaphoric affinity, by metonymic conflict, by micro-semiotic abductions. Here one might also suppose that the epic journey undertaken by this author ultimately wishes to re-concile (not ri-*legare*) the undaunted *différends*[13] of existence. That may be why he speaks of a project of 20-plus volumes. Should he live to prophetic ages, 300 to 400 years being typical (as in the Bible, the Veda and the Popul Vuh), the journey will go on. And Hermes, *is it a co-incidence?* is his protector, guiding/guardian angel and playful trader of signification, the aegis of the scripting nomad.

Notes

1. Richard Kostelanetz, *Autobiographies*, Mudborn Press, Santa Barbara, CA, 1980 (1975).
2. See for example O.ARS/1*,* "Coherence," Cambridge, MA, 1981; O.ARS/2*,* "Perception," ibid., 1982; *Ironwood* 20, Tucson, AZ, 1982, and other special issues of poetry and poetics journals from the mid-to late '80s that grappled with the issue of what constitutes an audience or a community in the face of, on the one hand, the splintering of the poetic *parole*, and on the other the issue of the role and relevance of poetry among the other arts in the advanced stages of electronic and media-driven performance arts.
3. Madison Morrison, *Engendering*, Poetry Around, Norman, OK, 1990.
4. Madison Morrison, *Realization*, Anterem Edizioni, Verona, 1996.
5. Madison Morrison and Dan Boord, *Revolution*, Bookman Books, Taipei, 1985.
6. See on this the theoretical work of Paul Ricoeur, principally *Temps et récit*. The issue has been at the center of many debates in postcolonial and cultural studies in the United States for the past 20 years at least. Writers on both sides of the Atlantic have long raided official histories and used their "fiction" in variously motivated attempts at re-writing history or the national allegories of emerging sovereign states or diasporic cultures seeking some sort of homogeneous or coherent sense of identity.
7. Reminded me, minus the stylistic fireworks, of Gabriele D'Annunzio's dazzling romp through the allegorical images of the Sistine Chapel in *Maia*, 1903.
8. Gérard Genette, *L'oeuvre d'art: Immanence et transcendance*, Minuit, Paris, 1993.
9. Madison Morrison, *SOLUNA: Collected Earlier Poems*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1989.
10. I also spontaneously associated Morrison to works by Paul Vangelisti (for example, *Portfolio*, Red Hill Press, Los Angeles, CA, 1985), Thomas Pynchon, and some artists published in *Dock(s)* and *Carte Segrete*. But the list could be expanded. See my next installment.
11. See for example Raffaele Perrotta, *Insignia*, Antonio Pellicani Editore, Rome, 1992.
12. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, translated by J.Glenn Gray, Harper & Row, New York, 1968.
13. Conflict or contest of phrases (meanings, therefore, and of referents) as elaborated by Jean-François Lyotard in *Le Différend*, Minuit, Paris, 1983.