VI

Interviews

With a Scholar on Chios

MM: I am about to set out for Vrontados to visit the Seat of Homer, but you tell me that "maybe it is not Homer's." What do you mean? *Herodotus of Alikarnossos tells the story of the birth, childhood and adulthood of Homer* (John Perikos).
Scholar: There is disputation. *In the Aeolic city of Kyme gathered together.* They are not sure. *Many Greeks.* Some say that maybe it is a tablet where sacrifices were made. *Many of these from Magnesia.*
MM: This is the opposite of Homer, isn't it?—Death instead of Life.
Scholar: Tell me, which place you come from?
MM: From America.
Scholar: The United States?
MM: Yes, The United States of America. *Among which was Melanopos, son of Ithagienis, in turn the son of Krithonos.* Now some scholars say that Homer's tomb will eventually be found in Vrontados, others, in Volissos.
Scholar: I do not heard [sic] about that. They say Homer, seven places, they will argue.
MM: Yes, I understand. And what is *your* opinion? *Melanopos, who had few worldly possessions, in Kyme married the daughter of Omyritos.*
Scholar: I cannot say. *And from this marriage a girl was born, named Kritheida.*
MM: Some say that he was born in Ismir, then went to Ithaka, and only afterward came to Chios.
Scholar: They say so, but it's not sure. *When Melanopos and his wife died, Kleanax of Argos looked after their daughter.* Many people have their opinion about the origin of Homerus.
MM: Some people say that he was still sighted—could still see—before he went to Ithaka, but when he was in Ithaka, *then* he went blind.
Scholar: There is a story about Homer: Evvios says that he includes many things that were not *permitted.* Not given over to the public. Like, let us say, the secret. How would you call it? The things they say are like Elefsis, they make the *mysteria.* In his poems he says many things. *As the years passed by, the girl, so it happened, had an affair and became pregnant.*
MM: He says many things that are secret; in other words, you are telling me that Homer must be understood in a different way. *At first she kept this a secret.*
Scholar: So finally they blind him. *But later it was understood by Kleanax.*
MM: How interesting! I did not know this story. *Who was angry at what he saw to be a great disgrace.* I did not know that, though I once wrote a poem called "The Blinding of Homer." *He blamed Kritheida very much.* Now here is another question: *Telling her how she was a shame to the people.* Do you consider the Homeric poems *sacred*?
Scholar: Yes, many people explain that Homer in his poems is writing secrets, of all history. So, like Socrates, because he say these things, he is punished.

MM: Let me ask you something else. *At that time the Kymeans built a town in the innermost part of Ermeiou Bay.* Do you think Homer was one man or many men?
Scholar: Some people historical, you know, say that Homer was Ulysses.
MM: So Homer is Odysseus!
Scholar: Yes, and they also say Ulysses is a person that we call Homer. *As it was being constructed Theseus gave to the town the name Smyrna, in memory of his wife. This Theseus, among the first Thessalians to build a city at Kyme, was the son of Evmilos, in turn the son of a very rich man called Admitos. At this point Kleanax helped Kritheida to leave, bringing her to a safe home, that of Isminia from Veotia, who was a Greek immigrant and a very good friend.*
MM: Let me ask you yet another question. *After a time.* Do you believe that Homer wrote both the Iliad and the Odyssey? *Kritheida went with other women to the River Melis, on the occasion of some celebration.*
Scholar: Well, I believe so. *Here, as her time came, she gave birth to a son, Homer, who was not then blind but enjoyed full sight.* He was collect these [*sic*], because they were old poems. *And she named the boy Melisigenis, taking the name from the river.*
MM: So, when Homer is writing about Odysseus, he is writing about himself ? *Up to that time Kritheida was staying with Isminia, but after some time she left, doing odd jobs to provide for the boy and herself.* In the Odyssey, you know, Odysseus is a storyteller, for example. *And she was also educating the boy as much as she could.*
Scholar: Yes, I believe so. *At the time when Homer was in Smyrna, there was a teacher called Fimios, who instructed children in general education and music.*
MM: So it occurs to me that all the characters in the Odyssey may well be figures out of Homer's autobiography. *At that time Fimios, who was living alone, paid Kritheida to spin wool.* However traditional the sources of his stories may be. *He received money from his students whilst she worked, showing modesty and prudence, and this pleased him.*
Scholar: It may be true.
MM: When I arrive at Daskalopetra, what will I find there? *Eventually he tried to persuade her to live with him.*
Scholar: Well, *daskalopetra* means "the stone of the teacher." *He told her that he would call Melisigenis his own son and educate him so that he might become famous.*
MM: In addition, then, to being a poet, and, like Odysseus, a traveler, Homer was also a teacher. *Because he had noticed that Homer was very clever.*
Scholar: Yes, a teacher. *In the end he persuaded her.* He has the old knowledge. *To do whatever he said.*
MM: By "old knowledge" what do you mean? *Homer had a good, diligent character.*
Scholar: I mean the stories from the old era. *And in matters of education he gained distinction from the others.*
MM: Do you believe, for example, that Homer knew about Egypt? *As the years passed by, not only was the child becoming a man, he was also coming to equal Fimios in the extent of his learning.*

Scholar: I believe that Homer was older than they. *Finally, when Fimios died, he left his property to the child.*
MM: Older than the Egyptians? *After some time, Kritheida also died.*
Scholar: Yes, because the civilization of the Egyptians comes from Creta. *And Melisigenis succeeded Fimios in teaching.* The Minoan kings went from Creta to Egypt and gave them the knowledge of their civilization.
MM: I have just been in Egypt, and I lived on Crete thirty years ago. You know, Odysseus often tells people that he comes from Crete.
Scholar: I did not hear that he comes from Creta.
MM: It is just an idea of mine. Perhaps his family originally came from Crete. Homer, you recall, says that Odysseus on his way to the battle in Troy stopped on the island of Crete.
Scholar: Yeah, maybe, maybe. I would suggest you interesting about the old history, because there are so many books. This is a part of the Greek history. There is another history, for example, about 10,000 years before the Christ. Very old.
MM: I understand. Now the Egyptian civilization is also very old.
Scholar: Yes, but it is not so much as the Greek history. The old kings of Creta worshipped Osiris, which Osiris is in the star of Sirius. The seven sites where they call Medea, the word had seven letters, and the word "Sirius" has six letters, the other six letters in this word. And they say Osiris was coming down to earth from Sirius.
MM: So they say, according to your understanding, that there are seven letters in this word "Sirius," and which seven things do they signify?
Scholar: Medea, we call, the very Delphos, Thebes, where the priests are saying what there is going on, for their lives, or the expedition they make.
MM: So you are speaking of oracles.
Scholar: Yes. *When he became alone, more and more people admired him, from locals to immigrants arriving in this place, because Smyrna was a great port with considerable exports of wheat and other grains.*
MM: And why are you telling me about Sirius? This is related to Osiris? You are suggesting, do I understand correctly, that Osiris comes from Sirius?
Scholar: *When the immigrants finished their work.* Yes. *They began passing their time by listening to and watching Melisigenis.*
MM: And that he was originally Greek?
Scholar: Yes. The people from this star were coming down. Apollo, the glorious light, signifies the Sirius.
MM: So you believe that early civilizations came from another planet.
Scholar: It is not the planet, it is the big star Sirius, bigger than ours. *And among them at that time was a boatswain from the island of Lefkada called Mentis.*
MM: Maybe they came from a planet in the planetary system of Sirius? *He came with his own ship to buy wheat.*

Scholar: Yes, there were two planets. *For Mentis was educated according to the education of that time and knew many things.* They make for every 100 years the metric system of ten. *And he persuaded Melisigenis to travel with him, to leave his teaching and to receive from him a salary and have all his needs met.*
MM: This is very interesting. You know, there is a new book, which looks at the photographs of Mars, and they find on Mars the pyramid. Do you think that Mars was also civilized and gave the Egyptians the pyramid?
Scholar: Maybe, because you know Mars have satellites, Phobos and Deimos are their names, which are Greek names and make a mention of the satellites of the Mars. Phobos mean terror. And Deimos also mean like terror. So I am wondering, how these people they knew, thousands of years ago before us.
MM: I think there are many things from the past that we no longer know, about Egypt, about ancient Greece.
Scholar: Yes, it was a great crime against humanity, when they burn the books of Alexandria. Ptolemais collect all the old knowledge, and give all these books very beautiful binding, and the Muslims burned them. *Mentis promised Homer that he would travel to kingdoms and republics well worth seeing, because he was young. It seems to me that with this decision Melisigenis succeeded. Maybe he was thinking of spending this time only on poetry. At any rate, he left his teaching and traveled with Mentis. Whichever and whatever country Homer visited, he was watching everything and asking the people about local history. So it was easy from all these trips to keep strong memories.*
MM: You mention many old things in Greece, much older than Homer. On Chios there is evidence of civilization long, long before the time of Homer. Is that right?
Scholar: Yeah.
MM: Earlier, when we began talking, you mentioned the worship of Kybeli. But there was also a much older civilization, in caves, the Neolithic civilization.
Scholar: Myself, I don't believe the Neolithic era, something like this. I have a different idea about the human being.
MM: Please tell me.
Scholar: As I tell you before, human being coming from other planets.
MM: From the star Sirius.
Scholar: Yes, from the star Sirius, but also from other places. I believe that the human being is something separate from the other creatures.
MM: He did not evolve from monkeys?
Scholar: I don't believe so. *At some time he returned from Tyrrhenia and Iberes, and reached Ithaka.*
MM: Now there's another great myth, a great story, which may be true, the story that things came from Atlantis. Then it happened that Melisigenis' eyes began to suffer.
Scholar: Atlantis is another story, if you read Plato. *Wishing to travel to Lefkada for treatment.* Plato makes mention of this. *Mentis left Homer there with his loyal friend*

Mentoras, son of Alkimos from Ithaka. And Solon, when he went to Egypt, he told them, you forget your story. *And asked him to take care of Homer.* You have become the very selfish peoples. *Saying that he would return to take him back.* Because you forget that the peoples of Europe and Asia and Africa before were very good, but you push them away.

MM: And this Atlantis, do you think it was on the island Santorini? Or the island that they called Thera?

Scholar: I don't believe so. *Mentoras took much care of the illness in Ithaka.* I don't believe so. I think Atlantis is closer to The United States. *He was rich and well known among the Ithacans for his justness and hospitality.* Because they found so many things close to the coast of The United States. *Here they told Melisigenis about Ulysses.* Andos and Dimini islands. They found at the bottom of the sea.

MM: So you believe that Atlantis was in the Atlantic Ocean.

Scholar: I believe so. And I think people know about Atlantis, but I don't know why they keep them silent.

MM: Now there is another mystery. Some people say that the great pyramids in Egypt are not Egyptian, because they have no hieroglyphs, no Egyptian writing on them. And some people think that Egyptian civilization came from Atlantis.

Scholar: Yes. I don't believe either that there was Egyptian civilization on the pyramids. Because when they excavate the things, Egypt was under the British sovereignty. So that when they were excavating and they found out the mystery, the British say "Stop, and don't do anything more." And so they do not give out the secrets.

MM: Yes, our view of Egypt is limited by the *Egyptologists*! I agree.

Scholar: As I told you before, you see many big cities of Egypt with Greek names: Thebes, Heliopolis . . . these are Greek names. And the religion of the Egyptian civilization come from Creta.

MM: Well, even Homer says there were 100 cities on Creta. *Ithacans say that Homer lost his sight in Ithaca.* And you are telling me that all the European races and people have come from Creta.

Scholar: Yes, and that these people migrated from Creta to Arcadia, and they multiplied and become all the races of the world. They were coming, our race and your race, and they were multiplied and they were the Arians, who not coming down from the north.

MM: A very interesting theory. *I say that he recovered this time and became blind in Colophon.* The Arian race, then, is not from the north but from the south.

Scholar: There is not Arian race, it is Elloi. "Aria" was the old form of Creta.

MM: So everything comes from Creta.

Scholar: Yes. *And the people in Colophon believe this story too!* The white people comes from Aria. *So Mentis returned from Lefkada, stayed in Ithaca and took Melisigenis away. For a time he traveled with him. Coming to Colophon, Homer's eyes again suffered. He did not get well this time, instead going blind there. And so blindness returned,*

from Colophon to Smyrna, and Homer was given to poetry. From this infliction, Melisigenis took the name Omiros (Homer). For the Kymeans called blind men "Omiros."
MM: May I ask you, what is your view of Hermes?
Scholar: Hermes, you know, was born in Pallini, in the Peloponnisos. His father was Atlas, and his mother was Maia. And he was a very clever god, and his father sent him to Egypt, and then he gave Egyptians civilization. Also the religion of the one god.
MM: So your books have a consistent thesis: that Orpheus, who is a poet of greater antiquity than Homer, mentions the one god, and that Hermes also mentions the one god.
Scholar: Hermes, in his book, is exactly the Christian religion.
MM: Hermes, in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, you are saying, predicts Christianity.
Scholar: He wrote 42 books but only 6 was saved.
MM: Some people think that Odysseus in Homer is also like Hermes.
Scholar: The Egyptians they call him Thoth.
MM: Yes. And when Odysseus is on Circe's island, Aiaia, Hermes comes and tells him to leave. *Coming to the town of Erythrea, Homer asked to travel to Chios.*
Scholar: It is different. Hermes is a god.
MM: I see. *Someone who had seen Homer in Phokea greeted him.*
Scholar: The other Hermes is a people.
MM: So we are not talking about the god. *Homer then asked his help finding a ship going to Chios.* What do you think about the god Hermes?
Scholar: First of all I have to tell you about the Greek gods.
MM: Yes, please do. *Here in Chios the fishermen were doing their job.*
Scholar: These Greek gods are not really gods. These were kings.
MM*: Homer, however, slept all night on the beach.* They were men first.
Scholar: Men, let's say, from extraterrestrial places, very very clever, and they make so many good things to the humanity, so people call them gods. *When day broke, walking and wandering he came to a village called Pitys.*
MM: Another question of interest to me is where Odysseus traveled. Where is the island of Kirke, the island of Kalypso, the island that Homer called Phaiakia, or Scheria?
Scholar: I will tell you, because I read the books of authors. *A servant Glafkos took him to his boss called Xios.* He mentions traveling whole *Mediterranea*, passing Gibraltar, and then goes off the course, and they say that the island of Kirke was in The United States, and then was off to the Labrador and the State of Maine. *In his discussions with Homer, Xios found him to be very educated and experienced.* And from there was coming back to Azores, and from Azores coming back home. *And Xios persuaded him to stay and become the teacher of his children.*
MM: In the Odyssey, then, which places correspond to America, to Labrador, to the State of Maine, to Azores?

Scholar: Labrador is the story of the Cows of Helios. Odysseus tell his men not to eat the cows, but his men do not obey and they cut the cows. And then the god was really angry with them. And the Kos is the Azores.
MM: And Azores, which Homer calls Ogygia, is where he meets Kalypso?
Scholar: Azores is where he meets Kalypso. And she says to he, go back home.
MM: But first he lands in Phaiakia. *There in Volissos, Homer composed his "paeginia" (joyful works) such as Cercopes, Batrachomyomachiae (Battles of Frogs and Mice), Eptapaktiti and Epicichlides.*
Scholar: Scheria, they say now, is the Corfu. *And soon he became very famous for his poetry in the town of Chios.* But the others they say that the Scheria is like Madeira. *After a time, he pleased the man Xios to show him the town of Chios, where he founded a school and taught the children his epics.* Or Malta. *The Chians understood that he was very able.* Something like this. *And many of them became his admirers.*
MM: Then, from Scheria, they send him in a magical boat back to Ithaka. *Homer became rich, married and had two daughters.* What is this magical boat?
Scholar: There were many stories. *One died unmarried.* Some people say from outer space they take him off to another world. *The other was married to a Chian.*
MM: Very interesting. *From his poetry Homer became famous in Ionia.* But he returns to Ithaka. *And all over Greece they spoke of him.* And here is another problem: *Living in Chios, many people visited him, asking him to go on trips with them.* On Ithaka we cannot find his palace. *He accepted, wishing very much to travel to other places.*
Scholar: Some people say that Ithaka is not the place of Odysseus but instead Kefallonia.
MM: And your opinion?
Scholar: Kefallonia is more correct. *After Kyme, eighteen years passed until Smyrna was colonized by the Kymeans.*
MM: Why does Homer tell a story about a man from Ithaka, why not a story about someone from Crete or Chios? *Since Homer was born, six hundred and twenty two years passed until Xerxes crossed the Hellespont.*
Scholar: These poems, he collect all these poems. *From this it is very easy for anyone to estimate the time by counting the dates in office of the Athenian governors.*
MM: And do you think he also wrote the Iliad*? From the time of the Trojan War sixty-eight years elapsed till Homer was born.*
Scholar: Yes I do, for we do not have any evidence that someone else did.
MM: And which poem do you think is the greater poem?
Scholar: Both, I think, have their value.

MM: We are talking here to . . .
Cynthia: Cynthia.
MM: Do you know what "Cynthia" means?
Cynthia: No.
MM: The chaste beauty of the moon.
Cynthia: Oh.
MM: Now you know.
Cynthia: I see.
MM: What is the moon like? Round, like your beautiful face. And you look at it, look at the moon, look at this face, and say, Wow!
Cynthia: Really?
MM: Yes. This is the first time, I think, I ever saw the moon with a gold tooth.
Cynthia: [Laughter.]
MM: I seen a man in the moon before, but I never seen a woman.
Cynthia: [Laughter.]
MM: When did you get that gold tooth of yours?
Cynthia: About eleven, twelve years ago.
MM: Was that when your older brother knocked you to the floor?
Cynthia: [Laughter.] No, no, not quite, no.
MM: Now how are you finding your life here in New York City?
Cynthia: Um . . . It has its goods . . . and its bads.
MM: Do you suppose that if you were somewhere else in the world you'd be happier?
Cynthia: Well, you know what they say, "No place like New York."
MM: And you believe that? (You told me you grew up in Virginia.)
Cynthia: Yes, I do. [Laughter.]
MM: What you got here in New York that's so good?
Cynthia: Uh . . . a lot a sights to see, a lot a history.
MM: You mean to tell me you do a lot a sight-seein', read a lot a hist'ry books?
Cynthia: Well, we also got cafés and music.
MM: Now we're gettin' down to the *honest* part!
Cynthia: [Laughter.]
MM: I didn't *think* you was basically a sightseer, or a history professor.
Cynthia: [Laughter.] There's a lot a New York that I hasn't seen yet.
MM: When are we gonna, like, go out and see a little bit of it ourselves?
Cynthia: [Laughter.] I'll have to talk to mah husband about that.
MM: Dang. I was wonderin' why you stayed home so much!
Cynthia: [Laughter.]
MM: Like, before you got married, did you ever go out sightseein'?
Cynthia: Um . . . pretty much so.

MM: And what was the sights that you especially liked to see?
Cynthia: The Statue of Liberty? The Twin Towers? A lot of musical plays on Broadway?
MM: I notice in your heart of hearts, though, it's not the sightseeing and the history but those cafés that you really like. Tell me a little more about the cafés. I'm from a place where we don't have many. What do you do in a café?
Cynthia: Enjoy the food.
MM: Enjoy the food? You mean they don't have music in these cafés?
Cynthia: Yeah, I like the music.
MM: What kinda music do they have?
Cynthia: It depends. Jazz. Rhythm and blues.
MM: They still got rhythm and blues in New York City?
Cynthia: Yeah. Matter of fact I think they just opened up B.B. King's.
MM: Is he still alive?
Cynthia: I believe so.
MM: I knew he was a living legend. So B.B. King is one of your favorites.
Cynthia: Yeah, he's an old-timer.
MM: And what about dancin'? Do you still go out dancin' with your husband?
Cynthia: Um, not as much as we used to. [Phone rings.]
MM: While you were talkin' on the phone, did you think of somethin' else you wanted to tell me, about what you really like to do?
Cynthia: No, not really.
MM: Cynthia, let's imagine that you're on Oprah, and that you've got three minutes to say what you want to say. And your Momma's watchin' and your Papa's watchin' and that brother who knocked out your tooth, and all those boyfriends you had before you got married and the kids who gave you this "Mom, We Love You" ring that you got on. What would you say?
Cynthia: I'd say "Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!" I'd say "Hello" to my family. Even my brother, the one, you know, that knocked out my tooth!

MM: You have given me your name card, and your gallery's card, but perhaps you should repeat your name for the reader of this interview.
Daniel: My name is Daniel Leon Dandoy.
MM: You have told me that you are Norwegian, but the name Dandoy, at least to my ear, sounds French rather than Norwegian.
Daniel: Yes, it is not a Norwegian but a Belgian name.
MM: So you have Belgian background. Did you grow up in Belgium or in Norway?
Daniel: I grew up in Belgium, though I was born in France.
MM: Do you, then, consider yourself, fundamentally French, Belgian, or Norwegian?
Daniel: I consider myself Norwegian, since I lived there for 32 years. I emigrated from Belgium in 1970 and spent most of my life working in Bergen.
MM: Now you have moved to Thailand, but to Pattaya rather than Bangkok, just as earlier you had moved to Bergen rather than Oslo. Why did you settle in Bergen?
Daniel: I settled there, because my Norwegian wife, whom I met in Copenhagen, was from Bergen. I enjoyed passing most of my life in that pleasant city, because in the west of Norway *la nature* is really very beautiful. In Bergen you have everything: the sea, the *montagnes*, the forest, the fjord. It is quite amazing.
MM: Yes, I have visited Bergen, in fact have written a few pages about the town, which is quite striking. But I also found it rather isolated. Did you ever feel the same way?
Daniel: Yes, I found that Bergen is a little isolated, especially in the wintertime. Nonetheless, today you have the airport, which keeps you in touch with the rest of the world. And you have the boats: to England, to Holland and to other places.
MM: I notice that many English tourists come by boat in the summertime. In Stavanger I arrived at a guesthouse, where I was received by a very tall Norwegian, who took my American passport. So he knew that I was not Norwegian. The next morning, however, when I came down for breakfast, he asked me in Norwegian if I had slept well and what I would like to eat. I found this very charming.
Daniel: [Laughter.]
MM: I think he did so, because many of the English who come to Norway on vacation try to learn Norwegian. And of course this is rather difficult, if people will not speak their own language with you. In the Chinese world I have found that the natives will not address you in their native language, if they can speak English (or think they can).

Daniel: When you try to learn Norwegian coming from England or Holland or Germany it is not too difficult, because these languages are related to Norwegian, but coming from France or Belgium it is much more difficult.
MM: During your early years in Norway, how did you get along? Did you speak Norwegian, did you speak English, or did you find people who could speak French?
Daniel: I found a few people who could speak French, but almost everyone that I dealt with in my daily life could speak English.
MM: The Scandinavians are quite unusual in this regard, aren't they? In Stockholm the Swedes, for example, speak English almost like native speakers.
Daniel: Well, the Norwegians are a people of the sea. Many of them spend five or six years away aboard ship. This enables them to learn many foreign languages. And that is why the Norwegians are so *internationale.* If you think about it a bit, there are little more than four million people who speak Norwegian, so if they want to communicate with other people in the world, they *must* learn the other languages.
MM: It has become a practical problem everywhere in the world, hasn't it? We should, I suppose, understand why everyone wants to practice English with the native speaker.
Daniel: Yes, English is very important.
MM: Now, if I may change the subject, or return to an earlier one: I am curious to know why later in life you have settled in Pattaya. You had told me that you have been here for only seventeen months, so your impressions must still be quite fresh. I wonder if you might express for us your view of this charmingly international city. How, for a start, does Pattaya in your view compare with Bergen?
Daniel: Actually, I had been coming to Thailand during my holidays for a dozen years, and while I was divorcing my Norwegian wife I found my second wife here. I needed a Thai lady, so that I could take her with me to Norway. This all happened more than a decade ago. My wife is from the Northeast of Thailand, a region far away, where there is nothing interesting for a man like me (it is just farm land, nothing to see, nothing to learn). Of course one has Bangkok, which is an interesting city, but it is far too busy for an old man. I wanted a little action, and Pattaya was excellently what I searched for.
MM: Did you meet your wife in Pattaya?
Daniel: Yes, I met my wife in Pattaya. She was working in a laundry. After a year she and I decided that we should spend the rest of our life together.
MM: And when was it that you decided to make Pattaya your home?
Daniel: Well, first we lived for a year together here, but because this second wife was so young she wanted to find a new job in Norway. To make a long story short, she is now a Norwegian.
MM: How wonderful! She has Norwegian citizenship?

Daniel: Yes, and because she is working, she wants to receive the advantages.
MM: Social security and so forth.
Daniel: And, most important, the retirement.
MM: Yes, a Norwegian pension.
Daniel: Because, you see, in Thailand only the military person or the government official can receive the pension.
MM: So now your wife remains in Norway, while you have begun your new life in Thailand with this beautiful gallery of yours! If your wife has become Norwegian, is it possible that you yourself may become Thai?
Daniel: No, that is impossible. To do so is a long and difficult process, very expensive, and it takes years, many many years. I am too old to try.
MM: The Asian civilizations do not share our view (do they?) of immigration and naturalization. They regard it as absurd that the foreigner (by which they mean a person with white skin) should become an Indian, or a Japanese, or a Chinese, and the same is true in Southeast Asia. Nationality and ethnicity for the Asian are one and the same. But some of these civilizations nonetheless are willing to entertain the white foreigner as a guest, even on cordial terms. Among them Thailand is perhaps the most hospitable. And for this reason many foreigners end up in Pattaya as permanent residents (if they must still renew their visas on a regular basis). I would hope that you might give us, from your greater experience, a broader view of this extraordinary community, for you are so well placed to help us understand Pattaya.
Daniel: First of all, Pattaya is a fast growing city. There is always something new. It is a beautiful place to live for a short time; it has everything that you want as a tourist. To live permanently in the center of the city, though very nice to the young person, is not so attractive when you get older, for you want something a little quieter. So I talk to people and now I have found a beautiful place in the countryside with a little garden.
MM: Many people, I find, have a stereotyped conception of Pattaya, from reading the newspapers. Each time that I visit the city I am impressed by its great diversity. This morning, for example, I took a walk out of the center of town up the beach to the area where there are several expensive hotels. I wandered into one of these to discover a medical conference in progress with hundreds upon hundreds of surgeons from all over Asia, attending seminars and examining displays of the most advanced operative and post-operative procedures. As a gallerist accustomed to encountering international visitors, both tourists and permanent residents, what aspects of Pattaya are you familiar with that the average person would not be?
Daniel: For the person who likes good food there are more than 300 restaurants here, so that you can eat whatever you want from all over the world. It is impossible not to find a restaurant that you enjoy. And you have a great deal of nightlife, you have floorshows and other entertainment, you have beautiful

beaches, you have golf, you have every possible sport. There is just one activity that is hard to find, if one comes from Norway, and that is the skating and the skiing. For you do not have the snow

MM: Well, I suppose that one can always go *water* skiing and take up *in-line* skating. With all this variety, with all this pleasure, and of course with its underside of suffering, is it possible that we might say (if we wished to be very philosophical) that Pattaya is a kind of metaphor for life itself?

Daniel: Yes, I think so.

MM: I am in the process of writing a book called *Life*, and our interview about Pattaya, which will take its place along with 28 other interviews that I have done on a trip around the world, will be a part of it. Along with the variety of Pattaya goes a vitality that always impresses me. What do you feel are the most conspicuous qualities of life here?

Daniel: What I think is so special in Pattaya is the *kindness*.

MM: Yes, in this international community, which has seen everything, and is prey to the vices as well as home to the virtues, one encounters great tolerance and understanding.

Daniel: And everyone is so welcoming! In the other cultures, people often remain inside themselves. They walk down the street and ignore the other people. But here in Pattaya, in a large city, people say "Good Morning" to you as they pass.

MM: Do you think that this tolerance and humane acceptance has to do perhaps with Buddhist doctrine, for as we know, Thailand is a thoroughly Buddhist country?

Daniel: Yes, I think so. And it belongs to the Thai life without stress. In other parts of the world you always have stress with your job and even stress after the job. This is not the way of living in Thailand.

MM: Perhaps, as you suggest, there is some more general principle involved, aside from those of Buddhist doctrine, one that governs the rhythm and nature of Thai life. For, after all, the Japanese and the Chinese are also Buddhist, or at least historically have been so, but the Mahayana form of this great religion does not seem to conduce as readily as the Theravada form to a relaxed quality of life such as we find not only in Thailand but elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Daniel: Yes, I think that life for the tourist is especially good in this country.

MM: The point that you are making is interesting. For tourism in this special sense is a relatively recent phenomenon, isn't it?

Daniel: Yes, we are now able to live for a long time as tourists in another country, and this is what happens in many cases in Pattaya.

MM: The practice, I have noticed, is becoming more and more possible in the other countries of this region: you have it not only in Thailand but in Cambodia, and I understand that it is even possible for the foreigner to live in Vietnam.

Daniel: The tourist industry is going to be very important in the future of the world, in particular for the older population, since people are living much longer now, and those who have earned their pensions in advanced countries have the chance to live out their old age in more comfortable and economical environments elsewhere.
MM: And the world has changed in other ways, hasn't it? For we can now take an airplane relatively cheaply and move about conveniently. In certain parts of the world, then, a truly international community is possible without the active element of trade or commerce, without the competitive aspect of immigration for the purpose of seeking employment and the class struggle that results from this process.
Daniel: Yes.
MM: Now in my interviews I usually ask people to tell me something about their work. You have unusual access to the international community of Pattaya, for along with more transient tourists it constitutes the clientele for the copies of western paintings that make up most of your offerings. Tell us which painters are most in demand.
Daniel: We have copies here, as you may see, of work by Gaugin and Monet and Van Gogh and Chagall and also by Gustav Klimt.
MM: I see among the books that you have on the table one about Monet. A generation ago he was regarded as a leading figure in the history of western painting, at least as far as popular taste was concerned. I find it of interest that recently Van Gogh seems to have replaced him. All over the world I have become aware of this shift in taste: in Europe, in America, even in East Asia. Can you tell us why it is, according to your view, that Van Gogh should have risen to such prominence?
Daniel: I think it is because Van Gogh is very personal. In his paintings there is something that we all can relate to.
MM: I notice too that you also have on display in your gallery a few Norwegian paintings. Have you been able to sell works by these artists?
Daniel: Yes, I have been able to sell some of them to the tourists.
MM: There is another modern painter who has achieved a universal appeal, a famous Belgian by the name of René Magritte, but I do not see any reproductions of his work.
Daniel: That is because I must wait for the customer to ask that a painting be copied.
MM: I see. And should you obtain such a commission, you may ask any of the ten artists that you tell me are working for you to copy one of his paintings. Now, if I may change the subject one last time, what do you see as the future of Pattaya?
Daniel: In the short term, many people from Europe will want to live in Pattaya. Then too within a few years we are speaking of making the Casino

here. In this case we shall be the first in Thailand. So, I believe, Pattaya will become even more attractive.

MM: I have taken much of your time and I want to thank you for expressing your views. Let me conclude by wishing you the best of luck in your new life in Pattaya!

The Heart of the Matter

Terry Kennedy Interviews MM

Melville once said the western edge of America is the shore of China. Whitman devoted seven years to the ancient Hindu classics before composing his "epic of Democracy." Henry Adams saw Buddhism as an alternative to Christianity. Nowadays Asia represents for the West an emerging economic market but also a political challenge and potential military threat, a region as unpredictable as Africa and as dangerous as the Middle East. I've invited Madison Morrison, author of books about India, China and Thailand, to write about some of these questions in an interview conducted by email. For the past sixteen years he's lived for the most part in Asia, during the past eight years in Taiwan, from which he's about to set out on a round-the-world lecture tour. As our interview progresses, from time to time he'll let us know where he is. We begin, then, with me in India and MM in Taiwan.

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TK: Writers today in general seem more interested in world affairs than they'd been in the past. Why is this?

MM: Because the world is changing, has already changed. A century ago it was still possible to maintain the fiction of a national identity influenced only by itself, to pretend that nothing essential transpired beyond its boundaries. Today we recognize that a global culture exists, of shared political, economic and ethical values. Increasingly we are formulating a common aesthetic as well. These commonalities, though they've been to some extent institutionalized, are mostly a matter of daily consensus, a consensus arrived at and updated in the media. Unless we refuse to surf the Internet, to watch television, to read news magazines or the daily paper, we're all influenced now by what you refer to as "world affairs."

TK: To bring us back for a moment to literature: Do Asian writers today look to the West in the way that earlier western writers had looked to the East? Or do Asians lag behind in the recent globalization of culture?

MM: I just had an email from a friend who's been asked this semester to teach modern American poetry in Paris. He reports that his graduate students at the Sorbonne have never heard of Eliot, Pound or Williams. By contrast, the Indians idolize T.S. Eliot, almost regard him as an Indian writer. In China the advanced scholar—if not the general reader—is very much aware of Ezra Pound. Here in Japan, where I'm writing this email, I've met young poets whose universe is largely defined by William Carlos Williams.

TK: But your principal argument seems to be that geopolitics, economics and even military considerations are more important to the poet than they used to be. Do you mean that the poets of empire—Vergil, Vyasa, Tasso, Camoens, the court poets of Persia and China—weren't affected by economic, political and military power?

MM: You have a good point. The ambitious poet's always been tempted by the prestige and benefits of power: its patronage, its privileged access to learning, the depth and refinement of sensibility made possible by leisure and a serious audience. What's new is the average writer's access through the media to an expanded consciousness of the world that was formerly available only to the privileged. Whitman learned about India by borrowing books from the New York Public Library. Here in Seattle, where I've been witnessing the protests against the World Trade Organization, this information is both being put to use and called into question.

TK: What you have said so far makes it sound as though the writer is a kind of poetic journalist, or worse, a public relations agent, a spokesman for the dominant ideologies of the day, those that emanate from Church or State or from other aspects of the status quo: gender bias, racial prejudice, cultural superiority, geographic privilege. Isn't there something of greater spiritual consequence that emanates from the Self?

MM: Here in the American Midwest, Buddhism has a certain vogue. Though not a Buddhist, I share the Buddhist disaffection with the Self, at least as it's been constructed in the West, where the Self is normally placed in opposition to Nature. Whitman's Self, the divine *Atman* of the Upanishads, is more sympathetic. But apart from certain brilliant manifestations (the Bhagavad Gita comes to mind), the Self is not, it seems to me, a reliable source for sustained poetic creativity. Even Vyasa puts Krishna into dialogue with Arjuna. The Self, then, may flourish best when it interacts with the Other, and the Other is more political, more worldly, is grounded in a culturally determined ethic and traditional aesthetic.

TK: You've told me that you first went to Asia—to Taiwan—from Oklahoma in 1983; returned to the U.S. in 1985; then after three years came back to Asia as a Fulbright Lecturer in India. After another year in the U.S. you came back once more, as a visiting professor in Thailand. From there you've taken a permanent position in Taiwan, where you've taught for eight years at one of its national universities. What is it that keeps bringing you back to Asia? And what plans to you have for exploring other Asian cultures through direct contact?

MM: There are many to explore, aren't there? Japan, which I've now visited four times, represents another major civilization that deserves attention, if only because it is constantly calling our assumptions into question. At a reading I gave in Tokyo a week ago a young Japanese poet read from *Finnegans Wake* in an Irish accent. I've yet to visit Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous

country. I know little about Korea, apart from what I read in the papers. Much of Southeast Asia remains a mystery. Clearly one lifetime is not enough!

TK: Do you believe, then, in reincarnation?

MM: I'm not quite sure. I do find it curious that so many people in the world indulge in such an apparently unscientific belief. Yet there may be a realistic basis for it. In a literal sense we are what we eat. When we eat vegetables, the vegetables become us. When our bodies die we feed more vegetables, which in turn feed more animals. In a way, then, all living things actually become one another. So reincarnation need not be regarded as a merely spiritual process. By the way, what do *you* believe? Do you feel that you, for example, have had a past life? And if so will there be another?

TK: What do I believe? In so much and so little at once! As far as reincarnation goes, I certainly believe we live many, many lives. I believe we are originally and ultimately divine but choose to live out various lives for reasons that I cannot fully comprehend yet, or even intuit. By divine, I don't mean like the gods of the various pantheons, but of the same substance as the creators and creations. I think those who read the Bible carefully, for example, or the teachings of Black Elk, say, or other sacred scriptures discover that we live many lives.

MM: If you believe that you lived an anterior life, where was it? Who were you and what did you do?

TK: I have a few clear memories of a life in China as a fashion designer and one in South America. In South America I was a dancer, and I believe this accounts for the fact that at two years of age I was dancing in recitals. It was "natural" for me. But my real belief is that we reincarnate over and over, until we decide to do something else. In spite of what Yogananda has so vividly described, in his *Autobiography of a Yogi*—the soul's after-death experience in the astral world, on the paradisal plane, in the place of *moksha* or liberation—I'm not sure it's a path my soul wants.

MM: You use the word "soul." Do you mean by this the Christian "Soul" or the Hindu "*Atman*"?

TK: According to my understanding the Hindu *Atman* is much closer to what I experience. But you yourself spoke earlier of the *Atman* as necessitating the Other. Does this mean that you envision two souls? What is this Other, the "Oversoul"? Is it simply a fancy word for God?

MM: I think of the Other as *Brahman*, more like what Yeats called the Body of Fate, the body of the world in all its fatedness, which may incidentally include ourselves, though Emerson's term derives from a conscientious study of Hindu doctrine.

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TK: So, after a long hiatus in our interview—you report having lost the use of your computer in South America and only having recovered it in Rome, after you had been to Egypt, the Middle East and Greece—it would seem that you've almost finished your world tour.
MM: Well, after northern Italy and Finland I now find myself in Russia. But the world is a big place. I still have India and Thailand to go.
TK: You earlier said that the world is changing, which clearly implies that it is shrinking. Moreover, you maintained that we were all developing a common aesthetic. Isn't this going to be anathema for the visionary, for the spearhead of the vanguard?
MM: Not necessarily. The vanguard is flourishing in St. Petersburg, for example, where last night I gave a reading with a Japanese-style Russian "harsh noise" band made up of 20-somethings who have friends all over the world. The visionary, after all, is simply the person who sees what's before his eyes, hears what everyone else hears, he simply hears and sees more clearly than other people.
TK: How do you think poets and writers moved from their formerly spiritual perspective, one from which the purpose of the work was to give man hope, to the current egomaniacal, self-promoting sort of stand-up-comic scene? Once upon a time, the title of poet was conferred over, or after, a lifetime. The greats rarely spoke of themselves as poets. Today, nearly a third of all published poets have been nominated for national prizes, hundreds receive state grants and routinely confer the title of poet on themselves.
MM: I think it's the result of a cultural democratization, a phase that we're passing through. According to this doctrine we're not allowed to believe that the few are substantially different, more profound, of greater breadth and understanding. In parts of the world, however, the poet still retains his glamour and status. Ironically, though, we are all of two minds about this, since we worship "stars" and know, if only secretly, that none of us can write music like Mozart.
TK: Could I change the subject for a moment and ask you about your early upbringing?
MM: Certainly.
TK: Where were you born, where did you grow up? Did you practice religion as a young person?
MM: I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, where my father, who worked for U.S. Steel, had a job. Subsequently the family followed him northward through a series of other positions, in Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, New York. After adolescence in Detroit, I went away to prep school, then to college and graduate school, while my parents were living in Chicago and New York. They had come from Protestant backgrounds, my mother from an especially puritanical

Scots Presbyterian heritage. I left the church when I was about seventeen or eighteen.

TK: When did you become interested in literature?

MM: Rather late, when I was in college. During the summers, while I was still in school, I returned to Detroit to work in a law firm, but when the choice came, after graduation from college, I decided to go to graduate school in literature rather than to law school.

TK: And when did you become interested in Asia?

MM: Back in the 1970s, when, as an English professor, one could teach nearly anything. Gradually I began to introduce into a course in comparative poetry certain Asian texts: the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddhist Sutras, the Confucian Analects, the Lao-zi. I encouraged students to give reports on Buddhism as well as Christianity, Hindu doctrine as well as Greek religion. In time this led to my beginning Chinese, at the age of 40, a painful decision.

TK: Why do you speak of the decision to begin Chinese at the age of 40 as "painful"?

MM: Because at age 40 acquiring any new language is difficult, but especially so if the spoken language is tonal and the written form ideographic. As a person working at a full time job I had to add fifteen hours of work a week to learn Chinese—which, incidentally, Tim Wong, a professional Sinologist, once told me, "You never learn, you just get better at." So much study and classroom attendance was painful at such an age, but I now speak the language, if I don't read much any more. Over the past 20 years I've managed to absorb into my work most of the Chinese materials that I set out to absorb.

TK: Clearly you owe a good deal to the Indian tradition as well as the Chinese. Do you read Sanskrit?

MM: No, and I regret not having taken up that language when I still had time. But I've profited immensely from the labor of Indian scholars, with their bilingual command of Sanskrit and English, their multilingual command of various modern Indian languages.

TK: You have talked about the *Atman*, Sanskrit for the Self, as something that you believe in, at least in a qualified way. If such is the case, why is it that you've not revealed more about yourself, about your early development, about what Ron Phelps calls your "difficult life," about the details of your daily existence, your domestic arrangements, and so on?

MM: To do so would be to confuse the *Atman*, or divine Self, with the *svayam*, or ordinary self. As recent biographers of Whitman have shown (they have been exploring the intimate details of his life), the first truly American epic poet, like most of his predecessors in the genre, did not reveal much about himself, even though he wrote an epyllion called "Song of Myself." Why? Because the "Song of Myself " is his Bhagavad Gita, his Song of the Lord.

TK: But don't you agree that the writer's life, especially before he becomes a writer, is responsible for what turns him to the pen?
MM: Perhaps, but that's not necessarily a sanction to explore these details of his personal life. We might equally say that the person who makes a deliberate decision to express himself by publishing thereby chooses to draw a line between his public and his private lives. Yet in this isn't he like everyone else? The right to privacy, like the duty to assume public responsibility, it seems to me, is one of the imperatives of civilization.
TK: Might we return to the question of religious belief? For though it is a personal matter, it can also take the form of public expression. You say that you were brought up in a strict, puritanical Protestantism but left the Presbyterian Church and remained agnostic, until, in early middle age, you embraced a philosophical form of Hinduism. Does this mean that you are anti-Christian?
MM: Less "anti-Christian," I think, than unsympathetic toward Christianity and Buddhism, both of which I regard as rather negative religions. Moreover, I don't like to be proselytized (and hope that I don't proselytize others). By "positive" religions I mean those that de-emphasize human suffering, guilt and sin and promote instead the pursuit of virtue and the worship of divinity through the cultivation of delight in the world. The world, after all, is all we have, and we should do all we can to preserve it, cherish it, improve it. Focusing upon iniquity doesn't seem to me the optimal way to accomplish this.
TK: I find your work very mystical, for it feels as if you are frequently implying that man's oneness with his fellow man is a oneness with the Deity. Have you an objection to being called "a mystic"?
MM: To be called "a mystic" implies to me an otherworldliness. I think of myself as of this world. But this world, I find increasingly, is deeper and more complex than we can fathom. In its unending series of discoveries Science is constantly revealing this to us. So I understand the temptation to posit a God or Deity of some sort as the operative intelligence behind it all.
TK: You don't, then, believe in the Deity?
MM: This question, I find, is partly a matter of definition. If the Deity is that which is unfathomable, complex beyond our understanding, then I think it very likely that the Deity exists, for its seems to me unlikely that man, placed as he is in such a limited circumstance of time and space, is ever likely to understand the cosmos.
TK: But the efforts of an Einstein, who was a mystic totally immersed in the Big Mystery, a person who sought by contemplation and self-surrender to the Ultimate Reality to understand it all, aren't they admirable?
MM: Oh, yes, by all means. So are the efforts of those pursuing so-called String Theory or those decoding the human genome. But as we pursue these ultimates, we must remember our limits. Charlie Chaplain, who knew a great deal about human nature, professed no interest whatsoever in the origin of the

universe. There's an ethical dimension to life that may be more important than the power to manipulate it.

TK: To return to your own work, how did you conceive of **Sentence of the Gods**? I'm especially fascinated by its architectural aspect. What prompted you to plan it out so deliberately and so cryptically? Was there a particular artist who influenced this construction?

MM: Someone will have to tell me the answer to your last question, for though I'm aware of a thousand people who've influenced me I'm not aware of any debt to a particular artist (or writer or musician or architect) for the structure of the work at large. The days of the week had considerable influence! In fact I began with only six of the individual books. At age 35 I saw that they could all be given one-word titles, so that the first letters of their titles would spell out SOLUNA, SOL and LUNA. When I realized that these two sequences also represented Sunday and Monday, I saw that I could complete the days of the week. Now of course there are other artists who have produced large seven-part works (Tasso, du Bartas, Spenser among them), but they had no influence on the form that I adopted. At least no influence that I was conscious of.

TK: *Happening*, your book on India, which is only one of the texts of **Sentence of the Gods**, seems a masterwork in itself. I didn't so much read it as study it. I learned so much not just about India but also about myself. At the end of this experience, for it was an experience for me of the sort that traditional epics give us, I felt a sort of catharsis. Did you mean for readers to read the book more as a poem than as a story? What kind of book did you intend it to be?

MM: *Happening* is part of APHRODITE, a sequence in **Sentence of the Gods**. It is about event, eventfulness, eventuality. If you read a little bit here, a little bit there, that is, treat, the book as the anthology that it also is, *Happening* is one thing; if, however, you read it page by page continuously, you will find that it quite another thing. Its argument includes a kind of underground burden that accumulates as one goes along, ending in a sort of release, or *moksha*. I love the secondary text interwoven through its final three pages, in which one of the great 19th century British historians of India in a single page or paragraph summarizes the whole colonial experience. (Try reading his text by itself, skipping the rest.) I often think of *Happening* as an Epic of India (hence the recapitulation of Ramayana earlier, and the backward reading, like Dandin's, of the Mahabharata, in those final pages on Calcutta). But no Indian has yet expressed an interest in this aspect of the book. Whitman, a great epic writer, in one sense is but a late continuator of the Indian tradition, his *Leaves of Grass* a reworking, as in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia and elsewhere, of Mahabharata and Ramayana.

TK: How did **Sentence of the Gods**—your masterwork—evolve into being? When did you begin the writing of it?

MM: In my twenties I made the decision not to begin writing till I'd finished my Ph.D. and had found a teaching job. That I did in 1969. The summer of 1970 I began writing, in verse. Between 1970 and 1976 I composed the six books that make up SOLUNA: *Sleep*, *O*, *Light*, *U*, *Need* and *A*. In 1975, on sabbatical leave in France, I wrote my half of a novel, in collaboration with Dan Boord, who wrote his half in Norman, Oklahoma. Except for a subsequent book half in verse and some poems that occur in a book of prose I've written only prose since then. It was in 1975 that I conceived of the larger project, though at that time nothing but the skeleton of the **Sentence** existed.

TK: Peter Carravetta has used the phrase "Poetica Cosmographica" in relation to your work? What does he mean by that?

MM: He means, if I understand him correctly, that **Sentence of the Gods** is a cosmographical work, one which has within its an appropriate, implicit poetic, that is to say, a cosmographical poetic. He begins his trenchant analysis from the common observation that many western epics have a cosmological, or cosmographical dimension. They set out, in other words, to describe the world, or the universe, as we know it. The Latin definition that he quotes in his essay is quite interesting in this regard.

TK: From several of the books that I have read in **Sentence of the Gods** I get the feeling that this was some sort of divine command, some duty you felt you had to undertake. Is that so?

MM: I guess one could say so, in retrospect, though I didn't then and don't now feel myself divinely inspired. I don't even have a Muse, though I do have a number of supportive friends who both offer criticism and help me decide what direction I should be going in.

TK: What, if anything, was your reason for undertaking all this?

MM: Like many other writers, I write because I have too. It's my vocation. As for planning out a life's work, many people do that too, if not so schematically as I have done. Epics don't get written in a day, or a decade. The **Sentence** is just a very large epic.

TK: To me it's a "sentence" of the kind criminals receive—an imprisonment for a period of time. Were you, like Dante, condemned, so to speak, to deliver this work, by a force or forces beyond your understanding?

MM: Depending on one's perspective what you say may be true: God as the Unconscious, to paraphrase Jung. But I don't feel doomed either by God or by the Unconscious to do this, partly because the project is constantly giving me choices: to do either this or that; to travel here or travel there; to bring one thing into focus or to let it fade into the cosmic background. In a sense, everyone is doomed: by existence, by the prospect of death. This doesn't, however, mean that we don't lead lives full of choices. Commitment to a life's work—in any field—can also be liberating. One is liberated from boredom, from meaninglessness, even from egotism. You've mentioned Dante. Dante set himself a

very strict form to follow, one in which he was guided by faith. He reaped the benefits from this but also paid the consequences. My form is more expansive and organic (which doesn't mean that the **Sentence** is formless) and is not dependent upon any single-minded belief.

TK: It's tough for me to imagine you teaching full time, correcting student papers, dealing with the everyday difficulties of living in Taiwan and still finding time for a creative work of this caliber. It would seem to me that you would need time away from the burdens of day-to-day survival to achieve the comfortable circumstances necessary for such a major creative project. Really, what is, or was, your secret?

MM: My secret may be that I've been reasonably happy with the University, as an environment for learning, if not as an arena for the appreciation of one's work. I entered college over 40 years ago and have never left the academic world. The so-called discipline of "English"—at least in the U.S.—allowed one during that period to teach almost anything written, in English or English translation, all under the rubric of one or another course in an English department. I've had the good fortune of teaching seven dozen different college courses in my career, and I've more or less been able to adapt the requirements of teaching to the requirements of my work, which is not to say that my work is academic (Ron Phelps compares it to "kill-the-ho gangsta rap"), nor that my teaching has been especially creative. There have simply been good opportunities: for example, in America, where I was able to teach Asian culture without a degree in the field, in Asia, where I teach courses that I wouldn't have taught in the USA. But I've also taught—in addition to literature—film, religious history, creative writing, Chinese landscape painting, and these along with others have directly contributed to work-in-progress.

TK: Speaking of work-in-progress, what is the present status of **Sentence of the Gods**?

MM: Seventeen of the 26 books are finished; another is half done; material has been gathered for a complete revision of two others; and I have tapes for yet two more. Eleven of the 26 books are in print and five hitherto unpublished books are about to appear.

TK: What has been the literary reception of the work so far?

MM: I'm not unhappy about how things are going at this point, though it was terribly difficult getting published in the early going, and the nineteen books that I've managed to publish since I got under way (they're not all parts of the sequence) have never been properly reviewed. To say that my reputation is "modest" would be an understatement. I'm hoping for some progress over the next decade.

TK: Where have you published your books, with what kinds of publishers?

MM: I've been quite fortunate in this, for I now have people doing books of mine in China, India, Italy and the USA, including several commercial houses.

One problem with gaining a reputation in such a context, however, is that one must publish four or five books in each of these countries before one's work becomes at all well known.

TK: But at least your work has had some circulation during your lifetime. That's not true of all epic writers.

MM: Yes. Milton didn't publish *Paradise Lost* until seven years before he died, and then in an edition of 1500 copies. Spenser only finished half of *The Faerie Queene* that he set out to write. Whitman died in obscurity. Ariosto had only a coterie audience. And, of course, many writers of ambition suffered much worse fates than they.

TK: Patronage is often a problem for the ambitious writer whose work is not popular enough to support him, isn't it so?

MM: Yes! And that's especially ironic, it seems to me, in a culture of such affluence as that of the western world today. I was fortunate in having a patron for seventeen years who footed the bill for publication. But given the amount of money that is spent on works of visual art, literary patronage is relatively parsimonious. I could live, work, publish and republish my books for another three decades on the *interest* off the sum that an art collector pays for one painting by Andy Warhol.

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TK: To return to our original subject, the subject of Asia, you have said that there is more of Asia for you to visit, to explore. Why is it that you are so immersed in Asia? Is there nothing in your native country to magnetize you, to inspire you?

MM: I lived permanently in the United States for the first 50 years of my life. I'm proud to be an American: I love my country. I'm not in exile. Nowadays, however, it's much easier to live abroad and still be in touch with one's native culture. In my early work I wrote extensively, if not exhaustively, about the USA. But there are many other places and cultures to write about, and one does that more readily by living in those places or traveling to them. Ironically, though I live in Asia, I've been writing about Europe for the past half dozen years and have new books under way that are set in Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Greece and Southern Italy.

TK: Nonetheless, in a sense, despite your disclaimers, you are still well grounded in Asia. What is your prediction for its future? Do you believe, for example, that China will eventually rule the world?

MM: I think momentum is definitely shifting toward Asia, as part of a long-term development. But I wouldn't count America or Europe out. By living in Asia for a long time one comes to appreciate the values of western civilization in a way that one doesn't by staying at home. As for China, I'm much less sympathetic toward this civilization than I once was, for what had been valid, or at least defensible, in an earlier age, I find no longer defensible today: ethno-

centricity, xenophobia, the bland acceptance of prejudice. No one today is at the center of the world. No culture is superior to all the rest. Combine these widely observable attitudes with nuclear weapons and expansionist ambitions and you have a formula for disaster.

TK: In conclusion—if you could describe in one sentence the difference between the West and the East, what would that sentence be?

MM: Why, the **Sentence of the Gods**, of course! Or Kipling's "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." In short, I agree that we may be overly sanguine about the resolution of these profound differences. Even within Asia, India and China, China and Japan, Japan and North Korea are hardly on the verge of any profound rapprochement. What will transpire between East and West is anybody's guess. We've been lucky so far. Now it's time to get serious about nuclear disarmament, time to rally behind the peacemakers and the forces of reconciliation, time to give up the atavism of religious exclusivity, ethnic superiority, reptilian territoriality.

The Cultural Matrix

Manjushree S. Kumar Interviews MM

In view of the multicultural and intercultural aspects of this collection of critical pieces about (and by) Madison Morrison, I thought it appropriate to take up issues concerning the cultural matrices of **Sentence of the Gods**: Egyptian, Greek and Roman, modern continental European, as well as American and Asiatic. Indian, Chinese and Japanese comment on his work appears in this volume alongside American and European. His own "Ten Poems from *Second*," included here in a variety of translations, adopt a critical idiom. Accordingly we begin this interview, conducted as part of a documentary film made in Jodhpur, with MM's recent collection of essays, *Particular and Universal.*

MSK: As a person who has taught literature for nearly 40 years, you must have had ample time to consider the relation between criticism and creativity. In your own work how has this relation figured?

MM: You might say that I began my apprenticeship as a writer by composing critical essays. At Yale and Harvard I wrote a million words. It was only, in fact, after I'd finished the last of three academic degrees that I began to write creatively. By that time I'd already taught for half a dozen years, so critical activity would have firmly established itself as a ground underlying any creative activity. In this, of course, I'm like many other over-educated writers.

I often hold up to students a different model: that of the Renaissance painter, who entered the master's workshop at the age of thirteen; fetched wine, bread and cheese until, at the age of fifteen, he could be trusted to grind pigment and stretch canvasses; continued with those chores until he was given a piece of charcoal; kept at his drawing until, at the age of seventeen, he was handed a brush and asked to execute a minor passage in a commissioned picture. I'm not sure which is the better model for artistic development, but I suspect it's the second.

MSK: In any case, you've recently brought out a book called *Particular and Universal: Essays in Asian, European and American Literature.* I notice a mainland Chinese scholar has reviewed it favorably. Could you explain for us what you mean by its title and why you've chosen to include in it these seven essays?

MM: As time has gone by my work's become increasingly particularized, while simultaneously filling out a scheme that should eventuate in a universal epic. The essays record specific research interests along the way: in Lao-zi, in the Asiatic aspect of Whitman and Anglo-American modernist poets, in the epic, in English literature and one of its particularized phases. But as I took up these

subjects in turn I became aware that my essays provide me with occasions to define indirectly certain aspects of my own creative work.
MSK: Such as?
MM: Such as the democratic, the oriental, the allegorical, the universal, the experiential.
MSK: One notices that in this book you've not taken up any work later than that of the modernist generation. But your own work belongs to the era widely called "postmodernist." How does your work relate to modernism and post-modernism?
MM: I myself grew up on the modernists, by which I mean Stravinsky, Picasso and Rilke as well as Yeats, Frost, Stevens, Williams, Pound and Eliot. I taught the Anglo-American poets for twenty years. But I'm not sure that "modernism" has been very well defined, it includes too much. After that term had gained academic currency, professors then invented "postmodernism," another ill-defined concept, to give themselves something else to write about. Among these later generations of writers I've never found anything as worthy of emulation as what I found among the modernists.
MSK: Like the modernists, you seem unusually devoted to the study of exotic cultures, to the juxtaposition of different cultures, whether through the interweaving of intertexts with primary texts or through the assembly of sequences that place books about disparate cultures next to one another.
MM: You've undeniably identified a connection between my work and that of the "cosmopolitan" modernists—Irish, English and American writers who, for the most part, lived abroad. I continue to admire these writers and see no harm in extending their practice by a more specific acquaintance with exotic cultures (I've taught in seven countries) and by a more inclusive frame of reference (I've visited fifty-two).
MSK: This collection of critical perspectives begins with an essay on one of your books, in which Arvind Thomas deploys the terminology of historiography to analyze your work. What role has history played in your thinking, and why have you adopted such an outdated mode?
MM: The epic is intimately bound up with history, whether in the form of ancient *epos* (as in Homer and Valmiki) or military chronicle (as in Renaissance martial epic) or modern event (as in Carlyle's *French Revolution* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*). So it's quite natural that I should incorporate history into the **Sentence**. *Revolution* does so in ironic fashion; *Each* even dismisses history; but history returns, in the treatment of Homer and the Bible (in *Second* and *Every*), in the form of quotations from nineteenth-century accounts of India (in *Happening*), and continues to play a role in APHRODITE. Cultural study itself is inherently historical. History is really but experience writ large. So autobiography is a form of history, and the epic, whatever form it takes, transmutes

personal experience into collective experience, or renders the collective experience of a culture in personal terms.

MSK: Much of the HERMES sequence, you've said elsewhere, was nourished by the study of religion, by teaching religious classics, oriental and occidental. What's the relation between your academic expertise and your personal belief? What *do* you believe, and how's your belief related to your writing?

MM: Others have asked this question, and I understand that it's a natural one. But that doesn't mean I necessarily agree with its underlying premise: that the epic writer's personal belief is the crucial issue. Vergil and Ovid may or may not have believed in the gods they wrote about. That Dante and Tasso, Spenser and Milton believed so fervently in God and Christ probably weakens rather than strengthens their work. An epic is not a religious tract. Instead it's part history, part politics, part cultural anthropology, part theology. When theology assumes a dominant role, our eyes glaze over, we yearn for more bloodshed, more romance, more humor.

MSK: Another component of your work is philosophy. How do you manage to include so many different philosophies without making clear your own philosophy? Is your work, or is it not, philosophical?

MM: If by "philosophical" one means systematic, as Dante, for example, systematically incorporates Aquinas, then I'm not philosophical. Or if by "philosophical" one means that a writer, Stevens, say, or Camus, takes up philosophical problems and seeks solutions to them, then I'm not philosophical. I regard philosophical systems as grist for the mill. By milling them one gets enjoyment from them and nourishment from the final product. I see nothing wrong with taking up inconsistent systems at different stages of one's career, or even at the same stage. After all, what's wrong with having rice, roti and paratha at the same meal?

MSK: How, then, after all is said and done, do you regard yourself: as an artist, as a thinker, as a religious seeker?

MM: Your question implies to me a rather modern view of the writer: as someone who performs a function earlier relegated to the priest or the moralist or the sage. Perhaps because my work is so visual, I often think of what I do by analogy with the activity of the painter. If a landscape painter produces two hundred successful canvasses in his lifetime, do we regard him as a religious seeker? As a thinker? To do so, it seems to me, does him a disfavor. My landscapes, of course, my cityscapes, whatever, are not simply mimetic reenactments. Other things have been added. They've been framed within various contexts. But the actuality that they embody still seems to me primary. Their other aspects—mythic, historical, philosophical, religious—are secondary, except in those cases where such elements assume a dominant position.

MSK: Would you nonetheless accept the characterization of **Sentence of the Gods** as a form of quest literature? And if not, how would you characterize your work?

MM: This is an interesting notion, I admit, one that I'd never really considered until your article on *Realization*. You've suggested that the narrative there has a kind of religious impulsion, that it's self-generated, self-perpetuating. Perhaps this has in part to do with the open-ended procedure whereby many of my books have been composed and by the open-endedness of the epic as a whole. Still, I'm slightly uncomfortable with the word "quest," because it has such traditional overtones. I'm not a crusader in quest of the Holy Grail. Nor do I think I've sublimated that pattern into a more secular form.

MSK: At the risk of raising a problematic question, what, finally, is the purpose of your work?

MM: This sort of teleological question is one that occurs quite naturally to the critic but often seems less useful to the writer and so less answerable. Let's ask what would happen if we turned the question, say, on Shakespeare. What is the purpose of his work? Do his thirty-nine plays have a goal? Or did he more likely write them one at a time for much more specific purposes or occasions? The most influential of all western writers, Ovid, seems to have had no purpose at all—no overall purpose—in composing his works. Now clearly other writers have had such a purpose, quite often because they've been operating under the influence of a theory that says a literary work should have a purpose. But I don't agree with that theory or way of operating, and I think I'm in pretty good company not to. What, for example, is Homer's "purpose," or Vyasa's?

MSK: If your work, then, doesn't have an overriding purpose, what—to return to the theme of our interview, the cultural matrix—what distinguishes it from merely anthropological or sociological study?

MM: Not much, perhaps. But perhaps that's not such a bad thing in a literary work. You mention cultural anthropology. In a sense Ovid's the first great cultural anthropologist, a sort of Lévi-Strauss of the world of ancient Greece and Rome. He's also a clinical psychologist of love. Carlyle, a contemporary of Ranke's, might be regarded as a sociologist, as a political scientist, though he's also a philosopher and a historian in the more traditional senses. I've read a fair amount of cultural anthropology—especially if one includes all those guide-books—and find it not surprising that such information has made its way into my work, if for the most part indirectly. Vanity, of course, makes one hope that one's work represents something more than merely academic anthropology.

MSK: To change our focus for a moment: you are nearing the completion of a world tour. What has all this travel had to do with your work? Has it made you more "aware," intellectually or spiritually?

MM: There are several dimensions to this recent activity. In practical terms, two purposes of my trip were to give lectures and to gather information for

new books: studies of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking worlds; of Egypt; of the Eastern Mediterranean. One can't go to places where one's never been without becoming more "aware." Geography is a powerful determinant.

On my travels in the Greek islands I more or less retraced the routes of Odysseus and Telemachus for a remake of the Odyssey. (This followed in situ writing designed for remakes of Old Testament, New Testament and Iliad.) In Greece I found that the modern Greeks have very different notions about Odysseus from what one encounters in books by professors at Harvard or Oxford or the Sorbonne. On Chios, to give one example, I met a man, as I was waiting for a bus to take me to the site where Homer was said to have "taught." (I was not aware that Homer had been regarded as a teacher on Chios, one of the seven places that've traditionally claimed his birth). When I asked this modern Greek—author, it turned out, of books on Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus—about the relation between Homer and Odysseus, he said, simply, "Ulysses *is* Homerus." When I asked a woman named Calliope how many boyfriends she thought Penelope had had in Odysseus' absence, she said, "Oh, two or three." In keeping with Herodotus the Chians have a fully developed biography of Homer, who, they say, was blinded in Ithaca, regained his sight on the Mainland, lost it again, married, had two daughters, one of whom married, one of whom remained a spinster. So there's much to become aware of through travel, nor is it all intellectual or spiritual.

MSK: What have you found, this time around the globe, of interest in the world of the arts?

MM: In Tokyo I gave a reading at Ben's Café. During the "open mike" that followed, an American poet read work that he'd created by manipulating a voice recognition computer. I also encountered strikingly original Japanese poets. In St. Petersburg I collaborated with a Japanese-style "harsh noise" band called Talonov Net, with whom I did two readings. In post-Communist Russia a lively avant garde is emerging in music, literature and the visual arts.

Brazilian music experienced at first hand is quite different than what is available commercially. I heard new things in Seattle, saw new things in Miami. Helsinki, with its gorgeous color sense, I regard as the world's most exotic design capital. This time in Finland I saw dazzling color combinations I'd never seen before, body piercings of unusual elegance. But nothing compares with the peasant costumes of Rajasthan! Milan and Paris have yet to catch up.

MSK: Much of your work takes the form of a kind of travelogue. What, in your view, is the relation among travel, travelogue and books of yours like *Realization*, *All*, *Happening*, *Or*, *Divine*, to name a few?

MM: By way of clarification I might say that often, for convenience's sake, I tell people I'm writing a book about Italy, or Egypt, or Scandinavia, but it would be more accurate to say that *Divine* is about divinity, *Renewed* is about renewal, *In* is about whatever that title means. In other words, travel to other

places is only part of the process. I don't myself read many travelogues, am rather weary of the genre, though I'm sure that my work shares its exoticizing strategy, its vacation spirit, and probably some of its cruder enthusiasms. But it's what can be done within this privileged domain, once arrived at, that draws me to it. I use it not simply to escape but to return to fundamental questions: of totality (as in *All*), of possibility (as in *Possibly*).

MSK: How has all this travel, this concern with other places and times, affected your work?

MM: Well, it has clearly enlarged my work and given it a new direction. I first used in situ writing to describe Paris in 1975. But I then incorporated the Michelin Guide walking tours of the city into the peregrinations of a fictional character, Jen, recently arrived from ancient China. Travel at this stage was still being treated vicariously and ironically.

In 1978, 1979 and 1980 I made three outings, from Norman, Oklahoma, to Houston and back, to Boston and back, to San Francisco and back. The resulting in situ registration became the basis for an intertextual book.

Next I explored the American Southwest through a series of forays into Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona. The resulting books, of which one is finished, will not have intertexts and will be taken up mostly with rural rather than urban scenery.

Beginning in 1988 I embarked on the books about place that comprise the APHRODITE sequence. Some of these employ the (for me) new technique of hypertext. Others combine several earlier techniques.

All these books, however, depend upon travel and all have contributed to what, I suppose, could be called a "globalization" of my work.

MSK: Time and space, then, have come to play an essential role in your work, which increasingly seems to be reaching out toward a cosmic grasp. Is there also a futuristic dimension to this? Why the cosmological expansion of space and time?

MM: The cosmological theme is a common property of traditional epic. History occurs, after all, in time and space. I suppose you could say that I'm a Kantian. We recall that it was Kant who first showed us that we can't have space without time, and vice-versa. But I'm also interested in contemporary cosmology, in the 26 dimensions of so-called "string theory." All epic poets manage in some way to take contemporary cosmogony and cosmology into account, and to some degree all epic writers are cosmographical. To be so implies that past and future will somehow find their way into one's work, no matter how preoccupied one is with the present.

MSK: Is it true that the Orient has fascinated you more than the Occident?

MM: I think that would be an exaggeration. Until I was 30 I devoted myself almost exclusively to the study of the West. True, I had a hankering after other worlds, bought books about the Orient, picked up what was generally in the

atmosphere. But it wasn't till 1972, when I began introducing Asian texts into a course of mine, that I acted seriously on these impulses. Only at the age of 40 did I begin Chinese, though in the meantime I'd written the Chinese chapters of *Revolution*. Now, after seventeen years spent off and on in Asia, I find myself returning to Europe—for inspiration and subject matter. Perhaps it's a matter of one's age. What I'd earlier found irritating in Europeans—a formality of manners—I now find myself very comfortable with.

MSK: Evidently Asia has had a major impact on your thought and work, as reflected in your "Chinese" books, *Revolution, Engendering, Excelling*, your "Indian" books, *Realization* and *Happening*, your projected book about Japan and the rewrite of half of another book to include Southeast Asian material. Yet when one steps back and looks at your scheme, that snaking ladder of gods, all seems western. Where is the East in your plan?

MM: Well, it's true that SOL and LUNA are nominally Roman; ARES, HERMES, HERA and APHRODITE, Greek; EL, an amalgam of earlier gods from the Middle East. But the scheme covers other layers of intention. The four letters of HERA, for example, represent not only Hera and her three brothers, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades but also Shakti, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. About half of HERMES, the HER that comprises *Her*, *Engendering* and *Realization*, contains a strong oriental element. And EL will be largely non-European.

MSK: What's your view of the major cultures and civilizations that make up your version of East and West?

MM: I believe in a hierarchy of cultures on both sides. In the East, India comes first, followed by China, Japan and the Southeast Asian cultures. In the West, Egypt comes first, followed by Greece, Rome and Renaissance Italy.

MSK: These rankings, one notices, are not only hierarchical but also chronological. Does this imply a theory of decline?

MM: It would seem that way, were it not for the regenerative force of Renaissance Italy and the potential of other cultures, such as the Japanese, for revival.

MSK: I notice that you are talking about cultures primarily, not civilizations. What's the relation between these two entities? Do they always go together, and what's the role of literature in their formation and maintenance?

MM: These are difficult questions, and to give definitive answers would be slightly preposterous, but since you ask . . . I'll try. Let's take the last question first. Literature comes rather late in the development of the most ancient cultures, since they begin with oral traditions. As for the relation of civilization and culture, it seems to me that the two don't necessarily go together. The USA, for example, is a relatively successful civilization but one that's rather lacking in culture, and not just because it's multicultural. There's no rootedness, no ingrained sense of propriety, no community of values, apart from the heraldry of

democratic principles—liberty, equality, and so forth. India is also a democracy, but its modern institutions haven't been allowed to efface its deeper cultural values. Among all the great traditions, however, ancient Egypt, from what I've come to understand, was closest to being at once a great culture and a great civilization. At the other end of the spectrum one finds developed culture in the absence of developed civilization, and finds it all over the world. Culture, it seems to me, is much less predictable, arises from more mysterious causes, is less the result of cumulative economic, political, social forces than is the case with civilization. But these are rather windy generalizations.

MSK: Let's return, then, to something more concrete: your use of classic texts from ancient Egypt, India and China, in *Magic, Realization* and *Engendering.* Did you have a common goal as well as a common method in composing these three books?

MM: These three books, you may have noticed, are very different from one another. *Magic* 's an autobiography, of a rather peculiar sort. It regresses from age fourteen to the moment of conception and then carries forward from age fifteen to an entry into the real world at age 28. The Egyptian Book of the Dead seemed paradoxically a suitable text to highlight issues in one's early development. Only much later in my Egyptological study have I seen how indebted western individualism is to Egypt. The blurring of Egypt with Plato in the book's interweaving of a second, neoplatonic text also seemed appropriate for an intermediate stage in one's life.

When we turn to *Realization* and *Engendering*, we find a pair of books whose techniques may seem quite similar: the in situ description of outward voyages and the in situ description of more inward-tending explorations of a single place. But the various classical texts here serve to enforce a number of discriminations. The Upanishads are philosophically religious and ultimately optimistic; the Dhammapada is much more pessimistic, or at least more astringent; the Bhagavad Gita is both epic and doctrinal. So *Realization*'s journeys, toward three cardinal points, are strongly differentiated by these texts.

In *Engendering* two contradictory but classic expressions of the Chinese mind and moral sensibility are brought into juxtaposition. The Chinese texts are more practical than the Indian texts. Confucius is a teacher of a highly social doctrine. In *Engendering* his text is fed into a university context of instruction by example. Lao-zi, on the other hand, is associated with the "town" in the "town and gown" distinction. He plays the night of sensibility to Confucius' daytime realm of judgment. But both are figures of sensibility, of judgment.

MSK: So *Engendering* is not just a matter of interweaving classic text with in situ material. It also aims at violently yoking two schools of thought. The Indic classics, Hindu and Buddhist, are reconcilable. Have the Chinese classics ever been treated this way?

MM: When I was researching Confucius and Lao-zi for a paper at a Stanford seminar in Chinese literature, I came across a scholarly Ming Dynasty novel, in which the author had deliberately attempted to merge Confucius and Lao-zi. So there's nothing new under the sun!

MSK: Looking back at my notes on these hierarchies of cultures east and west, I notice that Japan and Rome occupy analogous positions in the two lists that you've drawn up. Are you thinking of ancient Japan and ancient Rome?

MM: Well, *I* wasn't the one that drew the analogy, but the parallels are interesting, aren't they? Just as Japan worshipped at the feet of cultural China, so the Romans, sometimes slavishly, imitated the Greeks. Even so great a poet as Vergil gave his ultimate Roman epic a Greek title, *Aeneis*. Both have been imperial powers, Japan only recently curbed in its aspirations. I'm sure a lot of other parallels will suggest themselves. In other ways, of course, Japan and Rome are very different. Present-day Japan seems to me to be arriving at a culturally dominant position, whereas Rome, though still vital, is not the Rome that it once was.

MSK: You've included Renaissance Italy in your list. Isn't there a disproportion between a culture that flourished for only a few centuries and those that have maintained themselves for millennia?

MM: True enough, but I believe that it's the brilliance of a culture, not its longevity, that counts. Think of T'ang Dynasty China. The Italians are interesting to me for their curiously universal appeal as well. When I first arrived in Taipei, all the decorations in restaurants were Chinese—scrolls, pieces of framed calligraphy, even the music was Chinese. Now, when one enters a fashionable new restaurant, one finds a Botticelli on the wall. Everyone, the world over, recognizes the Mona Lisa, or God's finger touching Adam's on the Sistine ceiling. Why is this? Italian culture doesn't travel very well, since Italians don't speak English and most other people don't speak Italian. But go to St. Mark's Plaza and you'll find it packed with Japanese, all dressed in the latest fashions from Milan. These are mysterious matters. Until, that is, we realize that fashion and culture go together. Both express an *élan vital.*

MSK: Which direction, then, do you think things are going in? Is the attitude of Yeats that you once characterized as "an orientalized posture" still an answer to the dilemma of the West?

MM: I'm not sure the old thesis of Spengler's—the Decline of the West—is quite as valid as it was in his own time. In my experience as many Orientals look to the West as Occidentals look to the East. The requirements of a universal set of laws against nuclear destruction, in favor of reasonable trade agreements, of political, social, environmental health make western models of organization, negotiation, cooperation increasingly attractive.

MSK: Perhaps we could turn our attention to a series of less ambitious topics, those that concern the technical aspects of the **Sentence of the Gods**. Can you

explain for us this imposing structure and tell us how it came into being? Was it by fortuitous inspiration or did it grow gradually?

MM: A little of both. When I first started writing, I had no inkling of the whole design. After finishing several books I began to intuit that I was working toward a sequence of sorts. Then, suddenly, I noticed that by retitling my first six books I could manage a conjunction of Sol and Luna. Within a few days, as I recall—this was 1975, I saw that by luck the "A" of LUNA could introduce ARES, the "S" of ARES could provide the first letter of a backward-reading HERMES, whose "H" could be the first letter of HERA, and that the whole week of the gods would come to completion. Working out all the relations among these parts, however, has already taken a quarter of a century, and I'm nowhere near the end of the process.

MSK: Would you agree that intellectual intensity and activity are predominant features of your work?

MM: That would depend in part on where such a generalization is leading. Milton was intellectually intense, but he was also emotionally fervid. The epic writer, unlike the personal lyricist, must engage the world of learning. Vergil—though I can't substantiate this—was probably one of the most learned people who ever lived. (In the absence of letters, prose works, lecture notes, we must deduce this from his poetry.) The same was probably true of Homer, who, like Raymond Roussel, could recite his own work from memory. When we come down to the modern period, we have more evidence: Ezra Pound was incontestably erudite, intellectually intense and active, as you say. But so was Joyce, so was Blake, so are all ambitious epic writers.

MSK: You seem to seize every minute and inch of events and locale to harness them to your narrative. Why are you so devoted to the particular?

MM: Because it seems to me a missed opportunity not to be. Most falsehood consists not of incorrect statement so much as half-truth: the vague generality, the dubious abstraction, the commonplace that turns out under inspection not to correspond to the observable world of experience. So I'm intent on getting as much actual experience—not its fictional simulacrum, as much observation—not generalization, into my work as possible. I'd rather describe the world in detail than define it in terms of axiomatic truths.

MSK: Your descriptions of place resemble the technique of a camera panning top to bottom, zooming in on the principal subject, following someone as in a tracking shot. What's the relation of your in situ technique to cinematography?

MM: After I'd finished my first book, *Sleep*, I cast about for an entirely different way of writing. In *O*, my second book, I began to imitate the photograph, using postcards to construct the sequences about Chicago, Boston and New York. For a number of years I continued to flirt with photography, until I decided that cinematography was the next logical step. I studied technique with experimental filmmakers, taught narrative cinema and, as a result, produced the

in situ registration of *Realization*. With my next book, *Engendering*, I took this process one step further and began to imitate television, not only video registration, but TV programming, the 24-hour continuum, the segmentation of TV news, and so forth. I taught television and held it up as a model for creative writing students, who had few other vital models to work with (they were not versed in literature). Having done at last with models—having internalized them, so to speak—like the painter done with masters and museums, I went my own way.

MSK: We've been talking for the most part about your prose. What about your verse? Let's take a look at a single stanza from the long poem *Light*, your third book:

> A man from the South
> wants a ride back East.
> I've told him the family
> car goes only to childhood.
> Though his heart's not in it,
> his mind's made up.
> Driver's seat reclined,
> he rests his head in the
> back seat, a red
> folded blanket underneath.

MM: What is it about these lines that interests you?

MSK: I find them ruthlessly mystical.

MM: What do you mean by "mystical"?

MSK: They seem to reach out to an otherworldly realm. For instance, in the passage, "I've told him the / family car goes only to childhood," you are moving, it seems to me, beyond time and space. There's also a duality that runs throughout the stanza. You introduce two figures, "a man" and "I"; two regions, South and East; "heart" and "mind." The persona seems both decisive and indecisive.

MM: What do you find in this duality?

MSK: I think what I deduce from this duality is that the poet represents both his experience and his perception of it.

MM: But what makes such a situation "mystical"?

MSK: The fact that it is and it is not. The "it" is what both the experience and the perception represent.

MM: Do you mean that anything that's ambiguous is "mystical"?

MSK: Maybe it is the movement back and forth between experience and abstraction . . .

MM: What about the last four lines, are they also "mystical"?

MSK: Yes, I think so. We have, in the "driver's seat," the present, and, in the "back seat," the past.

MM: You mean a conjunction of past and present, an ambiguity with regard to the two, is a mysticism?

MSK: "He rests," for me, represents a transcendental, esoteric state of being.

MM: What about the "red folded blanket"?
MSK: "Red folded blanket" swerves back to the more tangible, the more physical. The "red" has a heavy earthiness about it, and "blanket" implies a kind of texture.
MM: So the blanket for you is real, and its reality proves the irreality of what precedes it.
MSK: Yes. What you are doing here is reminiscent of your technique in *Realization*, where you move back and forth between the tangible and the subtle. These lines remind me of Emily Dickinson. You begin the stanza by courting mystical apprehension and move through the stanza experiencing it. In the process you delineate it—through your return, by way of contrast, to the tangible.