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THOMAS MCGRATH AND THE VOCATION OF THE RADICAL POET

by

ERIC W. DEVLIN

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York**

2002

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Abstract**THOMAS MCGRATH AND THE VOCATION OF THE RADICAL POET**

by

Eric W. Devlin

Adviser: Professor Mary Ann Caws

This dissertation presents Thomas McGrath's poetic career as occurring in two stages: first, his poetic and political development, through the writing of five volumes of short but increasingly longer poems, into the poet who, in 1954, will undertake his major work, Letter To An Imaginary Friend; then his devotion for thirty years to writing Letter, his "pseudo-autobiography," in which, as an individual and as a representative man, he seeks his and the nation's way through the moral wilderness of twentieth-century America.

McGrath's poetry is personal, symbolic, celebrating loved ones for generosity, humor, and sacrifice in their error-ridden lives; and it is public in mourning loved ones destroyed by a capitalist economy that sacrifices the lives of its poor to the property of its rich. McGrath sings adoringly of the land whose beauty and variety have been devastated and homogenized by the same hands that have taken his friends and family.

His primary relationships on the family farm in 1930s North Dakota are the template for his political convictions: "Dakota is everywhere." First Manifesto, published in 1940, displays early signs of what will become his mature voice: rhythmic mastery of the six-beat line; preference for near over exact rhyme, used in unexpected places, and for variations on stanzaic and poetic forms; grim wit, and the connecting of the inner life to the outer world.

The next four volumes bring McGrath's voice to maturation, adding the bold dictional mix of standard vocabulary with arcane terminology and hipster street- and drug-talk; allusion to many fields of knowledge; audacious, wise-cracking irreverence toward the hypocrisy of powerful individuals and institutions; and a historical perspective on the present.

Blacklisted by HUAC, facing the dissolution of his second marriage, McGrath in 1954 begins Letter To An Imaginary Friend. In a cycle of returning between present and past, he tells in Part One of his radicalizing experiences and relationships on the farm. Parts Two through Four present his developing sense of calling as an atheist poet of revolution, first in imagery of epic heroes' journeys through the underworld, then in Roman Catholic language and symbols that equate his work with religious vocation.

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Chapter One

The Farm Through First Manifesto

Thomas McGrath is a remarkable, if uneven, poet who, for over five decades until his death in 1990, wrote passionately about the casualties of American life. Not widely known outside the poetry profession -- his *New York Times* obituary comprises thirty-one single-column lines and mentions only three of the twenty-four volumes of poetry and fiction published in his lifetime -- he was highly honored within it and, at his best, recognized as one of the finest American poets of the middle and late twentieth century by Hayden Carruth, Donald Hall, Terrence Des Pres, James Wright, and Robert Bly among many others.

In a wide range of poetic forms, especially the long poem, and in two novels and numerous shorter prose statements, McGrath depicts the life of a nation gone astray almost from the start, on a self-destructive course of victimization of which "the Indian was the first wound." The vision is strikingly consistent: a capitalist economy, driven by greed, sacrifices the lives of its poor to the property of its rich. This, McGrath declares, has been the cause of America's sad history of simultaneous exploitation and denial; and this history has led him reluctantly to the conclusion that America, once the world's best chance, may be an opportunity lost.

McGrath communicates this unhappy message through celebrations of loved ones remembered for the decency, generosity, humor, and sacrifice in their error-ridden lives,

and mourned for their destruction brought about by the impersonal greed of corporations, institutions and absentee owners. Similarly, he speaks admiringly and sometimes sings adoringly of the land, a continent whose beauty and variety have been devastated and homogenized, respectively, by the same hands that have taken his friends and family. This is a personal view; these are not abstract principles, but responses to life. They are frequently, as well, political statements.

McGrath came to many of his major concerns early in his career. His perceptions broaden and his understanding deepens, but he retains the same values, interwoven in a view of history in which "all of us live twice: once personally and once as a representative man or woman. I am interested in those moments when my life line crosses through the concentration points of the history of my time." ¹ His is an unusually unified body of work: "As someone has pointed out, I have been working on only one poem throughout all my work" (Ibid.). In an essay for a 1982 festschrift in his honor, McGrath says, "Poe was 100% wrong. It is the 'short' poem which is a contradiction in terms. In reality there are only long poems and the void. It is true that what we appear to get are 'aphorisms, epigrams, songs, song-like poems' and so on. But these are only fragments of the long poem which the poet somehow failed to write, that long poem which he will go on trying to write by fits and starts his whole life long." ² This "long poem" is the body of McGrath's work and also the major and unifying opus at its core, Letter To An Imaginary Friend, the four-part pseudo-autobiographical poem at which he worked for over thirty years, beginning in 1954.

McGrath writes about people who do physical work, on farms, in factories and

shipyards, and will always have to work. Sometimes there is the satisfaction of sharing with one's fellows, as among farmhands in North Dakota during the Great Depression.

But both the Depression and the need to work outlast this golden time of worker brotherhood; the opportunity for sharing has been lost; there will be no Commune.

Nostalgia for an Edenic past not only has countless antecedents in literature; it is virtually a field marking of the American radical left.³ McGrath develops this theme in Letter To An Imaginary Friend Part One, published in 1962, as well as in a number of shorter poems from the nineteen forties until his death.

Letter Part Two, completed and published with Part One in 1970, includes a passage in which work is done, not of grudging necessity and for the benefit of those already wealthy -- the context of most work for wages in a capitalist economy, in McGrath's view -- but for oneself and with joy, at once cheating the capitalists and gratifying himself:

And now a great hush: the universe halts: holding its breath
For the death of those infant worlds and the great shout of this my labor
Done for love only.

Halts for a moment.

Then the great bush
Of the silence unfurls in a fury of snow cursed out of a towering
Ash tree by a lout of a blasphemous jay.

He knows

My name.

All of 'em.

And the little world awakes, scolding:
"The bronco's back on the range! The lunatic's in the trees,
Chopping wood for the purest hell of it, wouldn't you know!"

And the crows come by to stone me, and the jay is filing his tongue
Like the deaf man tuning a buzz saw, and around in the ark-fat farms
They turn up their thermostats...

And one blow does all this,
One man cutting wood for fun, for the blaze of his own work!

In joy.

That does it.

Rockefeller revolves like a goose on a spit

In his whited sepulcher

a Texaco station goes down with all hands

Off Venezuela...

This ax, comrades, has blasphemed against fuel oil...(176-177)⁴

But such a possibility is never shown in the industrial workplace.

McGrath is bitter on the subject of worker exploitation. This Coffin Has No Handles, the novel he wrote in the late 'forties but did not publish until 1988; Letter Parts One and Two, and many of the shorter poems communicate rage at the use of humans as expendable resources for the amassing of profits in a few hands. The beautiful passage that opens This Coffin, describing the coming on of morning in New York, shows people descending from their residences, then going up to their places of work, as if they have been moved from one side of a giant balancing scale to the other:

You are aware of the weather first of all, and the limits of the known world, the sign of the Army and Navy Store on the Avenue, or from the fifteenth story the line of mist out toward Staten Island. The light is clean and new, not yet soiled by the commerce of the day....On a street in Hoboken a tenement wall collapses and the dust is puffed up into the clean light. Up and down. The world is arranging its weights and measures.

A million workers charge down the dusty chutes of the cold-water apartment houses, are siphoned off and sucked away into the subways. The bottom has fallen out of the barometer of sleep. Adjustments are made: in the fur district the pressure of industry is rising; and through the fog of brick and stone, the steel bones of the skyscrapers downtown, you see the thin red line of humanity and profit rise in exact ratio to the falling line on sleep's soiled glass. Up and down.⁵

Probably only war, to which he lost a brother, Jimmy, as well as some beloved friends, enrages McGrath more than the daily use of laborers by bosses. Wars are fought to

protect the property and position of owners; workers in war must give life as well as labor.

McGrath's worker-advocacy is authentic and transcends literary and academic venues. His vita lists his employment as farmer, welder, logger, woodworker, and machinist; Communist Party membership for a time, including party activism within and ultimately in opposition to the New York waterfront unions; unrepentant testimony about his politics at Congressional hearings, and consequent loss of a teaching job; and blacklisting from academia and Hollywood, where he wrote documentary filmscripts.

Unable at most times to support himself by writing only, McGrath is, strictly speaking, a worker-writer, if not always in the blue-collar, industrial mode of Jack Conroy.

McGrath's teaching career, his documentary-film writing, are work of a different sort than that done on the assembly line or in the mines or the wheat fields. He puts in time in blue-collar jobs when necessary -- early in his adulthood and later when blacklisted and financially desperate -- but returns to teaching and screen-writing when possible. But, whatever work he does, he is by necessity, not by choice, a part-time poet and fiction-writer who identifies with the working class. McGrath's origins in a North Dakota family, farming poor land, "land that should not ha' been broke, and they died/

Broke"(250), make his radicalism probable, to some: "Coming out the back door of the Dakotas in the twenties he had to be a dispossessed socialist of some sort," Norman Maclean writes of a character in his story "Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim'." ⁶ McGrath concurs: "I grew up out there and my first experience with radicalism was there...." ⁷ "I got a basic kind of radicalization out of my father and out of people around him, and people who passed through when I was a kid, working....My father says, 'Can't

trust any of those rich sons-of-bitches,' and Marx talks about the ruling bourgeoisie. And eventually, I guess, I made some kind of connection." ⁸

Michael Gold, one of the Communist Party U.S.A.'s major literary figures as editor of, first, the Liberator (1920-1926), then the New Masses (1926-1947), and a columnist for the Daily Worker from 1933 until his death in 1967, writes in his landmark essay "Go Left, Young Writers!" published in January 1929, that experience, not ideology, is the starting point of proletarian literature:

A new writer has been appearing, a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has not time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self-confidence but writes because he must -- and because he has a real talent. He is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him. His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment....A Jack London or a Walt Whitman will come of this new crop of young workers who write in the New Masses. ⁹

A year later Gold proposed a "national corps of writers":

Instead of having a board of contributing editors made up of those vague, rootless people known as writers, we will have a staff of industrial correspondents, whose function will be to report each month, in prose, poetry, plays and satire, what is happening in each part of industrial America. ¹⁰

Gold's ideas, issued from his roost as managing editor of New Masses in New York, and written in his powerful, rhythmic, incendiary prose, attracted wide attention and incited controversy. Jack Conroy, devoting a good portion of his after-work writing hours at this time to the organization of the Rebel Poets, replied to Gold in a letter to the editors of New Masses, published in April 1930, that local chapters of Rebel Poets "serve

as cultural oases where radicals may congregate for discussion of revolutionary art and other activities. In this way, the otherwise isolated proletarian should be made to feel that he is not fighting alone in his assaults against the citadels of capitalism." ¹¹ Conroy well knew this isolation; he knew many workers, but few radicals and fewer still radical writers. He interacted with literary colleagues and political comrades largely through letters; he and his co-founder of Rebel Poets, Ralph Cheyney, read each other's work in little magazines, corresponded, and collaborated for several years, but never met.

Joseph Kalar of International Falls, Minnesota, a poet, essayist, papermill worker and correspondent of Conroy's, entered the debate with his own letter to the editor of New Masses in April 1930:

Ten hours spent on the job would hardly give one the enthusiasm to write about it -- for ten [hours] irons out even the bitterness and hate -- leaving only an arid apathy and a desire for "escape."...The casual proletarian -- the floater, to whom it doesn't matter so much what he works at --and to whom, of necessity, all jobs are in his province, can probably get and report a truer picture of a steel plant than a real steelworker -- in two weeks. The brutality of it, the cruelty of it, are undoubtedly more apparent to one "fresh" than to one hardened to the grind, for the years can make even injustice seem commonplace. ¹²

McGrath fits into two strains of the radical literary tradition: the Midwestern worker-writer, encompassing farmers, factory workers and urban immigrants, mostly in Chicago, but also in Minneapolis-St. Paul, St. Louis, Kansas City, Detroit, and other smaller cities; and the intellectual left of both coasts, including blue- and white-collar worker-writers, university- and self-educated, largely immigrants or their children, primarily urban-dwelling, particularly in New York, where McGrath lived immediately before and after his World War II Army service and again in the 1960s, and in Los Angeles. The Midwestern

tradition was his by birth and upbringing, the bicoastal by experience. The years spent in Los Angeles, from the late 1940s to the early '60s, put him in touch with and in the midst of West Coast radicalism; his novel The Gates Of Ivory, The Gates Of Horn¹³ is a product of this milieu. McGrath states proudly in a later interview that at this time he was the connection between the young West Coast radicals and Michael Gold in New York, for he knew Michael Gold and had been published by him in the New Masses. But McGrath's primary identification always remained with the Midwest: "Dakota is everywhere."

Thomas McGrath was born in 1916, on November 20, in Ransom County, North Dakota, which is in the southeast corner of the state. As the town nearest his family's farm and in which he attended elementary and high schools was Sheldon, located in sandhills between the Maple and Sheyenne Rivers about forty miles southwest of Fargo, it is usually given as his birthplace. In a 1987 interview with Joshua Weiner, McGrath said Sheldon was "sort of my birthplace, though I wasn't born there -- I was born outside of there, but we lived around that place most of the time. I was actually born near a town called Fingal...I think that's where I was born. It's a great Irish name, Fingal. I'm not dead certain of it, but I was born certainly out in the country and not in any town."¹⁴ The identification with his Irish forebears and his farm upbringing, as well as his being an outsider -- "not in any town" -- are the issues here.

The ancestry is Irish on both sides, and Gaelic-speaking in his mother's family, the Sheas; but McGrath's identification is most strongly with his father, James McGrath. The parallels in their lives are striking: they share political sympathies and class loyalty; love of poetry, song and story; a work life that takes them by necessity through several

occupations and through periods of poverty, and the experience of being an outsider, a suspect.

James McGrath had grown up near where he raised his own six children, of whom Thomas was the eldest; he had worked as a railroadman and a lumberjack before settling into the life of a tenant farmer and farmhand for hire; only in his sixties did he own any land, a small property -- an eighth-section, eighty acres -- his wife, Catherine, had inherited from her father. He enjoyed occasional periods of relative prosperity, but hard-won subsistence was the norm.

Yet as his poet-son depicts him, he was different from those around him and was perceived by them as such. He had travelled more than his farming neighbors, thanks to his early occupations, "so he was more cosmopolitan than most of the people around, most of his contemporaries." ¹⁵ His in-laws, land-owning aspirants to the farming bourgeoisie, looked down on him, "especially because of his associations with people, and the people he hired and his politics. Not that he was a wild-eyed revolutionary, but he had brought back some things from the woods, some of them Wobbly things. And I remember, I think it was in 1940, he voted Communist -- probably the only farmer out there who did. He was a marvelous man." ¹⁶ Admiration led to emulation.

"My skippering Irish father, land-locked Sinbad,/ With his head in a song-bag" (4) "did more to teach me something about writing and poetry than anybody else in my life." ¹⁷

James McGrath's brief formal education had emphasized immersion in the McGuffey Readers, stories and poems from which he performed for family and friends for the rest of his life. Thomas McGrath's praise of his father's voice and memory for songs suggests the

likelihood that among the "Wobbly things" James McGrath had learned were some of the more than two hundred union songs produced by that movement, whose slogans included "Sing and fight!"¹⁸

"...that quiet man, chief among chiefs --/ Seemed so to me in those green years: and now as I say it," McGrath writes of him (334). "Don't hate anybody./ My father said," he also taught (30). And "Offering," included in the "New Poems" section of Selected Poems 1938-1988, presents James McGrath's life, especially after his marriage, as one of sacrifice and endurance:

Then our mother began
 Presenting us to you:
 One, every couple of years,
 Was conjured out of the gypsy tent of her black skirts.
 And you fed us:
 Fishing all night in the hungry waters,
 Giving your clothing to warm us,
 And you naked, shivering in the cold,
enduring --
 Why didn't you drown us like a litter of sick cats?

But...didn't.
 You gave your freedom for our mother's fulfillment.
 And you gave us
 All the lost honey of a young man's years --
 Steering through the vicious seas of those bitter times...
 Ah...dearest father, dear
 Helmsman!

This elegy, remembering James McGrath as protector, provider, sacrificer, is evocative of Whitman's Lincoln elegies "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the latter one of Thomas McGrath's two favorite Whitman poems.¹⁹ (The other, "Passage to India," gives a view of history that is of particular relevance to

Letter To An Imaginary Friend). McGrath, like Whitman, uses nautical imagery in praising a man of the plains; like Whitman, McGrath addresses his subject with a title of honor that metaphorically characterizes the man in terms of a role played, a function performed, in their relationship.

The McGrath-Whitman connection has been apparent to many. The preference for the six-beat line, the mix of ordinary and learned vocabulary, the populist values and respect for workers, the interest in history and geography, the sense of place -- the resemblances are many. Terrence Des Pres goes so far as to say, "In American poetry he is as close to Whitman as anyone since Whitman himself."²⁰ McGrath acknowledged his debt to Whitman and admitted to a fear of Whitman's immense influence: "I always tended to fight shy of him because of this terrific force of gravity that's involved."²¹ The extent of the dictional mix, the outright commitment to political revolution, and the intentionally outrageous humor, the latter a part of the picture from the Longshot O'Leary poems on, are among the elements that are surely McGrath's own.

Thomas McGrath's various references to his father suggest that the son's awareness of the father's sacrifices has been independently perceived rather than externally imposed; this, one senses, is not a father who reminds his son how much the father has done for him. Thomas McGrath's own experience of fatherhood, especially in the context of a turbulent marriage, financial distress, and deteriorating health, must have heightened his appreciation of James McGrath's familial devotion as well as identification with a sacrificing parent. There is also an unstated wish to emulate, maybe a longing to believe already true of himself, the courage, grace and intelligence amidst catastrophe he attributes

to his father and which, in "Offering," are said to be responsible for the McGraths' survival while others are engulfed around them.

McGrath mentions his mother, Catherine, immediately after his father in Letter, Part One, "her kindness and cookies,/ The whispering, ginghamy, prayers"; "Damp comforts. Tears/ Harder than nails./ A mint of loving laughter"(4). She is protective: "my mother fusses. Is the job too hard?"(15) She is nurturing, literally, as well: "She pets me and cooks"(15), and "She had a womanly notion/ (Which she didn't really believe) that all man's troubles/ Could be ended by eating -- it was a gesture she made/ To soothe the world"(29). She inspires by example: "her whole being a lamp in all times and weather" (303). There are few other references to her in the poetry.

"She was a very religious person...a very, very, very deep believer," McGrath said in an interview with James McKenzie and Robert Lewis in March 1985.²² Her Roman Catholic faith was responsible for the family's religious practice; James McGrath, a skeptic, attended church because she did, and he, like the rest of the family, loved her and did not wish to hurt her. For the same reason Thomas McGrath underwent confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church at thirteen, though he was already an atheist. His atheism, thus, preceded his communism.

Catherine McGrath's piety was a concern for her son when, after divorcing his first wife and marrying a second, a Jewish divorcee, he brought this second wife, Alice, home to the farm. Alice McGrath told her husband that his mother would be pleased by their love; McGrath replied that, on the contrary, she would be convinced he's damned to hell. Alice McGrath said there was no indication in Catherine McGrath's gracious conduct, then

or afterwards, that she had misgivings about their marriage. One notes that the literalness of Catherine McGrath's faith was not doubted.

The rest of McGrath's immediate family were "my next brother Jim, then Joe, then my only sister, Kathleen,/ Then Martin, then Jack, the baby" (303).

McGrath attended elementary and high school in Sheldon, where, despite the scarcity of books, he read The Iliad, The Odyssey, the Edda, and all the poetry of Thomas Moore and Walter Scott. He also read Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Hemingway, Joyce's Ulysses and Proust's Swann's Way. In about 1932 a teacher gave him an anthology of modern poetry that awakened McGrath to the possibility of a poem's reflecting his own circumstances and familiar surroundings. This book introduced McGrath to Frost and, memorably, Sandburg, whose Chicago Poems and Smoke and Steel²³ come to mind, in their depiction of urban blight and worker exploitation, when one reads such McGrath poems as "On the Memory of a Working-Class Girl,"²⁴ and whose use of urban street jargon is a precursor of the dictional mix that is a signature element of McGrath's style. McGrath's formalism and complexity create a tension that is missing in much of Sandburg's poetry, which, its virtues of candor, earnestness, accessibility, rhythm and figurative richness aside, gives the unfortunate impression of sameness throughout; a little Sandburg goes a long way, and there is a great deal of it. Of this first exposure to Sandburg, McGrath recalled, "I didn't like him very much, but I was struck by the fact that he was bringing in all kinds of things that I hadn't seen in poetry...and the kind of openness of the work."²⁵ McGrath's most important reaction was to write a poem, which he later recalled as his first and as a terrible poem; he went on trying for years until he had written something that he liked.²⁶

After graduating from Sheldon High School in 1934, he had to forego a scholarship to North Dakota State University because he would have had to stay in a dormitory and couldn't afford it. He attended Moorhead State University in Minnesota, across the border from Fargo, for a term, but for lack of funds had to drop out and work for a year. Money earned during this time, combined with a scholarship and an ongoing job, enabled him to enter and remain at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, receiving a B.A. and a Rhodes Scholarship in 1939.²⁷

Prevented by the onset of war in Europe from using the Rhodes Scholarship immediately, McGrath went instead to the polar opposite of North Dakota within the longitudinally central United States, enrolling at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He was drawn by the presence there of Cleanth Brooks, and also by the exoticness of the Deep South -- "the lynch-dreaming, the demon-haunted, the murderous virgin South" (from "The Topography of History") -- and the chance to do political work there: "I used to distribute leaflets out in the black barrios....I was a member of the CP."²⁸

The contact with Brooks was rewarding and an influence on McGrath's development. They spent a lot of time together, and McGrath was very fond of Brooks. McGrath came to feel later that his own political advocacy, his "need to assert or maintain my position, my attitude," had somewhat impeded his taking full advantage of the opportunity for growth that this relationship afforded. Among the benefits McGrath attributed to his exposure to Brooks were "some sense of the poem." " a certain idea of functionalism,"

"something of the idea of paradox, the idea of some poems, at least, being a network of related symbols, a family" -- particularly important to McGrath's eventual awareness of the interrelatedness of all of his poetry, with some of the shorter poems constituting footnotes to the long poem at the core of his work -- and "the sense that wit was a useful part of poetry." Cleverness for its own sake McGrath might never be able to value, but conspicuous cleverness in the service of a poem becomes an identifying trait of his work beginning with Longshot O'Leary. So too do the jokes, present in First Manifesto only as earnest witticisms. At the time disputing with Brooks and others at LSU the importance of irony in poetry, rejecting mechanisms of indirection as ethical compromises, McGrath eventually recognized the considerable role and value of irony in his own work.²⁹

The most important results of McGrath's year in Baton Rouge were his publishing relationship and lifelong friendship with Alan Swallow, a fellow student working toward the completion of a PhD. From First Manifesto in 1940 through The Movie At The End Of The World: Collected Poems in 1972, the Swallow Press was McGrath's house, and Swallow, until his death, was McGrath's publisher, editor, critic and friend.

The circumstances of their meeting and of the Swallow Press' origins on a handpress in a Baton Rouge garage are retold in many places, in interviews with or memoirs about both McGrath and Swallow. McGrath, some of whose work had been passed into Swallow's hands, eliciting an invitation to stop in, recalled his first impression of Swallow:

In the garage -- and it was hot -- there's this madman setting type, so I went in and introduced myself and he sat down, took the poems and started talking to me about the poems, saying "I don't like this line, this is good, that's bad...." We instantly started talking as if we had known each other for a long time....that was that and we were friends and continued from that time on.³⁰

McGrath's first published volume and the Swallow Press were born together.

McGrath and Swallow, only a year apart in age, shared political values and the childhood experience of rural life and hard winters, Swallow's on an irrigated farm in northwestern Wyoming, as well as lives in poetry. Both men have poems in a left-oriented collection titled Poets Of Today: A New American Anthology.³¹ The volume was edited by Walter Lowenfels, a poet of stature a generation older than they and, as an anthologist, an advocate of lesser-known and politically oppressed poets, especially blacks and communists. His radical credentials included a conviction under the Smith Act and subsequent prison term for membership in a group advocating the overthrow of the United States Government -- the Communist Party U.S.A. (The conviction was overturned on appeal, after some time had been served.) Swallow's poem "On the Outgoing Train" opens with a northern prairie landscape and concludes with praise for collectivism and worldwide brotherhood. McGrath is represented by a passage from Letter. One wonders if Swallow's presence in the volume may be due, aside from the quality of his poem, to McGrath, whom Lowenfels mentions as a friend and thanks "for his patience and help, particularly in collecting some of the Pacific Coast poets."³² Among the poets included are several McGrath friends, some of them former students: Alvaro Cardona-Hine, Gene Frumkin, Estelle Gershgoren, Don Gordon, Allen Planz, Naomi Replansky, and Mel Weisburd, as well as Swallow. (Had this anthology not been limited to the work of "living poets," it would undoubtedly have included a poem by Edwin Rolfe, an intimate friend of McGrath's in Los Angeles and, with Don Gordon, McGrath's favorite poet, according to

Alice McGrath. Rolfe, widely identified as the unofficial poet laureate of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, had died in 1954. Charles Humboldt, another McGrath intimate included in the anthology, died in 1964, the year of publication.)

But McGrath and Swallow did not always agree about poems, and McGrath "always wondered why he liked mine." ³³ Swallow's affinity and enthusiasm for the poetry of Yvor Winters, especially, and also J.V. Cunningham, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren were well known. (Warren had been his friend and teacher at LSU.) Swallow wrote, in the foreword to his collected prose, An Editor's Essays Of Two Decades, ³⁴ of the superiority of these, the best of this generation of American poets, to the best of his own generation, "those born approximately during World War I." Among the latter, he saw McGrath and Robert Lowell as "the persons of greatest innate genius." ³⁵ More specifically, "Like Lowell, McGrath is a great rhetorician. His work has been spotty in that he has so often tackled so many different things....And he has been most ambitious; and there are many who consider him almost saintly in his genius and devotion." ³⁶ In a letter to Allen Tate dated November 4, 1964, Swallow wrote of McGrath, "I feel that he and Lowell are the major developed talents of their particular generation." ³⁷ Swallow had previously written to Ann Stanford, on May 1, 1956, of a critic who compared McGrath unfavorably with Randall Jarrell, "He can't see the kind of vitality which does lie in McGrath's work, whatever its faults (which are often many)." ³⁸

Swallow's poetry is markedly different from McGrath's; it is quieter, using standard diction in, usually, iambic quadrimeter or pentameter. Swallow's poems, too, are more likely than McGrath's to be of a common length; only five of the thirty-six poems in

Swallow's The Nameless Sight: Poems 1937-1956³⁹ are thirty-two lines or longer.

Swallow favors the four-line stanza, rhyming ABAB or ABCB. His adventurousness does not extend far into explorations in form.

About Letter, Part One, McGrath recalled, "Alan Swallow liked the poem, but it in no way fit with his idea of what a poem ought to be. A poem ought to be a well-managed thing. I like that kind of poem too, but it's not my kind of poem."⁴⁰ Among other indications of common taste, and again perhaps of McGrath's advocacy, is the list of McGrath favorites eventually published by Swallow: Gordon, Cardona-Hine, Frumkin, Planz, Bert Meyers.

The principal evidence of their shared sense of poetry is Swallow's devotion to and proprietary interest in McGrath's work. First Manifesto⁴¹ is Swallow Pamphlets No. 1; "The Dialectics Of Love" is included intact, along with the work of William Peterson and James Franklin Lewis, in Swallow's Three Young Poets.⁴² Some McGrath poems appeared in the New Mexico Quarterly Review during Swallow's tenure as its poetry editor, from 1941 to about 1946. To Walk A Crooked Mile followed in 1947, in the first of two temporary alliances Swallow was to strike with a commercial house, in this case William Morrow and Company in New York.. (The second was with Harcourt Brace for publication of the multi-volume diary of Anais Nin.) Figures From A Double World⁴³ was awarded the first Swallow Poetry Award. Swallow issued Letter, Part One in 1962, New And Selected Poems in 1964; the Swallow Press continued with Letter, Parts One And Two in 1970, and The Movie At The End Of The World: Collected Poems in 1972. Thus, their publishing history together continued beyond the end of Swallow's life, for

Alan Swallow died, at his typewriter, on Thanksgiving Day 1966, at age 51. (Holidays were not good for him; he had suffered a major heart attack on Christmas Day 1962.)

Swallow Press continued to operate independently for a while, with poet Michael Anania as editor-in-chief, until it was turned over to Ohio University in the late 1970s. From that time it issued no new McGrath volumes.

On the other side of this relationship is McGrath's loyalty to Swallow. The Swallow Press had become, by the late 1950s, a respected and busy independent house whose acquisitions and editorial work were a one-man operation. As its reputation had grown, so had the volume of manuscript submissions. Publication by Swallow necessarily involved delay. Also at this time, Swallow was becoming dissatisfied with his previously efficient printing contractor, whose increasing commercial success had made Swallow's work less of a priority.

"I sent Letter One off to Swallow, and Swallow had a backlog as he always did," McGrath told McKenzie and Lewis.⁴⁴ "He said, 'Well, I'll see in about a year or so.' I thought, hell, who is going to publish this goddamn thing?" At the insistence of his friend Charles Humboldt, poet and an editor of Masses & Mainstream, McGrath showed Letter to Angus Cameron, the fiction editor at Little, Brown, "the last of the liberals in the publishing establishment," who liked it but couldn't sell it to his poetry department. The next submission was to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which accepted Letter. But McGrath felt he first had to clear this with Swallow. "He said, 'I'm your publisher, goddamnit; you get that book back.' So I got the book back, and he published it."⁴⁵ "But it took forever. Swallow was very slow about it."⁴⁶ Later, Robert Bly, Louis

Simpson and Donald Hall assembled a collection of McGrath, including "chunks" of Letter, and submitted it to Wesleyan University Press. "Wesleyan was writing me nasty letters saying, 'We've accepted your book. Why don't you reply?'" McGrath said, adding he'd told Bly "to clear this with Alan because he's my publisher." Indeed, Swallow replied by editing his own collection, much more to the poet's liking -- more complete and orderly, reflecting the chronology of writing and publication -- and publishing it in 1964 as New And Selected Poems.⁴⁷ Whether or not submission elsewhere, by McGrath or others, was intended to motivate Swallow is never mentioned; the unwavering desire of both men to publish together is evident.

First Manifesto -- "for my father and mother" -- consists of twenty-four poems printed together on the five-by-eight Kelsey handpress in Swallow's Baton Rouge garage and bound in a paper cover. Of all McGrath's individual volumes, it is the least represented in the three later collections. Five of its poems are included in New And Selected Poems (1964), edited by Swallow; these five plus three more appear in The Movie At The End Of The World: Collected Poems (1972); and three of these, two of which were in the 1964 volume, were chosen by Sam Hamill for Selected Poems 1938-1988. Some of the poems are startling, and as a group, First Manifesto shows a number of elements that will recur, eventually as identifying traits, through five decades.

"Plea: Variation on a Line" is the ninth of the twenty-four poems; it reappears, under the title "Get Out of Town," as the first poem in the 1964, 1972 and 1988 collections. It uses the six-beat free-verse line, which will become McGrath's enduring favorite. Several of these six-beat lines have only nine syllables each -- "Get out of town

before it's too late," "Say the hard word. Kiss the girls goodbye" -- thus placing two or three beats in immediate succession. This communicates an urgency and a violence in keeping with the warning of revolution and the exhortation to leave a populace that will not help itself, that gives no thought to the consequences of its choices. The rhythm, that of a machine-gun, is strong and audible, the result of effective dictional choices: short (one- or two-syllable), often hard-sounding words dominate this poem. McGrath uses here only two three-syllable words, and combines them in the unpleasant phrase "arteries hardening."

"Get Out of Town" shows the interest in stanzaic form and rhetorical strategy that characterizes all of McGrath's shorter poetry and is evident in set pieces within Letter. Each of the three four-line stanzas begins with the exhortation to action, "Get out of town," followed by a reason for action, and then a consequence of not acting, as in the second stanza:

Get out of town, cross the winter mountain.
There are arteries hardening. The mob yells murder,
But be stayed no one, yourself no traitor --
They will not be saved, themselves not try to.

Unlike the first and third stanzas, in which there is a mix of beats and off-beats as line endings, all lines in the second stanza end on off-beats, the rhythmic equivalent of staying put, doing nothing. The cumulative effect, by lines 11 and 12, is reader acceptance of the need to act. The presence of striking, quirky images -- "the speed boat is frozen in the arctic lake," "the cops are snoring in the frost-hung parlor," "the shotgun hidden under crumpled pillows," "the winter mountain," "arteries hardening" -- will also become a

McGrath signature.

As well as a rhythmist, McGrath is a melodist. This poem displays his ear and taste for subtleties of sound, as evident in the paired line endings: "it's too late/artic lake," "frost-hung parlor/crumpled pillow," "winter mountain/mob yells murder," "yourself no traitor/themselves not try to," "going is good/girls goodbye," "gloomy barrens/far from wood." He chooses near over exact rhyme -- "late/lake," "traitor/try to"; adds alliteration -- "parlor/pillow," "mountain/murder," "frozen/frost-hung," "water/wood" -- and makes combinations thereof -- "going is good/girls goodbye" -- even reversing positions -- "gloomy/...from," "barrens/far" -- within a driving, percussive rhythmic pattern. Syllables and consonant sounds echo from the ending of the second line of each stanza to that of the third: "arctic lake/frost-hung parlor," "mob yells murder/yourself no traitor," "girls goodbye/gloomy barrens." A pattern of opening sounds is evident in the lines of the second and third stanzas: "Get/There/But/They," "Get/Say/Let/A."

"Europe at Midnight -- Newsreport," reappearing in the 1964 and 1972 volumes, is a sonnet transformed, mutated, by the twentieth century and by war. It is a cry to preserve an episode of love as a moment's respite from relentless time and ceaseless, senseless violence. Kin to the poetry of wartime separation and uncertainty, from Wordsworth to Berryman, this poem has its closest fellowship, as do a number of McGrath's poems, with the peacetime existentialism of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."

this moment is at war with all of time
with the slow climbing moon whose drifting hours
fall earthward softly as the petals fall
from some moonbending flower

and we like moths upon a point of time
 make quaint conceits that all will be forever:
 hearing the startled chimes: the steady work of the river:
 dull knives of grass -- wish if moths to be safely under glass

so to forget the insane noise of the clock
 mockingly chuckling its two prayers in the gloom --
 the idiot fates play with our lives in an empty room
 and the heart beats sharp like the late machine guns in the park

-- *Turn up the radio. Give us a tune.*

and save this single moment in the dark hour of doom

Half of the fourteen lines are in the iambic pentameter of the Shakespearean sonnet; the rest are shorter (four-beat) or longer (six-beat) accentual lines with varying numbers of unaccented syllables. There is a near-rhyme scheme -- ABCB ADDE FGGF GG -- and much internal and occasional near-rhyme and alliteration, as well as the onomatopoeia of "the clock/mockingly chuckling."

The poetic structure and organization of thought correspond to those of the English sonnet forms, the Shakespearean and Spenserian, in this American poet's lyric on being caught up in the world war. The three four-line stanzas depict the situation: the first gives the relationship of "this moment" to "all of time"; the second speaks of the self-deception of the lovers, the third of the futility of their wish. The final, disjointed couplet begins with an interruption by another voice, raucous, insensitive, calling for an escape, an immediate release, answered by the original speaker's final plea to preserve even a moment of love. That's all the resolution this situation permits.

The opening metaphor -- "this moment is at war with all of time" -- begins a

parade of angular images: time passing "as the petals fall from some moonbending flower"; the lovers caught "like moths upon a point of time"; "startled chimes," "dull knives of grass," "the insane noise of the clock mockingly chuckling"; the plea hopeless because "the idiot fates play with our lives in an empty room."

"Sentiment for a Valediction" is reprinted in the 1964 and 1972 collections but not the 1988. It is a skillful statement about the need to move on, to grow; it is a conventional poem, proving McGrath's mastery of convention, about taking risks and transcending convention in order to achieve individuation as man and poet. The risk of entering "other darkneses" is undertaken with the expectation of there finding the resources to name, and thereby bring into being, "sun and summer." Its announced intention to "leave dead ways walked before," to "go and go beyond any Asia....There, learn some better ways" may itself be seen as conventional, were it not for the individuality with which, over the next fifty years, McGrath makes good on this resolve.

The first four of its five five-line stanzas are in mostly iambic five-beat lines. The enjambment of the last two stanzas, below, and the use of six-beat lines to begin and end the last stanza signify, surely not his arrival anywhere new, but at least his departure:

Say so-long to dead ways walked before --
 Leave clothes in closets, leaving sentry clocks,
 Put on new faces, forgetting to lock doors
 Or switch off lights, hoping to leave old aches
 And emptiness behind, steer by the stars

Toward other darkneses. Far: and not in Fall
 Return, but go and go beyond any Asia,
 Leave no address, footprint nor public scrawl
 "Wish you were here." There learn some better ways,
 New names for sun and summer, our own names last of all.

"Up the Dark Valley" appears in all three of the collections, and deservedly so as a clear and lovely poem, in this case about a man in nature, with an implied world view and statement of values. This poem describes a walk in the countryside, a rugged Western landscape of desert, hills and draws, rivers and coulees, perceived in the changing balance of light and shadow from morning to night. It is the record of a solitary outing among birds, insects, fish, wind, trees, evocative of solitude but, pointedly, not of isolation:

Darkness hid in the draws. I was soon surrounded.
Only the wind sound now. All through the evening,
Homeward I walk, hearing no human sound.

The birds of darkness sang back every call.

Though offering no explicit criticism of society, economy or political system, "Up the Dark Valley" is a quiet paean to the variety of nature and to our place in a rich environment, with consequent social, economic and political ramifications. In his prefatory note to the 1985 first edition of Letter, Parts Three and Four, McGrath states his intention "to return us to a view which all primitives, anyone who has spent time in the woods or anyone simply in his/her right mind has always had: that Nature is just as alive as we are." McGrath's attention to nature, whether literal or metaphorical, is usually to such an end, most often to depict the ravages of greed, as in Letter, Part Two, in the description of a prairie planted with missile siloes; in Bill Dee's gleefully subversive boast that the beaver have survived corporate agribusiness and the speaker's rueful recognition that the family farm has not; and in the grim details of the Wasteland-like urban landscape

revisited in "Return to Marsh Street: Easter, 1959." "Up the Dark Valley" is an early walk among some of those who share the world with us.

The poem, like its speaker in the wilderness, walks quietly through its mostly six-beat free-verse lines. Occasional near-rhyme draws no attention to itself, nor does the frequent alliteration; this is a poem of observation about an outing of observation.

First Manifesto opens with "This Room, in This Street, in This Time," which speaks throughout, as in these, its final two stanzas, in the truncated mode of military dispatches and telegrams, reporting alienation, danger and isolation:

mist drifts from river across cold moon.
nights are longer. men more restless. some show
signs of mutiny. all await portents. come soon:

find no one maybe. find among cold stones
our bones perhaps. cut off alone here. none
have names for native words. lost: our cry
cast along the runnels of this freezing foreign sky.

This is the bleak and perilous post-modern world whose unknown language the poet must discover if he is to communicate, that is, if he and poetry are to survive.

This poem, interesting if unremarkable in theme and execution, was not reprinted in any of the later collections; but among the new poems in the 1964 collection, and also in the 1972 collection, is "Again: This Room, in This Street, in This Time," which returns to the earlier poem to comment and update. It is a more specific poem, self-satirizing, audacious, and remarkable. It depicts the poet as an observer and reporter, a truth-teller and therefore fugitive outlaw in a society whose powers seek to exterminate truth. The writing and reading of poetry are shown as the sending and receiving of suppressed

subversive messages written in blood from one time -- "Who runs may read -- and now's the time for running" -- and place -- "all lands are alien" -- to another. The reading of the earlier poem, "bunged in a bottle...that the ebb tide dropped on my desk," brings the realization that its warnings didn't go far enough; the speaker wryly adds what he has learned since:

Who runs may read -- and now's the time for running.
 Was it -- yes-- Sy Devant who left all those notes behind
 Bunged in a bottle (the script as clean as a whistle
 And the blood all dry) that the ebb tide dropped on my desk

Tomorrow's news always arrives today:
 "An alien land" -- but then all lands are alien.
 "Natives unfriendly. Our first patrols were ambushed."
 He writes with the explorer's usual dramatic unction.

A far country, that one, where the horses don't have shadows
 And the moon sings like a bone.

Along about noontime

The notes drop on my desk "Smoke on the mountains,
 The roads washed out by rain." Next day: "Mutiny."

So, day unto day, and the notes arriving
 Each one more desperate and more familiar.
 "We came through the passes, we crossed the black mountain in snow."
 When did it happen? In what far land was that?

Little by little the geography settles and fixes:
 "A place between three rivers." "A city shaped like a crescent."
 "Many in jails and the poets all turned cowards
 So that they have no honor in this country.

"Now we have a wide road to the west,
 And beyond the mountains the sea and a smoky city.
 Ambushed again last night." Finally:
 "The cities stinking of commerce and the whole interior savage."

Little by little the landscape grows fixed and familiar.
 I wait for the last installment, which now at my desk

Lousy, bearded, in rags, my twin and stranger
Writes while a siren prowls like a wolf on the street.

Conditions have not changed, nor will they, and McGrath clearly resents that and the cost to him of telling the truth. He resents also those who have been frightened away from truth-telling.

Even in this grim assessment is the humorously named character Sy Devant, both an English and a French pun, the man he was "before, alas." Several other poems in First Manifesto feature such characters; this device will become a McGrath favorite, present in most of the poems in Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie and in Figures of the Double World, in Letter, and in some poems through all the later volumes. Like his father, McGrath is both story-teller and singer, and his story poems need characters, which are often satirical of himself and others. In this poem the wry self-criticism of his earlier thinking and writing softens, not the urgent warning or the bitter complaint, but the claiming of status as one who is faithful to his vocation. Geographical clues of autobiographical significance verify the speaker's identity as McGrath himself.

While each of the early poems cited displays one or another of the elements that will come to be seen as touches of McGrath's hand, missing are the bold dictional mix and overall audacity that, as in this last-cited and later poem, eventually will make McGrath's voice immediately identifiable.

Chapter Two

World War II and the Double World in its Wake

In the years from 1940 to 1955 Thomas McGrath lived in Louisiana, Maine, New York City, Alaska, New York again, Oxford, and Los Angeles, with intermittent returns to the North Dakota farm; he served the Communist Party and the United States Army; he worked as a shipyard welder and labor organizer; he taught at two colleges, resigned from the first and was dismissed from the second; he was a Rhodes scholar; he married and divorced one woman and then married another. In this intense and hectic time of his life he emerged as the poet we know and who will be known to posterity. This was accomplished through the writing and publication of three volumes of short poems -- To Walk A Crooked Mile, published in 1947; Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie (1949), and Figures of the Double World (1955) -- and his undertaking in 1954 of Letter To An Imaginary Friend, the long poem that occupied most of his writing time for nearly the next thirty years and for which he is best known. A close reading of poems from the three former volumes, seen in the light of their circumstances of composition, reveals much about McGrath's development into the poet who wrote Letter.

Thomas McGrath left Baton Rouge in 1940 with an M.A. and with one collection of his poems, First Manifesto, in print and another, his section of Three Young Poets, in preparation. Having gone virtually due south to Louisiana in his first significant departure from home, he traveled north by northeast to Waterville, Maine, to teach at Colby

College; his wife, Marian, whom he married in Missouri in June, joined him in Maine. He spent one year, thinking, as do so many young teachers, that he did not like the work and that perhaps he was no good at it, feeling isolated from most of his colleagues and uncomfortable with those of his students who were older than he. Yet he especially enjoyed contact with students from local Syrian and French Canadian communities and Jewish students from New York City, some of the latter remaining his friends for years. His own strong ethnic and regional identity contributed to both his rapport with these students and his alienation from colleagues. He loved the Maine woods and the Kennebec River but in the spring of 1941 left them for New York.⁴⁸

McGrath placed great importance at this time on working in the communist cause; while living in New York he was directed to his two principal employment situations by the Communist Party, in one case against his wishes. First he worked for a radical lawyer, doing library research for evidence of radical attitudes held by the American Founding Fathers, to be used in defending a Communist Party member from deportation.⁴⁹ Then, after a visit to North Dakota to tell his family of his plan to enlist in the U.S. Army Air Force, he was sent instead by the Party to work in a shipyard in Kearny, New Jersey, in order to strengthen a union local. He worked as a welder to gain entry to the union, where his real assignment lay. Of course, he continued to write poetry.

McGrath had written some poems in Maine, "very political poems," some of which were published in little magazines but later were lost without regret.⁵⁰ He wrote "Take Now This Sea: Maine, 1941," perhaps there and then, for it is set in Maine and speaks in the present. The impact of the Maine environment stayed with him, as evinced by "Men of

the Third Millennium: For Mike Gold," written in New York in 1941 or 1942, which speaks at length of the Kennebec and of the forest growing out of the granite earth.

This latter poem is one of several included in Three Young Poets that reappear in To Walk A Crooked Mile. It and two other of these poems -- "The Topography of History" and "The Drowned Man: Death Between Two Rivers" -- and another, "Blues for Warren," written several years later and first included in To Walk A Crooked Mile, represent a new tendency in McGrath's work: They are longer than any of his previous poems -- 88, 63, 132 and 181 lines respectively -- and make frequent use of the six-beat line. As was already familiar to McGrath's readers, these poems are reflective, morally serious, bold and ironic; but, in another new turn in keeping with their length, they develop an idea, a principle, as opposed to depicting a situation. They consider the nature of history, using the specific as representative. This value, later articulated by McGrath as a guideline in his writing of Letter, begins to be evident in these poems.

"Men of the Third Millennium" asserts the need for a new direction in history, guided by a corrected view of humanity's place in nature, to inaugurate an era of truer values. The poem equates the two millennia of the Christian era with people's mistreatment of themselves, each other, and the earth. These crimes are attributed to the influence of the false idea that humanity is apart from, indeed above, the rest of nature, which belief is traced directly to the story of the Fall of Man in the Book of Genesis: "Direction miscarried in that Fall." The Christian Church transformed the story of the Fall, originally a traditional myth of a discrete people chosen to receive it, into one of the main justifications for the aggressive evangelizing of a new faith with catholicity as its stated

objective. The repeated line "Bird is a fool, tree is a fool, stone is a fool" exemplifies humanity's own foolishness.

This is a poem, not an essay, and its rhetoric is the rhetoric of poetry, which, like the artifice of drama, must be accepted, if at all, on its own terms. There are gaps in the argument, and at least one of its assumptions is too easily dismissed, for not many species are noted for communal sharing. But the poem argues well that nature is a pattern of interrelationships and that humans' inability to understand this and their consequent assumption of a position for themselves above nature have played an unfortunate determining role in history.

"Men of the Third Millennium" is notable for its ambitious rhetorical attempt, its presentation of a developed idea, its view of the continuum of time, its moral commitment -- and primarily for the strengths of the poetry, especially the surprise-filled imagery:

The season has turned over many a new leaf
 Where flowers have issued the documents of spring.
 And here in this square, threatened by all the city,
 The mothering grass perfects its organizations.
 Indecent sparrows budding in the boughs
 Whistle content in their small lecheries....

* * * * *

Rock-racked, the circling Kennebec moves south,
 Losing indecision in the marching sea.

* * * * *

Direction miscarried in that great Fall:
 Non-human history sprouted human leaves;
 And the pious for protection built a fence of apes
 From any natural innocence that birds may feel.

* * * * *

**On plains we erected the phallic crescendo of cities,
 Forgetting nature, inventing our single history:
 Bird is a fool, tree is a fool, stone is a fool.**

This poem was written in New York City, "in this square," presumably Union Square where the CP, including Mike Gold, had offices and "threatened by all the city...perfect[ed] its organizations." McGrath was never a party-line Communist, even in this decade, a good portion of which he devoted to Party work. The sexually conservative CP, and perhaps Gold as well, might not have been pleased with McGrath's emphasis in this poem on the naturalness of sex and the major error that humans commit in condemning it morally. McGrath accepted CP assignments but objected to Party censorship. This difficult relationship is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

"The Topography of History" is another of these ambitious poems that attempt to provide a synthesis of macro- and microviews. Again the main idea is about history -- in this case, the history of geographic places, their geological evolution, their topographic and climatic characters, their effect on people who encounter them and, thus, their role in the history of human affairs. Ultimately the poem claims a relationship between the character of a place and the character of its people. It has this theme in common with some poems McGrath may have known at the time -- "The Book of the Dead" sequence in Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 volume U.S.1. The first poem in the sequence, "The Road," speaks of "your road, tying you to its meanings"; the final poem, also titled "The Book of

the Dead," depicts "a landscape mirrored in these men," and in that landscape "planted in our flesh these valleys stand."

After asserting the timeless and universal supremacy of weather in human life -- "All cities are open in the hot season" -- McGrath's poem takes first a longitudinal, then a latitudinal course across the central United States. (In an endnote to U.S.I Rukeyser writes, "This is to be a summary poem of the life of the Atlantic coast of this country, nourished by the communications which run down it.") These have been the main travel routes in U.S. history -- down the Mississippi River, flowing north-south, and across the plains from Eastern cities to Western mountains:

Southward that river carries its flood
 The dying winter, the spring's nostalgia:
 Wisconsin's dead grass beached at Baton Rouge.
 Carries the vegetable loves of the young blonde
 Going for water by the dikes of Winnetka or Louisville,
 Carries its obscure music and its strange humour,
 Its own disturbing life, its peculiar ideas of movement.
 Two thousand miles, moving from the secret north
 It crowds the country apart: at last reaching
 The lynch-dreaming, the demon-haunted, the murderous virgin South
 Makes its own bargains and says change in its own fashion.
 And where the Gulf choirs out its blue hosannas
 Carries the drowned men's bones and its buried life:
 It is an enormous bell, rung through the country's midnight.

* * *

Beyond the corrosive ironies of prairies,
 Midnight savannas, open vowels of the flat country,
 The moonstruck waters of the Kansas bays
 Where the Dakotas bell and nuzzle at the north coast,
 The nay-saying desolation where the mind is lost
 In the mean acres and the wind comes down for a thousand miles
 Smelling of the stars' high pastures, and speaking a strange language --
 There is the direct action of mountains, a revolution,

A revelation in stone, the solid decrees of past history,
 A soviet of language not yet cooled nor understood clearly:
 The voices from underground, the granite vocables.
 There shall that voice crying for justice be heard,
 But the local colorist, broken on cliffs of laughter,
 At the late dew point of pity collect only the irony of serene stars.

The Idealist, Dreamer, Sentimentalist display the influence of their environment without understanding it or themselves; and they cannot love their place, for they are of it only in part. They may live, though not fully, along the "mummy rivers" or on the plains, "hunting in the high latitudes of unreason," depending upon and ultimately being disappointed by their distorted perceptions and false expectations. The mountains are more specific in their demands and in their impact; they are "direct action," "a revelation in stone," and they require and produce a "holy wanderer," having "eyes burned slick with distances...minted of transcience."

The mountains were of recent acquaintance to McGrath and were connected to his friendship with Alan Swallow, a native of Powell, Wyoming. The mountains had made quite an impression; three other poems in To Walk A Crooked Mile are written in and are in part about the Western mountains: "The Seekers," "In The Hills of Old Wyoming," and "A Long Way Outside Yellowstone." McGrath's fairly recent decision to leave his home state was momentous, constituting a rejection of the life lived by both his parents' families for several generations. Later he will write about strength born of adversity on the plains and the communal efforts of farmers there; now he speaks of the plains as a bleak, isolating, brutal environment producing corresponding behaviors and qualities of character

in its inhabitants: "the nay-saying desolation where the mind is lost/In the mean acres."

"The Drowned Man: Death Between Two Rivers" is the longest and finest of these poems first included in Three Young Poets; it is one of the best in McGrath's body of work, the finest he had written up to that time, complex, passionate, unsentimental, rich in metaphor and allusion, rhythmic and aggressive. Broadly, the poem is about change, uncertainty, loss, limitation, greed, responsibility, and the hope inherent in the cycle of life. Specifically it is about the history of promise, betrayal and exploitation in America as a whole and New York City in particular, both then immersed in war, and the movement of history toward a workers' revolution.

McGrath wrote "The Drowned Man: Death Between Two Rivers" in New York during his first residency there in 1941-42, and it reflects his largely negative feelings about living there. This first tenure, prolonged, as noted above, by an assignment from the Communist Party, was followed by another in 1946-47, a brief third residency in 1949, and a final stay from 1959 to 1962. His objective each time, successfully achieved except in the third case, was to find employment. During a visit to the city in the mid-1970s, he told Joe Doyle, historian of radical labor activity on the Chelsea waterfront, that the particular conspicuousness of capital looming over the lives of working people made New York an intolerable place for him to live for any length of time.⁵¹

From the beginning of the poem, there is ugly, disturbing imagery or comparable allusion in almost every line:

Someone moves through the jungle
Where the East Side rears its neo-Tammany escarpment
Over East River toward the city of the dead, toward Brooklyn;

Past the opulent stinks, the sinks and pits of corruption,
 Where canned heat dreams are pregnant with rancid dragons --
 Immaculate conceptions!--

Someone, someone is moving:
 The feet go eastward, past the callow pimps
 Pasted on door-ways and past the wise, new-minted
 Eyes of the semi-virgins. Waters of Israel
 Open in paths before him: the Leaning Man,
 Comes out of Egypt.

Morbidity, danger, poverty, exploitation, degradation and the desperate pain-killing escapism they engender are the dominant features of this urban landscape. Movement is eastward, like Moses', but in America this is ironic because anti-historical, signifying the need to escape from a greatly diminished Promised Land, already owned, already ruined. The Biblical analogies are especially evocative in 1942 and in this setting on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, universally identified with its Jewish community, under the Williamsburg Bridge, "the bridge no one has written an ode to," at Delancey Street. McGrath's admiration for Mike Gold must certainly have extended to Gold's novel of immigrant radicalization through poverty in these streets, Jews Without Money.⁵² "The Leaning Man, the semi-vertical man" fleeing "the terrible land wherein the Lost Tribes dwell" links the history of Americans, both native and immigrant, to that of the Jews in their Egyptian and Babylonian captivities, the latter also between two rivers, and in the subsequent diaspora. The Manhattan skyline, "Altar of profane love,/ Each marvelous marble phallus," joins pharonic pyramids and towers of Babylon as shrines to greed and vanity erected with the labor and lives of an oppressed underclass.

The writing on the wall "winks in easy translations of neon," employing the newest tool in American marketing to warn of retribution to come. McGrath's hope that the very methods of capitalism will do it in is a basic principle of Marx and Engels; here it underlies a central poetic choice. Inherent in this atheist's lament for capitalism's victims are the language and landmark incidents, indeed the presence of the Savior himself, of the capitalist world's then-dominant religion.

The first of the poem's three sections climaxes in an assertion of worldwide worker brotherhood, again standard Marxism in a Christian voicing:

The East River upbore him:
 Two-thirds submerged in the riptides under the bridgeheads,
 In a montage of oil-smear, rotten fruit and wreckage --
 Christ! his poor face split like a seed-pod sowing
 In the crucified night an improbable human anguish --
 The face of my brother!

McGrath's images of tidal reversal and evolutionary adaptation depict the prerevolutionary unawareness of workers:

Full fathom five the East Side lies;
 The West Side lies five fathom under.
 A slow sea-change in the drowned veins,
 The unfortunate human condition creates its pitiful wonders:
 Unlikely fear has deepened into gills
 And cynic's scales -- armor against laughter;
 The dearest nightmare is the dream of waking,
 Waking to choke in the drowsy midnight waters:
 The drowned eye builds in token its cheap ambiguous altars
 In the Java Deeps of the Leaning Men, where the drunken small boat founders.

There are signs neither of revolution nor of a recognizable leader from whom to draw

encouragement; but if the principles of Marxism are the principles of life, their manifestation will constitute history's next epoch. Even in this, his earliest maturity as a poet, McGrath is forecasting the coming age, called "the fifth season" in this poem, elsewhere "the third millennium," and later, after Alan Swallow introduced him to the works of Frank Waters, especially Waters' masterpiece The Book of the Hopi,⁵³ "the Fifth World":

Someone is dying, someone is being born:
 Out of the salt blood, fiercer than the sea
 Where the human tide makes in the evening rush:
 Grand Central-Times Square undertow,
 Setting to a black moon over Harlem:
 Something is dying. Something is being born.

* * *

Somewhere
 A nightmare sharpens and a man cries out. The young
 Mother feels the child kick in her belly.
 Once. Twice. And deeper than pain she feels
 How out of the submerged life, the human winter,
 The young god comes to whom all eyes shall turn.
 One class dies. Another is being born.
 Word becomes flesh. The Specter becomes real.

Someone is born with the bright face of your brother.

The revolution progresses from "someone is dying" to "something is dying" to "one class dies. Another is being born," as the newly emerging face, at first that of "my brother," becomes that of "your brother." The Christ figure personifies the revolutionary consciousness, a bold choice for McGrath within both of the poem's contexts, the Marxism it propounds and the capitalism it opposes. The very use of Biblical allusion and

Christian imagery, like the sexual references in "Men of the Third Millenium," reflects a self-confidence and independence of mind resistant to party-line limits. McGrath does not play it safe.

Having lived in Maine and on Manhattan Island, the plainsman McGrath has apparently acquired a fascination with the sea comparable to that with the mountains evident in "The Topography of History." The pervasive image of drowning probably comes from the death at sea that spring of Warren Irwin, a friend from Louisiana in whose memory McGrath later wrote "Blues for Warren" and whom McGrath calls "my brother." The latter reference has led several critics to mistakenly identify Warren as a McGrath. The poet would lose one brother to the war, Jimmy, the sibling closest to him; the dedication of To Walk A Crooked Mile reads, "For Jimmy McGrath, killed June 1945." McGrath will further memorialize his brother in "Blues for Jimmy," the final poem in his next volume, Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie, and in two poems in the subsequent volume, Figures of the Double World: "Memorial" and "The World of the Perfect Tear."

"Blues for Warren" alludes to Jimmy McGrath's death as well as Warren Irwin's, so it was written after June 1945 but in time for inclusion in this 1947 volume. It is the longest poem McGrath had composed by that time, 181 lines, and it continues to do what these three other long poems have done: it depicts individual lives as representative of the life of a class or people, and it presents a view of history largely consistent with Marxism's, rooted in personal experience to which it refers.

"Blues for Warren" bitterly laments the loss of a dear friend in a war that was fought

in a cause other than his own. The teaching of history, the poet claims, deliberately misrepresents the past in order to mislead each generation into sacrificing against their own interests:

We fell from innocence into the trap of the State,
From Blind Man's Buff and legends, stepped into the war of the Thirties.

"The State" in McGrath's America is not the people, as in Marxism's post-revolutionary ideal, but the pre-revolutionary military and paramilitary instrument of the economic power-players. Like an abused child, the exploited citizen is manipulated into assuming responsibility for his circumstances:

Moving among the murders to the sound of broken treaties --
Shame of our kid's inexperience was all we knew at the start.

The history of his war-devastated generation is similarly misrepresented to the next, to serve as carrot to the eager, stick to the reluctant to expend themselves in the next war:

Now, after alarums and plots, the obscure future --
The time which is Now -- places awards and banners,
Emblems across our past; the time-shortened figures
Are decorated with light which none can feel.

Warren, somewhat older than McGrath, a father figure to the poet, who already admires and identifies with his own father, knows two such wars:

...among the ruins and broken columns,
The betrayals, incrustations, the harps of the Nineteenth Century,
And among the treachery and hideous moneys of the world,
The Judas flags, the parliaments of beasts,
Devils with Oxford diplomas and diplomats' visas

He moved to the accompaniment of dispossessed angels:
The Angel of Love who issued no marriage licenses
The Angel of Reason with the brutal face of a child

"Adonais," for example. The latter is invoked in an allusion to Warren as Adonis; but most of McGrath's other allusions are to contemporary politics and recent history, not to literature or mythology. This is the first of several occasions when McGrath, moved to write an elegy, will title it a blues.

This is a song of personal loss, mourning a special man: "Not all to that bright station dared to climb" is for McGrath as true of Warren Irwin as of John Keats. Warren's "bright station" is the courageous integrity of being himself and engaging the realities of life in the world. This distinguishes him from almost everyone else:

These envy the wild birds; these, the shy life of the mole --
 The blind night fugue of flight or the mothering cave in the hill.
 These dream the fast fadeout, blessed by distance:
 They see space as saviour, negation of form and identity,
 an underground existence.
 For these ran away at childhood, seeking a stranger's country
 But arrived as the masked Prince or the son of southern gentry.
 These others whose progressive alienation,
 centripetal and strict,
 Divorces the world instead of themselves,
 prefer the abstract
 And feuding heresy. They turn from the world and find
 Health in their high foreheads, or their indifference to hope,
 but their fond
 Elaborate and humdrum disguises can never bandage their wounds.

Warren is a "Man of the Third Millennium," as are "the mythical great Jesus," honored by McGrath as an advocate for "the poor and insulted," and Lenin. Warren's greatest significance is as a representative man, his loss thus indicative of the countless such losses throughout history:

And we have given hostages to the shadowing future
 (You Warren, and my brother, and the comrades
 in a hundred countries --

In the casualty lists all names are manifestoes)
 And burnt offerings to the shocking, sublime
 Instinct of brotherhood, the human desire for perfection.

Warren's life has served the workers' cause:

Who chose the difficult damnation and lived on that narrow margin
 While the cries went up from the poor and it snowed in the churches
 And hysterical roses mourned from the bankers' lapels.

The traditional elegy concludes with consolation for the mourner; McGrath's blues finds a workers' consolation in Warren's death, which

Takes you to transmutations in the wild interior uplands,
 Down fathomless dreaming funnels of the tides,
 To new planes of struggle, levels of organization,
 And the nodal point of qualitative change:
 Toward a richer fulfillment, to more definitive capes,
 Clamoring loud where on tomorrow's littoral reaches
 Are beached the spring-tide flowers of our hopes.

McGrath had read and may have had in mind Whitman's catalogue of universal self-identifications in "Song of Myself"; McGrath certainly knew and in this context very likely had in mind the legendary message of Wobbly martyr Joe Hill: "Don't waste time mourning. Organize." ⁵⁴

To Walk A Crooked Mile contains forty poems, fourteen of which previously appeared in McGrath's section, titled "The Dialectics of Love," of Swallow's Three Young Poets. Thirty of the poems are in the 1972 collection The Movie at the End of the World. This is the largest single group of poems from the 1940s, nearly half the total from that decade, included in any of the collections. Fifteen of the poems, out of a total of twenty-three from the 1940s, appear in Selected Poems 1938-1988. The poems of To Walk hold up over time.

The section of these poems in The Movie at the End of the World begins with "You Can't Go Home" and ends with "Homecoming," the closing poem of the original volume, that placement stating a theme of a number of these war-time and immediate post-war compositions. The former contrasts the hero's-welcome fantasy with the angering reality of homecoming. The poem is strongly ironic both in structure and in tone, until its culminating graveyard image that straightforwardly symbolizes the war-and-return experience:

Then hail and farewell, Friends, Brothers, all away,
 Lost as birds are on the mapless night of Asia,
 As bells in wind beyond the stormy Hebrides --
 And love O is lying under marble trees.

"You Can't Go Home" is virtually a double sonnet: a twelve-line revelation of a wish is followed by a two-line dismissal of it, then a nine-line self-castigation for having had the wish, and finally the four-line benediction, above, that, by implication, justifies the wish.

"Homecoming" is free of irony throughout. It depicts first the being at war, then the coming home, in comparable terms, the latter requiring that "we...clothe ourselves in the lives of strangers/ Whose names we carry but can no longer know." The returning man is "far from the dead boy who left so long ago."

The contrasts between this pair of thematically linked poems exemplify the range of this volume, which includes three poems stating social values in the context of sexual relationships: "The Dialectics of Love," a playful rhetorical poem written in close-rhymed couplets, which argues the moral superiority of promiscuity; "A Long Way Outside Yellowstone," which depicts a transient outdoor sexual encounter of a poor and rootless

man and woman as more authentically loving than an upperclass affair in plush surroundings; and "Love in a Bus," which develops the same theme to this conclusion:

For even though she was a whore
 And he a poor devil wearing built-up heels,
 Still, love has light which like an early lamp
 Or Hesperus, that star, to the simplest object
 Lends a magnificent impersonal radiance,
 Human, impermanent and permanently good.

The title poem, "To Walk A Crooked Mile," is a post-Prufrock "Dover Beach," asserting, as the previous poem implies, the indispensability of love in an absurd, chaotic world. This, like "You Can't Go Home," is an elongated sonnet, this one triple in length, with iambic pentameter the foundation of most lines, and a two-part crisis-resolution rhetorical organization. The thirty-line "octave" gives a doomsday view looking forward on New Year's Eve, "a midnight stark/As rigor mortis," to a future of violence, destruction and death. The twelve-line "sestet" offers assurance that love, even limited love "which has the strength to keep/Warm on one side only" -- the sexual encounters of "A Long Way Outside Yellowstone" and "Love in a Bus" -- can give sustenance and direction:

Midnight is morning in the arms of love --
 This love which has the strength to keep
 Warm on one side only, yet may speak
 The ordered syllables for even who
 In all the islands of the night have found
 Only the treachery of jungle peace;

Gives force and faith, and in the streets of death
 Bears bread of witness like a secret oath:
 Plenum of competence, range-finder, gives
 Compasses to walk a crooked mile:
 Can wait the phoenix hour, the ascendant sun --

See: from this bridge no midnight murders dawn.

McGrath is more than a political poet; he writes of the whole complex, contradictory person, to whose life more than political solutions are necessary. Yet political solutions are among the necessities; the first epigraph with which McGrath opens both the 1964 and 1972 collections is from Brecht: "First the pork chops, then morality."

McGrath wrote a number of poems in this book while serving in the Aleutians. Half a dozen address the issue of perception through conflicting perceptions of combat; several others speak to Marian about the difficulty of imposed separation. Two poems apparently written later are dedicated to friends and fellow radicals also in service in the Aleutians: "Like the Watchman in ~~Agamemnon~~: For Charley Wallant," and "One Who Has Looked at the Dark: For Harry Merer." Each of these poems speaks of the poet and the friend's special kinship as outsiders. For Charley Wallant:

...for you have been there also
 With your hands bound tight and a gag in your mouth,
 Watching the moss grow over the stone cairn
 While the sheriff adjusts the blindfold over the eyes you have loved.

And for Harry Merer:

...it is proper then, being incorruptible,
 That you should keep the lists of forgotten heroes,
 And of the world's small, terrible crimes that might betray us,
 Corroding into pity the will to action.
 It is honorable and dangerous -- I do you homage --
 That you have not sneered, nor flinched, nor turned to go
 From the war of the poor, the awful heart of man,
 Nor the little naked birds hustling in the snow.

Especially this latter poem reveals a relationship to a role model, as to McGrath's Wobbly singer-storyteller father, and to Warren Irwin, and to Cal in Letter; for like Harry Merer, McGrath as poet "keeps the lists," what in Letter he will call "keeping the winter count." Harry Merer is another of McGrath's hero-friends.

To Walk A Crooked Mile was published in an 89-page hardcover edition, the first book jointly issued by Swallow Press and William Morrow and Company, constituting McGrath's sole association with a major commercial publisher. His next volume, Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie, was issued in a 32-page paper edition by International Publishers, the Communist Party-associated house. Its contents, hardly commercially viable at the time, had been composed in a CP context, probably accounting for McGrath's departure from Swallow to another publisher for this one volume, the only such occasion in Swallow and McGrath's long relationship. Lacking any comment on the subject by either man, in publication or in the known correspondence, one wonders if McGrath submitted Longshot to Swallow or, if not, whether Swallow wished he had. Their relationship seems not to have suffered, and the choice seems a practical one.

International Publishers has been since its founding in 1924 the principal Communist-oriented publishing house in the United States. Bertram D. Wolfe, a historian of radical politics in twentieth century America and a Communist Party activist for a time, has called International Publishers "a covert Comintern publishing house."⁵⁵ While not an arm of the Communist Party U.S.A., International Publishers has shared personnel, outlook, adjacent office space and rising and falling fortunes with the CP. At this writing

International Publishers and the Communist Party are in the same building on West 23rd Street in Manhattan; an earlier address of both was a building on Union Square East between 15th and 16th Streets now occupied by Toys 'R' Us, a historical irony that brings to mind the warning in The Communist Manifesto against the bourgeoisie's creation of "new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes"⁵⁶ -- and leisure wants, to boot.

Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie is, it seems, a volume people like to cite in attempting to characterize McGrath's work. The title itself outrageously juxtaposes street-wise blue-collar ethnicity and elegant Renaissance erudition. Among the as yet small but nonetheless astute body of McGrath criticism Longshot O'Leary has attracted its share of attention. Joe Doyle's essay "Longshot O'Leary: Tom McGrath's Years on the New York Waterfront"⁵⁷ and E.P. Thompson's critical memoir "Homage to Thomas McGrath"⁵⁸ have especially interesting things to say about it.

"Longshot O'Leary was written, in part, as McGrath's tribute to Mac, Ray Condon, and the crew [Communist Party associates]....It was also written to get them off his back," according to Doyle, historian of labor activity and radical politics on the Chelsea waterfront of Manhattan. "Longshot O'Leary was a command performance of sorts....McGrath's demanding 'muses' wanted poems that could be performed...for political rallies, memorial meetings, and mass demonstrations." McGrath told Doyle he had been happy to accommodate his mostly self-educated comrades, for "these people were special, it seemed to me, perhaps a breed that doesn't exist anymore. They were both revolutionaries and intellectuals."⁵⁹

E.P. Thompson's friendship with McGrath dated from their almost daily contact at Oxford in 1947 and 1948 and continued in trans-Atlantic visits (mostly by Thompson to McGrath) and a mutually voluminous correspondence until McGrath's death. Thompson comments on the quasi-balladic form of some of the Longshot O'Leary poems, which has come to be widely identified as its characteristic form: "It is not so much the 'oldtime ballad' as Auden's reinvention of it in Look, Stranger and Another Time which gave to McGrath an inspiration for his own reinventions."⁶⁰ McGrath, incessant and eclectic reader, surely knew and probably was impressed and perhaps influenced by the Auden ballads. While writing Longshot in 1947 and 1948 McGrath was on Auden's former home turf and in the company of left-wing British writers likely themselves to be reading and discussing Auden -- the circle of poets and critics who contributed to Edgell Rickword's journals Our Time and Arena, a group that included McGrath's dear friends Thompson and Jack Beeching.⁶¹ Thompson's closeness to McGrath in itself gives weight to this claim. It is evident in context that Thompson's intention is not to establish McGrath's indebtedness to anyone in particular, but rather, by linking McGrath to a world-wide community of poets including Brecht, Lorca, Neruda and Pasternak, to refute dismissal of McGrath as a regionalist and writer of prairie pastoral.

There is a confluence of factors in the creation of Longshot O'Leary. Not to be forgotten among them is McGrath's wish to please and emulate his role models and hero-friends. This group, beginning with his father, singer of Wobbly songs, and recently augmented by the New York waterfront Communists, had included for some time Michael Gold, the dedicatee of "Men of the Third Millennium." In his foreword to 120

Million, a collection of his short pieces identified as "Proletarian Sketches" and

"Proletarian Chants and Recitations," Gold makes the same demand as McGrath's friends:

The workers' chants and recitations in the back of this book were inspired by things learned in Soviet Russia.

The poets there have socialized the aristocratic art of poetry.

Their theory is that poetry should be useful. It should organize the emotion of the Revolution, as political leaders organize the intellect.

Poetry is used in Soviet Russia as a means of welding the masses into solidarity.

It is chanted at mass-meetings, it furnishes new rituals. The Soviet poets have restored poetry to its primitive Homeric utilities.

I have written the first mass-recitation in this country, I believe, and some of the first workers' chants. I hope others will write them, too. They are needed.⁶²

McGrath's New York friends agreed; perhaps he did as well. It is less likely, however,

that he would have agreed with Gold's direction for performance:

Above all, no individualism; the director must find the rhythm of the whole recitation and discipline each word and each actor to the general plan.⁶³

Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie is poetry of invective; it is also the clearest example in his body of work and the volume most extensively devoted to what McGrath calls "tactical" poetry, that is, political poetry, either satirical or elegaic, with specific targets. McGrath distinguishes between tactical and "strategic" poetry, the latter reflecting on universal experience and questions of values, the former on particular contemporary situations. The observations of both Doyle and Thompson deal with the Longshot O'Leary poems' being of their time -- in form, content, motivation and application. Minor adaptations can fit some for other times; for republication in the 1972 collection, the poem "First Book of Genesis According to Marshall" was retitled "...According to the Diplomats," with a reference to Vandenburg becoming one to Nixon, and "the broad Yalu" becoming the Mekong Delta.

Much of the volume is audacious and sardonic, as in the opening stanzas of the first poem, "First Book of Genesis According to Marshall":

On the first day they drowned the orphans,
 The blue-eyed ones, in threes, in diplomats' pouches.
 The dollar stood at four pounds of flesh in open market
 And all markets were opened by the President,
 Officially, on the first day.

The second day some opposition
 Was begun by workers. These were all shot down
 By students of the Radicals for Vandenburg movement.
 Two million died in sin mortal and venial and
 In hunger on the second day;

And were buried, noon, on the third day
 In two speeches, given by the Secretary
 Who said they were foreigners, et cetera.

The audacity is disarming, the apparent exaggerations perhaps amusing. But these are serious, even grim poems.

This first poem condemns in the severest terms American capitalism and its associated institutions of government, religion, and the press. From "the first day" property is more important than life, and in pursuit of property, McGrath says in 1949, America has committed racist atrocities comparable to those of Nazi Germany. The church's immersion in intricate punitive legalisms disguises its lack of basic regard for human wellbeing. Students following the wrong leaders are mobilized for evil. Artists are corrupted, first by institutional affiliations, then by greed. Paranoia pervades the nation.

As McGrath's satirical skill makes persuasive this potentially repugnant indictment, so his craftsmanship gives casual charm to a tightly structured poem. The overall outward form is an enumerated sequence of statements satirizing the Biblical account of creation.

To satirize an organized statement is to gain unnoticed the use of its mode of organization. Thus a number of cause-effect relationships are implied and, by circular return to the starting point, repetition is used for emphasis, both more effective because inconspicuous. The stanzaic pattern works similarly. In each five-line stanza the first and fifth lines reprise ballad-like the number of the day. These are three-beat lines; lines two, three and four are five-, six- and five-beat lines respectively. The number of off-beats varies. This diversity seems casual, camouflaging the pattern.

"A Real Gone Guy: Short Requiem for Percival Angelman," written, according to McGrath, to be sung to "Streets of Laredo,"⁶⁴ gives a case study of the systemic exploitation condemned in "First Book of Genesis." The "gone guy" is a marginal figure, a drug addict who makes his living in "the racket," thereby having a questionable claim on reader sympathy. In a barroom encounter, he and the narrator, a socialist organizer, argue the merits of their respective courses of opposition to capitalism. The criminal:

"You'll never get yours if you work for a living,
But you may make a million for somebody else.
You buy him his women, his trips to Miami,
And all he expects is the loan of yourself."

The socialist:

"I'm with you, I said, "but here's what you've forgotten:
A working stiff's helpless to fight on his own,
But united with others he's stronger than numbers.
We can win when we learn that we can't win alone."

The criminal speaks for the desperate:

"Machinists or miners, sandhogs or chenangos --
Born in a scratch joint, live poor and die good.
With eight kids and a rupture, a wife and a mortgage,

And the years running out of their muscles like blood.

"Oh the boss stole the world and he's locked you outside it;
He's bought up the cops who patrol on his land.
He has hired judge and jury to hang you for trespass,
And pieced off a Bishop to see that you're damned."

Anticipating the criminal's inevitable premature death, the narrator urges that we "pardon his means which are those of our statesmen;/Forgive his ideals which are those of success...." The blame is laid on the capitalist state:

When he's dead send the body to all those who made him:
His head to the state, to the church his last scream;
His love to the poets, his heart to Chase National;
His skill with a gun to the U.S. Marines.

This poem surely preaches to the converted. Its standard socialism is unpalatable to many. But McGrath may keep those readers with him longer, first by having the socialist argue with the criminal, then by having the criminal reject socialism as unrealistic, a sentiment these readers may share:

"You sound like a mission-stiff gassed up on alky;
I won't hold my breath till your kingdom has come."

But the most effective rhetorical choice is the initial one, to write this poem to be sung to a popular folk song. A discomforting morality tale espousing a perhaps unacceptable viewpoint is thereby rendered entertaining and maybe even sympathetic.⁶⁵ McGrath's friendship with Cisco Houston, one of Woody Guthrie's closest friends and favorite performing partners, might have made the idea of writing for performance especially attractive.⁶⁶ Juxtaposed with the song's traditional cowboy associations are hipster street talk and McGrath's startling imagery, making these opening stanzas seductive:

As I walked out in the streets of Chicago,
 As I stopped in a bar in Manhattan one day,
 I saw a poor weedhead dressed up like a sharpie,
 Dressed up like a sharpie all muggled and fey.

He was beat to the socks, and his sick nerves were jumping
 Like newly caught fish in the sack of his face.
 He was wearing the monkey between his hired shoulders;
 It twitched like a bullseye: the sign of the chase.
 Twenty-three years from the dark of his mother,
 From the water-borne dreams of before he was found;
 Sixteen years from innocence, two from state suffrage,
 And one year away from a hole in the ground.

The "poor weedhead" is doomed, like the young cowboy who knows he's done wrong.

The evocation of that sympathetic association and the equating of the old western frontier with a contemporary urban wilderness are a satirical coup, enabling the poet to go on once again to depict capitalist America in the harshest terms.

McGrath wrote tactical poems into his last decade, and bold, sardonic wit characterizes much of his work. But the finest achievement of Longshot O'Leary is in its final poem, "Blues for Jimmy," which continues the development begun in the four long poems of To Walk A Crooked Mile and that will carry on through the writing of Letter.

(If it were evening on a dead man's watch,
 Flowerfall, sundown, the light furred on the pane;
 And the shutters going up on the windows of the twentieth century,
 6 Post Mortem in the world of the dead --)

The train was late. We waited among the others,
 All of us waiting for friends on the late train.
 Meanwhile the usual darkness, the usual stars,
 Allies of the light trust and homeless lovers.
 And then the train with its clanking mechanical fury.
 "Our will could neither turn it around nor stop it."
 Abrupt as history it violates the station --

The knife, the dream, the contemporary terror.

So opens the first section of "Blues for Jimmy," in a counterpoint of alternating stanzas that establishes the poem's two thematic veins, one speaking of ongoing time, the other of the person whose life has stopped, until the lines converge in the last section. The "dead man's watch" is all the warning we get that the soldier whose family has gathered to meet the "late train" is coming home in a coffin. The guilt for his death is collective, a "common plot":

The banker dug the grave, but the grave and gentle
 Were part of the common plot. The priestly succor,
 Scattering platitudes like wreaths of wilted flowers,
 Drove in the coffin nails with god's own little hammer --
 You are stapled still; and we are freed of onus.
 Brother, te laudamus, hallowed be our shame.

The guilt is also individual, a "massive implacable personal guilt" that the poet angrily insists is real blame, as distinguished from survivors' feelings of guilt.

The third section returns to the issue of time. The child not yet aware of death has a sense of safety and a simple perception of time -- until death takes away a loved one and brings an awful significance to time:

When I was a child the long evenings of midsummer
 Died slow and splendid on my bedroom windowpane,
 And I went into sleep's magnetic landscape
 With no fear of awakening in a country of nightmares.

It was easy then. You could let the light go --
 Tomorrow was another day and days were all the same:
 Pictures in a book you'd read, segments of sealed and certain time:
 Easy to go back to the day before yesterday, the year before last.

But now it is impossible. The leaf is there, and the light,
 Fixed in the photograph, but the happiness is lost in the album,

And your words are lost in the mind, and your voice in the years,
And your letters' improbable tongues trouble the attic darkness.

And this is the true nature of grief and the human condition:
That you are nowhere; that you are nowhere, nowhere,
Nowhere on the round earth, and nowhere in time,
And the days like doors close between us, lock us forever apart.

Space and time merge in the fourth section's catalogue of the indicators of changing

seasons:

Not where spring with its discontinued annuities
Fills birds' nests with watches, dyes the winds yellow,
Scatters on the night its little flowers of disenchantment
And a drunken alphabet like the memory of clocks.

Not where summer, at the mercury's Feast of Ascension,
Deploys in fields the scarecrows of remembrance;
Summer with the wheat, oil, bread, birth, honey and barley,
And a hypnotised regiment of weeping butterflies.

McGrath absolves his guilt, earning his own forgiveness for Jimmy's death, by

becoming "the dead man's watch" -- his witness, his memorial:

Though I give your loves to the hours,
Your bones to the first four seasons
Your hope to the ironies
Your eyes to the hawks of heaven
Your blood is made part of the general-strike fund
Your courage is coined into the Revolution
Your spirit informs the winds of the Fifth Season.

Only the tick of a watch divides us.
The crime is to deny the union of opposites.
I make your death my watch, a coin of love and anger,
With your death on one side and mine on the other.
Locked on my wrist to remember us by.

This is the most personal of the poems McGrath had written to date, the one among

his poems that he came to find too painful to include in public readings. Yet like his other long poems of the Forties, "Blues for Jimmy" gives a view of history; it presents the individual as representative of a class; it addresses systemic ills and concludes with the need for revolution. There is no clearer example in McGrath's work prior to Letter of the personal origins of his political resolve.

Figures of the Double World⁶⁷ was written while McGrath was in Los Angeles, where in 1953 he appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and refused to testify. These poems, he advises in an author's note to The Movie at the End of the World: Collected Poems (1972), should be read with "the emphasis on the dialectic, on process, on states of the world rather than states of mind." In fact, they depict states of mind that reflect the state of the world.

This volume appeared halfway into the first term of the immensely popular Eisenhower-Nixon Administration, which featured a Wall Street lawyer, John Foster Dulles, as Secretary of State, and the head of the Church of Latter Day Saints, Ezra Taft Benson, as Secretary of Agriculture. It was a plutocratic lineup, albeit democratically elected with limited non-white participation. The proliferation of television meant the single greatest opportunity for commercial advertising, and therefore for industrial capitalism and middle-class wealth, in history to date.

American poetry of the time boasted a living pantheon of twentieth-century giants: T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings were still writing; Ezra Pound was in St. Elizabeth's; Robert Penn Warren was middle-aged. But

these and other things would change. Wallace Stevens would die this year; Allen Ginsberg would publish Howl the next.

McGrath had reached a new level of maturity both poetically and politically in Los Angeles by the early 1950s. He was no longer the aspiring student poet, then fledgling literary star of the first several volumes that Alan Swallow had published. Nor was he still the apprentice Communist Party activist and adopted younger brother of experience-hardened New York waterfront buddies, roles that had led McGrath to write the bold and brilliantly witty Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie.

Within another few years McGrath had ended the marriage that dated from before his Army service, to Marian, like him the child of prairie populists, and in 1951 married Alice Greenfield, an urban sophisticate, renowned radical activist, brilliant and beautiful divorcee, Jewish mother of two.

He was teaching creative writing at Los Angeles State College when HUAC called. Alice McGrath attributes McGrath's HUAC subpoena to the fact that "his politics were well-known; he made no secret of it."⁶⁸ Mike Hazard, maker of the documentary film about McGrath titled The Movie at the End of the World,⁶⁹ blames the subpoena on McGrath's "having been fingered by someone from naval intelligence as a red."⁷⁰ Harry Merer's recollections of the beginning of his lifelong friendship with McGrath during their Army service in the Aleutians in World War II provide a link between the explanations of both Hazard and Mrs. McGrath:

One day Charley [Wallant] told me that he had noticed, while he was in the mail room, that a guy by the name of Thomas McGrath was receiving copies of The Pilot, the newspaper of the National Maritime Union and that he thought it might be a

good idea to check him out. Subsequently, Tom, Charley and I got together.⁷¹

The NMU was known as the most radical labor union of the time, and a subscription to The Pilot was assumed to be an indicator of leftist views, according to Joe Doyle.⁷² Attention paid to military mail in wartime could certainly have resulted in a notation on McGrath's record.

By the time of his HUAC appearance, McGrath seems less concerned than earlier with gaining the approval of others. He is more clearly defined, and has become so through his personal, poetic and political choices.

Gene Frumkin writes of enrolling in McGrath's poetry workshop for what turned out to be McGrath's last semester of employment before blacklisting barred him from college teaching for the rest of the decade. Frumkin says of McGrath's example, "Tom gave us standards, he was acute and critical, but he never gauged our success or failure on the marketplace (such as it is for poetry) nor by adherence to one precept or another."⁷³ The outcome, Frumkin says, was a lifetime of poetry writing for a number of participants, some enduring friendships, and a common valuing of integrity over commercial success and professional recognition. "I don't know how much Tom's example has influenced us in this, but the example is there."⁷⁴ By the time he wrote the acknowledgements in his collected poems The Old Man Who Swam Away and Left Only His Wet Feet,⁷⁵ Frumkin apparently felt he knew: "First is my mentor back at the old Los Angeles State College, the late Thomas McGrath, a superb teacher whose work and integrity were a model for many of us, his students and friends." That model lay in McGrath's commitment at a price

to the values guiding his politics, teaching and writing.

The price was paid initially and most visibly in the blacklisting that routinely followed noncooperation with HUAC and other pursuers of domestic Communists. The first installment was easily collected: Los Angeles State College simply made no offer of contract renewal to McGrath, who had been working under annual contracts without tenure, according to Alice McGrath. This, she said, led to student demonstrations featuring the writing in chalk of McGrath poems on campus walkways and the student-initiated publication in 1954 of Witness to the Times!,⁷⁶ a selection from his work.

McGrath's own response to his blacklisting was to found the Sequoia School, an independent writing workshop that met in rented space or in members' homes. Enrollees were literary, not political, followers: "Poetry was what we talked about and did. Politics merely surrounded us," Frumkin wrote.⁷⁷ After two years the Sequoia School "closed whatever doors it had,"⁷⁸ but hospitality at the McGraths' Marsh Street home continued to feature Saturday night poetry gatherings recalled lovingly in Frumkin's memoir and in conversation by Alice McGrath, and also by Naomi Replansky, author of The Dangerous World: New and Selected Poems 1934-1994.⁷⁹ A Bronx-born poet whose administrative "day job" took her to the West Coast for some years, Ms. Replansky cited the poetry evenings at the McGraths' as highlights of her residence in Los Angeles.⁸⁰

Figures of the Double World portrays outward appearance in conflict with inner reality. These poems explore the destructive toll of bourgeois success, many of them depicting domestic casualties who sacrifice creativity and love to conformity and the

promise of wealth. As in Plato's Republic, there is no room for imagination in the bourgeois city. The only survivors in McGrath's mid-century America are the outcasts, the bums -- the poets -- whose talents flourish in poverty.

"The Seven Stations of Mrs. D" is in seven six-line stanzas in which every two lines rhyme, as self-contained couplets early in the poem; but enjambement occurs increasingly, at first from line to line, then also from stanza to stanza. The initial order and containment thus yield to a spilling over and a running on. The poem is packed with images of American bourgeois life -- technology, consumer products, entertainment media, feel-good drugs, popular psychology. The hybrid "radio oven" embodies material excess, which when substituted for emotional, psychic and spiritual necessities produces emptiness. Attempts to defend against the emptiness with repression and unconsciousness lead to severe inner distress. This disparity between the inner and outer lives is Mrs. D.'s double world.

Waiting for the morning sickness of existence to pass
 Mrs. D. put her head into the radio oven and turned on the laughing gas,
 And after a briefing by Dr. Malcolm Quandary
 (The noted reporter who surveys each morning's boundary
 For Lady Macbeth Soaps) she was hopped up enough to face
 Her great American future, and unable any longer to stay in the place

Anyway, Mrs. D. charged her moral battery and went out to see
 What Mr. Luce and free enterprise might have hung on her 9 o'clock Christmas tree.
 But though the headlines proclaimed that she was ready for war
 (And there were assurances by three cardinals and one whore)
 Though the street was tree-proof and bird-proof, clean, shiny and nice
 Where civilization and sanitation had killed all but men and flies --
 Still, something was terribly wrong. It seemed to Mrs. D.
 That everything was properly accounted for. Then what could it be?

Mrs. D.'s "morning sickness" indicates that in the way of life apparently imposed

upon her, that of "incomplete consciousness," the real self, the recognizable individual, has not emerged, is gestating within. It is safe neither to think and feel nor to act on one's thoughts and feelings. "Dreams of steaks and assurances" keep one from awareness, in a state of "suppressed instincts" troubled by "the fire below" -- sexual repression, and also rage at the state of the world. For this poem, like others in Figures, is a poem of social criticism in which the representative character's state of mind reflects the state of the world.

Much of the irony in this pervasively ironic poem stems from the atheist McGrath's use of theological language and allusion, as in "The Drowned Man: Death Between Two Rivers." But these references have their secular truth too. Where Jesus had fourteen stations in his suffering, Mrs. D. has half as many but is as truly a martyr, to materialism and unconsciousness. Mrs. D.'s sense, even through her imperfect perceptions, that "there had passed away a glory from the earth" invokes the corruption of American life. The allusion is to "sic transit gloria mundi" in De Imitatione Christi of Thomas a Kempis, recited in the Roman Catholic ritual observing the death of a pope. The penumbra -- partial shadow, in-betweenness, alienation -- of Mrs. D. between the "still dead" and the "already living" is a spin on the resurrection of Jesus after the Stations of the Cross, making her "progress" an "imitation of Christ." "Intimations of responsibility" is the socialist's equivalent of the "immortality" evoked in the echo of Wordsworth's phrase. Thus McGrath uses the language of theology to point up the spiritual emptiness of the society whose money proclaims "In God We Trust."

"The Several Fortunes of Jonah Hope" depicts the stagnant life of a man in middle

age who never thinks to look within for the source of his growing disappointment, turning instead to a reader of palms and tea leaves, an astrologist and numerologist. He pays to be told what he wants to hear, longs for time past "where all his splendid future is everlasting." The Biblical Jonah comes to the realization that "they that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy"; in this poem the occult is a less-than-forceful metaphor for bourgeois life, but it does illustrate the superficiality, deception, and shift of focus to the object of an artificial need. The poem's concluding pun returns to the palmistry of the first stanza: "power was always in his hand."

"Mr. & Mrs. Foxbright X. Muddlehead, at Home" presents a bourgeois family in chaotic prosperity: the husband overburdened, dutiful, unwitting, lonely; the wife attractive but unthinking, immersed by telephone in pursuits away from her family, "ill with...the anguish of offspring asking for love"; children unparented, in a paradoxically wild state within middle-class civilization; all of the Muddleheads helpless. Their actual living has passed, "his ex-life in his heart like a fossil bone"; "Pity them, who, in some lost summer, loved, were young."

"Fantastic Gentry Wakes Up Dead" tells how death in life comes quietly, without crisis; Gentry's soul "screams distraction...but is not heard in the buzz buzz of conventional conversation" -- "conventional" the operative word. The living death is easier than life, which lacks guidelines and which involves passions, pains, risks of failure:

Secured beyond decision
Is the secret death of Gentry. And not so hard

As life, he reflects, while neither hope nor despair
Troubles his average day. Nothing again

Will move Gentry, whose heart in the long gone
Seasons of wish was haunted by fear and desire.

There persist questions, nocturnal doubts -- ultimately, the vital signs of "the heart," dear
to McGrath's own heart as the survival instincts of the independent outsider:

Observe him now, whom only life has destroyed:
Day after day driven past hope of solution
At last at peace. Or nearly. The heart will question,
Disturbing him often at night, asking: who is betrayed?

"Poor John Luck and the Middle Class Struggle/ Or: The Corpse in the
Bookkeeper's Body" answers Jonah Hope's question of whether the name John Luck
would bring his destiny of wealth and fame. The workday starts with his awakening to a
feeling of age and disappointment. The commute is part of the workday, as in This Coffin
Has No Handles, and John Luck is among the workers in lockstep leaving for, traveling
to, arriving at the workplace. He travels "on tenterhooks," spends the day at "commerce
and knavery...business and thievery," working until "the mind might snap and go sane."
He takes his "crying nerves" to the bar for relief, getting through the evening
"embalmed...snowed...hopped up...heeled." This is "a buried life," and a wasted life.

"Just Above the Battle, Mother --/ (The Death Song of Professor Francis Doubt)"
employs the sloganeering and the pop-song rhythms and rhymes of Longshot O'Leary,
mixed with more erudite references. For this is an anthem of America in decline, as sung
by a professor. It sings of manipulation through misrepresentation, as communism is a
scapegoat for America's flaws and such unsaintly figures as Franklin and Jefferson are
canonized:

Debs and Paine are underground,
 And Freedom has a double wound
 But Franklin's mistresses retain
 The Revolution's astral name.

The interest on St. Knox's gold
 Assails for Honor we have sold.
 The liberties a poet sings
 Are shadows, not substantial things.

Jefferson is dead and gone,
 And Monticello's but a tomb.
 High in History's azure steep
 The fathers of our country sleep.

"The Guardian Angel Won't Be Back" blends military and ecclesiastical images to show the church at war with the best impulses in human nature, the impulses of charity and fairness. The church is mobilized to protect the status quo, ostensibly as an act of faith, and condemns the wish to change as lack of faith:

For God knows nothing on earth is amiss --
 Isn't the Savior nailed to the Cross?
 The poor are easy laid in their graves,
 And what's never been had can never be lost.

"Mr. Carson Death on His Nights Out" is a personal poem, despite the satirically-named main character, as well as a social commentary. Carson Death is self-destructing with drink; he drinks, unsuccessfully, to forget. He seeks an orderly life, but it brings death along with love. "He remembered warnings of that treacherous coast/ And dreamed of crossing mountains homeward, north," but is "chained to a Caucasus of alcohol." McGrath has used a Promethean reference to himself elsewhere, in Letter, where he says that what he is doing, as a political poet in 1950s America, no one else is doing, and that

he is being punished for bringing enlightenment to America.

The "Caucasus of alcohol" is also a self-reference displaying the degree of McGrath's candor and self-awareness. The indications are that McGrath was an alcoholic. There were periods of conspicuously heavy drinking in his life, including part of the time he was married to Alice McGrath, from 1951 to 1957. After a period of estrangement following their divorce, she and McGrath resumed a friendship and correspondence that continued until his death. In a 1984 letter to Jack Beeching, a fellow poet and close friend of McGrath's from Oxford, Alice McGrath wrote of McGrath's backing out of a trip they were planning together to see Beeching:

It was disappointing, but more than that, it was a replay of the olden days -- the booze talking in the evening; the real Tom having hopes in the morning.... When Tom was here, we had a fine time. It was not like the old times. Then I had no place to go when he was being naughty; now I could enjoy being with him when he was being Tom, and go home when he was not.⁸¹

Other McGrath friends raised the subject of his drinking. Donald Hall teasingly wrote to McGrath in 1975 that the character reference McGrath had requested in support of a grant application would say, "Tom McGrath knows the insides of the best working class bars in the western United States."⁸² More solemn was the recollection of Naomi Replansky, who, after speaking of McGrath's generosity and kindness, said, "When he was drunk, he could be very mean. In vino veritas? I don't know about that."⁸³

McGrath's decision to use the formalist poems of Figures to make anti-conformist statements may seem surprising, especially considering the several levels of diction, from

hipster street talk through advertising jargon to the most erudite vocabulary, juxtaposed in each. The union of poetic formalism, dictional mix and subversive message is found throughout McGrath's work. His formalism is itself a statement, here specifically against the "incomplete consciousness" and absence of individuation required of mid-century Americans. For choices of form are conscious, deliberate, and, so as not to constitute a verbal pine box holding dead verse unworthy of notice, individualized. The developing variety in stanzaic form, line length and rhyme scheme is tangible demonstration of the individuation that consciousness fosters.

The formalism also constitutes another "doubleness" to these poems. McGrath spoke to Terrence Des Pres and Reginald Gibbons about this volume, "where many or most of the poems have a tight external form. Sometimes I'd take a form and sort of rotate it a little bit, and use off-rhymes where the original form would have used true rhymes....There are open poems in there, too. But there are a lot of others that are more traditional or pure on the surface....when you get inside them they're not very traditional -- either in attitudes, ideas or even in the structure."⁸⁴

There is other noteworthy poetry in this remarkable book. There are two short poems, direct in their engagement of grief, in memory of Jimmy McGrath: "Memorial" and "The World of the Perfect Tear." There is "Ode for the American Dead in Korea," republished in The Movie at the End of the World as "Ode for the American Dead in Asia" to incorporate those lost in Viet Nam. Alice McGrath cited this as first among her personal favorites.⁸⁵ Annette T. Rubinstein, a staff reviewer for Masses & Mainstream through the 1940s and from 1956 to 1960 a contributing editor of that journal's successor,

Mainstream, called this poem "unforgettable" in a 1982 letter to Fred Whitehead⁸⁶ and also quoted the poem in its entirety in a letter to the editor of Monthly Review, published in February 1999.⁸⁷ There is "The Trouble with the Times," dedicated to Naomi Replansky, which concludes:

No one is opening -- even on credit --
 A shop for the replacement of lost years.
 No one sells treasure maps. No one
 Retailers a poem at so much per love.

No. It is necessary
 To go down to the river where the burns at evening
 Assemble their histories like cancelled stamps.
 There you may find, perhaps, the purple
 Weather, for nothing; the blue
 Apples, free; the reddest
 Antelope, coming down to drink at the river,
 Given away.

The clarity of focus and the deceptively casual manner that McGrath achieves in Figures of the Double World, in poems that combine social criticism and personal significance, come in the direct line of development from Three Young Poets through To Walk a Crooked Mile and Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie and bring him to the threshold of Letter To An Imaginary Friend. He began Letter as Figures was being assembled and would live with it for thirty years.

Chapter Three

HUAC, Letter and the Round Dance

Letter To An Imaginary Friend is Thomas McGrath's biggest and best-known work. It is his longest undertaking in time -- almost thirty years from beginning to end, well over half his career as a poet, more than two thirds of the time from his first publication until his death, and in his private life, longer than his three marriages combined, longer than his experience of fatherhood, longer than most of the friendships of this devoted friend.

Letter is the largest product of his pen.⁸⁸ The 1997 edition of Letter, the only time the four parts have been printed together, is 407 pages. That is more than twice the length of either The Movie at the End of the World: Collected Poems, the 1972 volume of McGrath's shorter poems, highly inclusive to that date, or the Selected Poems 1938-1988, McGrath's final choice from his shorter works.

Most of the critical attention and, within it, much of the praise given to McGrath have focused on Letter.⁸⁹ McGrath himself identified it as the poem among his work that "most includes [him] and [his] world."⁹⁰ Letter undertakes to address the broadest themes in McGrath's body of work. This, his "pseudoautobiography," presents his life as an individual and as a representative person of his time, place and class. Thus it is the story of the Northern Plainsman, farmer, worker, poet, intellectual, Catholic-turned-atheist, war veteran, and leftwing revolutionary in twentieth century America. Letter "presents the history of an entire generation focused through an intensely personal vision."⁹¹ Within this

poem and its vision, in the poetic voice discovered and developed over the previous two decades, McGrath articulates with increasing specificity his radicalization, the sources of his radicalism, and his evolving sense of vocation as a radical poet.

Letter is McGrath's most important work, the work that was most important to him, the creation by which his creative merit is to be judged. A number of the shorter poems from various times in his career are also significant accomplishments. But McGrath's emphasis was on this long poem, to the point of his incorporating some shorter poems, initially published separately, into the developing Letter.⁹² Much is to be learned from this poem about the character of McGrath's art as well as the nature of his politics.

McGrath began writing Letter in direct, if delayed, response to his appearance before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and, evidence in the poem indicates, to turmoil within and the impending collapse of his second marriage, to Alice Greenfield McGrath.⁹³ McGrath appeared under subpoena before the HUAC subcommittee in Los Angeles on April 13, 1953. He was questioned about his Communist Party membership and related activities in Kearny, N.J., in 1942 and in Los Angeles in 1951-52. In the manner typical of these pseudo-investigatory but actually prosecutorial proceedings, which, rather than gathering new information, provided opportunities for the public announcement of damaging facts and allegations, the committee investigator made detailed statements about McGrath's employment and political involvement and asked the poet for corroboration. Citing the First, Fourth and Fifth Amendments, McGrath replied that he "must refuse to cooperate" for the following reasons:

...as a teacher, my first responsibility is to my students. To cooperate with this committee would be to set for them an example of accommodation to forces which can only have, as their end effect, the destruction of education itself. Such accommodation...would ruin my value as a teacher....there is a kind of unwritten oath which we follow: To teach as honestly, fairly, and fully as we can. The effect of this committee is destructive of such an ideal....as a poet, I must refuse to cooperate...on what I can only call esthetic grounds....one of the things required of us is to try to give life an esthetic ground, to give it some of the pattern and beauty of art....while I do not claim any great success, it would be...destructive of the pattern of my life, if I were to cooperate with the committee.⁹⁴

McGrath's contract as a non-tenured assistant professor at Los Angeles State College was not renewed, leaving him unemployed and blacklisted from teaching by the spring of 1954.

There was also a price to be paid as a poet:

I published on the left, and I published in some of the lunatic magazines of the West Coast. But in effect I had gone on a blacklist.⁹⁵

This was, he said, "a really bad time in my life."⁹⁶

McGrath responded, in part, by organizing the Sequoia School, as related by Gene Frumkin in Chapter Two above, and by doing some blue-collar work, including carpentry in a wooden-animal factory:

Wonderful job, but didn't pay anything.⁹⁷

But it was a period of despair until McGrath had an experience that he has called a satori, the name in Zen Buddhism for a state of intuitive enlightenment. Sitting outside on one sleepless night and noticing that birds were singing and that, despite the L.A. smog, stars shone above and the scent of flowers was in the air, he realized the insignificance of his troubles and "the comedy of my own being." This realization, he said, brought "a radical reassortment of the world."⁹⁸ Several months later, after a summer in which he wrote nothing and didn't know if he would ever write again -- a prospect which he insisted did

not distress him -- he began writing again with the encouragement of Don Gordon, a friend and fellow blacklisted poet⁹⁹:

Somehow I mentioned a poem I had at the back of my head, a long poem I thought, having to do with something out of my North Dakota childhood, but I had only a hazy notion of what it was about and no idea at all how to begin. I suppose that Don knew instantly that it was more lack of nerve than anything else that was stopping me. He gave me the obvious advice: Begin and see what happens. I made a beginning that night -- in terror....It was a more than ordinary terror, which suggested that the poem was going to be long and difficult. I had no idea how long: I was thinking of something of perhaps ten or fifteen pages.¹⁰⁰

McGrath's insistence that he didn't care if he never wrote again appears, in light of this account, to have been a "more than ordinary" denial, understandable considering the turn his life had taken. It seems he usually began writing with apprehension about the outcome; Gordon apparently knew this.

The writing of what turned out to be Part One "came, more spontaneously, I think, than anything I had ever done."¹⁰¹ McGrath began in October 1954, and wrote about half of Part One in two weeks. A dry spell followed, and then another rush of writing, "a 'fitted' of verse," in the spring.¹⁰² He said he felt freer at this time than ever before to write what he wanted because there was little chance of publication; he assumed the work would have no audience: "that's why it's A Letter to an Imaginary Friend"(sic).¹⁰³ One wonders why McGrath didn't think at this time of an actual friend, Alan Swallow, who was preparing Figures of the Double World for publication as McGrath began Letter and who would publish Part One in 1962. (The lead time for publication by Swallow Press, a one-person operation for most of Swallow's career, continually increased, especially as Swallow's growing prestige led to more manuscript submissions.) Perhaps the trauma of the time or

the difference in the format of this poetry put their near-decade-and-a-half of mutual loyalty out of McGrath's mind or made him unsure of it.

Shortly into the poem one becomes aware of an extensive rhetorical organization, perhaps the first striking thing about Part One. The interconnectedness of all of its passages makes Part One a cohesive whole rich in self-reference. Alan Swallow's assessment that "McGrath is a great rhetorician"¹⁰⁴ is especially pertinent considering McGrath's recollection that spontaneity characterized the writing of Part One. It is written in twelve sections, or books, each of which consists of a handful of numbered passages. (Part Two is in six sections, Part Three three, and Part Four one.) Each section, however many passages it comprises, returns in its final passage, usually to the place and time, always to the point of view and idea, of its first passage. Part One, Section I models this for every subsequent section of Letter.

The first passage of Part One establishes the poem's present, in time and place, and its relation to the past. This is done through the alternation of statements about the narrator - the poet -- and, in quotations from a supposed historical source, about his ancestors:

I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street,
 Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio, thinking,
 Hoping toward laughter and indifference.
 "They came through the passes,
 they crossed the dark mountains in a month of snow,
 Finding the plain, the bitter water,
 the iron rivers of the black North.
 Horsemen,
 Hunters of the hornless deer in the high plateaus of that country,
 They traveled the cold year, died in the stone desert." (3)

Another such pair of statements wryly equates the poet's present with his ancestors'

journey and thus his future with their end. The fifth passage and thus Section I end, as the first passage of Section I begins, with alternating statements of past and present that link the poet with his ancestors.

This is the poem's primary structural principle, every section of each of Letter's four parts starting in the place and time of composition and weaving in and out of the past in Joycean time cuts. This format constitutes a thematic statement, and by its inherence and ubiquity the work's most fundamental such statement: the past, the cumulative hereditary past as well as the past of one's personal experience, remains within one, running concurrently with and thereby shaping the present. Each echo, however partial, of one passage in another is a manifestation of this theme. This is one way in which the poem's form and content are united.

The narrative movement through time and space is especially challenging to readers, for, as the poem is thirty years in the writing, the present repeatedly changes. Part One, first published in its 131-page entirety by Alan Swallow in 1962, begins, as stated, in Los Angeles in 1954 and closes with the dateline "-- Los Angeles 1955." Part Two, 138 pages long, and first published, with Part One, by the post-Alan-Swallow Swallow Press in 1970, begins and ends in Greece and has as its closing dateline "-- North Dakota -- Skyros -- Ibiza -- Agaete -- Guadalajara 1968." Parts Three and Four, 82 and 51 pages respectively, and first published, together, by Copper Canyon Press in 1985, begin in North Dakota and end "in my upstairs room at six-fifteen South Eleventh/ In Moorhead, Minnesota" and have the closing dateline "-- North Dakota -- Portugal -- Moorhead, Minnesota, 1984."

Again and again, Letter goes back, from one passage to an earlier passage, from section to section, and eventually between parts. In writing the poem McGrath goes back to his memories, to his origins and influences, in Part Two literally to his family home, ultimately to his full commitment to and immersion in his vocation as a radical poet.

This returning is at times multi-dimensional, as when in Section VI of Part One he returns through recollection to the occasion of a return: Having gone away to his first college experience, he finds himself "back and busted." McGrath writes of this return to the North Dakota farm in the winter of 1934, when he was eighteen, from a semester at Moorhead State Teachers College in Minnesota (to which he will return to teach from 1969 until his retirement in 1983):

My mother stopped me.
 "It is the way the times are, Tom. Everyone's broke.
 But next year the crops...next year, if there's rain..."
 "Can't be bad times forever," my father said.
 "Between them Washington goddamned politicians,
 Bankers and debts -- they turn a man anyway but loose.
 Grasshoppers, rust and dust storms, mortgages and foreclosures,
 But we'll make it, Old Timer. We'll make her yet."
 "It's all right," I said. I knew I was home then --
 Back and busted from another of my universities.¹⁰⁵ (53)

This passage, returning to a return midway through Section VI, returns the poem to its start: McGrath is in fact "home" again in 1954 when he begins writing Letter, "back and busted" this time from teaching at Los Angeles County College.

The initial present of Letter, Part One, is a grim time, as grim as that of the poet's return from college, as announced in Letter's first line:

"From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east." (3)

The action of this line is also to return -- east to one's place of origin, east to the earlier stages of American history in its westward movement, and east to the nation's capital and to New York City, the headquarters of its capitalist operations, where the bodies can be laid at the feet of those responsible. For McGrath the current manifestation of the "Washington goddamned politicians, bankers and debts" is HUAC and the blacklist.

McGrath ends Section VI by asserting

I am a journey toward a distant wound. (56)

This too returns the poem to the first passage of Section One, where the poet identifies himself as the end of his ancestors' journey,

the journeying destination -- at least that. (3)

McGrath, like the "ancestral baggage" he carries ("Took them? They came"), is in his own wilderness, going through "high passes," in 1954 as in 1934. So too is the nation, the "hungering people," in crisis,

lost in the dark, in a ruck of tourists,
In the night of the compass, companioned by tame wolves, plagued
By theories, flies, visions, by the anthropophagi... (3)

He, his ancestors and the nation are limited by the erroneous assumptions and primitive means by which they in their respective times attempt to find their way through the unknown:

"The melt of the pig pointed to early spring.
The tossed bones augured an easy crossing.
North, said the mossy fur of the high pines.
West, said the colored stone at the sulphur pool." (3-4)

McGrath has both an individual and a vocational objective in the writing of this poem:

he would hold a "high wake," "bring these harvest dead into the light of speech," and thereby "out of imperfect confusion, to argue a purer chaos." Though not among the "harvest dead," he is a casualty,

No ghost, but O ill and older
Than other autumns when I ran the calico lanes
Past sleepy summer, gone, and the late west light
Downfallen. *Lost.* (5)

This autumn, instead of "calico lanes" he is in "the rusty garden/ Empty." He returns to his childhood in memory, first, for strength and healing:

Bright flags and fictions of those hyacinthine hours
Stain and sustain me past the hell of this mumming time.... (5)

The crisis is marital as well as professional and political:

In far Los Angeles I hear
The Flying Dutchman in the dry river
Mourning. *Mourning.* (8)

The Dutchman, in Wagner's telling, can be released from damnation only by finding a woman who will love him faithfully until death. McGrath repeats several times that the garden -- his home and marriage, as well as his poetic gift -- is rusty and empty.

The political crisis is not limited to McGrath's conflict with the government. Adding to his despair are ideological disputes within the radical movement, and especially the Communist Party U.S.A., that render its opposition to the government hopelessly ineffectual. He finds himself

Amidst collapsing empires of irreversible
Talk... (10)

His only potential allies waste their strength in

Anarcho-solipsist contraventions...
 Under the hysteria of the tide-containing moon
 The burghers rage. (They are hanging fresh sides of beef
 in the frost-bound dachas of their morning rooms,
 Davening to Peets)... (12)

The communist leadership is itself bourgeois; Peets, to whom the "burghers" of the CPUSA "daven," is McGrath's landlord in Baton Rouge.¹⁰⁶

Annette T. Rubinstein, who met McGrath when she was a staff literary reviewer for Masses & Mainstream in the 1940s, said his independence of mind and poetic excellence put him at odds with the party leadership:

The party had a problem with poets in general and especially good ones. They preferred the simplistic poets who stated clearly the "right" ideas.¹⁰⁷

A totally committed Marxist and a willing performer of party work, McGrath admired John Howard Lawson, an influential figure among American communist writers who was soon to be immortalized as one of the Hollywood Ten. But McGrath objected to Lawson's view at the time that art's merit lies mainly in its Marxist content.¹⁰⁸ McGrath also opposed, vocally by his own account, the continuation after World War II of the Popular Front, the anti-fascist alliance of communists and socialists with liberals and the Democratic Party that he had accepted as a wartime necessity but that after the war, he thought, was a betrayal of the party's mission of revolution.¹⁰⁹ Aggravating his distress is his sense that fellow radicals, comrades in revolution, have become harder to find in America after the war, as have potential sympathizers, people with "the generous wish":

Went underground about 1941 --
 Nor hide nor hair of 'em since.... (71)

Those in evidence are "fighting mainly each other." Everyone, including himself in as yet

unidentified ways, has been changed by the war. The former solidarity and sense of direction are gone:

The cantrip circle dispersed:
 Nothing to hold to:
 No center there and no center in myself. (120)

This is

The massive and central grief, the great secret loss of the war (117)
 and the fact that most distinguishes the diminished, despairing present from the past.

McGrath's political ideal, as articulated over and over through the four parts of Letter, is "the round dance," the community of shared labor that he knew briefly in childhood and that impressed him then as magical -- "cantrip." These are the relatives and neighbors who help each other at harvest, and the migrant farmhands whose solidarity derives from mutual respect as well as common interest; most important among them, his "skippering Irish father," envisioned as "the feathery, bearded and all-fathering wheat," and Cal, his "sun-blackened Virgil" and -- this expression of admiration further evidence of the poet's independent thinking within the Communist Party and indeed a reaching back to his pre-Communist radical origins -- "last of the real Wobs."¹⁰ These are McGrath's "honored dead," his "generous dead," over whom

in our new dispensation
 Of an ancient, man-chilling dark, the frost drops (70)

as it drops over his home and his hope. He will "harvest" these dead, not only in a wake of their memory, but in an awakening of the ideals they embody for him. Personal healing and the recovery of his poetic voice have required that McGrath return to the past; now

hope for the nation's progress requires a similar return, to effect the return of the past into the present.

There appears to be an inherent contradiction in this outlook; one is accustomed to hearing those on the the left condemn the right for harboring a reactionary wish to recreate the past. In Part Two McGrath is emphatic about the danger in turning back to "that loved past."¹¹ (139) Nonetheless, a present in which

You can't hear the crying for the sound of the counting of money (117)
can't stand up against "a lost, ebullient season" (69) when

What was real was the generosity, expectant hope,
The open and true desire to create the good. (70)

He recalls a time of sharing, group striving, equality, when "we warmed in each other's work" (60) and solidarity made workers' suffering seem less:

And did we freeze?
We froze in bunches of five. (61)

The adverse time and place, the years of the Great Depression "where the Red River flows north" (41), enhance the magic of "the cantrip circle."

It is in that time and place, among those people, that McGrath as a child first experiences work. The benevolence of his fellow workers and their ethic of sharing soften his trauma. Work, along with sex, becomes the coveted province of manhood and thus a source of pride,

The secret language foreign as a beard. (17)

The farmhands at his side, encouraging and protecting him, are his heroes; in this first of his collective impulses, he wants to join them, to share their fate,

To know. To burn in that fire. (22)

Their lot as McGrath witnesses it is a fire indeed, subjecting them to brutality and an exploitative greed that supercedes all other factors: his bourgeois uncle beats Cal for calling a work-stoppage, then strikes McGrath for coming to Cal's aid; the workers unite in refusing to work but move on with no immediate gain; they hitch rides and hop freights to their next job and probably more of the same until their solidarity effects a change.

"Among those pilgrim souls" (68) McGrath has known

The chime of comradeship that comes once maybe.... (61)

Surely his love and respect for the workers of his childhood and youth contribute to his adoption of the Marxist belief that work is the thing of greatest value, adding its value to that of its products, itself the most valuable element in them. McGrath writes of "the riches of common work" and says of working on a woodcutting team,

We sawed up the summer into stove-length rounds --
Chunks of pure sunlight made warmer by our work. (60)

Work will remain for him always a thing done happily when done for the wellbeing of loved ones, a thing that is gratifying in itself when not extorted by exploitative capitalists, who, significantly, do not labor themselves. McGrath's radicalization, then, is not only a response to adversity; it is also his personal testament to the examples of courage and generosity he has known.

Generosity, in fact, is the common element in both of the poet's comings of age, told in Sections III and IV of Part One and summed up in the first line of Section V:

Love and hunger! -- that is my whole story.... (40)

Shared effort transforms work's painful exertion and relentless grimness into an experience of pride and lasting affection; a unified response to exploitation brings strength and hope.

He recalls the partners of his adolescent sexual initiation as

Teachers of men! O hot, greathearted women
The world turns still on the axis of your thighs! (39)

In post-HUAC despair, his memories of them and of the pleasure freely given are an

Explosion of daisies in the stricken field. (33)

The placement of these accounts in immediate succession contrasts the pathology of American capitalism with the life-sustaining forces of fellowship and sexuality.

McGrath's use of an agricultural model in an industrial economy may seem particularly nostalgic. But he is not to be associated with either the Agrarians or the Fugitives, despite his and their turning to the past and to the farm for moral example in time of crisis. Nor should his regard for Cleanth Brooks, whose friends and professional collaborators included members of those groups, be seen as the basis for a connection.¹¹² Writing of his days at Louisiana State University, McGrath specifically rejects the central economic and religious tenets of the Agrarians:

And they got hold of Agrarianism --
Salvation -- forty acres and a mule -- the Protestant Heaven,
Free Enterprise! (80)

McGrath's affection is for the farmers of his youth, not for the difficult life they led.

And me with my three ideas
With my anarchist, peasant poverty, being told at last how bright
The bitter land was.
How the simple poor might lift a laud to the Lord. (83)

McGrath knows that those who labor on the land need relief rather than a lesson in

righteousness.

Once he leaves for college, McGrath is never again more than an interim visitor to the farm, helping with chores while on vacation from his academic and literary careers. He pursues advanced education on two continents, reading widely and incessantly and acquiring an extraordinarily sophisticated vocabulary. Most of his adult life is lived in towns and cities. Admiring artisans and manual laborers, he turns to their pursuits only out of necessity, when denied access to teaching or to gainful work as a writer.

But the farm is McGrath's personal past and his family's past. It symbolizes the values he lives by even in town; he derives from it his belief in the "city of swapped labor," "circle of warmth and work," "round song." It is his frame of reference and therefore, not surprisingly, the major source of his imagery.

The metaphor and simile of farm and farmhouse reflect the poet's early experience of nature's beauty and a nurturing home, with financial strain at first an unthreatening norm: "blue and mortgaged weather," "the turkey wind," "ceremony cheerful as a harness bell," "calico lanes," "placid, woodchuck-coughing afternoon."

The poet's first venturing forth moves from "the fish-stinking cow-dunged dark of the cattle crossing" to "the fox-barking, timber-wolf country" -- from the contemptibly familiar to the dangerously uncertain -- where, to the child's mind, "the cows were wilder:/ Horses carnivorous." The poet ironically recalls his father's advice, well-meant but superfluous to a farmboy, given as the son leaves for college for the first time:

He was saying that school would be hard, that times were
Hard, and that life was hard.

Country news. (41)

Interpreting town and city experiences, McGrath uses images of topography, weather, seasons and times of day -- the farmer's perceptions and concerns -- to connect to the farm or to contrast with it. These images imply values the poet associates with farmers. The dean of his first college, whose pince nez rests on the "cold col" -- the high mountain pass -- of his nose, is "mean as a cross-barred barbwire gate," and thoroughly a man of the town, not the farm. "The rusty garden/ Empty" in Los Angeles tells of McGrath's disappointment, of the absences of love and poetry. "The long thunder of money" and "continual wind of money" show the power of material greed, especially after World War II.

McGrath first evokes the Depression in imagery of the dust storm, of fatal significance to the plains farmer of the 'Thirties and symbolic to McGrath of the banker's opportunism:

I heard the wind howl in the night of the dust:
Somewhere a freight was poking a snout of sound
Through all that flying real estate. (40)

Images of winter cold on the farm depict crisis, setback, threat in the Depression:

So entered the dimension of winter, zero of hope
And the only shelter the lee of a barbwire fence. (58)

Indeed, McGrath finds shelter from the Depression's turbulence and cold and finds hope for social repair only in shared travail and community, if that of a mere hobo camp. This too he depicts in terms of weather and temperature:

The last collectivity stamping its feet in the cold. (59)

And:

A string of cabooses,
Remnants of vanished trains, crouch in a square
Like the pioneers' covered wagons, a tight perimeter
Against the Comanche winter. (68)

Through the farmer's eyes, the capitalist is a predatory animal:

a cloud of bankers like Siberian wolves
Snapping at ninety-ninth mortgages tossed like brides in their wake. (58)

McGrath records the progress of his radicalization in terms of one who lives outdoors and who makes decisions as the farmer does, in awareness of and relation to the natural environment:

No, in that polar light, all directions are North,
You must choose your stars there. (49)

McGrath presents the past as always present and awaiting acknowledgment; so his turning to the past hasn't far to go, nor is it a wholesale rejection of the present. Rather, it is a process of recalling, selecting and emulating, in the course of which he is inspired and encouraged. The memory of his radical heroes is available at all times:

They sing still; and are still; in the grandfather dark. (120)

Recalled in his difficult present, they are "a little piece of the old true unregenerate dark" (127) that makes possible McGrath's resolve, at the end of Part One, to turn

Toward the desert of the world, the wild garden,
With my politics: to be with the victims and fighters. (127)

Chapter Four

The Vocation of the Letter Writer

Part Two of Letter To An Imaginary Friend starts literally where Part One leaves off, repeating the predicate of the last sentence of Part One: " _____ coils in my ear like song...."¹¹³ (135) After this declaration of continuity, Part Two begins to indicate its differences from Part One. The first is a greater emphasis on the universality of its concerns; another is Part Two's self-identification as an epic poem. The most significant development of Part Two, subsuming both of these elements in a statement of purpose that resonates through Parts Three and Four to the last lines of the poem, is the increasingly specific definition of the poet's calling. Part Two of Letter begins this movement by emphatically asserting poetry's civic duty and, two decades after Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie, reasserting poetry's potential as an instrument for political change.

Part One of Letter To An Imaginary Friend begins, in Los Angeles in 1954, "From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east." Quoting from an account of a wilderness trek across the continent, the poet calls himself the "journeying destination" of his ancestors' such voyage. Perplexed and anguished, needing to mobilize himself to venture on in the political wilderness of mid-twentieth century America, he goes over his own past movements, the experiences that have formed his world view. Much of this movement is literal, at the same time that it signifies questions of values and forces of history, and

almost all of it occurs in North America.

Part Two of Letter To An Imaginary Friend opens in Skyros, Greece, with a metaphorical equating of the sea and the prairie, and therefore of Greece and North Dakota:

Beyond the window the wild
Salt north forty of wind and water, the loud, galloping
White-maned mustangs of the cold ungovernable sea... (135)

This is the same comparison implied between sea and prairie, but in the opposite direction, as in McGrath's introduction in Part One of his "skippering Irish father, landlocked Sinbad" on the "rusting poop deck of the north forty." The comparison in Part Two is explicit and becomes specific in terms of common climatic and economic adversity and the presence, in memory, of legendary heroes:

All leafsplit, seedshaken, buckling under the drive
Of the living orient red wind
constant abrasive
North Dakota
is everywhere.
This town where Theseus sleeps on his hill --
Dead like Crazy Horse.
This poverty.
This dialectic of money --
Dakota is everywhere.
A condition. (135-136)

The voices of the past are not the ostensibly written journal entries of Part One, but are spoken, vernacular, heard, not read, voices with identity and character; Part Two is more spoken and outspoken.

The first several pages of Part Two, Section I, include references to NATO,

About Alice, the bold idealist who was a principal organizer of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and a mainstay of support for the Zoot Suit murder defendants in Los Angeles from 1942 to 1944 -- a legendary episode of West Coast radical activism that is a rock-solid credential on any leftwing resume -- there was, he insinuates, a corrupting taste for luxury:

My wife was looking uphill
Toward the Gadget Tree (was last seen crossing over the smog line
Approaching an outpost of sports cars). (155)

The end of the marriage had left him bitter.¹¹⁴ There must have been financial pressures on the marriage stemming from his blacklisting:

and my hands are
Barer than most at best: and after ten years on the blacklist
Barest. Embarrassed and bare-assed.... (175)

Section IV, Passage 3 of Part Two speaks with remarkable candor, for some lines, of the passion and destructiveness of this marriage. McGrath tells of meeting

--Mask of a rich whore, a bourgeoisie, chipping around
With the dangerous world of the poor. (229)

Beneath the mask he finds "my own Dark Lady," who is essentially his female psychic counterpart, the two sharing all the same needs, desires and vulnerabilities. Their intense eroticism comes at the cost of stability:

Each road was chosen
Only for its dangers: the desperate authentication of terror
That kept the world at bay. (231)

He ends the account by focusing again on external forces:

And the world got in the way at last, the world of the blacklist,
Of money and need in a bourgeois town.
In time it finished us off. (232)

He blames the materialism of the 1950s, rather than causes within the relationships, for the widespread failure of marriages including his own, seeing formerly or potentially radical working-class couples as

doing the sacramental
Till-death-do-us-part on the Never-Never Plan of Death-by-Installment,
In the Holy Layaway Order of Resurrection: meditating
On the four last things: as: psychiatristsportscarswimmingpoolstatus. (189)

Capitalism, he believes, perhaps chooses to believe, has again assaulted his personal life, this time causing a crack in "the true foundation and threshing floor of love" (157).

Skyros has another significance to McGrath: It is believed by some to be the original burial place of Theseus, the legendary king of Attica in the thirteenth century B.C. According to Thucydides, Theseus' bones were exhumed and reinterred in Athens in the fifth century B.C.¹¹⁵ Bullfinch calls Theseus "a semi-historical personage,"¹¹⁶ and identifies him as the hero who navigates the labyrinth, destroys the Minotaur, conquers the Amazons, unites the Attic Greeks, and appears in spirit to the exhausted Athenians at Marathon, rallying them to victory. Indeed, within a few lines of this allusion to Theseus, McGrath speaks of his own duty

To enter the labyrinth and blaze the trail for the enduring journey
Toward the round dance and commune of light... (136)

McGrath's implied identification with such a hero seems grandiose. Equally sweeping is McGrath's claim, stated several times in Part Two in conspicuously nonstandard usage as a reminder that his heroes are of the proletariat:

What I am doing
ain't nobody
nowhere

done before... (266)

These contentions reflect his aspirations, as they reflect his assessment of his task and his readiness for it, given with solemn candor in the second passage of Section I:

It's hard and I'm
Scared... (142)

McGrath has reason to be scared, having lost for a time his livelihood and having seen others lose their freedom and some their lives to the political environment in America since the end of World War II. But also he has reason to identify with a vanquisher of oppressors, one who has fought his way back up from the world below, from the place of the dead. McGrath has survived his blacklisting by working at a variety of occupations including manual trades, and by 1960 has even returned to college teaching. Despite his bold defiance of HUAC he has served no jail time. The mutual loyalty of McGrath and Alan Swallow has kept open his access to publication by an independent house growing in stature. McGrath's shaken self-confidence likely has been restored in part, and he is emerging from the trauma of the 1950s; whereas Part One of Letter begins in autumn, "drifting toward Scorpio," by moonlight, Part Two is "begun before Easter in the holy sign/ Of the Fish" just before dawn.

By the middle and later 1960s, American attention is focused on the war in Vietnam as an extension of the Chinese threat and on the Berlin Wall, Castro in Cuba, suppression of dissidents in Prague, and other evidence of Soviet menace. Television, travel, and the massive importation of consumer goods give an international dimension to daily life in America, and the United Nations, the Peace Corps, and ever-increasing U.S. aid to and

writing and arranged for publication of Gates of Ivory, Gates of Horn. This fantasy novel depicts America, and especially California, as a hell of consumerism whose citizens are controlled through their appetites and addictions. As in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, but in the service of capitalism, the tyrannical government imposes sensations on the people as a way of suppressing their thought and emotion; not only alcoholism but also heroin use and promiscuity are mandatory.

Conceived as a science fiction potboiler, the novel became instead a bitter social satire of postwar capitalism.¹¹⁷ Its commercial potential thereby eliminated, it was published in New York in 1957 by Mainstream Press, the book-publishing arm of Masses & Mainstream, with a foreword by Charles Humboldt, McGrath's friend and the literary editor of Masses & Mainstream.

Gates' title comes originally from Book XIX of The Odyssey of Homer, in which Penelope tells her dreams to the stranger she has not yet recognized as her husband. One doesn't know which Odyssey McGrath may have read; but if he had chosen, like Keats, to look into Chapman's Homer, he would have found this in Book XIX:

But there are
To these light dreams, that like thin vapours fare,
Two two-leaved gates; the one of ivory,
The other horn. Those dreams, that fantasy
Takes from the polish'd ivory port, delude
The dreamer ever, and no truth include;
Those, that the glittering horn-gate lets abroad,
Do evermore some certain truth abode.

But in a chain of borrowing, McGrath apparently took this trope from another poet, Virgil, who had taken it from Homer and used it to end Book VI of The Aeneid, the

account of the hero's visit to his father in the world below. McGrath uses the final four lines of this passage, in the Dryden translation, as an epigraph to the novel. The depiction in McGrath's work of America as an underworld thus precedes Part Two of Letter, and Gates of Ivory, Gates of Horn establishes Virgil's epic as a source, if not the original source, for this motif. McGrath will continue to depict America in this way into his last decade; two of his major volumes of the 1980s are titled Passages Toward the Dark (1982) and Echoes Inside the Labyrinth (1983).

McGrath's concept of "pseudoautobiography" further connects Letter to the epic tradition:

I am very far from believing that all parts of my life are meaningful enough to be usable in the poem. But I believe that all of us live twice: once personally and once as a representative man or woman. I am interested in those moments when my life line crosses through the concentration points of the history of my time. Then I live both personally and representatively.¹¹⁸

As both poet and protagonist of Letter, McGrath uses his life to represent that of his people, not in the Classical sense of an embodiment of cultural ideals, but in the post-Renaissance manner of a typical person. Theseus, Odysseus, Achilles and Aeneas are kings who by virtue of their power and superior status hold the fate of their people in their hands; McGrath, a Marxist and self-proclaimed peasant, is himself one of the people, and his and their efforts will contribute to the common outcome. McGrath's people are, in the authorized English translation of Marx and Engels' words, the "workingmen of all countries"¹¹⁹ -- in the popular phrase, "workers of the world." As poet of the working people, his duty of citizenship -- serially expressed as the writing of the poem, the keeping of the winter count, the finding of the way, the blazing of the trail, the making of the

Kachina -- is as binding as Aeneas' mission to found Rome. Though not divinely ordained, McGrath's calling, like those of Aeneas and Theseus, is required by history, whereas Achilles, Odysseus and Dante pursue personal objectives. McGrath's goal and status as poet differ from Virgil's: McGrath the blacklisted pariah is writing not to unite the citizens to support those in power, as is the state-sponsored Virgil, but to promote the revolution that will depose them.

In Part Two, Section I, passage 2, the underworld is shown in three forms significant to McGrath's revolutionary duty: it is the underworld of death and therefore of the buried past, the dark labyrinth of the dangerous present, and the obscured prospect of the uncertain future. Broadening the underworld motif beyond its initial Classical associations, McGrath uses two metaphors that are specifically American in reference to identify his vocation as poet of revolution, and then takes from Roman Catholicism materials with which to practice this vocation.¹²⁰

McGrath's task is to enlighten the "night of America," that is, to write the truth about America's past and present, which will make clear the way to a better future:

But all time is redeemed by the single man --
Who remembers and resurrects.

And I remember.

I keep

The winter count. (155)

The winter count, an annual tribal census, records survivors and casualties in the season of greatest adversity. In identifying with this American Indian practice, McGrath invokes the first victim of American greed and xenophobia as representative of all of America's oppressed, and relates the Indians' "winter" of genocide to the current "night of America"

and to his own ordeal:

The Indian is the first
Wound. (244)

"Making the kachina" refers specifically to the Blue Star Kachina, the ritual by which the Hopi prepare for ascension into the Fifth World, a world without the greed and consequent violence of this Fourth World. The spiritually prepared reach the Fifth World through a hole in the sky, signifying that our world in its present state is the world below, the place of darkness, torment and death.

From the start of Part Two, the poet's role includes leading the way out of the underworld, and by the second passage of Section I this role has taken on the orphic burden of a prohibition against looking back:

And always, as I go forward,
And older I hear behind me, intolerable, the ghostlight footsteps --
Jimmy perhaps; or Jack; my father; Cal; Mac maybe --
The dead and the living -- and to turn back toward them -- that loved past --
Would be to offer my body to the loud crows and the crass
Lewd jackals of time and money, the academy of dream-scalpers, the mad
Congressional Committees on Fame, to be put on a crisscross for not wearing
The alien smell of the death they love.... (139)

Appropriation of his work, for their purposes, by the marketplace, the academy, the government, is his punishment if he succumbs to sentiment, indulges in nostalgia, instead of pushing ahead in his duty.

Diane Wakoski, in noting the orphic character of McGrath's persona in Letter, is especially interested in McGrath's presentation of himself as a Christ-child figure, a "resurrection man."¹²¹ Indeed, as discussed in Chapter Two above in reference to earlier,

shorter poems, McGrath through the fifty years of his writing life appropriates with great facility religious, especially Christian imagery to promote secular revolution. In Part Three of Letter he will take this further:

The old Biblical myth gives Adam (and offspring) "dominion" over Nature. But to have it, the pagan deities had to be demonized or destroyed. Then we had power over the world: it became "dead nature" -- so and so many board feet, and so and so much profit and loss. One project of the poem is to "angelize" these (and other) demons. That means: to return us to a view which all primitives, anyone who has spent time in the woods or anyone simply in his/her right mind has always had: that Nature is just as alive as we are.¹²²

An atheist from childhood, McGrath grants value to religion only to the extent that it serves the needs of people in their immediate material reality. His obvious approval in Letter of the Hopi rather than the Judeo-Christian mythology -- nowhere does he satirize Hopi beliefs and practices, whereas he frequently and bitterly mocks the unprincipled association of Christianity with capitalism and the materialism of both Catholics and Protestants -- reflects also his sympathy and respect for the Hopi's experience of oppression in the United States. Growing up in a Roman Catholic home and living most of his life in a largely Protestant state and nation, McGrath recognizes the power of Christian institutions in American life and perceives them as among the oppressors of the "workingmen of all countries." As a poet of revolution, he opposes any Christian doctrine and policy that protects a status quo of social inequality. His seizing of Christianity's weaponry to use against it claims for his own duty the status of a calling, the secular equivalent of a religious vocation. It was likely the latter that Catherine Shea McGrath envisioned for her eldest son.¹²³

McGrath is "resurrection man" as poet in several ways, none of them religious. The

most direct way is as he who "remembers and resurrects": he tells to the present and future the story of the past; he is a voice of history's oppressed, specifically America's, and primarily the American Plains', whose oppressed represent all because "Dakota is everywhere." Another way is as the maker of the kachina, his poem aiding the revolution that will enable him and others to ascend into the improved way of life they seek. A third way is in his individual return, through the writing of the poem, from confusion and despair to acceptance and renewed commitment.

The first two passages of Part Two, Section III add "resurrection man" to the facets of McGrath's persona that include the hero in the underworld, the outlaw, and the political poet. Passage 1 tells of chopping wood in the North Dakota winter. The poet has left the city and returned with Genya to the family farm to find his way in life, to resurrect himself.¹²⁴ One thinks of Dante in the forest seeking to regain the path of right. In cutting up deadfalls, the naturally fallen trees that he finds on the ground, McGrath resurrects them, bringing forth from dead and partly petrified wood the heat and light it absorbed in its years of life and growth. McGrath's taking pleasure in this work subverts capitalism's usual worker-exploitation:

In joy.

That does it.

Rockefeller revolves like a goose on a spit

In his whited sepulcher

a Texaco station goes down with all hands

Off Venezuela...

This ax, comrades, has blasphemed against fuel oil... (177)

McGrath's very name is now a curse to those whose comfort in the status quo he threatens; they call him "bronco" and "lunatic," to his evident delight. The imagery of the

world below reiterates the heroism of this ordinary undertaking:

I enter the world of the dead, the stormdowned
Deadfalls. I mine for my darling these stovelengths of buried light this
Ancestral warmth... (180)

This rich passage also symbolizes the poet's duty to recall the past into the present; to illuminate past, present and future, and to use the tools of his vocation to blaze a path for others to follow.

Passage 2 follows McGrath to the "vast infernal yards" of Federal Drydock and Shipyard, Kearney, New Jersey, where he is a welder on, significantly, the graveyard shift. The shipyard's landscape, like the treelot on the farm, is Dantean, the workers all categories of exotic demons. From behind his welder's mask,

I look out of my Platonic cave into
Hellsfire: electrico-magnetico-mechanico-metallico seventh
Circle. (182-183)

He works in the dark, wielding fire and breathing toxic fumes. As if this were not underworld enough, he goes further below into

(A claustrophobe's hell) the ship's lowest intestine (diseased:
With odd growths of pipe and wire, gobs and gobbets
Monstrous, necrotic).... (187)

The work is dangerous, lonely and frightening; he would rather not go. But he is able to hear, at times, "not knowing whether near or far," unseen comrades working in parallel shafts. Here also, as when chopping wood planted by his grandfather, there have been predecessors to guide him. Of greatest comfort are the "immortal blazonings" left by fellow workers, especially the ubiquitous Kilroy, legendary man of the people, insolent prankster who defies and outwits oppressive authority to bolster the popular morale.

McGrath identifies with Kilroy as a poet performing the poet's socially urgent but solitary task

to point
To the work that had to be done.¹²⁵ (192)

Kilroy is McGrath's Virgil, his Tiresias,¹²⁶ leading the poet further along the "blazed trail" that McGrath has been following since the mention of his ancestors at the start of Part One and that it is McGrath's mission to pass on to others, so that they, like he, find it

not so lonely with the fellow worker gone
Into the dark ahead. (187)

His poetic work, in which too he is alone and afraid, fuses disparate components as welding focuses heat, and in the process gives light and direction. There is no question that he will pursue the work, whatever the outcome:

I begin with identity
And seek the Wilderness Trace and the true road of the spirit.
I start alone with labor and a place.
Not much
But at least
That. (203)

The labor and place are his identity. He must undergo ordeals including loss of livelihood and marital strife to achieve the insight that will make his work meaningful to others:

Sunrise in the rock...
the light of my house
Burning...
Do you read my blaze
down
there
in the dark?
Over. (265)

The radio operator's punctuating "over" here signifies the end of his marriage and, for the

time, security and stability. This is a cause for which he must give much.

Like welding and the various other labors which he uses as symbols for his writing,
McGrath finds the writing itself strenuous and his capacity taxed,

the feet
Of language: raw: trailworn: needing to be reshod.... (266)

This poem brings particular frustration, risk and exhaustion, for

the message arrives from far off:
From some future galaxy -- arrives very fast, very faint, in a language
I can barely translate...
and always the danger of shortfall, noise,
And the plaindamn inability of readers to know good sense and song...
And so -- nights of waiting for a single word and nights
When all arrives at once like a migration of birds.
Days when I turn it off in order to breathe, days
When only an enigmatic phrase comes through from another galaxy.... (266-267)

Like the Classical epic poet, McGrath depicts himself as a vessel receiving his song from an external source, in his case from the post-revolutionary future. The humility implicit in this device, the same humility of "It's hard, and I'm scared," applies to the song, to the ideas within it, and to the use of the song as a revolutionary strategem.

Shortly before the end of Part Two McGrath fuses agricultural, geological, political and Christian theological metaphor to further specify his role as poet of revolution:

I am

The one who has come at last to wake the reluctant dreamer
Out of his surfeit of continental sleep
to free the Bound Man
Of the Revolution... (264-265)

The farmer knows who is most effective at awakening others:

It is not daybreak

Provokes cockcrow but cockcrow drags forth the reluctant sun not

**Resurrection that allows us to rise and walk but the rising
Of the rebel dead founds resurrection and overthrows hell. (265)**

To equate resurrection with revolution is to naturalize or materialize the supernatural, and in Cold War America to "angelize the demonic."

Accepting this work, the writing of the poem, as his vocation, McGrath cites several esteemed colleagues in Parts Two, Three and Four in a half-mocking exaltation, but exaltation nevertheless, that asserts his view of the poet as a figure of prophetic, even biblical importance:

**But no present; only the past and the future: both false.
As the poet saith (Bob Bly)... (249)**

Also:

**And it's only
The nostalgia for the living dead and for abandoned places that moves me.
(America is terribly old, saith the poet: Jim Wright)
Aye. (260)**

In Part Three McGrath makes the association of poet and prophet in the opposite direction:

***"They have sold the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes,"
Saith the poet (Amos), "who make the ephaw small and the shekel great."* (323)**

McGrath names not just any prophet, but the prophet chosen by God to tell Israel of His outrage at their greed and exploitation of the poor and to announce a revolution to come.

McGrath uses italics, attributing to Amos' words special significance. "The land is not able to bear all his words," the priest Amaziah says in accusing Amos of conspiracy against the king and ordering Amos to cease prophesying and leave the land.¹²⁷ Having experienced a similar response from HUAC to his having posed a comparable threat,

McGrath asserts here that confronting authority with truth remains an essential duty, for which a poet-prophet may be cast out.

The concluding lines of Part Two, which are restated as the opening line of Part Three, and a number of other references in Part Three indicate McGrath's self-identification with the preeminent Hebrew prophet, Moses:

I'll take you...
 my darlings, my dear ones...
 over the river (271)

is restated as

I'll take you over the river, over the winter ice... (275)

In the context, established in Part Two, of Classical and Dantean journeys through the underworld, this reference evokes the River Styx, with McGrath in the Tiresian/Virgilian role. But McGrath immediately identifies as the structuring present of Part Three a Christmas Eve of his childhood in North Dakota. The narrative moves into other presents thematically related to this one, as is McGrath's practice throughout Letter. Biblical and Christian liturgical allusions dominate some of these presents and are mixed with Classical allusions in others. For example, Part Three begins by deriving Christian significances from the Classical descent into the underworld. The light of day is falling, and the poet and his father set out for straw,

To bring the gold of the summer home for the creche and crib... (276)

Then, in recalling the descent of the Holy Ghost to impregnate Mary, McGrath interjects

(Hi there, Tomasito!) (277)

using his pet name for his own son and thereby equating himself (parenthetically) with

H.G., hydrogen grande, the sacerdotal hydrogen,
 That Always-Was-and-Always-Will-Be of the Steady State system
 Of the one and Triune God... (277)

Thus he demythologizes the conception, and the concept, of Jesus. Part Two's figurative topography of this world and the world below alternates at times in Part Three with the **Horizontal World**, also called the **World of Down** -- our material world -- and the **Vertical World**, the **World of Up** -- our spiritual concerns and myths, or actions taken in their name -- envisioned in Judeo-Christian terms predominantly. In this context the river is not the Styx but literally the Sheyenne, abutting the family farm in southeastern North Dakota, and figuratively the Jordan. McGrath's first use of this image is in the final lines of Part Two, Section II:

I'll take you as far as the river.

Sing now.

We'll make the Kachina. (174)

By the end of Part Two McGrath is able to do what Moses is not, to cross the river with his people. Hardly asserting his own superiority, McGrath here claims for radical poetry a greater value to humanity than that of religious scripture.

In a five-page extended synecdoche McGrath speaks about his hand as a laborer for revolution. He refers twice in this passage to his forty years of wandering, like that of Moses. As he writes this, McGrath has been a poet for about forty years. The hand, he says, is lost in the snow on the childhood Christmas Eve; several pages later he identifies the snow as the blank page before him. The hand's travels through space and time, broken intermittently by brief, teasing visits to McGrath, are a survey of nineteenth-and-twentieth-century radical history and of McGrath's own political activism. The hand's separations

from him show his sense that the artist's work follows its own course beyond his conscious control and that revolutionary work must go where history takes it. He regains possession of the hand when he reaches a heightened awareness of the relationship of radical poet to reader and of his place as poet in the worldwide comradeship and revolutionary tradition:

Yes.

I say it is all in our hands.

It is in all

Our hands' hard-lines-and-times and cold fatalities. (290)

The responsibility for achieving revolution extends beyond poets to their readers:

This hand is searching this white page of that distant snow --
 Like a blind hawk hunting the trackless emptiness ahead --
 Searching for your hand to hold while we write this down together --
 This: (290)

There follow seven blank lines, then a footnote:

*It may be that these lines (and there may be many more than suggested here) constitute the key to the whole poem -- and perhaps to all poems, or at least to those where unseen collaborators of present and future have added lines of their own. (291)

The writing itself does not fulfill the radical poet's duty; he must find his readers and move them to join him. He must write the poetry that they need to read. On their response hangs the validation of his calling. It is only a little later in the poem, in a passage continuing the association of the snow-covered field with the writer's blank page, that he says,

It is in winter we see the world as it is: wild:
 Inhuman... (319)

And:

Then we may love man: so weak, so poor, in that
 Cold wind... (319)

Thus has been added another dimension to the significance of the work, to McGrath's personal connection to it, and to the difficulty and humility it requires of him.

The secularizing of the divine, the naturalizing of the supernatural that McGrath practices in various ways, including by intermixing the Christian with the pagan Classical, at times takes the form of outright "angelizing of the demonic"¹²⁸:

But the Father offers the Son, that bearded foxfire,
And those ten-watt dusty streetlamps, the Saints, in place of the inner eye!
Oh! Orient, Paymon, Amoymon, Cham! Help me reject them!
Palanthon, Sitrael, Thamar, Sitrami! Send a true Prophet! (306)

This is intoned on the way to Christmas Eve confession, under

the bone glare of the moon
Her celestial pallor
deathshine...
(All that the priests have left
Of the warm and radiant Goddess who once held all our hands!) (305-306)

The confession itself is a hilarious episode in which the boy, having prayed for the gift of tongues, employs virtuosic wordplay to come up with a claim of sin that will yield a penance fitting his grand sense of his own wrongdoing. The result:

"Three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys --and get ye gone!"

And I'm out on the street -- *should* have been: all the Stations of the Cross --
Cut your own timber and bring your own hammer and nails! (332)

This might be a pious man's affectionate recollection of childhood, except for such theologically subversive statements as

"Have you ever
Taken the Lord's name in vain?"
"Yes."
"How often?"
"Always."

"Always?"
 "Always in vain I mean, Father.
 It never helped." (326)

He recalls the priest as like

a man who keeps *two* sets of books and can't find a safe place to keep 'em --
 Or a pugnacious peddler flogging his worthless wares to the marks.... (344)

McGrath further transfers sanctity from the supernatural to the human in recalling himself as a son setting out on his father's business this Christmas Eve, to find his father's friend and later his own childhood hero, Cal, to invite him to midnight mass and Christmas dinner. Cal's refusal includes his assessment that Jesus has been

"Turned into an icon for leapin' and creepin' Ufataism!
 And all for the glory of god: the All-time Ultra Outasight!
 All that's left of Sweet Jesus is the image of human pain..." (340)

McGrath portrays Cal himself as such an image:

He lifts the moonshine jar, the tiny
 Kingdom where Possibility opens her enormous arms. (340)

At the same time that he embodies Jesus' suffering, Cal and his girlfriend are "this Holy Couple," sheltered this Christmas Eve not in a stable but in other borrowed quarters:

I leave then on Nino Perdido:
 Street of the Lost Child: where they were born and will die
 Too far from anywhere always ever to get home at all. (340)

Cal will die not on a cross, but as a sacrifice to the demands of a worker's life, either

in some nameless struggle;
 Or as the poor die: of wear-and-tear of the spirit.... (342)

McGrath's eulogy for them adds an anti-religious dimension to his assertion of revolutionary and poetic purpose, by quoting the anti-monarchist and anti-capitalist

"Internationale" on this occasion of preparing to attend a Catholic mass:

Kneel we never shall
Is all the music. (343)

He defines as a poetic responsibility¹²⁹ the linking of churches with other institutions of oppression that revolution must overthrow:¹³⁰

And *this* voice, be it however small,
Must help shout down the slates from all steeples and prisons of this land... (343)

McGrath creates the mass itself in the form of a cantata without music for six voices; this ostensibly musical genre is identified as such by the labeling of sections according to vocal parts. McGrath takes as text the Christmas Eve story told in Luke 2:8-20, the scriptural passage read at probably every Christian worship service on Christmas Eve. This mass unlike any other demonstrates the fundamental role of language, the poet's tool, in the arbitration of truth.

The basso's section is from the King James Version, notably a Protestant Bible at a supposedly Catholic mass, a subversive presence from the start. The tenor part is a modern paraphrase telling the same story but with interpretative choices necessarily resulting from word choices.

With the alto, things begin to go haywire: The paragraphing, sentence structure and syntax remain the same as the tenor's; but many of the nouns have been changed to words with the same initial letters, and there have been some changes in the placement of end punctuation. Having just read the story in two variants that generally resemble each other, the reader can recognize wordplay at work, in keeping with the punning for which

McGrath has such an affinity and gift; prior familiarity with the original text would contribute to the impression that this is the same story retold with playful word substitutions.

The mass proceeds to the soprano and countertenor, whose texts are presented in parallel columns, as if simultaneously. These passages use the paragraphing, sentence structure and syntax of the King James Version and make noun substitutions entirely different from each other's and the alto's and more numerous and further from the original than the alto's.

There are now five forms of the story, in two groups: the King James and its two variants, and the modern paraphrase and its variant. In the first group, "country" becomes "regress" and then "coup"; "shepherds" become "shields" and "sheriffs"; "the angel of the Lord" becomes "the Anglican of the Lorry" and "the an-gi-o-car-di-o-graph of Lorica." In the second group, "a baby wrapped in a blanket in the manger" becomes "a bacalao wrapped in a blarina in a mangleman."

The progression is irreverent fun; but only in the progression is there preserved a connection to the intention of the original. Taken separately, these variants have the same organization and rhythm as the others in their group but utterly different meanings. That aspect of reader response that is influenced by organization and rhythm may remain the same; the variants may feel the same in those respects; but they tell entirely different stories.

NOW MOVE ALL SYMBOLS THREE LEAPS TO THE LEFT! (353; var.359)
McGrath writes in ending Part Three and opening Part Four. The poet, purveyor and

manipulator of symbols, has the work of revolution to do.

From the beginning of Letter McGrath has spoken often of his debt to many forebears: in the family his continent-crossing ancestors, his grandfather, his mother and especially his father; hero-friends Cal, Warren, Mac; "that sweet great man" teacher Cleanth Brooks; political guides and role models Marx, Lenin, Bakunin, Lambrakis, Che Guevara, William Z. Foster, Joe Hill, Big Bill Haywood; Communist Party comrades and military buddies Harry Merer and Charley Wallant. He speaks with affection and admiration of literary friends Don Gordon, Charles Humboldt, Naomi Replansky, Alan Swallow, Meridel LeSueur, Edwin Rolfe, Robert Bly, James Wright.

Not until Part Three, Section III, Passage 3 (on page 333, in fact), does McGrath acknowledge poetic forebears and models as such, and then only at the end of a list of poet-peers and proteges. Bob Edwards, Dale Jacobson, Bly, David Martinson, Mark Vinz, Sam Hamill, Bert Meyers, Humboldt, David Cumberland-Johnson, Fred Whitehead, Richard Nickson and Gordon, all McGrath friends and several his students, precede Hart Crane, Bertolt Brecht, and Pablo Neruda in a list culminating in

my father, that quiet man, chief among chiefs --
Seemed so to me in those green years: and now as I say it. (334)

This is a guest list, so to speak, not a comprehensive catalogue, of personal poetry relationships; McGrath's poetic preferences, like his political views, are the product of personal experience. In interviews McGrath has expressed affinity for Walt Whitman's and Robinson Jeffers' work, acknowledging their influence on his use of the long, usually six-beat line. But he harbors reservations about them as well, Whitman for his potential

danger to young poets stemming from the apparent ease with which he accomplishes the difficult, and Jeffers for his isolation and bitterness.¹³¹ Neither of them is invited to this episode or anywhere else in Letter; despite his regard for their work, they do not fit comfortably into the group around the pot-bellied stove.

The poets listed above are gathered in the McGrath barn to tell North Dakota farmers' stories of the Norwegian folk character Rolf Ristvedt, Americanized to Ralph Wristfed. This occasion's story is a morality tale about the search by "Questers three" for "the Risen One." With conspicuous evocations of Chaucer and references to the saviour myths of various religions, and with relentless use of staggeringly arcane words -- McGrath at his most playfully allusive and lexicographical best -- the story blends the tales of the first Christmas, the first Easter, and Groundhog's Day into a joke whose punchline discredits all claims to religious truth.

McGrath has said much in Letter about the poet's mission, and something about his experience of writing, but in this passage for the first time he has depicted poets at work. This story, presented as the product of the poets who are closest to him personally and poetically, embodies his concept of his work. First, however broad the social significance and intended audience of his poetry, it will be read first by other poets and is composed with those readers in mind, but is thereby no less suited to a wider readership. Second, playful and irreverent, with serious points to make about matters of truth, his poetry works to enlighten as it entertains; its capacity to entertain becomes a more important element in adverse times and places. Third, his form of choice is narrative, with a rhetorical argument built in; this serves the social purpose, and also reflects the common

focus of revolutionary poetry and traditional storytelling as well as McGrath's origins on the farm. Fourth, this poetry is richly, in places densely, allusive and dictionally complex, showing its self-awareness and self-approval as the product of a poetic heritage and an education in letters and its intention to perpetuate both. Fifth, it links the local to the global, the parochial to the cosmopolitan.

Early in Part Four McGrath as poet is ready to take the stage himself. He continues to demythologize the Biblical God, in part by mythologizing his own family as "our genealogizer and keeper of begats":

A little wizened-up wisp of a man:
Hair like an out-of-style bird's nest and eyes as wild as a wolf's!
Gorbellied, bend out of shape, short and scant of breath --
A walking chronicle: the very image of the modern poet! (366)

His dismissal of "the High & Mosthigh WhatsHisName" for giving up

after a week in which He couldn't
tell *lox* from *lux*, a week of
blundering-about creating whatever
came into His Head (366)

and leaving creation to "THE McGRATH," after which

On the Eighth Day the true creation
began (367)

again asserts radical poetry's contribution to human wellbeing as superior to that of religious scripture. This claim of truth extends to all McGraths and "McWraths" -- a family tree of the oppressed and their champions everywhere -- to whom are attributed

certain divinatory
powers in regard to the Social
Revolution. (367)

The song that he hears is of the search for love. He has repeatedly cited "love and hunger" or "love and the class struggle" as the themes of, the forces in life. This song is of the search for love that enables one to live and rise and to bring others with him -- to set their feet free from the rock as love can set his free -- rather than to die and petrify.

*As I slowly changed into stone my legs my tongue stony
Despair hardening my heavy heart (379)*

his unborn son comes to save him. He can continue his work

as long as blood

Shall beat in my veins and love shall move as it moves me now,
Chipping the flint of this page to blaze our passage home.... (380)

In the Christian myth a supernatural child is the savior of humankind, leading people to their places in Heaven. McGrath is saved by his love for a human child, who accompanies him back to the world and to his work. Like Orpheus emerging from the world below, like Aeneas leaving the ruins of Troy, the poet must keep on with the mission for which he is strengthened by the one he loves:

You have struck my foot free from the stone.

Take my hand.

We must not look back.

(381)

NOTES

¹ "A Note on Letter To An Imaginary Friend" in Passages Toward The Dark (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1982). 93.

² "McGrath On McGrath" in North Dakota Quarterly 50. 4 (1982): 14.

³ John Patrick Diggins, The Rise And Fall Of The American Left (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

⁴ Parenthetical page numbers throughout the text of this dissertation refer to Letter To An Imaginary Friend (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1997).

⁵ This Coffin Has No Handles (1986; New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1988) 1.

⁶ A River Runs Through It And Other Stories (New York: Pocket Books, 1992) 132.

⁷ Frederick C. Stern, "An Interview with Thomas McGrath," The Revolutionary Poet In The United States: The Poetry Of Thomas McGrath, ed. Stern (Columbia: U. of Missouri Press, 1988) 150-151.

⁸ Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres, "An Interview with Thomas McGrath, January 30-February 1, 1987," Thomas McGrath: Life And The Poem, ed. Gibbons and Des Pres (Urbana and Chicago: U. of Illinois Press, 1992) 44.

⁹ Douglas Wixson, Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Mid-western Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990 (Urbana and Chicago: U. of Illinois Press, 1994) 154.

¹⁰ Wixson 154-55.

¹¹ Wixson 155.

¹² Wixson 155.

¹³ New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1957.

¹⁴ Joshua Weiner, "More Questions: An Interview with Thomas McGrath, June 4, 1987," Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem, ed. Gibbons and Des Pres, 201.

¹⁵ Gibbons and Des Pres 55.

¹⁶ Weiner 202.

¹⁷ Weiner 202.

¹⁸ Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, eds., Songs of Work and Protest (1960; New York: Dover Publications, 1973) 9; Gibbons and Des Pres 53-54.

¹⁹ Stern 162.

²⁰ Terrence Des Pres, "Thomas McGrath," Gibbons and Des Pres 158.

²¹ Stern 162.

²² James McKenzie and Robert Lewis, ts., Thomas McGrath Papers, Chester Fritz Library, U. of North Dakota at Grand Forks; later published in Border Crossings, special issue of Arts Manitoba 4.4 (1985): 104-108.

²³ Chicago Poems (New York: Henry Holt, 1916); Smoke and Steel (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1920).

²⁴ Thomas McGrath, The Movie at the End of the World: Collected Poems (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1972; paperback reprint 1980) 135.

²⁵ Stern 152-153.

²⁶ James H. Rogers, "Vision and Feeling: An Interview with Thomas McGrath," ts., Thomas McGrath Papers, Chester Fritz Library, U. Of North Dakota at Grand Forks, 2.

²⁷ Stern 154.

²⁸ Stern 159.

²⁹ Stern 157-159.

³⁰ Stern 158.

³¹ Walter Lowenfels, ed., Poets of Today: A New American Anthology (New York: International Publishers, 1964).

³² Lowenfels 9.

³³ McKenzie and Lewis 25.

³⁴ Alan Swallow, An Editor's Essays of Two Decades (Seattle and Denver: Experiment Press, 1962).

³⁵ Swallow, Essays 9.

³⁶ Swallow, Essays 10.

³⁷ Alan Swallow, Publishing In The West: Alan Swallow, ed. William F. Claire (Santa Fe: The Lightning Tree, 1974) 31.

³⁸ Swallow, Publishing 24.

³⁹ Alan Swallow, The Nameless Sight: Poems 1937-1956 (Denver: Swallow Press, 1956).

⁴⁰ James McKenzie, "Conversations with Thomas McGrath," ts., Thomas McGrath Papers, Chester Fritz Library, U. of North Dakota at Grand Forks, 17; later published in North Dakota Quarterly 56.4 (1988).

⁴¹ Thomas McGrath, First Manifesto (Baton Rouge: Alan Swallow, 1940).

⁴² Thomas McGrath, Three Young Poets (Prairie City: The Press of J.A. Decker, 1942).

⁴³ Thomas McGrath, Figures From a Double World (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1955).

⁴⁴ McKenzie and Lewis 26.

⁴⁵ McKenzie and Lewis 26.

⁴⁶ McKenzie 18.

⁴⁷ McKenzie and Lewis 26.

⁴⁸ Stern, 160-162.

⁴⁹ Independence, a 30-minute documentary film of which McGrath was the principal writer, includes several expressions of this idea. The film, released in 1985, was produced by Joyce and Lloyd Ritter, directed by John Huston, narrated by E.G. Marshall, and features Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, Pat Hingle and Patrick O'Neal. It won the Cine

Golden Eagle Award and is shown daily to visitors to Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Correspondence between Lloyd Ritter and McGrath, contained in the Thomas McGrath Papers at the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections of the Chester Fritz Library, the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks, reports on Ritter's negotiations with his backers and distributors over their reluctance to give McGrath a writing credit because of his Communist Party membership. Ultimately McGrath received third billing, after Joyce and Lloyd Ritter.

⁵⁰ Stern 162.

⁵¹ Joe Doyle, personal interview, 22 July 1998.

⁵² New York: Horace Liveright, Inc., 1930; reprinted with an introduction by Alfred Kazin, New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996.

⁵³ New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1963.

⁵⁴ Fowke and Glazer 20-21. Hill's remark was the text of a telegram he sent to Wobbly leader William "Big Bill" Haywood the day before Hill's execution in Utah in 1915 for a murder conviction that remains controversial and that has been denounced ever since by many in the labor movement as a union-busting frame-up. The statement inspired a popular workers' ballad written in 1938 by Earl Robinson and Alfred Hayes, which says in part:

"The copper bosses killed you, Joe.
They shot you, Joe," says I.
"Takes more than guns to kill a man,"
Says Joe, "I didn't die."
Says Joe, "I didn't die."

And standing there as big as life
And smiling with his eyes,
Joe says, "What they forgot to kill
Went on to organize.
Went on to organize."

"Joe Hill ain't dead," he says to me,
"Joe Hill ain't never died.
Where working men are out on strike
Joe Hill is at their side.
Joe Hill is at their side."

"From San Diego up to Maine

In every mine and mill,
Where workers strike and organize,"
Says he, "You'll find Joe Hill."
Says he, "You'll find Joe Hill."

⁵⁵ Bertram D. Wolfe, A Life In Two Centuries: An Autobiography (New York: Stein and Day, 1981) 163.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, Authorized English Translation (unattributed) (New York: International Publishers, 1948) 12.

⁵⁷ Joe Doyle, "Longshot O'Leary: Tom McGrath's Years on the New York Waterfront," North Dakota Quarterly, 50.4: (1982) 32-40.

⁵⁸ E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Thomas McGrath," Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem, ed. Gibbons and Des Pres, 106-157.

⁵⁹ Doyle 39-40.

⁶⁰ Thompson 132-133.

⁶¹ Stern 167.

⁶² Michael Gold, 120 Million (New York: International Publishers, 1929) 8-9.

⁶³ Gold, 120 Million 171.

⁶⁴ McKenzie and Lewis 5, quoting McGrath: "...when I was writing the poems in Longshot O'Leary's Garland of Practical Poesie I had a general idea that I wanted to write some poems that could be sung, if somebody wanted to sing them. So 'Gone Guy' is written to the tune of 'Streets of Laredo.' Then there's another poem that I indicated was written to the tune of 'Mattie Grove,' an old folk song. Then there are others which are sort of blues-ish, but not set to any tune." Historically it is standard practice in the writing of political and protest songs to set new lyrics to traditional tunes. McGrath likely knew it, through his father, as a Wobbly mainstay; Ralph Chaplin's lyrics to "Solidarity Forever" and "The Commonwealth of Toil," anthems of the International Workers of the World, are set to the tunes of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Darling Nelly Gray" respectively. More recently, Woody Guthrie and Millard Lampell set "Union Maid" to the traditional "Red Wing"; Guthrie used the tune of the spiritual "I've Got To Walk My Lonesome Valley" for his union song "You've Got To Go Down"; Lee Hays transformed another spiritual, "The Old Ship of Zion," into "Union Train."

⁶⁵ In early 1999 Pete Seeger performed in Washington, D.C., at a breakfast meeting of heads of American Chambers of Commerce televised on C-Span. After leading the group through several non-political folk songs, Seeger taught the chorus of "Union Maid" ("You can't scare me, I'm stickin' to the union, stickin' to the union till the day I die"), which the audience sang strongly after each verse. The presiding officer of the meeting thanked Seeger, adding the hope that "my stockholders aren't watching."

⁶⁶ See Joe Klein, Woody Guthrie: A Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) on the Guthrie-Houston partnership and on Guthrie's practice of writing lyrics to well-known tunes.

⁶⁷ Originally published in 1955 by Alan Swallow under the incorrect title Figures From A Double World.

⁶⁸ Alice McGrath, telephone interview, 12 August 1998.

⁶⁹ The Movie at the End of the World, prod. Mike Hazard, 1981, distributed by CIE, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁷⁰ Mike Hazard, "Movie Moonlighting, or the Other Career of Tom McGrath," NDQ 50. 4 (1982): 102.

⁷¹ Harry Merer, "Alaska," NDQ 50. 41 (1982): 41.

⁷² Joe Doyle, personal interview, 22 July 1998.

⁷³ Gene Frumkin, "A Note on Tom McGrath-The Early 50s," NDQ 50. 4 (1982) 48.

⁷⁴ Frumkin, "Note" 50.

⁷⁵ Frumkin, The Old Man Who Swam Away and Left Only His Wet Feet (Albuquerque: La Alameda Press, 1998) 6.

⁷⁶ Privately printed.

⁷⁷ Frumkin, "Note" 49.

⁷⁸ Frumkin, "Note" 50.

⁷⁹ Chicago and New York: Another Chicago Press, 1994.

⁸⁰ Naomi Replansky, personal interview, 23 July 1998.

¹¹ Alice McGrath, letter to Jack Beeching, 17 April 1984, Thomas McGrath Papers, Chester Fritz Library, U. of North Dakota at Grand Forks.

¹² Donald Hall, letter to Thomas McGrath, 19 September 1975, Thomas McGrath Papers Chester Fritz Library, U. of North Dakota at Grand Forks.

¹³ Replansky interview.

¹⁴ Gibbons and Des Pres 77-78.

¹⁵ Alice McGrath interview.

¹⁶ Annette T. Rubinstein, letter to Fred Whitehead, NDQ 50.4 (1982): 89.

¹⁷ Rubinstein, letter, Monthly Review 50.9 (1999): 56-57.

¹⁸ Letter is about 10,000 lines in length in the estimation of Robert Bly, as stated in Bly's American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) 135.

¹⁹ Donald Hall calls Letter "his best book" ("McGrath's Invective," NDQ 50, 4:90). Rory Holscher says Letter "could become to adults what Howl was to so many adolescents" ("Receiving Thomas McGrath's Letter," NDQ 50.4:116). Philip Levine praises "McGrath's great and still unappreciated epic" ("A Small Tribute to Tom McGrath," Gibbons and Des Pres 105). Frederick C. Stern assesses Letter as "a major work of American poetry" (Stern 4). Fred Whitehead and Verle Muhrer, editors of Freethought on the American Frontier (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), write in the volume's introduction, "In the depths of the blacklist era, McGrath began the long poem, Letter to an Imaginary Friend, a vast chronicle of the century, and surely one of the great monuments to the heritage of Freethought in our culture" (26). When asked to name her favorites among her ex-husband's works, Alice McGrath cited several short poems "and of course Letter" (telephone interview, 12 August 1998). Naomi Replansky is noteworthy among McGrath's admirers for her decided preference for the shorter poems, especially the last volume, Death Song. She attributes this to her interest in formalism (personal interview, 23 July 1998).

²⁰ "McGrath on McGrath" 11.

²¹ Rubinstein, letter to Whitehead. Rubinstein letter to Monthly Review mentions "the great communist poet Tom McGrath" (56).

²² "A Note on the Book," The Movie at the End of the World: Collected Poems vi:

This book gathers together most of the short poems I want to save. HOWEVER IT DOES NOT contain work from my main project of recent years, the long poem Letter To An Imaginary Friend, except for two short sections which appeared to me first as autonomous pieces, were published separately and had a life of their own.

The "two short sections" appear in the "New Poems" section (short poems written since the 1955 publication of his last volume of new poems, Figures of the Double World) as "Return to Marsh Street, Easter, 1959" (142-144) and "Praises" (157-158). Both are found in Part Two of Letter, the former in Section II, Passage 4 (156-159), the latter in Section III, Passage 4 (201-202). The former also appears in the "New Poems" section, New and Selected Poems (Denver:Alan Swallow, 1964)110-112. Both collections include a list of periodicals that have given permission to reprint poems they originally published, but McGrath provides no list of the poems involved.

Two other short poems that McGrath subsequently included in Letter appear in Echoes Inside the Labyrinth (New York and Chicago: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1983): "Passages: for Tomasito" (127-130) and "Poem At The Winter Solstice" (146). Both are found in Letter Part Four, the former on 377-381, the latter on 406-407 (the work's final pages).

⁹¹ Their marriage, its end and aftermath, are discussed also in Chapters Two and Four.

⁹² U.S. Congress, House Committee on Un-American Activities, Investigation of Communist Activities in the Los Angeles Area Part 5, Eighty-Third Congress, First Session, 13 April 1953, 862. The boldness of McGrath's statement was not unique but nonetheless courageous, placing him in the company of other subpoenaed witnesses who spoke directly to the morally and Constitutionally untenable aspects of HUAC's proceedings. These statements put the witnesses at serious risk of contempt-of-Congress charges and thereby of imprisonment. Eric Bentley's Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968 (New York: Viking Press, 1971; rpt. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/ Nation Books, 2002) includes comparable testimony by Pete Seeger, Zero Mostel, Lionel Stander, and Paul Robeson, among others. Bentley acknowledges that his choice of witnesses included in the volume reflects his abiding interest in artists, especially of the theatre; but it reflects also HUAC's own emphasis on the entertainment industry (xxix).

⁹³ Gibbons and Des Pres 76-77.

⁹⁴ Gibbons and Des Pres 84.

⁹⁷ Stern 169.

⁹⁸ Stern 85, 84.

⁹⁹ McGrath said of Gordon, "Gordon is one of the great scandals of our poetry. He is one of our great lost poets, his books now out of print and his poems in none of the standard anthologies. Yet he is surely one of the very best of the revolutionary poets. Blacklisted in the fifties, he continued to write all through those bad times while the semi-official academic poets hunted for symbols, too removed or too cowardly to notice war and repression just outside the window" ("McGrath on McGrath" 14). Alice McGrath cited Gordon as one of the poets whose work McGrath most admired (Alice McGrath interview). A poem of Gordon's is in Lowenfels 59-60. Lowenfels, in his acknowledgements, thanks "Tom McGrath, for his patience and help, particularly in collecting some of the Pacific Coast poets," of whom Gordon likely was one (9). Alan Swallow, who surely observed no blacklist, published Gordon's volume Displaced Persons in 1958. McGrath would no doubt be pleased to know that Gordon is represented by three poems in Poetry Like Bread, ed. Martin Espada (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1994, 138-140), and that Curbstone published Gordon's last book, The Sea of Tranquility, in 1989, shortly before his death at the age of 87. Fred Whitehead is editing Gordon's collected works, with publication expected by the U. of Illinois Press.

¹⁰⁰ "McGrath on McGrath" 14.

¹⁰¹ "McGrath on McGrath" 15.

¹⁰² Gibbons and Des Pres 78.

¹⁰³ Gibbons and Des Pres 77.

¹⁰⁴ Swallow, Essays 10.

¹⁰⁵ As evident in the third line of this passage, McGrath uses the three ellipsis points in non-standard ways: to indicate a pause, to end a sentence. Nowhere in Letter does he use four points of ellipsis. This dissertation follows his practice where quoted passages include his use of ellipsis. Four points of ellipsis in passages quoted herein indicate that the end of the quotation is not the end of a sentence in Letter nor has McGrath used points of ellipsis there.

¹⁰⁶ Stern 163.

¹⁰⁷ Annette T. Rubinstein, personal interview, 17 April 2001. In addition to her work at Masses & Mainstream, from 1945 until 1952 Dr. Rubinstein was head of the Cultural Division of the Jefferson School of Social Science in Manhattan, the flagship of the schools of adult education that the Communist Party U.S.A. established in a number of cities. In that capacity and as a Communist Party member since the early 1930s, she said,

she had to appear three times before HUAC and once before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Special Committee; in 1952 she was questioned by Senator McCarthy himself, resulting in her blacklisting from teaching a year before McGrath's. Her friendship with Thomas McGrath lasted until his death. At Masses & Mainstream she worked closely with and became a friend of McGrath's friend, editor and mentor Charles Humboldt. In her ninety-second year at the time of this writing (March 2002), Dr. Rubinstein continues to teach literature, now at the Brecht Forum in Manhattan. The internecine conflict which McGrath deplored still plagues American communists and socialists, she said; their attempts to unite in a new political party have remained stalled for some years over the choice of a party name.

¹⁰⁸ Responding to Michael Gold's criticism of his work, Lawson insists that he aspires to be a more thoroughly Marxist writer:

He ignores my repeated statements...that my work to date is utterly unsatisfactory in its political orientation....Now it's perfectly possible to write a play about middle class and sterile people on Marxian lines; it seems to me correct to end such a play with the definite statement that the only solution, the only hope for these people, lies in Communism....Marxian criticism is the only criticism with which I am in the least concerned... ("Inner Conflict' and Proletarian Art," New Masses, 17 April 1934, rpt. New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties, Joseph North, ed., New York: International Publishers, 1969, 225-229).

Norma Jenckes writes about Lawson in Encyclopedia of the American Left (Urbana and Chicago: U. of Illinois Press, 1992, eds. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas):

Against Albert Maltz, who in 1946 argued in the New Masses that art had to be evaluated independently of political line, Lawson insisted on the Marxist concept of art as a form of social criticism that did not transcend the environment that creates the artist. (414)

His view apparently changed some; Jenckes writes that in his later years, after a lengthy blacklisting that he survived by writing under pseudonyms and by an agreement to use another writer's name, he emphasized "form as well as content" as "the concern of the committed playwright" (415).

McGrath recalled Lawson:

I was told...that I was very *presumptuous* because I *challenged* someone -- a good guy, but whom...others took to be a little too much of a guru then, John Howard Lawson. (Gibbons and Des Pres 50).

¹⁰⁹ I told them...that I would not support that kind of politics. So, I was put in limbo for some length of time. I was never expelled. I was just sort of lost; and I stayed lost for some time. I did the same things I had done: I worked sometimes with the CP, sometimes with the Progressive Labor Party....Sometimes with this group and that group.... (Gibbons and Des Pres 51).

¹¹⁰ The Wobblies, or Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), is a radical labor organization whose constituency largely has been the workers initially not represented by the craft and trade unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL): women and minorities, migrants, recent immigrants, and unskilled and semiskilled laborers. The IWW shares the Marxist goal of worker ownership of the means of production and distribution, but instead of the Marxist method of political revolution, the IWW has practiced an evolutionary approach depending upon local job actions to erode capitalist power. Evolution and erosion do not equal timidity, however; the Wobblies introduced the sitdown strike, the chain picket line, and the car caravan to the American labor movement. Founded in Chicago in 1905, the Wobblies quickly made themselves a notable presence in the workplace through their bold tactics, their inclusiveness, their principled opposition to wage contracts, their newspaper *The Industrial Worker* and its political cartoons, and their songs. Such legendary labor leaders as William "Big Bill" Haywood, Eugene V. Debs, and Mother Jones were founding members; Joe Hill and Ralph Chaplin, among others, contributed songs and poems that have immortalized the Wobblies (Buhle 354-361). The IWW still exists, with headquarters in Chicago and a website, but its membership is small. Thomas McGrath's father was a Wobbly as a young man and taught his son their songs; Cal, the poet's early mentor in radicalism, read *The Industrial Worker*. McGrath's fondness for the Wobblies is evident. But he writes of the IWW as a thing of the past, probably because of its diminished size and role, but also because its anti-revolutionary, anti-Communist positions on a number of issues beginning in the early 1920s caused many in the radical movement and particularly the CPUSA to turn away from it. Nonetheless, as Meridel Le Sueur writes, "In the Middle West I think we try not to forget the IWW's" (quoted in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, London and New York: Verso, 1996, 220).

¹¹¹ This is discussed in Chapter Four.

¹¹² Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, a founding member of the Agrarians and a later member of the Fugitives, are co-authors of *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938). Among those they acknowledge for help in preparing that volume are Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, founding members of both groups.

¹¹³ As discussed later in this chapter, Part Three begins with a sentence that essentially duplicates the last sentence of Part Two. Part Four's first line is an almost exact repetition of a sentence that first appears within a page of the end of Part Three. In addition to the

obvious functions of continuity, recognizability, and emphasis and its basis in the rhythmic foundation of poetry, this practice is in keeping with the poet's role of recalling the past into the present.

¹¹⁴ In a telephone interview on 12 August 1998, Alice McGrath declined to answer any questions about her relationship with Thomas McGrath. She praised his teaching, his generosity to other poets, and his political courage, and cited some examples of the loyalty he inspired in students and friends. She spoke of his deep love for his parents and siblings. She recalled with obvious pleasure the frequent poetry gatherings in their home at 2714 Marsh Street, Los Angeles. She terminated the conversation when asked about the circumstances of their marriage -- how and when they met, how long they were married. In refusing to talk about anything "personal" she was refusing to speak of their conflicts.

In a profile by Carlos Lozano that appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* Ventura County Edition, Feb. 22, 1998, 1, Ms. McGrath says of Thomas McGrath, her second husband, "He was the love of my life." Lozano adds, "Alice glows whenever she talks of him. They were married seven years."

Studs Terkel devotes a chapter in *Coming of Age: The Story of Our Century By Those Who've Lived It* (New York: The New Press, 1995, 361-367) to Ms. McGrath's career as a radical activist. In the course of telling of her experiences as a labor organizer for the CIO and as a figure in the Sleepy Lagoon case -- the central figure in raising funds and engaging legal defense, according to others' accounts of that time -- as well as her humanitarian work in Nicaragua in the 1980s and her management in the 1990s of a legal aid service for the indigent of Los Angeles, she mentions her marriage to "Tom McGrath, the poet" and his HUAC appearance and subsequent blacklisting from teaching.

By the early 1980s, after McGrath's estrangement from his third wife, Eugenia, Thomas and Alice McGrath had developed a strong friendship. They were in frequent contact by letter and telephone, were guests in each other's homes, and took at least one trip together, to Nicaragua in January 1987. McGrath wrote of this trip in "A Report from Nicaragua" (Heartland Bookletter 3, 1987, Kansas City, KS). They planned several other trips, to visit in Europe with old friends from their married days, but his health problems undermined those plans.

After McGrath's death, Ms. McGrath, with Fred Whitehead and McGrath's brother Martin, organized a tribute to McGrath in Chicago, and she also traveled to New York for another tribute.

Whatever the cause of their breakup -- his alcoholism was a likely contributing factor -- her devotion to him has not diminished, at least in these last two decades. Her commitment to leftwing values has also remained intact.

¹¹⁵ N.G.L. Hammond, *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford U. Press, 1963), 258.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Bullfinch, *Bullfinch's Mythology*, Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, undated), 127.

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I had thought I was going to make a living writing science fiction at one point after I had been fired and was on the blacklist. I did publish some things in the old Galaxy, which was probably the best magazine of that kind back in the Fifties, edited by a guy named Gold. He liked the work but he wrote to me, "Your social themes are a little more that I really want." So when I finished the short novel I sent it to him under...another name. He sent it back with a very anguished letter saying he really wanted to publish this, it was a marvelous book and so on. He wound up by saying, "I think we've done our share in handling social themes."

McGrath added, "Gold was right, they did publish social themes when no other science fiction magazine was publishing anything but bug-eyed monsters and the general paranoia that goes with science fiction." He cited Kenneth Fearing as another radical poet who wrote commercially successful fiction in order to subsidize his literary and political work. (McKenzie and Lewis).

Michael Denning writes of a left-wing group that was influential in the science fiction of this time:

The Futurians were formed in 1938 by radical young science-fiction writers, several of whom were members of the Young Communist League; over the next decade, the group, which included Isaac Asimov, Frederick Pohl, Cy Kornbluth, Judith Meril, James Blish, and Damon Knight, wrote for and edited the pulp magazines and paperback originals that remade science fiction in the post-war period. (The Cultural Front. London and New York: Verso, 1996, 225-226.)

¹¹⁸ From "A Note On Letter To An Imaginary Friend" in Passages Toward the Dark (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1982) 93.

¹¹⁹ Marks and Engels 44. In his preface, dated January 30, 1888, Engels writes, "The present translation is by Mr. Samuel Moore, the translator of the greater portions of Marx's Capital. We have revised it in common, and I have added a few notes explanatory of historical allusions" (7).

¹²⁰:...the Hopi prophetic material...became a primary way of seeing things for me. Partly because it's American and aboriginal....And it has naturally to do with the working class and peasant and Third World, what have you, revolutions.... it is a metaphor. And so is Christianity a metaphor. But Marxism I don't think is....it's based on actual processes within the world. And I don't believe that there are supernatural processes. I don't believe in higher powers, supernatural powers, I don't believe that....the way I see the world is as if it were a palimpsest: here's this writing, and underneath that is other writing, and

underneath that is other writing. But this is the kind of palimpsest in which the writings are all about the same thing. But they're done in different ways....(73-74)

Also, Stern 37:

It is to the language of religion, and to its symbol systems, that McGrath turns in finding readily evoked parallels and readily recognized formats for the kind of "inspiration" and hope for a millennium that he seeks to present.

¹²¹ Diane Wakoski, "Thomas McGrath: Orphic Poet of the Midwest" in Stern 59-67.

¹²² "A Note on Parts Three & Four of Letter To An Imaginary Friend," on an unnumbered page preceding the text of Parts Three and Four (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1985).

¹²³

Catholicism is a big thing in the poem because I was raised that way and I went through that whole business. And also because there are certain parallels between early Christianity and....revolution, communism. And the old Wobblies always talked about old Fellow Worker, you know? -- Jerusalem Slim, who was the all-time Olympic water walker and gandy dancer [generically, an itinerant laborer; specifically, a railroad section hand]. This was the view that a lot of the Wobblies took. They weren't religious at all, but they saw in the figure of Christ, in that myth, something that they recognized as being close. And as a matter of fact there was a poem called "Comrade Jesus"....So Catholicism is there partly because of where I lived, and through my life it was simply there....Also, I felt that same link that the Wobblies had with Christ as a revolutionary, as opposed to what he'd been made into. (Gibbons and Des Pres 62-63)

¹²⁴ "In 1962 my wife and I left New York and drove to North Dakota to spend the winter in the abandoned family farmhouse. This move has [sic] something to do with the poems which I was writing then, and especially with the long poem, Letter." "Autobiographical Sketch of Thomas McGrath," Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1967, ts., Thomas McGrath Papers, Chester Fritz Library, U. of North Dakota at Grand Forks.

¹²⁵ In a letter to Alan Lomax dated 19 Sept. 1940, Woody Guthrie makes the same claim for folk music:

A folk song is what's wrong and how to fix it, or it could be whose hungry and where their mouth is, or whose out of work and where the job is or whose broke and where the money is or whose carrying a gun and where the peace is -- that's

folk lore and folk made it up because they seen that the politicians couldn't find nothing to fix or nobody to feed or give a job of work.

From Joe Klein, Woody Guthrie: A Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 168-169.

¹²⁶ In an essay that makes several of the same observations at which this dissertation arrived independently about elements of classical epic in Letter, and makes different use of those observations, Joseph Butwin says of Kilroy that he is

"the Christ of Part Three, described by Cal as 'poor old Jerusalem Slim, the Galilean gandy dancer,' the presiding genius whose signature is both a joke and an elegy, his own 'ghost-joke' as well as an assertion of vitality and continuity. You never know where he will show up again or when, asserting last rights to a good last laugh." (Butwin, "The Last Laugh," in Stern 77).

The concluding pun is no doubt intentional. It is a valuable and interesting essay, positing two poetic voices, Thomas, "the solemn elegist of the old left," and Mad Tom, "the mad humorist," as the speakers respectively of what were at the time of Butwin's writing the two volumes of Letter To An Imaginary Friend -- Parts One and Two, published in 1970, and Parts Three and Four, published in 1985. The first one-volume edition of Letter was published in 1997.

Butwin's earlier essay "'The Winter Count': Politics in the Poetry of Thomas McGrath" (NDQ 50.4: 59-68) predates even the separate-volume publication of Parts Three and Four and thus has the voice of only Thomas to respond to. Butwin therein characterizes this poet and his political duty succinctly:

The political poet is the complementary opposite of the HUAC squealer. He names the names, the place names and the names of the "outlaws" who "held the hard road." (64)

¹²⁷ The Book of Amos 7:10 (Authorized King James Version); McGrath's references are to Amos 8:5,6. He substitutes "righteous" for Amos' "poor."

¹²⁸ McGrath, "A Note on Parts Three and Four of Letter To An Imaginary Friend":

There are some strange names early in Section I of Part Three. These are simply the names, according to medieval occultists, for, first the powers of the cardinal directions (Cham is North, Amoymon South, etc.), then of "the infernal kings of the north," then (Azael, etc.) of the four elements, then of the great powers which I associate with the "tetragrammaton" and the Kachina....These powers are ambiguous, and, from a Judeo-Christian-Catholic prejudice, demonic.

¹²⁹ One is reminded here of McGrath's statement to HUAC on April 13, 1953:

...as a poet I must refuse to cooperate with the committee on what I can only call esthetic grounds. The view of life which we receive through the great works of art is a privileged one -- it is a view of life according to probability or necessity, not subject to the chance and accident of our real world and therefore in a sense truer than the life we see lived all around us. I believe that one of the things required of us is to try to give life an esthetic ground, to give it some of the pattern and beauty of art. I have tried as best I can to do this with my own life, and while I do not claim any very great success, it would be anti-climactic, destructive of the pattern of my life, if I were to cooperate with the committee. (U.S. Congress 862-863).

- ¹³⁰ ...while sometimes I might have used religious imagery, because it's a kind of symbolism that I was aware of practically with my first breath, I think the poem certainly distances itself from religion, especially Catholicism, very strongly....it parodies things, makes a joke out of God, the gods -- I don't believe in any of that. I'm an atheist -- I was an atheist when I was thirteen and I'll be an atheist when I die. And I am militantly anti-religious, anti-organized religion. Most of it I think is a total fraud, and graft, and everything under the sun that you can imagine that's bad, outside of upper-class politics. Christ! -- religion has been as much a source of war as anything else.

Weiner 202-203.

- ¹³¹ Stern 150-179.

Regarding Jeffers:

I like Jeffers very, very much....I feel attracted to nature things, and here again is somebody whose attitudes are far from mine, and yet there are many things that I love about him. It has a lot to do with the sound in Jeffers. He's got long lines.... (156)

Regarding Whitman:

For a long time I didn't like Whitman....My argument went something like this: Whitman, stay as far away from him as possible, because if you get anywhere close to him he'll clutch you to his bosom and you're finished....I used to tell people, he's the greatest wrecker of poets there ever was, especially of left-wing poetry. You look at it, it seems so goddamn easy, all straight and open and all the rest of it, and the next thing you know your writing is total garbage. It's because you can't do what Whitman does in his poetry. He makes it seem easy and it isn't. (162)

¹³² Leonel Rugama's poem "La tierra es un satelite de la luna" ("The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon") is included in Martin Espada ed., Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination from Curbstone Press (Willimantic:Curbstone Press, 1994) 192-195. The following is the editor's biographical note:

Leonel Rugama (1949-1970) was born in Esteli, Nicaragua. In 1967 he joined the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front). Rugama died, along with three other comrades, fighting Somoza's National Guard in Managua, January 15, 1970, at the age of 20. The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon was published by Curbstone in 1987.

Espada includes Rugama among those political poets who "have engaged in the deeply political act of armed insurrection" and "have been murdered for political reasons." (18)

¹³³ "It wasn't by chance that I called it that": Gibbons and Des Pres, 75.

WORKS CONSULTED

ARCHIVE

The Thomas McGrath Papers in the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, the Chester Fritz Library, the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks.

POETRY BY THOMAS McGRATH

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