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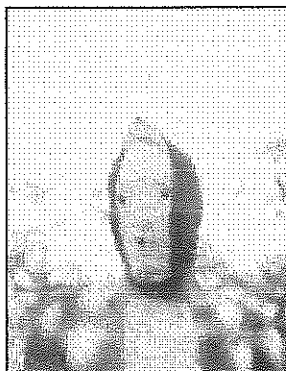
reviews

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Out of the  
American Night  
**Letter to an Imaginary  
Friend**  
by Thomas McGrath

Andrew Epstein



Patagonian man wearing the ceremonial *asf* mask.  
From *Patagonia: Natural History, Prehistory and  
Ethnography at the Uttermost End of the Earth* edited by  
Colin McEwan and others; listed in CULTURE AND  
SOCIETY

Fans of the late Thomas McGrath have long argued that appropriate recognition has been denied him because of his lifelong commitment to radical leftist politics. Indeed, McGrath, who depicts himself as a "maverick in lonesome canyons, singing/ Into the desert," is rarely featured in anthologies or histories of American poetry. Similarly, his *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is almost never mentioned in discussions of the American long poem, the tradition that descends from Whitman's "Song of Myself" to Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, Pound's *Cantos*, Williams's *Paterson* and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. Despite its shortcomings, this semi-autobiographical epic poem, written in three installments over a 30 year period, is an ambitious, compelling work that deserves to be considered in such company.

McGrath grew up in North Dakota on a farm during the harshest years of the Depression, in a world riven by class struggles and labor conflicts. He makes it the goal of his poem to explore and reconstruct that past—his own and America's—in order to work towards a more hopeful future, in which a true communal spirit will be possible: "I offer as guide this total myth,/ The legend of my life and time." Throughout this poem that "includes history" (to recall Pound's famous description of an epic), McGrath holds to the conviction that "all of us live twice: once personally and once as a representative man or woman." Thus, as he has explained in a note, "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.*"

McGrath began writing *Letter* in the dark days when the Cold War drastically impinged on his own life. Having seen the left driven underground or silenced after the war, McGrath, living in Los Angeles, was himself blacklisted and stripped of his teaching job. He became utterly disillusioned by what America had become in the complacent,

repressive 1950s. The poem opens ominously: " 'From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east.' " Thus McGrath sets in motion a bitter confrontation with his country's now-failed dreams of freedom, equality, and of an infinitely expansive Western frontier.

From his post at the far edge of the continent, McGrath movingly calls forth his personal "ghosts," his "ancestral baggage," bringing together the whole panorama of the past with the present moment, "to search there...for the lost sign, blazed tree, for the hidden place/ The century went wrong." One of the most memorable passages of Part I describes an episode from boyhood in which McGrath witnesses an idealistic worker and organizer, an idolized mentor, violently beaten in a labor struggle. The memory, sharply rendered, stands as an archetypal rite of passage that introduces the young speaker to cruelty, injustice, and the "generous wish" of the radical left.

In the third and fourth parts of the poem, McGrath turns increasingly towards broad satire and abstraction, and leaves behind the more gritty, realistic mode of the earlier sections. The poem's finale, for example, finds the speaker ascending in a dream, like a North Dakotan Dante, through various "heavens," climbing towards an ecstatic vision of populist harmony and brotherhood. This visionary mode feels somewhat forced and artificial, similar to Hart Crane's strained ascension to a unified vision at the end of *The Bridge*.

The quality of the poem's writing as a whole is rather uneven. McGrath's flexible style, with its varied diction and tones, allows him to pun, satirize, cajole, joke, lament, and condemn, often within the space of a page. But while he is frequently capable of startlingly beautiful, fresh imagery—

Observe.  
Sky-writing pigeons, their  
Blue unanswerable documents of flight, their  
unearthly attachments

\*\*\*\*

Now: mackerel sky: the cloudy bones of the wind

—he also resorts to slack phrases, heavy-handed imagery, and obscure abstractions. Thus, many passages sink under the weight of expository plainness or sentimental hokiness:

Nightmare, nightmare; despair, dream; and despair.

\*\*\*\*

Love and hunger: solidarity and indifference—  
so I ended my journey to the enduring wound

In addition, *Letter* sometimes succumbs to didactic preachiness and cant, as might be expected in a poem by a doctrinaire leftist who sees no division between his politics and his art. And McGrath almost always seems to write in invisible italics, boldly, floridly, and dramatically—a mode which can be as wearing as it is stirring.

Despite his bitter warnings that the "commune must fail in the filth of the American night—/ Fail for a time," McGrath remains earnestly devoted to the ambitions of his poetic project, since he believes "all time is redeemed by the single man—/ Who remembers and resurrects." This large-scale remembrance and resurrection of one man's life as it crosses paths with our disturbing century is an important and moving contribution to the tradition of the long poem, and to American poetry in

general. From here, at century's end, it is necessary to listen to this maverick who has been all alone, "singing into the desert," for too long.

**Andrew Epstein** is a doctoral candidate in English at Columbia University, where he teaches American literature and composition. His poems have appeared in *Verse*, *Lullwater Review*, and *Brooklyn Review*.

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