

Transcript #7
September 21, 2007
The Dragon and The Unicorn Part II

In conversation with Marthe Whitcomb
with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Douglas Kerr, & Andrew Leavitt

MW: You have to understand that Kenneth had been traveling in Europe for years in his mind and in his heart. It's my opinion that the first time he went was after he got the Guggenheim—that was the first trip that he ever took. But I could be wrong, because it's hard to tell. I literally did not know. I didn't go with him when he left after the Guggenheim. He went to Derek Savage in Cornwall and then I joined. I was a teaching assistant at Cal, and so after that was over in late June I went. I met him in Paris. I really do think that that was his first trip to Europe, but we don't know. The story was that he went there as a child and I think all of his childhood stories were really important to him and so I didn't really investigate. I mean, it's fine with me.

RH: I doubt that it's true.

MW: But he had a long, years long, decades long, correspondence with Derek Savage, for example and I feel that this was the first time they really met. Derek—he met me in London. So that was nice because I was alone. And we had dinner and he put me on the right train so...

RH: Where did you arrive in London?

MW: Well, actually, the plane landed somewhere outside of London and I had to take a two hour train ride into the city and I went directly to the station for the boat train and there was a great porter there who really saved me. He took care of everything. He said, "I'll bring your baggage to the boat train when it comes and I'll meet you there and you can go and do whatever you want and have dinner." Because I had hours to wait and I called Derek and he was in London and he had given me his number and so we met, we had early dinner and it was a nice day. And later, four or five years, later we lived with the Savages for a while in Cornwall. But that was the first time I'd met him. Anyway, I never—I truly don't know Kenneth's history for travel but it's always been a little amorphous to me. But it was...

BH: Well, I wasn't in on the discussion last time. I know that you did a sort of overview.

DK: Since then I looked up a little bit about, from the Hamalian and some other notes, about where Kenneth was and so on. In 1948 he did a US book tour and so the parts there where he—

MW: Is that when he went to the colleges all around?

DK: Yeah. And so now the publications for that tour—that was the first time he announced that there was a book in progress called the *The Dragon and the Unicorn*. And that must have been where he gets some of the poems in Part V, which is in Kansas.

MW: Well, Part V is odd because either it follows along, which is possible, because when we took the boat, well, we took the boat from Bordeaux and in New York I went one way and Kenneth went another, so all of that, a lot of the things in Part V, when I was rereading it, I'm still not sure whether I think some of that could have been from the past and some of it could have been what

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happened then. I mean he really zigzagged but I took a train to Oregon, to friends, and then I went to Washington DC, I mean, to Seattle, Washington and lived there for four or five months.

DK: Yeah, and Kenneth, when he went to Europe ahead of you, it was in April of 1949.

MW: In April, yeah.

DK: And he also, at that time, visited Derek Savage, so that's Part I, but then he goes to Europe and with friends he travels into the south of France.

MW: Yes, he went with Caresse Crosby and they drove.

RH: How did he know Caresse Crosby?

MW: I don't know. Maybe he met her when he was at Laughlin's? Yeah, that sounds logical to me, but I don't know. Is that when we were there later, whenever it was, in '49? He certainly did not want to introduce us to each other.

(everyone laughing)

BH: Is this a first edition in this?

MW: It's my copy. I mean, what would tell me it's a first edition?

RH: I don't know if I ever remember there being a second edition of a hardback of a long poem. Isn't that great?

MW: I read this. I've been reading this, thank you, it says "For my Dearest Marthe" but I don't know where it is.

AL: What was the book that we had up in Inverness that had all those details in it?

MW: Maybe I should go look. I've been looking at that book all week, I mean off and on, and I just don't understand it. What, have I been dreaming?

BH: Well, this "Dragon and the Unicorn," you mean?

MW: I'm losing my mind, Doug!

DK: Well, I've lost mine already.

BH: It's a fascinating poem.

RH: Talk about it, what do you mean you're losing your mind?

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MW: No, no, I just thought, I mean, I was using the book that had Kenneth's writing in it. It'll be ok. Don't worry. I think this is mine. Anyway...

BH: But this is a fascinating poem. We just kept talking, Bob and I, about how he just—the weaving—the weaving technique of the chunk of narrative and then the passage of philosophical musing and ranting and then this emotional, “red” and the thing he's trying to work out about love.

MW: Yeah.

BH: It seems to obsess him and it's such a fascinating poem.

MW: You know, I haven't been around Kenneth in a long time and I was once again sort of...

AL: There's not another copy.

MW: OK, thanks Andy. It must be. I must have been dreaming all week.

MW: I was surprised re-reading it. Well, first of all, his jokes are there, and old jokes, I mean, I've heard them hundreds of times and in the midst of I think, really ecstatic language there's a lot of... Well, he hates the bourgeoisie.

BH: That's for sure.

MW: He's really pretty strident. Now, for just for my own, when I did reread parts of it there's a place where we're at a party at Léontine's house and the party is very celebratory. It's very elaborated on and the menu is spelled out. That's not the menu I remember, but it is spelled out. And it sounds good. But anyway, in the course of the conversation, Léontine apparently admired my dress and did I get it from [unintelligible] and I'm supposed to have said, “Oh no, I made it myself.” Well, I couldn't even pass sewing in the eighth grade.

(everyone laughing)

I couldn't sew a napkin and that was my sewing class and I couldn't do it. So I never said that, but it's all right. I mean...

RH: He wanted you to be the good philosophical anarchist artist.

MW: I was the...

AL: Passed a generation because her daughter was a very good seamstress—Katharine.

MW: Yes, and of course that was the way you were supposed to be, she was a terrific seamstress—whatever you are when you are a seamstress.

BH: He had a fantasy about you that he wanted.

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MW: Yes.

BH: He had to come clean in this poem.

MW: I know, it worked for some of the things, but not for others. But anyway, my French was not that good so I probably didn't even understand it when he said it. I certainly didn't correct him. I wouldn't have known how, anyway, but it was interesting reading that poem again because it's both more colloquial than I remember and it's also the philosophical parts, I think, really hold up as true to him and what he had come to believe, and it has, when you think about it, far less stuff about his own growing up. Which I think, when he was writing about that, always invited him to make it a little something that it wasn't already, you know? Make it a little more glamorous or more...I don't know. It wasn't—it never felt quite real to me, but in the philosophical parts of *The Dragon and the Unicorn* I think it really, really held.

BH: Marthe, I wanted to ask really specifically, this is kind of the converse of that other thing which is on page 93 in here. You know I teach at Saint Mary's, you're supposed to give page numbers when you ask a question. He says he writes this really—it's in the middle of the Italy, in the past part. I'll read it: "You will find more peace and more / Communion, more love, in an hour / In the arms of a pickup in Singapore or Reykjavik, / Than you will find in a lifetime / Married to a middle class / White American [woman]" I mean, whoa.

AL: How did that strike you?

MW: But that tone persisted in a lot of the poem.

BH: Yeah, for sure, but how did that make you feel?

MW: Well, I didn't exactly consider myself.

RH: Well, she didn't count because she was—

MW: Yeah, I didn't count.

BH: It wasn't the middle class.

MW: You see, Kenneth had to make me something that I wasn't quite and something that I was less of or more of than I really was. But in the aftermath of the whole relationship with Kenneth, I don't hold that against him. It would make me very angry, very enraged and you know? But I don't feel any rage of that now.

RH: Was rage at not being seen?

MW: Not being seen, but not being...I don't think Kenneth saw a lot of people with clarity. I'm not sure. No, I was enraged at him at the time. Yeah, I was really enraged.

BH: Well, it's also interesting that, he'll write a very, amazingly lyric passage.

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MW: Yeah.

BH: And then drop something like that in, which is really...

MW: I think that goes throughout the poem.

BH: Yeah. It truly does.

MW: When you come back to read it. I haven't read it in a long time. It's really surprising to me.

BH: Yeah.

RH: What is surprising to you?

MW: It's surprising to me that juxtaposition of the lyric and the very beautiful poetry with the, fuck the bastards kind of stuff.

RH: It was the wounds, the social class from his childhood that made him feel...?

MW: I think a lot of the poem is an effort to be very clear about where he stands and where he positions himself. He didn't feel accepted at all in England and when they visited Auden and Spender and people like that, Kenneth was very gracious to them and welcomed them and arranged readings for them, and really, he very, (laughing) very angry. Yeah. It was hard, it was hard.

AL: Why did he hate them? Because they didn't respect him or for who they were?

MW: For some idea he had of who they were. Yeah, he was very—

RH: Spoiled kid communists.

MW: Yeah, right. Yeah.

DK: I have a question, really, about one of the philosophical passages because it was one of the first ones that really struck me as loneliness and isolation and I'm not sure how to tell you where it is.

BH: Tell us the part.

DK: It's in Part III and it's shortly after the Pascal vision with the fire.

BH: OK, what's the line of the break that's closest to it? Then I can skim.

DK: It's "This brings up the question." 77. Middle of the page. If I could read it. I was curious what everyone...I think this is very interesting because he seems to be saying quite a bit.

RH: Oh, this is very interesting, isn't it? Also uncharacteristic.

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DK: “This brings up the question, are / The other human beings, / The people around us who / Seem part of the unreal things / Of time and space, only more / Active, real? Are they all persons, / Potential objects of our love? / This question has no real meaning. / It is like, “Is compassion green?” / When viewed as part of the world / Of quantity, no. Just as the / Bursting of bombs, the falling / Of leaves or stars, are the voices / Of some person speaking to us, / Are perspectives on a person, / So the figures of clothed bipeds / Which surround us are similar / Perspectives. We assume from / Experience that if approached, / The person will in each case / Be present, usually more / Accessible than in the leaf / Or star. However, as part / Of the world of consequence / And possibility, “this crowd / Of men” is illusory.”

AL: Right.

DK: This is a passage that really struck me because we had been talking. Bob had mentioned briefly that he speaks of people as types in the book, and I had that in the back of my head so when I came to his passage it seemed to be speaking like a more frank expression in the philosophical discourse of people just being types for Kenneth.

MW: Right.

DK: And that is coming across.

MW: Like generics, something like...

DK: Right and it's really working into his philosophical workings as well.

BH: And this is—I found it to be quite striking—one of the most striking pieces of the philosophical.

MW: Because it is quite different from most of...

DK: Yeah, yeah.

RH: If you go on from the end of that then there are two stanzas: “Arezzo,” “Siena,” “And then for the undeveloped heart” is the reflection back two stanzas on...

MW: Two stanzas on “Arezzo” and then—

RH: “For the undeveloped heart.” Because toward the end of that he continues to think about this and I guess it's partly in terms of whether generic compassion is possible or something...relation and political violence... “For the undeveloped heart, / The news or even the sight / Of the destruction of thousands / Of other human beings / May assume only the form / Of a distant cry, coming / Through the complexities of / Disaster, of one other / Person.” The “distant cry” “of one other person” and then this has to do with this idea of love a little further on. “However, as the dual”... I guess this is self/other stuff. Was he reading Sartre?

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MW: Oh, I think he had, but I was just reading this. I think that this is a very deep part of Kenneth's philosophy of interpersonal love, that the dual becomes the organ of sight and of inclusion and that in a love relationship there is a duality that is established by the relationship itself and I think this matches for me a lot of the stuff that Kenneth wrote about reality and the coming together of two people as one and I think that this is more familiar to me—this stanza, than a lot of the philosophical stuff in the book.

RH: I was interested particularly in, towards the end of it: "There is no / Way of proving the existence."

MW: Yeah.

RH: "...except by / Experience..."

BH: That's very Blakean to me.

RH: I guess that's true but, I mean, are you worried about whether your patients exist?

AL: (laughing) Well, I remember taking philosophy in college. How do you know something exists is discussed.

RH: This is on page 413, 414.

BH: In the big book.

RH: "...but we assume / The appearance "human being" / Is always, at least potentially, / The immediate vesture / Of a person. None the less, / It must not be forgotten / That, as such, this appearance is / Only a sign of possible / Underlying reality / In a manifold..." and such. Again, I don't know where this kind of language comes from...Jiang?

BH: Yeah, what is the "Contingency?"

RH: "...no / Self subsistence whatever / In the manifold as such." That doesn't belong to a philosophical...

MW: That's not Gerber, and I don't know, the minor. I've read a little Sartre but I don't know.

BH: He uses the contingency thing a lot. Is that his consequence?

DK: Consequences.

BH: Contingency. These particular concepts that he seems to have going on and...

DK: Well he would do that earlier in books, when he was using a lot of Whitehead terms, in terms of unpacking Whitehead.

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MW: Oh yeah, there were a lot of those.

DK: He would add on to Whitehead a lot of “consequence.” Where Whitehead does not put organic “advance” in terms of a political material impact, Kenneth would always take it to that level.

BH: Yeah.

DK: To “actual material fact.”

MW: Material.

DK: And well, *In What Hour* and *Phoenix*—

MW: Oh, *In What Hour*. That’s very...

DK: But the language here. I went back and was looking to see if there were Whitehead clues, but it seems to be, as people were saying, quite different from the Whitehead language that he used so often before.

BH: Was the whole thing of binaries coming together? I kept thinking of Blake. Was he reading a lot of Blake at the time?

MW: No, I don’t think so.

DK: His big, one more thing, his big essay that was published at this time was the introduction to the collected poems of D. H. Lawrence.

MW: Oh yes, Lawrence was a major work project for him.

DK: And I reread that introduction recently and the language that appears there is about the contemplator—contemplation and the contemplator. That appears in the fifth part here. That’s the language that he was working through there. Didn’t see it in the writings that bring out this consequence.

MW: You’re right, the introduction to the Lawrence collected was...

DK: There was no duality there.

MW: No, no, no. Did you think there was?

DK: I was just looking for it there.

MW: I didn’t see it.

DK: But there was a sentence right there about the contemplator.

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RH: But it certainly is in Lawrence.

DK: Yes.

RH: The feeling that it is really quite rare, terrifying for two people as beings to actually touch each other.

MW: Yeah.

RH: Psychically or physically or...

BH: They all have cons in the first. (everyone laughing) I kept thinking, there's a contemplator and consequence and contingencies and they're just—of this period.

DK: And he's a contrarian.

BH: But I was thinking about Burma and...

MW: Yeah.

BH: And nature, where his origins of Burma had come from.

MW: Yes.

RH: With is the con—you're talking about an essential loneliness.

DK: That's how I was reading this because this is echoing not so much Pound as Stevens.

BH: Yeah.

RH: Yeah.

MW: As what?

DK: Wallace Stevens. Later Kenneth talks about Wallace Stevens talking about the essential relationships. It's all about relationships.

MW: I think you're right.

DK: There aren't people so much in Stevens' writing as much as concepts about relationships.

RH: He does refer in the introduction to poets and poems that nobody reads anymore and I only have read them because years ago I read the little introduction to this book and that is to the travel poems of Arthur Hugh Clough.

MW: Oh, yes, that was a...

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RH: And Samuel Rogers.

MW: That was a constant thing.

RH: Was he reading those poems?

MW: He had read them, I think when he was very young, and he never stopped talking about them.

BH: Really?

MW: I think it was part of his mystery travel life.

RH: And also, Mark Twain. I mean he clearly...

MW: Oh, Twain.

RH: Well, he clearly had in mind that you two were reacting *Innocents Abroad*.

MW: I made the mistake of—I wrote a paper in my English class when I was a graduate student about Mark Twain. Well, it was awful because I didn't want to show it to Kenneth at all. (everyone laughing) He got it out of me. But anyway, terrible, terrible day. I was just passing the class.

AL: Your teacher loved it probably.

RH: Do you remember what it was about?

MW: No, I really don't. It was just, it became a horror to me. (everyone laughing) I had one year after Mills. Oh, I know, at Berkeley you had to do, if you were a teaching assistant in Philosophy, you had to do the equivalent of an MA in another field so I did the other field in English and well. I had my Plato classes that I had to earn my money with and then I remember taking Mark Schorer and it was a terrible time.

BH: Mark Schorer.

RH: The few times I ever saw him—I actually saw him because I had quit school and I got a job running an old fashioned kind of Xerox machine at the county courthouse in San Rafael. And my boss had been the Benny Goodman's guitarist. He did arrangements for Ernie Heckscher's band.

MW: Oh, yes.

RH: And he would come in in the morning and he'd be there already. His wife had been a Cuban singer and from that... He would be smoking cigarettes, and he would be doing arrangements for this band that played at the Top of the Mark and he...

MW: Ernie Heckscher. He was big.

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RH: He would take his cigar out of his mouth and say, "Shovel and shit three more times." The local DA busted someone for selling *Tropic of Cancer*.

MW: Oh yeah, didn't they bust George Lane?

RH: Yeah, maybe it was. So Mark Schorer showed up to testify dressed in a black cape, black leather gloves in the jury box as if he was skinning his hands...

BH: I knew the Schorers in the '70s when I moved to Berkeley. They were just such an elegant, admired couple. They were so, so suave and beautiful --an elegant life that had passed, you know?

MW: Yes.

BH: Ruth and Mark, and they were at my first wedding, and they were just...delicate.

AL: Didn't have the cape then, did he?

BH: No, no cape.

RH: They had a 1952 MGTD.

AL: Oh. That's a nice car.

RH: But we better get back...One other question I guess, because there is a book that I remember by Michael Davidson that talks quite a bit about Kenneth's...

MW: What book is that?

RH: A scholarly book.

DK: *Gays Like Us*

RH: *Gays Like Us*. It's about the homophobia of Olsen and Kenneth and who else...

DK: Jack Kerouac.

RH: Jack Kerouac. All this kind of theorizing and ranting. It sounded like in his actual life he was quite I mean, it's ridiculous to have to say tolerant but what was his, what did you remember reading these passages?

MW: Well, I remember, yes, I remember he kept using "fairy" all the time. I mean, in our personal life, that wasn't the case. We had a lot of, I mean, one of my dearest, dearest, dearest people in my life is Robert Duncan and Robert loved Kenneth and they were close, they were always on the phone and so, I don't know. The fairies in the poem...they just didn't ring home for me. I felt a little bit resentment when I was reading it over and over again but I don't think of it as a personal

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trait of Kenneth's. And it's interesting because technically he traveled by car with Caresse Crosby and she's a member of the guilty bourgeoisie and he really enjoyed her and seemed to be very fond of her and sent her books all the time and so it's a little bit like his relationship with Laughlin, it was like that—Laughlin. Kenneth was so awful to him and then, at the same time they really liked each other so, it wasn't one way. It wasn't one way. And I think, Kenneth always, he has a line in this poem that I realized when I was reading it last week that I heard it so many times in so many situations but it was in this poem that, I forget what the term is, but it's the theme of "a true snob is someone who mimics the manners of the class above him." Kenneth's most favored accusations and, if you were technical about it, Kenneth did that a lot. I mean, he wanted to go to Caresse Crosby's party. I'm remembering that as a personal insult but he was always interested in, with the Bishop Pike, with going to work with him on something they did have a lot of times together. I'm sure if Mark Schorer had called him with an open question, Kenneth would have responded very yeah. It would have been his pleasure to participate in a conversation and exchange information. It wasn't, he wasn't withholding in the situation with another person. Not at all. So it was a little bit both ways—it was both ways. He resented and cursed the people out, but then, in a personal contact with them, he was at his best and also he gave of himself too, so that was always the case.

RH: I think about his relationship to this poem and also to his poems in general. Did he ever say, talk about what was wrong with his poems?

MW: Never.

(everyone laughing)

RH: This one I think is really terrific or this is not so good or I don't know what people are going to make of this or...

MW: Never, never heard those words. Never heard any. I mean, he fought with Laughlin over every comma, word, but that was based on the assumption that Laughlin thought he was a good poet and Kenneth knew that Laughlin thought that but... No.

DK: Did he show his poems to anyone else?

MW: When he was writing them?

DK: Yeah.

MW: I always saw them, yeah.

AL: You saw a lot of things in development?

MW: Yeah, all the time, and actually, he seemed to be interested in my reactions so I would. I listened and...

AL: Was he civil?

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MW: Yeah, well, I wasn't hard on him in a way. I mean, I was thinking of it as something that wasn't finished but I also, I liked Kenneth's poetry, I really do like it. I mean, when I think about it like its origins or what it came from emotionally in him, I have opinions about that but basically I think he was a very good poet. I like other poets better, but I thought he was a good poet.

BH: Did you, at the time, have strong feelings about other poets that you were drawn to that you sort of wished he would be going in that direction stylistically? Like did you have an aesthetic?

MW: I didn't. There were poets that I really liked and I liked to read. Yeats and old Williams and I read a lot of poetry but I thought of Kenneth as uniquely himself and I didn't. No.

BH: I just wondered how much input or how much thought you had about his sort of aesthetic, you know, choices that he was making.

MW: I don't think I had any influence on him, I really don't. Well, I don't know. I think I had very little.

BH: You must have influenced the choice of his, the way he was trying to write about this material though, because it seems very inclusive like he wanted to make a poem that was very big and had the capacity to, in a way, his Cantos, he was trying to work by a system.

MW: Right.

BH: He was trying to work his ideas through from one end to the other, you know? In some way, and he must have felt your love, at least.

MW: Well, he also, from the standpoint of content, he really wanted to talk about the content of his poems, and we did. But don't forget that he wrote a lot of short poems too, these expositions and cantos, and so those were pretty much, he was on his own in a real sense, writing the short poems but I really wanted to hear them and I don't know that I had any impact on the way he wrote them at all.

DK: Well, this poem, if, say, he tells us in the collected longer poems which is published in the mid '60s that the composition period was 1944 to 1950 and then there is the announcement again that this book is forthcoming and that's announced in 1947, so then he meets you and wants you to come to Europe and so on and really is working on this book and formulates parts I and II. He then rewrites parts III and IV with you in mind. So, in that sense, he really does incorporate you and change and rework this poem that he had been working on apparently for some time.

MW: Right, I think you're right.

DK: So, that's significant.

RH: What parts do you think? I think he was working, since it's set up as a travel poem that begins in England. How could he have been working on...he had published generic poems. Do you think some parts of Part V were written?

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DK: I think. I was trying to make a list of that, things that would have been, say in works at that time, would have been the philosophical passages he'd been working on the Lawrence essay for some time so perhaps the contemplation parts.

MW: Right.

DK: Also the rants against America—the atomic bomb.

MW: And rereading those, the early parts of the poem, this was almost his normal conversation. It was taken full-cloth from normal passions, in so far you could have normal passions but nothing was an interjection, it was all of a piece...it all followed, so they could have been, I think they could have been written at any point in the preceding ten years, but I don't know. I don't know. I knew he was writing a long travel poem and then it was clear that he was traveling for a year and also he was working while he was traveling so I think it puts together long thought about philosophical ideas and political ideas with the life of the sort of the traveler with the muse.

DK: If you have something you want to say and then you are composing different parts of it, you have blocks. You have the blocks to build your building, and then you decide the cement is going to be travel.

BH: Yeah, the narrative stuff. Some of the description could even be done without ever having seen the place.

DK: Exactly.

RH: That feels like it must have been done afterward.

MW: Oh yes, I mean obviously, and even—

DK: Well, how about the passages say in Part III where he starts to speak of the womb and Part III being the announcement again of your pregnancy?

MW: I know. But he didn't know that for months later.

DK: The womb of the enraptured wife theme comes in quite a few times to structure and give narrative to Part III. So I pictured him writing that while you were in Seattle.

MW: Exactly—or years later.

(everyone laughing)

MW: Not years later, but anyway, it refers to how much he would like a daughter, but I had no sense of that, really, not for a year. So it was not emotionally consecutive in any way for Kenneth.

BH: I was particularly intrigued the passage on page 98.

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DK: Starting “all things have”?

BH: From ““And what is truth?’ said Pilate.” Because Pilate is, and his address to Pilate, who I guess is the doubting figure.

MW: Yeah.

BH: Or the figure that he feels sort of doubt in relation to accused by and then "A,E,I,O,U-the spheres / Of the planets, the heavens' / Pentachord. A noir, E blanc, / I rouge, O bleu, U vert." And then I don't know why he has Pilate answer in French there but then: “When in Japan, the goddess / Of the sun, attracted by / The obscene gestures of the flesh, / Came out from eclipse, she spoke / The first and oldest mystery, / "1,2,3,4,5,6,7, / 8,9,10." / All things have a name. / Every mote in the sunlight has / A name, and the sunlight itself / Has a name, and the spirit who / Troubles the waters has a name. /As the Philosopher says, / "The Pythagoreans are / Of the opinion that the shapes / Of the Greek vase are reflections / Of the irrational numbers / Thought by the Pure Mind. On the / Other hand, the Epicureans / Hold them to be derived / From the curves of a girl's / Breasts and thighs and buttocks." Do you...what is that? What was going on there? Do you know what that philosophy is?

MW: I think he's talking about in the numbers and the letters. I think he wants to, well, I don't really know, but I think that he was talking about the pieces of reality and the numerical, the alphabetical, the meaningless of not—non-meaning—pieces of the reality and, but remember it's Pilate who is asking the question, too, so I don't know quite.

DK: Pilate asks that question to Christ?

BH: Yeah.

MW: Yeah.

BH: So, Kenneth gets the chance.

MW: And the Pythagoreans

RH: Also, the doctor's signature, and each thing has its name. I meant there was this intellectual fashion of (neo-Thomism). Aristotelian, Aquinas, scholasticism—and I think of the French philosopher who started writing about Dioscurides and the doctrine of signatures.

MW: Yeah.

RH: But Milosz was at this time. He would have been in Paris just either before or after.

MW: Or after exactly.

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RH: And I know that he was attending [Jill Sannes']? lectures at the university and the doctrine of signatures shows up in Pound's Cantos at this point, that Laughlin was publishing. There are several passages here that really echo the Cantos of this period as much as he calls that "in the pangs." But it's clear that he'd been reading it so some of what's going on here definitely belongs to stuff that was in the air and sort of crossing between mystical philosophy of the particular but all knowledge is apprehension of the particular on the one hand, it's kind of a anti-rationalist philosophy of that period.

DK: In 1929 they published in *Blues* part of a letter from Kenneth, and he was attacking the left avant-garde for not taking [inaudible] seriously enough, not having grounded it in enough philosophy and then he attacks Yvor Winters.

MW: Exactly.

DK: He hasn't had his philosophy worked out and that needs to be done, he said.

AL: This was 1929?

DK: '29?

MW: '29—isn't that amazing?

RH: He's in his twenties. Where is this letter?

MW: It was a lifelong—he had against...

DK: It's a really interesting piece.

MW: Where did you read it? At the library?

AL: On microfiche?

DK: They have the old copies of *Blues*. I could bring it to show it to you. It's very interesting because, wow, he's been thinking. He also calls the poem fake—the poem is a fake—the functions of the universes—it's not a real thing.

BH: Do they let you scan?

DK: I could get a copy of that, yeah.

(everyone laughing)

DK: It's really because I hear echoes of that in this as well.

MW: Yeah.

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DK: Re-funneling it for himself. The other thing that's interesting is he did a cover for *Blues*. He painted a cover for *Blues*. It's one of his geometric paintings.

MW: Oh yeah, a lot of them were blue. A lot were red and black, too.

BH: His cubist period. His cubist poem period.

DK: And that goes along with the idea of vectors and...

MW: That was a red decade. Yeah. That's amazing.

DK: I'll try - that's my job I'll bring some of that.

(everyone laughing)

BH: He's so full of it in so many ways but, I totally agree with like 9/10th of all of this weirdo mystical stuff; it's the Pythagorean.

MW: Pythagoreans.

BH: This passage.

MW: The mathematical precision?

BH: Yeah.

MW: He sets it up as opposed to the Epicurean.

BH: Which is in joy.

MW: Shapes and curves.

DK: Which was more in line with him, right?

MW: Oh, totally.

DK: The shapes, the curves.

BH: Or the split, actually.

MW: It's the other hand.

BH: Split between. He has his own binary, it seems, like between his Neoplatonic, you know?

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MW: And then he talks about the doctrine of signatures which is, he says, the law by which we were made. It uses such things. It's written in the law by which we were made. It's a part of the unique character so, I think that, he was talking about this for all the time I ever knew him.

BH: Maybe he was trying. Maybe part of what he and Duncan—I mean it seems like Duncan was also trying to bring these.

MW: He was.

BH: Bring these things together. Like his Neo-platonism, but his sensuality and his sense of inanimate existence right here and now obviously his...

MW: Duncan wanted to have those things together in his own life philosophy.

BH: It seems like it, yeah.

MW: Duncan talked to my Plato class.

BH: Oh really?

MW: Yeah, my freshman, and it was great.

RH: Do you remember what about?

MW: Oh, it was something about platonic harmony, but that would be very appealing. Yeah.

BH: Duncan talked to one of my English classes at Pomona but he didn't talk about that. He talked about field theory and just wrote it on the board in his dramatic way and he had his cape and he just wrote the theory and started talking about the theory.

MW: He would be great at that. I heard him talk to several classes up in Vancouver, too.

BH: Yeah. But this passage seems to me like the doctrine of signatures.

MW: Yeah.

BH: Blake uses it, too.

DK: It's in Whitman as well.

BH: Whitman, Yeah.

DK: The desire for the naming to be attached, one can read it that way.

MW: You can read it in that way, exactly.

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RH: Pound associates it with an English philosopher and alchemist named John Heydon but I could never track him down because just at this time at the Cantos...

BH: I think it's very Kabalistic notion too that the names float around kind of looking for their things to be attached to them, which is very Kabalistic. It's all very Gnostic, too. Well, it's fascinating. It's just four or five different philosophies in this one little passage.

MW: I know.

BH: Doesn't it seem cool? I love that.

DK: You know, that Pilate returns again in the fifth part, so as far as I've tracked the first question is, What is love? That began, then there is, What is true?

RH: The whole poem.

DK: There's truth, which Brenda just took us through, and then there's the question "Said Pilate, 'What is proof?'" and his has to be a multitude, and it's right here.

MW: Oh good.

DK: 165. For the end of the poem, Bob, and work backwards. It's just two lines.

BH: Yeah.

DK: "What is proof?"

MW: That's Pilate again.

BH: The very—just a few pages.

DK: I found it interesting to go from love to truth to proof in the course of the long poem, to be asking that question or posing that, not long before he proves the point. Yeah, because then he also asks him "Pilate...does the grail of the"...I don't know what that means?

RH: Yeah, it feels like he finds it down here. This is the epigraph of the poem and Pilate keeps coming in sometimes truth, sometimes love, always washing his hands.

DK: And when you read it, Marthe, do you feel like he's come to any answers?

MW: That Kenneth has come to answers?

DK: In this way, lots of the post-war poems, none of them directly speak about the atomic bomb or the Holocaust, but here he is actually naming the atomic bomb trying to pinpoint the sickness of society, American society—especially in American society that led to that, and it doesn't seem like he's really satisfied.

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MW: I think he got clearer about who the enemy is, about who he was writing against, but I don't know.

DK: I guess I just feel less certain of that. I mean, it seems like he has his old enemies and list of targets, but at the end of the thing...

MW: Yeah, you're right.

DK: And that's the section where he moves into the contemplation and the importance of the contemplator.

MW: Yeah, the contemplator.

DK: The individual.

RH: If you look at this passage just following that, the one that hits the insecurity and ambiguity.

MW: Is a reflection of...

RH: The order in culture is a reflection of the instability of the love relationship so, middle class people with their bad sex and the world with its commodity culture make for an insecure and ambiguous "...the instability / Of the love relationship."...but "Art provides instruments of / Contemplation. Contemplation / Is the satisfaction of fulfilled / Love relationships, union with / The beloved object..." which is certainly the doctrine of all contemplative of philosophy...but "If love is / Invalidated, the whole fabric / Of the world culture crumbles" So he's supposed to be artist building a perfect contemplation.

MW: Contemplative, yes.

RH: Stability.

MW: The realization—the love realization happens.

RH: That's a big job for the loved object.

(everyone laughing)

DK: The whole world is falling down.

BH: Like the vestal virgin and the whore – it's the mother's fault.

DK: So does that mean he thinks a lot of you or he's going to be able to blame everything on you?

(everyone laughing)

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MW: There was always that possibility.

RH: His mother's death.

MW: What?

RH: I think, his mother's early death, his marrying this disturbed young woman who dies.

AL: Andree?

BH: Yeah.

MW: His mother died when he was...

AL: Oh yeah.

DK: Shortly after that he makes this list to be mixing... "Tara, the Power of Buddha; / Kali, the Power of Shiva; / Artemis, Apollo's sister; / The Wisdom of the Lord; the / Shekinah, Jehovah's Glory; / Mary, the Mother of God; / Magdalena, bride of Christ; / Act and power, the twin lovers; / Each reflects the other like / The two chambers of the heart" ...and so again.

MW: Then we go back to the Pilate.

RH: "The lavabo of Pilate / was the Grail of the Passover."

MW: What does that mean in relation to?

RH: The imitation of the Passover dinner that Christ had with his disciples before the Romans got him.

BH: But he's just saying like the place where he washes...

MW: Where he washes.

BH: Is actually the grail, they can't exist without each other, to take the grail possible which is the basic Christian doctrine anyway-- That's how I read it.

DK: And in that sense, the poem is returning to the question of *The Odyssey*, the question of evil, which is a big thing.

MW: Yeah.

DK: Which I think is in a lot of his long poems.

MW: I think that's right. I think you're right.

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BH: Yeah, the place that they're in, the same place, the wound and the eye kind of idea—two things. I mean, he's got a lot of really great—and here's contemplator again from Lawrence on the next page. On 168.

DK: How does that section start?

BH: "At the center of every / Universe, which flows from him / And back to him again is a / Contemplator; there are millions / Of universes, each with its / Contemplator, in a grain of sand. / Every entity, real or / Imagined, dust mote or hero / Of fiction, is one face of a / Contemplative -- reality"

AL: 518 in the big book.

BH: "At twelve thousand feet, the perfume / Of the phlox is like a drug." See, I mean, he didn't have to be anywhere to be writing this. He could be doing this all from his memory if he wanted, if you think of it, look at a lot of this, he could.

RH: It's in the end it comes so much more alive.

BH: Oh yeah.

RH: Than it does in the beginning of the poem.

BH: Sure.

RH: Raveling off. Thank you.

BH: I love the sort of turbulent way he tries to bring it together in the end, all these different passage, vestiges and his idea of emptiness that he can't quite bring it all together, so on page 170 in our book he goes, "Since Isis and Osiris / Many gods and goddesses / Have ridden the boats of / The sun and the moon. I stand / On the hill above my hut / And watch the sun set in the / Fog bank over the distant / Ocean. Shortly afterward / The moon rises, transparent / In the twilight above the / Mountain. There is nobody / In them this evening. I / Am sure they are empty, that / I am alone in the great / Void, where they journey, empty / Through the darkness and the light." I think it's really cool that even though he had these really strong doctrines and everything, he did let in, it's very Duncan. Duncan, I mean he must have influenced Duncan a lot in this way, he kept the whole mythological expanse.

MW: Right, he did.

DK: What direction do you think was an influence?

BH: I would think it'd be Pound influencing Rexroth. Pound and all the stuff he was reading influencing Rexroth, influencing Duncan because Duncan's younger by twenty years.

DK: Oh. I see. Although Duncan was born in 1919 and Kenneth was born in?

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BH: '05

MW: 1905.

DK: There's a point here. Duncan does say, Robert says that Kenneth invented the elegiac mode in the late '40s and seems to really connect here but it seems like the elegiac mode is the way, the style.

MW: And that was the time that Duncan was going a little bit the opposite way, I think. From love poems to deeper into his own philosophy in the forties and fifties.

BH: So, what are other passages we want—we should probably give it another 15 minutes so we don't get too tired and exhaust Marthe's energy. I see that he gives, he touches that hat to the beloved at the end. "You are Shiva, but you dream."

MW: Oh yeah. On 171.

BH: "...her eyes shining," Oh that's not you. I guess he ends it kind of with the solitary vision. Are there other passages that you remember when you were rereading these last couple of weeks where you were you talking in the beginning about the discrepancy between what he describes especially in the narrative, the travel narratives, and what you remember about the...

MW: Well, in Part V, I don't feel that, I mean, I think it's not a consecutive travel journey there but the pieces are all—they strike me as very real and very likely but they were from... I think it was put together. I think he did. I think Kenneth didn't go to the mountains after he got back, but I really can't remember. I couldn't remember that but I think he is trying to arrange his life once again and figure out things for Marie.

BH: And you had gone to Seattle?

MW: I was in Seattle, yeah.

BH: Did you have any weird feelings about reading these passages about his sort of love affair? Maybe you talked about this last week?

RH: We talked about this last time.

MW: About what?

BH: His love affair?

RH: I know.

BH: With, Yes, she's about—

MW: I mean it's really interesting in this book. Almost, it was sort of a book about our trip.

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BH: Yeah.

MW: But not really. And also time-wise it wasn't, obviously is not consecutive, and also Kenneth is very, very interested in weighing out—beyond my sewing ability—weighing out past times and occasions and meetings that were his alone. So, when I first read the book, the poem, I got it but I almost feel divorced from it.

BH: Yeah.

MW: Because the first part of our trip was by bicycle from Paris to Nice and that had a lot of hardships by the time we got as far south as Aix-en-Provence. Essentially I think our relationship was very broken so it was very hard to continue the relationship but I was a little bit like, What am I to do here? I am with this bicycle and this person and? ...And then they act the business of going through Italy and Italian trains and the Italian people and going to all over Italy and the churches and everything I didn't. That was important to me. It was unforgettable and so by the time I got back to Paris I was really feeling very sick—probably pregnancy sick—and then I was so, like with Kenneth, it felt so dead to me at that point. I realized that he had arranged safely for his return with Marie so that was, that was hard.

BH: Yeah.

MW: To kill the fat cat. So, I really was very eager to get back to what made me feel more real which was, I had really good friends in Oregon and then the Talmunds were in Seattle and Wayne Burns, who is an old friend of mine who is in the department there. I felt relieved to be away from Kenneth so it was not the trail of the travel—the path in the book was not a happy one for me, so it was hard.

BH: How long was the whole trip?

MW: Well, I got there in, it really wasn't that long. I mean Kenneth was gone longer, he went from April, I think.

DK: He arrived right around Easter in '49 and Marthe arrived in late July—this is all from the Hamalian.

MW: Was I?

DK: And then it ends in New York in December of that year.

MW: It ends where?

DK: The trip sort of ends.

MW: Does it end in Paris?

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DK: But you arrive back in the States.

MW: I arrive back in December.

DK: December of that year.

DK: And then the first part of the book is published in 1950.

MW: And it was published as a long poem and another thing before that?

DK: No, it was just the first section.

MW: Oh, ok.

DK: Published in the annuals.

MW: In one of the New Directions end of the year things.

DK: Do you remember Florence?

MW: Yeah. Oh, I loved it! There was a lot to be said for the trip because...

BH: Yeah.

AL: We touched one of those points, keep going.

MW: Yeah. I do remember. I don't forget Florence.

RH: What struck you about it?

MW: Well, I was so identified with D.H. Lawrence. We stayed in his hotel. And then I would be very happy there by myself. You could walk everywhere. I loved all the shops. You went from jewelry to plumbing and it was all very elegant, like a movie set. I also loved the mornings, because very early in the morning all the Italian men would be in a courtyard outside my hotel window. And you would hear them talking—they had their coffee, obviously, because they were very steamed up and talking. I guess this was like the preamble to a market or something, but they were the businessmen of Florence—very elegant, very good looking and lots and lots of talk. I mean, it was great. I loved it. And then, I walked all over Florence and I saw so much art. It was wonderful. It was great.

DK: Were you mostly together looking at the art?

MW: Yeah, at the art, we were. That was good, that was good.

BH: So how long was Florence all together?

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MW: I guess we stayed. I don't know, because we went back. I get the two trips a little bit mixed up. It must have been at least a week.

AL: Seems like there's enough to do for a week in Florence.

MW: I don't know how long it was. I can't remember.

DK: Because when I read his third section, we talked about it last time, there's the Pascal vision Kenneth writes about Florence.

MW: Yeah.

DK: And then he ends with a vision of Pascal's.

MW: Yeah.

DK: But you're there, his lover is there, and I knew he had gone to Florence before you came, so I was like, "Oh, did he write it when he was missing you?"

MW: I don't know.

DK: From the thought of being there with you.

MW: Could be, could be either time. And I went to Florence later when we were there with the two children, but I'm guessing a week but I don't know.

MW: I was experiencing this in an emotional haze too.

BH: Yeah.

MW: I mean, half the time in Italy I was trying to figure out how can I get home and everything and I had to figure out the money and all that.