

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

MW: This is his longest, it's a very long poem, and Laughlin [James of New Directions] didn't intend to publish it as a book. I can't remember where it was first published and then he published it as a separate thing. But I re-read parts of it just to sort of remember, and he goes all over the place, really, from the standpoint of who's there with him. Of course, for Kenneth I think it was an exposition of philosophy and belief so...

It was also a very hurtful time for me. I think he got his first Guggenheim before that trip. The trip was '49 and during that academic year, '48-'49, I was teaching as a teaching assistant in philosophy at Berkeley. He left for England in the early spring, and I needed to stay to finish teaching my Plato class. So when classes were over in June, I joined him in Paris. It was a hard time for me since Kenneth had time that he felt had been provided for him. He really did use the Guggenheim to that end, and I think he got a 2nd Guggenheim and a couple of Fulbrights. I think it meant a tremendous amount to him to get that check and to provide for himself the time and the workspace that he needed. I knew it was very important to him. It was personally a hard time for me, but that was the way it was.

RH: A hard time as far as getting there?

MW: Well, when I got to Paris, the first thing was I couldn't find Kenneth (laughing). I had an address, and I took a cab there, and he wasn't there. So then I thought I'd go to where the mail was because he always was very interested in his mail. I went to the American Express, and sure enough he came in looking very at home. He had a place in a hotel behind the dome, a little apartment for us, and I just felt that Kenneth had made a lot of connections that he wanted to make—some of them personal, some of them with a lot of women, and some of them with people he really wanted to meet. For example, in England, where he'd been in March and April, he was with Derek Savage and that was an old friend and an important connection for him—and later we all stayed with Derek, eight years later when we were back. But I felt a little bit that I had really worked very hard to get to Paris. It was really hard for me to get there, and I had decided that I wouldn't continue at Berkeley and graduate school perhaps because I didn't know where I'd be. So then I began to feel angry because Kenneth was very connected, and I felt sort of like an intrusion. And I think that I was in a way, although, I don't think he would ever acknowledge that to himself.

RH: So he wanted you to come but then once you came...

MW: He was extremely ambivalent. He acted glad to see me. (laughing) In Aix-en-Provence we were bicycling. Very shortly after I arrived we bought bikes and started this trip through France by bicycle, and we got to Aix-en-Provence which is where, 8 years later, we went back to live. It's so beautiful, but by the time we got there and sitting in the café there, I realized from things he'd said that he had been feeding me to come and he was going to kill himself if I didn't. It was a typical refrain of Kenneth's—unless I got there... But he'd also had the same argument for Marie, secretly in letters to her, so I felt very hurt. It was very hurtful to me. And in the meantime, of course, Marie and I, we were beginning to be good friends. I felt it was really unfair to us both (laughing) so to speak. Anyway by the time we got to Aix I felt very angry and unattached to him. It was a hard trip, and when I found out the best way to do the trip was to let Kenneth ride one little village ahead of

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me, then I was very happy because I met a lot of people. I had coffee, and I talked to the French people, and then I'd find him down the road. So that was nice. That made the trip better and then when we got to Marseille we left the bikes or sold them. I guess we sold them, and we went through Italy on trains, and that was pretty good.

RH: It sounds like you went from Rome south to...

MW: We went to Naples and Pistoia and Kenneth had a friend in Naples.

RH: And then north again, also on the trains, to Milan?

MW: Yeah, we used the Italian rail system that was very fast and good and went all over Italy. How did we end up in Milan? I know we took the train from Milan to Switzerland going back...

RH: Yeah, part 4 is Switzerland and part 4 is mostly opinion, it's less travelogue, it's more...

MW: Oh, in the book?

RH: Yes.

MW: Oh?

Doug Kerr: It's interesting *The Dragon and the Unicorn* is in 5 parts. It follows the pattern of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*. And the third part, the middle part, because you were traveling through Italy together, starts talking more and more about love and the person and the community.

MW: Because that whole first part, Kenneth is on his own and in England largely and then...

DK: If I could ask one thing, because the bicycle story doesn't come up, because it's an interesting one. The poem is dedicated to you, and so I was wondering, when I was re-reading this, how are you going to enter? How you're going to appear in this poem, which is a travelogue of sorts? Well, you're never mentioned by name until the end of the third part...

MW: I know.

DK: In the second part is simply something like...

MW: There's a referral to 'we' or whatever but... He does mention other people by name Léontine, Yvonne Pene DuBois, but I don't think I'm very personalized in the first part of the poem.

DK: Yes, in the third part of the poem, he'll have a vision, and then he'll have to bring the vision to say the social world. So, after you two make love, and there's a vision, he then theorizes about the current state of America and the sickness of Americans. And, in contrast, at the end of the section, he finally names you and says that you're pregnant. It's the first time that you're actually named.

MW: I didn't know that I was named in it.

DK: You're named there and then later on. I'll find the pages.

RH: It's interesting because the Italy section, I mean, the philosophy is sort of yadda yadda yadda.

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MW: Yadda, yadda, right. The first two sections are much more grounded.

RH: And in the third section it begins to be, to move toward this philosophy of love, personal love and human love and while he's conducting his education in Italian art and then at the end in Milan.

MW: When we're leaving Italy.

RH: Yeah.

DK: Page 225.

MW: Thanks. Let's see.

RH: He's looking at this enclave of Raphael "We look at it all day long./Just before the light goes, a group/of schoolgirls comes in. They all stand/At the back and listen to their/Nun. Except one little blonde girl,/About twelve, with a face of/Untempered sensibility,/Who advances slowly, hands/Folded, lips parted, eyes wrapt away./We turn aside, as though we had/Pried on the vision of a saint."

MW: I'd forgotten about that one in there.

RH: "I say to Marthe, "I would/Give anything in the world to/Have a daughter like that." Our/Daughter is already alive./The next day we leave Italy."

MW: But we didn't know that of course. Yeah, I forgot that was in it. It's a little bit of an emotional amnesia because we didn't come home together.

RH: Yes.

MW: And so I went to visit friends. I didn't know whether I was pregnant and went to visit a friend in Oregon—Elaine Walker. And when I went to Oregon I went to a physician and confirmed the pregnancy, and then I decided that I would go to Seattle where the Talmunds lived, my good friends. I was going to stay with them. I really didn't plan to return to Kenneth, but it was very difficult. Because first of all, he was very insistent and also very...he felt that he was missing something that he wanted all his life. I'm not so sure about that, but he did feel that something was very much being taken away from him. Then he got Marie involved and I started...

RH: Something was taken away from him when you didn't want to be with him?

MW: Yes, because of the baby. And then he got Marie involved, and Marie is my friend (laughing), and so Marie—I guess she was still in the house on 8th Avenue—she immediately moved. She started writing to me and begging me to return, and in the meantime I was working in the Seattle Public Library and trying to figure out my life. So it was a little bit... In one way I wanted to return, because I was a little scared, and also it seemed like almost the right thing to do. And then I got letters from Jim Laughlin saying that he was a constant for Kenneth and me, meaning that he would always be there. He was there always. Not so much for me, but for Kenneth. For example, when Kenneth was very sick in Santa Barbara before his death, Laughlin sent money to Carol [Tinker] so that Kenneth could stay at home and have nursing 'round the clock. He always came through. But anyway, Laughlin had always been a big supporter with Kenneth and anything to do with our

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relationship because he had to. What could he do? You weren't going to tell Kenneth to straighten up and... (laughing) comb your hair and things like that. But he became a very supportive person to me. And then Kenneth began to be very insistent that he wanted to be with me and with the baby, and so I did come back.

RH: According to the Hamalian biography, when you first told him, he wanted you to get an abortion?

MW: Yes, yes, he did. I think the idea grew on him, because I think he always thought that, of course he could have children, but Marie couldn't or something. It was kind of a family lie that they told each other. I don't know what the truth was, but obviously he could have children. I was about 7 ½ months pregnant I came back to San Francisco. I gave up my job at the Seattle Public Library, and then it was a little bit... It was alright. It was difficult, but I was worried about money because we didn't have very much.

RH: Were you hopeful about the relationship?

MW: I wanted to be, but I'm not sure that I was. After Mary was born, she was born in July, and in September I started working at San Francisco State College in the audio-visual department, and it was very hard to leave her. But I left her with Kenneth, and I think he was a very good father. He was very involved, very identified, and I think he was a good father to her.

RH: By the time she's sixteen—you're married to a Jungian analyst is that...

MW: My marriage was—she was sixteen. Oh, Steve and I were married, and Mary had been living with Kenneth. But she had started coming over, and so I had quite a bit of time with her. I had a lot of time with her before she went with Kenneth to Europe.

DK: I'm excited to ask questions. Right here, page 236. It's towards the end of the 4th part, and it's the second place that you're named. There's a party and apparently Kenneth is speaking a lot of French. See here this is where your name begins.

MW: Oh, yeah, right.

DK: And you're called a philosopher

MW: Yeah, right.

DK: There's an interesting discussion where some people ask you about your dress, and you say you made it by yourself.

MW: I didn't. It's not true.

DK: I was intrigued because there is so much French included in the poem here. So how much of that is fiction and...

MW: So here's the thing about Kenneth and French. He knew he had a tremendous French vocabulary. He was afraid to speak French. He understood a lot of French, but when we lived in Aix

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later, eight years later, I did all the errands because I didn't care. I spoke bad French, but I got what we needed...

DK: Do you think that this is based on an actual farewell party that you two...?

MW: Well, I was reading this last night, and I think it's a putting together of time's with Léontine. Now, I don't remember this grand dinner and everything and this party, but I could see how it got written. And certainly that wasn't when I first got introduced to Léontine. I had met her before. When we met, I don't remember that we had a farewell dinner. So, to tell you the truth...

RH: Who is Léontine?

MW: Léontine was a very...congenial prostitute in Paris, and Kenneth had gotten to know her very well. She had a sister, and she had a child. He was sort of involved with the family, which he liked, but this is very... When I read this last night, I realized it's very filled in. There were no neighbors there, and Léontine could not have afforded this dinner. I mean, it would have not have been, but it was maybe what Kenneth wished for. I don't know. It's not anything I was at. I never made a dress in my life. I tried to make an apron in 7th grade, and I failed so (laughing) that's not me. You know, Kenneth sewed, he made things, like for the mountains and everything, so maybe he wished I could sew, but anyway...

DK: There was one other piece I wanted to ask about on page 243. He quotes apparently from Milosz, one of the poems that you two translated together, which means... "Symphony of November"—Here, see it, Bob, it would be...

MW: Yeah 243 is what?

DK: He's going through writing in French here, but then, one of the poets you translate, it becomes a part of the poem, and that seems to be...

MW: That is. That's a restatement of one of the Milosz. In one of Milosz's poems he says it will be exactly like this line. We translated that. Oh, on the boat coming back from this trip. So it's not in sequence but it's, yeah...

RH: Oh Paris...that's Milosz?

DK: It might be interesting for you to look at, too, beginning here. Where is that from? There seems to be quite a bit stitched together, as well as other Rexroth poems included in the text.

MW: I don't know. I just don't know. It could. This could easily be a lot of Kenneth, because... Yeah, I really do think that is often true, but I couldn't—I can't take that apart—the Milosz. I know that this one verse begins—that Milosz "Symphony in November." That is from one of his poems that we did. In fact, those three stanzas are yeah, one of them is a Milosz poem.

DK: Marthe, looking at this I was thinking, okay, you two had translated the poems coming back at some point. I thought about how this was a fiction, of sorts, and it led me to the questions. How was the poem composed? Or, when you arrived in Paris and everything was so turbulent, what kind of information was gathered in order to compose the poem? Was Kenneth keeping a journal to write the poems?

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MW: You know, it's interesting, I was actually thinking last night...was there a notebook? And there was *always* a notebook. There was always a notebook. I think my guess is that the notebook was not a prototype for the poem...that ideas were there and whatever, but that most of this was written later. I really think so.

DK: The first part was published in 1950.

MW: No, that's right, when we got home. So, I could be wrong. Maybe he was writing as he went along but I was not aware of that.

RH: Are there notebooks at UCLA?

DK: That I haven't seen.

MW: When does this poem end, this long poem? Is it in something else?

RH: That's what I wanted to ask you about—the chronology at some point of the poem.

MW: Because I think it was published in something else.

RH: Do you remember when he was writing it? I have several specific questions. Just to see if you can help with things that are... But the thing that humanly struck me about it is, I admire the poem much more this time reading it, I have to say.

MW: So do I. I have to tell you. So do I.

RH: Some parts are very beautiful and very moving and starting in the middle sections he starts thinking about this. The whole thing begins to turn on sort of religious philosophy of love and marriage.

MW: Yes.

RH: And sexuality that he's developing, which is wildly disconnected from what's actually going on.

MW: From what was happening, exactly. Exactly.

RH: It's very moving, but it's...

MW: He was in a diabolical twist there, and I don't know whether there was continuity within Kenneth as he was producing this poem. How much he wrote as he was traveling, I don't know. Because I certainly didn't hear any of it. He only read to me if poems he had written were finished, and this obviously was not a poem he was going to finish, but I don't know. And you know, Kenneth wanted to be sacramental about marriage, and he wanted to be faithful to the ideals of joining together and philosophically moving towards a unity that would come from shared experience of some kind but... He wanted that I think all his life but...