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Thomas McGrath

A Conversation

This conversation is extracted from a much longer interview that covered more ground—McGrath's forbears in North Dakota, his own life, aspects of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, and his left aesthetic. In the course of these hours of talk, McGrath spoke also about his experience in writing films, and the background of that experience. Because of limitations of space this topic had to be excised from the longer interview (which appears in *Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem*, University of Illinois Press, 1991), but it seemed too interesting to McGrath's life and work to be lost. So it has been edited for publication separately, and appears below. I conducted this interview with Terrence Des Pres on three afternoons in January, 1987, at McGrath's apartment in Minneapolis. McGrath laughed a lot as he talked, whether he was angry, sad, or amused. It was a part of his generous character that his wrath and humor were great peaks marking a mighty range of feeling, but that even at his angriest, laughter might come at any time—wry, perhaps, or the laughter of occasional despair.

Terrence Des Pres died in 1987. Thomas McGrath died in 1990.

Reginald Gibbons

RG: After the army you went back to North Dakota?
TM: Yeah. The going back was after McCarthy.
RG: You spent a winter there—I wondered what year that was?
TM: I don't know exactly, but it was probably in '60, '61. I would

guess. It was the end of my blacklisting—because I went out there, I'd been blacklisted—*discovered* I'd been blacklisted (laughs)—for television. Well, I'd never *written* for television, but I had a film to write about a hurricane and it was for some outfit in New York; they were selling it to CBS or NBC and *they* were putting up the money. And I was to go to Houston and do some research, but I didn't get my ticket; and the unit manager, after I'd waited around for a couple of hours, said, "You're supposed to be out there in that plane."

I said, "I don't have my ticket."

And he said, "Those stupid bastards, I'll call them. I'll call upstairs and see what's wrong with them."

So he called; and then I could see his face getting white, and he says—he was white with anger—he said, "You're on the blacklist!"

Which was news to me. I'd been on other blacklists—but *that* one, since I'd never worked there? I still think maybe they blacklisted some other McGrath and they just discovered my name there—because I had never worked for television or anything like that.

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TM: Do you know Frederick Manfred? Have you ever met him or heard of him?

RG: I've heard of him.

TM: Well, he's a novelist from out here, he lives in Luverne. He came from Iowa and lived in Minnesota. He's written a whole bunch of books, of which the best might be a book called *Conquering Horse*, which I think is in its way a classic. It's about Indians out here, the Yanktonai, the Yankton Sioux, before the white men got here. (There's one reference to the white man in the books and it's this: they see this bee, a honey bee, and they know the white man is somewhere back there, because the honey bee tells them that the white man is somewhere—he's only a rumor.)

Anyway, he's written variously about this place. And he's the only person I've ever heard of—a white guy—for whom the Indians came out and danced. He had TB, he was living here in Minneapolis some place, he had written this book. And one day, a bunch of cars pulled up, old jalopies, in front of his place—during the thirties, I guess. Someone comes and knocks. So Manfred comes to the door,

and the person there says, "Are you Fredrick Manfred?"

He says, "Yes."

So they say, "Well we're the Chippewa." They say, "We've come to dance for you." [Laughs] So they danced on his lawn! [Laughs]

Manfred has gone on writing books about his area. They're usually books about the past, I don't know how close he's ever gotten to contemporary times. He was a good friend of Sinclair Lewis, and when Lewis wanted his ashes scattered [laughs] in the graveyard up at the Sauk Center, where he was born, Manfred was the scatterer. There were a handful of people who knew who Lewis was, and of course these Sauk Center people had always thought of Lewis as a red-headed son-of-a-bitch who did nothing except run down their beautiful little town. So they scattered the ashes there—which Fred says "Mostly blew in our faces."

He's very naive in some ways and that's in his style. In the case of this book *Conquering Horse*, it works very much to his advantage. I used to know Mike Cimino quite well, and do you know that name? The guy who did the *Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*? I'd known him in New York before he made any films and I worked on some things with him—or for him, rather—that were never made. When I came back from the end of the Guggenheim, we came back from New York, and Tomasito had just been born in April, and I went to work at Moorhead State University, that was my first year there. And I'd hardly gotten started when Mike came out from L.A.

He had spent a winter in Fargo, North Dakota, while I worked on a film that he had an idea about. I wrote the film there for very little money and was teaching at the same time. He was living in a little dump beside the railroad tracks, driving his red Jaguar around, and being arrested very frequently—or not arrested but stopped, because nobody in the Fargo police force believed that anybody out *there* had a red Jaguar and would drive it around in a wintertime. So, anyway, that winter I did that piece of that particular film, and then I told him about Manfred and this book, and told him it [*Conquering Horse*] would make a wonderful film. And so he said yes.

A few years later he *had* actually read the book, and decided that it *would* make a good film, and he had some kind of a base out in L.A., down there in Hollywood, as they say—[pronouncing it "holy wood"]—the mystical community of saints [laughs]. And he had

got to Universal and had got them to put up some money, just by, I suppose, jaw-boning—because, while he'd read the book, he didn't have anything to offer.

They said, "O.K., we'll give you some money and you get a script and you go on a hunt for locations." So, he came out there and I worked on the script—wrote the script. And he and Fred went looking for locations, and found one.

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TDP: What was your feeling toward Hollywood in the days when you were in Los Angeles?

TM: Well, I knew nothing about it when I was *there*. You know, I don't think I knew *anybody* there except for one person, I knew Ben Madow. He wrote *Asphalt Jungle*, and that really sort of made him there. He *was* a very very fine poet, under the name of David Wolf. And I'd seen some of his works, bits and pieces here and there. He's never had a book, that I know of, and as far as I know he stopped writing poetry, but I would say that back in the thirties, say around '36, '37, something like that, he was the best left-wing poet in America. Well, no—Don Gordon is the best. But he was very close to that.

When I lived out in L.A., Don Gordon, Ben Maddow, Ed Rolfe, who had been in Spain and done a few books and was a good poet—sometimes a very good poet—and Naomi Replansky, who had come out from New York and was living there for a while (and I think she's one of the best—totally lost, now)... we all used to meet from time to time and talk and read work at each other, and so on.

It was out of those meetings that I started writing *Letter*. Because—I've told this a number of times—Don asked, after we'd read poems at each other and torn them up, "What are you doing?" Or "What have you got in mind to do?" I had been writing poems as they came along, and I said, "Well, I have this idea for a long poem, could be ten, could be twenty pages, but that's a lot of *work*." I'd written poems that were six, maybe eight, pages long, but this—I didn't know how to start it.

His advice was, "It's just a matter of nerve." [Laughs] "Go home, sit down, write the first line that comes into your head; and then just go on." And that's what I did. And the first line was "From here it

is necessary to ship all bodies east." And that probably came because of the novel I had written, where there's a body that's being shipped west—you know, it's being shipped there by accident. And then the next line was, "I am here in Los Angeles at 2716 Marsh Street.

TDP: 2714.

TM: 2714? Well, I guess I must have been in the wrong house! [Laughs]

TDP: Why do you put quotation marks around that first line?

TM: I don't know *why* I did, but I guess I was thinking of... to some degree, I guess, in the back of my head, was the body that had been shipped west. And also, you know, it seemed to me that everybody in L.A. came from probably some place in the Middle West, and when they died they'd probably be shipped back. I really saw L.A. as one of the great cities of the dead, of the *world*; and in many ways I still do. It set a kind of style for easy death. So, anyway, I'd started that and I went on with the poem. But I digress.

TDP: We were talking about if you had any relationship to the Hollywood dream factory.

TM: No, I had none. Ben Maddow had worked and was working for Hollywood; but by the time we were having these meetings I had been blacklisted from teaching. Don had been a reader at Universal or some place—in fact he was I think sort of unofficial head of the Reading Department—the Reading Department looked at books and things and made recommendations. It was a job he had fallen into and despised, but—you know, it's better to work than not to work, and so that's what he was doing. And Rolfe had written one really very enchanting film—not a documentary, but for lack of better word call it a documentary—called, I think, *Muscle Beach.*

Do you know Muscle Beach in L.A.? It was a place in the Santa Monica area where all the body-worshippers went [laughs]. It was the muscular gays, that's what it was, but it was before homosexuality had become "gay," and it was a *thing*—you could go out and you could see these people, who were always oiling themselves up. I've forgotten who wrote the music for it, but it was a little ballad about something kind of odd and funny, very well done. Well, Ed needed to make money, and as a poet he didn't have much opportunity that way, so he had a sort of a foot in Hollywood, because he knew a lot of the left-wing people who were still there. They hadn't been blown

away yet, totally, by the blacklist. And Ben was working there too, anyway. All that got blown away, and Ben turned out to be a fink, and Ed died of a heart attack, and Don Gordon is still there—he got fired also, blacklisted, and worked as a warehouseman with Cisco Houston, who was a sidekick of Woody Guthrie. And another friend of mine who was an ex-Brigade guy. Art Landis, who's written a couple of books on Spain.

TDP: Did you see at any time a parallel or crossover between your poetry and film work you were doing?

TM: I wasn't doing any film work, then. I hadn't started doing that at all. But later, when I started doing it, I was lucky with the first film that I made—after I was blacklisted, one summer I went back to New York. The idea was that I was going to go back for about a week and see old friends there. The first place I went was to see Charlie Humboldt and Mimi, who he was living with, a wonderful woman. I had just come into town the night before, I guess, and I went over that morning to see them, and he said, "Listen, do you know Leo Hurwitz."

I said, "No."

And he said "Well, he's one of those people who worked with Pare Lorentz on *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*—" these classic documentaries made at government expense during the thirties.

I'd seen one of those films, I guess.

And he said, "Well, he's got a film and he wants a poet—he wants to talk to you."

So I said, "O.K.," and almost immediately the phone rang and it was Leo Hurwitz, who said, "I've got this film and I need a *poet* to write the narration for it." He had hoped, I think, to get Ed Rolfe, who was an old friend of his, Rolfe having been born in New York also. But Rolfe was unavailable, he had been ill.

I told him, "I don't know *anything* about writing film."

He said, "You *like* films?"

I said, "Yes."

And, "Have you *seen* a lot of films?"

Yes, I had.

And so he said, "You come down to my cutting room and I'll show you the film and we can talk about it." So I did.

It was a film called *The Museum and the Fury*. He had already cut

the film. There were two parts of it. One part had to do with Auschwitz, and the fact that the Poles had turned it into a museum. A museum whose main point was to warn about the possibilities. . . I guess really the possibilities of human beings. But also it was a historical thing about what had happened there. So, he had footage from there—some of it German, you know, from the time when it was a going concern; some of it from the Poles, after the Russians had liberated that area and the Poles took the place over. And instead of blowing it up or plowing it under, which might have been the first idea, they decided to preserve it. And make use of it. You know, in an educational, or propagandistic, way. (That's a term that I think the Vatican first used.)

TDP: To "propagate the faith."

TM: Yes. The committee or Council for the Propagation of the Faith—and "propaganda" was a word before it became a bad word.

So he showed me this film which was—God, it was a total mystery. I mean, I knew some of the things that were in it, but I couldn't see what the links were between things. Because first of all, there was the concentration camp and the documentary footage; then there were a few passages that he had go from a Polish dramatic film, the name of which I've forgotten—not much, but a little which dealt with people being hauled into the concentration camps, and the resistance, and so forth. And the third thing was shots of works of arts of all sorts.

He said, "Well, what do you think?"

I said, "I don't know *what* to think."

He said, "Well, I believe you can do this. So why don't you come down tomorrow morning and start running this. . . " And he showed me how to run a movieola. He showed me how to thread it up and this, that and the other, and so I sat for a couple of days running this totally through, a number of times, and then I'd stop and back up, and I began to see how things hooked up. He wouldn't give me a goddamn *idea* of what *he* thought were the links or the terms or the themes of the film. He just said, "You'll figure it out."

I was going to be paid a little bit for this—not very much, but I got a few thousand bucks, I guess, for about six weeks. Because instead of staying a week and seeing my friends, I wound up staying however long it was, and running this film and writing bits of it and running things back and so on. And naturally, eventually we locked

horns over things. If we could just cut out—sometimes it was as little as just a couple of frames. . . No way!

So, anyway, I worked on that film and eventually got it finished. But, as I say, Leo is the most stubborn man I have ever met in this world; and that's the opinion of anybody who's ever known him. He's a *genius*, in many ways, but once he's got a film cut, the film is *there*, and then it's up to him to find a writer who can somehow decipher or discover what the themes are and what the connections are. So, I tell you, when I finished working on that film, *The Museum and the Fury*, I knew about anything that needed to be known about *writing* films, and the result was that eventually I had a reputation that went something like this: "If you've used up all your money for writers and you still haven't got what you want, call McGrath." [Laughs] "He's hungry, and he can do the unexpected things. And he's *poetico.*" (And that was good stuff for a lot of the people who didn't know what poetry was.) The result was that on some films, I managed to write things which I incorporated in my poems.

RG: Can one get hold of the films that you've done?

TM: Yeah, some of them.

RG: That one?

TM: Yes. In fact, last spring I went out to Marshall, Minnesota, Southwest State University there. They had a whole week of things. I've never seen anything quite like it, it was like the Modern Language Association, something was happening *all* the time. They had wanted to do a whole thing on film, but it didn't work out. But they did pick up *The Museum and the Fury* and showed it. I'd never seen the thing in the final version, I'd never seen it with music, I'd never heard whoever read the narration. I think it was Burgess Meredith—no, he might have read part of it; it was a woman, and I don't know who it was. She was quite good; maybe in some places, not as good as might have been, but—just because of range—a very intelligent reading and altogether very good.

Well, anyway, I saw the film, and I saw then what I had thought and had argued with Leo about—the film is repetitive in some ways, it's longer than it should be. I would have cut it back a good deal. But in any case, it was a film which—you know, every film that's ever made, every documentary, wins lots of prizes.There must be thousands of committees [laughs] around the country and the world, waiting to give a prize to any documentary that ever gets made. So

it was a big hit in some places like Europe.

In France, years later when I went there, I was taken to be one of the great gurus of film by the people of Cinematech, which is an outfit that was gathering as much documentary stuff as they could. I was in the ranks of Jacques Prévert, who wrote some wonderful, absolutely fabulous stuff, for French documentaries (but of course he wrote other films also—dramatic films). And he's a marvelous poet; was, I guess.

So, in any case, that was the first thing. And, as I say, when I wrote a film, if I wrote a passage that I thought was useful, that somehow I might make use of, I snaffled it. [Laughs]

Another film I did was a thing out on the West Coast; when I wrote it I called it *Limit High*. It was about a building that went up as high as it was allowable in earthquake country. I've forgotten who it was made for—some oil company. I guess they put up the money for it as what used to be called "institutional advertising." That is, there's nothing about the company in the film, but at the end of the film (which I've never seen) they probably put "Courtesy of" or whatever, and then they distribute these things to anybody who wants free films. Schools can get them, and all that sort of stuff. Occasionally a film gets put on television.

On the other hand, sometimes I had a job which was a rush job, and if I had some lines from poems of my own that would help me, I banged them into the script! [Laughs] So, here and there, there are echoes of the poems and in the poems, there are echoes of. . . Because usually I was working under very strong time things—I told you I had this reputation—such as it was—for being able to rescue the dead. And usually you don't get too much time to do that. [Laughs] They get around to me when they're in their last gasp, you know. So, that was my life as a documentary film writer.

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I did write this script, as I say, for Mike Cimino, and I'm told he's still thinking and talking of doing it. I saw Fred Manfred last spring down at Marshall and he said he'd talked with him, but I don't know. I tried to get in touch with Mike this summer, thinking maybe that Tomasito could work for a summer as a gofer or something. But I couldn't even—I couldn't raise him, he was off in Sicily or Sardinia

doing a Godfatherish film. I couldn't reach Mike, and, I don't know, I may not be on his list any longer. With the rich and mighty, a little patience—that's one of the old proverbs. He has a very powerful drive to "succeed." I don't know what he means by that, and I don't know whether he does, either. It isn't money; though he's probably made bloody fortunes and he's certainly spent them. On *Heaven's Gate*.

To go back to this film that I did write for him, the script for *Conquering Horse*: the script, everything, was acceptable, all was fine, until they started budgeting it. At that point I should have said, there's something else about Mike Cimino (laughs), because the budget, as they budgeted it, was *far* over what had been projected. So, then I began to get calls. First of all, I talked with Mike when he'd told me this—there was no reason why it couldn't have been a far less expensive film. There was no need for—you know, *hundreds* of Indians; the story is such that that's not required. *But*, you know, Aristotle said that—I've forgotten what term he used for it—not "special effects," but "mass effects," "*spectacle*" (one of the six parts of drama), is the least important. I think that's true, too. But, of course, out *there*, the spectacle is the primary thing.

I told Mike, fairly well along, that the book tells it's a small band of Indians, and you don't need these masses of things. So then they wanted to scale it down and how to do this and that and the other. And the last call, I said, "I know exactly what to do. First of all, we'll modernize it and make it a musical."

And I waited, and there was a long silence [laughs], and another voice said, "That sounds interesting."

So then I said, "And our hero lives on skid row, where there are a lot of Indians." (And that's true—in L.A., see).

"And when he sets out on his quest, his vision quest, his first problem is, how to get across the freeway."

And they said, "We'll get back to you." [Laughs.] And I didn't start to wait, and they've never gotten back to me.

And the thing is still there and it's still a possibility and I guess Mike probably owns it by now. And who knows, it might get made sometime. The idea was, we were going to make it in the Sioux language, and use subtitles and call it "A film from an occupied country." Well, those were the days, right? So, I don't know what would ever happen to it if it ever got made. It could make a very good

small film, you know—it can't be one of these big monsters, that's not what's inside it. But it could make a very small—not *very* small, but a *powerful* small—lyrical, mostly lyrical, film. If it ever gets done. It's unlikely, I think.

I did one film for the Chicago City Missionary Society, which I thought was a really good film. But I kept saying to the guy who had hired me, "I don't think they're ever going to accept this."

And he said, "I've got them in the hollow of my hand. You do anything you want, what you're doing is great, go right ahead." So I did. In the shooting script, I filled Soldier Field in Chicago—I *filled* it!—with people holding these little transistor radios up to their ears. [Laughs] I've forgotten what the point of that film was. It was a serious film, but I often wanted to take it out in other directions: as well as just being a film about the ghetto, I wanted to take it just as far as it would go, since he said, "Go ahead," I did.

RG: It was never made?

TM: The City Missionary Society [laughs] eventually—well, they got hold of the script and said, "What in Christ's name have we got here?" [Laughs] They *shot* it, actually, as I had written it! No, not with the stadium and not some of the other things, but *fairly* close, I guess. Because I talked with the guy who edited the film. I met him by chance, and he said, "Oh, you're the McGrath who wrote this thing." [Laughs] He said, "God that was a *wonderful* film. The script was marvelous, but. . . " He said once they started looking at it they started rewriting it. So, I don't think I probably have a *word* in it—I've never seen the film, I don't know what the title of it is (which is not uncommon).

RG: Are copies of your film scripts in your papers at one place or another?

TM: No—there may be a few here and there. But—well, I lost them here and there: and when I moved down here [to Minneapolis], I lost a whole box of manuscripts and poems, and film scripts that I liked, so I don't know. I don't think they exist.

I used to keep drafts of some of these documentaries; but the thing is, you never saw the final one. You know, I'd write something and send it off or give it off to whoever typed the thing, and then I'd go on and do the next part—but the final draft, when I've sent it in and people say, "O.K., this is what we have and this is what we're working with," I probably never got that back. There are a few that

I'd like to have, that were good enough, I think, so that there might have been some point in saving them, but. . . .

RG: Which ones?

TM: Well, one would be *Museum and the Fury*. One was this one that I called *Limit High*—which was made under the title of *A Building Is Many Buildings*, which is a piece of the first line of the film. One would have been that Chicago City Missionary thing. Oh, I don't know, there've been a few others. Some of these films that I made are well-known and are around. I don't think they're among the best that I wrote. But one of them was a film called *Genesis*, which was done in I-Max or Omnimax. It's a special system where it's projected as a 70mm image, and you have to have a particular kind of theater that's built half-way in the round, and they can use the ceiling, the regular part of the screen, and even the floor.

There is one in this town. I wrote this thing called *Genesis*, which is mainly about plate tectonics. It was written specially to open the Omnimax theater here at the Minnesota Museum of Science, which I think is in St. Paul. And that's one of the few films I've ever seen—you know, *my* films. It was a huge success. I wrote the shooting script and the narration, then some parts they couldn't shoot because of weather, and this and that. They couldn't shoot Macchu Picchu because they couldn't get any crew that was willing to fly in the weather at the time. They couldn't shoot some stuff from the Rift Valley because that was the local Ho Chi Minh trail, and I guess it would have been Tanzania that told them they might get shot up. Because they were white, and they were in a place where the revolutionaries were heading south. So they didn't get anything except maybe a little fringe stuff.

The point about the Rift Valley had nothing to do with the politics there at the time. But from the standpoint of plate tectonics, it's one of the interesting pieces of the earth; because it's an area that's going to be under the sea before too long. Two plates are together and they're moving apart. The most dramatic place is in Iceland, where you can stand with one foot on one plate and the other foot on the other plate; and they're moving—they're not going to cause you to fall down, unless you stand there for a million years or so.

So, in any case, that film was a huge success and it's been played all over the country; the last time I was reading in Seattle it was showing there again for the second or third time.

Another one, where I just wrote the narration, was a film called *To Fly*, which is far and far away the most successful film of this sort that's ever been made. It's been shown everywhere. The thing that makes it so great is that, with all these Omnimax things, you're so much inside, it's like a three dimensional sort of thing.

When I went down here and saw *Genesis* after it'd been playing here for a while, it was strange; it was like when I was a little kid—you know one of the standard shots was of a locomotive coming straight down the screen at you. And I remember, it sure used to tighten my guts. The little kids would be screaming and trying to crawl under the seats. In this film, there's a passage where a helicopter is going through the Alps and you are right there. And it begins to move around and little kids start screaming and people start puking—it *involves* the viewer.

Well, that's the most successful, if not the best. Neither is *Genesis*. But there are a few other films that are, I think, pretty good.