

2009

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Recommended Citation

Treseler, Heather and Michael S. Harper. "Office Hours: A Memoir and an Interview with Michael S. Harper." *The Iowa Review* 39.3 (2009): 100-123. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6754>

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HEATHER TRESELER

Office Hours: A Memoir and an Interview with Michael S. Harper

I first met Professor Harper in the fall of 1999, as a nervous sophomore. I was paying my way at Brown University through odd jobs for the local oligarchy. So, to the side of my humanities classes, I was earning an auxiliary education in tutoring the distracted children of the very wealthy; cataloguing for an agoraphobic math professor; mowing the lawn (and once, accidentally, the hibiscus) of a mournful divorcée; and tending the rose garden of a Shakespearean scholar with meticulous prepositions. At night, while my roommate headed to the dorm rooftop with a new stash of marijuana, I dreamt of the Shakespearean's weeds *among, beside, down, during* and *except* the rosebushes.

I had begun at Brown shortly after a traumatic injury, which made sitting for long periods of time difficult. The year I met Professor Harper, I was still doing my coursework face-down on a converted massage table that the University allowed me to keep in a small room on the third floor of the Rockefeller Library. I liked reading in this snug monastic cell, although being there each night—and spending afternoons working one odd job or another—had rendered me a half-step removed from my peers whose ambitious schedules of extracurriculars and tribal activities could not be my own. Lonesome and proud, homesick and physically hurt, I was determined to earn my education, though unsure of how to stay and measure that course.

With unfledged ambition and the encouragement of a history professor to whom I'd shown my best doggerel, I applied to Professor Harper's "Advanced Poetry Composition," a class limited to twelve. Thirty applicants showed up to the first class meeting. About ten had to sit on the floor—as many of our Boomer parents had once, albeit to resist rather than flatter authority. "If you intend on applying to this course," intoned a magisterial voice from the middle of the room, "you must understand that I AM THE REGISTRAR." This baritone, full of command and whimsy, reminded me of the thundering, oracular voice of the Wizard of Oz.

“If you think you would like to apply, you had best look at the syllabus. The class list will be posted NEXT WEDNESDAY, NOT BEFORE.”

Shyly, I caught a sideways glimpse of the six-foot-three presence seated at the far end of the rectangular table. His dark eyes gleamed with a chromatic intensity at once kindly, omniscient, and demanding. He removed a black beret to reveal close-cut silver hair. And then he stared straight ahead, at no one in particular, although his gaze seemed to take in the whole room. “Note the schedule and the required reading. Deadlines are inflexible, unless you have made proper and timely application to me beforehand.”

I looked down at the syllabus: thirty books of poetry and weekly “verse-exercises” in traditional poetic forms. These assignments would reduce a dozen of us to fits of Byronic despair that semester, as we struggled to adjust our postmodern ears to the rhythms of Petrarchan sonnets, traditional ballads, sestinas, blank verse, villanelles, and heroic couplets. But this syllabus—in its blunt, type-written font—would also be my springboard to a summer research grant, to epistolary treasures in the archives at Harvard and Vassar College, to a fellowship for graduate school, and to the subject of a doctoral dissertation. Within two years time, life did not look as bleak as a divorcée’s endless lawn or a Shakespearean’s over-watered rosebush.

But in that moment, I was thinking only (and desperately) about the tasks on Professor Harper’s entrance exam: an eight-line poem in decasyllabics that included our parents’ first names, a primary color, the year and location of our birth; two essays based on (unidentified) literary quotations; and, in the time remaining, our reasons for applying to the course. As the two-hour class concluded, Professor Harper announced that the fourth part of the exam would take place later that week: he would interview each of us during his appointed office hours, which began at seven o’clock on Friday morning.

Wilbour Hall, a cheerful red brick Colonial, looks prim beside the structural excesses of its neighbor, the Rockefeller Humanities Library. The latter is a calendar girl of 1960s aesthetic disasters: rectangular, low-to-the-ground, grim in its concrete and sallow fluorescence. But it was between those two buildings—the erudite, kindly poet in one, and the bibliographic resources of the other—that I

earned the beginnings of a respectable education. I have a keen nostalgia for one lit window on the third floor of Wilbour Hall.

At quarter-to-seven on that first Friday morning, a janitor vacuuming the hallway assured me that I had indeed come to the right place: “Mike” Harper’s office was no longer in the English Department, but here in Wilbour Hall, a building that housed the Department of Egyptology. Positioned among the Egyptologists like the resident Sphinx, Harper maintains a peaceable existence with the scholars of hieroglyphs. “We don’t need to talk, not beyond pleasantries. They’re not looking to me for some dog bone of appreciation, for some ego-massage. They’re in their pyramids and that’s just fine,” he said, in one of our first meetings. (I began taking notes, after our colloquies, so I could remember my assignments and some of Professor Harper’s distinct phraseology.)

During that first semester, I learned that Harper had been tenured at Brown in 1971 and had served as director of the (now illustrious) graduate writing program for nearly a decade (1975–1985). In 1982, he had been named the Israel J. Kapstein Professor of English, at a ceremony attended by a few local dignitaries including a former student’s mother, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Best of all, the status of “University Professor” had at last allowed him to be “a committee of one,” no longer subject to departmental policies and politics. “Thank God,” he added, shaking his head. “And I’m not moving, although I think there’s a Cleopatra downstairs who would like this office. The last time the University moved me, it was total discombobulation! Books and files lost for years. Some still haven’t turned up.”

Harper’s office was daunting in itself: a lapidarian wonderland of books, mail, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and a half-century’s gallery of word processing technology—from a ribbon typewriter to a brand new flat-screen computer.

Others have described their first encounters with Professor Harper as something between an intellectual shakedown, which serves to confirm one’s sense of ignorance, and an oracular rant.

“A generally pathetic parade,” Professor Harper began, as I tentatively sat down. “But maybe not all of you are trifling. You were born in Brighton? You studied with Saul Bellow? And your father is a running coach?”

I nodded, and the Neo-Socratic dialogue began. What became blushing clear, in that first meeting, was how little I knew about contemporary poetry. Like a giant bald stone gradually coming into view in the middle of a deciduous forest, my ignorance grew by widening proportions through each round of questions.

“Now who wrote ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’? ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’? Have you studied *any* Auden or Yeats, young lady?”

I shook my head.

“I see. When I met W. H. Auden in Christopher Isherwood’s class at Los Angeles State, I asked him to recite ‘September 1, 1939’ and he did. It was remarkable. So take a look at that poem! *Today*, Ms. Treseler! And Yeats—he is the premier elegist of the twentieth century. You need to have him *by heart* if you plan to write a poem someday about the death of your goldfish, understand?”

I nodded, vigorously. My sense of the genre had been formed by Virgilian Latin, witticisms from Pope, dollops of Metaphysical conceit, and proper drills in Shakespeare. My knowledge of literature, however, hit an abrupt cul-de-sac around 1945. I knew Eliot’s Prufrockian, peach-eating existentialism, but nothing of the High Church in the *Four Quartets*. I knew a little Paul Dunbar and Langston Hughes. And I’d memorized anthology selections of the three female American poets taken seriously, before 1950: Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop. But I had little sense—outside the limericks of Ogden Nash—of how poetry related to a living language.

The Professor asked about my background in sports, which led to the story of my accident. Before I knew it, I’d told him about my secret room in the library with its supine “chair.” His brown eyes widened with attention. “There are *distinguished* emeritus professors who’ve been on a waiting list for years trying to get a room up there. Third floor? That’s prime real estate, young lady. This is serious—you’re still recuperating from that surgery?”

I nodded. Too shy to meet his gaze, I studied the book bindings on the shelf just past his shoulder: a Yeats compendium, the diaries of Christopher Isherwood, a biography of Lincoln, and Heaney’s *Station Island*.

“I bet you’re trying to make sense of all this, your hurt leg,” he said, shifting in his chair and angling his gaze. “Alongside your classes, your career ideas, and perhaps the ‘twenty-something

male,' that bizarre version of the human mammal. Now, do you know what Freud wrote about the assimilation of trauma?"

I shook my head.

"Add that to your homework. Also, find out where Freud puts forth this insight: that love and work are the two requisites for an informed life. Now, in the meantime, tell me about Saul Bellow."

The interview took three-quarters of an hour, and when I left I had no assurance—no indication, really—that I had earned Professor Harper's consideration. The following Wednesday, when I found my name on the typed class list, my heart leapt like a fish in a wooden bucket, full of floppy hope in being plucked from the general, indistinct current of things.

As Harper's student, research assistant, and "tutee," I spent the next three years scurrying across campus before seven o'clock in the morning, attending his early morning office hour with the diligence of an analysand. Harper gave me compass points to guide my library hours: Keats's works, letters, and biographies; the complete works of twenty contemporary American poets; Yeats's poetry and prose; the major coteries of post-war poets; intensifying doses of Adrienne Rich, Rita Dove, Maxine Kumin, Anne Sexton, and Heather McHugh. But it was our hours of interlocution that suggested a steadying way forward. Harper is legendary for the intensity and endurance of his conversation, and I was not the first to discover that his mind is as encyclopediac as his bookshelves, that he has an uncanny recall of seemingly everything he has read. In any given visit, he would quote passages of Wordsworth, Hardy, and Browning alongside Hayden, Rich, Rukeyser, and Levine. Mixing remarks about prosody and literary biography with historical curios, editorialized news, and teasing banter, he filled that third-floor atelier with an expansive melody of thought.

Eventually I found the gumption to speak myself, and our back-and-forth about Frank Bidart's dramatic monologues, John Matthias's gnomic pastorals, Ralph Ellison and Saul Bellow's shared house on the Hudson River, and the phantasmagoria of James Wright's Ohio made literary study seem pragmatically alive. In my other literature classes, the language of the academy—pristine, technical, cleverly detached—often displaced the intimacy I had grown up seeking in books. As my academic parent, Harper bridged

this breach, blending the bibliographic reach of a scholar with a poet's restive and deeply personal engagement.

He also knew exactly how to get my goat. "You'll waste your twenties," he would say, teasingly, a four-word challenge that never failed to spark my will to disprove him. I always left his office with a new list of assignments that sent me burrowing into the library stacks, digging through archives, and writing well into the evening. By the end of four years, I had a critical thesis, a novella, and a collection of poetry; the last two won monetary prizes, which eased the necessity from what the Professor called (somewhat worriedly) my "odd jobbery." I never went back to the divorcée's gaseous lawnmower.

In those years, whenever I appeared at Harper's door looking tired or a little glum, a banana or a Baby Ruth candy bar invariably sailed across his desk. Often, it arrived with a maxim: "Remember that persona is the first piece of art." "Learn to judge your efforts by what's already on the library shelves." "The first rule of teaching is: do no injury. The first rule of being a student is: *don't* leave home without breakfast—you can't get by on adrenaline." "If you've got a poem or a story coming on, *find a way*. A poem is worth feigning a head cold." And, "Remember what Yeats said, 'Memories are old identities.' Occasionally a poet can inhabit them, put them to use." Like parochial school Beatitudes—"Hold the door for adults," "Don't call Belinda 'frog-face,'" "Drink all your milk at lunchtime"—Harper's adages stuck in the mind like aesthetic commandments, ways in which he himself managed to curb the dark unruly work of art into the daily clothes of application, routine, and a cautious respect for the complexity of others.

When Ruth Kaplan, the President of the Poetry Society of America, awarded Michael Harper the Robert Frost Medal for a lifetime of achievement in poetry (the Society's highest honor), she noted his legacy as "a deeply respected teacher, mentor, and editor, and—supremely—as a poet." In an age in which poets increasingly find a patron in the Academy, Professor Harper provides a paradigm of how the twinned life—as a dedicated teacher, as a consummate literary artist—might be achieved. Beside Harper's ten books of poetry, edited collections, and some of poetry's highest honors, there is a growing list (from four generations) of published novel-

ists, poets, playwrights, and young professors who credit his tutelage for their beginning.

In the ten years I have known Professor Harper, we have stayed in touch via e-mail, visits in Providence, telephone calls, and the occasional typed postcard, a Harper specialty. The first Harper postcard arrived from the MacDowell artists' colony in New Hampshire about a month after I had graduated from Brown. I had taken a job as a technical writer at an architecture firm in Providence, and I was already missing school. "HCT: Happy Bastille Day!" began Harper's note. "Living in the house featured on the front of the card—with a roommate. They do not leave the old revolutionary in the woods alone (smile)." He went on to detail what he was reading, writing, and playing on the turntable. "Hope you are thriving and enjoying your days," it concluded, with a postscript suggesting that I show the postcard, which featured an award-winning residence at MacDowell, to the architects who were my employers.

About a month later, I finally replied. I was despondent, convinced, with a publisher's rejection of my novella and the humdrum exhaustion of making a living, that I would never find a way to write and sustain myself. Besides, I only had another nine years of my "twenties" to waste. Harper's response came quickly and was medicinal. In that letter, he wrote about his year at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he found the psychodynamics of his workshop classes complicated and intensified by half-hidden racism. He had arrived in Iowa City in early January without a winter coat, and he struggled to find housing in a city that was still implicitly segregated. He also worked his own set of inglorious odd jobs—tutoring student athletes and hawking pennants at football games—in order to subsist. His letter concluded: "I learned to 'bide my time'; you bide yours; the best is yet to come."

I have yet to earn Harper's generous prophecy. But when, due to teaching constraints, I could not attend the Frost Medal award ceremony this April, I asked Professor Harper if we might arrange another office hour. Only this time, I would conduct the interview.

Heather Treseler: You've discussed your dual commitment to writing as "a black poet and an American poet." Would you say that this has heightened your investment, as a literary artist, in Keats's Negative Capability?

Michael Harper: Perhaps I'm not easily understood, even in my poems, which demand reading and rereading. Sometimes the poet is not necessarily the best commentator. "Don't Explain," Billie Holiday's wondrous song rendition comes to mind. When I was young, I was often the token in classes, literature and writing. I made up for this "aside" by doing my own reading, often in the open stacks, at Los Angeles State College.

HT: Could you describe your high school experience?

MH: At Dorsey High School, I was not allowed to read aloud in Latin class and I remember distinctly hearing no discussion of *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954. I also wrecked the family auto the night before high school graduation. (No poems about any of this, you'll notice.)

I was still riding my bicycle to school as a kid with a paper route. I always wanted to get out of my father's house and into my own.

HT: What were you reading back then?

MH: I read Keats as an undergraduate with Norman Fruman, who taught me criticism, and wrote a book on Coleridge called *The Damaged Archangel*. We fought a lot about Plato and Aristotle, Platinus, Samuel Johnson, and Wordsworth. I had read Pope and Dryden in a class taught by Paul Zall, who also taught me Milton. English poetry was not palatable to my ear. Already I was reading the modernists: Williams, Eliot, Pound.

HT: After graduating from L.A. State, you continued your education at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Was it difficult to leave Los Angeles and its familiar milieu for Iowa City?

MH: Iowa was hard for me, bad timing: I wanted to go to Paris after undergraduate school. My politics were not fully formed, but already "The White Negro" by Norman Mailer was not my notion of clarity in cultural commentary. (*Esquire* had held a special fiction symposium on campus the semester before I arrived, [featuring] Mailer, Philip Roth, and James Baldwin.) Much of what I read about race was barbarous and ill-conceived. Early in my writing life I'd

heard master musicians; I wanted to do what they were doing in my “area” of literature. So, I wrote one-act plays with Lester “Pres” Young as the main protagonist. The problem was Pres’s idiom of speech: anarchic, original, profane.

HT: I’ll ask a very general question: how does race influence aesthetics?

MH: Race is the most debilitating factor in my life in America. Look at what we have with Obama now: distortion everywhere. It’s the same in aesthetic discourse. Among publishers and editors one is always placed in a position of begging, of having to explain.

In all my years at L.A. State College, I worked in the post office, part-time. This was my real education, working the facing table, or in Airmail with people older and wiser than myself. I always carried a book, which I read on breaks. One day Charles Mingus’s older sister, who worked in Airmail, candidly told me that I was surrounded by PhDs and not to act too studious with my elders; I was only part-time and many around me had read Dostoevsky, but were too well-mannered to disillusion me with my absorption with books. I took this all in stride since my father worked in the same building in the registry section. Surely he was checking on me without my knowing, though he never mentioned his colleagues at home. Of course many writers had worked in the post office, including Richard Wright, whose short stories were a great influence on me early.

HT: Do racial politics bear upon the private act of composition?

MH: I am used to being approached as an individual, at least in poetry; and one learns to immerse oneself in individual poems, and in chronologies set out in books. I love the idea of problem-solving in the act of composition. Sometimes I have no words for what is happening, but my immersion in it is daunting; sometimes I discover nuances of meaning and discourse that are revelations. I try to hone this processing into good poems. A good poem is a true poem. Often it cannot be distilled into a slogan, or an easy thesis. Argument is not the only way to resolve a problem, or even formulate the issues. What is mutual affinity and true exchange is seldom

easily come by. School was the first instance of this anomaly, but I never had a mentor. This was liberation.

HT: So who were your early literary models, as you forged a lyric voice?

MH: Frost's "Sound and Sense" made a certain sense to me. He was working toward a syllabic tonality that was most American, idiomatic, and local. And he paid attention to how people talked: to one another, and to oneself. I had also begun reading African novels before there was any program, or any notion of Black Studies. But the American politic came to demand it. Race is always a factor in America. It begins with the Constitution and the three-fifths clause; hence, my book, *Honorable Amendments* (1995). The question of form, idiom, and content is an artistic question: literature is a study in comparative humanity. It is not an accident that *Honorable Amendments* begins with Ulysses S. Grant, in a poem of indirection suggested by Mark Twain.

HT: Your poem, "Blue Ruth: America" (1971) depicts the nation in a hospital bed. Have we begun to reckon history as etiology, as this poem seems to do? If so, would you say that the "patient" is now in a more stable condition than it was thirty years ago? Has the nature of our country's "disease" changed or advanced since 1971?

MH: A reading of "Ruth's Blues," a poem in twenty parts, later published in *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* (1971) produced this comment from Ishmael Reed: "Harper, everybody in your poetry seems to live in the emergency ward." I think he meant that as a compliment; he'd read the book. To answer your question, the patient is in cardiac arrest.

HT: I don't mean to press, but could you say more about how we are, as a nation, in cardiac arrest?

MH: When I published Robert Hayden's *American Journal* in 1978, in limited edition by Effendi Press, I had to buy a press to get it published. The title poem, "American Journal," features an extraterrestrial who comes to visit us during the bicentennial year. Hayden

says, “America, as much a problem in metaphysics as it is an earthly entity.” And later: “technologists, their shamans.” His poem was a masterly critique of our self-anointment as a supreme democracy with its many contradictions of race, poverty, color, xenophobia: the land of the free and the home of the brave.

HT: Roland Johnson, your maternal grandfather, was a well-respected Canadian physician. As an undergraduate, you fulfilled pre-med course requirements before switching to literature. Could you comment on the potential role of the poet as a diagnostician, as a physician?

MH: Dr. Roland Rufus Johnson delivered me at home: 902 Lafayette Avenue, in Brooklyn, New York. My mother was a doctor’s daughter and the first daughter of her generation. In my teens, we called her “the witch doctor” because she knew a miscellany of facts and fictions, and she was quick to respond. She taught me to read before kindergarten and thought I was born with ESP, which I quickly submerged in meeting the outside world.

HT: When did you first consider medical school?

MH: It was assumed, in my family, that I would study medicine. I passed the Regents exam for the three best academic schools in New York City, but at the end of the eighth grade my family moved to Los Angeles, and my high school education was a mix of emotional upset, no counseling, and Lowell’s maxim: “these are the tranquilized ’50s and I am forty.” Robert Bone was the first critic to point to this loss of neighborhood, Brooklyn in my case, as a gift: it gave me my subject matter.

HT: In your poetry, the neighborhood is often metonymy for the nation. And in the epistolary memoir of your father, *I Do Believe in People* (2005), an arc of American history is evident in the stories of a single family tree. What can be gained from reading history this way?

MH: My grandmother, Alice, was the youngest of five. They were all Braxtons, born in New York. Their father, an ex-slave, James

Randolph Braxton, was born in Orange Court House, Virginia, and my mother always said that we descended from Carter Braxton, the white slaveholder, who signed the Declaration of Independence. To become a diagnostician of society is to hunt for kin among the ledgers of animals at the University of Virginia archives. James Braxton was said to be an octoroon, but we have no birth date for him. He died in 1903. He had bought two brownstones in Brooklyn: paid cash. Ellison's "how to trace people" always meant a lot to me. This begins with family.

HT: I noticed in your newest book, *Use Trouble* (2008), that you have a poem called "Public Letters."

MH: Oh yes, because one of the things I'm trying to get people to understand is that we need public rhetoric, which is one of the reasons why we're having so much trouble with Obama, because he is eloquent *in the public theater*, talking about consequential things. And they are used to sound bites! But he's serious, and there's a standard out there in Lincoln's politics and rhetoric. Lincoln wrote most of his own speeches.

HT: As a poet, how do you understand the Iraq War?

MH: I would answer the question with a question: Why did we fight the Vietnam War? I read a book on world resources published by Cal Tech Press in the early '50s called *The Next Ninety Years*. At that time the USA was 6% of the world's population and was consuming more than 60% of the world's natural resources. I applied for a passport in December, 1960; I received a draft notice instead. I had to get into grad school instantly, which is why I went to Iowa. I have been out of sequence in my *miseducation* ever since.

HT: And how about the country's domestic situation?

MH: I had a student, Ron Herndon, whom I taught at Reed College in 1968, who's remained in Portland, Oregon for decades teaching children; he's the local leader and spokesperson for Head Start. (I wrote a poem for him in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*. It concerns his leadership in a student protest.) He recently sent a memo about

President Bush cutting money from the nation's budget. The "War on Poverty" was a myth. Some few people profited, but almost all children remain in poverty if they are born poor. Our cities are the most segregated in the world. Our neighborhoods are still largely gerrymandered. The "Ruth's Blues" section of *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* is the first part of my coming to terms with racism and segregation, nation-wide, and within my own family.

The gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is widening. Slavery never really ended, and the Confederacy won the Civil War. Look where our prisons are located. It is a huge industry: black males, mostly illiterate, make up the largest percentages. Despite these inequities, some people pull themselves above the dross. Hayden's "For a Young Artist" comes to mind.

HT: How does working in the academy affect the writer's work?

MH: From 1975 to 1985, I was director of the Creative Writing Program at Brown. It was full-time, and of course that costs a lot. And I was dealing with some very, very crazy and mentally challenged people.

HT: And this craziness was among the faculty, or the students, or both?

MH: Well the students were not difficult, but the students of course reflect their teachers. And if you have a collision, say, between two fiction writers: a Verlin Cassill on the one hand, and a John Hawkes on the other...well, aesthetic values mean everything, and that was the first thing I had to learn at Iowa. I sat down and read all the manuscripts of those who had preceded me. All of them in poetry, many of them in fiction, including *The Glass Menagerie*. Which was written by...?

HT: Tennessee Williams.

MH: Yeah! And as it turned out, that was an *undergraduate play* that they turned down! And I thought to myself, "Jesus." The names I

kept hearing were Flannery O'Connor and Philip Roth, who had just won the National Book Award.

HT: For *Goodbye, Columbus*?

MH: Yes, I had read this book before. Then I met his wife. He's married to a woman with two children not his own. I'm in two different workshops and they always put the work to review in the vestibule of the workshop building. One of those days, I was coming in the door and I ran into Mrs. Roth. So I said "hello" and just went about my business. And she stopped me. She said, "Isn't your name Michael Harper? Philip has been *talking* about you." I said, "Oh." And she said, "Yeah, I think he's afraid of you."

HT: Really?

MH: She just said it, straight out. "You know," she said, "Philip and I are going to the Iowa Union," which was a restaurant at the top of the hill. She said, "I'd like you to come along...how would you feel about that?"

"Well," I said, "there are two answers to your question. First thing is, I've got no problem going to dinner, but I wouldn't allow you to buy a meal for me and I'm on a very small budget. I'm selling pennants at football games in order to pay my way, so an evening out to me is a big deal. But I'll take a rain check. It's not personal."

HT: Where did things go from there?

MH: I'm not sure of what transpired after I left. She was just being civil. But at the same time, I was twenty-two years old, having just dealt with the draft board, just gotten off a plane.

HT: In the middle of the winter, no?

MH: Yes, in the middle of wintertime. It was twenty-five degrees below zero when I met Paul Engle in his office after taking the mail route on Ozark Airlines from Chicago. And he had his daughter, Laura, with him—she must have been about fifteen. And he intro-

duced me to her and I said “hi” and didn’t think any more about it, because to me she was just a little kid. But Engle looked at me in a way that white males look at black men when they want to find out if they need to protect their daughters. I just picked it up. And I didn’t say anything, though I was super-sensitive about it.

HT: While you were in the Workshop, did you feel pressure to adopt a particular style?

MH: The most important thing that was going on during my time at Iowa was that people were trying to break away from rhyme and meter, and they were beginning to write in syllabics. Donald Justice, if you look at some of his work after *Summer Anniversaries* (1960), which was his first book, you can see that he was doing this. And Charles Wright, who came after me at Iowa the next semester, had his own system.

HT: Were you persuaded to try syllabics?

MH: Well, people were beginning to experiment with syllabic form, but this struck me as being incredibly mechanical, even though I knew that Frost had done this and counting syllables is not all that difficult to do. (See “In Dives’ Dive” in Frost’s *A Further Range*.) But to come to the writing of a poem, and to have the system—let’s say you’re going to write in odd syllables, let’s say they’re going to be seven—is to me, to cut off the possibilities, to not give independence to what I would call the *nuance* of composition, when you’re in the moment and you’re no longer concerned about display. You’re not showing off, you’re just trying as best you can to communicate, even if the reader is someone who isn’t at all like you.

In fiction I was influenced by Joyce, in playwriting, O’Neill. Early on I wrote some one-act plays with central characters who mastered the idiom of “slang,” or be-bop talk: the master was Lester “the President” Young.

HT: Had you always been interested in cultural idioms?

MH: At a very young age I knew that idiom was important, especially for minorities. The Jews had their *Forward* in Yiddish. We had

black newspapers, the black church, and *The Crisis* from the NAACP. The Irish had the Mass and unions in most cities. I have always struggled with race, ideology, aesthetics, and literary forms—including the inventions of new ones.

HT: What else happened at Iowa?

MH: Well, I had this war with Roth. You know, nine units of “C” drive most people out of graduate school, never to come back.

HT: Nine units of “C”?

MH: I was taking nine units of coursework: six in fiction and three in Roth’s Continental literature seminar. It was my first semester at Iowa and I was in between stanzas in my life, having fought the Des Moines “physical” draft board’s effort to draft me into the military.

HT: What was this “war” with Roth about?

MH: Roth had the habit of assuming that “all blacks knew each other.” He kept asking me about Baldwin, who was born in 1924 in Harlem. I was born in Brooklyn in 1938. I felt that he was being provocative, and I was in no mood to be accused of plagiarism, which was his affront to my paper on *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. He didn’t realize that I had read Golding’s books that were printed in England, three novels that Isherwood had lent me as I studied the fable at L.A. State.

So, after my first term at Iowa, Isherwood came to my parents’ house with Henri Coulette, in different cars. It was summertime and I was working as a lifeguard for the city. Isherwood came to my parents and asked, “Is Michael going to return to Iowa?” And my mother said, “Of course.” She was serving “Ish” tea with her best china. Coulette and Bob Mezey, who came in separate cars, were not teetotalers but were respectful. My parents in their bungalow on Orange Drive were used to holding court; my mother was an imperious figure, sometimes devastating in her commentary.

HT: Did you return to Iowa?

MH: I was not going to return at all. At that time I had no fantasy about a college teaching post. Coulette thought I was angry because right next to the place where I finally found an apartment was a barbershop in which I could not get my hair cut. And the black athletes themselves lived off of campus. The university rented houses for them, and when they recruited they had these “salt-and-pepper parties”: all black guys and all white girls. Yes, that was recruitment. If I ever write a novel or a memoir, I will talk about some of these anomalies—and also about living in a garage behind a black family with a white roommate, Johnny Hodgkins from Mineola, NY.

HT: What was Iowa City like in 1961?

MH: Most of the things I learned at Iowa had nothing to do with the Workshop. Kennedy was being inaugurated. The Freedom Riders were protesting and being beaten, but Kennedy was saying nothing. Freedom Riders were coming to campus and they would put on these rallies trying not only to raise consciousness but also to raise money, and I was deeply involved in that, in just picking up the atmosphere, and avoiding the Young Socialists’ League.

HT: It sounds incredibly galvanic.

MH: There was the whole question, of course, of what I was doing on my own: reading and writing. Not hanging out. I didn’t have enough money to be hanging out. I did go to Kenney’s Bar, which was the literary bar with a very limited jukebox. As for how I inter-related with people? The graduate students who had families were staying in the old barracks where they had accommodations for wives and children. Those were contiguous to the barracks where we met in the classroom, so they would have beer parties and such and I would go over there. But I got sick of them; I got sick of the gossip. They were basically children. It wasn’t that I was all that sophisticated, but I was a bicoastal guy. So my ambitions were different. If I had had a car, I would have been spending every weekend in Chicago listening to live music. Or in the Quad Cities which were just fifty miles away, according to Lawson Inada, who liked gutbucket speakeasies in Moline or Davenport.

HT: Well, you had been raised in the city.

MH: Of course. The notion of sitting and drinking six-packs of beer and talking stuff with white guys *and no music* was kind of silly. And this kind of literary talk was basically gossip; it wasn't technical. So I realize now, as I think about it, that there was little I learned from them, though I wasn't into disliking people. It was just that I found I had very little in common with them. Once I finally got an apartment, Inada was right next door, and he had a tremendous record collection. And so we became inseparable, talking to one another.

HT: I'm thinking about your experiences in Iowa and California during the Sixties, and I wonder if you could speak about the connection (or disjunction) between public persona and private inscape. In one of your poems for Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Poet's Voice," you suggest that her inner world is irreducible to a moniker or a public caricature. I'll quote two of the couplets here:

Known by detractors and sycophants
alike as "Mother Afrika"

but she remains a citizen in daily
interiors of unassailable synapse.

MH: Do you understand what I'm talking about when I say, "Mother Afrika"?

HT: I think so.

MH: There were certain events that took place in the Sixties, which were canonical. And Gwendolyn Brooks was called, behind her back, "Mother Afrika" because of an incident which took place at Fisk University, where Robert Hayden was at the time. I was not there, so I didn't witness it, but there were people in attendance including Nikki Giovanni, who was a student there.

HT: And you had a long friendship with Gwendolyn.

MH: She was the person who gave me my career: she took my book out of the slush pile and insisted that the University of Pittsburgh Press publish my book, even though I didn't win the prize. She wrote me that wonderful letter—"YOU WERE MY CLEAR WINNER," in capital letters, on pink or pink-peach paper. Of course it was sent to my mother and father's house in Los Angeles, the return address I'd given for the manuscript. When I got home, I knew that my mother had already read the letter.

HT: You're kidding.

MH: No I'm not—I said to her, "Well, Mom, what do they say?" She started laughing, and she said, "What do you mean, what did they say?" And I said, "I know you've already put the letter in the freezer and have opened it, so why don't you just read it to me?" A couple of days later the Press themselves wrote me and said they'd like to publish my book.

HT: The University of Pittsburgh?

MH: Yes. The contest was the US Prize and it was for two thousand dollars. It was money I could have used. I didn't win, but Gwendolyn was behind it, and that was enough—certainly enough for me. Having a book published meant that I could put so many other things behind me. And the timing was correct. I was reviewed in *Time* magazine in 1970 and Jesse Jackson was on the cover. Ralph Ellison wrote the cover essay, "What Would America Be Without Blacks?", and I was nominated for the National Book Award.

HT: Had you sent the book out before?

MH: When I first started teaching, I had publications but I had no book. It was Philip Levine who insisted that I send the book out, because I had already sent the book to Wesleyan, which was his publisher. Wesleyan had turned down the book, saying that they "already had a black poet." This was Clarence Major's book, *Swallow the Lake*. So when I got it back, I just decided the hell with it: I'll put it away. And it was Phil who said, "Do not put that manuscript

aside! Put it right in an envelope again and send it to Pittsburgh,” which I did. Had it not been for him, I wouldn’t have done it.

HT: I’m thinking of the drama of the mail, of your mother’s opening of Brooks’s letter, of your own graveyard shifts in the L.A. post office while you were in college, and of the epistolary sources of some famous poems. With e-mail, the letter seems to be a dying art form, a kind of *techné* from the past. Could you talk about the connection between letters and poems?

MH: I use the epistolary poem because all of literature *begins* with the letter form. Is that not so? What is the epistolary novel? A novel of letters, right? And Mr. Hayden writes that stunning poem called “Letter to Phyllis Wheatley.” It’s in the letter form. And there have also been collections of letters written between poets; for example, James Wright had an exchange with Leslie Silko. Whenever poets have an exchange, they end up talking about things in code, and oftentimes it’s about craft.

HT: In *Use Trouble*, there are several poems about your trip to Africa through which the title of your book attains especial and specific resonance. For instance, in “Zambia,” you describe being detained for several hours in South Africa, a risky place for an American to be in 1977. Why had you decided to go there?

MH: In 1960 in March, the Sharpeville incident took place in which people protested against pass laws in South Africa. And they had shot these black protesters in the back as they were running away from the police: they killed sixty-nine of them.

My great-grandfather had bought land in a town called Evaton, which is only eight miles away from Sharpeville. On that land, the first institution for the education of blacks in South Africa was built: the Wilberforce Institute. My great-grandfather not only bought the land where that institute was constructed, but the first dormitory was named after Fanny Coppin, who was the wife of my great-grandfather’s best friend, Bishop Coppin. So you can see why, when I was given the opportunity in 1977 to go to Africa, the first thing I did was to ask if I could go to *South Africa*.

HT: But wasn't that at great risk?

MH: The woman who had called me was a Brown graduate named Sharon Wilkerson, working for the State Department. She said, "About half the countries you want to go to you can't go to. We don't have relations with them, and we can't guarantee your security." While I was negotiating all this, the word came back that I *could* get a "removable" visa to go to South Africa. To go to South Africa as an individual meant that you had to become an "Honorary White," that was the actual designation. They gave you a visa that could be taken out of your passport, because for you to visit other African countries, a stamp on your passport from South Africa would mean that you probably could not get access to, let's say, Nigeria.

HT: What happened?

MH: I went to nine countries: Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Kenya, and Liberia, and I was detained in Soweto, South Africa for a few hours. I was there "in country" for two weeks. But I also got a chance to see my great-grandfather's house, the house he lived in, in Evaton, which he had rented to some old people, who "remembered" me. When they first saw my face, they said, "You look like Bishop Johnson."

These people were in their nineties. The woman said, "We remember him from when we were children. And we remember where he lived." So they took me into town and showed me his house, a couple of streets away from the school. The Institute was closed because so many of the people who were protesting against apartheid had been educated there, including members of the A.N.C. and P.A.C.

HT: You have described yourself as "an initiate of the *subjective correlative*; that is, a slant affinity to modernism as practiced by the ancestors." I'm thinking of Eliot's objective correlative and the notion that emotion ought to be sublimated into an impersonal image or description. Could you talk about what a "subjective correlative" entails?

MH: First of all, I'm going directly in the teeth of Eliot, because I think that he was wrong on many things, including race and how to read canonical texts like "All God's Childun Got Wings" by Eugene O'Neill.

What I was trying to get at, I think, is tied to the notion of exegesis or explication; exegesis coming from the Greek, and Biblical in the sense that one begins with a *literal* interpretation. Certainly "Ruth's Blues" is the story of one who gives comfort to another tribe than her own. You'll notice that the lineation is various... so, I'm saying something about the ways in which a poem can be structured. I'm also saying that there are things like "voicings," or what I tried to suggest in the monologue-and-dialogue business earlier, where *one is always responsible for the speaker*. But the speakers are allowed to vary.

HT: Could you give us an example?

MH: When I wrote "Elvin's Blues," I deliberately knew that it was going to be a monologue, because I wanted a character speaking like Robert Browning, but not using Browning's idiom. But the idiom being used was not only going to be a musician's. There would be a succinctness and a profanity in it. Many of the stances of artists in a racist society, implicitly or explicitly, require an anarchic tendency. This includes a tendency to go at one's competitors directly and masculinity is connected with it. Why is it that you've got all these Type A personalities in jail? It's because they can't bend. Therefore, they are going to be sacrificed. To survive as an artist in America is always an endurance contest, particularly if you are black. Musicians are always on the front lines. They are the pioneers.

HT: Are the difficulties that artists face indicative of a larger pattern in American history?

MH: It takes us back to just how bad slavery must have been, such that we can't even talk about it. The writing is so poor, so elliptical, and so apologetic, except in the spirituals and in the Blues. So, all that to say that *there is a schizophrenia in the language as it is formed*. I think of this in terms of Prospero and Caliban. This is the speech of the outsider: "You taught me language and I curse you for it."

It's very important, the way in which one gives oneself permission to speak. Form is a vessel, a container that carries the essence, whatever that is. I think that we are too formulaic in thinking—well there's that famous line of Auden's, quoted here in Brodsky's collection of essays. "Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, force us to have second thoughts, free us from the fetters of self." Poetics praxis, or all the weight of what one knows in the act of composition, doesn't necessarily entail just what we *consciously* know.

So this is a long ungracious trip here on my part to explain that when I take risks in the public domain, I am trying to expand the dialogue by using references to sacred books which are not English or American. When Hayden decides to write "The Snow Lamp: An Eskimo Song Poem," he's saying "my aesthetics take me *this* way. I am an Inuit abiding a tradition as another human, and a poet as well."

HT: Hayden does this to invoke the richness of another tradition?

MH: Yes, and to capture something that he *hears*. You have to consider the way in which he adapts all forms: when he writes a sonnet, it's not regular. When he writes a ballad, it's not traditional. He adapts a formal pattern to his own devices. When he writes an epic, he's got a whole different way of telling the story, as in "Middle Passage." That need to innovate, to improvise, takes tremendous courage, particularly if you have been as studious as Hayden was in learning the craft. As he said to me several times, the only teacher he would submit to was Auden.

But here's the point I'm trying to make: what one hears and what one sees are sometimes in contradiction. That's what Sterling Brown knew—he used vernacular and historical experience alongside his knowledge of Chaucer, of Shakespeare. You have to have the *whole* tradition at hand to "conjure" the folk in "dramatic portraiture."

HT: So it was Sterling Brown's scholarly sensibility—his knowledge of several literary traditions—that allowed him to create a character like "Slim Greer"?

MH: Yes, because he had this authority, which was one of the reasons why I selected his book. I had heard him read at Brown in 1973, and I have a copy of that reading: Sterling read for almost two hours and his introduction was about twenty minutes long. He talked about Frost, about Robinson, about Sandburg. He was very much for “the contemporary and for the new,” but he also knew what was classical. Therefore, his issue with some of the modernists like William Carlos Williams was that they didn’t know enough about those most closely at hand, like blacks in Paterson, New Jersey.

HT: Professor, your reputation as a teacher spans almost five generations now. But teaching today’s “wired” college kids to develop an *ear* for poetry and a knowledge of the literary tradition must be difficult indeed.

MH: Yes, and what I’m trying to say to them, over and over again, is that “Being Human” is in capital letters. When Bob Hayden says *human*, when Sterling Brown says, “my standards are not white, my standards are not black, my standards are *human*” and I play for you his reading at Williams College and I play for you his talk at Williams, what are you hearing beyond what you’re reading on the page? I mean, are you hearing the human being behind it?