

September 3, 2012

Robert and Desirée Yarber  
President/Operations Officer - Morris Graves Foundation  
5241 Tompkins Hill Road  
Loleta, CA 95551

Dear Robert and Desirée Yarber,

1) **My specific interest** in the life and work of Morris Graves comes out of the attraction to the praxis of art as a “soul-building” effort. I am led by the Michael McClure quote, “If poetry and science cannot change one’s life, they’re meaningless.” I see Mr. Graves’ work as a statement of the moment and of the hunger for liberation, which makes it at once a rare thing in American art as well as a very strong attractor field. That he is one of the few Seattle artists to achieve world wide notoriety is important, but not as important as the *way* in which he achieved that, with an artistic gesture that seeks to transcend the mundane elements of man’s nature and move toward the noble human impulse and the levels beyond that. That he looked to the East for inspiration as early as the 1930s put him way ahead of a trend that would intensify throughout his life and beyond it, providing meaning where the industry-generated-culture (anti-culture) of the West would surely not suffice.

2) **Responses: a)** There is a Graves manuscript on display at the downtown Seattle Public Library the title of which might be *Silence Over-Worded*. To place the context, I’ll reproduce it here:

**Silence over-worded:**--This is It--now--perfect--everchanging--illusory--.

We each project our Spirit's environment--private, apparently, beyond mind's comprehension--yet including the universe + its Humanity--indebtedness + responsibility within the knowledge that the "Creation" has not been created--the interplay of paradoxes which governs our subjective-journey-through Deity--our journey back from sense's-world-of nature to that conscious recognition that we are our undefinable Origin.

Only when conditioned by a "Vision of God," + its resultant detachment, does man significantly use the language-of-his-actions to praise his journey's

environment-- + to worship the miracle-of-the-illusion of his consciousness seeking + finding Rest.----"Yes--so it is--so be it--Amen." All is Void.

From the title we get a sense of what may have come to Mr. Graves in meditation, or in a similar state, an effort to put words to the ineffable. There are many similarities in this statement to my own process and to the kind of process I have been investigating since before 1995, when the poet Michael McClure brought the Charles Olson essay *Projective Verse* to my attention. To sum up that stance toward poem-making I would use a Denise Levertov quote: *Form is never more than a REVELATION of content.* (My capital letters.) What it suggests is that, as artists, we can sing from our selves, or we can transcend that sense by a process of surrender to the divine, or what Graves calls *Deity*.

From the second line: "We each project our Spirit's environment--private, apparently, beyond mind's comprehension--yet including the universe..." I am reminded that the subtitle of Olson's essay: "Composition by Field" and the title of a lecture William Carlos Williams gave at the University of Washington in 1948 *The Poem as a Field of Action*. I believe that, in composing spontaneously, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, open to impulses beyond the notion of one's "self" (certainly to a sense of self one would describe as "non-local") and that the resulting work is more deeply a projection of that self. McClure (again) once said *We swirl out what we are and watch what returns* in his 1974 poem *Rare Angel*. So the poem (or the painting, sculpture, &c) acts as a feedback mechanism, similar to how a scale lets us know how our recent diet and exercise regimen has been. A sort of spiritual check-in. To have such a quest in one's own praxis renders typical American notions of artistic success somewhat irrelevant.

**2 b) The second piece is a 1979 painting entitled: *The Great Blue Heron and the Great Rainbow Trout Yogi in Phenomenal Space, Mental Space and the Space of Consciousness.***

It is a triptych, as the title would indicate, and the images start as a fairly conventional painting, but then turn abstract and colorful. I am taken by this piece because of the three images, the progression in them and the title which (in my view) in part, shows us that since the advent of the camera, painting and art in general has been liberated from direct representation to more fully reflect deeper levels of consciousness and impulses below the superficial level. By the third panel

reds, yellows and sky blues replace the blue gray pastels of the first two panels. In addition, the trout has appeared to merge with the head of the heron and a thick red brushstroke gives the appearance that the heron's wings, or at least one of them, is now flexed. The heron also appears to be looking on the opposite direction from the first two panels, suggesting the attention has been turned completely.

That artists in our age would still be satisfied with a praxis of copying nature, rather than getting in touch with the deep nature inside our deepest self, is one of the great mysteries to me. That there is considerably more color, action and energy at the deeper levels of consciousness is intimated here, at least in my view. That the images are iconic Cascadia images, at least the Great Blue Heron, suggest a deep sense of place, one of the attributes I seek to enhance in my own work. (Hence the focus on Cascadia and its history and culture.) That a view would change 180 degrees with such a focus, or depth of seeing, suggests that we can move to acceptance, gratitude and other deep levels of being by training ourselves to see what is deeper than surface level, that we should, in the words of Allen Ginsberg, be people who *notice what we notice*. The implication here is that one is given the opportunity to develop a deeper consciousness while here on this planet. It is our birthright, but is especially the calling of the true artist in these dark times of whole system transition. Having such a praxis grounds us and, in a humble way, provides a model for other creative seekers.

3) **I have had four previous writing retreats:** two at Centrum in Port Townsend, one at the Whiteley Center on San Juan Island and one at Doe Bay Resort on Orcas Island. While these retreats were productive and memorable, none of these destinations emit the same field that I am sure The Lake has, given the remarkable art and consciousness that has been produced and cultivated there. To have the opportunity to delve deeper into the life and work of Cascadia's most renowned artist can only deepen the depth of my own gesture. I am hoping I will get some Morris Graves poems in my Cascadia serial poem and feel it is not out of line to wish that some of the magic there can rub off on me.

4) **Other retreats:** Centrum, March 2002, October 2004, Whiteley Center, San Juan Island, January 2012, Doe Bay, Orcas Island, May 2012.

5 & 6) **Further thoughts on Personal Philosophies, &c. & How I learned about the Retreat Opportunity:** I think my friend Sam Hamill told me about The Lake and the Woodside Braseth Gallery website had some basic retreat information. **As for #5,** I have written extensively about the Organic approach in poetry. I think I have outlined here how I see the work of Morris Graves reaching a level beyond the self, allied in spirit with Robin Blaser's *Practice of Outside*. The levels reachable by transcending self are much more energetic than those available by staying within the heart and mind and certainly beyond the ego.

But there is an interesting anecdote about the process of composing this application. While I had gathered my materials on Morris Graves in preparation for sitting down and writing this, I had a Morris Berman book at my bedside, *The Twilight of American Culture*. On one or two evenings I wondered why I was reading this book when my work required that I more fully immerse myself in materials on Mr. Graves rather than this apparent sidebar. Well, lo and behold, there appeared a passage from Mr. Berman on one way in which we may get through the inevitable dissolution of the American empire and to a more just and sustainable existence, something that turned out to be quite relevant.

Mr. Berman has a chapter in the book entitled: *The Monastic Option in the Twenty-First Century*. He writes:

I have argued that we are in the grip of structural forces that are the culmination of a certain historical process, so a major change is not likely to be quick or dramatic; but individual shifts in lifeways and values may just possibly act as a wedge that would serve as counterweight to the world of schlock, ignorance, social inequality, and mass consumerism that now defines the American landscape. At the very least these "new monks" or native expatriates, as one might call them, could provide a kind of record of authentic ways of living that could be preserved and handed down, to resurface later on, during healthier times... we are *drowning* in information; hence, what is required is that it be *embodied*, preserved through ways of living. If *this* can get passed down, our cultural heritage may well serve as a seed for a subsequent renaissance.

Mr. Berman then quotes Basho:

Journeying through the world  
To and Fro, to and fro  
Cultivating a small field.

It is my own small field I wish to cultivate more deeply and it is apparent that a stay at The Lake would enhance that, in my view. As an author I interviewed said years ago, *if you do not see auras and wish to, hang out with people who do*. I wish to deepen my own artistic gesture and feel there may be no other place in Cascadia better than The Lake in which to do it.

Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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