

Private Interview with N. Scott MOMADAY¹

Translated from Anne Garrait-Bourrier's *N. Scott Momaday, l'homme-ours: voix et regard* [N. Scott Momaday, *the Man-Bear: Voice and Perspective*] (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2005: pp. 13-19)

[All italicized parentheticals are those of the original French author-interviewer. My few translator-interpolations are in square brackets But I must introduce this translation with a bit of editorializing on my part. The American scholar familiar with Momaday's work (and "voice") will find little here that is new and surprising; the most fascinating aspect of this interview, certainly, is how revelatory it is of the French/European perception of the Native American, in the grand context of U.S. politics—and perhaps how conciliatory N. Scott is regarding some pretty odd questions (though this is perhaps hardly surprising, either).]

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AGB: *Do you consider yourself a "rebel" writer?*

SM: I think that the expression "rebel writer" fits me well in the sense that I violate certain rules in my works . . . in distancing myself from a straight chronology, in building stories within a story, in mixing fiction with non-fiction, in threading different voices together . . . etc. I don't write anything that's conventional. I like to break the norms.

AGB: *Could one say that it's always your own voice that one hears in your writing?*

SM: I am careful, no doubt, in establishing a clear difference between my voice and those of others. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the different voices—those of myth, history, and memory—are distinct, but then they combine into one voice, I think. Mine.

AGB: *What do you think of the term "genocide" as applied to the Indian community? French scholars, like Yves Berger in his latest work, object to the use of this term, with a few exceptions. What do you think?*

SM: The question of genocide is a very difficult one. I can readily agree with Yves when he says that there hasn't been a genocidal "federal policy" in America, at least nothing clearly named as such. The term "removal" has been the euphemism chosen by the politicians. But our history is full of examples of the complete annihilation of tribes. The Puritans' massacre of the Pequots is one example. Likewise, the Sand Creek Massacre and the so-called "Battle" of the Washita River. The total destruction of the

California Indians in the 19th century is a history as shameful as the Holocaust. If that isn't a form of genocide, I don't know what is.

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AGB: *But Yves Berger points out that the U.S. authorities didn't want to destroy the Indians, but rather, contain and subdue them.*²

SM: I think that I've partly responded to that already, but I would add that Yves' words sound a bit like an excessive simplification of the problem, and I think it's necessary to put it all in context. The distinction between "contain" and "destroy" is quite problematic in our history. Indians have been "contained" all the way to the slaughters at Wounded Knee and elsewhere. The list of atrocities is extremely long.

AGB: *In this book, I try to define your fiction as a writing "between the two [spaces]," that is, in that space—to express it more precisely—between being American and being Indian that is "reserved" today for Native Americans. Would you subscribe to this definition of your literary space?*

SM: I would say yes. There is a tension between being Indian and being non-Indian, and I live in that space, and so I know what it's all about. I think that it's possible to find an equilibrium between the two, and I feel at ease in these two worlds in the broadest sense, but it's a fine perception on your part because this reality is not only true for me but for all Indians today. They have a keen sense of their own cultural identity, and I would say that they know how to preserve it against all odds. My father, for example, was subject to more pressures than me because of the generation that he belonged to. He grew up in an exclusively Indian world and had no idea about anything else. All those outside forces came to him later in his life than in mine; I was experiencing them from childhood. It is true in general that my parents' generation had much greater difficulty preserving its cultural identity and being comfortable living in two worlds. I was lucky in this regard because so many Indians still suffer with this problem of identity today.

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AGB: *And not you, though?*

SM: No, not really. But there were moments, in fact, when I felt it difficult to define and to know who I was. . . .

AGB: *You're referring to your childhood here, and to the racism you felt when you lived at Hobbs [New Mexico]?*

SM: At Hobbs, yes, that's right.

AGB: *Was life difficult?*

SM: No, not really. For a child, things aren't really "difficult," but one can sense being different, and I remember that I didn't know exactly who I was . . . but early on, I already knew my abilities, and I didn't lack in self-confidence. I could fight, I was big and strong, and I knew how to survive.

AGB: *Your work is extremely poetic (not only your writing but your paintings and drawings . . .). Poetry seems to take over your work even when it isn't in verse form. Don't you think it's poetry that gives your work that unity and fullness that characterizes it, beyond genres, norms, and styles?*

SM: Yes, absolutely. I appreciate, by the way, the topic that you've chosen for the last part of your book ["Poetic Expression"], emphasizing that poetry is everywhere in my work. I am a poet. I want to be a poet. I think that poetry is the most refined artistic expression, and it's more important to me than other forms of expression. As soon as I can, I try to invest all my writings with a kind of poetic lyricism, and I often succeed.

AGB: *What do you think of the American slogan "E Pluribus Unum"?*

SM: Well, yes, something like "one for all, and all for one"? . . . I suppose that it's a compressed notion of what a democracy is. As a slogan, it's fine. But to live in accord with it, that's another story! I'm not sure that it works, but it's undeniably a fine aspiration.

AGB: *Don't you think that this motto could be applied to your own work, in which a single voice emerges above the multiplicity of identities?*

SM: I hope that's true. In any case, it's something I aspire to in my work, this unity. That it all becomes a synthesis, and {16} that a perspective,³ a voice, a self, an identity emerges from it all . . . full and entire. That would be an excellent thing.

AGB: *And so this motto becomes, in a somewhat ironic fashion, that of Momaday?*

SM: I've never thought about that, consciously. But it's true that it could belong to me as a motto . . . but I have had more than one in my life!

AGB: *Might I conclude, then, that you are more American than Indian?*

SM: *(laughs)* No, you mustn't conclude that! Besides, I find it difficult to distinguish Americans from Indians, because Indians are the most "American" people I know . . . they're the most patriotic of all, however strange that may seem! But I completely understand that people make the distinction "Indians/Americans" . . . but no, I am not more American than Indian . . . to really think about it, I am rather more Indian than . . . non-Indian! But it happens that I am both at the same time.

AGB: *Might one truly say, without misunderstanding you, that Abel and Set are incarnations of what I would call the "Other" in you?*

SM: Yes. I fully subscribe to your notion of the Other. All writing is autobiography, we must write from who we are because that's all we have, and so one could truly say that Abel and Set are, in a certain sense, reflections of myself. Set probably more than Abel, but it works for Abel, too.

AGB: *Do you try to put some distance between you and your characters, to comprehend as objectively as possible the fate of the Indian in modern America?*

SM: Yes . . . yes, distance is essential for objectivity. I try. In working on characters of fiction who are not totally fictional since they are also autobiographical, you need you put them in a territory that isn't yours, in order to see the details and the complex aspects of their personalities. For this reason, it seemed a very delicate thing for me to find a name for them, for example. It was very difficult to establish this distance, at that exact moment. When you are doing autobiography, you go inside yourself and you're dealing with what one of my friends has called "the Burden of Memory," and it's very difficult to get beyond that . . . but you can succeed!

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AGB: *Can you identify with female characters, like Grey, for example?*

SM: *(laughs)* Yes, bears⁴ do that very well! Grey is one of my favorite creations. She was inspired by one of my daughters, very Indian in her features, very dark hair, a very beautiful young woman. And I was thinking of her, in terms of the physical description, in fashioning the character of Grey, and I wanted to make Grey a rebellious human being in a way, with a very strong soul, capable of affirming herself as a woman like she does in the novel; but she asserts herself spiritually even more, because she is a "medicine woman." That fascinates me because, you know, in many ways I am a "medicine man"

myself (*note: this term could just as well have been translated as "healer"*). My father was a "medicine man," that's an essential aspect of Indian culture and identity, and I wanted to invest her with this power. I like to work on female characters, and I think I'm rather successful at it, I couldn't say why. I suppose that I get that from my mother and our very special relationship. I have always preferred the company of women to that of men. I find them intrinsically more interesting. So I like to write about them. Angela, in *House Made of Dawn*, equally fascinated me.

AGB: *She represents Evil for you?*

SM: Yes, I think so. It isn't that I liked her, but I found her interesting and fascinating. I loved working with her. . . . Evil? I'm not sure, really. She isn't an incarnation of Good, certainly; she doesn't walk the straight and narrow path and has a bit of a disturbed spirit.

AGB: *Susan Scarberry-Garcia has delineated in a very convincing fashion the powers of "healing" in your writing. Do you agree with her analysis, and if so, since there is a healing, it's because there also has been a wound. What wound are you talking about? Your own? A nation's? The reader's?*

SM: The question of the wound is an essential one. I think that Susan's book is very intuitive and profound. She has performed a very close reading of *House Made of Dawn* and has noticed things that most previous readers had never seen. She has even uncovered some aspects that I hadn't perceived when I was writing the book! Writing is truly a strange act: you write what your unconscious tells you, and you create things without being conscious of them. It's the {18} mystery and perhaps even the miracle of writing, and I like this dimension of her study, the way in which she captures this miracle. The "healing" aspect is, I think, real. One of the functions of literature is to cure, to heal; and to develop a character as "disabled" as Abel (*there is a pun here impossible to translate*) of course entails the important work of that character's healing. To "write" Abel sets the process of healing in motion, to write the story of Abel leads likewise to a healing . . . yes, I truly think that her analysis is sound and that she is right.

AGB: *And the wound?*

SM: Ah, yes, the wound! Now that's difficult. . . .

AGB: *Yes, you've tried to escape, but I'm returning to it. . . .*

SM: (laughs) Yes, I see. . . . if I can return to Abel, then, he is wounded in his very psyche, in his mind, in his soul, and for a character like him, the healing process is long and full of anguish, which is clear in the book, but there are more profound degrees of being wounded, as you so well perceive. A major part of this wound belongs to me, no doubt: I have been wounded by history: the Indian has suffered persecutions, and so I have suffered, too. I carry that within me. What my ancestors were in the golden age of the Kiowa culture, that was marvelous. We had a radiant, magnificent culture, full of glory, full of bravery . . . everything that one admires in literature. Then it suffered decline, dragged down by a good number of external forces, and it's sad. It shouldn't have happened. Certain atrocities are impossible to forgive. I think about it now and then, and I get angry because of it but, unlike some of my Indian friends, I don't allow myself to be carried away by this anger. I keep it inside me and work it out by writing or speaking.

AGB: *So you are an angry writer?*

SM: Yes, I am angry, and I think that most Indians are; they carry the weight of their anger with them.

AGB: *In contrast to Indians' anger, might one speak of a feeling of guilt on the part of white Americans? Haven't Indians passed outside of History today?*

SM: That's a quite accurate remark. I think that the American mentality is marked by a deep guilt regarding the history of white-Indian relations, because it's a history full of shame. And people feel badly in respect to that, not personally, of course—I don't think one could easily find someone in America who would tell you, "Oh, I feel terribly guilty for what {19} happened to you"—rather, it's expressed in the following fashion: "Oh, that should never have happened; there are others who are obviously responsible, not me, but I deplore all the same what my ancestors did to you, and I'm sorry for it." Given the situation today, it is very difficult, indeed impossible, to generalize about the situation of Indians. There is too much diversity to allow such a generalization; one cannot simply say, Indians aren't as poor as they used to be, a century ago. Of course that's true! But to try to define why, to point at such and such a tribe, and then to another, it shows on the contrary that each tribal situation is very different, that the problems are different, and that therefore the solutions must be different. There are a good hundred independent Native American languages still being spoken, and thus the differences are immense.

NOTES

1. This interview took place at two different times. It began in Paris on July 18th, 2003, where I met Scott Momaday living on the Rue de Lille at the time, working on his next book. The second part of the interview took place in October 2003, on the occasion of Scott's visit to Auvergne to receive an honorary doctorate from Blaise Pascal University, Clairmont-Ferrand.
2. Yves Berger is a French writer fascinated by the American West and Native American culture. A friend of Scott Momaday, he is the author of the preface to the French edition of the novel *House Made of Dawn* (*Éditions du Rocher*, 1993). He died November 16th, 2004. Speaking of his *Dictionary for Lovers of America* (*Éditions Plon*, 2003), he said, "I show that there has never been an intention of genocide on the part of white Americans. The Indians were confronted and beaten back, that's true, and when the reservations were established, it wasn't an act of kindness, but of containment . . ." (interview by Daniel Martin, "Yves Berger: American Voice," *La Montagne*, p. 5, Sunday, August 31st, 2003). This newspaper article was sent to Scott Momaday.
3. This reply itself illustrates the title of the present work [i.e., the subtitle *Voice and Perspective*]. [Translator's note: the word "*regard*" of the subtitle is pretty much impossible to translate with a single word; the author's multiple intent here includes not only the *looking* and *seeing* and *gaze* of the characters in Momaday's novels, but Momaday's own *view/viewpoint/attitude/vision/perspective*.]
4. Humorous reference to the title of this book [i.e., *N. Scott Momaday, the Man-Bear*], which is itself derived from Momaday's conviction of being intrinsically possessed by the figure of the bear, an animal venerated by the Kiowas and the personal totem of the writer.