

Robin Blaser

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Robin Blaser

Reading Robin Blaser

by Stan Persky

I

My first encounter with Robin Blaser's poetry was in 1960. I was a nineteen-year-old sailor stationed at the American naval air base at Capodichino, Italy, just outside Naples. Harold and Dora Dull, a couple from the San Francisco poetry scene, whom I'd met the year before at Sunday afternoon poets' meetings there, had arrived for a sojourn in Europe and were staying in a small fishing village, Amalfitano, along the Amalfi coast just south of the bay of Naples. On Friday afternoons, I left the military base and took the bus from Naples to spend the weekend with them. Later, in easy stages, they made their way north, to Rome, Florence, Paris, with me tagging along in their wake, and eventually they temporarily settled on the island of Ibiza, where Dora gave birth to twin girls.

Harold and Dora were six or seven years older than me, old enough for me to adopt them as putative modernist parents or elder siblings. They introduced me to music, paintings, museums, churches, books, thought — in short, civilization — in all the places I visited them. Amalfitano, on the Mediterranean Sea, consisted of narrow lanes and jumbled houses clinging to the ver-

tiginous cliffs just back of the beaches, where fishermen mended their nets and sorted the catch.

The first weekend I arrived at the eyrie they'd rented above the sea, Harold handed me a copy of a recently written poem that he'd brought from San Francisco. It was by Robin Blaser, a San Francisco poet who had been living in Boston and working as a librarian at Harvard, and whom I knew of only from talk in San Francisco that placed him as one of a literary threesome that included Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan. They had all been classmates at the University of California in Berkeley at the end of World War II. The poem Harold handed me was called *Cups* and was Blaser's first "serial" poem, the form Jack Spicer had invented a couple of years earlier in his book *After Lorca*.

Almost immediately, Blaser introduces one of the poem's great themes, the nature of art made in oppositional friendship:

There were two.
Their posture
taken out of the wall-
paper (a ghost story)
Jack talked. His
determined privacy against
My public face. The poem
by dictation. . . .

The relationship of the "two" is encoded in a kind of shorthand, bearing traces and notations of private biographical references, such as the wallpaper at a communal house where they had lived as students, but there's an immediate opposition in their "posture." One's "determined privacy" against the other's "public face" is resolved, however, in the agreement on "The

poem / by dictation.” The idea is that the poem is transmitted from some unidentified outside source *through* the poet, and although it makes use of the poet’s own vocabulary, biographical details, etc. (what Spicer called “the furniture in the room”), the poet is not permitted to interfere with the “dictation.” Whether this theory of poetry is true, I quickly learned, matters less than the fact that Spicer and Blaser used it as their working procedure, as their “myth.”

The first poem of *Cups*, like most of the succeeding ones in the serial, ends in a semi-rhymed, musical language:

The clown of dignity sits in a tree.
The clown of games hangs there too.
Which is which or where they go —
the point is to make others see
that two men in a tree is clearly
the same thing as poetry.

The two men are Jack Spicer and Blaser himself, and the poem traces the narrative of their art, as they appear in their respective, characteristic guises, Blaser with his notion of dignity, Spicer with his love of games, both of them clowns, but more importantly, both of them *in the tree*, which is “clearly / the same thing as poetry.”

The other themes of *Cups*, the title of which refers to one of the suits in a pack of Tarot cards, include the shifting figure of Amor, under whose sign the poets work, as well as erotic desire itself, and the scenes of Blaser’s boyhood, the arid landscapes of rural Idaho in the 1930s, with its sere gullies and desolate railroad tracks, which provide the sources of Blaser’s amorous vocabulary.

The two poets both fall down, as poets are prone to do, “into the clover where love abounds,” tangled in their imaginings. There, they gather a poem made of four leaves:

1 for the lip of Amor’s crown.
1 for the tree they ran around.
1 for the bed where they lay down.
1 for the comical physical union
their arms like briars
wrapped around.

In Blaser’s poetry, characteristically, some sight from the mundane world is seen as a “marvel” or some object is looked into until it spills out: “This / time I saw the god / offer with outstretched hand / the heart to be devoured. The / lake flowed into my hands. / Dante would say the lake / of the heart.” But throughout, the ballad-like passages, reminiscent of rhymes in a children’s book, are subverted by an unsentimental realism. The romance of desire becomes the “comical physical union” of actual sex. Our behaviour, as poets and lovers, is farcical: “Two men sit in a tree / and wink and spit.” Yet “. . . this is the tree / where Amor sits,” and it is gift-giving Amor who lays down the “rules” of the game.

One imagined two small windows
cut in his skin. His breasts
look out upon the tree.
The other thought the shape
of his tongue was poetry.
The word, he said
drawn like an arrow,

so fits
into the body of the bird it hits.

Both the landscape and memory of Blaser's childhood emerge from the metric narrative. The "shadow of the sagebrush / turns the hill blue . . .", the tree itself speaks, and Robin's Uncle Mitch writes Westerns and whistles between fragmented sentences, invoking an older history of the American frontier, its aboriginal inhabitants, and the rider-scout-guide "who leads us out." In the sexual darkness of youth there is the "effort to untie the strings / of the loins. The lips endure / the semen of strangers." Although the poem assumes homoeroticism, it doesn't insist on sexual preference. More important is the relation between Amor, the body, and poetry. "Where Amor sits," the poem says, "the body renews itself, / twists / inhabits the rights of poetry." Throughout it all:

Two men sit in a tree.
How ugly they are
in the bright eye
of this pageantry.
In service to love
is dignity, one cried,
1, 2, 3, the other replied,
you're out
when the dew falls from imagination's dark.

Amor turned geometer,
briefly, of course,
and cut their bodies into triangular parts.
When reassembled
they hung in that tree,

their genitals placed
where their heads should be.

If poetry is the “pageantry,” the poets are ugly, which is to say, merely human, as they spout their maxims about our undignified efforts to maintain our dignity in desire or recite the rule in baseball about three strikes and you are momentarily out of the game. For their trouble, the self-deceptions of desire leave them with their genitals placed “where their heads should be.” Images of incestuous desire, sexual mutilation, and jokes about bestiality and the like, all of which turn up in *Cups*, are the turnings back and forth of language and desire. It would be a mistake to read them as perversity for its own sake; rather, they reflect the literal perversity or turnings of desire. The children’s rhymes function as metamorphoses: so, “The dew fell from imagination’s dark / on to our hands where it stuck like bark,” and later,

What falls from the tree
renews itself in the guise
of poetry.

 The guide
rides out of the dark
with a body shaped
from the sluffing bark.

I’d learned to “read” poetry only the year before, at the poets’ Sunday afternoon meetings in San Francisco presided over by my teacher, Jack Spicer. Through listening to and observing what excited the poets’ interest, I quickly got an idea of what poetry was about, and soon I was writing some poems of my own. Now, above the Mediterranean, with Harold and Dora

sharing my pleasure, I immediately recognized Blaser's shape-shifting poem about the intersections of myth and memory, of poetry and desire.

Cups may have initiated my interest in Dante, or perhaps I found the Italian master through Harold, who had considerable facility with language and was learning to read the fourteenth century poet's *Commedia* in the original. In any case, I, too, soon encountered Dante's *lago del cor*, "the lake of the heart" that appeared in Blaser's *Cups*. But thinking of the fishermen at Amalfitano, I wrote,

It was not the lake of the heart
it was the load
taken from the sea
and the seen is not enough
to know the poetry. For that
you have to go
into the poet's country
which is a darkling wood . . .

thus echoing, as so many poets have, Dante's *mi ritrovai in una selva oscura* ("I found myself in a dark wood") in the first canto of *The Inferno*.

2

When I returned to San Francisco in January 1962, I found Jack Spicer sitting on a barstool at Gino and Carlo's on Green Street in North Beach, and brought him my poem, "Lake," upon which he promptly placed his imprimatur. He shyly clapped me on the back and proclaimed it "the best poem anyone around here has

written in two years,” a double-edged compliment in that it was also meant to chastise those poets who had been lazing about not writing the best poem in the last two years. Though I was pleased by my master’s approval, sitting in the half-deserted bar on a chilly January night, it looked like a long winter ahead.

Spicer mentioned that Robin Blaser was in town, back from Boston. As much to relieve Spicer’s boredom and to forestall his complaints that “no one was coming around to the bar,” I suggested that we call Blaser up and get him to join us in Gino’s.

“Oh no, Robin never comes out to the bar,” Spicer grouched.

“He will if I call him,” the arrogance of youth replied.

Spicer bet me a quarter I couldn’t get Blaser down to the bar, and even supplied me with the nickel for the telephone call.

“Hi,” I said to Blaser, giving my name and announcing, “I’m twenty-one years old, I’ve just come back from the Navy, and I’m here in Gino’s with Jack Spicer. Jack says you don’t come out to the bar, but I told him he’s wrong. So why don’t you come down here and have a drink with us like a regular guy?” Utterly shameless. But what does youth have to trade on but youth? That, and the fact that, after all, “regular guys” got together for drinks, didn’t they?

In about half an hour Blaser appeared in the doorway of Gino’s. Jack paid off his bet, which he no doubt considered a bargain, given the entertainment value of having Blaser in the bar. For his part, Blaser acted as though, on the one hand, he’d been invited to a chic cocktail party which he was longing to attend, and on the other, that having a drink in Gino’s is what regular guys did all the time.

Blaser was a trim man, in his mid-thirties, with an aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and a careful brush-cut. He was one of those people who, while gawky as a youth, becomes strik-

ingly handsome as an adult, and distinguished-looking as an elder. There was a slightly fey edge to him, but it was unlike that of full-fledged homosexual queens I'd met who enacted the wounded bitterness found in much of camp behaviour. Blaser's manner derived from an older connection to the world of faerie, as he called it in a subsequent poem he'd written that played on Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In any case, Spicer had the satisfaction of an entertaining evening in an otherwise desolate bar, I got to meet the author of *Cups*, and we had our drinks. Blaser walked me home.

I'm now going to explicitly intervene here for one paragraph. Blaser and I soon began a relationship, and we lived together for about five years, eventually moving from San Francisco to Vancouver in 1966, the year after Spicer's death, where Blaser became a professor at Simon Fraser University. I intend to draw the proverbial curtain around our private life, treating it as simply that, private. I have no intimate and/or scandalous gossip to retail here. If there are any personal details to reveal, they'll be relevant to my main subject, Blaser's poetry. I can say of my part of the relationship that I was often thoughtless in the way people in their twenties can be, but didn't cause, I don't think, any lasting damage. More important, more than forty years later, Blaser and I were still intimate friends, who happened to live less than a block from each other in Vancouver. In various book inscriptions, dedications, and notes from him, I'm always regarded as a *companion du voyage*, attended by "love, of course."

What remains, from the clutter of the personal and the orders of the places where we lived, are the poems. While I would turn out to be something of a loner, Blaser was by temperament inclined toward the domestic. His ideal working condition as a poet included the rustle of the other person, or even the roar

of the televised crowd as I sprawled in the next room watching a Sunday afternoon football game, while he “fumed,” as he described it, over a poem at the book-cluttered kitchen table. Both the companion and the house — a series of apartments and houses, on Baker Street, Bernal Heights, and Allen Street in San Francisco, and on 1st Avenue, then Trafalgar Street in Vancouver — were central to his way of life. While my basic mode of habitation is the more or less anonymous hotel room, something close to Jack Spicer’s shabby rented rooms, Blaser introduced me to the magic of the household.

As visitors to all of Blaser’s domiciles immediately remarked, sometimes jokingly referring to them as a “museum,” the house for him was an order of objects, art, furniture, carpets, books, each deliberately chosen and arranged, so that their inter-relationships set up a sort of field of activity. The old notion of household gods was treated literally.

The house is connected to the outside by way of the garden, whose trees and flowers Blaser tended, and from which he brought

*Robin Blaser and
Stan Persky, Stinson
Beach, north of San
Francisco, 1963.
Photographer: Helen
Adam, Courtesy
David Farwell*



into the house buds of willow, blue irises, branches of pepper tree and other blossoms that appear in his work. In one poem, Blaser refers to a blue bottle in the shape of a goddess, into whose open head he inserted a stalk of daphne one day. The unmistakable sweet scent of the daphne plant had filled the house by the time we returned late that night, an event which Blaser reads in a poem as “giving power” over the house to the goddess. Again, whether or not such magic is “true” in a conventional sense, it should, like “the poem / by dictation,” be regarded as a working procedure.

Finally, beyond the garden, which is the domestic representation of nature or a larger entity Blaser called “the holy forest,” there is the city. With its buildings looming out of the fog of San Francisco, or its downtown towers perched on a peninsula amid the “burning water” of Burrard Inlet of Vancouver, the “city” is connected to notions of community and the public realm, the “political” themes of Blaser’s poetry. The actual city is shadowed by the historical notion of the Greek *polis*, an urban space defined by the active engagement of its *polites* or citizens. In fact, all of these — house, garden and city, sometimes the whole of it a holy forest — have to be seen as both specifics and categories in Blaser’s ordering of the world.

But it was a strange event in the house that began Blaser’s *Moth Poem*. One day in 1962, in his Baker Street apartment, he heard an eerie sound emanating from the baby grand piano, as if the instrument itself was playing. When he lifted the lid of the piano, he discovered the source of the sound, a moth trapped in the piano strings. The moth was duly rescued and the poem began. Once the first moth appeared, so did others, over a year or more, inexplicably turning up in the most unexpected ways, to

provide the images or metaphors upon which successive poems in the serial were predicated.

If the appearances of the moths were a kind of “magic,” as Spicer and Blaser used that term, nonetheless, Blaser insisted on identifying himself as a “literalist,” as the titles of the first two poems in the series put it. That is, it really happened.

the moth in the piano
will play on
frightened wings brush
the wired interior
of that machine

I said, ‘master’

One of the differences between poetry and prose is that the lines of poetry function as “doubles,” bearing the meaning contained in the line — the moth in the piano “will play on,” that is, will continue to play, whether one reads the moth as simply a literal creature or a representation of the poet — as well as the meanings extended by succeeding lines — the moth in the piano “will play on / frightened wings.” And “frightened wings brush / the wired interior / of that machine.” This fleeting reminder of why poems have linebreaks is the most fundamental element of the art, yet it’s a point seldom made in schools, leaving students puzzled about how the poem tells multiple stories.

The story of “The Moth Poem” is of a man and his episodic encounters with the ephemeral meaning of the world, embodied in the figure of moths. At its core is the narrative of the “medium” in a world of language, moth-wings, house, holy forest, and the politics of the city. Blaser says in “The Medium,”

it is essentially reluctance the language
a darkness, a friendship, tying to the real
but it is unreal

the clarity desired, a wish for true sight,
all tangling

'you' tried me, the everyday which
caught me, turning the house

in the wind, a lovecraft the political
was not my business I could not look

without seeing the decay, the shit poured
on most things, by indifference, the personal

power which is simply that . . .

Poetry's language, Blaser asserts, is essentially a "reluctance," the art of it is neither easy nor simple. The language is a "darkness," yet it is also a "friendship," tying us to the "real" world, but as throughout this dialectic of assertion and denial, the real is also "unreal." The desire for clarity and "true sight" is tangled, and we are "tried," tested, by the forces, both literal and metaphoric, that shape our lives. Here, Blaser makes one of his first uses of a pronomial figure, the second person singular placed in single quote-marks, 'you,' which will reappear throughout his life's work. While the word *you* (without quotes) is used in conventional ways to address another person or to reflexively refer to oneself, 'you' in single quotes becomes a god or spirit of otherness. Like other figures in Blaser's poetry, 'you' is a shape-shift-

ing entity, whose apparitions range from simply the other person in the sense of his or her separateness from ourselves, to an embodied figure in one of Blaser's late works, an opera libretto called *The Last Supper* (2000), where the 'you' is a woman who is the ghost of the twentieth century addressing the audience:

I am the ghost of you,
of your century,
of your courage,
in the fragments
of our paradise
I can see myself in your eyes.

While Blaser is a poet who envisions a fragmented paradise, embodied in the marvels of literal objects and events, this possibility is consistently juxtaposed against the actual political world. Although he declares it not his business, he nonetheless confesses, "I could not look / / without seeing the decay, the shit poured / on most things, by indifference, the personal / / power which is simply that." Or as the ghost says to the public of *The Last Supper*, "... each of us, / a bare thing, swims / against the brutality and terror / of our century." Although Blaser's poetry is remarkable for its beauty, even its "poetical" qualities, the magic of the real always appears within the context of a twentieth century of war, genocide, and exclusions. It is not at all inconsistent when the Christ in Blaser's libretto declares, "The Holocaust shattered my heart," offering the naked apology that the Roman Catholic Church, which claims to operate in Christ's name, was unable to pronounce, even a half-century after the murder of European Jewry.

"The Medium" was written one weekend while we were stay-

ing at a friend's summer cabin on the Russian River, north of San Francisco. That night, says the poem,

. . . I slept
in a fire on my book bag, one dried wing

of a white moth the story is of a man
who lost his way in the holy wood

“Lost,” the poem says, “because the way had never been taken without / at least two friends, one on each side,” an oblique reference to Spicer and Robert Duncan, their long friendship now strained by quarrels over poetry and flare-ups of personality. Friendship gone astray, so that Blaser is

. . . now left to acknowledge

he can't breathe, the darkness bled
the white wing, one of the body
of the moth that moved him, of the other
wing, the language is bereft

Repeatedly, in a poem that argues that art and intelligence are as perilous as the lives of moths, these creatures reappear, tapping against a window with the sound of “it it it it,” and evoking immediate scenes as well as a childhood past replete with remembered grandmothers. As a moth “tacked with the wind's changes, / careened, then, taking flight, hid / in the fig tree” of the garden, it is encircled by the larger cosmos, “the moon, the stars, the / planets and below, under the earth”; equally, the sound of the moth in the piano becomes “a tone / beyond that,

the lyre,” until the mind of the poet-priest is “nearly destroyed by the presences, the fine / points which have no beginning.” The moments caught by “The Moth Poem” are precise miniatures, the poems of modest size, but the poetry is large.

At the end, in a sort of epilogue called “The Translator: A Tale,” Blaser is translating Catullus’ “Attis” one morning. He notices that

last night’s coffee spoon sticks to the drainboard
 under it the clear print of a brown moth, made of sugar,
 cream, coffee with chicory, and a Mexican spoon of blue
 and white enamel
 The ashtray is full and should be emptied before working
 that translation, *Attis ran to the wooded pastures . . .*

Instead, the ashtray is neglected while the poet translates from the Latin of Catullus’ gender-shifting poem, only to produce a final epiphany:

the mound of cigarette butts moves, the ashes shift,
 fall back on themselves like sand, startle out of
 the ashes, awakened by my burning cigarette, a
 brown moth noses its way, takes flight

3

Even as he was concluding “The Moth Poem” with a last magical appearance of a moth rising from the full ashtray, a virtual phoenix, Blaser had already embarked upon a new, but different kind of serial poem. *Image-Nations*, the first of which were written in the midst of the previous composition, is an intermittent, rather

than consecutive poem, one that would continue, concurrent with other poems, over the next three and a half decades. This kind of serial poem was not without its precursors in San Francisco. In Robert Duncan's book, *The Opening of the Field*, which had appeared in 1960, a similar serial, "The Structure of Rime," begins with eloquent bravado:

I ask the unyielding Sentence that shows Itself forth
in the language as I make it,
Speak! For I name myself your master,
who come to
serve.

Writing is first a search in
obedience.

For all the disputes of local friendship — the bitchiness, bitter gossip, the "feuds" — the San Francisco poets of the early 1960s were indisputably engaged in a community of poetry. If the poems within a given serial poem resonated against each other, it can be equally said that the poems and books, the work of various poets — Duncan, Blaser, Spicer, but others such as George Stanley, Harold Dull, Joanne Kyger and Ebbe Borregaard as well — also resonated with and against each other in this West Coast city that was easily seen as a double-city. There was the visible one whose streets, hills, and business canyons we walked, and the invisible city that bound us both to contemporary poets across the country — Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara and others — who were part of the "New American Poetry," as well as across time, to poets in various lineages of a tradition that extended back from the pre-

ceding generation of modernists to the first bards.

In a 1968 essay, "The Fire," Blaser expounded upon the San Francisco variant of this poetry. "I'm interested in a particular kind of narrative," he says, what Spicer and he had agreed to call the serial poem, "a narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves. The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which run out when so much of a tale is told." Blaser describes this "in Ovidean terms, as a *carmen perpetuum*, a continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected." Ovid's words, as Blaser cites them in his own translation, are

to tell of bodies
transformed
into new shapes
you gods, whose power
worked all transformations,
helped the poet's breathing,
lead my continuous song
from the beginning to the present world

The reason for spelling all this out, about Blaser, Spicer and others, in considerable detail, is that this discussion ought to be construed as an attempted rescue or defense of poetry. None of this account would make much sense unless I believed, as I do, that poetry is a mode of experience in the world that cannot be subsumed by the other modes of language, namely, story, discourse, and the mathematical languages of science. Because, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, poetry has been

utterly “marginalized” in the culture in which I live, it becomes imperative to leave future readers, if there are any, with at least an echo of an indispensable experience which the present forces of the world would dispense with and erase. There is nothing outside ourselves to mandate the existence of a mode of experience, especially under conditions of the decreasing communicability of that experience, and in a world where the value of such experience has been debased. So, poetry can be lost, and if not yet lost, is imperilled.

Blaser’s *Image-Nations*, which obviously play on the notion of “imagination” while demarcating its visual and political elements as “image-nations,” begin with a sense of such peril, when he declares, “the participation is broken”:

that matter of language caught
in the fact so that we
meet in paradise in such
times, the I consumes itself

The relation of language and poet is conceived as a “participation,” a meeting in paradise, yet language is “caught / in the fact,” that is, its daily usage in the world. Even from this early point in Blaser’s poetry, the authorial “I” and related notions of the self are challenged as a given idea. The “I” is not merely a first-person voice providing autobiographical anecdotes, but an uncertain nexus in a process of construction and dissolution. In asking how the broken participation might be restored, Blaser turns to the story of the household cat giving birth to four kittens on the bed. “When they are there / she comes to his feet,” he writes,

picked up and held, she
 fills his hand with blood
 the red pool flows over
 his silver ring, drips
 to the floor

The bloody birth and the broken participation between language and poet converge in the poem's resolution:

the language sticks to
 his honey-breath she is
 the path of a tale, a door
 to the perishing moonshine,
holes of intelligence
supposed to be in the heart

The birth blood that drips to the floor becomes the language that sticks to the poet's "honey-breath," while the story of the marvel of birth transforms the household cat into "the path of a tale, a door" leading to the "holes of intelligence . . . in the heart." Although subsequent *Image-Nations* will enter more complex and difficult structures of meaning, the first poems of this series retain the guise of children's tales, albeit for adults, given the density of thought, and a narrative that defies prosaic paraphrase.

With *Image-Nations* underway, and "The Moth Poem" completed, Blaser embarked on a project of translation, the creation of an English-language version of the nineteenth century mystical poet Gérard de Nerval's *Les Chimères*. At the centre of this poem, whose eponymous metaphor of apparitional appearances would have a natural affinity for Blaser, is a several part poem

called “Christ Among the Olives.” The premise of the poem — both Nerval’s and Blaser’s version of it — is rooted in the debased spiritual condition of the times.

under the holy trees,
the Lord lifted his thin arms
to the sky, as poets do
after the silence
and the loss of his friends’
belief

he turned toward those
who waited below, lost
in animal sleep, dreaming
of themselves as kings,
wisemen, prophets, but deadened
he began to call, *God*
does not exist

In Nerval’s poem, Christ speaks in a spiritually dead world “whose shadow is the emptiness.” It is Christ himself who is bereft: “seeking the eye of God / I saw only a socket, / huge, black and bottomless” inhabited by night. In a world where “no one heard the grief of the sacrifice,” Christ calls upon Judas, the “only one / awake in Jerusalem.” As in Blaser’s later *Last Supper*, the betrayal of Christ is found in the indifference of those who claim to be faithful rather than in Judas’ “crime . . . in friendship.” Blaser’s subsequent fierce opposition to “Christianism” is not an argument about metaphysical reality, but an accusation that Christ’s “religion of love” has been disfigured into an absolutism of hatred.

Nerval's *Chimères* ends in a "Golden Poem" recalling the ancient maxim that "everything is alive."

take the ghost stirring
in an animal each
flower, a piece of light
scattering love's mystery
asleep in metal alive
the coherence takes power
over you

Blaser sought an assurance for his version of this strange, unsettling poem of Nerval's. When I suggested that I bring Spicer to the house to hear it, even though the two of them were in the midst of some personal quarrel and not officially speaking to each other at the time, Blaser readily agreed. That day, when I joined Spicer in Aquatic Park where he frequently spent his afternoons, sitting on sheets of newspaper spread on the damp grass, listening to the baseball game on a transistor radio, drinking beer, and gazing out in the direction of a long pier beyond which was San Francisco Bay, I told him that Blaser had written a new poem and would like him to come up to the house and listen to it. Again, there wasn't a moment's hesitation. Spicer and I boarded the Polk Street bus and made our way up to Russian Hill where Blaser and I lived.

It was the year before Spicer's death and he already complained of patches of "fading." When he arrived at the apartment, he asked to take a nap, sleeping for a half-hour on a day-bed in an alcove of books, while our white cat, Tim, snoozed alongside him. When he awoke, he came into the kitchen, Blaser provided

drinks, and then read his Nerval poem. Spicer sat silently, occasionally vigorously nodding at some particular line. When the reading ended, there was a moment of silence, and Spicer slowly said, “Wonder-full” — pun intended — then added, “I wish I had written that.”

There was an unhappy epilogue to *Les Chimères* that came from an unexpected direction. Once it was published, as a chapbook, Robert Duncan took offence, complaining that the poem wasn’t really a “translation.” Duncan soon produced his own translation of Nerval, a stilted, wooden transliteration, along with a brief but flamboyant essay attacking Blaser’s *Chimères*.

Since Blaser’s persona incorporated the notion of the poet as a wounded figure, Duncan’s attack naturally caused him untold, unnecessary grief. Duncan’s foray in the end came to little — that is, it had no effect on the reading of Blaser’s work — so it has to be seen as merely a malevolent aspect of Duncan’s otherwise larger personality, a spewing of resentment over the fraying friendship of the former triumverate of young poets, himself, Spicer and Blaser.

Duncan was at least aware of all this. A couple of years earlier, at the height of his quarrel with Spicer (and Spicer could be as cruel as Duncan), not only were he and Spicer not speaking to each other but Spicer had taken to referring to Duncan in the past tense as if he were a dead poet. Duncan made an unexpected trip across town to North Beach to show Spicer a series of versions or transformations of sonnets by Dante that he’d just written. The third of the series, addressed to Blaser, declared:

Robin, it would be a great thing if you, me, and Jack
Spicer

Were taken up in a sorcery with our mortal heads so
turned
That life dimmed . . .

. . . Having no memory of ourselves but the poets we were
In certain verses that had such a semblance or charm
Our lusts and loves confused in one

Lord or Magician of Amor's likeness.
And that we might have ever at our call
Those youths we have celebrated to play Eros
And erased to lament in the passing of things.

And to weave themes forever of Love.
And that each might be glad
To be so far abroad from what he was.

That night, Spicer took me outside Gino's bar and extracted the pages of Duncan's poems, now somewhat crumpled, from his back packet and handed them to me so that I could read those lines by the light of the neon sign outside the bar on Green Street. Almost predictably, Spicer's approval only incensed Duncan. "I knew he was going to like those poems!" Duncan complained, still irked by Spicer's rejection of other parts of his work.

For Blaser, too, there was ultimately "no memory of ourselves but the poets we were." Nothing was forgotten, of course, not the slightest slight, but that wasn't the point. In Blaser's elegy for Duncan — a quarter-century later — written in 1988, just after latter's death, what comes to mind is the origin of friendship in the poetry:

the first of your poems

I read: *Among my friends love is a great sorrow* (brought to
me

in typescript by Jack, 1946, that we three should meet)

— no voice

like it turns, turns in the body of

thought *Among*

my friends . . .

In this re-reading, the place of origins, a small West Coast college town, Berkeley — a place become mythic in the imaginations of all of us who were touched by it, literally or by legend — also returns.

the absence was there before the meeting the radical of
presence and absence does not return with death's
chance-encounter . . .

Berkeley shimmers and shakes

in my mind most lost the absence preceded the
place

and the friendships . . .

In the biographies of the poets, most of which are, to my mind, written “upside-down,” the point is not that the “life” explains the poems but, rather, that the poems transcend the gossip. The gossip is fun, sure, but if that was all there was, the whole thing would be without purpose. As it is, we already have enough of a problem with life’s purposelessness, other than the purposes we propose for it, not to add to the incoherence delineated by modernity. Above the “oppositions,” and much worse, the pettinesses

of the merely personal, the gifts of friendship also incur obligations, debts. A decade or so after Spicer's death in 1965, Blaser edited *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, to which he appended his own extraordinary account of their relationship in poetics, an essay called "The Practice of Outside." And in mourning Duncan's death, he says:

There is no exstacy of Beauty in which I will not remember

Man's misery,

compounded by what we have done sighted in ruins,
neither old nor discontinuous

(I smile it is the thought of you a happiness
that could not be without your having been

there

quarrelling)

In those senses I would say, that with respect to his friends, Blaser paid the debts of friendship in full, honouring their memories, their continuing presences/absences.

4

I have the idea of the figure of a First Reader, the person to whom the poem is initially given to confirm that it is a poem, who reads it before it is read by "the readers of the poem." I've had the fortune to be a first reader, on occasion, for several writers, including Blaser, Spicer, George Stanley, Brian Fawcett, and others. At the end of the 1960s, when Blaser and I went our separate domestic ways — but not really separate, since our lives remained intertwined — I ceased to be his first reader and joined the ranks of the readers of his poems.

The attention of the readers of the poem, one of intermitten-
cies and intensities, is different from that of a first reader or the
author as reader of him- or herself. The reader dips into the pages
of a large book, the eye from time to time caught by some par-
ticular poem or a run of them. Now, the reader is lost and found,
lost in the poem, and then found in the room where one is read-
ing, about to prepare a meal or run an errand, and the book is
placed on the pile of other books, or put on a shelf.

The book in question is Robin Blaser's *The Holy Forest*, a "col-
lected" poems or collection of his books and serials, from *Cups*
to recent works, that the Canadian novelist and poet Michael
Ondaatje and I edited for its original publisher in 1993, Coach
House Press. (An expanded and updated edition of *The Holy For-
est*, edited by Miriam Nichols, was published by the University
of California Press in 2006, along with a volume of Blaser's col-
lected essays, *The Fire*, also edited by Nichols.)

By the time of the publication of *The Holy Forest*, the Denver-
born, Idaho-raised poet had lived and worked in his adopted
country, Canada, for more than a quarter-century and, like mil-
lions of other immigrants who make up a large proportion of
that nation's inhabitants, had long since become a citizen of the
"True North." Blaser's connections to the country and his com-
munity ran deeper than that. As a professor at Simon Fraser Uni-
versity for twenty years, he'd been legendary as a scholar and
teacher, and for his guidance of a generation of younger scholars
and writers who had been his graduate students. As a scholar
and editor, he'd been responsible for editions of selected poems
of the Canadian modernist Louis Dudek and Blaser's younger
Canadian contemporary, George Bowering, as well as produ-
cing the requisite array of prefaces, introductions, and volumes
of conference papers. There was even a celebration and *festschrift*

held in Vancouver in 1995, organized by friends, colleagues and students, to mark Blaser's seventieth birthday (see Charles Watts and Edward Byrne, editors, *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser*, Talon, 1999).

As a figure of great poetic and intellectual power, over the years of his teaching career Blaser was a kind of magnet who drew, like metal filings, an unusual range of devotions and oppositions. I'll skip most of that — and the gossip and psychological motivations attached to each possible anecdote — as being of little moment, or at least not to my purposes. More important, as many people (including me) are willing to testify, Blaser as teacher and mentor changed or enlarged lives for the better.

Here, I'll speak personally for a moment. If I had to sum up in a phrase what Blaser gave me, I would say, echoing his vocabulary, it is the appreciation of the marvels or "astonishments" of the world — both wonderful and horrific — in ways I never would have imagined on my own. This is a process of enlargement that probably begins with the first Mother Goose rhyme I heard or read ("Hickory-dickery-dock / The mouse ran up the clock"), but the encounter with Blaser's vision was especially transformative. At the intellectual centre of his world-view is the injunction "to keep duty and love alive," as he puts it in a poem about one of the grandmothers who raised him. Amid the decay (and defecation) of the world, from which Blaser doesn't at all avert his gaze, he also has an eye that picks out the wonders that gleam in the muck — an appreciation for places, lives, texts, human beauties, objects (among them, moonstones found between the railroad ties when he was a child in Idaho).

It was such appreciation that he transmitted to others — poets, lovers, readers, a generation of students — a sense of how to live more fully in one's time. Blaser occasionally remarked, "A lot of

people have lived in the twentieth century without having lived in the twentieth century.” He was referring, of course, not to those multitudes, who by poverty of circumstance, had no access to the culture and thought of their time, but to those of us living in privileged civilizations who almost willfully remained ignorant of the art, politics, and thinking of the century. Blaser recurrently pointed to such “treasures” in poems, readings, formal talks and, as much as anything, in excited conversation.

The particular character of Blaser’s conversation — I often went down the lane to his house for morning coffee — is that it’s care-free with respect to temporality, topic and taboo. The shifts are instantaneous and unmarked: he and I call up some minuscule incident of shared memory from decades ago and then, without any overt signal, shift to a bit of the day’s news that has come in over the radio that murmurs in his kitchen. Ditto for sacred/profane: from “shining masters” to “dirty talk” about the figures in the “comical physical union / our arms like briars / wrapped around.” Equally, there is no discrimination culturally between the seemingly most esoteric work of “high” art and lines from a pop song on the charts (“Let’s face it, baby / We’re just animal(s) / So let’s do it like they do it / on the Discovery Channel,” sing the Bloodhound Gang). Nothing has *a priori* intrinsic worth or lack of value. The appreciations open a world whose definition is open-ended. Because of Blaser, I understand it differently, I am different than I might have been.

No doubt my account or portrait of Blaser makes him out to be more saintly, or at least priestly, than he in fact is. Still, there is something priest-like in his devotions, as well as in his bearing, and his sense of responsibility for that role when he says in “The Moth Poem,” “You, priest, must know why you strike,” in an era “when all the world is loved by the / daimon of mediocrity.”

But Blaser's biographers need not fear a shortage of suitable "material": the poet has drunk the equivalent of an ocean-liner full of martinis (I've made and poured a few of them), he's wept over lost loves not worth weeping over, his passions have escalated into raving and ranting, his quarrels have been as petty as the next person's, he's indulged in countless extravagances, and in the self-portrait of his own poems he's recurrently aware of "tearing, teasing in that silly personality," of "this overweening pride in the peacock flesh," of looking for (as he writes in "Psyche")

some cinch, some way to live
 entangled and closed in heat
 you were even to yourself
 an ancient face preening
 before mirrors of comfort

For all that, Blaser also lived for more than three decades with his friend and partner, David Farwell, a social worker and therapist who worked at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver. While to some, Blaser's a creature from outer space, or as he puts it, "the best thing ever said about me / critically was 'alien exotica,'" others of us find him more comprehensible. But, as I say, biography is not my business here. Nor is hagiography.

In "Image-Nation 9 (half and half)", one of the *Image-Nations* from the late 1960s which appear among the "books" and serials of *The Holy Forest*, Blaser begins,

as the image wears away
 there is a wind in the heart

the translated men
disappear into what they have
translated

rocking the heart a childish man
entangles an absence a still-life
at the edge of his body
erasing the body of those opposites
who are companions
and also horizons in one another's
eyes at the ends of the world

the words do not end but come back
from the adventure . . .

The structures (or he might say, the metric) of Blaser's poems become more dense, more complex, but the "adventure" of language and the companions who are "horizons in one another's / eyes" remain. Despite whatever "longing / for completion" there might be,

the task of a man and his words
is at the edge
 where we are
translated restless men
the quarrel over the immortal language,
one may believe in a god-language
behind us, but god moves to the end
of our sentences
 where words foment
a largeness

of visible
and invisible worlds

Certainly, that seems a clear enough credo for a life's work. Among the poets of his generation, the quality and range of Blaser's intellect is notable, and he, along with George Stanley, is probably the best-read, philosophically, of the group of poets with whom he's associated. For those familiar with the thought of the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, Blaser's poetry engages philosophically mainly with a contemporary Continental array of thinkers — Deleuze, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, Serres, de Certeau, Agamben, Nancy, Arendt and others — many of whom are present or at the margins, by way of "borrowings" and citations, in Blaser's poems. I don't think any apology is necessary for the genuine difficulty of thought involved. If life were simple, we would have remained snakes. But as it is, we are not merely reptilian, but slightly more evolved intelligences capable of contact with "shining masters."

when I tell you what they
look like some of it is
nearly false their blue hair

but they are not ourselves they
are equivalents of action they
compose forms, which we hear

sound within a context
as if that action we are
images of used us
the body becomes an instrument

sometimes the harp pierces the body
and a man only hangs on the strings

The thinking here is paratactic — that is, in Charles Olson’s phrase, one perception leads immediately to another — and the meaning unfolds hermeneutically. The shining masters “are not ourselves,” rather they are “equivalents” of “action.” The concept of action is the philosophically-charged term in this conceptualization of how the process of poetic thought works. The action of the shining masters “compose forms, which we hear.” We, too, are images of an action, and it’s as if the action “used us,” used our bodies as instruments to hear the “*sound within a context.*” This is one of the more articulated reformulations of what Blaser began with in *Cups*, “The poem / by dictation.”

As other images in the same poem make obvious, this work is in part a response to the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s. The reason Blaser is so concerned to get clear on the “metaphysics,” as I’m calling it, is because “public life has fallen asleep,” and the danger of ignorance in the face of the meaning of the war is that we will engage in the “reduction of horror to sentiment”. Although Blaser’s approach to politics is variously direct and indirect, his poetry is perhaps surprisingly political or, more important, almost always politically intelligent.

In a comic poem of the late-1980s, “As If By Chance,” one of several that deal with the recurrent theme of the disappearance of the “public world,” Blaser says, “the Private Sector worries me / it can, the ubiquitous ‘they’ say, solve — that is — clear up—” and then follows a list of sectors and definitions, including the economy, the political, the cultural, and the sexual, all the way to technology, angels and religion, which the free market

can allegedly subsume. From economics, “confused science and confused theology prancing around together,” to angels “who became isms and hierarchies in order to immaterialize the real things we’re thrown up against, as we become startled subjects — to which I object,” Blaser heaps considered scorn on the nostrums of the day.

In “Even On Sunday,” a poem written for the Gay Games held in Vancouver in 1990, Blaser says, “I don’t know anything about God but what the human record tells / me — in whatever languages I can muster —” He then proceeds directly to an attack on the homosexual-hating religious fundamentalists of the day and “that blasphemy which defines god’s / nature by our own hatred and prayers for vengeance and dominance — / that *he* (lower case and questionable pronoun) would destroy by a / hideous disease one lover of another or by war, a nation for what / uprightness and economic hide-and-peek — and he . . . / is on the side of the always-ignorance of politics / in which we trust.” “Blasphemies all, against multiplicity / which is all anyone knows about god,” Blaser declares.

Even in a poem mainly about the childhood sources “where vocabulary begins,” the long “Image-Nation (‘oh, pshaw,’” from the early 1990s, Blaser, as in his conversation, can suddenly shift the focus to our immediate condition:

here, plagues galore weave among us — aids, racism,
 homophobia,
 displacement and poverty, christianism with its political
 plans,
 the Vatican sending out ‘advisory letters’ to the Bishops
 that
 it’s okay to discriminate against gays in jobs, housing, and

professions — wacky — and the murder of Dr. David
Gunn,
'justification,' they say, 'as a pro-life casualty' . . .

Although there are always other dimensions to Blaser's poems that directly address our political life, the specific moment — a doctor who provided abortion services assassinated by a religious nut — serves to substantiate the accuracy of the thought in which it is embedded.

In "(oh, pshaw," — the phrase is an expletive of his great-grandmother Ina — Blaser returns to the first landscapes found in *Cups*, the sagebrush and aspen valleys in the rural Idaho of his childhood in the 1930s. The dominant figures of the poem are a set of grandparents, great-grandparents and a grandaunt, but especially grandmother Sophia Nichols, known as Dot for short because she worked as a telegrapher for the railways. The family lived in a series of whistlestops — Orchard, Idaho, even a place named Blaser, Idaho — dwelling in a yellow Union Pacific rail-car parked by the tracks, which follow the course of the Portneuf River. In a series of childhood episodes and engagements, the poet he will be takes form:

once the rains were so heavy the water rose up the opposite embankment, nearly reaching the railbed, and stayed for days — 'a sea,' Sophia Nichols said, never having seen one, and it was wide and stretched along the tracks as far as I could see — we needed supplies from the commissary across there — Carnation condensed milk, I remember — and we plotted a way to cross that sea — the tin tub and a shingle, just the right size boat and paddle for me, we thought — round and round it went, being round,

and drifted from shore meandering — she tossed me a broom, which luckily floated near enough to reach it — ‘see if you can touch bottom,’ she said — I could — ‘so push,’ she said — and I made it there circuitously, pulled my tub up on the beach, got the supplies, and returned — ‘circuitously Odyssean,’ she said, having spent hours those rainy days telling me stories of Odysseus, which were, she said, homeward journeys of the soul . . .

In an earlier poem, Blaser cites his friend, the poet Charles Olson telling him, “I’d trust you / anywhere with image, but / you’ve got no syntax.” This remark is recorded in a book of Blaser’s called, appropriately, *Syntax*. Now, in a prose-poem syntax of his own contrivance in (“Oh, pshaw,”), Blaser makes his Odyssean way homeward to the yellow railcar source of his poetry. In the poem, the images and figures emerge that will be permanent guides in his work:

the rocking chair from their lost house in Salt Lake City, often talked about, had a painted leather back — the wandering Jew or nomad — whose marvellous, piercing eye followed everyone up and down the boxcar parlour — into corners, even under the library table, also from the lost house — eros of wandering — eros of being sought in every nook and cranny — that, so far as I’m concerned is where vocabulary begins — fierce eyed — dot-dash-space — and syntax is later and difficult

In the next poem of the *Image-Nation* series, “(Exody,” a poem about Hieronymous Bosch’s sixteenth century painting, “The

Garden of Earthly Delight,” amid the painter’s phantasmagoric rendering of a “bird-headed moth . . . a spotted, kerchiefed cat . . . arrows, flowers, sticks, bird beaks stuck up asses . . . a broken egg shell with a tavern in it” and all the rest, the emblematic Wandering Jew reappears:

they threw the old rocking chair from the lost house
out — but they cut the leather backrest out — with the
portrait of the wandering Jew or nomad on it — whose
eyes follow me or ‘you’ — into corners — to the end of
the boxcar parlour — even into the brilliance of reading
under the library table — and sent it to me

So, at the end of this exegesis, we have Blaser’s “exody,” his neologism suggesting not the exit of exodus, but an entrance into, or embarkation upon the voyage.

5. *Death’s Duty*

Robin Blaser died of a brain tumour on May 7, 2009, in Vancouver, at age eighty-three.

One of the first poems of Blaser’s to which I paid attention, even before I read *Cups*, a poem published in Don Allen’s 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*, was an untitled sonnet-like work that begins, “And when I pay death’s duty / a few men will come to mind.” It reads:

And when I pay death’s duty
a few men will come to mind
and 1 or 2 objects shine like buttons

And when I pay death's duty
my dry mouth will swallow up

INDIGNITY

And old hands crack its wedding cup.

And when I pay death's duty, the big question is what will it feel like with eyes wide open. It won't be complete darkness because there isn't any. One thing will stop and that's this overweening pride in the peacock flesh. That's a negative definition. More to the point is that the skin wrinkles and the muscles weaken. And what I think is that there's a sparrow in an old man's heart and it flies up —

Thus

in the wrinkling flesh the discovery of disgust.
What is the word for completion. A steel girder?
A building going up?

And when I pay death's duty
the love I never conquered
when young will end as such.

I was fascinated by the triple-pun of the second line. In Blaser's imagining of his own death, written at age thirty or so, in 1956, he says that as he pays Charon the boatman the standard one-obol fee (that's one meaning of "death's duty") to ferry him across the River Styx to the Underworld, a few of those he knew in his life will appear before his mind. "Death's duty" also means, more obviously, that we have a duty to pay to death, namely, our lives.

At the same time, “a few men will come to mind” has two more meanings that are to be found in the double sense of the verb “to mind,” as meaning both “to attend” and “to object.” When the poet pays death’s duty, a few of the men and women he knew will come to attend his death. They will be his “minders” at the ceremonies of death, as they were in his life and during the process of his dying. Finally, a few of those he knew will “mind” that he died, that is, they will object to, be troubled by, and mourn his death.

When he pays death’s duty, “the big question” for Blaser “is what it will feel like with eyes wide open. / It won’t be complete darkness because there / isn’t any . . .” Until I read the poem (I was nineteen then), I hadn’t known there isn’t any “complete darkness.” However, “One thing will stop and that’s this / overweening pride in the peacock flesh.” Having discovered “disgust” “in the wrinkling flesh” of aging, the poet recognizes that death will, if nothing else, put an end to our vanity, our “overweening pride in the peacock flesh.”

At the end of the poem, Blaser says, “And when I pay death’s duty / the love I never conquered / when young will end as such.” I found those last lines puzzling and was never quite sure what they meant. They mean, of course, that just as our vanity ends with death, so will our never-conquered, unrequited love. I only later realized that one of the reasons that I was uncertain of the meaning of those lines is that I made a crucial *mis-reading* of them: I read the word “end” as meaning “remain,” so that it read “the love I never conquered / when young will *remain* as such,” and I imagined those who had been loved remaining, untouched by time and aging, “as such.” Those who had been loved are the immortals of our mortality.

I’m afraid that my mis-reading says more about me than about

the poem, but since I'm one of those who have "come to mind," mis-reading joins the reading of the poem. What's more, it was a mis-reading that Blaser was inclined to accept on the occasions we talked about it.

In any case, "when I pay death's duty" is a poem that I not only attended to, but that stayed in mind through the almost fifty years that I knew Blaser as a friend, intimate companion, and master. That last word, "master" also has multiple meanings: Blaser uses it in his poetry as a submissive address to the powers in language greater than ours: "O, master." But it also means master of the art and craft of poetry, which Blaser was and, in a more conventional sense, it simply identifies Blaser as one of our teachers, as he was to the large number of people who were his students.

A few years ago, I brought Blaser a poem I'd written, titled "Friend," that begins, "The law of friendship is / one of us must die // before the other / Mourning begins // before death . . ." It was a poem I wrote upon reading Jacques Derrida's book, *The Work of Mourning*, moved by his idea that in any intense friendship we are aware of the inevitable absence of one of the friends or the other, and thus mourning begins before death. After Blaser performed the prescribed task of the master or peer of confirming (or not confirming) that it was a poem, we sat in his kitchen, drinking coffee as we'd done countless times before, and talked about the recently dead philosopher, Derrida, who had inspired the poem, and provided lines for it.

Then I read it aloud again (another custom of the poetry trade). It ends:

so the sorrow is shared
In the reader's grief

the work of mourning keeps
the dead who never die
alive within ourselves the world
the poem at a loss for words

Blaser looked up afterwards, and slyly asked, “Is that for me?” I was taken aback, startled that he was asking something more than a conventional question about whether the poem was dedicated to him, as in “for Robin.” I hadn’t thought about it before he asked. Was he the “one” who “must die / / before the other” in our friendship? Was this the beginning of my mourning for him? “Who else?” I replied, without thinking, then added, “or for whichever of us,” since I too, though it was less likely, could be the one.

Three months before Blaser’s death, on the day before I was leaving Vancouver for Berlin, in early February 2009, I visited him at Vancouver General Hospital once more to say goodbye. We went downstairs to a parking lot outside one of the hospital’s back entrances so that he could smoke a cigarette. He was in a wheelchair, looking reasonably elegant with his shock of white hair, and wearing a thick dark bathrobe. The tumour had progressed so that present memory dissolved every thirty seconds or so, and he frequently repeated questions he’d asked only a minute before, but his recognition of others and past memory remained.

The moment of departure arrived in the chill February sunshine, while the hospital behind us and the traffic on the street across from the parking lot both continued to hum in their daily rhythm, as if a permanent break between us wasn’t about to happen.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” I said.

He suddenly focused. “This really is goodbye,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” I said, once more (as on countless occasions) startled by his sudden coherence.

“Don’t forget me,” he said.

“I won’t forget you, Robin,” I said, almost as if I’d been accused of forgetting.

Then, with some effort, he visibly pulled himself together, looking up at me from his wheelchair, and in a voice both tearful and ferocious, said, “I won’t let you forget me!”

So, let the muses weep; they, after all, have more time on their hands than we do. As for us, the temporarily living, we won’t be allowed to forget Robin Blaser.

6

In spring of 2000, the wandering Blaser appeared in Berlin, where the libretto of *The Last Supper* he’d written for composer Harrison Birtwistle’s opera received its premiere at the Staatoperhaus, the seventeenth century theatre located on the Unter den Linden, east Berlin’s grand, stately boulevard. Along with other friends of his, I attended opening night in the old opera house and was present when the silver-haired, tuxedo-garbed poet, just before his seventy-fifth birthday, stood on the stage after the performance to receive the audience’s applause and to take his bow.

Afterwards a group of us, including Blaser, wandered next door to the cobbled August-Bebel-Platz. In 1933, this was the site of the Nazi book burning. Now, there’s an installation there by the sculptor Mischa Ullman. It consists of an unobtrusive marker, noting the historical event that occurred there — accompanied by the poet Heinrich Heine’s prophetic remark that people who

begin by burning books will end by burning people — and a rectangle of glass.

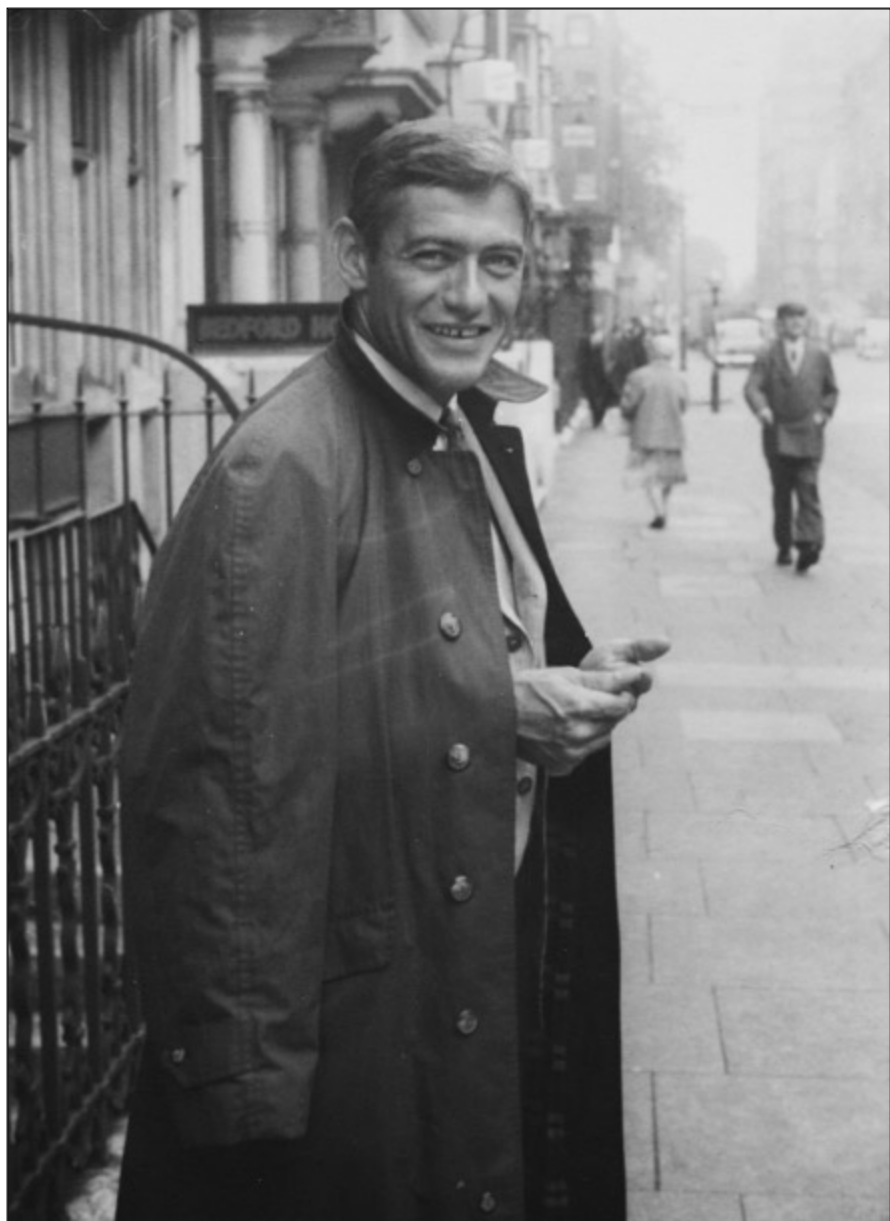
When you edge up to the glass window set into the rough surface of the square, and look down, you see it is the transparent ceiling of a white, lighted underground room. The room is empty except for, on all four walls, sets of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, also empty. At night, in the otherwise darkened square, the underground empty library room emits a shaft of light up into the night air, through which, that evening, a thin drizzle was falling. Blaser, as always when in the presence of the “marvellous,” as he calls it, was transfixed — curious, moved, joyous, his face reflecting the illumination of the underground library. For a moment, as I stood on the other side of the glass and its shaft of brightness, I glimpsed, as I often have, the figure of Robin Blaser through the shifting light.



Robin Blaser, circa 1945



Robin Blaser, circa 1957–8, contents of martini unknown



London, England, 1959



Robin Blaser in his kitchen, San Francisco, circa 1950



This collage was created by Robert Berg, with whom Robin worked in the acquisitions and catalogue department of San Francisco State College Library in the early 1960s.



*Berkeley Poetry Conference, 1965: John Wieners,
Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley*



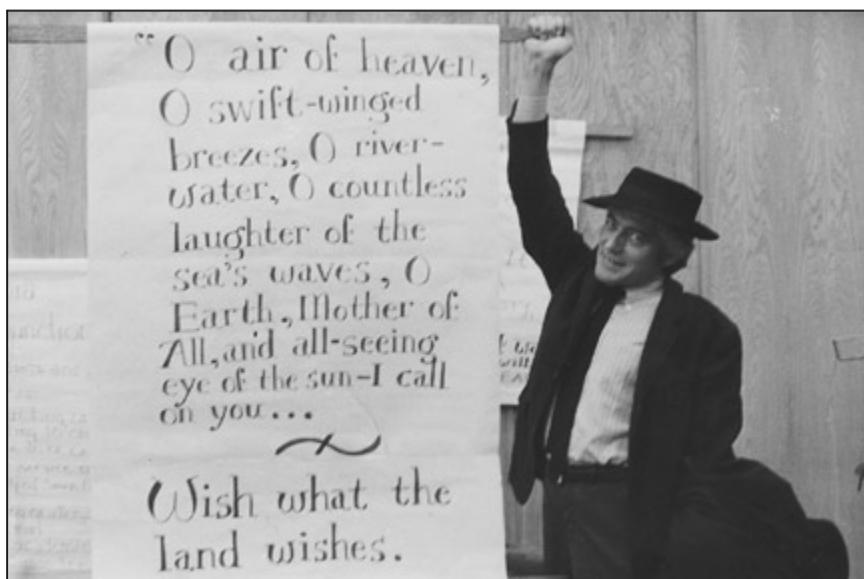
Blaser in his kitchen at 1636 Trafalgar Street, Vancouver, 1983



*Robin Blaser painting the kitchen of 1636 Trafalgar Street,
Vancouver, 1976. Photographer: Brian Fawcett*



Robin Blaser, circa 1962-1963, San Francisco



Robin Blaser, circa 1961, San Francisco



TOP: *Robin Blaser and Robert Creeley, Prince George, 1980.*
Photographer: Bev King. **BOTTOM:** *Robin Blaser and*
George Bowering, circa 2004



Robin Blaser, circa 1995, Probably in Vancouver



Robin Blaser with martini, circa 2002 (location unknown)



Robin Blaser reading, probably at Charles Watts' wake, 1998



Robin Blaser, 2006, Vancouver



Robin Blaser at work at the kitchen table, 1636 Trafalgar Street

*The photos on the preceding pages appear courtesy David Farwell.
In most cases, the photographers are unknown.*

Robin and Me; The New American Poetry and Us

by Brian Fawcett

1. *Robin and Me*

I was just shy of twenty-two years old when I touched down at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C., a suburb of Vancouver, in January, 1966. It was the second semester after the new university opened its doors and I was there to learn how to be a writer.

I'm being exact about this. I wasn't a student interested in literature and I wasn't a writer attending university classes. In my mind, I was neither a writer nor a student. I was a nobody from the north, and I was there to *learn how* to be a writer.

From the time I'd emerged from puberty's hormone coma, it had been clear to me that I had just two career paths open. One was the conventional path: I could cut things down and hit anyone who got in my way, as the people I'd grown up around tried and mostly failed to do. But I was already flinching at the hit-and-destroy around me, and the more things I saw getting screwed up, the less willing I was to ride on the team bus while men I could see were morons were contending with one another to be the bus driver.

My second career path was to become a writer — or try to. I

didn't think my odds of success were very good, but it didn't stop me from dreaming. The books I would make might tame dragons, rescue damsels in distress while I, the writer, would wear a silver suit and ride by the lake.

Everything I discovered about what real world writers did made the job look like the one I wanted. For starters, having a pickup truck with a rifle in the back window wasn't necessary. For another, I could sit around and think without being made fun of or getting beaten up. Almost as good, I could read books, and no one would make jokes about it or dun me for idleness or eggheadedness. And I soon learned that sitting around looking — and feeling — vacant was an optional part of the job description. These were all things I could do, sometimes quite convincingly.

But there were obstructions. My ignorance was the main one. Wherever I was able to recognize it, it seemed bottomless. I was from Prince George, the far north of British Columbia, where going to school beyond high school wasn't naturally on anyone's dance card, and where any activity that didn't reap a quick and tangible reward was, officially anyway, beyond imagining. And in my own mind, there was skepticism: really, exactly what were dragons, and where were the damsels? The shores of every lake in my world were a tangle of alders and devil's club, so where could someone like me ride?

Becoming a writer, you see, was roughly equivalent to transforming myself into a unicorn — in a place where a unicorn, should one show up, would be quickly blasted, skinned, and splayed across a wall as a trophy of the hunt. I harboured a suspicion that writers, if recognized, would be treated the same way. Yet herein lay some small but exquisite pleasures. Since I was equally without live action local examples of what writers and

unicorns were and did, I was free to decide on my own what they ought to be and do.

My surroundings offered me loud tactical suggestions. If, as a writer/unicorn, I didn't want to get beaten up regularly, I'd better not be flamboyant: don't expose your pen to strangers, don't brandish your unicorn horn. Thus, in the absence of magic — the unicorn's sole defense mechanism — I would have to adapt. My kind of writer/unicorn would need to outsmart everyone and everything, but do so quietly, keeping the silver suit and the forehead horn out of sight. Having large important ideas was a given, but without grandstanding, pandering to the powerful or chewing on the scenery. I stole most of this straight from Ernest Hemingway, whose Michigan fishing and camping stories I read as if they were instruction manuals: be big and gruff with big, gruff ideas, make coffee with sticks mixed in, and write novels about fishing and camping and hunting grizzly bears, without park benches, rest zones or park wardens, and in sentences without a trace of filigree.

Since I understood, in the real world, that I wasn't really a unicorn, and I truly wasn't sure what a writer should do in the absence of the instruments writers live by — publishers, bookstores, critics, readers — I became, in my late teens, a serious reader. I read most of Shakespeare, I read volumes of poetry, heritage and contemporary — mostly without understanding anything but the music — and I read history. But most avidly, I read novels, which had both the music and the history.

I ploughed through the nineteenth-century Russian and mid-twentieth-century American novel before I was twenty years old. The Russians convinced me that Hemingway wasn't model enough, and that what I truly ought to be was the next Dostoyevsky. I read my way through the early twentieth-century Amer-

ican novel, read as many twentieth-century British novels as I could, then followed that with what I could find of twentieth-century German and French novels. I never could bring myself to read nineteenth century British novelists other than Dickens, and little of the American novel before Hemingway save Melville and Hawthorne. The standard stuff made me sleepy, and a healthy fear of returning to the coma I'd so recently escaped kept me clear of both Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad until I was old enough to appreciate them.

Most of this novel-reading was complete by the time I reached Simon Fraser. What all those novels contributed to my education still isn't entirely clear to me today, except that they'd been good companions of my youth. I'd read them in a dozen European train stations, bars and park benches, I'd read them under canvas tents in the snowy silence of northern British Columbia winters while I was in the Forest Service, and I'd read them in my parents' basement, to which I'd had the nourishing luxury of periodically retreating while I was conducting my investigations of the world.

I called myself a novelist even though the cultural terror whenever I voiced the word "novelist" aloud usually dimmed it to a whisper. I'd had Hemingway and Dostoyevsky inside my head for years, and along the way I'd added André Malraux, Günter Grass, Norman Mailer, and a dozen other giants to crowd out my ego. I deemed myself a novelist because I'd started to write at least twenty novels. Never mind that I'd yet to get beyond twenty pages of any one of them, that most hadn't gotten past the first page, and that five or six hadn't reached their second sentence. And never mind that I was a novelist because I couldn't bear to be anything else. Not a logger, not a business dork, not even a refugee from childhood.

My poor productivity didn't trouble me. I'd read, somewhere in Henry Miller, that I was living in the Age of The Diarists, and so I was enthusiastically playing my part in that revolution — and honing my writing skills — by filling notebook after notebook with depictions of the action, which is to say, my plans for world domination mixed in with self-serving analyses of why nearly everyone around me was less sensitive than I was. The base truth here wasn't complicated. Every day it stared back at me in the mirror: I didn't yet have the knowledge, skills, or the attention span to write a novel, but that was as it should be. Modesty alone compelled me to make my notes and bide my time.

I arrived on Simon Fraser's bleak hilltop campus in the first week of January, 1966 without friends to comfort me, my worldly possessions parked in a dingy motel in the suburbs of a city that was very large and strange, and though I wasn't about to let it show, scary as hell. I was a small rocket loaded to the top with fuel, sizzling on its launch pad without either a guidance system and possibly without a warhead, but ready to launch anyway. And I was also, of course, as close to heaven as I could imagine.

All of this is to make clear that in that first moment at university I truly was there with two priorities: 1) to learn how to be a writer and 2) to get my novels written. I was not there to play cards in the cafeteria as a prelude to a career in the family business, nor was I there to learn to be a professor or a scholar/critic or a teacher of other people — any or all of which I might have been better suited to succeed at. I even had, in the absence of culture, skill and talent, a fairly sensible plan. I would compensate for coming from the uncivilized north by learning more than anyone around me about my civilization — only that way would I be able to delineate its local subplots or cosmic subtexts for my novels. I'd deduced, with Mathew Arnold and Ralph Waldo

Emerson counseling me because no live person I'd met seemed interested, that university was going to give me the general outline for the knowledge that a writer ought to have, a substantial whack of the specifics, and the technical skills to write novels as great as *The Brothers Karamazov*.

That's when I got very, very lucky.

In the very first university classroom I walked into, my professor was a Genuine Card-Carrying Writer — the first I'd ever laid eyes on. During this first class, the Writer gave the assembled students (it was, I discovered later, his first class, too) a short quiz to find out what we'd been reading, if anything. The Writer discovered that I'd not only been reading but reading a lot, and I discovered that most of my classmates didn't think reading was worth the trouble. The class ended, and while I busied myself with changing my concept of what an average student was about, the Writer called me over and confided that he had met and talked to Jack Kerouac, the American novelist I'd listed at the top of my favourites. I didn't know whether to believe him or not.

The Writer was Robin Blaser, and there was something about him that convinced me, even though the very idea was preposterous, that he really had met Jack Kerouac. He was also, it turned out, on a first-name basis with nearly all the contemporary poets I'd been reading since I was sixteen or seventeen, the most important of these being Allen Ginsberg, John Wieners, and Gary Snyder. All were part of a movement called the New American Poetry, a group of poets assembled and categorized by Donald Allen's 1960 Grove Press anthology of the same name. I was carrying a much-pored-over copy of that anthology when I arrived at Simon Fraser, and it is hard to describe the intensity of

my excitement when I found Blaser's name in its table of contents along with those of my heroes.

At twenty-two, I was impressionable in all the ways a young man ought to be. Since I hadn't encountered any writers while I was growing up, I hardly believed they were flesh-and-blood creatures. I thought live writers were going to be like Theseus and Heracles from Greek mythology: half human, half divine, or if not godlike, at least far beyond the human and mortal stuff I was made of.

Blaser didn't disappoint. He was just turned forty, handsome and sophisticated enough to be called, not entirely tongue-in-cheek, the Marlon Brando of American poetry. He was immensely well-read, not just on my terms, and he was just reaching full command of his intellectual powers: pretty much a god to a twenty-two year old wanting to be a writer, in other words.

I imagined myself, a country boy in the big city, as half human and half animal. Maybe, I hoped, a centaur or wolf-boy, but more likely just a talking dog or monkey. The truth, despite my up-front ambition, is that I feared that I was too brutish and stupid to write books. I wasn't sure what I really was, or what I was capable of.

Blaser didn't treat me as if I was a brute. When he recognized that I really *had* read the books I'd listed and more, and when he'd talked with me enough to decide that I was going to be permanently thrilled by language and literature, he treated me as if I were a fellow intellectual and a co-conspirator in language. Within the first minutes of our relationship, he was challenging me to read more widely and think more deeply than I had. That first class with him was, I think, the most important moment

in my entire education, both as a writer and as a human being. Hands down, it was the most thrilling one.

In the weeks and months that followed, the centre of my universe shifted and its dimensions enlarged. But it wasn't quite as if its poles had reversed, because I remained the same young man from the north who wanted to be a unicorn, and so I adapted as if this was the way it was always meant to be. Within a month, I'd tossed away my list of novels and shifted my focus from reading and writing novels to reading poetry and history. Before too long, I was writing poems of my own, too, mostly about the things I'd seen and learned while I was in the Forest Service. They weren't very good, but they didn't sound much like the new poets and poems I was reading, and they didn't sound like Blaser's, either. Otherwise, I followed Blaser around, cheerfully and obliviously. He was now my mentor even though I was far too shy to declare this openly and he still too modest to assume the arrogance of pedagogy.

A life filled with poetry wasn't a completely difficult adaptation for me because poetry was, not surprisingly, where I'd started. As a sixteen-year-old high school boy, I'd chosen, one fateful night, to write a poem about a dead cat while my friends were out stringing the poor beast by its hind legs over a despised teacher's front door. My poem wasn't very good, and neither were the several hundred more that followed before I began to cook my novels. But what these poems *were* was something very different from the urges and impulses that commanded the young men around me, and not just because nothing died because of the poems. I understood, dimly, that the poems I was writing weren't so much aesthetic accomplishments as declarations of dissidence — cognitive and cultural. They were my way of getting beyond adolescence without buying into the Darwinian mercantilism

I was hemmed in by, and a perpetually renewed reminder that I needed to get the hell out of town. Now, to have found, in my first university class, a teacher of such quality and glamour struck me as an amazing stroke of good fortune. Continuing to insist on pursuing my silly unwritable novels would have been an insult to that, wouldn't it?

Over the next several years, I took every course Blaser taught, and along with a growing entourage, I traveled more or less uncritically in his intellectual slipstream, my bullshit detector not quite shut down, but running on low wattage. Blaser, newly liberated from a previous career as a librarian at Harvard and at San Francisco State College, and validated by his tenure-track job as a university professor at Simon Fraser, quickly became both an intellectual and social force in Vancouver's artistic circles. As pedagogues go, he was generous and demanding: all his students were expected to read widely, and (not incidentally) to bring the fruits of that reading to whatever investigation he happened to be conducting at the time. Most students didn't, of course. But I did, and with great pleasure. So did a constantly shifting group of other students.

Perhaps the most convincing element of Blaser's pedagogy wasn't scholarly or conventionally intellectual, but rather, social and psychological. He taught, by example and by demonstration, that the construction of meaning was a full-time occupation, one that required a poet or any other intellectual practitioner to have his or her attentions poised on the world so as not to let any instance or instrument of what he called, after Rilke's marvelously complicated double entendre of the sublime, *invisibility*, get by unapprehended.

How can I explain how this worked? Try this: One Saturday morning in June 1968, my then-wife Sharon Thesen opened



Brian Fawcett and Sharon Thesen in 1967.

Photographer: D.H. Fawcett

our Kitsilano apartment door to bring in the newspaper. She found, beside the newspaper, a large crystal vase crowded with in-season Siberian irises. Both of us knew instantly that the gift was Blaser's. He had been courting us for some time, as he did most of his life with people he found interesting and/or attractive. He had a way of cancelling the boundary between "interesting" and "attractive" in ways that made his attentions at once erotic and distinctly *not-erotic*. Sharon and I were charmed by the irises, and gratified by the attention Blaser was paying to us. We already knew we were intelligent and attractive, and that older people often gravitate to those things, sometimes to exploit them, sometimes simply to bask in their energy. But this wasn't like that. Blaser's always-interrogative attention was subtly different, and infinitely more thrilling. There was, inherent in his gift, a challenge: Pay attention! It is spring! Siberian irises! Summer is coming! What does this mean?!

When Sharon opened that door, neither of us knew what Siberian irises were, or the difference between crystal and glass. But since we were interesting enough to warrant this very specific gift, we then had to take responsibility for it. Within days both of us were minor experts on both irises and crystal. That, in a nutshell, describes the magical kingdom that Blaser offered to those around him.

Blaser brought with him, to everything he did, the exhilaration of intelligence — the promise that one can know one's world, and the conviction that the effort to understand without simplification is always worth the difficulty. He had innumerable ways of communicating this to those who were receptive, and the vase of Siberian irises was just one. Most of his ways brought you nose to nose with exactness and specificity, which are the truest instruments of poetry.

I don't want you to think that Blaser became my whole life. In part, my character prevented that. But it was also the case that Blaser himself was not interested in creating a cult around himself that would insulate him from the world. Outside of his demanding tutelage, I was also receiving a conventional English Department education. That meant that I learned a lot more about the history of literature written in English (but not by Canadians) than has subsequently remained relevant, and I learned even more about the intricacies of twentieth-century literary criticism, almost none of which now seems worth the powder to blow it to intellectual or political hell. But together with what I was learning from Blaser, the English Department did provide a somewhat larger-and-more-skewed-than-normal view of the vast panorama of human understanding liberal arts educators then called the History of Ideas — now derisively called the History of European Ideas as Interpreted by Dead White

European Males and Taught by Molester/Professors of Mainly European Descent.

Today I can acknowledge the reasoning behind the hostility with which the History of Ideas is now treated in North American universities, and I understand that the insurgency is a necessary correction to the cultural imbalances the old way tended to protect. Still, the non-denominational History of Ideas as I encountered it still strikes me as the most fertile ground for a young intellectual to cultivate, if only because it is the most secular opus that remains intact. At very least, the History of Ideas isn't likely to convince people to wrap their bodies in explosives and inflict their religious or ideological certainties on the nearest infidel. When deployed as a pedagogic instrument, the History of Western Ideas most often transformed students into intellectuals and citizens, not into believers.

In the midst of the Blaser-inspired onslaught of new ideas and methods, I read a great deal of contemporary and near-contemporary poetry on my own, and soon began to write more poems of my own, most of them at least slightly better than the ones I'd written in high school even if they weren't any less self-centred. Blaser read some of them, pronounced them "interesting" and made it clear that if I continued to read and write, they would get much better. I listened, too, unsceptical of an adult for the first time since mid-childhood.

Within a few months of meeting Blaser, I lost most of my interest not only in reading and writing novels, but also in Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. In their place I gained a serious forensic interest in the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and I made a political and technical investment I didn't entirely feel in New American Poetry luminaries Charles Olson, Jack Spicer and Robert Creeley. Curiously, my attachment to

John Wieners survived the shift in ground more or less intact, even though I was still too oblivious to notice that Wieners was homosexual. When someone pointed it out to me, it didn't seem very important: I was getting a liberal education in more ways than one. Blaser himself was gay. So what? I was heterosexual, he'd made no advances, and if he were to do so at some point, it was a free country and I would have to choose from the materials of the moment, not from the pulpit or from the prejudices of my ancestors.

Blaser's approach to the teaching of literature was to make it the base for pursuing his own transgressive version of the History of Ideas. Happily, his pursuit was more than mere transgression. It was broader than the conventional approaches of the era, which sought to produce art that approximated and supported the museum curios of the past, and within a range of ideas that wouldn't provoke mental indigestion at an Anglican church picnic. Blaser did not think much of the then already fashionable "creativity" approach to literature, nor was he interested in studying either authorial technology or production psychology. If we were studying Ezra Pound, for example, our task was to assemble Pound's antecedents and his intellectual sources, local and historical, and to decipher from them what it was Pound thought he was saying. If that meant (and it did) poring through Homer and Hesiod, Confucian texts, the fiduciary documents of the early years of American democracy, or the wacky economics of Social Credit, so be it. Content was content, and we weren't permitted to turn up our noses at any of it once we'd uncovered it.

Blaser asked his students to proceed by both more and less than conventional scholarly methods — more because he made us responsible for any source of information we encountered, and less because we weren't required to numb our brains with the

usual ploddingly anal accretions of logically collated data or be blinded by the pleasures of imposing discursive theories over text and phenomena. His own intellectual methods were relentlessly heterodox if not always thorough, and the slipstream of his investigation was an infinitely more pleasant and productive place than where I was asked to go by the other members of the English Department, who mostly dithered over poetic technique or lit/crit aesthetics that started at the notion that imaginative literature was unacceptably obscure and in need of supervisory interpretation. A writer's style, Blaser insisted, is defined by how that writer articulates what he or she knows, not on how delicately or uniquely words get arranged on a sheet of paper.

In the macropolitics of poetry, Blaser was committed, as were most of his New American Poetry contemporaries, to poetic constructions like Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. At least for Blaser, this was because each of these masterworks had wires that were visibly connected to the epic and to the critical interstices of political understanding and error. To this base, Blaser spliced a subtle adjustment he had made to Spicer's notion of dictation, which aggressively suggested that the sources of poetry were outside the self but more likely to reside in local specificities than in the cosmological. Blaser developed this as "seriality" in his own masterwork, *The Holy Forest* which proposed that both poetry and meaning were intermittent recognitions uncovered within the fundamental darkness of the sublime. His parallel notion of parataxis, derived partly from Pindar's notion that poetry derives from the simultaneity of the profane, the political and the cosmological, became the intellectual spine of *The Holy Forest*.

As a teacher, Blaser, like Olson and Pound before him — and

unlike Spicer — assumed that the beauty of the wires was self-evident, which, for most of us who studied with him, was the case once we got an inkling of just how much of the world those wires connected to and how powerful the currents they carried. Most of the time, anyway. Like Pound, Olson hadn't bothered to note that imperialism and epic are often indistinguishable, or that as Canadians, we might not share those imperial epic concerns. Both Blaser's writing and his pedagogy were much more fastidious on this issue, which I'll return to later in the essay.

Blaser's intellectual fastidiousness didn't permit his students to waste much energy with the artificial elevation of their self-esteem, and anyway, it wasn't my nature to slap myself on the back in the middle of a job. Blaser's belief that literary criticism was a tertiary intellectual activity, along with his elegantly concealed contempt for the self-involved lyric poetry issuing from mainstream culture, the academy, and from us, helped to prevent me from burying my sensibilities in my own navel the way many of my contemporaries did. Where it didn't, it at least gave me a map to escape my navel when the time came.

For me and for many others who studied under him, Blaser remained a beacon of intellectual if not academic integrity long after his retirement from university teaching in the late 1980s — he stayed in touch, and most of the students close to him stayed interested in his many intellectual projects well after academic motives had faded. He's been a continuous and intense if increasingly remote influence on my intellectual life for forty years now, and I'm deeply grateful for the influence, often on a daily basis.

From the beginning, he was a better teacher and a more responsible mentor than any of his ostensible betters within the New American Poetry. In part this was a product of his fundamental sanity, his suppressed but always present Catholicism, his play-

fulness, and ironically, of his desire, as a gay man, for middle-class respectability. In the lecture hall, he had the happy trick of turning sleepy undergraduates into avid seminarians, and he had a knack for transforming dim-bulbs into dancers with his mastery of tutorial pedagogy. Yet he was happiest of all in the cloistered silences of a university library, which he convinced even post-literates like me was the purest repository of human understanding, one to be respected and protected from political contingency above all other instruments and institutions.

So what, precisely, did I learn from Blaser? What things did he communicate successfully enough to me that I not only acted on them within the pedagogic moment, but integrated them into my permanent cognitive equipment? I can think of at least eight important things about writing and living I likely wouldn't have learned otherwise, and which I've permanently adopted and adapted.

1. I learned that real thinking and writing is more about orchestration of materials than creativity. Your task, whether as a poet or novelist or scholar or union researcher or urban planner, is to integrate your own intelligence with the active intelligence around you to enhance articulation. You are not here to impose your signature on a set of materials, raw or cooked, human or inanimate. You are here to discover both their essential and detailed truth, and to then put both into action politically and personally.

2. I learned that harmony, taken in the sense of things with power working together to create something of greater intensity, beauty or amplitude, as say, with Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, is more important than spiritual equilibrium or political equality.

3. I learned that open curiosity is the civilizing instrument of all human enterprise; that enterprise is corrupted when har-

nessed to ideology or other forms of excessive certainty; and that it is my job as an intellectual to leave spaces within my thought for the things I haven't yet learned.

4. I learned that equality and social justice are useless if they're achieved at the cost of imposed mediocrity, intellectual squalor and the suppression of understanding. Recognizing this, and searching for contextually relevant ways to act on it, was what inoculated me against the Bolshevism that burned up a lot of my contemporaries from within. It also made me resistant to the strain of entrepreneurial brutality I inherited from my own genetic line and early socialization.

5. I learned that individual life — private gain, personal enlightenment, individual advancement and/or survival — is not necessarily the highest good even when acceptable formulations of common or collective good are absent or unattractive.

6. I learned that the apprehension of harmonies of the difficult and disparate are the ones most worth pursuing, and that simplicity is often a dangerous illusion.

7. I learned that the highest form of passion was not the unleashing of libido but thought, and that the relentless pursuit of thorough exactness was its primary instrument.

8. Finally, I learned that the pursuit of elegance — in intellectual work, in art, in social and political life, and in, well, household management — is always worth the trouble, and that its pursuit is indivisible from most other intellectual and artistic activities. To keep this from looming and pretense, Blaser also proposed that the pursuit shouldn't ever be a means of elevating oneself above others, and that it ought to be fun. Doing things right (to generate beauty and calm insight) is a political act, and not a minor one.

All of these are now part of my daily equipment — key com-

ponents of what they'd call, on *Star Trek*, the "receptor array" I deploy to interpret the world. The different elements of it are always "on", and are, on good days, adequately integrated and operational. Blaser enabled me many more good days than I'd otherwise have had.

2. *The New American Poetry and Us*

The short version on Robin Blaser is this: he was a competent and generous mentor and a responsible and civilizing teacher. But I say this with the understanding that the influence he had on me was more as an intellectual than as a writer of poems. The poetry I've written and published was much more the product of the 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, along with the social and cultural attitudes that sprang from it. I was most strongly influenced by the poetry of Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, John Wieners, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, in roughly that order of importance, with Olson's influence notably larger than that of the others.

As influences go, the *New American Poetry* anthology and its principal poets — which from this point I'll lump together as "The New American Poetry" — were compelling but not always sanguine. When I stopped publishing verse in 1983 and stopped calling myself a poet and stopped thinking of myself as one, I did so with a sense of having been hustled by The New American Poetry, if not quite betrayed. I made the identification almost without noticing it, and not from Oedipal rage or from the (currently all-too-common) notion that I was entitled to an education free of mistakes and abuse. It was a judgment I came to gradually and reluctantly, and almost without noticing. Yet by the mid-1980s, I'd come to distrust my artistic roots because they and

the materials they deployed to construct meaning were unable to defend the particular and local — the very things they proposed to protect — against the new totality of the post-1960 era: the marketplace, corporatism and the cognitive prostheses those forces created to achieve their aims. For more than two decades now I've worked in other modes of public writing and thinking with a slight but nagging sense of intellectual dislocation.

I suppose I'm occasionally tempted to blame the New American Poetry for some of my private failures as both a writer and as a human being — and when I do, I no doubt sound grumpy and bitter, the kind of writer of which the movement has produced more of its share. But a more relevant response is to conduct a personal autopsy on the New American Poetry, one that tries to break down where it and “Projective Verse” failed both as a construction technology for writing and as an intellectual method.

Projective Verse

The verse technology of the New American Poetry, and a sizeable portion of its poetics, was articulated by Charles Olson's 1950 essay “Projective Verse”. Olson proposed, as a technical principle of verse-making, that line and verse length ought to be determined by a quasi-mystical speech/breath proprioception of the individual poet within his/her physical, cognitive and cultural environments. Deployed thus, projectivity would become a means of getting away from what Olson called “the private-soul-at-any-public-wall”, and from formal strictures of verse patterns derived mainly from the speech and social rhythms of seventeenth and eighteenth century England.

Olson was trying to address several real-world literary problems that English language verse had become mired in largely as a result of the attempts of individual poets to come to terms with

the trauma of the First World War, where the physical and emotional assault on the sensoria of combatants had been unprecedentedly violent, and the “Oh-woe-is-me” lyrics that came from it really weren’t self-inflation but a sensible response to a devastating phenomenological reality the human mind could only process from inside the shield of rigid formalities. The war had not only forced verse further back into the forms of the past, but also sequestered its cognitive toolbox by turning poetry into a kind of psychic triage station for the combatant-poets. But in *Maximus 1-22* and in a dozen or so relatively long poems that stood outside the epic structure of *The Maximus Poems*, Olson succeeded in creating a poetry able to carry more content and to deliver that content with greater force than had been seen in English language verse since Whitman.

What you get when you read Olson’s early poems is an exemplary performance of exactly what he proposes verse do in “Projective Verse”. His utterly declarative mind packs every iota of intelligence he has into each instant, and lets the narrative and the conventions of the referential universe fend for themselves. Thus the poems move with sometimes disorienting velocity from philosophical deposit to psychophysical registrations to facts and speculations about local history and geography to what he could see out the kitchen window to cosmological musings, the different modes often lurching over or colliding with one another, frequently slipping into parenthetical digressions or into unacknowledged quotes:

What does not change / is the will to change

He woke, fully clothed, in his bed. He
remembered only one thing, the birds, how

when he came in, he had gone around the rooms
and got them back in their cage, the green one first,
she with the bad leg, and then the blue,
the one they had hoped was a male

Otherwise? Yes, Fernand, who had talked lispingly of
Albers & Angkor Vat.
He had left the party without a word. How he got up, got
into his coat,
I do not know. When I saw him, he was at the door, but it
did not matter,
he was already sliding along the wall of the night, losing
himself
in some crack of the ruins. That it should have been he
who said "The kingfishers!"

Who cares
For their feathers
Now?"

("The Kingfishers")

Or, this, from "In Cold Hell, In Thicket":

ya, selva oscura, but hell now
is not exterior, is not to be got out of, is
the coat of your own self, the beasts
emblazoned on you And who
can turn this total thing, invert
and let the ragged sleeves be seen
by any bitch or common character? Who
can endure it where it is, where the beasts are met,

where yourself is, your beloved is, where she
who is separate from you, is not separate, is not
goddess, is, as your core is,
the making of one hell

where she moves off, where she is
no longer arch

Powerful, high-speed and rhapsodic as they are, these are narratives that can be easily tracked with the sensorium, yet do not proceed by logical progressions. Olson's insistent voice scoops you up, almost overpowering in its vitality, demanding that you travel at its speed. If you're intellectually conscientious or skeptical of the materials, you can, as with Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, go back later, track down what referential evidence you're able to break into, and then read the work again with greater penetration. But you can't ever get it all because it moves with unapologetic speed in a mix of short-hand and vernacular, leaps of logic and detail, always at the extreme velocities with which Olson's mind moves. If you are a poet, you are challenged to try to make something as fast-moving yourself. But you will find it very hard not to manufacture it, as several generations of poets have found, with the unforgettable voice and mental rhythms of Charles Olson playing through — and sometimes supplanting — your own.

Olson frequently turned to dreams as the narrative backbone for poems, and some of these turned out to be his most arresting. The opening frames of "The Kingfishers" quoted above employ dream sequences, as do "The Librarian" and "As the Dead Prey Upon Us", both in more extensive ways.

I was struck by the fact I was in Gloucester, and that my
daughter
was there — that I would see her! She was over the Cut. I
hadn't even connected her with my being there, that she
was

here. That she was there (in the Promised Land — the
Cut!

But there was this business, of poets, that all my Jews
were in the fish-house too, that the Librarian had made a
party

I was to read. They were. There were many of them,
slumped
around. It was not for me. I was outside. It was the Fort.
The Fort was in East Gloucester — old Gorton's Wharf,
where the Library
was. It was a region of coal houses, bins. In one a gang
was beating someone to death, in a corner of the labyrinth
of fences. I could see their arms and shoulders whacking
down. But not the victim. I got out of there. But cops
tailed me along the Fort beach toward the Tavern

(“The Librarian”)

I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.

I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
But suddenly the huge underbody was above me, and the
rear tires

were masses of rubber and thread various clinging
together

as were the dead souls in the living room, gathered
about my mother, some of them taking care to pass
beneath the beam of the movie projector, some record
playing on the victrola, and all of them
desperate with tawdriness of their life in hell

(“As the Dead Prey Upon Us”)

Each of these poems is liberated from conventional logic in exactly the way all dreams are. The data flow, some of it from the depths of Olson’s subconscious and/or unconscious, some of it unprocessed or shallow sensory impressions from short-term memory engrams, all of it undeniably authentic, is simply laid on in the paratactic sequence in which it comes to Olson, and it creates its own fragmented narrative. What a breakthrough this must have seemed to Olson in the 1950s: a narrative mode that was at once experientially familiar to every reader, unassailable in its authenticity and not trackable by the ratiocinative mind. It must have seemed to Olson that he’d solved the central weakness of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, which relied for structure and fuel on Pound’s authorial ego. Olson recognized that Pound’s ego had led the *Cantos* into long passages of inscrutability or incoherence (“it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere”) and Pound himself into periods of profound derangement.

The use of dream data and the paralogic by which dreams build narrative subsequently became a staple of later New American Poetry-influenced verse. Unfortunately, few were able to use

it as forcefully as Olson did. In the hands of lesser poets, the use of dreams became a new form of onanistic self-elevation.

Olson died in 1970, but through the 1970s, when his work and the New American Poetry were at the apex of their influence among students and young poets inside the universities, you could hear mini-Olsons at virtually every poetry reading, some of them huffing and puffing inside Olson's increasingly idiosyncratic reference field, one that was heavily weighted to maritime American history and his own self-created paleocosmological classicism. The results, if you happened to be, say, an urban poet from the West Coast, were often ludicrous and bombastic. The more successful poets were those who tried to make their brains go as fast and cut as wide an intellectual and sensory swath as Olson's did, but within their own earned set of particularities and knowledges. A few succeeded, usually by constricting their subject matter and by exerting enough will to keep Olson's voice from taking over. Most fell beneath the Olson steamroller.

As a practitioner of verse, Olson was an unapologetic *rhapsode*, and the *Maximus Poems*, which began as an authentic American epic, degenerated into a kind of Jungian rhapsodomancy near the end of his life as the evidential tracks widened and became increasingly opaque and incoherent. Much of the later work of the lesser New American Poets suffered from a similar drift from coherence into what is best described as a self-jubilance that was often conflated with misanthropic environmentalism: one with nature, but with little interest in human solidarity. The poetry was no longer in the pity, but it is a similarly cramped corner of the human universe, more consonant with Wordsworth than with Whitman.

Olson and the pursuit of knowledge

There was more to Charles Olson than his radical propositions about how to construct verse, and it is these other things as much as the innovations to verse that account for Olson's appeal and that of the other poets of the New American Poetry. Olson, both as a poet and public intellectual, posed a seething one-man question mark at a crucial junction in Western history. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Euro-American civilization was at the sorry end of a cultural unanimity that had begun, by Olson's reckoning, with Aristotle, then bursting into full flower with the Reformation and René Descartes and culminating in the sometimes crazed utilitarianism of modernism. "Projective Verse" and the essays that support it (of which "Human Universe" is the most important) are a protest against the excesses and limitations of ratiocination, and a call for alternate ways of securing reality and being in the world.

When Olson put together "Projective Verse" in the late 1940s, he was in that rarest of all intellectual conditions — of having figured out several things no one else, anywhere, knew, and of being able to articulate it in seductive if not precise terms. Olson's chief insight was that the best defense against the cultural and psychological homogenization of human experience and cognition that is the byproduct of the mass economic and information systems we understand today as globalism would be precise local knowledge coupled with a studied and deliberate intellectual cosmopolitanism. As an intellectual strategy for producing verse, this insight translated into the notion that poetic diction should become coincident with "body-speech", which is to say, it should issue from bodily limits, strengths, and be within the limits of — and accountable to — its sensory and

cultural perimeters. At the time, this was in sharp opposition to the artifice and patterning that academic poetry had fallen into, after a very brief respite at the beginning of the twentieth century with Imagism.

Olson was further armed by his understanding of the physicist Werner Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, which recognized that any act of measuring alters both the process and the physical properties being measured, and that thus the measuring must be accounted for in *all* calculations. He turned this on the constructions of mass society and political totality, frequently with striking effect. Ultimately, it led him to demand that ratiocination settle for a more moderate portion of human perception and judgment and that it let bodily intelligence authenticate it — and (not incidentally) render it incapable of the kinds of mass violence the first half of the twentieth century saw too much of. Olson's true beef, therefore, wasn't an aesthetic disagreement with the effete academics who had taken over American verse, but with the totalities that had been growing in Western thought since the Renaissance, and which culminated in Fascism, Soviet Communism and the two ultra-violent world wars that claimed eighty-five million lives. While Olson was concocting "Projective Verse" those totalities were morphing into the totalizing lunacies of McCarthyism and later, the Cold War; no wonder that Olson was seeking other ways of being in the world.

Olson and Communications

Olson's rejection of the Aristotelian toolbox — logic and classification as the means of establishing "reality" — is understandable given the events of the previous decades, where they had been employed by totalitarian governments, most notably Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, to improve the efficiency

with which they selected and then murdered their enemies. But Olson's seminal essay "Human Universe", which was both informed and conditioned by the fact that he was living in the Mayan region of Mexico while he was writing it, is in reality an attempt to reintroduce the perceptual systems of tribalism without coming to terms with why tribalism had been supplanted as a system for human organization.

Primitive cultures do operate through a less adversarial relationship between individual human beings and the natural world. But as an array of social strategies that regulate interactions between groups of human beings, tribalism only functions in settings where populations are small enough and the space between tribal groups is large enough to avoid regular contact. Because tribalism solves all conflicts as nature does — with violence — in an increasingly crowded world it proved too violent, and other forms of social and cognitive organization evolved. Olson, like McLuhan after him, thought tribalism could be defanged and improved, not recognizing that electronics and improved communications technology would not gentle it but rather enhance its capacities for social manipulation and violence. In that sense, Olson ignored one of the more obtuse lessons of Nazi Fascism: that the ability to communicate beyond the physical range of a human voice enhances the capacity for tribal objectification and violence as much as it enhances anything else. The proofs of this are today everywhere depressingly apparent.

Taking Pound's Confucian lead, Olson preached that the habits of thought are also the habits of action. This happened to be the deepest idealism of the New American Poetry and of the hundreds of parallel "radical" social, political, and artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, whether that meant the discipline of Marxist dialectics or simply "you are what you do". At its most

basic, it was another way of saying that if you couldn't imagine a better world, you couldn't create one. But it also supposed that if individuals changed their inner selves for the better, the mass of those changes would magically cause the world to follow suit.

The jury is still out on that one, and may always be. The communications advances of the last half of the twentieth century, meanwhile, have made it a depressing truism that the consumer habits in mass societies are more easily transformed into the habits of thought. Most of us, whether in small or profound ways, live our lives from habits that were created for us by prescriptive consumer advertising and other sophisticated manipulations of the psychological, social and economic fields we're enmeshed in. Most of these habits aren't really in our best collective or individual interests, and certainly aren't in the best interests of the planet.

To be empowered, as Olson was through his experience with the Mayans, by the thought of looking at the world through one's own unmediated eyes now seems at once naïve, overconfident of individual capacities, and wonderfully uncynical about human possibility. But in a sense, Olson succeeded as far as he did because he made *everything* about bodily perception, post-Heisenbergian measure and the kind of cultured but open-minded phenomenology his opus argues for from every poem. It also ran him straight into the ideology-fueled cultural theory that has since more or less taken over the universities and most other Western cultural agencies.

Olson, Pound and Epic

Olson was more a disciple of Ezra Pound than he admitted to, and on balance, it was Pound rather than Olson who was the greater beneficiary. Olson's essay, "This is Yeats Speaking" was one of the

most articulate pieces of writing done in Pound's defense, and it was the organizing skills and political connections of Olson as much as any other writer that kept Pound from standing trial for treason. Olson was also a regular and psychologically important visitor while Pound was incarcerated at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC, as criminally insane.

Though the two men shared few values beyond the common interest in poetry, they did share a number of personality traits. Even more than Pound before him, Olson possessed the temperament of a "village explainer". The difference was that Olson had a real world village — Gloucester, Massachusetts — to talk to and about. Perhaps a more important and exact similarity was that like Pound, Olson was capable of grinding philosophy, anthropology and high-level linguistic theory into the heart of poetry as if to do so was no more complicated than making a haystack after scything the grass in a meadow. Like Pound, Olson delivered cosmology as if it was him-and-you-and-the-gods. But Olson's delivery was the stronger one: he got in your face, he bullied you whether you were friend or foe, and he believed, with a manic locomotion unmatched by Pound or any of his own contemporaries, that his obsessions were everyone's and so were his agonies and woes. Everything about Olson moved to or within the epical: his vast intellectual range, the rhapsodic delivery, the dactyl and spondee-loaded rhythms, and the man himself.

Olson was a world ego in the sense that D.H. Lawrence was, a part-maniac, part-angelic orator and demagogue. For a few years in the 1950s, he generated such utterly authentic and unique intellectual force that everyone from Marshall McLuhan to the tow-truck driver in Gloucester was leaning on it and him for insight. He had much of Pound's ability to piss off tight-assed reactionaries, but he also had a rare gift of making many of those

who came in contact with him feel elevated just to be alive and with access to his poetic and intellectual insights. Despite his physical stature — he was six foot nine inches tall — he didn't need to loom over you in person to do it, because he wrote prose and poetry that burst from the page, gripping readers with the physicality and particularity of its imagery and sweeping them along in its dynamism. When you read Olson's poems (or much better, heard him read them) you really did see Olson's world through his eyes, even if you couldn't always understand it with your own brain and senses because it was going too fast.

It's no accident that "Projective Verse" remained the primary statement of the movement's verse technology, and wasn't substantially extrapolated, critiqued or challenged from the inside except in Jack Spicer's imaginary letters to Garcia Lorca in *After Lorca* (1957). In those, Spicer sought to reestablish the primacy of image in poetry, and sidestepped the dogmatics in Olson's "epic" concerns by positing the more moderate notion that because human experience is serial and co-respondent rather than epical and dogmatic, the narrative structure of verse could and maybe should proceed by other strategies.

Blaser was closest to Jack Spicer among the poets of New American Poetry even though in sensibility and demeanor the two men were very different. Unlike Blaser, who was a man of discretion, both in the sense of being socially, intellectually, and poetically elegant and "all of a piece", Spicer was a circus of contradictions: a theory-loving linguist immersed in, and comfortable with, working-class popular culture; a frequently out-of-control alcoholic who could be attentive to and charming with small children; a libidinous homosexual who was socially shy and quick to take offense. Spicer's poetry was more accessible and ostensibly profane than that of virtually any poet in the New

American Poetry, including Blaser, who made little effort to be accessible.

Out of modesty or design, Blaser delivered a lot more Spicer to the young poets who were milling around him at Simon Fraser University than he did of himself or his own work. This was a rather curious thing, because Blaser was present, living and breathing, while Spicer was, when Blaser arrived in Vancouver, some five months dead at the age of just forty. No small part of this, I suspect, was that Blaser was in a job originally designed for Spicer, whose skills as a linguist had impressed SFU English Department head Ron Baker, himself a linguist, and who had offered Spicer a job teaching linguistics well before the university opened in September 1965. When Spicer died, a job was offered to Blaser instead. He arrived in January 1966, and a decade passed before he got over the notion that he was Spicer's substitute teacher.

Despite Spicer's unique and attractive deployment of common sense and vernacular and his distrust of Olson's epic focus, he was, I suspect, too fragile and alcoholic a personality to be truly candid with his readers about the Orphic protocols of modern verse-making, which have as much to do with homosexuality as with the manufacture of verse. That said, Spicer's quasi-mystical notion of dictation, which supposed, sometimes ironically and sometimes literally, that the sources of poetry derived from outside human personality — spooks or archetypes or cultural libido — was a less fraught compositional frame than Olson's *Pax Americana* drive to epic. It was also a fairly profound rejigging of his "composition by field" as a means of getting the self out as the fuel for poetry.

John Wieners was a poet with lyrical gifts as extreme as those of W.H. Auden, of whom he might have ended up as a poor

copy had he not encountered Charles Olson in the early 1950s. Along with Robert Creeley, Wieners was probably the most successful at deploying the precise Pound and Williams-derived instrumentality of “Projective Verse” without ending up sounding like Olson himself. The key difference in Wieners’ best work was that projectivity was not an instrument of the epic stance Olson sought, but rather a way to create a filter against both his conflicted and often sentimental nature, and the structural sentimentality that the lyric voice is rarely able to overcome.

“A Glimpse”, from *Ace of Pentacles* (1964) displays a different kind of projectivity from that of either Olson or Spicer (as do many of the other poems in that, his most Olson-influenced volume.) As poems go, it is as subjectively lyrical as it is possible to be without descending into the maudlin or the purely personal, and yet it moves with the mind’s speed:

There is a knot in the middle of my head
that will never be untied.
Two monkeys sit there,
one on the right turned toward me, the
other crouched and turned
away. They
have red hair and do not play
with their chains. But sit on a ledge
above Venice? Anyway a city with canals
painted by Brueghel, I see
them in a mirror when I look for my own face.

Unfortunately, Wieners’ poetry, after about 1970, while remaining “projective” in his unique way, became less and less lucid — roughly following the trajectory of Wieners himself. Yet

his music was so sweet and on the page that until I was in my mid-thirties it simply didn't occur to me that he was mentally ill and/or queer. Even after it was pointed out to me, I continued to hear — and emulate — what I heard in each new book of poems he produced until his mental illness, drug use and disintegrating health silenced him. To this day, I still hear wisps of melody in my own prosody that echo his. It likely isn't the sort of immortality Wieners would have cherished, but it's something. And it has more of Spicer's dictation than Olson's projectivity.

It's worth pointing out that the sheer vitality and intellectual force of Olson's personality ensured that none of his followers was going to paraphrase or interpret very far beyond him, let alone disagree or strike out on their own. If you were proximate to Charles Olson, you buried your misgivings and did poetry his way, or you got off the bus.

In the long term, this wasn't a good thing. Olson had adopted Ezra Pound's deliberately fractured syntax and vocabulary, which had been a slightly bizarre cornpone routine Pound likely invented to peckerspray the Brits he was living amidst and to insist on his masculine Americanness even while it was becoming so idiosyncratic that it was hard to distinguish, even by Pound, from intellectual quackery and for a few years, outright lunacy. Some poets and readers have found the cornpone of both Olson and Pound entertaining and I suppose, a comforting shield against the rigours of formal discourse. Many others — too many — have taken it as an invitation to craft their own ill-disciplined jargon.

But here's the thing, see. Given that the basis for the public realm is by definition formal insofar as we need common grammatical and syntactic rules and at least a partial lexicon as a basis for communications, Olson and Pound's imposition of personal

shorthand and the cornpone vernacular accomplished little other than to create large quantities of unproductive confusion for anyone trying to understand what was being said. Its result — from both Pound and Olson in different ways — was poetry and prose that tracked more frequently by opaque expressives than by a penetrable syntax or a followable narrative logic. The essential energy in most of Olson's work is highly rhetorical: the promise of meaning that is often impossible to pin down.

As for the epic, has everyone forgotten that a highly formalized oral/aural technology is at work in all oral literature, and particularly in epic? And doesn't Olson, patriotic and paternal American that he was and remained despite his dissidence, often conflate "epic" and "imperial", albeit in more attractive terms than Pound? Epic isn't simply a matter of claiming that "We're Number One" and getting out the elephants, the gold brocade and the F-18s. It's about cosmology when it's both particular and absolute: The life and death of exemplary human beings trying to figure out why they're alive. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for instance, is true epic because of how its protagonists pursue the absolute, even though there's not a serious military battle in it. Epic doesn't always have its own armed forces and propaganda bureau, and you don't have to cross seas with an army the way the Greeks did to be in the grip of epic forces.

The argument of "Projective Verse" moves, as Olson proposed poetry do, one expressive perception after another, building a kind of rhetorical wave that left readers to agree without reservation or stop reading. "Projective Verse" thus proceeds by a kind of built-in "you know what I mean" that declines inquiry: you either "get it" or you don't. Not to get it, while Olson was alive, was to be condemned as "square" or reactionary and out of touch.

If you're not sure what I'm getting at, try to read "Projective Verse" as if you were a Martian anthropologist. Read within that insulating persona, what it communicates most emphatically — now as a half century ago — is Olson's sense of mission, along with the excitement of being onto and into something that is cutting across a raft of seemingly arbitrary restraints on both language and thought. Yet what would a Martian make of this kind of shouting?

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION.

It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!

Martians aside, it is hard for normal human being, even a half-century later, not to be swept up by the rush of Olson's projective adrenalin, here or in his best poems. That makes it easy to overlook the truth that the expressive energy is carrying most of the weight, and the essay argues its polemic by rhetoric and Olson's sweeping generalizations, many of them openly speculative. This is not to say that "Projective Verse" wasn't accurate or relevant. Here as in most of Olson, the man was onto something, and when he was simply wrong or couldn't pin the thing down, there was as much to be learned from both his instincts and his errors

as there is from what most intellectuals get right. This was true of Pound a generation earlier, despite all the stains his unrepentant Fascism smeared across his work. Yet it remains true that very little in the work of either poet was argued inside the evidential universe, or with anything close to the rules of social discourse. To the degree that Olson was articulate, it was largely due to his adherence to William Carlos Williams's dictum "no idea but in things", which Olson adapted as a crucial element of "Projective Verse" as particularity. It kept Olson, for awhile, local and until late in his life, phenomenologically sound.

"Projective Verse" did enable some very good poetry when the poets using it were talented and strong enough to avoid simply parroting Olson's rhythms and obsessions. That said, nothing spares the mediocre from their mediocrity. And it's worth remembering that mediocrity's strategy is always to take the easy way, and to corrupt the enablers, whether the enabler is a person or a method or a technology. Mediocrity also seeks to codify, to transform insight into laws and manuals. That's how the New American Poetry ended up with a generation of poets with their heads no less stuck up their own narcissistic asses than the academic poet-professors Olson so loathed, but here working with the dogmatic certitude of a Maoist political cell that what was fueling them was theory-enameled absolute truth.

One perception immediately following upon another, and Creeley's notion that digression is life are okay, if you have subject matter to apply, and sufficient energy and focus to pursue something specific that's in the world and might affect it further. But without content and particularity both the writing and the thinking too easily go haywire. A lot of post-Projective Verse poems have been perfectly dead imitations of Olson's projectivity — exactly the opposite of what "Projective Verse" called for.

A real “Projective Verse”-inspired poem could, as Olson himself pointed out, conceivably be a perfectly rhymed fourteen-line sonnet. What made Shakespeare’s sonnets work was the way he handled content: you saw the thing itself, the glorious particular projected in a rhythmic structure as “natural” as Olson’s “Maximus, from Dogtown” or Robert Creeley’s “For Love”.

Another now-evident naïveté was that Olson believed, with Pound, that if we could just get everyone to read the Great Books, the human spirit would be tamed. But the human spirit, as reinvented by television, has done away with the wisdom and influence of Great Books by replacing them with the marketplace’s version of democracy and a popular culture aimed mostly at enticing people to consume product of one sort or another.

The New American Poetry in cultural history

Nothing I’ve argued above undermines the fact that the New American Poetry in 1960, with its singularity of focus through Olson and its broad range of expressive dissidence, was a uniquely accurate response to the political/cultural tyrannies of the first half of the twentieth century, one that presaged the counter-culture of the mid-1960s and the eventual onset of multi-ethnic pluralism. It did this by prioritizing the local and by romanticizing the idiosyncratic, and by suggesting that authenticity is simply what is local and doesn’t require general application or testing against any standards. That’s why the poets of *The New American Poetry* were a marvelous choir of dissidents singing wildly different songs in different keys. Anyone who reads the *New American Poetry* anthology in relation to the other, “straight” or non-dissident anthologies that came out around the same time will discover how many good poets were part of it, and how much better their poetry.

At the risk of repeating myself, I'm going to summarize what The New American Poetry and Charles Olson *did* accomplish within the cultural and intellectual realm:

1. Olson's anti-literary bias did lead to the reopening of huge ranges of subject matter and ways of seeing for poetry. As noted, Olson himself was far more interested in geography, American history and a number of other intellectual disciplines than in the aesthetic parlour games of academic literary criticism or the technologies of creating fine aesthetic and/or literary artifacts. He made it possible for working English-language poets to be expert in things other than verse manufacture for the first time since Whitman.

2. Olson's insistence on the importance of local and specific knowledge at least raised a red flag on the leveling generality of the totalizing political system of the era: Communism, Fascism, and (although less clearly) the American cold war apparatus erected to resist the imperialisms of the Soviet Union after 1946 and Red China after 1950. From where we are today, or even from what we could see at the beginning of the 1960s, it wasn't hard to feel hostility toward the American postwar colossus. The disastrous wars in Southeast Asia, the Gulf and Iraq have since exposed its imperial leer, the myopias of succeeding presidencies that culminated in the Bush-Cheney fiasco and the proroguing of democracy into the chaos of contending civil rights without corresponding duties that passes for politics in the twenty-first century.

3. In the late 1940s, during which Olson published his study of Melville, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) and was cooking up "Projective Verse", it was possible to say without cynicism, as Olson did at the beginning of *Call Me Ishmael*, echoing Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, that "I take SPACE to be the central fact to

man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.” It also makes it possible to proceed in the same expansively thrilling terms about the possibility of a global democracy and the liberation of human consciousness in the American model. This was not a bad thing in 1950.

4. Olson’s notions about rhythm and projectivity in poetry and the necessary return to a bodily basis for artistic perception were the true sources of many of Marshall McLuhan’s insights into communications. But with the usual messy application of good ideas, McLuhan saw Olson’s “Human universe” as a platform for electronic enhancement of tribalism, and opened it to economic and cultural exploitation by the corporatists. Mass tribalism, is, first of all, a contradiction in terms, and second, a recipe for the kind of inter-ethnic violence the world has seen increase radically since the 1960s. That wasn’t Olson’s fault, of course, but his naïveté about tribalism caused him to overestimate its powers.

5. Olson more or less single-handedly turned poetry back to what its true utility to human societies has always consisted of: a non-reactionary advocate for clarity and directness that doesn’t sacrifice the complexity of human perception and experience, and a crucial cleanser of the pursuit of understanding. He was always more interested in the conditions of knowledge than in art: how we know things and if it can be communicated accurately and without toxic warping. However blind an alley his own work ended in, he did find and expose the flaw in the Cartesian universe, which was that it had not accounted for the real-world effect on measure of the act of measuring, having instead accounted all discrepancies to the whim and wisdom of God, which it gladly took to be beyond human understanding. Olson,

at least, showed us the entrance to a more humane and particular universe.

6. And here I remind myself again that the New American Poetry is more than the imagination of Charles Olson. It consisted of many poets and groups of poets working simultaneously (and often reading each other) in different parts of the United States that created a dynamic intellectual field able to generate an alternative critique of American and Global society to that found in the conventional mainstream of cultural analysis like Sloan Wilson's *The Man In the Gray Flannel Suit*, William Whyte's *The Organization Man*, and Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*.

7. The bad effects and several outright errors in Olson's reconstruction of the human realm shouldn't be swept under the rug. His dogmatisms concerning epic were in error on several counts. Not-all-that-recent research has uncovered that the memory technologies that allowed for oral transmission of epic were highly programmed and convention-driven: rhapsodes were not really the shamans Olson wanted them to be, and neither was he. There is a rhetoric deployed by aural epic, and more conventions than Olson's generation was comfortable admitting to, each of them costly to human understanding.

8. Whatever it might have been to the poets and other artists inside it, the New American Poetry movement was a minor subset of the reactive post-World War II zeitgeist that shifted societal focus from collective responsibility to individual self-realization and well-being. In that respect, the New American Poetry's closest intellectual sibling was the Gestalt therapy movement that was incubated in the early 1960s between California's bohemian and university communities. Neither the Gestalt movement nor the New American Poetry originated in California, but both had

the predisposition toward narcissism that thrives there. Gestalt and other therapies that came out of that period may be of use in terms of understanding aspects of one's personality. They're problematic when they serve as a displacement of culture and politics.

9. Projective Verse tied prosody somewhat ambiguously to both an insurgent self as well as to what is local and particular. Olson also built — or seemed to — a dynamic democratic politics into the core of the poetics of the New American Poetry. The fusion between that generous impulse and the less socially-generous impulses that forge self-liberation and the implicit empowerment of social and interpersonal asymmetry attracted a generation of young and socially-dissident poets. Late in his life, as reflected in the poetry he wrote, Olson's politicized localism morphed into a Jungian cosmography that was perfectly consonant with the counterculture currents then in full swirl. Virtually everyone in the movement followed — some reluctantly, most so enthusiastically that you'd have sworn they thought they were diving into a swimming pool filled with caramel sauce. Most simply drowned in the sweetness.

10. If you contrast Olson's excited projection of American democracy with the post-war existentialisms coming from battered Europe, you get a sense of why he was so compelling. That said, an élan is excited cognitive molecules, not substance, and it is more likely to attract sheep and lemmings than lions, tigers or relevantly autonomous human beings. The anti-Aristotelian impatience Olson evinces from 1947 to his death in 1970 was in fact, the same American sensibility that came to grief in Vietnam, up against an enemy disciplined with both rigid ideology and home field advantage.

11. Olson's tacit anti-humanism, and the "objectism" that is at the root of "Projective Verse" lent its energy to the species self-loathing that has characterized many of the literary offshoots and bifurcations of the New American Poetry, and which is the core to the environmental movement, the Animal Rights movement, and Gestalt and other lifestyle therapies that have supplanted inclusive politics.

12. It is possible to understand, more or less absolutely, where the New American Poetry came from, and to agree, not so absolutely, to the accuracy with which it responded to the conditions of the era. But at the same time, it is also very hard not to assign a measure of opprobrium to the New American Poetry for the things it missed and for the contemptuous attitudes toward readers it more or less openly encouraged. By itself, that contempt has to bear some responsibility for the intellectual and cultural catastrophe that has reduced literature to the status of cultural craft activity—not that every other literary genre and movement can't be tarred with the same brush.

13. One more thing. Around 1980, Howard Broomfield, who I'd worked with while Murray Schafer was concocting the World Soundscape Project about ten years earlier, gave me a cassette tape of a very strange recording he'd made. Using a bandwidth filter, he'd stripped everything out of Pink Floyd's rock anthem *The Wall* except the rhythm track. Howard, an acoustically and otherwise hypersensitive man who was to commit suicide four years later, was agitated when he gave me the tape, but wouldn't explain his agitation, saying that I'd understand when I listened.

The recording started by sounding exactly like the Pink Floyd recording, because that was what it was, and where Howard

began. But gradually the vocal dimmed, and then, as Howard filtered out successive bandwidths, the lead guitar and base faded, leaving the naked rhythm track. *That* sounded nothing like I expected. No long-haired drummer in a concert hall filled with bored and angry teenagers playing out his liberation and mine. This was the drummer of a prancing military marching band surrounded by the goose-stepping soldiers from earlier in our century, *tata-ta-tum-tum-tata-tum-tum-tum*.

When I talked to Howard about it a few days later, I asked him if he'd known what was beneath the Pink Floyd recording before he began.

"I suspected it wasn't going to be pretty," he said. "But not so extreme. A lot of the music we get today has the same drive train hiding inside it. It scares the hell out of me. Rhythm is a hypnotist. It isn't going to hold your hand, and it isn't really your friend. Remember that mass communications systems always work toward the goals of those who own and control the systems."

I think I have remembered. Charles Olson imagined a world in which the rhythms of art would be those of the human heartbeat. But what Broomfield was telling me was that the last half of the twentieth century saw the acoustic and cognitive triumph of something quite different: the internal combustion engine, and the 60-cycle hum. The result has been Chicago blues, techno and hip-hop, along with dub poetry and a thousand similarly hobbled-by-the-marketplace expressions. You have to go far outside the mainstream of contemporary economics and culture — now more or less integrated — for a location where cars and electricity aren't the governing rhythms. The poetry you'll write from that vantage is likely to sound more like Wordsworth than Walt Whitman or Charles Olson.

Now That the Future is Here, What Did It All Mean?

From roughly the publication of *Maximus I-22* in 1956 until his death in 1970, Olson wandered progressively further and further from his setting insights. In the 1960s, Olson became so obsessed — or impressed — with the cosmological vibrations coming off his project that he turned it into the virtual opposite of what it set out to be. Thus, what began as a project to stud democratic dogma with local particularities, inoculate it against totality and thus produce a renewed American narrative by which citizens could know themselves and their place in both practical politics and universality became a blowhard cosmography predicated on the larger-than-life poet's inner life, his larger-than-life ego, and possibly a few too many of the psychedelic drugs that were making the rounds back then. This was a huge and largely unacknowledged diminution.

The last two volumes of the *Maximus Poems* had too many Jungian bats in their belfry for Olson to make much more than expressive sense, and then only to already-committed readers. For the converted, the drum-rolls were spectacular because Olson remained a magnetic personality who continued to be a larger-than-life figure until the end. But most of the melodies he was stringing it on couldn't be followed by others without a lot of faked humming and a blind faith in the genius of the lyricist.

The fundamental ambiguity between self-revelation and local particularities as the energy source in Olson's thought, along with the later Jungian elements created a dead end for young writers who used the New American Poetry and Olson as models for investigating human reality. I was one of them, and I suspect this is a major reason (other than that the economic and political culture of the era preferred intellectuals and artists this way) why

I and many others of my generation remained in a state of intellectual adolescence so long.

Another element was the failure of Olson, Jack Spicer, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and others on the leading edge of the New American Poetry movement to recognize that we are no longer, with poetry, at the centre of the human universe or even at the centre of the artistic universe. This error might be forgivable, but dogmatically neglecting to note that there are other legitimate methods of exercising intelligence wasn't.

I suppose it is *almost* excusable that these poets believed that, just as Ezra Pound had been at the centre of modernism a generation earlier, they were at the heart of a social and artistic revolution. But when that revolution, soon to be named postmodernism, materialized, Olson and others misunderstood the nature of its enterprise, which turned everything into a market commodity and redefined art as either a decorative commodity or non-essential luxury that might, if picturesque enough, attract tourists to the agora and thus generate profit.

The deep thinkers of the New American Poetry thought that the enterprise of postmodernism was about the extension of private consciousness and thus an occasion for writing poetry. In the real world, postmodernism has been about the superimposition of economic and fiscal models upon all human activities and the substitution of commodity consumption for meaning and for human solidarity. In this error, the bright lights of the New American Poetry were monumentally self-serving, and their errors seeded my generation with a self-absorption and arrogance that runs so deep only a tiny minority of us to this day recognizes the humiliation of what has transpired in the shift over the last thirty years from political and cultural models based on democracy and equality of opportunity to an oligarchy of

Darwinian entrepreneurs modeling all human activities on the marketplace.

It's a truism to say that fine poets don't ever need theory and that the songbird in them will sing despite cages and shackles. Even so, the New American Poetry and Projective Verse have become cages and shackles not much better or worse than the cage and shackles they set out to free poets from. And in the twenty-first century, poets sing to a much truncated audience.

I'm not sure what Charles Olson would say about today's "spoken word" fiestas in which the inarticulate morons of self-esteem's censorious orthodoxies go cheek-to-jowl with a generation of musician/geniuses who effortlessly embody Olson's wildest hopes in "Projective Verse" in the same way those 40,000 guitarists who can play better than Eric Clapton do in half the bars and clubs of North America on any given weekend. Olson once wrote that "what does not change/is the will to change." But even when change is inevitable and necessary, few people really like the changes — usually other people's changes — that go against one's will. These changes always seem more numerous and profound than the ones we want. In the twenty-first century, the median skill level of poets has elevated, sure. But the audience has vanished, or is addicted to a far different rhapsody than the one Olson imagined.

The New American Poetry and Gestalt therapy shared the same Achilles' heel with much of what came to be called the Counterculture: a substitution of "private soul at public wall" for "private soul in group hand-holding circle". The problem is that from one to the other, there's not much to choose from, other things being equal. Much of the poetry the movement produced after 1975 amounts to linguistic narcissism — particularity transformed into programmatic idiosyncrasy or attempts, as one

prominent Canadian poet had it, to feel good about one's pronouns and syntax. That's pretty much where the later *Maximus Poems* ended up: in bombastic self-declaration so interiorized and hermetic that they only wave at the possibility of the collective understandings, even though the earlier Olson was clear that those collective understandings are the basis of all democratic politics.

The realities of the twenty-first century pose their own questions to Olson and the New American Poetry:

1. Is it going too far to suggest that the New American Poetry and the several prominent parallel dissidences it mirrors were engendered by the ostentatious failure of totalitarian ideologies — Marxism, Fascism — to be just, and by the abject failure of the nation-states of the era to constrain those ideologies and their entrepreneurs?

2. How is it that the local and the particular are now enmeshed in and suppressed by even larger if depoliticized technical and cultural systems that have largely emerged since 1960, and that these systems co-opt locality and particularity into elements of a single, totalized marketplace where everything — and nearly everyone — is bought and sold on a for-profit basis?

3. The human species has been subjected to the two world wars, and after that, the state terrorism of the Cold War. Is this why self-as-universal-ego and democracy-as-leave-us-the-fuck-alone have been the most common progeny of Olson's belief in local knowledge and particularity?

4. Is it also why the corporations were able to rush in to impose the marketplace as the sole arbiter of culture and politics, redefining both, and eventually, even socialization and private imagination along with them? If nothing else, the New American Poetry,

along with its parallels and successors, have been silent on that, or stupidly partisan to the left's lunatic fringe.

A less recognized mistake of the New American Poetry is that it didn't recognize that the technical genius of one generation is automatically built into the next generation's operating system. Both Olson and Creeley seemed utterly oblivious here. All the fist-pounding about projectivity as a verse technology and about form never being more than an extension of content had been streaming through my generation's pores and being sucked into our lungs with the oxygen supply even while we were children sitting in the back of our parents' cars being hammered by the 4/4 rhythm of the internal combustion engine and the slip-slop of the windshield wipers. Our mentors wasted our hearts and our attention proselytizing it, because most of us could write and think projectively with less effort than Olson and Creeley's generation could. We were born, in a sense, with the innate ability — and will — to hear our own hearts beating. Their technical fist-pounding was no substitute for competent global poetics, or for having a working sense of how and why different eras constructed verse or learning to practice an open-minded phenomenology in the heart of a projective poem, something that was dead easy for Olson but with his epic presence as the working model, progressively more difficult for those who followed.

In the end, the New American Poetry foundered on its ill-conceived prejudice for spontaneity, which is what, when attentions lag, you get when you jettison the Aristotelian toolbox. Without a disciplined pursuit of particularity and local knowledge as political and social instruments as well as psychophysical and "spiritual" commodities, there's not enough substance to underpin writing, and little structure to restrain the sociopolit-

ical extrapolations that frequently evolved into a prejudicial and anti-intellectual ethos.

A half-century and change later, we're on the business end of Olson's demands for Projective Verse, which were achieved, culturally and cognitively, by the mid-1960s and then were rolled under by the subsequent mass systems that co-opted both the local and the particular. The first decade of the twenty-first century has become the cultural and cognitive equivalent of the Tower of Babel; democracy commoditized and personal liberation gone berserk in a vacuum.

3. *A Long Postscript*

So, now that there's all this, a confession.

I've written this essay because I need to resolve some Oedipal issues I claimed earlier didn't exist. They *do* exist, and I'm surprised and slightly mortified. Let me start with the easy issues.

First, I've needed to ask myself whether Charles Olson was a legitimate intellectual force, in poetry and in general. On balance, I think he was, particularly before 1960, and anyone who encountered him was better for it, in spite of the danger of being overwhelmed by his size and vitality.

Olson argued that poetry is a distinct and indispensable mode of thought rather than regimented aesthetic accretions issuing from the human need for literary self-expression, and he created new means of practicing poetry that widened its range of inquiry and sharpened the focus and delivery of it.

Second, I needed to know whether Jack Spicer was a major poet and technical visionary who devised, with the notion of poetic dictation, a way to take verse beyond "the private soul at the public wall" without landing it in the realm of imperial American

epic. That interrogation is and will remain inconclusive. Spicer was a fine poet, and an extraordinary if flawed human being whose work and ideas will likely exert an influence over young poets for the foreseeable future. But I remain ambivalent about dictation in several ways.

I can cheerfully concede that Spicer's notion of dictation can be a good strategy for preventing the private ego and its usually neurotic agendas from controlling the composition of verse and suppressing understanding. But I think that Spicer, in practical reality, often substituted a proselytizing Orphic libido for personality/ego. Much more important, it seems to me that dictation only works if the poet is conscious that it is a technical strategy and not a belief system one will inevitably use to reorganize reality on one's own behalf at the expense of incoming phenomena.

I think it matters whether Spicer (and Blaser after him) actually believed in dictation as remote spooks sending images for poetry from some Orphic beyond. It was over this issue of literality, back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that I moved away from both Spicer and Blaser as guides to poetic composition. I was and remain painfully aware, as an observer of history, that my species spent its adolescence under the oppressive thumb of remote gods, and now, when we appeared capable for the first time of evolving beyond such forms of authority, dictation seems like a falling back into their laps.

In addition, the ex-Forest Service cruiser in me stepped in and refused to accept the acts of contrite faith that dictation appeared to involve, maybe because I'd learned that what alone could be trusted in the field was your focus on what you could see directly in front of you on your compass track—along with the wary attentions that kept you from tripping on that wet log and breaking your neck. If composition requires faith, doesn't

that put us back five hundred years, looking to be stroked by the Will of God?

In his introduction to *The Shadow Line* (1920) Joseph Conrad put it in writers' terms better than I can: "All my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part. The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is — marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state."

Third, I've needed to ask myself who and what Robin Blaser was to me as an intellectual mentor — and why he was never really my literary mentor. Answering the first part has been easy: he was the greatest piece of pure luck in my now-long life. He instilled in me a curiosity about complexity I would otherwise not have gained, and he taught me how to look at the world without dogmatism and/or without the level of aggression that is more or less natural to me.

He never became my guide as a writer partly because of my objection to the literality of dictation, noted above. But there was more to it than that. His pedagogy enabled — and even forced — me to remain within my own sensibility, intelligence and language capabilities, each of which were profoundly different from his. In fact, several times he rebuked me very gently for what he recognized were imitative homages. In this respect he was fundamentally different than the major figures in the New American poetry I was drawn to: Olson, Spicer, Duncan.

Their pedagogy was flawed in just such a way as to prohibit the flowering of other kinds of methods and imaginations within their pedagogic domains. They were practicing a formal partisanship without admitting it, and not a true pedagogy or an open discourse. In Olson's case it was the sheer size and velocity of his character. With Spicer there seemed little room to maneuver within his Orphism; Duncan likewise.

That I got Blaser as my mentor, therefore, seems doubly lucky: his pedagogy was open. Had it not been, both Stan Persky and I, along with many others, would have been kicked out as heretics. And now that I think of it, being taught by Blaser might have been triple luck, given that it was actually supposed to have been Spicer teaching that first university literature class I stumbled into.

Finally, and most profoundly, I've needed to locate where written literature has descended to as an instrument of civility, public education, social justice and the pursuit of beauty, and if — and then where — the ideas that energized me as a younger man have succeeded in making a better world, or failed to. Most of these ideas are ones I took from poets and texts from the New American Poetry.

It's worth pointing out here that the New American Poetry was a "movement", which is to say, like any other movement, it encouraged its followers to give up independent inquiry for the comfort of belief. In spite of the clear and localist phenomenology Charles Olson, following William Carlos Williams's lead, tried to build into it, The New American poetry did what all movements — literary, religious or otherwise — do: produce a lot of people who believe and do things without understanding why. That described me for roughly ten years, after which

I slowly separated myself from poets, texts and the movement itself, and, as it happened, from the production of verse as my primary mode of inquiry.

It's also worth pointing out that the effect that the New American Poetry had on me and most of my Canadian contemporaries who fell under its influence was partly a consequence of where we were: Vancouver, BC, Canada, during the years between the rise of the "counterculture" in 1964 and 1965 to roughly the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. In one sense, we were on the periphery of the signal events of the era: we weren't American, but together with an amorphous group of other young poets, intellectuals and academics from a number of liberal arts disciplines, we were squarely in the path of the political and cultural physics of the New American Poetry's dissident American epic concerns, which we neither understood nor experienced the effects of in any direct and/or mortal sense. We were relatively clear of its physical consequences — the military draft, mainly, which sent a generation of Americans either into exile or the jungles of Southeast Asia. But we were also free of the republican and imperial sentimentalities that infused American thinking in the years before the defeat in Vietnam.

Most of us, interestingly, were also relatively unaffected by the increasing nationalism then building in Canada's national culture and politics, which we regarded as faintly alien. British Columbia, in that era, had a unique strain of provincialism that we both participated in and helped to mythologize. It was about, I thought, loggers versus capitalists, a strange categorization that nonetheless forced more conventional cultural and political tropes through its filters. My generation of poets wasn't on the side of the capitalists, but we were distrustful of the loggers, who I knew, coming as I did from the north, would kick our

pansy asses if we tried to offer them solidarity. So we looked south for our models, and that brought us to Olson and to the New American poetry, which had a strong presence on the West Coast through Warren Tallman's teaching at UBC, and Blaser's at Simon Fraser .

I didn't really become consciously Canadian until midway through the Trudeau era — the mid-1970s — and then only as a federalist pretty much on Pierre Trudeau's terms: defensive about the U.S. and global capitalism's growing aggression, and distrustful of flag-waving as a defense against those things.

The occasion for this re-evaluation has been the death, on May 7, 2009, of Robin Blaser. Since then, a few additional things have become clear to me, and should be recorded.

Because Blaser was always a deeply social — and sociable — man, he became, for a number of years, a kind of dinner party magician for a generation of erotically conflicted and intellectually inferior middle class men and women his own age, most of them university colleagues. The circus of these fortunate beneficiaries of the rapid expansion of the universities in the 1960s — most of whom would have otherwise been selling licenses and filing forms in obscure government offices — and who rarely made it to any of the revolutions then going on, found Blaser's "alien exoticism" an illuminating diversion from their unproductive self-involvement, and I think Blaser wasted enormous amounts of energy and heart on them. That he and his poetry survived and outgrew most of them as he approached old age is one of the many minor miracles of concentration that are his hallmark as a writer and scholar. His students, me among them, sometimes

learned as much from watching the delicate dance of that sociable but tenacious concentration as from listening to what he was trying to pound into our thick skulls.

Late in his career, Blaser achieved a degree of formal recognition few would have predicted. Canada's Griffin Prize apparatus gave him both a special award in 2007 and the prize itself in 2008 for the reissue, by an American university press, of *The Holy Forest*. A volume of collected essays has also appeared, but since Blaser's prose was always notoriously more hermetic and paraclete than his verse, one is tempted to query the quality of at least some of this late acclaim as not much more than the academic filing of mineral claim-stakes for the future deployment by entrepreneurial professors. Never mind that. That Blaser got this recognition was a lovely sweetening of the pot, and I'm happy that it happened. I'm also gratified by the grateful admirers and friends who surrounded him in his old age. I'm particularly moved by the way his exit was so solicitously chorused by these people.

In March 2009, a month or so after he was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, I flew out to Vancouver to see him one last time. I was there a week, but because there were so many others who wanted to ease his way to the end, I got to see him just twice, once while Simon Fraser University was conferring an honorary doctorate on him, and the other for a three-hour stint as his custodian to the steady stream of visitors he was, as always, too accommodating and polite to turn away even though they were a drain on his fragile concentration and limited energies.

I wasn't upset that I didn't see more of him. I felt lucky to have the three hours I did get with him. While I was with him, he was gloriously himself, despite the stroke-induced short-term memory deficit, now exacerbated by the brain cancer. There, and

with characteristic attentiveness, he made a point of saying how attractive he found my now snow-white hair, going on to discuss the special shampoos we've both used (and which he'd forgotten that I learned their use from him twenty years earlier). And that, of course, was where the memory deficit kicked in: we repeated the conversation about my hair and about the special shampoos nine times over the three hours I was there.

No, I didn't become impatient. Each time we repeated the routine, it was Robin Blaser, with all his marvelous charm and complexity, the man I respected and loved and from whom I'd learned much of what I know of how to be a civilized human being and a competent intellectual. In retrospect, the composition and behavior of the community around him while he was dying may be the most accurate reflection of his legacy, and the clearest testimony to his character. There were poets, writers, therapists, academics, other professionals and intellectuals of a startling range of understanding among them. Many were ex-students, and many were young. They were what he'd taught them to be: generous, gentle, and affectionate, and most seemed comforted to see the others who'd assembled there in homage.

It gave me the idea that I should make a compilation of what the different understandings among them had gleaned from Blaser and his writing. And for this, not surprisingly, there was an initial enthusiasm and some responses, most of them — hardly surprising in the circumstance — short and slightly sentimental, one or two entrepreneurial. Then the longstanding social and ideological alignments and interpersonal hostilities set in, and it became clear to them that I had asked a very difficult question, and clear to me that my project wasn't going to happen: I'd made my share of enemies over the years, people were busy, and the

question I had posed *was* a difficult one, maybe impossible for most to answer without the sort of fundamental re-examination of their values and their sources I've just recorded here.

I wasn't present for his last hours, nor did I attend the funeral. I'd said my final goodbyes during that three hours I spent with him, knowing full well that he was going to forget what I said to him within minutes. I told him that I loved him, and that I was lucky to have been a part of his very large world. He accepted my expression of gratitude as I expected him to. He said, "It was nothing."

Before I could protest — it had not been nothing; it had been the gift of a much larger world than I would have had without him — he looked into my eyes and added, "but you're welcome."

