

## Notes on The Practice of Outside: Robin Blaser's Divine Real

Before I knew Robin Blaser's work, I knew *of* Robin Blaser, having found out about him through my early poetry investigations of Michael McClure and Robert Duncan. This was before his beautiful, two-part goodbye note, *The Holy Forest* and *The Fire*, collected poems and essays respectively. His notes on the serial poem (Sam Hamill sometimes calls it the *sequential poem*) are some of the best ever written on that topic from a completely West Coast North American view. That he was active in the Berkeley Renaissance with Duncan and Jack Spicer and also was at the center of another one of the continent's organic/projective hot spots (Vancouver) is something well worth noting. That he has extended the poetry/Alfred North Whitehead connection beyond what Charles Olson did is telling regarding his "stance toward reality" in Olson's words or his "world" or "cosmology" in words he'd be more comfortable using, or the "real."<sup>1</sup>

Directing people (usually workshop participants) to the essay Projective Verse over the years was not enough and when I first took on Blaser's essay ostensibly about Jack Spicer's poetry entitled *The Practice of Outside*, I saw its length and feared its depth, but still was able to get some nuggets out of it and see how Blaser was one of those few intellects who could clearly say why a poem had to be made like this (the benefits of writing in this manner) and could also write that poem. There is an authenticity to this dual ability that can spoil you if you let it. There is also a vibrant spirituality which was a difficult thing to admit in the post-modern era. Soul is old-fashioned, besides the point, is residue from the reign of religions and religious thought goes some of the thinking. As Nate Mackey said in an interview,

It's psyche. In the deepest sense, it's meaning. It's what we mean by trying to find meaning in our lives. Language, of course, is an essential instrument of that and poetry is nothing if not the use of that instrument, the carrying of that instrument to certain lengths and hopefully heights in which the work of soul-making is advanced. It's something that's not easy to talk about. That's probably one of the reasons I resort to poetry to talk about it. It's a vocabulary that's out of fashion in a lot of quarters, even in poetry quarters in which that vocabulary has traditionally been at home. To find a way to continue

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<sup>1</sup> See the essay The Violets: Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead. [http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Blaser-Robin\\_The-Violets.html](http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Blaser-Robin_The-Violets.html)

to pursue that, but at a time where that term has almost been bracketed, is one of the things that I've been trying to do...(13)

And in Blaser parlance, the “real. The effort to describe a world seen by a person who has - if not rejected the reductionist world view, recognizes its limitations and has constructed his life accordingly. He gets to that in the first (long) paragraph of the essay when he says,

It is part of his [Spicer's] notion that poetry is necessary to the composition or knowledge of the “real” and thus drew him into a combat for the context of poetry -- that it was an act or event of the real, rather than a discourse true only to itself. He had said early on in conversation with a young poet that one had first to learn to use the I and then to lose it. This becomes an attack and “subjective aim” and assurance of a whole culture. And it cuts the ground from under a poetry that ceaselessly returns to wrap itself around a personality. It was especially costly to a poet who refused those resolving images of the writer as victim or hero (272).

There is so much I could highlight in that one section that I would be in danger of putting the whole quote in italics and saying “emphasis mine” but the notion of going beyond “hero” consciousness and its necessary evil twin “victim” consciousness is where the literary ice in this culture begins to thin. Compose using Blaser's (and Olson's, Spicer's, Duncan's &c) and advocate for that real in a culture that does not subscribe to this version of what's real, that there is something behind the cultural curtain, some “invisible writing on the wall” of the culture, in Eileen Myles' words, and you're begging for a fight. (Or failed grant application, failed publishing opportunity, &c.) Whole oeuvre's are made of this thinking, that things are the sum of their parts. That reality is things and not occasions of experience in Whitehead's view and what Blaser was reacting to with his constant refrain of *the real*. And it's not just a culture that this way of writing (The Practice of Outside, the Organic, the Projective) is attacking, but also a literary culture which is bound to those parameters a good hundred years after quantum physics began to point out its limitations. Thousands of years after indigenous, Eastern and hermetic Western cultures were saying what was real. Remove the personality (and the fragile ego behind it) and you're eliminating the writer (they fear.) To go beyond intelligence, mere reason. When people actually go through a transformation, through the process of individuation, those fragile egos begin to understand the

inherent liberation provided by this way of thinking, this notion of what is real and how taking responsibility for *everything* that happens to you is liberating and not a “blame the victim” approach to life. Of course when you intuit your two options as “hero” or “victim” you can get pretty uptight, especially when there is something deep down that suggests your birthright deserves more, as it naturally does.

More on the notion of de-wrapping the poet from the personality, but a little of what Blaser understood as the real, from *The Violets*,

For Olson, as for any poet, the poetry is primary, but this poetic places before us the argued ground both of practice and of world-view. Poets have repeatedly in this century turned philosophers, so to speak, in order to argue the value of poetry and its practice within the disturbed meanings of our time. These arguments are fascinating because they have everything to do with the poet's sense of reality in which imagery is entangled with thought. Often, they reflect Pound's sense of “make it new” or the modernist notion that this century and its art are simultaneously the end of something and the beginning of something else, a new consciousness, and so forth. It is not one argument or another for or against tradition, nor is it the complex renewal of the imaginary which our arts witness, for, as I take it, the enlightened mind does not undervalue the imaginary, which is the most striking matter of these poetics; what is laid out before us finally is the fundamental struggle for the nature of the real. And this, in my view, is a spiritual struggle, both philosophical and poetic (197).

There we have it again. Blaser on “the spiritual.” Worm can. Closet Catholic. Well, no. We pick up the essay on its third page and we're back into Blaser's main thrust and into more reasons for the reductionist poets to get nervous. He talks about Spicer and how the “poet tends to disappear from his work. There may be, in this sense, an ‘angel of the work.’” Here Blaser gets into Spicer's transformation and dates it 1957. The year that the Soviet Union inaugurated the Space Age with the launching of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite to orbit the earth and the resulting intensification of the Cold War. (It's symptomatic of that by-gone era where the U.S. response was to increase education spending, while today we add trillions to an already bloated military.) Federal troops were being sent by Eisenhower into Central High School to ensure the rights of African-American students and the decision to move the Dodgers to Los Angeles

from Brooklyn was made, never mind there were no longer any trolleys to dodge in L.A. by 1957.

1957 for Spicer was when he would move on beyond the lyric to the “narrative” and when he would “jokingly” use the phrase “serial poem.” In *The Practice of Outside*, Blaser reports the serial had to “hold on to a motivation that was not strictly his own.” He (she, the poet) would understand what Denise Levertov would mean when she said “the poem is never more than a revelation of content.” It would, in Duncan’s terms “cooperate with language, not use it.” They would be getting beyond themselves, or at least beyond their egos or personalities. Thankfully. Spicer was picking up the thread left by Yeats and his “spooks” and “poetry of dictation” and Spicer’s notion (by way of Cocteau) of the poet as radio station picking up a signal from Mars is well known. Blaser quotes a huge hunk of Spicer’s June 13, 1965 Vancouver lecture, which ironically was the 100th anniversary of Yeats’ birth, about the notion that dictation’s lineage could be traced to Blake (he’d also see Rilke as using “dictation”,) but would have one brief sentence where he whiffed. That sentence would be that when taking these things from the outside, “The source is unimportant.” This is what got him. This is one meaning of *The Fire* to which Blaser was alluding. As the Grandson of a woman who was an Espirista in Cuba and died of leukemia at age 57, I can begin to understand this practice, and perhaps am genetically programmed to write this way, but gut says this lack of discernment as to what from the outside you were channeling was the fatal mistake with Spicer. Blaser says it was not the drinking, but drinking dims the spectrum from which to choose (or from which entities choose you) when writing this way. And some purifying practice is necessary to cleanse the toxins, spiritual and otherwise when writing this way, or you will attract from the outside what resonates with those practices you do have and for Jack it was drinking. Forgive me. I enjoy a cold glass of Otokoyama or a wee dram (or three) of Balvenie Doublewood, but that’s usually out of my system in 48 hours, worst case scenario, but when drinking stands in for yoga, meditation or any number of mindfulness disciplines, you’re asking for trouble and playing with, as Blaser surmised, fire. Blaser continues,

*A reopened language* lets the unknown, the Other, the outside in again as a voice in the language. Thus, the reversal is not a reduction, but an openness. The safety of a closed language is gone and its

tendency to reduce thought to a reasonableness and definiteness is disturbed (276).

Blaser writes about the duality between the visible and invisible and the duality is self and Not Self. What's divine and what's the you that's not divine. Where does *I* stop and *not I* begin? The notion of an immanence is important here. A divine indwelling. This is part of what makes the cosmology of many fundamentalist USAmericans so infuriating, that they see god as "out there" and that they also subscribe to the reductionist paradigm, allowing such notions of "us" and "them" and 1,000 military bases designed to get the "bad guys" &c, at the expense of education, infrastructure, crime, transportation, health care, the environment and so many other real threats. This is not, I believe a WWJD approach to the world, but combine fundamentalism and reductionism and these are the, uh, fruits.

I am reminded of the correspondence of Duncan and Levertov discussing the world view of Conventional, Free Verse and Organic poets and he recognized the safety-seeking conventional poets and the limitations of those writing Free Verse. I am also reminded of William Carlos Williams writing about the fear of the new.<sup>2</sup>

Yes this is a poetry, and more importantly, a world-view that goes far beyond the conventional. The negative capability is there, or as Blaser puts it in the essay, "A meaning is constantly playing within the poetry because the poetry in its openness is more than a meaning and in the composition less than a meaning. Unfixed." Blaser also suggests in this method of composition, "death is an interrogation close to the world because it is not ourselves" (277). Not ourselves but not totally not ourselves, if that makes sense. The edge again, where self meets Self. The bigger "S" Self can look at the situation without the irritable reaching which can manifest as a fear of death and this to my mind invokes the duende Lorca wrote about. It's why I recognized so early into my writing life that this method is a way of getting more skin in the game. A connection to the real where language and experience are "so immediately reversible." Writing this way is an event, not the record of one in work composed more conventionally. It is unsurprising that Spicer would be writing *After Lorca*, literally and figuratively. Where the surprise comes in is where he writes *as Lorca*. Of

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://paulenelson.com/organic-poetry/writing-out-of-hell-the-practice-of-william-carlos-williams-and-the-opening-of-the-field/> and note the title is in sync with the topic(s) in this essay.

course he leaves it open for people like Garry Thomas Morse to pull the same on him and it is hard to believe it took someone a longer period of time to do that after Spicer's death than it was after Lorca's. After Lorca took 19 years. *After Jack* took 40. But the notion of the dead speaking through us is something that all indigenous cultures understand as possible. As one Igbo friend put it, "The voice does not belong to the speaker." This does not mean a trance, necessarily, but a keen recognition that, while composing, you are tapped in to something larger. You know you can turn it off, answer the phone, see the Stellar's Jay perched on the branch just outside the window, or address whatever concerns occur outside the poem for a moment or two. You can resume control, but the poem is composed in the nether region between you and it. Between self and Self. Blaser reaches for Merleau-Ponty and Foucault to prove certain points and also to Spicer's situation in San Francisco, at the edge of the land to explain in part why he (Spicer) and this notion of the edge (of self and Self) is such an important factor in his work and method. That it is a "profound interrogation" is interesting, suggesting that rather than a single entity negotiating the gray area beyond "self" it can also be seen as an area where self engages Self. That, like Olson, Blaser would understand the significance of perception and the connection between a practice that enhances perception and, therefore, relates directly to the public, political and social. Hence Olson's emphasis on being of "use" and acting in the world. I can relate to the need to write, but also be active in the world beyond that, to create structures for community and forums for discussion and experience that allow participants a taste of that good life between self and Self. Blaser argues that the "subjective aim" of culture is to "escape from the thought of something so alive they can't stop it" (290). This is the Achilles Heel of the reductionist paradigm. The world is not run by men. They must surrender to a force that is larger than themselves, one way or another. Learn how to surrender and death is not as fearsome as it may seem, while still being completely fatal. There are limits to control and, I suspect, we're about to find out a lot about them here in the next few decades, starting with the climate system, capitalism and other things the industry-generated-culture takes for granted. May you live in interesting times, eh?

Blaser knew by 1975 that the words soul, spirit, god, angel, had been lost for a long time, that they had been used for a long time in a sloppy way and we need not return to them. He liked Merleau-Ponty's term Chiasma (crossing, intertwining) and would invoke Foucault's characterization of the absence

of same as the “disappearance of discourse.” Fair enough. And while US industry-generated-culture continues to be partial to the fundamentalist program, which does not revolt over the 1,000+ U.S. military bases, or any of the other radical excesses of the military-industrial (pharmaceutical-educational-technological) complex, we can let those words rest for a while, or use them sparingly. I am in no hurry to suggest replacements, (though I like the Indonesian term “jiwa” which some believe is close to synonymous with “soul”) but I do know when one is composing with this method, or something sympathetic to it, as in Mackey, and his use of it (soul) in *Mu* and *Song of the Andoumboulou*, it gives his protagonists’ quest all the more meaning when you begin to understand the context. That he would be attracted to the serial poem is no surprise. That Blaser would go to Foucault again, with his question: *Who is speaking?* is not surprising either, though that is an exercise best left to the philosophers, as long as our work of detoxifying physically and spiritually will strengthen the odds in the favor of the poet.

That Spicer’s last poem was about Allen Ginsberg is interesting, as well as the anecdote that Ginsberg allegedly told Spicer he’d come to Gino & Carlo’s Bar to “save Jack’s soul.” Spicer’s response was that he’d better watch it or he’d become a cult leader rather than a poet. The Naropa Merwin-Trungpa incident comes to mind, with Spicer as prophet again.

A few random thoughts to close. “Poetry becomes an active record of that outside which draws into itself the man” (307). On the word “ghost” “...part of the usage of the word in Jack’s work reflects the battle of the highest contemporary poetry to recognize spirit” (307). That Spicer’s dictation develops from a “spiritual discipline” (308). That writing in the open has “cost a few poets their lives” (309) but without something, some other practice that allows us to re-tune the mechanism of perception to something larger (call it what you will) or more eternal than our own selves, it can be deadly. That one must “re-enact life” (310). That *The Practice of Outside* begins where the person leaves off - “at the open end of what we are... a beloved that may begin in sexuality, but... will end in the world” (310). That “words found or discovered in a book are one level of a dictation” (323). And finally to Artaud and Poe with another concept that has become, in our culture, hackneyed and the province of the greeting card, the heart. In Spicer’s eyes, given his push, one can give some slack for a moment, understanding Artaud saying, “My heart is what isn’t my ego” (323) and Poe’s *Eureka* “where the universe is an invisible heart that is

also your heart, where you begin again each time” (324). That Spicer lived in the West, so the “wise symbolic East... is from this shore West of us” (325) and Spicer’s famous last words to Blaser (some of them, anyway) which gave the next edition of Spicer’s collected poems its title are also of interest to me.

Like many who can grok the spiritual aspect of life, can point us to it in many ways, but who struggle with the process of connecting to it, Spicer is not unusual, but that his process is still avant-garde, still threatening to a cultural status quo and not yet fully understood is of note here. Just try to suggest to people in THIS day and age, 2013, that there is something beyond the world of owning “stacks of cheesy things to prove yourself” to use Michael McClure’s words and you’ll get something between glassy stares and outright hostility, especially in the US, but Jack was on to something starting in the 50s and had an intelligent, articulate friend like Robin Spicer who could sing its praises for 55 pages and ready future generations for this method, still an avant-garde, still a minority opinion, still misunderstood and still a threat. May it continue.

3:50P - 6.18.13  
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