

@poetics

The UB Poetics Discussion Group

Archive of Electronic Correspondence

December 1993

2 messages · Wed 8 Dec 1993 – Wed 8 Dec 1993

An electronic mailing-list archive

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

A reading edition. For each post the author's name, the subject, and the message are foregrounded, and the date is kept but subdued. Machine headers, encoded attachments, and the repeated listserv routing that once framed every message have been cleared away; email addresses, telephone and fax numbers, and similar personal contact details have been redacted.

Editor's Introduction

Kristen M. Fabians

December 1993, and the list is scarcely three months old — a room still mostly empty, its few voices carrying all the further for the quiet around them. The month leaves only two letters in the archive; yet between them they rehearse the whole future argument of the place, which is finally an argument about two objects: what a book is, and what a word is. From Vancouver, Peter Quartermain sends down the text of the remarks he made at the Western Front, where Robin Blaser had just launched his collected *Holy Forest* to a room of some two hundred. Quartermain confesses he had set out to mark the passages he might quote and found himself marking everything — “*These poems utterly resist predatory reading*”, he decides, and resolves to read them aloud instead.

The launch arrives already choral, prefaced by five wishes wired in from those who could not come. Phyllis Webb salutes Blaser as “*the great moth that can't be pinned down*”; Michael Palmer gathers the whole company into “*the Lost & Found Department of the Holy Forest*”; Fred Wah, Michael Ondaatje, and Charles Bernstein add theirs from their several cities. It is the list's oldest gesture, performed before the list quite knew it had one — the poets assembling, at a distance and by wire, to honour a book into the world.

Against that celebration Kenneth Sherwood sets a smaller and stranger offering, a close reading he titles *Violent Dictionary*, tracking Tina Darragh's alphabet-poem through its wrenching and wrestling of the letter with Judith Butler kept close at hand. He forwards his copy-text with an apology and a wink, proposing that a network might yet manage “*hacker anarchy with etiquette*”. Two letters only, and a season's worth of silence around them; but the terms are already set — reverence and mischief, the book and the machine — and the room, as it fills, will spend years arguing them out.

— K. M. F.

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1. **peter quartermain**

Robin Blaser: Launch of _The Holy Forest_

Wed 8 Dec 1993

Robin Blaser's new book *_The Holy Forest_*, published 30 November by Coach House in Toronto, was officially launched with a reading by Blaser at the Western Front in Vancouver, 3 December 1993. What follows is the text of my introductory remarks, prefaced by five messages received from those unable to come. For about two hours Blaser read to well over 200 people: a new work *_Fax 1_* (to Sharon Thesen), followed by the whole of *_CUPS_*, *_Image-Nation 9_* (half and half, "yellow ribbons", "As If By Chance", "Interlunar Thoughts", "Even on Sunday", "in the tree tops", *_Image-Nation 24_* ("Oh, Pshaw"), *_Exody_* and some others.

1. [from Michael Ondaatje, Diana Martin, Margaret McClintock and everyone at Coach House Press:]

Everyone at Coach House Press is thrilled
and proud to be
publishing this book.

2. [from Phyllis Webb:]

Dear Robin:

You are the great moth that can't be
pinned down. Thank you for that. Thank
you for your moth music, for all your
perfect canticles.

Phyllis Webb

3. [from Michael Palmer:]

Night out west, early this time of year,
and I'm thinking in the dark of the dark.
I'm thinking of the sweet darkness, the
burning pages -- a dream I remember called
In the Dark. About being lost, of course.
In a dark wood. I'm thinking of friends
such as Robin, all of us, in the Lost &
Found Department of the Holy Forest.

Love from the company in your other city,
Michael Palmer

4. [from Fred Wah:]

Dear Robin:
Another night in the forest. I wish I
could be there with you tonight, among
the silences, lost in the indecipherable,
forgetting the way in order to find it. I
can almost hear your voice over the Rockies,
your careful deference to the wild
residue of the inside word, your handsome
astonishment at the beauty of the book.
But, surely, it's not the end of the plot?
Congratulations

Fred Wah

5. [from Charles Bernstein:]

I'm not sure what sort of note I could send
to Robin re. The_Holy_Forest, except that
there is no book I have waited for longer
or with more eagerness and I appreciate
all that Blaser has done for and in poetry
and poetics, without which I don't know how
I could have gotten any grounding at all.

Charles Bernstein

[The unspoken title of my remarks
was "(no fixed address)"]

When Stan Persky and Coach House Press asked
me to introduce Robin tonight I started
marking up passages in The_Holy_Forest that
I thought I might quote, only to discover
that I was marking **everything**. These poems
utterly resist predatory reading. I'm not
going to take up much of your time, and to
make sure of that, I'm going to read to you.
For there is so much, and so little, to say.
"a candy-wrapper with a phone number / on it
suffices to call the largeness, and / the
smallness." Of all the poets I can think of,
none so quickly -- in the space of two lines,
three perhaps, draws the reader so into his

language, into the world of the poem, into the imagination. The poems retrieve what we did not know we'd lost, but whose lack we mourn. They retrieve the reader's imagination, retrieve imagination, reminding us of what it is, then, to read. Composing the good, the imagination invents its own landscape by seeing where it is.

The fact that we have lost our way in the holy forest does not mean we can shit in the soup. or cut down the trees. or lose our alertness. It is a place of terrors and wonders. It is the only forest we've got. And it's unknowable. "transcendence," the poet tells us, "like ourselves is historical, even in dreams" (324). That's why the truth is laughter.

Of course there's another way to say this: in Allen Ginsberg's words, we're not souls, communicating, we're just meat talking to meat. And *that's* all we've got: "a lacunary system, a cosmos unsure of its postulates" (368). The absurd comedy of that condition is also an absurd nightmare, of course. But spirit begins in matter -- as does our language and all histories.

There's another way of saying this, too. Blaser says it with great wit:

If there's one thing Harry learned
to love more than the sacred, it was
the sacred in ruins.

This is the only world we've got. There has always been a garden and it has always been among the ruins, a path, and a relief. If paradise is to be found anywhere, it can only be found here. The difficulty with Heaven and Hell is that it's hard to tell the difference. Each, after all, is a source of light, and neither is a source of ease -- the sense of paradise includes its loss.

But turn your back on the sacred, shit in the soup, and all hell breaks loose. Turn your back on the sacred and you force it into the violence of leashed imagination, which will burst its bonds and us in the process; turn our backs on the sacred, make the artist (as one poem quotes) _the_deodorant_puck_in_the_urinal_of_life_ (191), and WE erupt into violence, or we become dull grey, the poet tamed, our dreams our musics and our architectures our joys our sorrows our passions come home at last members of no more than a classroom education.

Blaser is the poet who makes a stink. He reminds us that we are creatures of language and it is our very nature to be in need. He is the poet of disturbance; our doom is that there is always more, and the only surety we have is the violence of our desire. What holds these poems, what holds the attention, is the strength of their passion and their love, their attention to what is. The mind / the poet / the imagination exfoliates , in-forming and out-forming, the dis-covery re-covery of what is and what-it-is-to-be alive. Mind as body, thought's flesh. Making sense / making Sense / extending the perceived/able. the unseen is not beyond our vision. Blaser is a visionary poet, but not by that with his eyes on any world but **this** one. A great player of syntax, sound, and line break, Blaser always resists completion, every line always turns to another -- or to potentiality, potency -- never resting, but without display.

The event we are celebrating tonight, the publication of _The_Holy_Forest, is major. I can't think of another book of Canadian poetry which has been so anxiously and eagerly awaited, and which is so well worth the wait. It is an astonishing and wonderful

book, the integrity of the writing, the refusal to pander to taste or to fashion, to kowtow to the demands of others, unmatched save perhaps by Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky. Please welcome (and honour) Robin Blaser.

Peter Quartermain
3 December 1993

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2. Kenneth Sherwood

Violent Dictionary

Wed 8 Dec 1993

Traditional Close Reading : Tina Darragh's "'A' was for 'ox'"

A movement/moment from on/off too. As if "A" were dependent on "ox" which "suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory." ("Theoretical" qts. from Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*)

"A" as in origin, as in "the political stakes in designating an origin and cause". (B) "Those identity categories that are in fact effects of institutions, practices, discourses..." (B) "The elements surrounding it were strong..." (D) A site of ordering, an arbitrary "a b D".

It is "motor-wise" to write: write our own ticket..." as if volition; "write-down" as if fixed, a unified construct; "write in" as if believing there were the potential for change, political actions. Representation in both senses: mimesis and a political standing in for.

What is "edge". Where the lines broken by contingencies of a book's form. These happenings are quite random, occur naturally, *cannot yet be predicted with significant accuracy*?

Trying to convince students that words don't _come_ from dictionaries, aren't born there, that their (who be they?) status in The Book is an effect/affect.

Resist "con c e s s i o n ."

That a subject be defined in order to be (re)presented.
Requirement of articulation through received forms
in order to challenge said forms with efficacy.

KS

Copy text:

(Below is a translation--presumably illegal--of Tina Darragh's published, copyrighted poem. Please don't forward this all over the place. We can have hacker anarchy with etiquette, right?)

from %on the corner to off the corner% Sun & Moon 1981

"A" was for "ox"

The first oxygen conversion occurred as an incline, a sharp bend as in "wrench". The elements surrounding it were strong, physically violent ones--wreck, wrestle, wretch--with the exception of "wren". The next major activity was "wrinkle", again related to "wrench" with the addition of "wind". Wrist action proceeded from there--wrist-lock, wrist-pin, wrist-shot, wrist wrestle, wristy--preparing us "motor-wise" to write: write our own ticket, write-down and write-in.

"elaborative" to "Eleatic" for "D"

"Egg" and "oxygen" both contain "edge", with egg's edge located at "share" and oxygen's at shear". The distance doubles from one to the other along this line: shar et vb farme atim domin numer iz cti porta acio torti him sho SHAG low ME L dou sha tio HE min ears cou ock metim semb dj

Kenneth Sherwood |
our wholes" RIF/T (e-poetry@ubvm)

"Fragments are  |
--Clark Coolidge

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