

## Robin Blaser / LETTER FROM A STUDENT — LETTER TO A STUDENT

*Dear Mr. Blaser:*

*I am a 4th year English major at X University. A friend and I have elected to present a seminar on you and your poetry to our class. I must confess that I'm having difficulty not only in how to make your poetry accessible to my friends but also in interpreting it myself!*

*I am reading through Pell Mell at this time and I wonder if you would be able to answer a few questions for me. Before I get to these questions will you please forgive my presumption in writing to you? I just felt that I had to explore all the options in presenting your poems justly.*

*Mr. Blaser — how would you prefer me to represent you to my classmates?*

*I noticed that you dedicated a poem to bpNichol; what is the nature of your relationship to his poetry?*

*Can you tell me what you meant by "alien exotica" and "scientific angelism?"*

*I noticed various references to art and artists; what role do these play in your writing of poetry?*

*I am exploring your poem serials; can you tell me what benefits you gain in using this medium instead of other types of poetry?*

*Would you say that there is a 'concrete' element to your poetry?*

*May I thank you in advance for simply looking at this letter? A humble student's undying gratitude is yours if you actually respond.*

*Sincerely,*

X

Dear X and friend,

Your letter was forwarded to me by Coach House Press, and I thank you for your generous interest in *Pell Mell*. You offer attention to my work, and attention is fundamental to the way any one of us moves around in the world. I am uneasy with your sense of a necessary “gratitude,” but I don’t want the courtesy you meant by it to die like a dead letter. That would make me a dead-letter officer. Your exploration of my poems implies a cordiality, and it is that which draws me to respond.

First, you mention “difficulty” and “interpretation.”

So first, I answer, “just read” — then try any one poem outloud — you and your friend might read to one another — “difficulty” is one aspect of my reputation that I think is rapidly solved with familiarity —

I suppose syntax is one difficulty — how is so much going on without the “I” of the poem taking imperial power over the flow? — our traditional, learned arrangement of a sentence (syntax) goes something like this: I drive (the) my car — ownership of things all the way — very comfortable — the “I” never at stake in the verb and life of the relation —

the arrangement of my sentences is meant to deny the simplicity and danger of such a relationship as ownership — why, the language isn’t yours alone — it’s older than you are, and largely other than you are, and it’s never transparent to any reality you can think of —

the “I” of my poems is among things, people, etc. (images) — say, “Drive I Car” — there’s a fancy word for this — *parataxis* — a placing alongside — or, to put it my way, the “I” of (my) poems is discovered among things, not in charge of them, not owning them, not drowning them in my sentiments —

the “I” then, found among things, is also in great part created by them — whether they be loved, hated, or simply met —

a poem is a commotion among things — a search for form — because form is alive — and the poet is, thereby, a *commoter* — not a commuter of meaning —

(Have you ever read or, for that matter, written a love poem in

which you/I can't see the beloved? — in which one only gets the slop of your/my feeling? — therein, the beloved most often disappears — we have honoured no one — in fact, we've asked the beloved to be drunk up in a disappearance — and the reader is left with your/our washing up)

still, there's an admonition best kept in mind — as Jack Spicer put it, "Learn to use the I before even trying to give it up" — one has, I think, only a brief time to hone the mind, to discover and honour the structures of reason, folding and unfolding as they historically are — only then does one come upon the limits of reason and beautiful clarities — and enter the unfolded of what and where we are —

"Interpretation" — before you, the student, become a critic or a theorist or a philosopher — is perhaps best thought of as what one is saying to one's self as one reads — about what is happening in the poem and about what is happening in one's experience in relation to the poem — and this, when you share it with others, is CONVERSATION — as between you and your friend — as among you and your classmates — there you come upon what you do, indeed, know and feel — and you come upon what you don't know, which is a pleasure of particulars and of finding out studiously — in order to feel and know beyond one's lonely self —

accordingly, one finds out that we're not wandering around looking for a **SELF** that preceded experience, but, rather, we are looking for a world in which to find ourselves — alive and celebrating, sometimes sadly at a loss —

"Interpretation" is not a matter of *a meaning* belonging to an object (the poem) or to somebody else — it's first of all an engagement with — a relation —

have you ever tried to say what music *means*? — not, I hope, without some sense of harmony, disharmony, noise, and counterpoint — voices — of *meaning* —

**Language** strikes me — rings in my ears — as an instrument by which we converse of our experience in the depths of things, big and little pieces of depths — then, there is, of course, the Language of linguistics and philosophy for your reason to study as an object —

something you are as a person thrown against, while simultaneously you're under it — biologically attached and curious about cosmogony —

How to represent me to your classmates? — well, don't — that would require a photograph — I'm white-headed, approaching 69, no sexual graphic intended — where does that get you? — instead, why not try to open up a relation to a poem — say “poetry is ordinary busyness” — note the child's memory of a barn dance — the beauty of a woman (his mother? he isn't sure) in the tulle dress — wearing a blue pendant — “ pendant blue sparkle” — followed by the laughter of the words the caller uses to guide the steps, as he pounds a broom on the floor to set the rhythm — or try “The Iceberg” — that's about love and human nature that's beneath the surface of what we see — or how about “Image-Nation 20 (the Eve” — that's about Christmas Eve and families in Canada calling their soldier sons and husbands via CBC in Golan, Baden, and Cypress (it seems there were no women over there that year) — surely conversation could begin with such bits and pieces —

bpNichol — he loved that poem — “the universe is part of ourselves” — so I gave it to him, by name — in my view, he is Canada's #1 poet — top of the heap — I miss him — that youthful going-gone — nevertheless, he left a very great poetry beside you and me, whenever we wish for that refreshment — his wife and daughter, Ellie and Sarah, sent me one of his poems for Christmas this year. I quote it here in case you and your classmates might like to talk about it:

### **The Natural Thing**

I go out at night  
when the moon is new  
hair grown long and  
pockets full of poems.

I carry strange birds on my shoulders  
that sing and cry thru the long night,

walk with angels  
when the wind is high  
wings billowing around me and  
long robes flowing.

I am a stranger in the new fields  
writing poems from natural things.

I gather  
stars, moon, trees and river,  
shape them in my hands as  
they urge me

till they burst forth  
a new, more natural thing.

Your question about “alien exotica” — that occurs in the first poem of the *Pell Mell* series, “Waiting for Hours” — I didn’t mean anything by that — as the poem makes clear, it was said about me — and she who said it is there — she’s wearing a piano shawl with long fringe — “alien” because, I guess, I was born in Denver, Colorado — “exotica” because she took anything she didn’t understand to be exotic, foreign, an unlikeness loaded with the disparaging — she’s devoted to sameness as in insiderdom, which defines outsiderdom — her hatred is/was rather silly, but fun for me — I won’t tell you her name because I am carefully forgetting it —

You ask about “scientific angelism” — which turns up more than once in my poems and in my essays, always in italics to indicate that it isn’t just mine — it is brilliantly applied in René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, where I found it — to describe a certain brand of science which believes it can explain everything, thus becoming systematic power rather than science within the human, intellectual effort — and this is NOT the greatness of science, but, rather, an arrangement of knowledge — a kind of desire, like syntax — that becomes totalitarian, positivistic, deterministic, an ism or many isms — and never admits to the conspiracy to own reality, yours, mine, everybody’s — it is philosophically and poetically impoverished — now, using that popular metaphor accountants have given us, consider carefully their “bottom line” — human nature is indeterminate — awesomely and dangerously so — and creative — there is another world of science, which belongs to your honed intelligence — that we work to know — take, for example, Canada’s own Nobel Prizer, John Charles Polanyi — his fine public statements — which may, indeed, inherit and reflect his father’s views on those “irreducible entities” we call persons — there are angels of the mind very different from those isms — angels are, shall we say, okay —

Concerning “art and artists” in my work — where else would one learn about art except from them and among them? They are particulars — like bread and butter and earthworms — of my heart and thought — so, I honour them as best I can —

You ask about “serial poems” — this is a way to keep the form open — *open form* — never a closure in or of being among things — a continuous song — *a fold which unfolds the unfolded* — perhaps, you could think of modes in music, wherein the major and minor scales are unfound, disturbed, lost, or distrusted — take a look at “Image-Nation 18 (an apple,” wherein “Love is Form” and ethos — if my poems say anything that is larger than any one of the poems can say singly, the serial structure — 1 to infinity — allows me to say that human nature — mine in the midst of things — is INDETERMINATE, *an adventure, an open narrative — continuing* —

There are no “types” of poetry — that is, if we’re talking about our experience of any given poem — typology is interesting for classifying things and for generalizations—where that would get you, I have no idea, except one mountain becomes all mountains and one sea becomes all seas—there are, however, formalities of poetry — *form* is a lovely word, coming to us out of Latin — the trouble is that we’ve lost our sense of the life of it — its rhythm, another lovely word, coming to us out of Greek — *rhythmos* — we too often take the word *form* to mean *shape*, a spatial sense of it — as of an object, a circle, a square, or a blob (exactly what some poems are, especially when the “I” of the poet sits in tons on top of the thing) — but-but-but form is alive, a structure in words — *form is no more than an extension of content*, and that’s a lot — is your content alive? — your language operational — not stamped into a shape in a General Motors Plant —

Please note that open form is a discovery of twentieth-century art and thought (philosophy and science included) — so you will find artists, composers, philosophers, and scientists swimming around in the waves of my work — I try to honour them —

Would I say that “there’s a ‘concrete’ element to my poetry?” you ask — there’s the concrete of the particulars — there’s the concrete of the language, which allows me some relation to and respect from certain of the Language Poets — in fact, I wish to be joined with those poets who are overwhelmingly aware of the *materiality* of language — that it’s not transparent to tradition, to reality, to pie-in-the-sky — this has a great deal to do with our contemporary condition —



our contemporary belief — the WORD was not spoken once and forever (for me, Mallarmé is a guide in this) — syntax, our arrangement of words towards a meaning is disturbed — the TRUTH, in poetic or philosophical terms, may be one somewhere, but, as Kafka said, it has many faces—changing into mortality — where the dance begins —

You did not ask about my “notorious erudition” — Heavens to Betsy! I’m grateful for that — that’s a pretentious way of describing another concrete aspect of my work — the record of a search and an adventure — in books and languages — in the delight of what is other and way beyond what I am, who am as little, wispy, and whispering as everybody else —

So, think over what you mean by the word “concrete” — basically, the word means something solid — how solid is language and the experience of it? — materiality, like spirituality, is not exactly solid — I think I’ll go for the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s sense of a *process of concretion* — that takes the “concrete” beyond my stolidity into the happenings among things — *the side walks* —

I’d like also to ask you to remember that there is no quarrel between “popular” art and “high” art, so called — that’s cultural anxiety about commercialism, which currently controls form — mixed up with North American anti-intellectuality — the God-given, as if creation were not at work — both high and popular (which face to face imply something lower than) are conditions — situations — of thought and feeling you may enter or not, according to your energy — they exist together and entwine, so to speak, like briars wrapped around whatever “we” are — they’s rhythm — rhythm — rhythm — writing, talking, singing, painting, sculpting—on and on, an entanglement — my favourite example of which is an evening with the Chronos Quartet playing the most demanding of contemporary music — and offering in encores — full Quartet style — Jimi Hendrix’s wonderful “Purple Haze” and “Foxy Lady” — that’s rhythm — of intelligence — of form — and the youths there hummed along — swaying the auditorium —

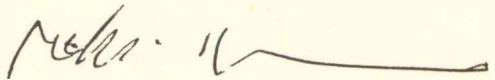


Hey! you two — students should not be humble — I hope that's not the new style — attention is good enough, for therein begins scholarship in the best sense —

and friendship, which is guidance in every attention, is good enough — to take you somewhere —

Oh! and ask your classmates to look out for the fun and laughter in *Pell Mell* — seriousness is ruined without laughter's companionship —

Yours in Whatever,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pell Mell", followed by a long horizontal flourish line.