

Robin Blaser / A CORRESPONDENCE

To Colin:

6 February, 1997 — just now I'm listening to elephant language on CBC, and, in the midst of it, that delightful Shelagh Rogers has quoted Wittgenstein: "To imagine a language is to imagine a life." Not a bad beginning to this good morning. Outside the kitchen window, a parliament of varied thrushes, red crossbills, sparrows, and robins converse musically about feathers and food. So, perching on a what-knot —

You ask me three questions, which are very close to your own meditations. For this occasion, I'll come at only the 1st of them. The 2nd asks me about my coming to Canada and would require remarks on my part in the community of poets in San Francisco, on my invitation to come here, and on my reading of the early Northrop Frye, predating the stereotypes he calls archetypes, and of George Whalley's brilliant *Poetic Process* before I came here — that I might lay out a map of the new country I came to. The 3rd asks me about Laura Riding, whose path I first crossed in 1948, a stunning poet who renounced poetry, a contrary modernist of enormous power and intelligence — whose startling books *Anarchism is not enough* (1928), *Progress of Stories* (1935), and *Collected Poems* (1938) I'd want to talk about — whose relationship with Robert Graves is now very much better understood with the help of Deborah Baker's excellent biography, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (Grove Press, 1993) — how to say that she is one of those poets who broke on the Truth? There's too much here for one conversation. Please give me a rain-check on 2 and 3.

From Colin Browne:

1. Robin, you always studied language as a social act, never pretending that it can be isolated as a purely linguistic act. You have written and spoken often about the Sacred. Has your relationship to the Sacred altered in your time, and how would

you speak today about the relationship between poetry and the Sacred? You and I have both been reading René Girard. How do you see the relationship between poetry, language and sacrifice?

I have a feeling sometimes that language reaches for a word to identify a thing only as that thing begins to slip away — and that this may be the central function of language. Perhaps a poem is a brake, a machine that suspends memory, an articulation of what is disappearing, above the debris of all that has already disappeared. Perhaps, in the shadow of the accusation that language is silent, language will remain as evidence — which we hoard against the day of judgement, which we'll brandish in the face of the whirlwind. It's my conviction that we do not perceive something until it's vanishing, which is also the moment that it takes on value — for the first time. This is a complex confliction recognition.

Question 1: This is a very contemporary question — who's talking to whom? In my effort to reply to a previous question from Lisa Robertson (*Capilano Review*, Winter/Spring, 1996), I drew forward the conversation of The Sphinx and The Chimera in Flaubert's *The Temptation of St. Antony* and the delirious passage of St Antony's longing "to be matter — to know what it thinks." I did not mention the progress of monsters — "cloudy convolutions and curves" in which "he makes out what appear to be human bodies" — and should have. I do think of this extraordinary book of 1874 as fitting the twentieth century — as a shoe might, if a century could walk out on itself. Sphinx and Chimera are so familiar.

You ask me about language as a "social act, never pretending that it can be isolated as a purely linguistic act." Two problems draw my attention here. First, the word *social* has spread out in meaning to a degree that we may not recognize that what we want to talk about is relationship, one to one and to another and another. The word *social* comes into English by way of Latin *socius* — sharing, joining in, partaking, united, associated, kindred, allied, fellow — whereby it designates pieces of something real enough — and from *socialis* — of or belonging to companionship. In our sense of the social and society, the

intimacy is gone. The social order, the State, the Nation, the System that restricts the individual and only promises community life have taken over. In this enlargement of what it means to act in the social we come upon those acts of many of us that we call democracy and politics, and we have valued such possibility. The helplessness of democracy and politics on the twentieth-century record is depressing. Under Communism, democracy and politics became impostures, unrecognized because they were fortune-tellers of the future. (Marxist theorists have a great deal to explain about what happened to the last great thought of social justice when it was put into practice.) In Nazism/Fascism, we have seen a corruption so deep that millions were murdered, or, rather sacrificed to the promise of the purity of a thousand years. Now, Capitalism runs amuck — ultimately a homicidal mania — corrupting politics and endangering democracy. We should undertake a study of the proper limits of government.

The word *government* comes to us out of Latin, where it had already come to mean rule, but it derives from a Greek word meaning to steer, to pilot. In my own view, derived from long study of the work of Hannah Arendt, the pursuit of government is to steer the problems of large numbers of people — food, shelter, clothing, and health. (This was something to be proud of as Canada approached this with policies of redistributing wealth across the Confederation.) These essentials of the natural body solved democratically, the point is to release an entire population into the freedoms of education, art, sports, and entertainment, according to the energy and mental talent of each one. The freedoms of language encircle these like covered wagons. Language in context is an activity in the inner and outer hearts. Reality is never simply or wholly common by language. I know little about the societal, having always been an outsider. I do have experience with community — and especially enjoy one of resistance — most recently with The Recovery of the Public World Conference here in Vancouver, 1-4 June, 1995. The resistance was impending in the poetry and in the poetic practices. We were all ordinary poets, philosophers, and readers at the work of resistance.

Just here, let me open up the word *ordinary* — that is to say, what is going on in the ordinary:

To the ordinary man [and woman].

To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, waling in countless thousands on the streets. In invoking here at the outset of my narratives the absent figure who provides both their beginning and their necessity, I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents. What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or the inspiring muses?

This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages, he comes before texts. He does not expect representations. He squats now at the centre of our scientific stages. The floodlights have moved away from the actors who possess proper names and social blazons, turning first toward the secondary characters, then settling on the mass of the audience We witness the advent of the number. It comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics. It is a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric and neither rips nor darns patches, a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one.

Michel de Certeau
The Practice of Everyday Life

Allow me to insert an anecdote:

I'd just given a talk on what I thought were the irreparables of our time — WOW! — and was standing outside on the grass smoking a cigarette —

when a young man came up, self-induced plainness shining all over him — he said, "I had trouble following you," and he went on about someone telling him he was just too ordinary, and what, he seemed to ask, could he do about that —

I said, "Tell me, have you ever in your whole life felt ordinary

— even once?”

after a long pause, searching every sparkle of his honesty, he said very quietly, “No” —

“Well,” I said, “you’ve turned it inside out, exactly — since the ordinary is always and only a rumour about somebody else” —

“And,” I added, “why not tell whomever-it-may-concern to put the ordinary where the sun don’t shine — everybody’s got a place like that” —

We must study the necessary limitations of government, especially those reflected in the labyrinthine manipulations of what is called the social. And we must insist upon those limitations. Then, perhaps, we could form governments that release us into those freedoms that are the play and creation of reality. Another anecdote: of my youthful search for a social body — that is, apart from voting and thinking about the electrocutions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Jack Spicer and I had come upon a Trotskyite study group, which numbered 17 after we started to attend it. We arrived reading Marx and Trotsky, of course. At our second meeting, we were to offer motions of social consequence. One young man stood and said, “I move that we ban supernaturalist religions.” This struck me as enormously funny — 17 of us would make the ancient of days disappear. Spicer and I had talked about the curiosity of atheism that whatever it banned it never got near the contents of the word *god*. With Spicer’s encouragement, I asked permission to speak to the motion, stood up, and said, “I’m Papal Nunzio for the Bay Area . . .” I got no further with my joke or my point. I was thrown out and, indeed, they moved their place of meeting. Some months later, I ran into the leader of the group on campus. He stopped to say, ever so quietly, “Comes the Revolution, you’re going to hang from a lamppost.”

Obviously, poetry is not simply a matter of biography.

And democracy, which is recent, unAthenian, unPerkleian, incomplete, and by nature unstable and creative — fare-thee-well in the face of the vain boasting of totalities —

From my commonplace:

If we reject the distinction elite/people . . . Only active politi-

cal experience can teach us what it could be — if we know how to read that experience. It is not out of place to call this to mind at a time when pressing questions about political and cultural action are being raised Sustained by the corpse whose trace it carries, aimed at the inexistence it promises but never delivers, speech remains the riddle of the Sphinx. It maintains, between the actions it symbolizes, the problematical space of an inquiry.

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. . . the last ruse of knowledge is to reserve for itself the role of political prophecy.

Michel de Certeau
Heterologies: Discourse on the Other

The second problem that your question poses for me, Colin, is in your phrase “a pure linguistic act.” Yes, a linguist is one skilled in languages, and linguistics is the splendid, twentieth-century science of language. But, here, we ought to be cautious. Wlad Godzich points out in his reading of Michel de Certeau’s invaluable book *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* that language as an “object of knowledge is a construct of philosophers and linguists” — that literature is a “mode of language use,” in this sense “a discourse,” and that “discourse constitutes forms of actual social interaction and practice.” Thus it is with full consciousness in our Language poets.

Then, you move to question me about the Sacred. Now, that’s a swift hook. I’ll change the metaphor. The pile-up of elements in your first paragraph suggests a symphonic structure of many dissonances difficult to resolve. But, continuing the musical metaphor, I’ll try by hook or by crook — never, of course, to reach the grace notes thereof. Dissonance is our condition. The *sacre-sacer*, “devoted or consecrated to a divinity or to the holy.” The *sacred-sacer*, “devoted to a divinity for destruction, forfeited.” The *sacred-sacer*, accursed, criminal, wicked.” The feel of the *Mysterium Magnum* composes _____, fill in your

own blanks. Perhaps, something like an invisible carpet out of which one is unwoven to float in the womb — over which one walks later without a patterned beauty — into which one is rewoven, invisible again.

Yes, my *relation* to the sacred has altered during my years in the forests of language. I lowercase the word in order to throw not the sacred but its hierarchism out with the bathwater. I come from a Magic Valley of southern Idaho, the Portneuf and Snake Rivers, Craters of the Moon, sagebrushes, and the Roman Catholic Church. I am post-Catholic, moment by moment polytheist, and exodic. I think the three great religions of Abraham are dying into the violence from which they derive. We are, as another poet has said, living through something like the 2nd century A.D. — when a great religious mind was dying into another that had not yet found itself as imperium, as moral or philosophical principle (Read Hume). Christianity has been in a condition of humiliation since the sixteenth century, as Michel de Certeau maps it in *The Mystic Fable*. We wind up in phantasmagoria, which has its charms and *angeli*. Great voices of such freedom are St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

One may well be dismayed at the way in which Christianity forgives itself in the name of eternity. The brilliant, 1986 film *The Mission* is an indictment — be sure to sit through the credits when the Cardinal suddenly fills the screen, smiling at you over his achievements in “Latin America.” I’ve listened to the fundamentalists and evangelicals prophesy from TV pulpits — inattentive to or ignorant of the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments — unheeding of the dire difficulties of translation — because language is in eternity. We should be so lucky. Of course, the proposition that God speaks to them overwhelms the necessity of honesty in the act of language. I listen to the righteousness, curses, regressions that surround the blessings thereof — exclusions, manipulations of political power, the definitions of human nature — and think, in their own terms, of blasphemy.

René Girard first came to my attention by way of the proposition in the title of his book *Violence and the Sacred*. “Violence and the Sacred are inseparable.” (19)

The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man’s

effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence — violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred. (31)

One needs to track this proposition through the detailed exposition of Christianity as the “most sacrificial of religions” in Girard’s *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the world* (1987), its title taken from *Matthew* 13: 35. The most sacrificial, but Orthodoxies do offer sacrifices out of their own impulses — each bundle (*fascio*) has its *motu proprio*. For example, the “secular” sacrificial rages of Stalin’s Russia and of Nazi Germany, both Christian countries in which the famous effort of religion to “subdue violence” indicates a tendency of the impulse proper to it to subside. Indeed, it is time to interrogate the sacred and its institutions — where they leave ethos to pin a tail on our animality.

You ask about the relation of poetry *and* language *and* sacrifice. So much of poetry is an interrogation and a discovery of language that hold the heart. But, first, let me take up the word *sacrifice* before it overwhelms the other two. We’ve all heard it said that so-and-so gave up everything for his/her art. A little dramatic, don’t you think? And probably untrue. The Orphic poets give up a very great deal to the interrogation of the relation of language and death. Artaud and Spicer give up a great deal in their interrogations and disclosures of language. I would not like to say that they saw themselves as sacrificed. They did on the record of their poems see themselves often as violated, but it is quite another matter to notice their love of the “event of language.” The word *sacrifice* is really two words: *sacer* and *ficare* — to make sacred. I think I have said enough about the pungent smoke offered to the gods, however enmyrrhed. The word *gift* seems to me a better choice — to give something to art, like knowing something about it. Another might be *desire* — a desire for a language so accurate, so homey, so beautiful/ugly to say how the world is that one might offer one’s mind and heart to the occasion of it. Poetry is not sacred; it interrogates the sacred. It may be visionary with the deepest

insight into present conditions and into the words that are freedoms from them. The poet as such is not a priest. (Read beloved H.D. as taking the gods back — and from Ezra Pound to boot.) The poet is often only a preposition of relations among things, working with the dangers of words and syntax. Poets are also voices that resist the separation of the ethical and the aesthetic and refuse the separation of the ethical from the epistemological.

Colin, your meditation in the next paragraph on “a feeling sometimes that language reaches for a word to identify a thing only as that thing begins to slip away” should not be analyzed by me. It is yours and profoundly so. I do wonder if you mean that “language reaches” or that your experience of language reaches. Certainly, language is “older and other” than we are (Foucault and Chomsky), certainly always never simply mine or yours. I remember reading years ago Weston La Barre’s fine tantrum on Plato’s discovery of the absolute in that he did not understand language. Within the structure of language from subject to predicate, we do have, however, great responsibility not just for the name but also for the verb that got us to the word for the thing, concrete or abstract. Overuse of the word *is* (being) is a hobgoblin of thought and poetry. I think you are meditating on the relation of language to death or nothingness — an aspect of the experience of language even when the poem, say, is celebrating life. Let me draw your attention to a book by Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. Here you will find a brilliant discussion of our historical relation to language and of our present stake in it — a map of the “confrontation of poetry and philosophy” in that “both seek to grasp that original, inaccessible place of the word.” Historically: “The *inventio* of classical rhetoric presupposed the event of language as already completed.” This is one way that the mind comes to its instrument — language as already completed, allowing rhetorical invention within it. But, Agamben, again:

The first seeds of change in this conception of *inventio*, sowed during that radical transformation of language that was Christianity, are already evident in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* . . . Here man is not always already in the place of language, but he must come into it; he can only do this through *appetitus*, some amorous desire, from which the word can be born if it is

united with knowledge. The experience of the event of language is, thus, above all an amorous experience. (67-68)

Now, this change is still with us, even in the face of the confused sense of the religious tradition that the Bible and God's speech to us within the life of language belong to "language as already completed" — stupifying in those ranges called the sacred. And stupidifying of the anguish and desire to which fundamentalism speaks — and of the social consequences.

I think back to the troubadours and Dante, when modern poetic practice began in this amorous experience of the event of language. Giorgio Agamben takes us to the Provençal poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries:

For the troubadour, it is not a question of psychological or biographical events that we successively expressed in words, but, rather, of the attempt to live the topos itself, the event of language as a fundamental amorous and poetic experience. (68)

These days, Colin, there are such unfoundings of our human course underfoot in the social, the economic, the political, and the religious that we stumble on the debris. *Gossip* is two words — *God + sibb*, related to God. Nevertheless, there's the event of language. Its companionship is the work of the voice, which needs the companionship of those who "seek to grasp that original, inaccessible place of the word." In this I find Giorgio Agamben most helpful:

A completed foundation of humanity in itself should . . . signify the definitive elimination of the sacrificial mythogeme and of the idea of nature and culture, of the unspeakable and the speakable, which are grounded in it. In fact, even the sacralization of life derives from sacrifice: from this point of view it simply abandons the naked natural life to its own violence and its own unspeakableness, in order to ground in them every cultural rule and all language. The ethos, humanity's own, is not something unspeakable or sacer that must remain unsaid in all praxis and human speech. Neither is it nothingness, whose nullity serves as the basis for the arbitrariness and violence of social action. Rather, it is social praxis itself, human speech itself, which have become transparent to themselves. (106)

So language is our voice, our language. As you now speak, that is ethics. (108) The *razo* (reason) of poetry.

Reading Agamben, I come upon this poem by Giasomo Leopardi:

L'infinito

This lonely knoll was ever dear to me,
and this hedgerow that hides from view
so large a part of the remote horizon.
But as I sit and gaze my thought conceives
interminable spaces lying beyond that
and supernatural silences
and profoundest calm, until my heart
almost becomes dismayed. And I hear
the wind come rustling through these leaves,
I find myself comparing to this voice
that infinite silence: and I recall eternity
and all the ages that are dead
and the living presence and its sounds. And so
in this immensity my thought is drowned:
and in this sea is foundering sweet to me.

Perhaps this speaks to you.

It is reported on CBC this morning, 13 February, 1997, that the world is weirder than it was by 2.09% Ah! the gossip of things.

Robert Blase