

## **SOMA FELDMAR / A Conversation on Writing with Robin Blaser**

The following conversation took place on June 22, 2004 at Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado, during one of Naropa's Summer Writing Programs. These programs consist of four weeks of intensive workshops, readings, colloquia, performances, screenings, discussions, etc. Each week, a student is invited to interview one of the many visiting writers about her or his writing. These events are advertised as "Conversations on Craft," and take place at Naropa's Performing Arts Center in front of a live audience. Before arriving at Naropa that summer, Robin Blaser and his partner, David Farwell, had traveled in Spain, and their recent visits to Córdoba and Granada enter the conversation below.

Soma Feldmar: Robin Blaser was born on May 18, in 1925, in Denver, Colorado. In 1944, he wound up at UC Berkeley, and it was two years after he arrived in California that he met Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, in 1946 . . . yes?

Robin Blaser: Yes. In '46 a man named Gene Wahl, from LA, brought Jack Spicer to me, well, before that—1945. And then Jack discovers Robert Duncan at Kenneth Rexroth's Anarchist meetings and brings Robert Duncan to me—1946—as a kind of prize, I guess. [big laugh] And he was a prize! Only Duncan always knew he was a prize, so it was sometimes annoying.

SF: One of them started calling his birthday, his birth year, 1946. I believe that was Spicer. Robin, the first question I want to ask you has to do with history, and the importance of history in your writing. I'm realizing that we may have to define this term "history" first. I'm curious about how it comes into your writing, your text, your relationship to language, and if it comes into your actual writing practice.

RB: Well, history simply means story. Who isn't interested in stories? And then the combination of Spicer and Duncan and I there in Berkeley. We had the great advantage of the presence of a man named Ernst Kantorowicz. Now Ernst Kantorowicz is absolutely a key figure in all three of our lives. His courses were on, take Byzantium, for example. Now if you'd been a little hick, you know, and you came from Idaho,

or something like that, you got the idea there was something going on in the world besides Idaho. We went back to Byzantium first. We took a course that concentrated on the thirteenth century, which meant that we had Dante brought to our attention. I had known him before, but Dante became a figure in history for us, not that curious thing where you enter upon poetry and it's sort of, you know, the idea of "just poetry"? Well, there's no such thing as "just poetry." And so, there we were, suddenly faced with this amazing range of the poetic mixed up directly with the politics and history of Europe. And then we could enlarge that into the other ranges of the world, that move us way back into Asia, and as far as China and Japan and so forth. So that then languages began. I think that's one of the secrets of interest for me in history: the multiplicity of languages. I like all those voices, and I like all their different accents. I learn as many as I can. At least so you can read them, or at least so you can go through and work with a dictionary and batter your way through a line or two. History for me is a history of language also; it's the story of language. We only come by our knowledge of history, that is to say the actions of men and women throughout the entire human record, we only come to that by way of the record given us in language.

Now, Kantorowicz brought us into the height and richness of that. And the other magnificent teacher was Hannah Arendt. She was only there one year. She hated California. She didn't tell us that, but I found it out in her biography. I was simply furious. I adore California. We were so sad that she only stayed the year, but it was very very important to have had that opportunity to know her work. And in those days the university was relatively small. When we first got to Berkeley, there were 8,000 students. Now, I don't know, perhaps it's reached 80,000. I don't know what it is, but it's enormous. In those days it was only 8,000. It was like a kind of private school. And if you were the kind that weren't there just to get a job in something or another, you would then shop. Classes weren't crowded; you didn't have to rush in and sign up. So we shopped very carefully, and there were many others I could name, particularly the language teachers. But Ernst Kantorowicz and Hannah Arendt were big events in terms of what we thought of as mind. And then they opened that range into the history of the mind.

And that makes me want to say, okay, you know, it's not "stuffy" to know some classics. It just ain't. It's the most wonderful thing. My father would have said "hain't," in Idaho. It just hain't true, that that is stuffy stuff. It's what we are. It's also the only

thing that we really offer to anybody else—this thing of having been able to speak, of having been able to think, and having been able to turn to books of all ages and all places and draw them in to the map that becomes your territory. And everybody's gotta have a territory. Now, Idaho was my territory, and I'm very fond of Kamima and Wapai. I mean, should I go on with the list? I can give you those where there's no longer any population. Orchard and Blaser, Idaho. There is a Blaser, Idaho. There's a Blaser highway, etc., etc. It's simply a matter of territory, and the territory's not a matter of ownership, but a matter of acquaintance.

SF: In terms of what you were just saying, about what we have to offer, in speech, in history, I'm wondering what you think of—how you deal, in your work, in language, in your life—with ethics? There's a lot of ethics in your work. I find a lot of it in the poetry, in the essays.

RB: Now, as long as everybody understands that: [playing a haughty character] "I'm a very moral person, you understand. I teach morality at all times, actually. My careful careful very high class accent comes into the teaching of it." [end character]

"Ethics" is an extraordinary word. It has to do with one's behavior in the world. It is personal, and then that extends into those various forms that we give permission to, that is to say, to our politics. It was interesting to wake up this morning to a new set of lies coming out of Washington. This is simply unacceptable. There are at least three major world leaders who must be brought to task, and soon. I'll let you name them for yourselves, so that they won't close the border to me when I try to come back from Canada next time. And the extraordinary business on civil liberties. But ethics: this is the way you behave towards another person; this is the way you behave towards your own group; this is the way you behave towards your family; this is the way you behave towards your society. Ethics, insofar as they mean anything to any one of us, is the way in which we enter upon all of those various arrangements of our lives, from the personal to the social.

And it really, ethics, the word "ethics," yes, we'll drop the morality of it because the churches have ruined that. Totally ruined it. They've become companions of fascism, etc., over a period of time, and are indeed now part of the very great difficulty which, Samuel [Samuel R Delany, who is in the audience], you mentioned today. The theology under which we are now suffering, the religions have very much to answer



for. They, in my view, are being thrown immediately into purgatory because I am not unkind enough to throw them into hell. But they must go into that purgatory; that word that comes from the word purge. This is the great cosmology of Dante—that the world is divided into hell, purgatory, and heaven. In the meantime, our lives move towards the summary that would be named hell, purgatory, or paradise. I hope you're not going to practice hell. I hope that no one else is going to practice hell on you. I do think most of us are in purgatory, because we have to answer for the way in which our governments and our societies treat us, treat others.

The poverty that is amuck now, in both Canada and the United States, is unforgivable. There is no excuse for that in this very rich society. The ethics of it: one watches to see what it is that one does, and then in every instance this is informed by love. We can use the word “care” so we don't get too involved in our passions, but it has to be a very true care for one another. We haven't got anything else. We certainly have no governments that can speak to that. It takes great insistence to get the taxes to go in the right directions.

SF: What I'm wondering about now is—I believe it was Agamben, whom I know you love, Giorgio Agamben, who spoke about poetic language and how poetic language is the only ethical language because it does not annihilate human experience—could you speak about ethics in terms of language?

RB: Giorgio Agamben. It's very interesting. Mussolini destroyed philosophy, in Italy, as Hitler did in Germany, and as Franco did in Spain. In that vast run, they destroyed philosophy. And then, well, this is the history. I'm very aware of what the history of philosophy is, and the history of poetry that runs up to this, this run of disasters. And, well, I like to check. Italy is a beloved place to me, so is Spain, and so on. And so I very carefully—and France—I very carefully watch what came through again, after there had been a destruction of the mind, of the heart, and of the lives in a whole population. And out of these, in Italy, for example, the post-1945 world of thought, is Giorgio Agamben. Now, am I still on the topic you asked me?

SF: Yes.

RB: Giorgio Agamben does something really fascinating. The first book available to us in English is called *The Coming Community*. Agamben, yes, Agamben is a—yeah, I'll

just use the word—I'm not talking about his view of me, I'm saying he's my companion. Now in terms of the history of thought, and the history of poetry, one has companions. And they are there. They're holding on to you, and you're holding on to them.

Giorgio Agamben's little book was the first one available to us in English, though there are several now available. *The Coming Community* is an effort to open—this word “open”—in fact, the latest book by Giorgio Agamben that is available to us is called *The Open*. Agamben wants to find a community that is free of what we have understood to be community, which can be so manipulated that our lives are actually lost in it. Now, this is a major effort of thought, and he then follows with several books in which he argues for that openness, the thing that would open us, that would free us. This gets us into some pretty peculiar areas. One of them is an end of history. Now that's a technical term, because history doesn't have any end. But if there is a sense that history has moved us—we are inside this great story—moved us to a point where something has to be done, that is where philosophers begin to imagine something called the “end of history.” That it opens up to something else and we devote our thought, our lives, and certainly our writing to this openness.

Now openness for writing is certainly a fascinating undertaking, because it's a territory you have to discover, and this is a language issue. This begins to put the real test to your language. What can you handle? Every writer knows this if they stop over it. What can you handle in the language that you've got at hand, in your mind? And then it starts to move. You begin to look for other words. You begin to check etymologies to find out what the pieces of words mean. You begin to play with the ways other authors use words. And Agamben is one who's most most interesting in the way he uses words, but, and also to get back to the point where you began, Soma, that is, I've noticed in a whole run of philosophy now, they give particular attention to the poetic voice. It's not the philosophy that some of you caught in certain universities where it's all a matter of theorizing and abstraction. These philosophers are particularly devoted to the human condition, in which the voice of that condition is made plain, and one of the major places for making things plain is in poetry.

And this goes to Jean-Luc Nancy, who is well acquainted with Agamben personally and otherwise, and is another one of the philosophers of this order where the complexity of their discussion always somehow reflects the poetic. Now, the poetic—I mean, what in the hell have we got when we get into this world, you know? Our



beloved mothers and perhaps beloved fathers, I hope so, and so on. What we've got is potentiality. That's all we've got. Now take that away, whether because you're poor, whether because your educational system is a total disaster, and they wanted to teach you nothing but to be a straight man or woman—and, well, straight men and women can be kind of nice on stage because they become a joke, but we're not on stage when they turn us into straight men and women. So this is what must happen: We must protect our potentialities. We must see that the experience of the potential is there for each one of us, and receive the education that allows that potentiality to become a work of a life, which is to say a work of art. Every life can be a work of art.

SF: You spoke about language, using the language and finding the words, and what language is in your head, and how to express what you need, part of it being the potentiality, the philosophy. And I've heard you speak about "over-writing" as a problem. I'm wondering if you can expand on what that might look like.

RB: Okay, I'd like to take first the business on language, that is, to begin paying attention to etymologies. That's history. That's the way you get in touch with the age of the language. And how it comes together, how it's pieced together, and how magically it's found over the centuries. It's just such glorious stuff. Now, what was the next part of that question? Uh, I got into heaven briefly there, you'll forgive me.

SF: The potential difficulty of "over-writing."

RB: Over-writing, yeah. Well, that's me being kind of snotty, I think. But you know, there is a point, I mean, because I don't like to discourage anybody, but we must all know somebody: they just write all the time, and it becomes a kind of spillage rather than a creation. Then the other danger is, when you over-write, when one over-writes, is to get a system going.

Now when you've got a system going, your language begins to close. The structures that your language searches for, and a structure is always a search, it begins to be nothing but the same structure, over and over and over, you know. [singing] "My mommy didn't love me, my daddy didn't care, da dada da da." I can tell you that story over and over again. I think it's just fascinating. [audience laughter] I don't mean to be too, pardon me, because one should never discourage anyone in writing, it's just that you're picking up on the fact that I'm very troubled by over-writing in which it's just a

constant . . . uh . . . blabbing. And there's a lot of that. And some of it is in journalism. When it gets into literature, it tends to be . . . well, I'm not going to. I think I just won't name anybody. I'll let you find the names, you know.

SF: I'm not sure how you're going to feel about this next question, how secret it might be for you, but I'm very curious about your writing process. I've heard you speak about silence being attached to poetry, of having to wait for the language to make the poem, and about the poetic mind. What I want to ask is how do you personally work with all that? How do you move between the other mind and the poetic mind? How do you know when the language is ready? I don't even know if these are answerable questions, but they're questions.

RB: Well, they're reflections. Reflections can be made on those. Silence is after all the garden of language. I mean silence—when you watch the silence begin to move, to take shape, then the words are beginning. Now Spicer called this dictation, and well, he'd get home late at night quite drunk and so on, and the poems would begin. One of my favorite lines that I remember: “bee bop bee beep, we are all asleep.” I think it's a marvelous line. And it was a voice that came out of the ceiling or something, so to speak, in the middle of the night. It's in Jack's book, *The Collected Books*, which I edited. But “bee bop bee beep, we are all asleep.” Now, that's a voice that came out of silence.

There are moments, the dead moments, the moments when you just aren't writing and can't write. Those need to be respected and watched. And in those cases you become a kind of guardian over your own possibility in language. They need to be watched. They can be so damned depressing. And the trouble with depression is that it falls right inside of you and there's nothin' there but just inside of you, and that won't get you anywhere except inside of you. So, you have to guard and watch over that in order to make sure that you're really conversing with that silence. Then, I think there are the periods when you can be so disturbed, and I had great difficulty recently in writing because I am so disturbed politically, across the world. So I began listening to everything. I mean, how much television can you take?! I usually can take damn little of that thing.

You know, I mean, and then for amusement, I will turn to channel 24 where they're saving me. And that, curiously, will always bring me into some kind of laughter



and language. I mean by the time he's, this is Jack Van Impe and his wife Rexella. Now, I don't know whether you have all watched this, and there's those of you who've heard me tell this story before, but they're really quite marvelous. I always like the moment when Jack is giving us the entire end of the world treatment. [In dramatic loud whisper:] "it's coming, it's coming, it's here, it's here!" And then he wants me to put my hands on the television glass so that I get there too! Well now, as someone interested in reading the past, I know that in the book of Revelations only 133,00 people get into that paradise, and I'm thinking of writing to Jack, the Reverend Jack Van Impe and to Rexella, so that she can say, "Oh Jack! What do you think of this?" and she's taken something out of *Time* magazine and she's usually holding it and then Jack gives us his reflections. In the mean time, I haven't been saved. Not adequately at any rate.

I researched these people for a while, and I got to the point where I just couldn't do it any more. I couldn't stand it anymore. But I did find out very interesting things, which I brought up with a group that I talked to separately from you, where at least two plane loads of red heifers have been sent to Israel. And there will be more plane loads of red heifers sent to Israel. Now, if you go back and check your history out to find out the nature of sacrifice—check it all the way too, because that tradition stayed all the way through to Christ—the whole story that Christ had to be sacrificed is ancient to our background. It goes all the way back in. We have a great number of fundamentalists who believe that there is the second coming, coming. And we are to be ready for it, and it's preached on television, over and over again, and then when the time comes—they will know, I presume—I'm, at this point, going to be in some other realm. They will know and they will immediately go over there and knock down that beautiful blue mosque on the mountain in Jerusalem. I don't know what's happened to the Muslims at this point; they're certainly not going to get into this paradise according to these people. And they will rebuild the temple and the sacrifices, I'm quoting now from one of those television programs: "the sacrifices of the red heifers" (it's very very important that they be red heifers) "will begin again the smoke to God," and this time the sacrifice, I quote, "will be in the name of Christ."

I haven't made this up. If I had been able to make that up, I'd stop writing. [audience laughter] It is an extraordinary event in the thing. Now back to the point of the question, the point at which you stop writing. I got really just tied down with the politics. I would watch everything; I would read everything. I carefully watched



with delight when I saw a magazine I very much like and enjoy, *The New Yorker*, suddenly become political. It contains some of the best political pieces. Well, then I went around to see what the more radical magazines did. *The Nation* has become invaluable to me, and I get *Le Monde Diplomatique*—there's an English edition of that and I recommend it to your attention—and *The Guardian*, and so on. I had to gather these to me. Now there's too much of that for me, really, because I find myself reading all of this. And *Harpers* comes in, and *Lapham's* is just marvelous. Well, you can spend your whole time reading all of it. So, what are you gonna do? Well, when I get back home, those guys are gonna wait in stacks. I'll get there when I can't write. You need them, and they're all good writers, especially at *Lapham's*, it's just astonishingly good. But there's a point at which the politics that stands there can stop you dead. You'll just sit there worrying and you'll suddenly run to the TV to find out the latest scandal, or the latest bit of pop, and I mean bad pop in the bottle, that's coming off of CNN. It was very curious, and I checked this out, researched, and I think this is the point at which this sort of thing has to stop because it stopped my writing. I watched—you never got to see the people killed in Iraq. CNN carefully edited it. You'd see a picture of a disaster building, but you didn't see who got it. And now, the savagery just goes on and on and on, on both sides when, in my view, Iraq should never have happened. And I was pleased living in Canada that Canada did not join. But now it has turned into a vast disaster endangering all of the Middle East.

And, so, there's a point at which you can be in the world so much that you haven't got a voice of your own left, and I think you've got to find a way to protect that voice and that poetics. Because each poetics is a different poetics. That's what's so fascinating. There's no rule, no description I can give of a poetic unless I start talking about a poetry, a particular poet. Every single one differs, and in my workshop, each one we have heard has a different poetic. And I'm not talking about their personalities. They're very nice personalities. They've got a different poetic. It's a different poiesis, which means "to make." To make, to make a world.

So I tried in that long little harangue, I'm trying to warn you against what's happened to me recently. I had intended to come here with a poem specifically written about Córdoba and Granada, a long poem, like my Dante poem, which I once read here. I wanted to come here with a poem where we looked with great care at the

last place in history where Jews, Christians, and Muslims could propose together, not without difficulties, propose to be civilized together, and that was in Córdoba and Granada, eleventh, late eleventh – twelfth centuries. And then I decided I just couldn't get it all together for you. So you ain't gonna hear that poem. But there will be that poem, and it'll be out somewhere as soon as I get it done, because I was so moved by it.

We stopped, my companion David and I, stopped to go to García Lorca's grave. Found we had to have our hotel search for a driver who knew how to get there. And we got out there, and got out and walked in, and they do have a big piece of granite there to commemorate their greatest twentieth century poet, in my view. There are other marvelous Spanish poets, but García Lorca, if you've not read him, get busy. I mean, it's just the top of the line. Jack's first book is *After Lorca*. And then we went up and stood where he had been shot, and he was shot with a whole group, and they were all tossed into a big hole and covered over. I suppose we were standing on them. The Spanish government wishes to use DNA and dig that all up and try to find García Lorca and give him a special spot. And I wish that they would listen to me. García Lorca: "I'll get you, you bastards!" He got killed with a whole group and he would stay there. I am very sure.

But I like that combo. I went to look for a place where a civilization went. We checked for the mosques, which are still there, magnificent and beautiful. In one instance, at least, invaded by Christianity. That is to say that the walls have become bronzes of the suffering of Christ and here are the arches of eternity in red and white stripes that—you just walk through the door and you're upon arches, arches, arches. And then suddenly you realize that Christianity came in and invaded. The King—Carlos the V, right?—allowed them to build a Christian cathedral in one of the greatest of the mosques that remain with us. And when they got through with it, because it's the church, the cathedral has been built right into the mosque, and yet these arches are all there. Some of you must have been there. King Carlos the V commented, "I gave you permission to do this, but you have done what anyone could do. And you have ruined a great piece of art." And it's true, but what's fascinating is to go look at the two religions face to face.

Then we began searching for the synagogues—most of them gone—and found a very beautiful one. [Asks David, who is in the audience:] That was Granada, wasn't it? [David answers "Córdoba."] Córdoba! We found a very beautiful one there. Very small,



very intimate, very elegant. [David adds “and very Moorish!”] Yes, very Moorish. The Moors remained, and some of it is so beautiful, nobody can dare destroy it. Except of course, the twentieth century, which can blow up anything these days.

Oh right, did that answer, or did I just lose—go off into one of my things?

SF: I think possibly a bit of both, which is great.

RB: Over and out! [audience laughter]

SF: So, there's 15 minutes left before we have to stop. I've already asked a few questions, and I'm wondering if anyone in the audience has anything they would like to ask. [silence]

RB: [to SF] So ask your questions. And I'll behave. [audience laughter]

SF: My next question has to do with the idea of the “post-modern.” I've heard you talk about it, and I've heard you say it's a mistaken term because thought does not “post” anything. I'm aware that a shift took place in a large part of the art world—writing, architecture, painting, music, sculpture—post WWII. Can you think of anything you'd like to call that shift other than “post-modern”?

RB: Just about anything else. That word “post,” you know, it's silly. And it also doesn't in any way talk about the way time works. In time, we don't “post” anything, we get on with it. Now, the twentieth century became an enormous problem. If I had time to go back and go through the nineteenth century with you, and the Victorians, and so on, and even to look at what could be done with American nineteenth century poetry with Longfellow and so on and so forth, “The Wreck of the Hesperus” and all this sort of thing. The kind of heroism that was believed in. Now, let's move to the twentieth century. I'm not “post” that. I've gone along with everyone someplace else where some other problems have turned up. Poiesis takes that on in every instance. It is another insistence that one take one's world seriously, with love, and with purpose. That is the twentieth century. It's got nothing to do with being modern, in that most of the people I know don't even know what modern is. They don't read the books, they don't go to the museums, they don't know why Picasso acted up that way, etcetera.

I mean, “post” what? It's an intolerable term, and it also allows the academics, of a certain rather, I think, mediocre level, to arrange everything so neatly. We've got

the Romantics, now we have the modern, and guess what, we've got TS Eliot going on about Christianity absolutely beautifully. We've got Ezra Pound tearing up the place, or trying to, and getting into terrible trouble with Fascism. And so on and so on and so forth. This is not "post." This is a constant effort, and it's largely in the arts, because the real stress and care of mind is in the arts, alongside their companionship with philosophy which reflects upon them.

We are nowhere in the modern, and as for the post-modern, I don't know where in the hell that is. Does that mean, you know, paintings that are just all white paint on the canvas? What does that mean? It doesn't mean anything other than art was no longer answering in that range of painting to what the condition is, and such minimalist painters took it on as another way to insist that art was there but it couldn't do anything to stop it. We will look at a blank white painting and realize how absolutely beautiful blank white is, especially when you're faced with a bunch of shit. And, I mean, does that answer the question? [audience laughter and applause]

SF: Yes. [audience laughter] So, what was / is the project? What is art, writing, poetry? What have we been doing since the modern and continuing after the modern and now?

RB: Well, your word "project" is interesting because, you see "project," that's a neat word, where you set it all up. The real meaning of the word is that it's "projected." A project's gonna stop you dead, but it may be very useful. You know, okay, so a project, you know, you wanna go out and pick peanuts with me, well let's go do it. We'll have some peanuts for supper. They're very good in curry, incidentally. And the real point of what art is doing is that it's projective. It's constantly projecting outward into a realm that is quite frankly what we used to call the transcendent.

Now, that whole realm of the transcendent has just fallen on your heads. And the word, not "project" but "projective"—they *pro-ject* the arts, ever since the nineteenth century. And the projection of them has been harsher, more demanding, than it was before. We don't have the Romantic story to cover whether or not my face is in seven pieces. It probably is because that's the world I live in. It's the projection-ing that is the real identity of the twentieth century. The "modern," those are neat words, we can use them if we wish, but I think if you just go back, go walk through the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example. Or all the stuff that's going on now down



in Denver—Denver has a very good gallery—just walk through it and watch what it's doing. It's projective. It is to take "project" and make it alive, to find openings, and the twentieth century has needed openings more than any century that we will know much about.

So I think, I think that's the way to look at it. And I don't feel, do you feel modern? [audience laughter] Well, I was just gonna say show me and nobody endangered him or herself. And I'm quite sure that if I asked the question, do you feel post? Well, you can climb a post and become a flag on it, that's what you can do. So, I think you drop those things and go at it. Okay. Now what else are you going to do to me? [more audience laughter]

SF: I started to get scared you were going to ask me questions.

RB: [big laugh] Well now. Should we settle down. [audience laughter]

SF: We've only got seven minutes.

RB: That's not enough for what I want to know about you. [audience laughter and applause] I'm sorry [laughs] I can't resist.

SF: What you were talking about in terms of the movements, the change, and the opening up in the twentieth century—one thing I feel from my vantage point, really coming to writing at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, is that there was a shift around 1945.

RB: Yes. Oh, yes.

SF: Academically and critically it's important to be able to identify certain shifts in culture, in society, and thus in art. I'm wondering if you see something new happening now, as we're entering the twenty-first century.

RB: Well, to take 1945 first, remember, we're coming out of a war that did not really solve anything, finally. We didn't know that at the time. In fact, it should have been celebrated, since there was peace of a kind, and so forth. So, 1945. Watching the movement of time, I think vast numbers of thinking people did see it as an opening into something else. And so we have a very different kind of art, and what I find very curious is we began to get a movement, say, in people like Charles Olson, and in Duncan,

in Jack Spicer, where people think of the whole work. That it's a work that has to be done, that goes on for a lifetime. So you get the long poem, you get huge efforts to re-imagine the world. Olson takes us back to the Pleistocene, and then tries to bring us forward, in fact, indeed does bring us forward in the most magical way.

The twenty-first century. That's a really tough question because we've had so little of it. What year is this anyway? 2004. Four years, and what have we had? See, the twenty-first century seems to me to have perhaps a more heightened and tenser relationship to what is going on around us than ever before because I think we have some very powerful governments in which vast numbers of us do not believe and cannot honor. And this is characteristic of the twenty-first century. It's a vast labour that's ahead of us, but I think it's different from anything that moved us into the twentieth century, to the first world war, to the second, even Vietnam, that terrifying and terrible mistake, to put it in polite terms. And then the many many others. I mean, there are so many wars that are even forgotten now that were going on.

This time we've moved into, in my view, we've moved into a dissatisfaction that has broad support. Now, there's the opposition right now, and that's very important and becoming more so all the time. But I think a vast disappointment, a vast disbelief, has begun to inform a large number of people. And we're thrown, in the twenty-first century, into all the problems of what answers that. Because of the vast—notice the dissatisfaction is a kind of silence, as unhappiness is a kind of silence. They are all kinds of loneliness. And we are lonely, very lonely. We have not a government that we can believe; we have not a shape that will tell us we can be sure of the future. Instead, it looks like a continuous war is being proposed, to win oil, to win empire, to win I don't know what. This would be my response, that the twenty-first century has that particular characteristic—that so many of us are alone in this, alone, not because we're not together, I mean, but alone in the sense that you can't—it's very difficult to gather the community now. It's very difficult to hold the patriotisms. It's very difficult to wave flags, unless you wish to turn to the magnificent Maitri flags, Maitri colours that fly here on the poles, the five colours.

Maitri colours, Maitri rooms, have you visited those? I don't know if they're open anymore for many visits. You would know more probably. Oh, the five colour rooms—they're open? Don't go in crowds because each room requires a meditation and a meditation is a very interesting thing. What happens when you're in a room of



all one colour, one of the five great colours here? What happens? Does the colour enter you or do you enter the colour? And that happening, you're in a poiesis . . . which'll make you fly.

I don't want to leave you in a depressed place, alright?

SF: You just said "Make you fly!" [laughter]

RB: I'm glad I got to those rooms. Alright? [applause begins]

SF: Yes. Thank you very much!

RB: Shall we end this dance?

[big audience applause]

RB: [walks off stage humming a tune]