

STEPHEN COLLIS / “overturning the furniture”: An Interview with Ellen Tallman

This interview took place at Ellen Tallman’s house on April 25, 2005, several weeks after the Kootenay School of Writing hosted a Robert Duncan symposium, at which Ellen read her paper “My Robert Duncan Stories.” Ellen first met Duncan in Berkeley in the mid-1940s, where they both attended Wednesday night anarchist meetings hosted by Kenneth Rexroth.

Ellen and Warren Tallman first came to Vancouver in the mid-1950s, to teach at the University of British Columbia. Drawing upon their California literary connections, they began bringing innovative poets such as Duncan and Robert Creeley to the city to read, lecture, and teach—often in the Tallman’s own living room. In 1963 they organized the landmark Vancouver Poetry Conference, at which leading figures of the Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, and Beat movements—including Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg—read and gave workshops for three summer weeks. It is difficult to overestimate the Tallmans’ influence on Vancouver—and in fact Canadian—writing.

Stephen Collis: In the 1970s and ’80s, there was some tension around the issue of an “American invasion,” spearheaded by the Tallmans—something of a backlash from Canadian nationalists. What are your memories of this and how did it affect you and Warren?

Ellen Tallman: It was a real shock, when we moved here in 1956, how anti-American Canadians seemed to be. And we thought we were anti-American, always cynical of the US, and pacifist, and so on. Warren had been drafted but he got out of basic training by going to a psychologist. But here Warren was immediately caught up in Canadian literature—it was like a new land to explore. I think the both of us always sort of thought of our lives and experiences as West Coast; if it was anything, it was a west-east split.

SC: I agree. Still.

ET: Right. So it was quite surprising when students would make fun of my accent. But at the time there was an influx of Americans, and many Brits were being hired right at that time.

SC: Still today, I find when I go to Washington, Oregon, even California in a lot of ways—it feels less foreign to me than going to Toronto or Ottawa or the eastern United States, which feels quite different.

What was your and Warren's relationship with the UBC English department like? I'm particularly interested in your dealings with figures like Earle Birney and Roy Daniels. Did any UBC faculty take an interest in the poetry events happening at your home?

ET: Well for the first couple of years we lived in faculty housing out on campus and we were surrounded by English people, which made us miss Seattle even more. We had our friends here and our weekends in Seattle. And of course our department at UBC, as many departments are, was political. Warren was really interested in the Creative Writing department and what was happening there, and it just turned out that Esther Birney and I became good friends. And Esther was always on the outs with Earl, so she would run away and come here. So this didn't make things easier for Warren—they did try to keep all these things separate, but . . . Earl must have helped somehow in getting Creeley here. As far as people in the department sharing Warren's interests—it was more people in other departments who were interested, not the English department. And that was true during the 1963 poetry conference. I don't know if you know anything about Norman Epstein, he's in the Chemical Engineering department, and he's an anarchist. So he was at everything. George Knox was head of the Fine Arts department and he was very interested in what was happening.

SC: It's fascinating to me that Norman Epstein and George Knox and people from other departments—actually, it seems typical to me when there's a sense of an avant-garde, or any new movement in the arts, especially in literature, and it's not often the literature people themselves who are interested. It's often someone in another discipline.

ET: Well, you wanted to talk about anarchism. An anarchist is someone who denies authority and fights against it. The whole “authority” thing was a huge issue in the English department. Other departments didn’t seem as authority-bound, or anti-authority, as the English department was. At times I’d think, everybody in this department has an authority problem that they’re trying to work out with each other. And Warren was definitely anti-authority—he didn’t take well to authority at all. He was very un-authoritarian as a teacher—a terrific teacher, I thought. But other people, even friends John Hulcoop, thought he wasn’t enough of an authority figure. Always finding out what the students thought and then weaving in it. In that sense he’d be called an anarchist....

SC: I’m curious, then, as to how much anarchism was something that the two of you thought about, read about, discussed with other people.

ET: Only with George Woodcock, who we saw quite a lot, then later when Robert Duncan would come up, we’d always go over to Woodcock’s. Otherwise, since we were both teaching and had two little children, we weren’t involved in any political groups. We started a school for our children, hung out with Norman Epstein, people like that. So we never exactly talked about anarchism but it was always at the edges of things.

SC: As it so often is, I think. You started a school?

ET: Yes, we started something called the New School for our children. And then when they got to be high-school aged, they started their own school called K-N-O-W Place. Knowplace. And it was a little further out than we would have had it, if we’d had our say in it, which we didn’t. They’d go to school every day but this would happen after. Other children would come too. In the sense that anarchism is about social change, is always about social change, I think it felt comfortable in the beginning to talk about being an anarchist. When all your colleagues are using the word “esoteric,” you’re not talking on the same level. This reminds me—my mother, when I called from Seattle to tell my parents that I was going to get married, my mother flew up to Seattle. She wanted to meet him. So when I met her at the plane she said, “Okay, just tell me, is he black?” No, I said. “Is he a communist?” No, I said, he’s an anarchist!

And she said, "Oh, that's just literary." She said wonderful things—she was a great person. How did she even know it was literary?

SC: That's fantastic. You must have introduced Warren to Duncan, right? For some reason I have the sense that the Duncan relationship was key for Warren (more important, ultimately, than even Olson or Ginsberg). Is this so, or was the Duncan connection more yours?

ET: Right. I'd known Duncan. But he and Warren didn't really become close until he started coming up here all the time. What it seemed like then is that Warren's relationship with Robert, starting in 1959, was information. What Robert came with was a total opening of the field. What he came with was books about everything. Since he was interested mainly in teaching, he was teaching Warren everything and it was Warren's chance to learn from someone whose attitude was one of a co-respondent. They were co-responding to each other's work. And in this case, mainly all the Black Mountain—the painters, the writers, everything. Just with a swoop everything came down from Duncan, non-stop. He never gave you the chance to get out of it, to not be involved. It was incredible. With Creeley, too—I remember the first time I saw him, I thought, this is the hippest man I've ever seen. He was just in on every conversation, picking up and knowing and connecting. He was just amazing. But mostly in those days it was a lot of heavy drinking and drugs, you know; they would've leave the house until you pushed them out, till every drop was gone. And Bob had a lot of anger; one side of him was absolutely the dearest, kindest, most polite New Englander, and the other was just—for no reason at all that you could see, he'd be smashing someone's window, overturning the furniture, carrying on.

SC: And Duncan came so often because Warren took a particular interest...

ET: Well, he had a community up here. Once he had given the initial lectures, he had a whole community of students and they adored him. He'd read in classes and talk in classes, and Warren would always set up readings at some place or another. Robert liked it up here. We took care of him and it was fun.

SC: Would it have been through Duncan or Creeley that you and Warren found out about Olson?

ET: Initially from Duncan. When he first starting coming up here, he'd bring all the Olson stuff. Actually, before Duncan, the *New American Poetry* anthology. Warren used it as a textbook; we were all using it. We'd have our Sunday afternoon poetry gatherings, and several people were studying Projective Verse. That was really at about the same time that Robert was coming up here.

SC: And what about your own teaching? Your own work?

ET: I taught for seventeen years at UBC, from the time we came up here, but I just had a B.A. from Berkeley. I'd been doing my Master's in Creative Writing at the University of Washington, but I had my children and I was working full-time while Warren finished his Ph.D., and somehow I didn't finish my degree—I finished everything but the thesis. So at UBC I was teaching English 100, but then I started teaching Arts One, which I did for eight years, and that was really interesting. Arts One was an alternative course for freshman; it gave them 60 or 70 per cent of their arts credits, we'd meet every day of the week, we'd have big lectures, there'd be a hundred in a group and six of us faculty, mostly from English, and we'd figure out a theme ahead of time. We had lectures from outside and all over, and we each had fifteen to twenty kids and met three times a week in these smaller groups. Very intensive reading and writing. The themes tended to be things that included Freud, lots of philosophical work, even Einstein, as well as *War and Peace*, you know. It was the perfect course to be teaching when all the poets were coming because I could just bring them in there to the big meetings. Kids wouldn't have heard of Allen Ginsberg, wouldn't have heard of Gary Snyder, but there they'd be, teaching for a couple of hours. And then we had stuff at the house.

SC: An alternate university, wasn't it?

ET: It was. Someone would bring in a Cocteau movie, you know...it was just so much broader and richer than you could ever make it in an actual university. At some point, then, I got involved in training to become a therapist. So I shifted over into another field and I quit my job at UBC. I worked for a place called Cold Mountain, a growth institute, for ten years. I was up at Cortez Island doing three-month programs; I'd bring Duncan up there; I could bring anyone I wanted to the programs that I gave. But I also taught for the next nine years at Antioch College, through Cold Mountain,

teaching the basics therapy to M.A. students, then did some supervising at SFU through the Clinical Psychology department.

SC: Duncan had his interest in psychology too, from Freud (he called himself a Freudian) to Hillman. He wrote a poem in response to James Hillman (it's the last of his "Passages" series—"Whose"), and he gave a talk on Hillman ("Opening the Dreamway")...

ET: Hillman was out here a few years ago, actually. That was great. Robert and I had a great time talking about dreams; he was always encouraging me to have dreams about my clients, and they have dreams about me, and then we bring the dreams together and work on that. I'd say oh God, Robert, we'd need you for that. He was wonderful in his classes when he talked about using dreams in relation to poetry. I use dreams a lot in my work; the clients I work with often send their dreams in an email a few days before we meet. They're just so useful in so many ways; for one thing, they really seem to show where the person is already and available emotionally to deal with stuff. If it's in the dreams, it feels safe enough to deal with it. It's a way into traumatic areas; once it appears in the dream, then there's a kind of safety.

SC: When you were at Washington, what were you writing or wanting to write?

ET: I was writing short stories at the time—that's how I got to know Warren, through my writing. Then Warren and I would visit Kenneth Rexroth and Marthe Larsen in the early days, up until 1953 I guess, we'd spend the summer up there. But Kenneth would go into the mountains every summer, so we were there with Marthe. Kenneth was working at the post office, and I was babysitting Mary, their oldest child. Marthe was working. And when Kenneth came back from the mountains, Marthe and Mary were really happy, we'd all had a nice, easy time. Then Kenneth got it into his head that I was Marthe's lesbian lover, so he kicked us out of the house at five in the morning. From then on, he was jealous of Marthe's friends; he was very paranoid and jealous. So we would see him after that until Marthe was trying to break away from him and she'd come and stay with us. I think Warren was writing her letters to support her leaving Kenneth and going to Creeley; she did that while he was away. Then Kenneth found the letters from Warren. So he wrote a letter—Warren was evil incarnate and he'd have nothing more to do with us. When he and Marthe split, he moved

to Santa Barbara and taught there, wrote a column for the *San Francisco Examiner*, and had another woman taking care of him.

SC: What did Marthe do after that? Where did she go?

ET: During all the terrible stuff with Kenneth, Kenneth was trying to get custody of the children, saying Marthe was crazy, sex-driven, drug-taking...all lies, really. So her lawyer said she had to have a psychiatrist back her up. She went to a psychiatrist, Steve Shelton, and they fell in love, and he left his wife and five children and he brought her two children and they lived together. I still see Steve quite a bit—a fascinating psychiatrist. He was one of the early psychiatrists to be using LSD with patients. She and Steve were together for five or six years, then he moved down to Palo Alto, and lives in San Fransisco now. We talk on the phone all the time.

Actually that was another place I saw Duncan a lot, at the Rexroths'. Robert would come over for dinner a lot, Kenneth cooked. Kenneth was amazing in many ways—when he had his radio show on KCFA, he was indeed amazing. He had all sorts of great guests, and it was radio like you've never heard because he would belch, he would fart. I'd love to get the tape sometime. He had Jack Spicer on there...various people.

SC: What are your memories of Phyllis Webb?

ET: Well, she...I'll free associate: a beauty, exotic, dazzling, brilliant—that's what she was when we first got here. I didn't really get to know her. I would see her at Jane Rule and Helen Sonthoff's, and on other occasions, but I sort of felt like a dowdy faculty wife around her, she was so exotic. She was great. Gorgeous big rings...

SC: Long hands...

ET: Oh yes! And if I said something, I remember her saying, "Oh *really*? Do you feel *that* way about it?" And I sort of felt, oh, I don't know—she was very sophisticated. And I don't know what Warren thought of her poetry; I know he had a great respect for her, and by the time I was aware of what poetry was happening, I sort of thought she was *the* woman poet in Canada. She certainly was interested in the poetry and the poets who were here, and in fact it was Duncan who told me of her interest in Kropotkin; I didn't know anything about that from the poems that were out. I think

in the early days she was sort of under a black cloud, suicidal. Other than admiring her work and person, I didn't really feel like I was in the same world with her, in a way. I think she was the favourite of many people, of many men, of many women. And doing fascinating things.

SC: Some people seem to have a sense of there being a division between the TISH poets and the "downtown poets" (bill bissett, Roy Kiyooka, etc.). Do you remember Warren's sense of this, or how he saw the TISH poets fitting in locally, nationally?

ET: The TISH poets were Warren's students, they lived in our house, slept on the floor or the couches sometimes... there were always readings, study sessions, hanging out. George and Lionel and Gladys and Fred and Pauline were sort of like family; the others were more distant, Dan McLeod and Jamie Reid who was a Maoist at the time. Warren was much into giving them their own authority. It was so different from most academic settings. And when we'd go to Berkeley, Fred and Pauline would come down with us. We had friends who had great places in Berkeley—my close friend in Berkeley was Kate Mulholland, and they had a huge house. They let us stay there; we held a lot of the '65 poetry thing there. Heady times, you know. So Warren's relation to the TISH group was both overseeing and generous. And I guess we weren't particularly talking about poetry; we were talking about stuff that we were involved in at the same level, just learning it together. I remember saying to Warren after he'd been talking to Duncan, after Duncan had been talking to him—I said, "Did you understand what Duncan was saying?" He said, "No, no, but it'll come. It'll come."

And bill bissett, by the time we got here, was already his own being—he was painting, he was a poet, he was a performer. And Warren was his sponsor—we supported bissett. We put a mortgage on our house to get him out of jail. That was a very different kind of relationship with bill. And Roy Kiyooka was a close friend of Warren's; he'd bring his family over, and our house was full of his paintings at the time. It was almost a gallery of his. Roy was just in on everything, was his own authority on things. Much more authority-bound than other of our friends.

SC: And what about Robin Blaser arriving in Vancouver?

ET: I think Robin was in Boston—he wasn't here for the 1963 poetry conference. Robin was a close friend of mine at Berkeley, in school. Don Allen was another

friend. Warren and I could go down to Berkeley for the summer, so all of us would get together. I know Warren brought Robin up here to read, and he read at a gallery downtown. And that was when he was living with Stan Persky, so he and Stan came up on the bus. Then Warren tried to get him a job at UBC, but that didn't work; but they hired him at Simon Fraser. Then he and Stan came up again together and lived with us for two months. And they changed our lives for the worse—they introduced us to martinis! Before then, Warren and I had only been drinking this homemade sake that Frank Davey made. But when martinis started, neither of us were ready for this big shift. Stan became my marker in Arts One when all the political stuff was going on on campus. I saw him in Berlin and he said, "Someone came up to me in the street and said, 'You were Mrs. Tallman's marker!'" So Robin was teaching at SFU, and he and I spent a lot of time together.

SC: It almost seems that there was a shift around then in terms of where the innovative poetry was happening—first at UBC, with Warren, then with Robin and George and Lionel at SFU. Maybe by the '70s.

ET: Warren was doing readings at the Italian Cultural Centre in 1979. He was still in that mode—he didn't feel all that connected to UBC; his students had moved on by then. He just wanted to keep the poetry going. We were separated by then; we separated in '71. I think that Warren stayed on with the Olson/Creeley/Duncan; I don't know that he took in everything else as much. He was drinking a lot, but we did an intervention for him and took him down to Betty Ford. And it was great—it was fabulous. Of course he *hated* the thought of it, but in the end he loved it! He had a fantastic time there. He was a big storyteller, and at one point we had to go down for group therapy with him—and we discovered he'd been writing other people's biographies for them. They all had to write biographies, so they all came to him. And he was having a wonderful time. He quit drinking for three years, and Bob got him a job at Buffalo and he lived there, across the street from Bob and Penelope.

SC: This is the '80s now?

ET: Yes, and after that he went to Toronto and taught there. But he started drinking again. So I think the politics and poetry, and the politics *of* poetry, around that time were a bit beyond his being able to deal with it.