

TED BYRNE & LISA ROBERTSON/ This Animal, The Pronoun: An Interview

Ted Byrne: Last weekend I thought that, on Saturday, I would just read all of your work again. (Laughter) I knew it would be difficult, because your writing slows the reader down. You can't read it quickly. But that's what I decided to do. My experience of it was a kind of absolute but distant familiarity with *XEclogue* and *Debbie*. The landscape was familiar. However, by the time I got through *Debbie* it was almost too much. It was so rich, it was like eating chocolate. Then I went on chronologically. There were things that truly amazed me. *The Weather's* "Wednesday" was one. But what really astonished me was *The Men*. I felt that I was reading it for the first time and really got it. It was powerful. It was an experience. I'll tell you what kind of experience maybe later. Then with *R's Boat*, at a certain point I found myself laughing and I thought, "Oh, okay, so she's a humourist. This is what I didn't understand. All along. I didn't get that." But I couldn't stop laughing—it was late at night, I was by myself. It started with the line "I'm just a beam of light, or something." (Laughter) And then everything was funny after that.

Lisa Robertson: People don't laugh at my work very much. It might be the straight delivery when I read it. But, hell, what am I supposed to do? Hold up a "laugh now" card?

TB: Well, maybe people do have to have permission to laugh when it's not really clear that they should. For example: *Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip*. (Laughter) It promises, by its title, to be funny. It's not all funny, though.

LR: No, it's not all funny. It's more wry than actually funny.

TB: What kind of a book is it?

LR: I thought of it as a grab-bag. I'd had this idea for a long time that it could be interesting just to pull together a bunch of poems that I'd been writing between or during more project-like books. And, since conceptualism has started to define itself as a centralized discourse, I've been really sick of hearing about projects, even though, ironically, I thought of all my books as "projects." They were all mapped out concep-

tually. And then I just got tired of it. So I thought, “I’m going to have an anti-project book”—pull together a pile of left-over poems and see how they read. In my imagination this is how a lot of people write their books. Eventually they probably think “I guess I have enough. I’ll pull them together and just start reading and see what happens.” So I was performing my imagination of what non-project poets do.

TB: Do you differentiate in some way what you’re referring to as “project” books from “the book as unit of composition,” the book as what one composes?

LR: Yes, I think I’m not differentiating when maybe I should be. The book as unit—that’s where my thinking came from. From studying with Roy Miki, basically, who really... I think probably the first class I took with Roy Miki in the mid-eighties was about the book as a unit of composition. I think we looked at *Rocky Mountain Foot*, and probably *Breathing My Name with a Sigh*, and bp, a number of Canadian books...

TB: But characterizing a book as a project seems to imply an element of research, and I was thinking, when you talked about conceptualism, “Well, okay, maybe,” but *your* writing isn’t so much rule-based as research-based. When you say “project” it’s more like a research project.

LR: Yes. There is a certain component of rule-based method there, but basically as soon as I get going on a rule I break it. That’s why a rule is interesting to me. Not to fulfil it in some way, but just to get it going long enough to set up a pattern of expectation.

TB: That seems like an important point, though, because the nature of the rule is that either it has to be followed or it has to be broken. The attitude towards the rule in a rule-based procedure is to follow the rule, isn’t it? I mean, that’s somehow what bothers me with Oulipo, that the rule is meant to be followed.

LR: Yes, but I like having a rule to follow to start with, because it gives me something to do.

TB: Give me an example.

LR: It’s not really a rule, but working with genre. I’m thinking of when I wrote *Debbie*. There were components that an epic had to have: starting in medias res, invo-

cation of the muses, the battle scene. There's a list of all these things that, traditionally speaking, any epic worth its salt has to include. That became a sort of map for me. All I had to do, to write an epic, was to make sure I ticked them all off the list. "This is my second invocation of the muses." "How am I going to write the battle scene?" "Where's the descent to the underworld?" That became a set of rules. It was at least a system that gave me tasks to perform. I didn't have to think it up. I didn't have to start from zero. But maybe a slightly more Oulipien relationship to rule would be in *The Weather* where I was using source texts, systematically appropriating from source texts, making my lists of kinds of phrases, sorting out some ways to use sequence, the phrase typology.

TB: Were you copying text?

LR: Yes.

TB: Strictly?

LR: I broke it down. But at the beginning, that's what I was doing. I was strictly copying text. The texts were so great, why wouldn't I want to copy them? There's no photocopying in the Cambridge rare book room, so to copy them you transcribe. By hand. Not in a computer, in a notebook. So it gave me something to do. Every day I'd go to the library and there'd be all these tweedy old blokes doing the same thing, and we'd all sit down in our customary places at the long table and start transcribing. It was just wonderful. That was my job, to transcribe these texts. One would lead to another, and I'd just transcribe. That's all I did. And then later I figured out ways to select from my transcriptions, and then to re-sequence the selection. But then, and this is where it differed from conceptual appropriation, in almost every instance I figured out a way to interrupt the material that I'd amassed and edited and sequenced according to the set of rules. So the interruption was bringing in some sort of outside material that was not related to meteorology.

TB: Was the selection rule based?

LR: Not in the sense of number. It was more rhetorical. I was interested in kinds of phrase formations which seemed very characteristic of certain texts. It seemed very unusual to me because these were scientific texts and the phrase formations were very purple and unlike any style that I would have imagined for scientific discourse.

TB: Because it's the discourse of a particular era? Or of a particular genre?

LR: It was a discourse that was happening before science and literature were differentiated, strictly speaking, and so it was like the last gasps of a more integrated practice of description, where natural history had very minimal and totally erasable boundaries in relation to literary description. That was something that I was wanting to explore almost in terms of stylistic typologies. How do they actually make this description? So I was really interested in pulling it apart at that level.

TB: Does anything similar happen in the archive with something like "Face" or "Utopia" in *R's Boat*?

LR: Yeah. It was less subtle really. What I was looking for when I re-read that material didn't have to do with stylistic typology. It was very simple minded. It was just certain kinds of content in sentences. So "Face" was just sentences with the first person. It started out before my papers were in the archive. They had approached me to ask me if I would like to sell them, and I was self-conscious and uncomfortable, but at the same time curious, and thought, "I probably am going to do this." Because, I don't know, I needed the money, I was flattered, I was about to leave the country. So I set out to reread all my notebooks.

TB: So is the whole book that material?

LR: Yup. There's nothing in there that didn't come from my archive. At first I wanted to carry through the same method I'd worked out for *The Weather*, doing some sort of systematic reading, enunciating a list or typology, then finding a way to interrupt it. I really liked writing *The Weather* and I was always surprised by what happened as I was working. I still think it's probably my strongest work. So why not just repeat it? But that didn't really work, and I couldn't figure out what to interrupt this material with. I tried lots of different stuff. Then, for that first piece I wrote, "Face," I just suddenly had this idea: "I can interrupt it with *itself*," re-sequence the material and then splice it in as a double. So I did that. It was very satisfying and clean as a method. I've used it for other pieces but not within that book, and I have to discipline myself not to use it often because it's just totally satisfying as a method. It creates, with one gesture, structure, closure, rhyme, an internal tension or dynamic.

TB: There's a kind of continuity between *XEclogue* and *Debbie*. Because, as I thought at the time I first read these works, you were heading towards accomplishing a kind of Rota Virgiliana, right?

LR: *The Weather* would be the third. It's the *Georgics*.

TB: So you did finish it.

LR: Yeah, I did. Then Virgil also has a book of ephemera, which I suppose would be *Soul Whip*.

TB: Okay, so you, you...damaged my train of thought there. I was going to say I'm glad you didn't fully accomplish that, the Rota Virgiliana, but you did, if *The Weather* is the *Georgics*, as you say.

LR: A bit too tidy, but...

TB: No, but *The Weather* is a very different text.

LR: Yes, in its relationship to style.

TB: But you're also not, or are you, working with or against genre there to anything like the extent you are with the others?

LR: No. I wasn't using genre in a formal or structural sense as I did in my first two books. Not at all. I was doing a lot of source research, trying to read as many of the texts that Virgil used in his *Georgics*, his source texts, which is what got me reading Lucretius, and Aratus, Hesiod, the various stuff that I'd learned that he read and used to compose the *Georgics*. That sort of research-y aspect is similar to the other two books, but...

TB: One of the aspects of the approach that you characterized earlier as "project based" is that you don't wind up so thoroughly repeating yourself. Because the first two books are caught within one horizon in terms of project or rule, and there's a kind of continuity that I'm happy... I mean, I love those books, but I wouldn't want to see a whole career based on...

LR: No, it would become mawkish or tacky.

TB: And yet at the same time there's an incredible degree of repetition—things that you do over and over and things that you say over and over throughout.

LR: Between the three, you mean?

TB: No, across all of your books.

LR: Endless references to surface, for example. The decorative. There's a lot that follows through. But I think one of the things that happened in writing *The Weather* is that, structurally, I was very open to letting myself be influenced by music and painting. I was listening to a lot of that '90s electronica pop music.

TB: Name a band.

LR: Portishead. Moby. Air. A lot of layering of tracks on top of tracks. Very minimalist. It's basically coming out of Steve Reich. Working with loops and layering of loops. I was listening to a lot of that, and I was really interested in that procedurally, and at the same time I was thinking of painting and how painters have a surface in front of them, and they're not generally starting in this corner and making an entire painting a little bit at a time until they fill the whole canvas. They're building up layers across the entire surface.

TB: So in *The Weather*, for example, if I think about that, there's a cumulative effect. When I ask myself, in the act of reading these works, how they should be read, there are certain constructions, there are certain moments in which you become aphoristic, and then one begins to think, "what does this mean?" Then there are other moments when that would be a pointless question, and so one just moves from phrase to phrase, and then the effect becomes cumulative in a musical or visual sense. There's no uniform approach to the sentence. Take for example what you were saying earlier about working with banal sentences—there are also sentences that operate within a pretty complex rhetoric. I'm thinking of something that you say with regard to transparency: "I have given thought to making my words clear rather than ornate." One has no difficulty comprehending what's meant there, until you start to think about it, until you arrive at the very next sentence which is "Then the windows were as ripe as fruits bleeding sugars." On the one hand you have the thought, and then you just negate it. You toss it away. In retrospect the first sentence then operates like a casual

comment to me, the reader, that “Yeah, I thought about that at some point.” But the contrast between “clear” and “ornate” is like the contrast between glass and stained glass. And then the next sentence is ornate: “Then the windows were as ripe as fruits bleeding sugars.”

LR: But that might be clear to somebody.

TB: It’s clear to me. The option is for stained glass. You’re saying there’s a context in which the second sentence might actually be clear?

LR: Yeah. The funny thing is, I’m sure the first sentence, “I’ve given thought to making my words clear rather than ornate,” is an appropriated sentence, and I think it might come from an early Renaissance treatise on perspective. Alberti. Or it might come from Dürer talking about perspective. Those were the texts I was reading then. So the sentence about clarity is an appropriated sentence, and then the next sentence about the windows was a sentence that I actually composed myself, that felt to me like a precise description of something I saw. That seemed to me to be quite a clear description of twilight, when the lights come on in domestic spaces, and you’re walking out on the sidewalk, and they’re all sort of golden, and you can almost see into people’s lives.

TB: So it is clear rather than ornate.

LR: Yes, it seemed quite clear to me. (Laughter) But of course I also recognize the fact that on the surface it would not appear to be clear. And the other sentence would seem like the more truthful kind of statement. I’m interested in those sorts of paradoxical or ambivalent or equivocal relationships between kinds of statements, and how the effect of truth or sincerity migrates very quickly among positions and so can’t really be located in any statement per se. And it may be that this effect of truth or sincerity in a text actually doesn’t come from any content whatsoever, but maybe comes from the very paradoxical nature of a sequence, and the differences that are set up and come into play between kinds of statements. It seems to me that, if you’re talking about sincerity, uncertainty and equivocation is perhaps the most truthful position to be occupying.

TB: Truthful in the sense of honest. And sincere.

LR: Yes. But that probably says a lot about my sense of my own psychology. Somebody else might not agree with that at all. But I'm also talking about sincerity as a literary effect, and what sets up this sense of sincerity in a text is also perhaps the equivocal relation between statements. You see this in a writer like Montaigne. Reading his *Essays* you get a sense of incredible human wholeness because of the equivocal nature of the statements that succeed one another in a reading experience. Reading one of his essays, you're actually not going to learn very much about Virgil or any of the topics that the essays purport to be about. You're not going to find some truth statement about death or a thumb or sex in old age. What you're going to find is somebody's mind at work in time across different kinds of relationships within language. If you read one of the editions of Montaigne where there's a code, so you can see what was added at what point, you see how these texts were built up over decades, and that the equivocation which each essay performs is also a representation of the shifts that happen within our own thinking and experience over the course of decades passing. You know, how you can feel certain about something at 23 that at 50 just... (Laughter) But what's interesting in Montaigne is that he might leave that kernel of earlier certainty intact. He doesn't decide to excise it from the text. He just puts something different next to it. I think that's incredible. And I feel that's what gives those essays their rigour. The reason Montaigne's essays have rigour is because they hold human ambivalence within their structure.

TB: I'm curious about the distinction that you seem to be making between sincerity and truth or honesty and truth. Is truth an effect of discourse? I can make you think that I am being honest by saying certain things that may be very dishonest.

LR: Sure, but you can also believe that you're being honest because the statement you are making might seem to represent some actuality that you've perceived or experienced, and yet further down the line you can come to understand that what you had experienced as honesty was inflected by a situation, or had more to do with incomplete knowledge, incomplete perception. I'm not saying... I'm not sure what I'm saying, actually.

TB: I understood you to say something to the effect that, within the context of one essay, although it's re-worked, and maybe contradictions or ambiguities are introduced, he doesn't abandon himself in the process.

LR: That's right.

TB: Which would seem to be an indication of sincerity.

LR: Yes, but sincerity as a willingness to permit uncertainty to have its place. One of the things I read about Montaigne is that he started those essays from... people used to keep commonplace books, books of quotes, and that was sort of a typical—well, it's not all that unusual, we do it in our notebooks all the time, really—but it was a conventional practice among a learned class of people, keeping commonplace books of citations from texts that you're reading. And exchanging these citations with others, contributing to others' commonplace books. And what Montaigne started to do was to write between the citations, if you like, to start to think into them, and to link them with an experimental prising open of possible interpretations. That what began, purportedly—I forget where I read this, probably in the Starobinski book on Montaigne—that what started as a list or collection of appropriations, citations, whatever, becomes the framework for what we're experiencing as the truth of the individual. And that's just really interesting to me. In part because it blows all the asinine statements that one can hear out in the world about “what is lyric?” and “what is discourse?” and “what is critique?” and “what is not critique?” etcetera... it just blows them all out of the water.

TB: Explain that.

LR: I don't see that an abandonment of the lyrical poem as a kind of representation achieves anything. I feel it's much more interesting to head right into the mess of this—of course it's impossible—but, say this moment of inflection of the subject by history and vice versa. It seems that in the now-normative avant-garde critique of lyricism it's assumed, strangely, that the subject is static and fixed, and that the expressive or lyrical language of the subject is very straightforwardly representing that fixity. But when I read the lyric poem I don't see any of that fixity and what I experience as a reader is a blowing open of the subject. I experience the opposite to what the conventions of avant-garde critical practice tell me that I ought to be experiencing. I read the lyric poem as being shot through at every point vividly by history, as is the subject. And I feel that that reading experience brings that problematizing back into one's own perception of one's own subjectivity. So that in fact it's a de-stabilization within the poem and within the reader's relationship to the poem, and hence the

reader's relationship to their own subject formation. So for me the lyric poem is a profound and enduring historical practice that places the subject openly in a foundering.

TB: I'm trying to put this into the context of an example. It would be better for you to choose one, but what runs through my mind is that, from the stilnovisti through to the romantics, the subject in lyric is a threatened subject. It may be threatened by the movement of "spirits" through its body and its psyche in a kind of Averroistic sense with, say, Cavalcanti. It may be threatened in terms of its relationship to the other as in the sonnets, Shakespeare. What happens in—I hesitate to say what happens in Wordsworth or Coleridge—but it certainly isn't that the subject position is a unity. It is a unit, one speaks from a unit, but what emerges is multiple and implicated in all sorts of other moments. So just in terms of exemplifying what you were saying...

LR: Well, I'm not nearly as well-read in this area as you are...

TB: I'm not nearly as well-read as I pretend to be at times. (Laughter)

LR: We could all say that! But I'm thinking about the early Italian Renaissance, because I have been, in the past year or so, re-reading Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, and reading that tract in relationship to a southern European lyric tradition coming out of a tri-cultural Spain. Basically, this reading is dependent on a book by a woman named Maria Menocal, which I think is fabulous. Stacy Doris turned me onto this book a couple of years ago, *Shards of Love*. In it she talks about Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*. She talks about what it means to seize upon the vernacular as the voice of the lyric poem, in the context of a multi-lingual vernacular song tradition coming out of early mediæval Spain, the muwashshah, and in relation to early nation formation in mediæval Italy, slightly later. And, looking at Dante's own historical subject position as somebody in exile, somebody forced out of his own city for political reasons, what does it mean for him to choose to make a claim for writing in the vernacular of his city when he's exiled from that city? And what does it mean that in elevating the vernacular as the language of sincere poetry, as the language of lyric, he's basically describing something that's been going on in the southern European Arab and Jewish context for several hundred years at that point? He's describing a kind of poetry that has been circulating both popularly and at the court level, out of Spain through the trobar tradition in the south of France and into Italy. It's very complicated, the claims he's making and the reversal he's making in the relationship between the official

language of power and the vernacular. The claims are loaded at every single point. And they're loaded from the point of view of gender, because the vernacular song tradition that was going on in mediæval Spain was borrowing from a women's song tradition, an Arabic women's street language that was being appropriated into the lyric poems of a higher culture of literary circulation. So it's this bringing of the vernacular into the lyric poem, which is still the position that lyric is coming from, that really Wordsworth and Coleridge were just renewing. In Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* he's talking about using the language of the common people in poetry. That's what Dante was talking about. He's simply renewing the dynamic—this vernacular dynamic.

TB: Because lyric really begins in the vernacular.

LR: And the vernacular was not unilingual, either. Understanding that the vernacular is always this mixed...

TB: But Dante has to make an argument in Latin for using the vernacular.

LR: The vernacular had been used for years. The reason he wants to make an argument for using it, but in a purified, monocultural setting, has to do with the political positioning that he's lining up.

TB: It has to do with the university as well. It has to do with the fact that Latin is the language of learned discourse, and so at the University of Bologna, at the University of Paris, the cosmopolitanism would have been a Latin cosmopolitanism. Everyone—"the birds in their own latin"—everyone used Latin at a certain level of culture, which is the level of power.

LR: But what interests me about Dante is that he's reversing the relationship between the spoken vernacular and the Latin so profoundly that he says that spoken vernacular precedes Latin, and that Latin is a retrospective and projected construction. He's basically saying that the received narrative of romance languages—that there was one originating Latin which devolved over time into the various regional languages—he's saying that's entirely wrong. There was only ever a sort of rich, messed-up mixture of languages that then this false Latin of authority was formed out of, retrospectively. For Dante, Latin is inauthentic.

TB: But that false Latin is the language of the Law and the language of the Church.

LR: Yes. So he's revealing the language of Law and the Church as being constructed. As not being natural, which is just astounding, really. (Long pause)

TB: I would really like to talk about *The Men*. I was very surprised by what I found it doing. I know that when I heard it read a couple of times it had a pretty powerful effect, particularly on men.

LR: (Laughs)

TB: They tend to think that you're angry, and there is a rhetoric of anger that sort of enters, but what's really happening, I think, and correct me if I'm wrong... What occurred to me at some point was, "Oh! Yes! If you substituted 'women' for 'men,' this is how men talk about women." You can certainly talk about women in those terms without it seeming odd, or uncanny almost, but as a man reading the text, and being the object of the discourse, it's a very unusual experience.

LR: Women tend to find it hilarious.

TB: Yeah, well, I did too once I caught on.

LR: My non-poetry-reading extended female family can read that book and say "Now I finally know what you're talking about."

TB: My notes: "man as other," "man as a problem," "the question of man," "what is man," "what does man want"—I mean...

LR: Frankly, it's what women talk about all the time. Well, you know, when we're not talking about how to solve the problems of world history.

TB: But you're not talking about it within an official discourse where those questions seem to be legitimate.

LR: Well, from your point of view. (Laughter) Most of my life I've been involved in discussions with women about men. With my grandmother, with my mother, with my sister, with my sister-in-law, with my friends, and we're always trying to figure out what the fuck is going on with men anyways. And how do we conduct ourselves in relation to these problems.

TB: Okay, but I still think that one of the things that's happening in *The Men* is that you adopt a discourse that would not seem unusual if the position from which it was coming was male.

LR: No, of course not. I was reading Petrarch, among other stuff, when I was writing those poems. At a certain point I just realized how strongly I was actually identifying with the voice, so that became the point of entry. (Long pause)

TB: Earlier you mentioned trobar. That being a largely male phenomenon, there's also a strong sense of the unified ego in those texts. And it occurred to me that it appears unified because it's essentially collective. It's a "we." They're saying "I," but as in the *De vulgari eloquentia* they're really saying "we." They're saying "illustrious," "noble," "worthy," and so on. So they're speaking, then, from a position of power. Then I remembered the trobairitz, the women troubadours, who are the product of a particular moment of history that lets them get away with trobar. Because of the crusades, because of the demographics, they are allowed to own property. And so they are actually in a position—in this very limited region in the Rhône—in a position of some power, and they begin to write. And they speak an "I," and their "I" really is a personal "I." I guess there's a kind of collectivity, but they don't seem, in their writing—I'm relying on this book by Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours*—in their writing they're...

LR: Oh, yeah, I have that book. I found it on the sidewalk in Oakland! Honest to God.

TB: ...they don't display a need to be worshipped, and their writing is not setting men up in the position of adoration. In their lyrics they're talking about men from a position that questions, primarily, his absence. It's about the uncertainty of male love, its treachery, its infidelity, which is very different from what the men are doing. And it seemed to me the question of pronominal subjectivity can also be explored in the context of your book, *The Men*. You said that it's not a project work, that it's a personal work, and yet reading it, I didn't see much that appeared to be personal, partly because of the complexity of the subject position. It seemed to me that you were also speaking from a first-person singular that often is really plural, is a "we." But in this case it's male subjectivity as object that's being explored. Does that make sense?

LR: The “personal,” and a plural, complex first person don’t seem contradictory to me. I did write these poems more or less in the middle of writing the Soft Architecture texts, which were all first-person plural, “we,” and towards the end of writing *The Weather*, which was also first person plural. So that sense of a plural subjectivity was really the terrain I had been exploring for quite a while.

TB: So it sort of bleeds into this.

LR: I think it does. When I say it wasn’t project based, what I mean is, I just sat down and wrote poems in my notebook. There was no research and no...

TB: Yes, but there was, because of the use of Petrarch.

LR: Well, these were the books I had around me, you know, but I guess usually I’m more structured about my approach to research. I have questions and techniques, and I amass a great deal of material, but these I just started writing. I was writing them in relation to other texts, texts that sort of fell into my lap at the moment, that were just in my house. Or I was a house guest and my hosts had Pound’s Cavalcanti translations, for example. The very first poem in this book is a rip-off from Pound’s Cavalcanti, and I think I simply took the word “spirit” and replaced it with “men.” And I monkeyed around with it ever so slightly but it’s pretty, you know... I just saw this word, “spirit, spirit, spirit, spirit, spirit, spirit, spirit” and I’m thinking “What does this word mean?” So that’s the first poem I wrote, and it’s the first poem in the book, and the poems roughly come in the same sequence that I wrote them in, and they’re basically typed out of my notes, transcribed from my notebook into the computer, typed out and slightly edited, and there you have it.

TB: But there’s a structure nonetheless. My thoughts on the first section were that it does fit my earlier characterization of the book as polemical. The second piece is more like a meditation. In the third piece you move back into a kind of polemic. And then there’s something of a treatise, “A Record,” and then in the last piece you get something more, again, like a meditation. So some of the sections are softer, or gentler in their approach to the topic. Others are more harsh. (Long pause) You said you were reading Petrarch...

LR: I was also reading *De vulgari eloquentia*. I was reading Montaigne, and I was reading Sir Thomas Browne, his book *Religio Medici*, so I think all of those guys...

and there's no particular reason—that's just what I was reading, you know? I suppose Petrarch is the most obvious, choicewise, and Dante maybe too. I was just interested in the certainty of voice that was achieved stylistically. And it wasn't like I wanted to parody it. This wasn't meant as parody. I just *wanted* it.

TB: What I said earlier, that you could almost substitute "woman" for "man"...that's not quite right...

LR: That was a way for you to understand it, yes.

TB: But in fact, what's happening more often is simply that "the men" are being placed in the position that "the women" would be placed in in male discourse. But you couldn't simply change out the terms. (Pause) "Each man—I could write / His poem. He needs no voice." (Long pause) "...I am preoccupied with grace / And have started to speak expensively—as in / Have joys / Which look like choice." It's comic, too. "The Men's / Cocks / And their faces / As we do so / Fall upwards." The penis is pretty funny, granted. I was thinking, reading this piece, because you say "joys" and "choice," I was thinking of Molly Bloom, and her comments about the cock, that to her is like this oddity—it's a funny thing.

LR: Yes, it's a funny thing.

TB: "And their faces." What about the faces? There's this notion of surface that persists throughout. (Long pause) "The / Men are enjambed." "A man could learn a lot from a conchologist..."

LR: (Laughs)

TB: "Could learn amazement."

LR: (Laughs) I do find parts funny, yes.

TB: The talking dog.

LR: I have a talking dog in almost every book, I think.

TB: No kidding. Really? I never noticed.

LR: Not in *XEclogue*. In *Debbie* there's a lot of dog activity.

TB: It works like a treatise, doesn't it? When you say "The Men"—let's just talk about the title, *The Men*—oh, and then it says "A Lyric Book," I hadn't noticed that—but *The Men*, it makes one think of a treatise, "On The Men," like Aristotle's *De Anima*, like Petrarch's, all those, I forget what they're called, but...

LR: I was intensely reading Montaigne at the time—there are all these essays, "On this" or "On that."

TB: Ah-ha, so Montaigne then, an essay "On The Men."

LR: So it's maybe like an essay...

TB: ...on The Men. I began to read it as kind of anti-*De vulgari eloquentia*. Which I think it is. "When a man rides with a demon, when he transmits, and snags, when a man feels his psyche work all over america, in its humble way, when he has no obligation, when he marches on, when a man marches on..."

LR: (Laughing) It's not very light-handed, is it?

TB: No, it's not. "Under any meridian I was born." The "I" is a "we." If you say that you were born "under *any* meridian," you must be plural. "...I was born / in the climate of them..."

LR: The pronoun itself...

TB: Do we want to talk about the pronoun?

LR: We could try...

TB: I went back and looked at Benveniste—it seemed pertinent to this discussion—the essay on the pronoun.

LR: Yes, it's an amazing essay. I didn't read that until last year but I felt I identified with what he was saying really thoroughly. I think he was saying something I hadn't been able to articulate but had perhaps been trying to work through in various texts I'd written.

TB: Well, okay, but I was going to comment, if we'd been a little more successful in talking about *The Men*, that I don't think the "I" in this text operates as the pronoun

that Benveniste is describing. It's not an "I" occurring in a moment of discourse. Because that can only happen in spoken discourse. So as soon as there's an author, or even a narrator, as there would almost seem to be, you've got something else going on with the "I." And, here, the "I" is slipping into the "we." So what is it, then, that differs in the notion of the "I" only emerging in the instance of discourse?

LR: I do think Benveniste is describing something that definitely happens in speech, that this shifter that's the pronoun is something that is continuously being given to the other in reciprocity. It's an almost utopian sensibility he's expressing. However, if you step back and look at, not the instance of discourse, of collective exchange, but at the institutional forms that are permitting and shaping that exchange, the fact is that in many, many situations there's not a reciprocity. That, for example, a woman could be denied the possibility of receiving and speaking this shifting pronoun position, which is what can happen, and does happen to different degrees. There are conventional permissions that are carried into any speech act and discursive moment, and I think that part of what *The Men* does is try to open up the problematics of that convention which does or doesn't permit the exchange of a speaking "I" as subject. I think that the "I" that is permitted, that the "I" that is assumed as being given to the female subject to utter and exchange is not the same "I" as the "I" that is given to a male subject. And for somebody—for Petrarch, for example, who was pretty much at the top of his heap—there is an "I" that circulates, and he can identify with Virgil, or whatever man he chooses to identify with, within a structure of power and authority and convention. And it's not problematical, particularly. And there is an "I" that a woman can assume that is also not problematical. But these are different "I's." I think one of the things that might be going on in *The Men* is that there's a lot of slippage between these kinds of "I's" that are already shaped to enter into a discursive moment. So as the writer of this book I'm not wielding the subject position, I'm not wielding the pronoun that's been given to me to wield.

TB: Only momentarily, parodically, here and there.

LR: I am sometimes, but it's like a slip, and it's also not a complete assumption of a more authorized masculine "I." So there's a lot of troubling. And there are not just two "I's," either. I'm not quite sure, because it's not something I schematized as I was writing it. It was something I was experiencing at a pretty visceral level and trying to play out experimentally as I was doing the work.

TB: Dante never slips—Dante, or whoever—never slips out of that position, except in moments, when you can catch him outside of it, but it's really rare. But Benveniste isn't, at least in that essay, engaging with that problematic. He's simply saying that the "I" comes into existence only in the instance of discourse. He does seem to be questioning the notion of a unified subject position existing outside of speech.

LR: Yes. He's questioning any sort of stable point or site of referentiality that the pronoun unproblematically points to. But in other work he is looking at the institutional shaping behind conventions of usage. The book on Indo-European institutions, that's what the entire book is about. I don't know when this essay was written, and I think that it was first published in a psychoanalytic context, in some sort of professional psychoanalytic review. Maybe he was pointing his argument in the direction of that practice.

TB: In the *De vulgari eloquentia* the question seems to be first of all, what is the illustrious vernacular, what is the vulgari eloquentia, but secondly, who has a right to speak it? And where? It's illustrious, but it's also courtly and curial. It has a legal existence, a juridical existence. You have a right to speak because the law allows you that right. He's very explicit about women not having it, in a number of instances, and usually in the context of it being ridiculous to think that a woman...

LR: Well, at the same time he situates women as its source in terms of maternity and first language acquisition.

TB: Whelping, as you call it, in *The Men*.

LR: (Laughs) Do I?

TB: Yes, you do. Apparently we haven't forgiven you for whelping us! (Laughter)

LR: It's a nice word, though.

TB: It's a great word...

LR: ...I can't remember using it...

TB: ...if you're not the object of it.

LR: This book was written for women to read.

TB: It is? Give me a break!

LR: Initially, you know, *The Men* was written for my girlfriends. The first people who read it were gay male friends and heterosexual women friends. So people who have had a certain kind of engagement with *The Men*.

TB: So I don't really have a right to read it. So my over-interpretation of it is actually an instance of...

LR: Maybe this is why—you said it makes lots of men really uncomfortable to read—maybe this is partially why. Maybe men, in a way, feel they don't have a right to read it and maybe they're not used to having that feeling, whereas one is used to having that feeling as a woman, unfortunately.

TB: Well it makes them uncomfortable to hear it. I don't know about reading it. But I certainly have witnessed discomfort at readings.

LR: I've had a lot of feedback about that too. (Long pause) It's really difficult for me to talk about this book in a direct way.

TB: I might have found better ways of asking about it, but now that I know I don't have the right to read it...

LR: (Laughs) Doesn't that make it even more tempting? That's why I read everything I read. Why would I read any of these texts if I had a right to read them?

TB: Earlier in this interview, when I said that there were certain concepts that repeat, the first thing that came to your mind was surface, which I wasn't thinking of at all. It seems to me that in your work the present has a relationship to time that the surface has to space.

LR: Actually, I was just looking through a stack of old notebooks, looking for material for a lecture that I have to write this week, and I found this interesting observation about Benveniste and the pronoun in utterance in the present. I was reading Saussure and really grappling with and getting a handle on his notion of the synchronic and diachronic axes and their intersection. And thinking of Benveniste's theory of utterance, articulation, I forget the exact word he uses, in relation to that synchronic/diachronic grid. And it seemed to me that the pronoun, the shifter, only ever has

reference in the present point of utterance. It is always renewed and given agency in the moment of utterance. And that moment of utterance is like a point of bisection, of a diachronic axis. So it is this moment of bisection of a temporal trajectory, or at least a sort of fantasized temporal trajectory proceeding linearly from past to future. Through the present. That structuring point of intersection, which is the present, is the moment of the pronoun. And that's the point where language becomes embodied through that seizing of the temporal.

TB: Language becomes embodied, but the subject comes into being in language.

LR: Which is the same thing. That's what Benveniste talks about in his essay on the subject too.

TB: I hadn't thought about it in terms of time before.

LR: He doesn't talk about time, but I was grappling to understand him in relation to Saussure, who strongly influenced him. And Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*—maybe it's not in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, maybe it's in *The Order of Things*—he talks about the Saussurean grid, the diachronic/synchronic. Foucault was one of Benveniste's students and was influenced by his work, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is Benvenistean. He very slightly shifts the vocabulary, but I now see it as a purely Benvenistean project. Even in terms of his analysis of institutions, which is what Benveniste was doing in *Indo-European Institutions*. He was bringing together these different moments of Benveniste that I was grappling to understand enough to say anything about earlier. We were talking about the psychoanalytic moment of this discourse around the pronoun and the subject, and its relation to institution critique and institution analysis as that unfolds in *Indo-European Institutions*. And maybe what Foucault is doing is taking those areas of discourse—the subjective and the institutional—and overlaying one over the other so that they can be seen more in relation to one another, or so they are becoming one another. So that the discourse instant, the moment of utterance, is always already, in that hackneyed phrase, an institutional event, an institutional frame that's permitted by, etcetera, etcetera. So I was trying to understand that because I was teaching that stuff, and then I started thinking about it in relation to the Saussurean grid and had this bit of an aha! moment. And it's always handy to have a diagram to draw on the blackboard, because it gives everyone in the room something to look at, and have issues about, and so that diagram helped us

think through the idea of the pronoun, the subject and the present in relation to time and language.

TB: How does that work in your writing?

LR: I don't know. I can't really explicate the exact relationship between my theoretical and research interests and how I write, what I write. I can talk about the kind of research that I'm carrying out because I know what it is, and I know what my questions are, but I can't provide a causal explanation of the relationship of the research to how a poem or a text is formed. I "take a leap"...

TB: Hang on a sec, though. If you think of what you're doing in the act of writing, in your writing, as a dialogue, in a sense, because you make frequent enough address to the reader and...

LR: ...or to a dog...

TB: ...to a dog, yeah...but if you put that into the context of the abundant use of the functioning of pronouns in your work, and if you think about that in Benvenistean terms, or in the terms that you just related, then there is almost an instant of discourse in the act of writing, even though it leaves a trace, even though what you wind up with is very different from speech. But then speech leaves a trace. Dialogue leaves a trace. So in that act of writing, is there a similar or same operation occurring?

LR: To what I just described?

TB: Yeah. In the actual act of writing there is a similar moment, is there not?

LR: Yes. There is. I've been working through this pronoun matter since my work first started being published, with *The Apothecary*. So even in that work, which is all first person, I kind of fell into this idea of using a first person that I didn't biographically identify with. Using the first person as an impersonal opening device, as a way of not pinning language to my experience but opening language to other experience. I'm not quite sure how I got to that idea, I'm not sure at all, but at that time I was reading a lot of Leslie Scalapino and a fair amount of William James and Stein and Lyn Hejinian and Steve McCaffery. But somehow all the stuff I was reading and the conversations I was having with my friends, Catriona and Christine, led me to the idea that I could use this "I" in a non-referential, and therefore, according to my thinking

at that time in my life, an anti-lyrical way. And it was a real turning point for me in my work. By the time I was writing *The Weather*, when I fell upon this first person plural, it really became this idea of posing a pronoun as a point of identification that was somehow really spectral, or other, rather than sewn up in a traditionally-conceived notion of subjectivity. It really opened for me and it became... I could think of this practice of the pronoun in very opened-up political terms, and I could think of the expansion of the field of subjectivity that such pronominal practice could invest as being really where I wanted to go with my work, and also as being the way in which the work functioned politically or socially.

TB: So that would seem to contradict my hypothesis.

LR: Repeat your hypothesis.

TB: It was a question of whether there is a similar or same occurrence in the act of writing as there is in the act of speaking according to Benveniste.

LR: I wouldn't say I'm against what you just said, because the identification that takes place within an act of speaking, within a seizing of the moment of the pronoun, it's also a structured identification. It feels natural, but it's a moment of agency that's enabled by an entire historicity, having to do with everything: family, community, economics, sexuality, etcetera. So usually when we speak there is a relatively unproblematic experience of assuming an "I," assuming a first person...

TB: If we're sane...

LR: Yes, or "if," "if"—there could be a million "ifs" there, really, and that sort of "normal" zone of unproblematic assumption of subjectivity probably doesn't exist, because we are all in some sort of skewed or troubled relationship to the assumption of subjectivity. At any point in your life there's some reason why you're not normal. You're in love, you're sick, you're politically dispossessed. If you're a young person trying to talk to your professor, to say "I" in that instance could seem the most false and over-determined thing you could do. If you're ill and have to speak to your surgeon, how do you evoke yourself? How do you speak a subjectivity into that context? It's always problematic, so I think that one of the things that writing does, it's not simply countering some sort of "normal" unproblematic zone, it's revealing the inherent ambivalence of that agency that's driving the appropriation of subjectivity in the instant. It's opening

up that ambivalent space, and I suppose giving it a kind of aesthetic frame, a ludic frame so it's both less and more dangerous than it often feels in quotidian existence. So no, I don't think that they're separate things, speaking and writing. They each seize an enunciated present. I think that that seizing, that identification, is never seamless, but we're supposed to act like it's seamless most of the time. The practice of writing is simply slowing down, opening up that discomfort and in so doing giving it a kind of spatial potency where something else can happen. That potency can be very funny, too. When I started writing "we" it just felt hilarious, so mawkish and over the top. There's always the "royal we" as a kind of sickening undertone. So there's all this ostentatiousness and a false sense of collectivity. But isn't that the case any time you might say "we"? Or even "I"? Only you smooth it over.

TB: The "we" in "Seven Walks," which predominates almost entirely—there are moments when you're speaking from the position of oneself, the "I," but not many—is not a collective "we." It's a very specific "we." It's myself and my guide.

LR: Yeah, that's a big shift from the "we" of *The Weather*.

TB: I first encountered that work in the publication *Giantess*. One of the walks.

LR: At that point I hadn't even conceived of it as a walk.

TB: It struck me as something that really needed to be expanded.

LR: It took a few years for me to get back to it.

TB: What brought "Seven Walks" to mind was your comment about ostentatiousness and being over the top, and that kind of flaunting of a nineteenth century, or even an eighteenth century—the costumes seem more eighteenth century than nineteenth century—personhood. But in the context of what also seems pretty clearly to be Vancouver, and you walking with your dog, who talks.

LR: Yeah. You want me to comment on that? I don't know what to say about that, other than "yeah." When I was writing those works I started out purely just to—I really like writing prose, but I have terrible problems with narrative. Something about the intimate "we" dynamic in those walks gave enough of a tension to at least substitute for a narrative, for a certain duration. So I didn't really need to have a story. There is just sort of a tensile plural in movement, and that was enough.

TB: There's a strong sense of narration, though.

LR: What I was trying to do was to amuse myself. Just to see what I could do. At first I didn't have any agenda at all, other than "Okay, I'm going to write 250 words a day of this sort of fakey narration and see where it goes." And that's how I wrote the first one. And then in the interim I read Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and became really interested in the genre of the walk, and realized that what I had already written was in fact a walk, and that I could develop that. So my reading filled me in on a way in which I could conceive of what I'd already done, so that I could continue with the tone I had established, and a version of the style I had established, having discovered this genre, and how it circulated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature as a genre, as a device. It gave me some confidence. I could name what it was that I was doing and so continue with it. So that's really what I did. They were all published as they were written, pretty much. The second two or three in *Front* magazine. So I was just exploring. But I'd say that that sort of relationship between my reading and historical research and my writing practice would be fairly typical, that at first I'm just winging it, doing things more or less instinctually. Not out of nothing—my sense of style and so forth is totally formed by my reading. But it's usually only retroactively that I can figure out what it is I've been writing so that then I can open it further and continue with it.

TB: Rereading "Seven Walks" led me to think about writing and pleasure and, also looking at your essay "Lastingness," the way in which some texts operate as a kind of opiate. They're so rich, and that's what you want in reading them, a kind of pleasure that wouldn't be provided if they were discursive. For instance, in Henry James there are descriptive moments that operate like that. They almost shouldn't be written. I'm trying to approach the notion of pornography, because I know from previous conversations, and also from "Lastingness," of your interest in *The Story of O*.

LR: I hadn't yet read *The Story of O* when I was writing "Seven Walks." I'd maybe read some excerpts in that Grove Press anthology taken from the various erotic texts from the Olympia Press. So I think I'd read whatever excerpt they had from *The Story of O* in there, but I'd never had my hands on the whole book. But I had read that one called *The Image*, which was also written under a pseudonym, Jean de Berg, something like that, do you know that book? Similar period, mid-twentieth-century, French, kind of high-end porno, sado-masochistic triangles.

TB: Is that Réage?

LR: I don't know who it was. I don't know if it's her. I actually haven't done much research into it. I read the book. I lent it to a student and didn't get it back. How could I go chasing after my porno?

TB: "Seven Walks" has a gloss. It resembles some of the automatic texts of the surrealists, like *Soluble Fish*, but it also carries the taint of the nineteenth-century "yellow book."

LR: Even though I hadn't read all of those texts, it's an area of reading that I've always been really interested in. There's a guilty pleasure involved, not because of its erotic referentiality, but because of its stylistic over-the-top-ness—a pleasure that made it more attractive to me given my schooling in modernism. From an Anglo high-modernist point of view, this tradition of French high-end erotic literature is very problematic. In almost any way that you can imagine it's problematic. I was reading a lot of Swinburne too, and Swinburne's prose. *Lesbia Brandon*. That was a really big text for me. Decadence as a historical style and as a cultural practice is something I've always intuitively gone towards. In part, initially maybe, out of a bratty contrariness, but really just because I enjoyed reading it. So I thought, "Well, why should I deny myself the pleasure of reading these texts just because nobody else wants to take them seriously." And then one of the really interesting things that's pretty hard to ignore is that most of the people who were writing these texts were not straight men. This is a tradition that women and queer people have shaped, so the relationship of the decadent text to sexuality was a really radical one for me. I was never really much of a reader of what now gets called French feminism—Kristeva and Cixous and Irigaray. I read little bits of their work, but I was never deeply into it. But I think in a way that my interest in French erotic literature has to do with that sort of pleasurable opening of the materiality of the text that Kristeva was talking about. She talks about Céline and James Joyce but she could just as well be talking about Violette Leduc and Laclos and Pauline Réage, even Michèle Bernstein, that alternate stylistic tradition. It still interests me a lot, even the fact that it's not really very widely known among anglophone readers. It's now very obscure, but these people were hugely famous in their time. They were not obscure writers. They were winning major literary prizes, were distributed in mass markets—speaking of Pauline Réage or Violette

Leduc. And yet they've just been dropped because they don't fit into our paradigm of femininity and our paradigm of what the woman writer, the woman intellectual, performs culturally. It's still so suffocatingly puny and under-nourished. I don't think it's improved a single bit and, for me, reading these texts gives me hope, you know? That there's an opened potential for a lived female subjectivity as it circulates through intellectual and textual life. So I like to go around promoting this porno. (Laughter) Lending it to my students until I get busted.

TB: In terms of pornography, Réage is writing what could be characterized as pornography, partly because, as you point out, she's writing it for Jean Paulhan.

LR: Yes, but Pauline Réage—Dominique Aury—was writing a lot anyway. She wasn't a non-writer who just happened to write this text to turn on her boyfriend. She was somebody with a profound and seriously developed investment in the history of literature and translation. She was a senior editor with Gallimard, she was Blanchot's main editor, she was translating seventeenth-century English metaphysical poetry. She edited a number of serious anthologies of poetry in France.

TB: I wasn't trying to diminish her achievement. I'm just saying that in terms of all of the texts that you're talking about this is the one that focuses on eroticism in a way that might not be as central to the kind of decadence you were describing. Although there is an equation between eroticism and decadence, through the channels of pleasure...

LR: I feel the Réage text functions as political allegory as well. I haven't really developed this, but I was reading Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, in relation to *The Story of O*. What this text is coming out of is the context of occupied Fascist France. Réage had been on the right then she shifted sides. She worked in the underground. Some of her colleagues were murdered by the Nazis. That was her world. I feel, in a way, that what she was writing was one way of talking about what was happening in French political life at that time, and it's also a way of talking about what was happening to female intellectuals in French cultural life at that time. I think there are many, many ways of reading that text and all of them are structured into the writing. They're not readerly wishfulness. And insofar as she did write the text for her lover, Paulhan, he also would have been somebody who was more than capable of reading on all those levels as well. Those readings were also meant for him as somebody who shared that

context. But she was not the only one in her circle who chose to express her intellectual and political life in the form of an erotic text. It was something that was going on. Certainly Bataille did it as well, and he was part of her intimate circle. I think this is very interesting work. Susan Sontag wrote about it, Angela Carter wrote about it, but now it doesn't really get considered. There are crappy movies that get made of it from time to time, that exploit the narrative. (Pause) I've never written an overtly pornographic text, but as you point out there's something about the stylistic surface that I'm interested in producing that pertains to pornography—something having to do with description. I mean, a pornographic text is just purely descriptive, really. Not much happens. We know what does happen. It just has to repeatedly happen. (Laughter) Kind of banal, and so the only thing that brings any interest to it is the mode of description.

TB: The work you read last night at Co-op Books—the last piece that you read, which you announced as being, I thought, in some way part of the same project as the one that preceded it, the one that draws on Lucretius... But maybe I misunderstood that, because it didn't seem like part of the same project as the Lucretius work.

LR: It's not directly translating, no. Well, I mean, for me, what *On The Nature of Things* does, right from the opening hymn to Venus, is raise the problem of the relationship between nature and politics and ask the question, in the context of the political and in the context of nature: What is change? And then the poem tries to answer this question in various ways. Lucretius talks about it in terms of love, in terms of disease, in terms of war, in terms of geography, in terms of weather, etcetera. But it's the same dynamic playing out in each section. And I've just started to gradually realize that those are questions that I've been asking in my work too, over the years of writing—the relationship of nature to politics and the question, What is change? You can see that pretty clearly starting with *XEclogue*. That is the motivating triad of problems, relationships, and it's just continued through all my work. So I think that reading Lucretius has given me insight into this. I recognize that his problem has also been my problem, but I haven't been able to articulate it as specifically to myself. It has come out sideways through my interest in genre, but not as a set of questions that I could ask more directly. I feel like the work that I'm working on right now, that doesn't sound Lucretian in its vocabulary, in its diction, in its musicality, is in fact directly working through those problems.

TB: What is his answer to the question of change?

LR: Well, this is where he's Epicurean, and so he uses Epicurus's theory of the *clinamen*. And this is what Marx grabs onto in Epicurus and Lucretius as well. Marx is also confronting the problem of agency. If this universe is purely physical or material, and is working following mechanistic patterns of cause and effect, then everything is determined, so how can change occur? So that's Marx's problem and it's Lucretius's and Epicurus's problem, and Epicurus as an atomist is breaking the problem down to the level of the atom, and he's saying that there's an unforeseeable swerve that's inherent to the nature of atomic matter but which is completely unpredictable. And it's this swerve that guarantees freedom. So it's a really ancient problem, like the relationship between fate and free will, but brought into political and material contexts. It's not staged in terms of the drama of the individual psyche. It's staged as the vast drama of human and other life on the planet.

TB: But also—and I've noticed this—when change happens...

LR: ...it's fucking devastating...

TB: ...it happens suddenly, as in the context of a negotiation, for instance, or a relationship, when change actually happens, you couldn't immediately identify its causes.

LR: No.

TB: And time suddenly moves very quickly—or events move quickly within time, I guess I would rather say, because time actually slows down in some ways. So that's the *clinamen*?

LR: Yes.

TB: And in what you read last night you're addressing those same problems.

LR: Yes, but not with any... I really am just writing that work right now so it's really hard for me to say what it's doing, because if I knew what it was doing I wouldn't have to write it, but that's the terrain that I'm interested in. I mean, a lot of what I was reading last night has to do with the body, so the question of the body becomes the terrain of this nature/politics dynamic. That's been the long-term problem that feminism addresses, but it seems like in the history of the address of this problem,

of the relationship of nature to politics within the body, it's always been looked at as a special problem of difference. Only those who are marked as Other have to deal with the body, officially speaking. We know that's not true, of course, but institutions found themselves on that false premise. It's become really interesting for me, who's educated myself within a feminist intellectual tradition, to recognize the most dynamic and difficult problems within that tradition as being present within this text of Lucretius. And for me it's helped to open up the discourse of feminism beyond some sort of "special" sector and into a general philosophical question. And this reading of Lucretius, and the gradual realization of this dynamic that I'm describing that I see in the text, it's opening for me into the terrain of a feminist philosophical thought, and has also been happening during a period of my biological life when I've been going through major change, even illness. And so the questions become more lived, and that also becomes very interesting in terms of my history as a reader of philosophy and as a participant in the philosophical questions. Through this Lucretius work I've been feeling like the terrain of the questions of philosophy is the terrain of my body. It doesn't solve any of the problems to have that realization—it doesn't sew anything up tidily, that's for sure—but it's giving me a renewed impetus to want to face these problems and find a language for them.

TB: When I mentioned the presence of a talking dog in a couple of instances in your writing, you said that there was almost always a talking dog, which I thought was rather curious. But I noticed last night in your reading, in that last piece, that there was a talking dog—at least if the fact that you were talking to the dog implied that the dog could talk back.

LR: My longest-term relationship has been with a dog! (Laughter)

TB: Did you hear that, Rosa? Yes!

LR: In my domestic life the dog is the constant. But no, there's this funniness, and you know the sceptics were dogs.

TB: That's true, cynics anyway.

LR: Cynics! The cynics were dogs. The sceptics were on a porch, weren't they? Yeah, dogs and porches the two great topics! (Laughter) No, there's a dog presence. It's the Agamben question, you know, what is an animal? And what is the breach that we

project as being existent between the human and the animal? When you live with an animal that question is in your mind every day, in some way, “Why do I think I’m different from this animal?” It seems less and less apparent that there ought to be any reason. Of course, with non-dog-liking friends you play it down quite a lot. (Laughter) Animals are such mysteries, but they’re also really the mystery that we are to ourselves—the mystery of embodiment and mortality and co-existence. And then the observation in dogs of the life of power is so interesting—speaking about the dog’s relationship with other dogs—because you’re always having to let the animal have its social life, and so you have to learn how to read animal social interactions. So that’s very interesting, too—watching how dogs communicate with one another. We can only have a tiny access to that communication, because it’s happening on so many levels that we can’t perceive at all. The level of scent, for example, what the hell can we ever know about how dogs communicate via scent? We can’t know anything, really. They have all these modes of communication that we can’t participate in. But we can’t participate in most of our own modes of communication either! (Laughter)