
Robin Blaser's Last Interview

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Robin Blaser

I was searching for my interview with **Robin Blaser** online and it appears the link that was the best, from Lou Rowan's [Golden Handcuffs Review](#), is down and I'm going to rectify that here. Actually two interviews I did, the second at the suggestion of Lou, who is an expert editor and has very good taste in material, which makes GHR one of the finest journals around. He felt there were some loose threads that could have worked as a radio interview but, for his print purposes, needed some tying up.



GHR#9

So here is the version that appeared in the Golden Handcuffs Review #9 (Winter, Spring 2007-2008; Vol. 1, No. 9) which also has a nice feature on Seattle poets, of all people. The interview is presented with deep appreciation for Lou Rowan and his fine work and of course for Robin Blaser, his graciousness and time and for how he used his life energy to propel his poetry practice in a "[serial-like search](#)" that feeds anyone willing to invest a minimal amount of time with it.

Interview with Robin Blaser: Tracking the Fire in Open Form (with Paul Nelson)

Seated at Robin's dinner table at his home in Vancouver, BC, we start by discussing Simon Fraser University's Special Collections Library.

RB – There was no such collection. UBC wasn't much use at all and Simon Fraser was a new university, so you took on things like that. Of course to take on all of the local poets and then follow that by making a real collection of poetry. My ideal there was to have the best poetry collection in North America. Well I think there are a lot of places that beat it such as Harvard and the like, but maybe not because Harvard was very bad about contemporary (poetry). Simon Fraser was just a wonderful spot for that because they were ready to do something very strong and, I think, continue it...That's Ralph Maud... (Olson scholar, head of the Charles Olson Memorial Society) between the two of us (we) made a very good combo to see the library faced up and did what was necessary...

PN – In the title essay of your new collection *The Fire*, you say early on that the real business of poetry is cosmology. A couple of pages later you discuss the scientific basis for the proprioceptive process of Charles Olson as being, in the words of Margaret Mead: a human instinctual need for a perceptual relation to the universe. [In an Orphic sense it's more about having entrance to rather than power over.] Can you discuss the cosmology behind your work, and Olson's and the similarities of those writing in the open, or projective?

RB – That's a biggie! (Laughter.) I begin with poetry and other poets like Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan and the painter Jess and all this time also reading the great moderns Joyce, H.D...I think that it was the cosmology that attracted all of us together. Spicer is a cosmologist in a very extraordinary way, which I could return to. Duncan was cosmology from beginning to end and was very clear. His entire work is a cosmological structure, which is one of its great pleasures. And it also opened to both Jack and me that this was writing poems that are never really by

themselves. That is to say a book by me or a book by Spicer, a book by Duncan is a continuous poem and you read it that way, you don't really narrow it. And all of us were against the lyric because it left you with your musical voice and it was just you. The others meant that you could find an entire ground, which was very important, particularly with Spicer, whose ground was so complex and difficult, to step in for the rest of us. Spicer was more experimental than Duncan or me in those days.

I find it fascinating when I am asked questions like this that all three of us were drawn to a cosmological direction and you didn't know what to do with that because what was a cosmos? In those days in Berkeley we didn't have a cosmos. The university didn't teach poetry as though it proposed a cosmos, or talked toward a cosmos, or even gave you a cosmos. You never talked about that...AS a consequence you couldn't read William Carlos Williams with any decency at all so he wasn't taught. Ezra Pound was simply dismissed as a complexity of some kind that nobody wanted to handle. In the meantime of course, we're meeting in our own group, especially the three of us, Duncan, Spicer and myself, reading all of that stuff, independently, because you couldn't read it anywhere else. And also as a consequence, our differing poetics structures coming out of that ground...and we mustn't leave H.D. out of this. H.D. is a special writer of this day and I know nothing good written on her. I think it's time somebody did. I just don't want to do that sort of thing anymore. But I think that H.D. needs some attention. SHE'S a cosmologist of great fascination.

PN – And how would you describe the basic cosmology? What are the components of that worldview?

RB – The main components are, first, that there isn't one. That was what you felt and this was what the 20th century tried to do to us. It took us away and Marxism didn't help at all unfortunately with that problem. Marxism is quite a different thing, but that's when we're already social and know how to move and then Marxism can speak to you. Otherwise, you're fucked. You've not got a cosmos with which: Where's God? We'll you're sure not going to...even an old Catholic like me isn't going to turn into THAT. And Spicer, I mean, Spicer's view of the Catholic Church (laughing heartily) IS ONE KICK IN THE ASS AFTER ANOTHER! HA! and I just loved it. And Duncan, oooh Duncan. He was an occultist in some part and the occult tradition was a fascinating one. We all came to know of it. But the occult was a counter Christian, counter religious tradition that was also a religious tradition, whatever a religion means, essentially to be tied to a world at large. So all of us were busy working around it, sometimes at quite a loss. Spicer is utterly fascinating for the size of the world in his work. First I think it's by experimenting with language. Spicer was so marvelous since (because of) the fact that language wasn't working. It didn't give him a world. It didn't give any of the rest of us a world. It just jabbered on & on & on. And lectures could just be insolent jabbering, so you were sitting there and you'd try to get some Shelley in all this jabberwocky. I'm not going to mention any of the professors. They're dead now. I'm glad I'm not. But it was simply a matter of finding language as the way with which you could walk on a piece of earth...

PN – So it's a process?

RB – It's a process. And that's a good word to bring up because that word really did not come to us until Olson.

PN – And Olson pulled it out of Whitehead from Process and Reality. (Alfred North Whitehead is known for his Process Philosophy. This is a shift from the Newtonian physics notion of the world being made up of disconnected things, to occasions of experience as Whitehead saw as the fundamental elements of the universe.)

RB – Yes, and all of us read it...

PN – With much difficulty.

RB – YES! Yes, and still do in some ways.

RB – ...All of us were very different strands and when you get to the point where you have to pull your own knitting together, that's why we're all so interesting I think...the weaving is so alive and it's so much a new universe. We all came in with one thing or another. I came in with Catholicism. Duncan came in with Occultism... Spicer was as much a cosmologist, if not more, than the rest of us. And then we found Olson who was VERY

CONSCIOUSLY working on a cosmology. And H.D. was a very important figure. Duncan brought her in to our attention.

The cosmology that guides me would be very broad...Poets working with cosmos, it's a little different. You haven't really got a map. You're trying to make a world, and when I say there's a cosmos in a poet's work, then I'm going to look very carefully at what parts of which that cosmos is made.

Now, the first place that a cosmos is made is in friendships, lovers, sex, that kind of thing. Then, of course, you want a world in which those figurations can have an appearance. And making some kind of world, that means that you're headed for the largest possible sense of the world. The first thing you can do is see about your home town. Once you've gotten out of your home town, and in my case I had to run for it, then you go to a city and you try to find out, figure out, what a city is. And as the city moves, you keep moving further and further until you're into cosmologies. Now, cosmologies can be religious, in my case I begin with a Catholic cosmology, so you're very sure of who God is and all that stuff. When you lose that, then you're in the cosmos and there has to be some sense of the physical world. First of all, how to read with people. The next thing is what kind of world those people make of it. And, beyond that, what kind of world goes on in the largeness of politics? And that you kind wind up moving and moving and moving into a cosmos that is a case of ball in which you fold the yarn around and around and around and then you can pull it out every so often in terms of wherever your knowledge has gone. I suppose that is what I meant as I was asked.

what would you do if all the lovers of your years passed by at midnight dressed in the flesh they wore when you last loved them? what do I do? what do I say? I loved you then, I touch you now with all the glow you left in the palm of my hands.

PN – So, in response to your talking about a cosmology starting with your lovers, that's the poem of yours that first came to my mind. RB – Oh that's lovely! It makes it go further than I would like it to go.

PN – Explain why.

RB – I think that lovers are the first real move towards a cosmos. I think your first sense of cosmos will come to you when you're in love. Love gives you an enlargement and a promise which you may lose, but which you may also keep. I try to keep my memory of all my lovers because it's another realm of the world. And so there are great circles of these that are gifts of the relationship, gifts of the conversation, gifts of the sex, gifts of the intimacy, that wonderful thing that is hard to come by. Great teachers brought intimacy into the room and so I tried to do that all the years I had to teach to pay my rent.

PN – You say in the book *The Fire* that since 1955 you have worked to find a line which will hold what you see and hear and will tie the reader to the poems and not to you. Can you talk about this quest and any relation it may have to composition by field? Because when I think of line breaks, William Carlos Williams struggling with what he called the Variable Foot, which I thought was a clunky way (Robin laughs) of describing it. George (Bowering) disagrees, but then with Olson talking about *Composition by Field*, it just explodes that whole realm. Did that aid your search and effort to try and find a line?

RB – Yes I can in a sense in personal terms, I found it very difficult to have a line. I thought frequently when I tried to write, that is was simply false. And that would mean that I hadn't gotten the line. That it was false...or it was flat. So that what one's after is a language that's alive all the time and that means that the syntax has to be ABSOLUTELY alive and I think you have to find it in your own terms, that's why each poet is such a different marvel...You can't ever let go of the fact that the language you're writing is turning into sentences, and the sentences NEVER come to a full period. Writing is a flow, a flow of intelligence. Language, when you realize language is not yours, it belongs to something really quite mysterious in human nature (laughing) if it's even there! Language is a way in which you are never simply yourself. I think the attachment to language, and I think as a writer, my attachment and those poets I've admired so much in my life were all poets TIED IN with the language

something so alive that it was close to having a body.

PN – And it was outside of them.

RB – It was outside, so you were always in some kind of amor. I don't think any good poetry comes without it.

PN – And it's been 51 years. Are you satisfied that you've found that now?

RB – (Laughing) No. I try. You never...if that's your view, of language, that it is life itself that's speaking, it isn't yours, it's life, and that means you've got to be very, very prepared, and it has to do with making sure you're educated. You have to be prepared for it. You have to be able to read as many languages as you can get your head around. You have to be able to speak to yourself in words that surprise you. If you speak to yourself the way you're always speaking to yourself, you'll find you're the biggest fucking bore in the world...Language must always remain the strongest. I think it's true in conversation. I think it's certainly true in writing. Poetry's greatest adventure is always to stay within that lifeline that is never quite yours but it's a lifeline that moves everybody. It's your love affair. Language is your love affair.

PN – And if it IS your love affair, and as you say in (the essay) *The Practice of Outside*, you talk about Spicer's notion that this must be a spiritual discipline, so all that you're talking about are facets of this spiritual discipline that serious poets develop.

RB – Yes, and I don't admire, I can't think of any poet who did not follow...And we've so fucked up the word spiritual. It's become so damned...so shortened of what its order is. It had to do with spirit, the spirit itself, that which is that thing we are and aren't both at the same time. And we track, we map...the best poets are those that map what is yours and what is not yours...That's the reason that the whole tradition of the lyric got fucked up was because the academics thought that it was a personal voice. Well go back and read Shelley! Try some Keats and see if you can stay back down! Well, you wouldn't. I had to walk out of classes. Duncan walked out and Spicer wouldn't even go. And Olson in this (laughing) marvelous way he could express contempt! And Creeley who would do it so quietly. Creeley is a lesson in poetics. He can remain absolutely natural, and at the same time...a great romance of what language can follow and track. Duncan was always grand and decorative and I don't mean those in negative senses. He's the best you can be on those orders. Creeley is another matter. He's winding the thread of you on his fingers. And that's a charming and brilliant...only geniuses can do that. Duncan is quite genius, but Spicer had the ability, in his language, to make it always crackle. PN – We were talking about a Spiritual Discipline, and you said any serious poet has one. And you mentioned some of the things, knowing a different language, and other things, but can you talk about your spiritual discipline as regards to poetry?

RB – (Speaking to partner David Farwell) He likes to ask the tough ones. (Laughs.) Spiritually, I'm brought up a Roman Catholic. You can't stay there because of what has happened to the Catholic Church...but I'm brought up Roman Catholic, that's my Mother who was schooled in her convent and all that sort of stuff. I suppose spirituality in that sense when you get to recognize spirituality at all. I think you can recognize it very early, actually... That's one of the positive things you could say about a religious upbringing. It immediately draws you into a realm of spirituality, that's what they're trying to teach, spirit. They always see spirit as being in another world. But you as a young person will not find it that way. You'll find it very personal and it will be constantly searched for, looked for. In the case of the Catholic Church it was a Father Ackerman, a very splendid, charming, young, handsome priest. And that was a magical image of a man. It humanized that aura of huge religious knowledge beyond you and made it so that you could take that hugeness and make it personal, that it could be a conversation between you and a young man, who happened also to be a priest.

Monsignor O'Toole was absolutely a fierce and frightening man. I've forgotten what exactly it was I did when the phone rang and it was this voice that I'll never forget, Monsignor's voice: GET OVER HERE IMMEDIATELY! I had Holy Water...I was soaking wet with Holy Water. (David says "DeMolay.") AH, YES! My uncle had gotten me to go to DeMolays. And the DeMolays, that's the junior section of the Masons. You can imagine what the Catholic

Church thinks! (Laughing) Getting to block things like that! Well, it was very attractive. The DeMolays would dress you up in these wonderful robes and we wandered around. For a fag like me it was really quite fun! (Laughing heartily.) HA! I was enjoying my self enormously when the phone rang with Monsignor O'Toole. And for a Catholic boy like me you rush off immediately that you're told and literally I was soaking in Holy Water to clean me up...I guess. On my Father's side of the family they're all Mormons. Right there I wouldn't call that in those days at all a Spiritual Battle. The Mormons are not exactly a traditional religion. They come out of Utah. They have all kinds of good social attitudes and so on and so forth. But they're nothing like the Roman Catholic Church with its antiquity. And I think the way I would put that is that one of the wonderful values for me as a kid, not even knowing how to say it, was how OLD it was. I suddenly knew something about time. I knew that it wasn't all here. It wasn't all my cabbage patch. It was some place that had come way out of there which gave me an enormous love of Europe.

Then I tried to get my languages going, French and German, and some Spanish and all of that stuff, in order to have some ability to read and then one day to travel in such places. That came quite early and I would up with a marvelous woman who gave me French lessons. Madame Larsen. Madame Larsen was married to a Swedish man, nothing French at all, but she had grown up in MONTREAL and she warned me now don't you go to Montreal and learn how to speak French the way they do in Montreal. You go to Paris and (laughing) on & on & on. But, it was magic. The Roman Catholic Church did Latin. The mass was still in Latin. Now, I'm the kind of person that you don't let Latin just sit there and flow over you. That meant that I not only took the Latin courses, but I had to learn Latin in a decent sort of way. It's just the way I am and we're back on the Latin. What magic it was! There was just no torture in any of that. It was just utter magic. Then, Madame Larsen was...from Quebec. She had been schooled in Paris and her French was absolutely gorgeous. That was just a fascination. See, you headed for languages. And then of course when university came, I could have Latin. Well, I had Latin in high school for one thing, but you could have Greek then. And you could do ALL of the European languages that your mind could handle. I chose mainly French because it was what I could come up with, and loved it.

All of this has though to do with loving words and the excitement when you find them in other languages. To go from French to German for example, it's a pleasure. It's something that you would do just because it was fun. Meaning that you had NO IDEA that all this English you had been brought up with and know well and well educated in it and everything but at the same time you were fitting into it French, German, not much Spanish until later. And then Latin which was in high school and went on into university, and of course Greek, because if you'd got some Latin it seems dumb to me if you don't get some Greek. And when you get through you have this MARVELOUS beginning of a map of language. And language, for all of what else it is, is a map. And to move from one to another means that you're also able to walk a different distance. It's not just ground, but it's distance. I love it. Everybody should have that advantage. I don't know what the schools are doing with languages now but I was fortunate enough to have one that did very good Latin. And then I had a French tutor, Madame Larsen that I am indebted to this very day. I did that. I went to work in a men's clothing store and sold a lot of silk stockings to pay for my French lessons.

PN – And not only are they maps but they are also tremendous energy fields. Fields of energy that go back thousands of years.

RB – YES, and I think the attraction of their going back thousands of years is what I was trying to say something about and you put it right there. That was the exciting thing. And as soon as you know that language is old, VERY old, and yours is only one of those elderly things. You're into an excitement that I don't think you ever recover from. And the only thing you can do is keep studying and the university's a great gift. If you go there. And language is an essential part of it.

PN – You also recognize that you need to develop, or in a good scenario you understand that you need to develop

what Olson called: An humilitas sufficient to make him of use. You see that these (languages) go back thousands and thousands of years. They're beyond your little neck of the woods. I'm guessing this is still Idaho or something like that..

RB – Yeah.

PN – So it's got to seem huge, I mean right now Latin, Greek, German, French is exotic in Idaho, so I can imagine (both laughing) what it was like when you were talking about it.

RB – It was VERY exotic then. The Latin was in the school and the French I had to get elsewhere, my tutor, to whom I still am indebted. And you made your own choice. And then of course by the time you got to the university if you loved language at all you had all that choice. And I did wind up going to Berkeley, which was an amazing setup. I mean, you could have what you wanted. Duncan was not awfully good about going to anybody's classes. Cause he was such a class act in his own right (laughing.) But Spicer and I both attended language classes and so on and Duncan was not lacking in that information at all.

PN – But you realize that you're very small. These languages have gone on thousands of years before you. There are so many of them and you're studying just a fraction of them, European languages, so you begin to get a sense that there's a lot out there that you are unfamiliar with. There's a lot of things going on that you only have a little bit of the knowledge of. And you speaking several languages so much more than the average person, certainly the average American. So the humility was one thing that immediately, it would seem there would be an opportunity to develop a healthy humility.

RB – I'm stammering a little bit because I don't think of myself as having humility, but then I don't think you would have humility if you thought of yourself as having humility, SO! (Laughing.) Yes, I think if I put the word into the personal, I think I felt humble about these things and I still do. And one of the places you feel oh so strongly the humility is in languages. As soon as you hit a class in a language you don't know at all, the humility is an order of things that you work with or ELSE and I can remember because the French was particularly a delight back then because you then when you figure out what a pleasure it is to struggle to get out of the nowhere to a WHERE, then you know you have been someplace. And one of the big places you can go is into a language. It's the biggest place you can go. So that it's really very, very sad that the high schools don't offer that anymore.

PN – Well, my daughter is taking Japanese at her high school.

RB – Oh, they're offering Japanese?

PN – YEAH!

RB – That's terrific.

PN – I think so. Well, I have mixed emotions she's not taking Spanish but I think she'll get that.

RB – Oh she'll probably move to get some Spanish and then some Latin. It's nice if you're going to do the Romance languages if you get a bit of Latin tossed in and then of course it's Greek then you're into that Whoop-te-do.

PN – You talked about going to a big place. You moved from the United States to Canada forty years before the re-selection of George W. Bush long before the rush of people seeking to flee that regime. I heard something about a record number of hits on the Canada immigration website the day after the 2004 election (Robin laughs) so you kind of beat the rush. Can you talk about that move? Was it simply to take the job at Simon Fraser, or did you find that there was more of an OPENNESS to what you were talking about and what you were interested in? Open Form or projectivism or whatever you want to call it.

RB – Open Form and Projectiveness and so on takes me back in to Olson and Creeley. And there will be others as well, Dorn and that whole marvel of things. And one had some of it, but I had gone to Harvard as a librarian and then had gone to Berkeley as a librarian, and these were all well-paying jobs and of great interest. They were fine. But the library thing, somehow or another you didn't really have great intellectual companionship. So I wanted to

return to the university context. And when the offer came from Simon Fraser, it was a position to teach. Well, that gave me the opportunity to be among the faculty where I wouldn't always simply be caught up in the library world, which is a marvelous enough world. But it's generally-speaking not the focus. You're not going to USE the books... PN – But was Vancouver different. It was obviously a different place, but did you find it was a more open place. I mean TISH was going on and they were hearing what Spicer and Duncan and these folks were saying and they were eating it up. They were using it. People like George Bowering and Fred Wah, and the TISH group were using this as a way to really create a truly Canadian language. I mean they're reading William Carlos Williams, at least George was. I'm sure the others were, who was saying it has to be in the demotic, and so you come up here just after the very successful conference in 1963 and the cultural stew must have been very, very tasty at that time. RB – Well it was, and remains so in many ways. It was a very, very rich in the sense that I had a position at San Francisco State. San Francisco State didn't have any of that excitement that I could find anyway, then...It didn't. And Berkeley was not offering it either. Berkeley was the high professional standard of everything and yet I did not find, (of course I did not have a position there, it may have made a difference) but, I didn't find that sense of intellectual community. Some of the great academic places, Harvard and so on & so forth, the high standard is marvelous and some of the professors they were marvelous people and I got to know some of them. And Berkeley has always had marvelous people and you get to know some of them. But it's very difficult at some of those large, old universities for there to be a community that somehow really LIVES with that vitality. When the opportunity came and that was thanks to Warren Tallman, and Ellen Tallman, and Ralph Maud who was at Simon Fraser and Ron Baker, who was Chair of the Department back then, they both attended the very first meeting. I didn't feel I was being tested out. But I was being watched very carefully, listened to very carefully and talked to very thoughtfully. It was magical. It wasn't a professional SETUP where they decided if you had the right records and all that sort of thing. How does he stand when you let him move around the ground a little bit? And I just forgot about it and just moved around the ground and so did they. It was a lovely sense that this could be a community. And I think that community was very, very good. I mean Simon Fraser had a position. And it was a very nice one too, with real range and allowance for what I wanted to teach, and how to teach it. They were generous with everybody, but I took full advantage of it. So, it was a free space in which the mind would find the way in which you could talk about it and not be in a straight jacket and you had to do it THIS way. Nobody ever said it had to be this way. Also the magic of that was that you could set up a course. You set the course up, you chose the books for the course, you were left to find the way in which that map would appeal to students. And the students, then become magical, because they respond to something that goes on when it's not simply a setup of you can just eat this cracker and then we'll let you go on and eat another cracker, but instead give them something where they're absolutely going to use it in their own lives. Simon Fraser allowed me to do that and I'm sure other members of that faculty would say the same thing.

PN – You're describing an open situation.

RB – An open situation.

PN – You're describing a WIDE open situation. And it's my gut feeling that 1963 Simon Fraser hires you, Vancouver in a sense becomes a nexus for this stance toward poem-making. A world nexus for it.

RB – Yes I think so and Warren Tallman who was at UBC was I think part of that nexus. That was his thing. Everything breathed poetry. Simon Fraser was an open, new place and ready to let you move it the way you thought it should be moved. And ready to have all of that contemporary poetry present and there were other people there as well. Not just me doing that...Well I guess openness was just the word for it because somehow because a new university is a great pleasure, because if it's competent at all, and Simon Fraser certainly was, it was alive and at the same time, free. Not stupidities, there weren't any. There was no room for stupidities. The place is too fast.

PN – There was a lot of energy.

RB – Yes.

PN – And it's Olson's contention that writing in the projective allows for more energy to come into the poem.

RB – I must have thought of it that way but I think I learned that from Olson in some way. It's certainly the way his is. And certainly I learned an awful lot from Olson. Duncan gave me a very strong, what I think of as a more traditional knowledge. A beautiful and highest order of that. Spicer gave me something else. He ...was the guy that was cranking us awful fast. And then when Olson and Creeley turn up, they seem to be in major modes of a work beyond any of that. At some point or another it took their presence for me to find the openness of the field. In fact I think Olson taught everybody about the openness of the field and gave you courage to do it. And then when you meet Creeley, Creeley is working there at the highest possible level. Creeley is (looking at Collected Poems) well, I didn't bring this out here because you were coming. I was fussing around (laughing) about Robert Creeley all over again.

PN – And of course next week...(Referring to the ON WORDS: a conference on the Life and Work of Robert Creeley at SUNY Buffalo October 12-14, 2006.)

RB – I wanted to select something to open with that was Creeley's and I haven't chosen...superb poem, superb mind...And I don't mean that Olson isn't necessarily. I think I came to Olson before Bob because I can...I didn't follow Creeley at the beginning very easily. I think because I hadn't got rid of that fancy notion of what a poem is. And Duncan was going to teach you how fancy he was. And there I was with that. Spicer was a countermeasure. Those two people were extremely important to me. He was a countermeasure that I seemed to need...so that it wasn't so simply personal, well here comes Creeley, and they just blew it open, for me.

PN – Circa 1950, 1952?

RB – Early fifties. For them, but not that Duncan and Spicer aren't great. Spicer is one of the major ones for me. But those two gave me the courage to move OUT. And walk proud. Kick the cans. And I loved that. Duncan's beautiful formality and traditional poetry and it's the best of its kind in the 20th century. But it wasn't where I wanted to go. (Maybe I should put it that way because I just don't have that talent or something.) Those two, Creeley and Olson, three, Spicer, told me how to kick the can.

PN – Now, speaking of Charles Olson, we go back to another one of the essays that, thankfully, was published in *The Fire*, the new book of essays, and that would be the essay called *The Violets*. You say in that that Olson's process poetics are a modality for escaping the personal cost of life in a mechanistic, materialistic culture.

RB – No, I think that's very true. Olson was an enormous lesson, for me. I think he was a big lesson for Duncan. I don't think Spicer needed that lesson, the way that he was...I think what we had to...you had somehow to learn how to have a ground. Learn how to walk on that ground and then find out how many different grounds you can enter. And that requires all kinds of different things. Back again to language. I think you need as many as you can handle, as your head will handle. And before you can do it...I've always wondered about people who can have the opportunity into that stuff, that ... it works such that you are...you don't need to be free from that place that you have only your own language. You have to be at the point where you're freed in somebody else's language SO WONDERFULLY that it somehow becomes a gift to you. Doesn't matter it's a gift everyone knows, but a gift to you. And that happens only with, [well of course it's a careful reading of it,] only what the business of going ABSOLUTELY into the cosmology of each poet. And I have never run into a poet that had the same cosmology, among my contemporaries...Duncan's cosmology makes a heaven-knows-what and it's a marvelous, special kind of one that is his own. And, if you're going to read Duncan...I get very tired of those people who look at me as if I know all that occult stuff that he used. Duncan's is something else and it's absolutely there. Then when you have to put him alongside Creeley, Creeley makes you (imitating Creeley) calm down now. Let's stay in town, shall we, for a while? And you wind up with the greatest pleasure in the present condition, Creeley's gift. Olson: How am I

going to get in the biggest tale that anyone ever told, anyone? And you watch his marvelous effort. SO, you begin to find out that if you're going to be a poet that has the fortune to live for a few years, then you can look forward to a way in which maybe you can write big. That everything isn't your throwing tiddly winks...and at somewhere or another in your career, it's the most blasting sense that you can sit down and write free of any of that order of small. It has a shape the form shows. It's the activity of shape...Does that makes sense?

PN – Yes, so here's where the meaning comes in, in a culture that denies meaning.

RB – Yes, and doesn't like it, doesn't teach it.

PN – Ridicules it when it does see it.

RB – Yes, and who wants to replace it with some kind of propaganda, which is not thinking at all, it's somebody else's something or another. Most of the time it's suspect so that...well I don't know, I think poets have a real struggle these days. I mean, to come out of that. Well, I guess not so much me now that I'm retired, but when I read these poets, one of them, one of the efforts was always to get them to get them to have some sense of their own ground and then see what they can do to make that ground bigger.

PN – To expand it?RB – Expand, expand,expand. Expansion is the thing the professor should be teaching. You don't say that to the students, but that's what you should fucking well be doing!

PN – Or facilitating an environment in which that can happen.

RB – Yeah, right.

PN – Facilitating an environment where there is entrance to another ground.

RB – Your lectures have to be able to do that and that's strong. But also the book-sharing. Getting them to read, what you recommend (to) them. And how do you tie students into the SIZE of the world of poetry study? ... You've got to get them absolutely mapping the language and watching it. William Carlos Williams is a great one to do this with, because...of that simplicity.

PN – And coherence.

RB – Oh yes, always with coherence. I mean you could go to Duncan and Spicer too and I love Spicer's...Spicer's language is magnificent. It's a language that comes out of his unhappiness. So that the language always there is a part of what to do with unhappiness and there are very few...I think there are very few writers who can do it with such distinction. Spicer could make his own unhappiness become not his own. Become something out there...You can protect yourself if you wish or you can take it on. And I suggest taking it on is a very good idea because THEN you know what it's like to be somebody like Jack Spicer.

PN – Well you, in the book, liken Open Form, in the practice of it, to a kind of madness. And you say its cost a few poets their lives.

RB – Oh, I'd forgotten I'd said that but it's true. In fact, I think it wrecks some people too, they can't handle that. Open Form doesn't propose you have shape with what you work or you adapt, or belongs traditionally. Open Form means you have to find out what form is. Now form is an extraordinary thing. Because it doesn't exist until somehow you have SO worked the language that it has found a shape that you go get and it is not YOU. Now, even if you are doing traditional verse. The great ones, somebody like Shelley, I mean it's delicious to take a poet who shines and just sit because that is NEVER something you can do by simply copying those lines, writing in those forms. Shelley's a great secret I think. I never heard him talked about in the university. They sentimentalism him. And that isn't the way to read Shelley...

PN – Is it a matter of trust? I mean you're saying an Open Form discipline costs certain poets their lives.

RB – Yes it does.

PN – And does it get to trust and not being able to trust?

RB – Well, I was trying to think of who I was thinking of that did that because so many poets simply lost their place in trying to work in open form...

PN – To some extent Robert Creeley even near the end of his life was not writing in Projectivism, didn't have the energy he said to write in Projectivism and went to more of a traditional form...

RB – Which he does very nicely. But they also aren't quite the same energy of the other work. I don't mean that as a dismissal. I hadn't realized he had said that but I had noted it was an area in which he was no longer moving with such fire...

PN – So if we're talking about dealing with fire, and talking about a madness, then we're talking about people being burned from it.

RB – Yes, very much.

PN – Is that what happened to Jack?

RB – Yes, in many ways. Of course was living under a strain too and drinking an awful lot. Jack was unhappy, a very unhappy man. The poems are medicine...but he was knocked out, so to speak. Knocked out of the box by the unhappiness that the poems couldn't make up for. Duncan never suffered that. Duncan always had full sense of his genius and told every about it and insisted that everybody recognize it and could write wonderful poems that way.

PN – Did you know much about his disagreement with Denise Levertov?

RB – No. and they never, either of them, told me very much. I thought it had something to do with the fact that she writes in a much more common mode. That he had somehow crossed the bar in trying to push her someplace she did not want to go. That was my guess. I have no information at all on that and I have not seen her under circumstances where I could ask her. Duncan would not be trustworthy to ask him.

PN – Because?

RB – Oh, he'd make up a big story about something or another and I loved his stories, they're quite worth listening to but they're not, generally speaking, a measure of the issue.

PN – A bit of a sidebar?

RB – Yes, and self-serving.

PN – Right. So if one can figure out how to deal with the fire, and not let it turn into madness, not let it take over one's life, or destroy one's life, is this a process that deepens the consciousness of the practitioner?

RB – I would think that it would have to deepen the consciousness because you can't GO there without your consciousness...being capable of handling depth. Also being capable of and being wary of blowing up and losing your mind. And what you do to stop that...and you can write that way once in a while...but if you go all the way in which you're no longer able to come back and find form...because form is what saves us, ultimately. And I don't mean that to be a formalist. If you get to the point where you can't even control any of that then you're a goner. That is a goner mentally. To be gone mentally is to neglect the body.

PN – I'm reminded, or your discussion of this has brought up situations where someone might be in a shamanic trance or something and they experience the ecstasy of that other side and they don't come back to their body. Is this a similar...is that a metaphor for what you think's going on here, for people who do venture into the madness that a practice of Open Form can also facilitate?

RB – I think it is but also Open Form always promises that there is a form. And what saves the Open Form writer mind is that you know that you're searching form. So I think what keeps the DANGER out from just going into madness, which can lead to some interesting things, but, madness won't go very far, because nobody's madness is really, terribly original. You'll USUALLY find that you're being brought back. That the very issue of that wildness is bringing you back to a point where there must be a moment's rest. There has to be a moment where the mind settles into its ordinariness...As a consequence you're trying to catch something that's on the fly, but you got to be able to come and put your ass back in the chair.

PN – And you go nuts.

RB – Yeah! And I don't want to go nuts. Not yet! (Laughter.)

–October 5, 2006, and February 16, 2007, Vancouver, BC

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About Splabman

Seattle Poetics LAB (SPLAB) founder Paul E Nelson wrote *Organic Poetry* (VDM Verlag, Germany, 2008) & a serial poem re-enacting the history of Auburn, Washington, *A Time Before Slaughter* (Apprentice House, 2010) and *Organic in Cascadia: A Sequence of Energies* (Lumme, Brazil, 2013). Founder of the Cascadia Poetry Festival, in 26 years of radio he interviewed Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Anne Waldman, Sam Hamill, Robin Blaser, Nate Mackey, Eileen Myles, Wanda Coleman, Brenda Hillman, George Bowering, Joanne Kyger, Jerome Rothenberg & others, including many Cascadia poets. He lives in Seattle and writes at least one American Sentence every day. <http://www.PaulENelson.com>. www.CascadiaPoetryFestival.org (Apr 30-May 3, 2015, Nanaimo, BC)

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Paul E Nelson

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