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A CONVERSATION

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RICHARD FROUDE

To start, bibliomancy with Bob Dylan's *Chronicles*. He writes: "I assumed that when critics dismissed my work ... that the public would forget about me. How mad is that?" So my question is how mad IS that?

Dylan continues: "As long as my own form of certainty stayed intact, I owed nobody nothing." I think this might be a question about audience (critical, social or otherwise) at the point of writing or after the work has been made public. How does an audience play into your writing/thinking? And the tree that falls in the wood etc. etc. – should it desire to be heard? How does this desire represent or resist an exchange of power?

SELAH SATERSTROM

I think it is the only way to start anything when I really think about it, bibliomancy.

Blanchot speaks of proceeding with the organizing principle of disarray, and over the past couple of years I've been testing this out...mind you, not always to sparkling or charming effect, but I've become a believer in the divinatory possibilities lurking within seemingly (but only seemingly...don't be fooled!) "unconventional" logics.

My own form of certainty, Dylan says. We all craft them. The stories we tell ourselves (for whatever reason – not to be completely undone by our anxieties, for example) in the midst of so much uncertainty, our own forms which perform quite strategically.

I personally find that my own forms of certainty do not really stay intact so well, but still I seek to stay in a kind of illumined union with something I would call essential, and feel intensely the desire to do right by that deeply embedded emanation.

In a general sense what I suppose is ideal is for our forms, whatever they are, to be congruent with something we might call integrity. That if we do that, at the end of the day, we have done

what we can during our Limited-Time-Only! dance with the medium.

How does audience play into my writing/thinking? Well, I am thinking of Derrida, his holy trembling in the post office, when he slips the letter into the slot (the slit mouth threshold which leads into the darker economy of mystery) knowing the letter may or may not ever arrive.

We could say this post office metaphor performs, embodies, or genuflects to the metaphysical structure of language. And what is a book, but language? And what is an audience? Perhaps many things, including the slit mouth threshold that marks where the mystery begins. Which is to say, I am writing for some one and for a long time I have thought about the books as post cards.

I submit the work to the mystery, which very much includes audience. Which doesn't guarantee one – or the one we thought we would have (sometimes we get other people's mail), but it is this act of submission -- of *participating* with trembling hands -- of tipping our letters into the

larger flow of mystery (of uncertainty) where magic and its technologies abide.

I experience the space between myself and audience as magical – where anything might happen. And this feeds the work and I feel it in my body when I write. I grew up in the deep South and heard a lot of Blues music, so I could put it another way and say I believe in the call & response pattern (the backbone of Blues music), that within the field of this collective solitude, there is a signaling across space to one another. This signaling doesn't undo the solitude and our resulting suffering, not by a long shot. But it does constellate the vast spaces between us in truly fascinating ways, it decorates the mystery and in so doing performs a kind of Midrash upon it. We can divine (read) these constellations and glean information from them concerning what it means to be human. The space between the call (here is my text) and the response (potential audience) on a fundamental level performs something very profound.

You asked, *How does this desire represent or resist an exchange of power?* Thinking of

what we've already been talking about – one thing a writer/audience dynamic suggests, then, is reciprocity – as a paradigm. That it might become an alternative to power structures built on or addicted to binary consciousness (as most power hierarchies generally are). A reciprocity not based on EITHER/OR dynamics, but an AND dynamic, a more spectrum based logic. Which of course is what an audience is, a spectrum – a tangle of veins and claims and thoughts and postures where more than one thing is true at the same time. “Audience” may be a great place to ruminate upon how we might learn to live with contradictions since every audience does this so well.

Now it is your turn for some bibliomancy fun. And aren't you lucky because the book on my bedside table is the French sculptor and artist Louise Bourgeois's *Wonderwater: Alice Offshore (Vol 1)*. On page 61 (printed in red ink) she writes:

The big apron with a pocket
The big butcher apron

Let the small children come to me

You know, this has always been one of my favorite texts by her. It's creepy, and of course, somehow wrong, and yet I just adore it. The glint of the butcher's tool illuminates, to use filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky's words, the dark theatre of the skull. So of course I am thinking too of Kafka and his axe – his call for an art which radically opens us, that we might be more deeply delivered into our existing questions, but changed, transfigured by (one hopes) a new poignancy. Bourgeois's text also reminds me of the hymn to the Hindu Goddess, Durga:

Who dares misery, love
And hug the form of death,
Dance in destruction's dance
To him the Mother comes.

This hymn often doubles as my understanding of writing. There are times when I am writing and I open into a space within the theatre of my own skull that is golden and also very dark, the darkness of the catacombs. And in

that space, it is her, the Dark Mother, coming for me. And why? Because I asked for this. We could call the Dark Mother by other names (a kind of vigilance or awareness that we associate or cultivate with writing, for example) but for the sake of this conversation I'll stick with Dark Mother. No one is more powerful than she is, so it's quite exciting, but of course the trick is standing at the Crossroads place and seeing her face and surviving...in other words, being able to tell the story of the encounter at all. The bottom line being this: everyone knows the Crossroads isn't a place for the faint-hearted. Which is to say, there is a way that by signing up for this writing life that we give the Dark Mother our names and addresses (then later, in the middle of the night, we tremble).

In your experience, what has been required of you to be the kind of writer you want and need to be? What is the writer's contract with vigilance? What does it mean, then, as you experience it, to be "a writer"?

RICHARD FROUDE

I think I have two answers to this: the first is movement and the second is silence. I want to be able to say something about classification or transmigration but I know my best attempts will fall short. Perhaps this is the feeling, the experience of being “a writer”: knowing that what we do will never be satisfactory, that rather than resolve our uncertainties it can only suggest the rupture in which we must live. Can I get to this?

When I was 15, my Religious Studies teacher told the class we should read *Fear and Trembling*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. I tried to read them all but I only ended up getting through Salinger, and it was maybe another 2 years later. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Bronte, I didn't give a shit about these things when I was 17 but I liked the idea of them. Anyway, I remember reading Salinger on the couch at my grandparents' house and my grandfather asking me what it was I was reading. He'd ask me what I was studying. This wasn't long before he died

and he was suffering from Alzheimer's. So he kept asking me and every time I replied it felt awkward. Not because of the repetition, I had grown up with this and was used to it. It just felt awkward to verbalize what I was doing. And I think this might be it, the twinned excitement and anxiety I feel over describing my own engagement with the world.

In another of Salinger's books, a character gives his occupation as "writer." Another character (I think Seymour) says "writer" is not what you do, it's what you are. That has always stuck. But before any of this, at school I had to go to chapel every morning. We sung one hymn each day. These hymns are burnt into my memory: the rhythms and cadence of the lines, the exultation, the contrition, the awe. This has always felt important.

In the same way, scraps of language stay in my head, like they are caught in orbit. "I paint the things I want to see." I don't know who said that. Somebody put it in a song which is where I heard it. I recently had lunch with a friend who told me how Marcel Duchamp made her angry.

8 or 9 years ago a fashion designer friend told me that her project was to design and create the garments she saw in her dreams. I think this was the first time I understood how something can exist completely divorced from a received sense of utility. Or, how utility can exist not as a commodity but as beauty, as energy.

This, so far, is to suggest the things that I have required of myself in order to be a writer which is the platform from which I begin, where the contract with vigilance is issued. To be vigilant is to witness so that writing becomes testimony. When I use the word “testimony” I want all of the spiritual weight attached. Writing is (to me) a serious thing. That is not to say that it cannot be funny, playful etc. By serious, I mean honest, vulnerable, vigilant that language is a power, and we are wielding it without knowing what it will do. This is part of the mystery. We are, as you say, “participating with trembling hands.” When Ben Kenobi gives Luke Skywalker the blue light saber in the first Star Wars movie, and then how the Nazis contextualized Nietzsche into justifying atrocity.

My point is that in writing (and whenever we use language) we are playing with a very dangerous toy, and the consequences of our play cannot be fully realized at the time of writing. I think Anselm Hollo said this and it was used on an early version of the Kerouac School website. Regard all language as a dangerous toy. Something like this.

Anyway, to me this engagement demands seriousness, an honesty, a nakedness in the moment of writing. I am aware how problematic a word “serious” is, especially in the way I am using it. I mean to imply a sense of reverence, of awe. Although this reverence may indeed have a sense of humor, it is difficult for me to stomach writing that feels glib, facetious, too clever. I mean, think about everything we don’t understand. In that light, what use is cleverness other than a parlor trick? But honesty, humility, uncertainty ... these remain the same in any light. The world cannot outgrow these things like it outgrows cleverness. I do not mean to sink into literary (or linguistic) agnosticism because agnosticism always feels like an excuse, a turning

away from the question. Instead, I say look the question in the eye, which is to look yourself in the eye. Swallow the question and all its uncertainties so you take on the rupture at its center, the lack of balance, the seemingly irresolvable. This is negative capability: not only to be aware of uncertainty or the question but to dwell in that uncertainty, to live and write out of it. To paraphrase Kafka, this means that I am only really interested in the books that cut into us, that, as the hymn says, in their reverence “hug the form of death.”

I want to steer this back. I grew up next to a cemetery and a train track, that particular movement and silence. The trains would run through the night, and still there is something when I hear trains in the night. Growing up felt like being in the midst of movement and silence. I like to think this way about being alive. When I lived in Los Angeles, one of my favorite places was Union Station. It never felt like anywhere else in the city. The sound of train triggers this sense.

I remember a dream I had when I was very young, not so much the details but the feeling. Something is about to happen in the dream, something bigger than death, a transformation, something simultaneously closing and opening. Throughout my life I hear whispers of this feeling: an occasional numbness in the body, the way a shadow falls, sometimes the smell of diesel fuel, a particular coldness etc. This is my most powerful form of (un)certainty and it's the thing I'm always trying to get at in writing. It is something that has always refused language. As a writer I am trying to use language to jar the mind into this feeling, to construct something (an artifice built of honesty) that is congruent with this deep seated uncertainty.

I don't know if that really answered the question, or if that made any sense but I think that might be the best I can do. And that, I think, was the point I was trying to make.

Alright, alright.

This is a short question from a poem by Tom Raworth that keeps coming back to me.

SELAH SATERSTROM

You mentioned Salinger. I was 16, in reform school, when I read *Catcher in the Rye*. I can't remember the details, only that I found this damaged book. I was intrigued by the font on its plain cover. That's why I read it: because it was trash with an interesting font. I had never read anything like this book and I will never forget the devastation and elation I felt when I realized (that moment in the text when everything flips) that my trusted guide through the narrative (world) was in fact supremely unstable. And I thought: this is like love.

What I knew already (from my family experience) was how to follow madness embodied in such luminous forms. An act shot through with love, informed by a keening sense of survival, erupting from necessity. With Salinger, I knew this is what I also had to do in the act of reading. In my trajectory as a writer, it was an important moment. Salinger embodied a dynamic through syntax and it all happened on my nervous system. I thought: this is what my

writing should also attempt. It should be more than words “telling,” it should be words that are so-many-becomings.

During this time my obsession with the Eucharist was also budding (I was denied the Eucharist around this time and it really pissed me off and so became a point of fascination). I observed that when I loved the act of reading, it felt like a devouring, like eating. We talk about books in the language of the body (and it was bodies that first made books: animal skin and so on). And I thought of the body-of-the-text as a body I ate, one that transubstantiated inside me, and of course this is the magic of the Eucharist: that in eating the body of the text, it re-
alchemizes you, it changes you.

It is probably why, when someone soon after said to me: you make everyone seem so god damned awful in your stories! I said: I love these people! Meaning that, in regards to complexity, I seek (and fail and seek) to observe the person or situation beyond binaries which, in the end for me, has required compassion: a willingness to, as much as I am able, liberate my

observations from the limitations of my own narrative making tendencies. I want to be more than my fears, limitations, and distractions when I stand at the crossroads (that place where narrative endlessly proliferates) and see (through writing) what is always-already happening.

I am not saying that I condone the actions of the perpetrators that have appeared in my work. I mean that in learning to bear the contradictions of relationship, a heart gets diversified. It gets broken. And once broken, it is also opened. And an open heart connects into the larger clusterfuck of paradox where there are no answers, only questions. But thus opened, we might land in more poignant versions of our existing questions. This is what I felt when I first read *Catcher in the Rye*: that it might help me to continue in the difficulty of loving and bearing my own ghosts, the luminous forms.

You said, “When I use the word “testimony” I want all of the spiritual weight attached...Writing is (to me) a serious thing...I mean honest, vulnerable, vigilant that language is a power, and we are wielding it without

knowing what it will do. This is part of the mystery....”. Don’t you think language – Etymology – and I mean *resonating in the bones of words* – is Ontologically oriented? (from the Greek *of being*). It seems so to me. I experience Etymology as a branch of Ontology, which is furthermore a branch of Metaphysics.

I’ve thought a lot about the final lines of the Tom Raworth poem - the gap between the words: paint/and:

reaching this point

he sees that he has written pain for **paint** **and** it works

better

The slip-gaps within language (and existence, which is to say: within every text), things go missing there. Letters do. (what Derrida knew in the post office). When we unload our laundry to discover we are inexplicably missing a sock, we say it has gone into the slip-gap, that alternative universe where things go, a wasteland of socks and valentines. But why? Is the slip-gap hungry? For that

matter, what even is the slip-gap? A kind of black hole?

A black hole is a region of space in which the gravity well is so deep that time is halted. A black hole's mass is concentrated and is called "the Singularity." The Singularity is like a very exact pin-point. Surrounding it is a spherical boundary called the Event Horizon. The Event Horizon marks the "point of no return," a boundary beyond which matter inevitably falls inward, towards the singularity. It is called a "black" hole because it absorbs light and reflects nothing. Despite its invisible interior, a black hole reveals its presence by interacting with the matter in proximity to its seeming absence. And turns out, they *are* hungry. Astrophysics articulates the violence of this hunger quite well. It was recently established that a huge black hole seems to be at the heart of our very own galaxy. Big surprise.

What I mean is that maybe the slip-gap is the longest running cosmic picture show, playing in every town, in every life, 24 hours a day, every day. Starring Presence and Absence,

which zip back \and forth across the space of the gap (a space created by their momentary difference). This is how film works on a fundamental level: intermittence. So, in fact, this back/forth gesture is congruent with how we see and experience narrative. And lurking beneath the observation is the idea that everything that is eventually converges into its most opposite expression and becomes again.

Between the birth/death – or – arriving/receding, language is disrupted, erupting, decaying, and regenerating. Language performing the secret of the universe, and in so doing, giving us information about it – what it means to be in it.

RICHARD FROUDE

I went to church between 4 and 10 times a week until I was 18. This was made up of the parish church mostly on Sundays and compulsory school chapel every weekday morning. The language and ritual of the Eucharist was present throughout growing up. I think this may be where I received the notion of

swallowing the question and taking on its rupture, this kind of transformative symbolism being the center of the Eucharist, to swallow the body and blood of Christ and then take on that salvation, to allow Christ to atone for your sins as one with the savior. The inclusive body this creates, the communion, is pretty much the culmination of the faith – it is the final enabling of salvation.

What I find most relevant is the gap (or lack of gap) between the actual and symbolic and how in the course of the Eucharist, the actual and symbolic become one. The wine and wafer do not only represent the body and blood, they become them. Yet, this binding occurs through faith and as such remains fragile to the outsider. This is the way I understand the relationships within language. The word contains both its symbolic and actual lives. It takes an act of faith to conflate these and enable the use of language as a communicative or expressive tool. Do we believe in language? Do we even have a choice? If we swallow it, it will change us, as you note of the Eucharist. If we swallow the body and blood

of Christ, the Eucharist maintains that we will take on his salvation. If we swallow language, if we allow ourselves to believe in it, then we must in turn take on its uncertainties, or in the words of Eric Gould “suffer amid its wide and violent gaps.”

I want to talk about the gap and our desire for completion. So much of this conversation reminds me of other conversations we have had about Edmond Jabès. I am thinking specifically of his notion that “every word is a nest for a bird of doubt” and how we attempt to engage with an absent center – the black hole. I have addressed this before in an essay about Jabès and I don’t know if I can articulate it differently:

We cannot get to the center of Jabès and construct reasoned argument around it in the same way that we cannot face Blanchot’s disaster that “ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.” Here, the center of gravity only exhausts reason. We can only find ways to consider this intricate failure, above all the failure of language in the guise

of our capacities to engage, process and understand.

Failure is perhaps too strong a word. What we are dealing with here is incongruence, or better, through Rosmarie Waldrop's invocation of William Carlos Williams, the dissonance that "(if you are interested) / leads to discovery." It is not only the incongruence of our desire for completion onto a text of fundamental aperture but the dissonance of our very terms of engagement: of word and the world, of any combination of Saussure's sign, signifier and signified.

OK, enough quoting myself. Yes, I do believe that language is ontologically oriented, but in the fluidity of being there is not only the potential but the necessity for change. My point is that we can predict the direction of this change but we cannot know it until it is upon us. By the time it is upon us, we may already be gone. Language as etymology will continue without us and the relationships between

signifier and signified will evolve and warp with time. The sign itself will change and the world will change beneath it. I think of Jabès's persistent image of the shipwreck floating on the ocean, a moving body on a surface that is itself moving.

As we cannot completely know these changes (because we will not be present for infinity or "the end of time"), we cannot know the complete meaning of the language we issue. I think of this as very similar to the debates in metaphysics over laws of nature (that is, the notion that the information necessary to endorse a law of nature can only be collected when no other information can ever become available – at "the end of time"). Until "the end of time" radical movement remains possible. Etymology is, to me, the account of this movement as it relates to our engagement with the world – the evolution of the sign. If we follow this to the end of the line then we can read etymology as a tragic love story. That story is the performance of our engagement where language becomes a narrative unto itself, a beautiful account of its own failure.