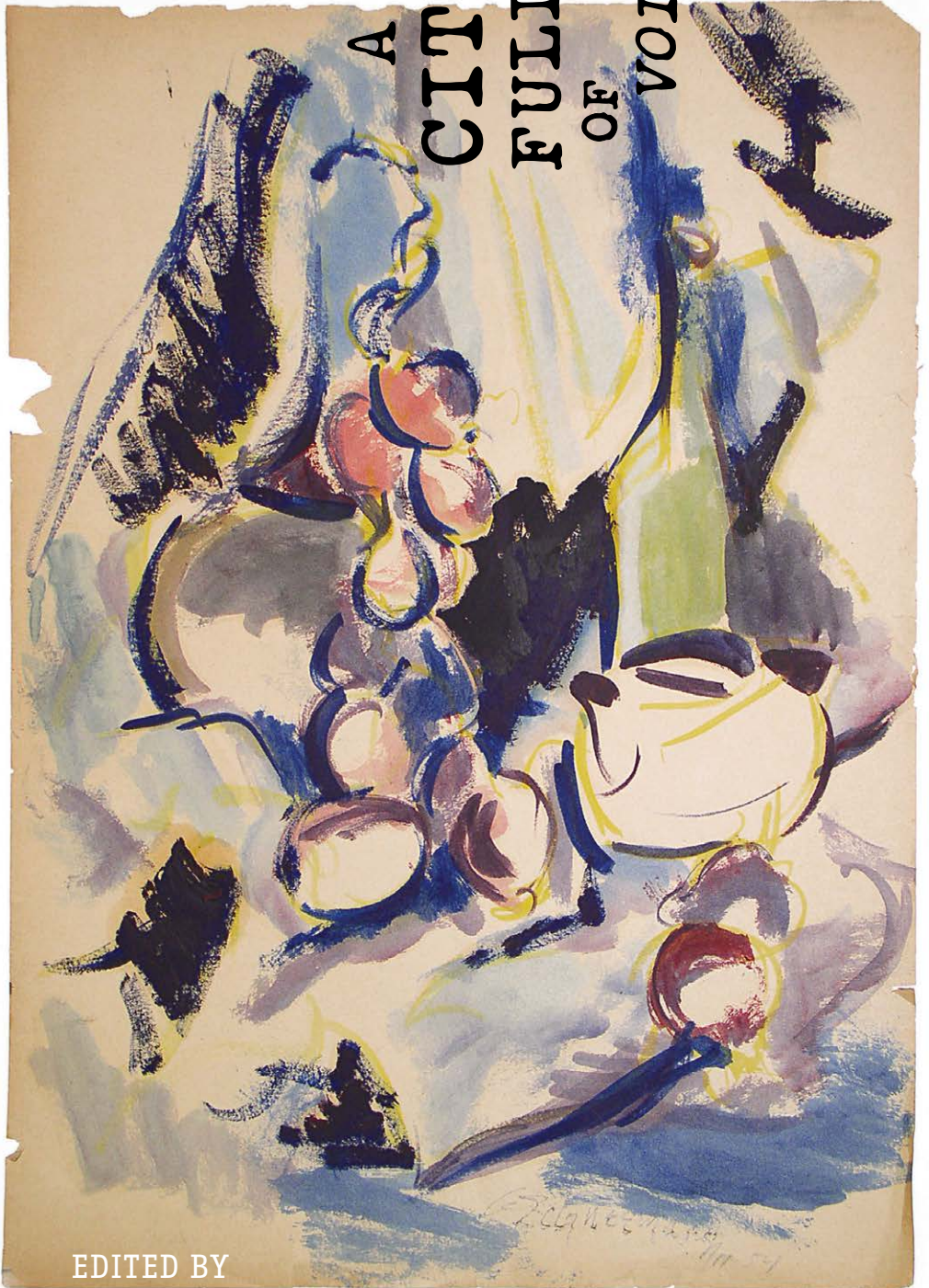


Essays on the Work
of Robert Kelly

A
CITY
FULL
OF
VOICES



EDITED BY

Pierre Joris
with Peter Cockelbergh & Joel Newberger

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

O-VI	PREFACE	
VII	FRONTISPIECE: Phong Bui	
o	Gerrit Lansing “Sombre Fulguration”	
	<i>THREADS 13: ROBERT SAYS</i>	4
1. A BOOK OF IMAGES REVISITED		
8	Charles Olson Response to Robert Kelly’s “Notes on the Poetry of the Deep Image”	
9	Robert Creeley / Jerome Rothenberg Exchange on Deep Image	
16	Denise Levertov An Argument. In Response to <i>Trobar</i> #2 Kelly’s “Notes on the Poetry of the Deep Image”	
19	David Ossman Comments on Montage	
22	Stan Brakhage [Two letters]	
	<i>THREADS 14: ROBERT SAYS</i>	32
2. A BOOK OF EARLY RESPONSES		
36	Paul Blackburn The American Duende	
42	Kenneth Irby On Her Body Against Time	
47	A Letter and a Rattle from Jerome Rothenberg	
52	Clayton Eshleman On <i>Finding the Measure</i>	
54	Diane Wakoski On <i>Songs I—XXX</i>	
57	P. Adams Sitney My Debt to Robert Kelly	

3. A BOOK FROM VORT MAGAZINE

- 76 Guy Davenport | Kelly in Time
 80 Jonathan Williams | Joyous Rodomontade & Instant Remoulade
 for the Flatbush Flash
 82 Theodore Enslin | A Brief Take on R.K.'s *Mill of Particulars*
 84 Norman Weinstein | On Robert Kelly's Work of the Morning

4. A BOOK ON NARRATIVE

- 94 Christina Milletti | "Getting Word"; The Force of Language
 in Robert Kelly's Short Fictions
 102 Sharon Mesmer | Unfinished Sentence → Unfinished Sentence.
 Revisiting my Essay "Ordering Emptiness: Robert Kelly's
The Scorpions"
 108 Steven Fama | A Truly Trippy Prose Poem. On *Cities*.
 116 John Yau | A Map that Never Stays the Same. On *A Line of Sight*.

5. A BOOK ON THE OCCULT / KNOWLEDGE

- 132 Charles Stein | Re: The Occult. Robert Kelly and The Esoteric
 Traditions
 148 Tamas Panitz | A Note on Robert Kelly's *Calls*, and The
 Island Cycle
 152 Sylvia Mae Gorelick | Kelly After Nietzsche: On "Her Voice
 In All These Years"
 164 Alana Siegel | Thoughts on Thread

6. A BOOK OF READINGS

- 172 Edward Schelb | Home Movies of the Angels: *Songs I—XXX*
and Stan Brakhage’s Cinematic Dance
- 191 Billie Chernicoff | Reading *The Loom*
- 219 Thomas Meyer | Hieroglyph of This Unfallen World. On *The
Convections* (1978) and *The Book of Persephone* (1978)
- 225 G.E. Schwartz | Of Dromenons, Silences, Sentences, & Emptyings
- 235 Kimberly Lyons | Falling Flowers: Reading Robert Kelly
Reading Li Shang-yin

7. A BOOK ON LINE AND MEASURE

- 246 Ron Silliman | What *Measure* Measures: Robert Kelly in
the Sixties
- 262 Jed Rasula | Flesh Dream Books
- 274 Allen Fisher | Robert Kelly: Facture and Reception in the Field

8. A BOOK ON HOW TO READ

- 296 Pierre Joris | A Primer for the Gradual Understanding
of Robert Kelly
- 314 Jennifer Moxley | Charlotte’s Cardinal: Some Thoughts
on Robert Kelly’s Poetry
- 328 Peter Monaco | “We are all made of stars”: the Demands
of “Reading” Robert Kelly
- 349 Peter Cockelbergh | “Day by day. Make it new.” On Searching
for RK starting points and Teaching *Threads*

9. A BOOK OF BIRD'S EYE OVERVIEWS

- 366 Jed Rasula | Ten Different Fruits on One Different Tree
408 Elizabeth Robinson | That Hollow Place Inside the World
Just One Word Down
415 Mary Caponegro | Incessantly the Sum

10. A BOOK OF SPECIFICS

- 430 Thomas Meyer | The Middle Voice
437 David Levi Strauss | 20 or 30 Things I've Learned From
Reading Robert Kelly
442 Michael Ives | East of the Sun, West of the RK: Christic
Sections / "Thread 31" Annotations
455 Joel Newberger | Kelly's Consistency
460 Charlotte Mandell | This Island Music

11. A BOOK OF INTERROGATIONS

- 470 David Ossman | Interview for *The Sullen Art*
476 George Quasha & Charles Stein | *Ta'wil* or How to Read
509 Clayton Eshleman | 20 Questions for Robert Kelly

12. A BOOK ON RECENT WRITINGS

- 530 Barbara Roether | The Island Cycle: Fire Exit,
Uncertainties, The Hexagon, Heart Thread, Calls
- 537 Jordan Reynolds | The Place of Love: Say What We Do
to Each Other Goes On
- 551 George Quasha | Uncertainties: Robert Kelly, *Ta'wil*,
and the Poetics of Singularity
- 570 Billie Chernicoff | On Robert Kelly's *Seaspel*
-
- 574 Kush | "Nvame Dreams Ritual"
-
- 578 EDITORS
-
- 579 LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS
-
- 589 ALSO BY

“The birds are in one tree now, neglect, neglect, how many
hours blind here in darkness,
afraid to turn the light on,
not every augury, not any
augury worth enduring.

It is a large world you swing, Great Man, and one that has such tempers
OF NECESSITY in it...but how CLEARLY you put it: “worth
enduring” — beyond any of my a(u)rgur(y)ing. And then how you
clarify the “my own” (dog, film, etc.) which has upped and set me these
last several years, viz:

“you are such eyes & in your letter to my wife you write of
your “own” self,
alyssum . which takes its name, it is not madness
I would be large in commendation of this herb, were I but
eloquent”

and then, and lending PURE distinction to those searches I was, phone-
wise, making last night to you viz: eyes searching for name-sake among
the stars & stars in the eyes (and ears) of The World, and then your:

“It is your eyes that carry you, you must go with them”

AND:

“The focusses surround the sight, the world dances
between our eyes.”

And all of ROUND DANCE: THE ANIMAL (others I’ve only had
time to take in phrases thereof) moves thru me in a dance with Stein’s
observations on dogs sleeping for distinctions between HUMAN
NATURE & THE HUMAN MIND, viz, here:

“There is no real reality to a really imagined life any more.

“Nothing I like more than when a dog barks in his sleep.

“That is a reality that can be known not by listening but by the dog
who is asleep and feels like barking, he barks as if he barks and it is a bark

it really is a bark although he is only dreaming. How much does he know that he is barking.

“Human nature moves around and does the human mind move around.”

I feel, by copying her here, some prime distinction of your rythmn — ah YES, it is the DIMENSION (as distinct from Stein’s flat art) ...and now on check that you ARE, yes, playing on my mind’s rythmn centers distinctly in ROUND DANCES (as I found envisioning centers shifted one to another with clarity, as of eye shift, in *WEEKS*) these being more of (g)ear shift ((g) there to denote more total body movevovement, as of rythmnwise) and these do BE, then, yes, CLEARLY DANCES (“Clear, or in the clear, among joiners and carpenters, is applied to the net distance between two bodies, where no other intervenes, or between their nearest surfaces” — Webster’s)

Okay,,, this is the next day — cold manifesting itself in knee weakness ... THAT tension between brains & pain. Ah, my dream comes suddenly to feelingmind now — the phrase “People, people everywhere/ and not a drop to drink” (memoirs of a disappointed vampire?) ...a muggy grey people-moving atmosphere — deadly silent...silent? — NO: a hiss of escaping steam. What were all these people, what was I, doing? I cannot remember.

Last night we had guests: four people came up from Denver, with projector, asking to see films. I called my friend Angelo DiBenedetto over (thank God: One of the four was continually insulting. I showed films, extended graciousness, graySHUSHness, finally shutUPness, friend Angelo patient trying to explain something of 2000 years of western culture to the dissatisfied man with the projector, etcetcrrrrrrrrrr. Suddenly a strange woman arrives, come searching for Angelo, natch — comes in out (angel sent, I say) of the night. Party breaks up; BUT fray-end with projector searches me out (needles-needles every air and not a stitch in time) — I turn on his flapping mouth sloooooowly (Actually feeling as if in slow motion) and say: “I’m WARNING you, I have NOT the patience of my friend Angelo to put UP with your kind.” He turns white (Jane said even she was frightened to see my face), apologizes

constantly for half an hour until I contrive to get him and friends AND projector OUT. Then I let Angelo read your letter; and he reads it aloud to his girl friend, and Jane and I. Somewhere in it he begins to cry; and we all sit around (THAT closeness) feeling deeply moved by the beauty of it, the giving benevolence of it; by I am also moved by the SURE sense that I must contrive, however crudely at first, some means, and meanness if necessary, whereby ONLY the godsent of ANY man can enter these environs, let alone this center (no that center may BE let alone, AS center of my working process need no imposition of morality or other because its environs are goodly, Godly), know the center of, say, this kitchen: that soup bowl: is NO place I care to manipulate a long spoon, that evil thrives on such fascinations, such lure to such tricks as contriving ways and means to eat with the devil, endless nutz and pee tricks, etcetera. This house will be [a?] place for those who come to do the good work, find each his pleasure in himself, a share of godliness with each other. And, ah, yes, we will take in wounded heroes, as I take P. Adams to be (“clean of Europe,” yes, but NOT clean of what was given him, NOT chosen by him, to defend there) but in the, from NOW on, sense of: leave your rings at the door, no loaded closed systems allowed, and so forth — “to the end of the world” ...which finds its end in each instant of any being right here, wherever any and all are, after all — as IS said and done... ah MEN!

And to help your “crabbiness” a little — bless you for uplift of mine into open clarity — DUENDE is in THIS house, ALL issues thereof, each of which we much look forward to receiving...I have also seen complete collection in Pocatello (you know where!) and three such complete collections in S.F., plus a full supply thereof at City Lights.

Love,
Stan

Ah, God, I could go on for hours. Rythmn centers much differently than visions do in the mind. It seems to me, for instance that any approximation to wave of sound evokes most center sense of hearing but then TOO most inner penetration. A wave-like rythmn, then,

You are gone into world.
You move in unvisited places & sun moves round you,
no alchemical earth but a
burst of food & flowers
bearing your own darkness,
spring up to sustain me

(“The first beloved in her flesh”)

As he wrote in *Nomad*, Autumn 1962:

Since we are men, in the human scale of time & space relationships, the discovery is of ourselves through the visible, of the visible through ourselves. The gateway is the visible; but we must go in.

Not simply visible, but all by which we apprehend: toes, to ears, to hairs in the nostrils. Not sillily that there is some vast curtain that we *must* tear back each time if we are to see the *real* grass: but that we do not usually feel very far, not just depth, but sideways or whatever whichaway: be open when the sideways glance shows what had not been known before, then accept it, do not turn away. Where are we? Who are we? What can we do, that is an action, not simply a grate of possibilities? — how answer except to plunge, accept, come open into the real world, further and further, whether it is the old mown wheatfields in the mind or the sunlight clear out my window to the mountains east holding off the Llano Estacado from this valley.

I mean to say that for Kelly the vastnesses of our persons is not simply something to talk of, as I speak here, but it is to be acted upon: the poem is the means *he* has to go in there:

We cannot move in the space of God. In the process of discovery (not invention) we call poem, the hidden real must be “created” in the same instant it is found. I have in mind this instantaneousness when I speak of the poem happening, too, of the poet in his poem. (*Nomad*, Autumn 1962)

I do not believe with Paul Blackburn in his review of Kelly's work in *Kulchur* 7, that this quality of the world and his life that Kelly gives us, is one of *hallucination*, for that word to me is of the meaning Webster gives us: "perception of objects with no reality" — but that's to quibble and I don't want that, I mean, simply, to say that the poems are *very* real, open doors, swing them open, but the vista is not of dream or even the visions of mescaline and LSD. It is as Huizinga said of the people when they were "half a thousand years younger," that their view of the world still had the directness of child life. But Kelly is no child, and there is no innocence from ignorance in what he gives us. But I think Blackburn hits home when he says:

A kind of mystique of the earth and the things of the earth,
which we use or waste, and so tie us to ourselves or make us
alien to our own lives, persists throughout all of Kelly's work.

And accurate, too, when he says that many people will simply not be willing to open themselves to the multiplicity and directness of the world these poems offer, God knows, they must be read slowly, carefully, this book of *Her Body Against Time* the more, or they will slip on away and maybe leave you damp a little, but hardly knowing whether it rained or not.

So, *Her Body Against Time* is the record, or better, the action itself, of a man living as closely as he can to the objects of earth around him, whether it is up at Bard-on-the-Hudson or where. But just because this book is off in those woods behind his house, it would be stupid to say Kelly is not aware of the tear and rupture socially, politically that goes on, on off beyond the fringe of those woods; I don't know of any more accurate and hard-hitting "social" poem going than "Third Avenue" in that same *Nomad*; or "The Spread" in *Sum* 2, that says more of Kennedy's assassination finally than any of the dozens others written "for the occasion." "Beauty," wrote Christopher Caudwell, "is the knowledge of oneself as a part of other selves in a real world, and reflects the growth in richness and complexity of their relations." We reflect what we can of the fight down this street, if we have ears or eyes at all, as we can, at least no turning the back and a wince; ignorance of what happens everyday to people, "innocence" of it, is the failure and sin — the more when innocence in our time comes to be that blindness that lets a 10-ton

a young poet's advantage to publish with small or underground presses. I have also always felt that poets are the worst editors of their own work and therefore the best procedure as a young poet is to get all of your work in print and then let some editor who likes you put together what seems most interesting. Put this into collections which will have wider circulation and availability. However, where do you get an editor who can read through 15,000 poems and make books out of them? Well, obviously, the author of those 15,000 poems becomes the editor. Kelly is a various poet, a man of several modes but one voice, yet there is no collection of his which gives the uninitiated reader this sense at all.

Songs is a collection of what Kelly calls "experiments in the extended lyric." In the terminating notes to the book Kelly says: "These poems are parts of a continuous process of finding each day's song, not of a long poem or any such thing. Roots and manifestations recur: we walk the same streets day by day." *Songs* is definitely a true part of Kelly's work, but hardly a representative one. In a way, despite his prolific bulk as a writer, Kelly is a small and delicate writer. He says,

I was not a tree,
I hung in my bones like a man in a tree,
the tree talked . I said nothing .

("Song XVII")

and it reinforces what I always feel when I hear Kelly reading his poems: that what he is saying is unimportant, but it is how he is saying it, and that in placing the emphasis there, he is making a kind of abstract music out of poetry. I do not mean music here as song. I mean that after days of reading bad poetry or attending to student work, when I begin to ask myself why in the world anyone would want to write poetry and forgetting the Lorca and Stevens that always restore my faith in art, I can turn on my tape recorder and listen to Robert Kelly reading his poems and relax, sure that the American language is a beautiful instrument, that, couched in the singing of polysyllabic words is the simple love of speaking. I listen to Kelly's poems not for overall meanings or ideas, nor for narrative content or arguments, all of which are my own primary interests in poetry, but rather for his words of wisdom which suddenly crop up in an amazing texture of language. There is a kind of contradiction between Kelly

and his poetry, in that Kelly the man is extremely erudite, a reader of several languages, a lover of ancient wisdom, a ponderous heavy intellect suspicious of the unlearned, while his poetry, riddled with exotic words, ideas, ancient or bookish references, does not have the effect of serious talk at all; it is rather a man singing very softly to himself all the most beautiful words he can think of to calm himself, to make himself believe in life. I suspect Kelly sometimes of being a choirmaster writing a gigantic mass which would take 10 years of continuous singing to perform; the mass would be for people celebrating life as a religious event, and the fact that all the connections were abstract, and unless you sat attentively for the whole 10 years you would not see them, would not bother you. Stopping by to listen, you would always be moved by the beauty. When it is simplest, it is most beautiful. And probably that simplicity could not exist other than from such a complex mind. I do think Kelly is a beautiful poet, but I wish to heaven we could get a nice representative 700-page book of his poems one of these days, so that those of you who have not been listening to him for 10 years, as I have, could hear that various voice too.

Poetry (September 1971)

P. ADAMS SITNEY

MY DEBT TO ROBERT KELLY

I have lately learned of myself that I cannot long be away from the myths and still flourish. Never fully persuaded (faith sways), I erect the myths again, fill them with my life when I am strongest, that they may sustain me when I am not...

During the same conversation with Brakhage and Sitney where it became clear that I could write something about Maas, it became evident too that events within the time of life are susceptible of understanding most when they, in their forms and rhythms, reconstitute the mythical patterns we rediscover from earliest history...

All that is crucial is hidden in childhood, a childhood impressionistically reflective, now inaccessible to the normal, inevitable operations of my memory. I would not explore them if I could, fearing being trapped in memory...

Rest easy. My childhood and youth will never be here exposed. But I am thinking at this moment of an event in what I take to be my 15th year, an event that brought together, in some kind of focus, the radiations of that image, and cast them forward into my future, for a little while at least, an organized beam of light.

These discontinuous paragraphs come from an essay entitled "Geography of the Body" where "that image" refers to seeing the eponymous film of Willard Maas. I find myself walking along the path of those words today because an email conversation with Joel Newberger and a rereading of "Geography of the Body" after more than 50 years made it nearly clear that I could write something about Robert Kelly, if I allowed myself to fill, with a tangent of my life, the myth Wallace Stevens (following Plato) called "The Noble Rider," that is, the myth of The Poet.

Sometime in the Fall of 1963 I accepted an invitation from Stan Brakhage to ride with him on an afternoon visit to Robert Kelly. Brakhage's brother-in-law, the poet Jack Collom, whom I had met a few years earlier at the New Haven Poetry Society, drove us to Kelly's

I know that I read *A Line of Sight* when it first came out, some months earlier, and that I bought both thin, stapled editions at the Grolier Poetry Book Shop, 6 Plympton Street, Cambridge, Mass, which is the “oldest continuous poetry bookshop in the United States.” I learned of the Grolier when I was in high school — I believe there was an article on it in the Boston Globe — and the one person near my age that I met there was the poet and translator Ammiel Alcalay.

Gordon Cairnie, who was born in Canada in 1893, opened the Grolier in 1927. Cairnie was around 70 when I met him, and had been running the store for 40 years. He was a friend of Conrad Aiken, who lived upstairs at 6 Plympton. Cairnie had gone to Harvard to study landscape architecture and ended up opening a bookstore that sold, as the hand-printed sign on the front door tersely announced, “only poetry, no text books.”

Landscape architecture and poetry rhyme, as Alexander Pope knew when he entered a hidden passageway from the cellar of his villa at Twickenham, walked past the grotto he had designed — it lacked only nymphs, he wrote a friend — and entered a tunnel that went under a road and emerged in his secret garden.

We live in time. *A Line of Sight* is different from when I first read it more than 35 years ago and, needless to say, so am I. This is my first attempt to map a small territory of Kelly’s that I have explored many times over the years, but until now I have written almost nothing down about my travels there.

* * *

At the end of the first sentence of Chapter I of *A Line of Sight*, the reader is directed to “Note 1,” which begins: “A road, but no street. A street, but no number.” According to the author, he has “computed that by the grid of the city down the river” (he is speaking of New York City, specifically Manhattan), he lives on 2097th Street, West 2097th St. “But,” as he goes on to say, “that city is no longer anybody’s system. The grid is more spacious now, builds up as well as out, comprises the nearer stars, has its roots in water.” “The nearer stars,” not the nearest stars. The former suggests a vastness that knows no end, while the latter points to an unstable limit.

“The house is dark most days,” Kelly tells us in the second sentence of Chapter I. The fact that it has no address doesn’t bother him because

it doesn't actually reveal where he is in the vastness, of which we know only a tiny, perforated sliver. Even the city down the river — its storied gathering of money and power, and institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum — “is no longer anybody's system.”

According to Kelly, who seems not to have left the house yet: “Years ago it had a name, 2, taken from the two lime trees that block the afternoon sun from the front windows, trees much sought by bees in May and June.” I finish the third sentence of Chapter I before turning to “Note 2: a name, Erwin Smith the postmaster lived in the house around the turn of the century, and called the place Lindenwood, from the two in front, one at the side, saplings all around.”

Kelly tells us

The tree is Schubert's Lindenbaum, an aching song of nostalgia that summoned Hans Castorp back into the bourgeois world from the bourgeois dreamworld of Davos. I don't know much about Erwin Smith, but pieces of hardware from the original house turn up in other houses round about. A characteristic door-hinge. A hasp.

The “dreamworld of Davos” was where those with lung ailments went in the 19th Century. Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle spent time there. It is the setting for Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner painted the mountains, before committing suicide there on June 15, 1938, five years after his works were condemned by the Nazis as “degenerate.”

Is there an occult power emanating from this house, in which a postmaster and a poet — individuals who puzzle over words and are concerned with messages, origins, and destinations — have chosen to live? Kelly makes no mention of this because it is already there for us to read. Some rhymes do not need to end in a rhyme.

* * *

A Line of Sight is five short chapters, none more than a page. Chapter I is the longest at four paragraphs. The 12 “notes” are divided among the first four chapters, with no notes to the last chapter. The longest note is

Correlative to this visionary profusion is the fact that what I will be calling the Kelly Poet is concerned with ultimate questions on the most intimate terrain: each poem finds itself as if between Being in the raw and the immediate impulse to utterance. The avidity for what presents itself, what comes to hand or comes to mind, for meanings, for speculative possibilities — again and again return the poet from the success of his own articulations to the immediate ocean or ground or *ungrund* of inquiry and concern. Currents and waves languaging Being abound. One current would be “The Occult.”

3.

In a short piece titled “RE: THE OCCULT” written for the one-issue magazine *AION: A Journal of Traditional Science* that I edited in 1964 largely under Kelly’s supervision, the poet said that such sciences “represent at best that empirical speculativeness which constitutes our best mind — study thereof can make us perceptive of conditions, states, rhythms we are no longer *in our bodies* conscious of.”²⁹

4.

I met Kelly in June of 1960 when I was not yet 16 years old and he was in his mid-20s. Our friendship took off two years later when I became, for a spell, an initiate in an esoteric order directly descending from “The Golden Dawn” of W.B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, Charles Williams’ fame. For the next four or five years I was a regular guest at his home at Bard College. Our conversations ever-returned to “occult” matters: alchemy, kabbalah (Jewish, Christian, occultist); *haute magie*; Free Masonry; the tarot cards as a symbolic system; Rosicrucianism; astrology; ceremonial magic; Paracelsian and homeopathic medicine; theosophy; “Theosophy”; the esoteric strata of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism; Platonism(s); Christianity in its more Romantic guises (Charles Williams, Rudolph Steiner, Jacob Boehme, William Blake) as well as Anglo-Catholic and even aspects of Roman Catholic orthodoxy.

29. Joris & Cockerbergh, *A Voice Full of Cities*, 85 ff.

My initiation consisted of a correspondence course and participation in a weekly ceremony in New York City. I received lessons in a variant of the syncretic system organized largely by MacGregor Mathers and Wynn Wescott and reworked by Paul Foster Case. For me the possibility of participation in these lessons was their truly participatory character. One was presented with the details of a grand cosmography in an organized fashion, but study involved integration of it into one's own sense of things in a way that was more participatory and intuitive than dogmatic. Since the system was a synthesis of symbolic materials from the above-mentioned subjects, initiation was essentially a formal practice of imaginal elaboration.

The lessons proposed connections between different topics on various planes of correspondence in the manner of the great Renaissance compendia of "Natural Magic." How those connections could be established involved the active imagination of the initiate. *Why* was metallic mercury coordinated with the planet and the god of that name? Examine a dollop of it; observe how it breaks into droplets and recondenses; learn something about the erratic orbit of the planet; meditate upon the stories about Hermes-Mercury; speculate regarding the metaphors of the correspondences and record your thoughts in a diary dedicated to such matters.

Every symbol in the syncretism was subject to this sort of participation. One even attained the ineffable acme of the system by imaginal means. What passed beyond imagination was summoned into one's ken through the work with images. One's own mind would be the site where the hidden, even as hidden, would be revealed. At the highest grade of the cult one reconstructed the system itself on one's own terms. The latter-day variations on this material — those of W.B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, A.E. Waite, Paul Foster Case, Frater Achad, Gareth Knight, Dion Fortune, not to mention Austin Spare, Harry Smith, Kenneth Anger, Gerrit Lansing, Harvey Bialy, and most recently Robert Podgurski (there are no doubt others) — are testimony to this procedure. The tradition itself was a "rumor" — a "fama" as indicated in the famous "*Fama Fraternitatis*" of the Rosicrucians — a rumor propagated by those capable of carrying it further through creative participation.

Robert, I think, was fascinated by *my* participation. I would present him not only with something of the substance of what I was being taught

but the results of my own deliberations: poems, remarks, experiences, speculations. I in turn was fascinated by the challenging fact that Robert seemed to be able to generate something very much like this hermeneutic process in relation to whatever came to hand or came to mind from his reading or in his daily life. Robert challenged the conventional character of the systematic initiation while at the same time furthering its essential work. Poetry was already initiation, both in the sense that its composition drew the poet into practices analogous to “occult work” and because poetry itself — his own and a certain strand within the received poetic tradition — initiates the reader into the speculative connections forged by its inner orders. The intuitions, insights, assertions, animadversions, abrogations, appropriations of the poetry as it was written, seemed, I think to him — but particularly to me — a continuously evolving initiation of an order I only hoped my practice with the formal cult would lead me on to.

At that time Kelly was fond of repeating a dictum of Robert Duncan’s, itself quoted somewhere in *The H. D. Book* from lessons of another, probably quite parallel, initiatory cult: “A man is no wiser than the book he has written.” The book in the quotation was in fact the “book” of one’s own being, but both Roberts took it literally as speaking of their poetry: the aspiration to insight, *sophia, gnosis*, had its native home and test in the quality of one’s writing. As I was a poet, Robert did lean on that injunction. But there was a complementary point here: that the manifest insight of the work did or might bespeak insight attained in one’s being.

Creative activity was therefore of an alchemical nature. One was oneself transformed by the transformations one wrought in the materials of one’s art: there could be no insight of a subjective character unless it stem from and be manifest as objective work. The work was a mirror of inner unfolding; inner life the condition for and product of its articulation. The relation between one’s being and one’s poetry was intransitive, mutually mirroring, mutually transformative.

5.

The Kelly Poet

The alchemists say “solve et coagula”: dissolve and cause to congeal. The “Kelly Poet” — let me call him that — in his magical performativity continually performs both. He causes the conventional to vanish or transmogrify; he makes the unheard of connection arise and appear.

I have been insisting of late that the practice of contemporary magic (I abuse “alchemy” and write it in this context interchangeably with “magic”) is not at all the miraculous manipulation of material phenomena without technological con-trivance, but the power to originate an ontological perspective and make it stick. In this there is a natural affinity with poetry’s ontological concern — with or without the will to impose. Poetry is *onto-poietic*: it *forges* being. Blake’s poet-figure, Los, is a smithy. Hermes, a god of heady poetry, is also the father of lies. That is, poetry is *phano-poietic*: it causes Being to come to apparency and, conversely, to fall under occultation. But in regard to this heady philosophical agenda, if it is an agenda, one can find in Kelly a library of passages that deny that the poet is a philosopher. The Kelly Poet does not assert something. The Kelly Poet lets words speak — lets them come to form. That is its ethic, its poetics, in a rubric. Responsibility is exhausted by responsiveness to that which arises and the attention that bestows form. In this spirit, the highest matters can be treated in a deceptively playful guise. Much of later Kelly-poetry is playful in a grand and lofty spirit. One likes the work if one is in the mood or can summon the capacity for such play.

But such play is not without its provocations, its consequences. What is ever-at-play in this liberal giving voice to language itself is the entire play of mind and sensibility. Whatever comes to perception and to the full range of fantasy, association, affect, intuition, concept, conceit, will be allowed articulation in an ever-expanding gamut of rhetorical modes (traditional or invented first time out) with every imaginable species and degree of enframement, complex textualization, “forest-path” (Heideggerian), and other metaphorical meanderings. If this is not philosophy, it nevertheless poses for the philosopher the question of her own mode of Being, the ultimate ontological import of any utterance, the nature of our engagement with the matter of how Being takes on appearance through the formation and formative processes of language.

The Kelly Poet is no philosopher, but the philosopher who is sensible to the famous “linguistic turn” in the thought that continues to torque from the 20th century would do well to reflect on the Kelly Poet. And if I am not too far off in my conflation of contemporary magic with the *onto-poietic*, the contemporary philosophic agenda is implicated in this poetry and its esoteric abrogations and affinities.

through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking”⁴⁶ — an impossible eye, the fictitious eye behind which the mechanics of knowledge *an sich* would operate. Nietzsche thus protests that it is only in the wide variousness of different perspectives, *different* eyes alive with the forces of action and interpretation, that knowledge can be sought.

Kelly proposes *Mitleid* as the only means to reaching other perspectives; only through shared passion can we see the seeing of another eye and know the knowing of another mind. Only in this way can the gradual constitution of a totality of knowledge — an “objectivity” — be reached, an objectivity, however, whose secret is its own impossibility. This impossibility is twofold: first, it is the impossibility of concordant views and concordant truths held by each eye — perspectives are by nature irreconcilable with one another; secondly, it is the impossibility of a finitude of perspectives — it is because these eyes proliferate infinitely that knowledge can only be an infinite task. And yet, from Kelly’s standpoint, Nietzsche is incapable of exercising his own perspectivism — blind to compassion, hiding in fear of any shared passion, his heart is closed to others, and thus also to the truth. This point touches on the limit that the transvaluation of all values unveils — the limit between, firstly, the values of Christianity which must be surpassed, values based upon *ressentiment* and the negation of life through the valuation of weakness over strength, and secondly, the values of the future, to be established. And the reversal of *Mitleid* as pity into *Mitleid* as compassion is perhaps one way to move from Christianity’s system of values to a new constellation of new values — *perhaps*. Such a reversal would depend upon a full exit from the physiological forms into which these Christian values have molded men — that is, from forms of progressive weakness. In order for pity to become compassion, to transform from a mutually weakening value to a mutually strengthening value, from a value that says *no* to life to one that says *yes* to life, the body must already have attained great power. In the light Kelly throws on it, the body is fully penetrated by compassion:

46. *Ibid.*

Color means the shape
 or body we inhabit,
 it is translucent
 to our hopes and fears
 but perfectly transparent
 to compassion.

In the shared experience of *Mitleid*, the heart is sounded, past the form or façade of body, color, shape — compassion is the force, then, that itself overcomes weakness by mutually strengthening the hearts that share in it, the transformational force of the value it names. In an aphorism from *Daybreak*, Nietzsche explains that what we refer to as pity, *Mitleid*, is not in fact true *Mitleid* — acts that claim to be performed out of pity are in fact a reaction of self-preservation in face of the sight of weakness and suffering in another. “Pity” is a reaction provoked by the *fear* that one’s own “impotence” or “cowardice” will be revealed if one does not help the sufferer. Simultaneously, acts of “pity” are performed out of a desire to be glorified for one’s heroism and charity. What passes, then, in daily life, for *Mitleid* is falsely named — it is not suffering *with* another but simply suffering oneself, solitarily, as a reaction to the sight of another suffering and the acts that result from it are not acts of pity but acts of pure selfishness.⁴⁷ Such an assertion opens another possibility, that of a true *Mitleid*, a compassion that would do justice to its name — a true *passion-with* in which the solitary self could dispel its fears of weakness and overcome its vanity to feel with another. Not to feel pain, suffering, and impotence, but to feel the strengthening force of *shared passion*. This would require that the relation of mutual necessity and constant, reciprocal creative action that Nietzsche had envisioned between man and woman and, by extension, between the gods Apollo & Dionysos in *The Birth of Tragedy* be fully realized between humans, and that it be given the name of *Mitleid*. Unthinkable reversal in the context of Nietzsche’s own *œuvre* and yet —

Nietzsche often spoke of the drive to knowledge and the will to truth as destructive forces capable of leading mankind to suicide — in

47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, ed. Maudemarie Clark, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (1997) §133, 83—85.

an early fragment, he writes: “In knowledge, humanity has a beautiful means to perish.”⁴⁸ Is this not because truth is supposed by humanity to be a woman in the sense of the dogmatists? A glittering object that must be stripped bare to be discovered? Following in Nietzsche’s own inversion of Platonism,⁴⁹ could we not say that this new *Mitleid* proposed by Kelly, this new identity of love and truth, is the inversion of Platonic love? For it no longer ascends the Platonic hierarchy of loves from the basest love to the most pure, which coincides with truth but on the contrary, this *Mitleid* plunges into the person of the other, into the mind and heart of the other to find a *perspective* truth, a truth embedded in the being of the other only born out of the contact in passion that the *mit* represents. It is just possible that this new conception of truth, truth as born of the contact in common love between two beings could arise as the beginning of a Nietzschean future for humanity, in spite of Nietzsche himself. It would require that the *mit* shatter the individualities of each of the two in order that new forms of life, new forms of passion, be born of their union.

The poem ends with the sound of her voice and its result resounding in the heart of an I:

*Now everything you find is yours
because you looked for it*
I hear her say
far up above us both
I want that kiss too
her playful lips
her words inside us
strangely spoken
as if we were her too,
all of us,
open all our eyes,
the truth is only in the other ever.

48. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Le Livre du philosophe*, tr. Angèle Kremer-Marietti (1969) §125, 86.

49. In a fragment of 1870, Nietzsche writes: “My philosophy is an *inverted* [*umgedrehter*] *Platonism*” (Nietzsche, *Unpublished Writings*, 13).

Kelly described Brakhage as an initiate into mysteries of his own making — a characterization that also applies to Kelly himself, as he was already steeped in alchemy and myth and engaged in poetic initiations largely homemade. At the same time, Brakhage was completing the Prelude to *Dog Star Man*, a stunning orchestration of images in transformation that enacted Olson's poetic knowing. Not only was Brakhage able to assemble images into quicksilver sequences, he was also an animated polemicist and homespun theorist in ways reminiscent of Kelly's own forays into poetics. Kelly had not only begun to assemble vast occult and philosophical learning, he was investigating ways in which to embody those emblems and ciphers. He sought what the Greeks called *chros*, the "face of the body's / joining with the world, membrane of the self / at the brink of the gap." He wanted a kinetic immediacy, imagery in movement that reenacted the mind's flow. Quickly Kelly and Brakhage began a process of poetic cross-fertilization, resulting finally in Kelly's *Songs I–XXX*, his cinematic exploration of the "extended lyric."

Brakhage and Kelly saw themselves in occult terms, with the extravagant theosophy of Duncan intoxicating both. In many ways, it was the alchemy of the record player. The hermetic tradition with a soundtrack by Bach, with even Bach (in Brakhage's characterization) becoming an early instance of Projective Verse, "helping to defeat dominance of brain wave's math in music, giving excuse perhaps for ear-regularities and/or impulses of a non-brain origin" (*Telling Time*, 32). Naturally, the shamanic and visionary masks they assumed were also part of counterculture tribalism — Brakhage's letters from the period are full of free love and hallucinogens, Vietnam and racial antagonisms (as, beneath the surface, the racial tensions in Boston in the mid-1960s exist as raw material for Kelly's alchemical excursions). But what attracted Kelly was the technique of *Dog Star Man*, which Brakhage's formal adventurousness, with its intricate composition and rapid cuts, superimpositions, use of color filters, scratching and painting on the film itself. In *Dog Star Man*, a great number of the techniques Brakhage would exploit in his later, more abstract films, combine with a simple narrative of struggle, as the Dog Star Man journeys through a bleak landscape that finally overcomes him.

Importantly for Kelly, *Dog Star Man* did not move through the machinery of plot; as Kelly argues in his "Notes on Brakhage," these early films "broke the illusion of personal narrative. It is not that he destroyed

the line, but (like our master Kandinsky) moved off from the line into continents of color, geologies of mass and bodily shove.” Elemental images abound in *Dog Star Man* — solar flares, sex, the pulse of blood vessels, mountains, the orbiting moon, — as well as gestures that elude strict definition. All are orchestrated into a “cosmological epic” where images are shaped into an organic sequence. In his poetic assembling of images, Brakhage followed Olson’s lead: “The mind’s flow of (thus) moving images, transformative images which are metamorphosing and (thereby) reflective of the sensual world, is (as Olson’s dream has it) designate of knowing...” (*Telling Time*, 10). Kelly ended up dedicating the *Songs* to Brakhage. He called the poems “parts of a continuous process of finding each day’s song,” and within the volume he consciously explored a poetics of the fragment. (Slightly earlier, Brakhage had characterized his own work as *Songs*: “I carry a Camera (usually 8 mm) with me on almost every trip away from the house ... and I call these home and travel movies “SONGS,” as they are to me the recorded visual music of my inner and exterior life — the ‘fixed melodies’ of, the filmic memory of, my living”).⁵⁵

Kelly’s entire song cycle was structured as a series of quick glimpses and rapid transitions, where images constantly transform and mutate. Like Pound’s ideograms, Kelly shows the truth of the momentary in a dance of the intellect among words. Interestingly, Brakhage himself saw the Chinese ideogram as a type of film: “The pictures themselves were enjambed, that the eyes might flick one t’other, in a two or three frame ‘movie’ construct, yes! so that this surfacing of the brain (which eyes are) must shift viscerally back/forth in reverberatory dance of conception” (*Telling Time*, 11—12). Within the *Songs*, Kelly offers meditations on Brakhage, draws parallels to their respective methods, evokes certain image-strands in *Dog Star Man*, particularly in his moon rhapsody, and allows the poetics of film to resonate within the *Songs*’ cosmology.

From the opening lines of Kelly’s *Songs*, the universe is seen cinematically. Each song moves with a kind of associational logic, as image begets image, and each possesses a surface of rapid and enigmatic transitions. Like the root system of plants, the images entwine; nodal points break

55. Stan Brakhage, *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings* (1982) 168.

off into branches that in turn couple with other points, establishing a vast dendritic network of correspondences similar to *Axon Dendron Tree*. Or, to shift metaphors, they can be seen as a series of isolated notes and disjunct melodic passages that obscure the underlying structure, much like tone-row compositions in music (in fact, Kelly cites Schoenberg's unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron*, perhaps identifying his debt to the composer's dissonant surfaces). Historical figures come and go sporadically, cinematically, as the poems reduce history into an elaboration of the present moment.

Within the songs, systems of knowledge and historical epochs intertwine; as in Pound's *Cantos*, all ages become contemporaneous. Moreover, they become incarnate, inextricable from the rhythms of the body. In Brakhage's description, poetic time is recognized as "relative to the organic perceiver, to the very beat of the heart (which is not a drum or a drummer, but rather a collection of squeezer/releasers, down to each cell-of-it, which surge to various agreements of variously complex pulses always subtly at odds with clock or metronome" (*Telling Time*, 15). That rhythm is bound to mortality — one is reminded of John Cage's listening to the beat of his own heart in the absence of all other sound — and not to an abstract, universal ordering of pulse. Instead, both Brakhage and Kelly seek something like the rhythm of decay and transmutation, envisioned at a level far beneath the surface of things.

Central to the *Songs* is Giordano Bruno, the Italian Dominican scholar burnt at the stake in 1600 for heresy. Kelly was drawn to his intoxicating mixture of troubadour longing, word-magic, allegorical extravagance, and embrace of infinite worlds. Kelly had ventured into Pound's territory, and the *Songs* attempted to make peace with Pound's *Cantos* and their deep conservatism (Confucius appears a few times in a delightful sidestep of Pound's obsession with money). While certainly one can sense Pound's technique in these poems — with his tessellated *Cantos* — one can also sense the mechanics of film, raised to a metaphysical level. The body of Bruno becomes an alchemical emblem as it burns — like the burning salamander or corpse of kings in *Atalanta Fugiens* — as it emits light, "a controlled radiance." The body is dissolved in light, and that light is also the light of film; in Brakhage's words, "All interference with The Light (all shaped tones and formal silhouettes) ought to be an illumination of source-as-light" (*Telling Time*, 51). Thus the burn-

Among lyric epics, *The Loom* might be closest to *The Divine Comedy* in its weaving of sacred and secular, or intimate and mythic, in its keen and compassionate scrutiny of human nature, in the overwhelming desire of the poem and all its souls to converse, the wisdom and charm of its improbable guides, the poet exiled from his city who carries his city within.

*

Chantefable. What if the sung and spoken do not alternate in time only, but in space also — is it possible for opposing rhythms to be heard at once, an aural palimpsest? Take Section 18 for example, (*His Wood — Jesus's Song to his Rood*), the exact middle of *The Loom*, the cross pointing in all directions. The lines are nearly breathless, ragged, but heard against that crisis is the rhythm of what could be blank verse, alliterative, rhyme-full, the sound of Prospero almost, if you slip through the line breaks a bit. Read it aloud for the music, the counterpoint, and so as not to rush by this most acutely beautiful of love songs and leave-takings.

How many? the poem asks Christ. How many what? *Elements scattered?* How many prophecies fulfilled? How many nails? How many ransomed by his sacrifice? How many songs?

until the both
of us
were only carbon
& even that
much of form
defined a song,
one
that others
have leave to
sing
since you & I
are done.

Christ takes leave of his rood. *You and I / are done*. Is he speaking to the cross, the wood itself? To his body? To you (we) human beings, to the readers of the poem, to the poem itself? Do *you & I* dissolve because no longer separate, because one? Is that love?

*

Notes on The Hero of *The Loom*:

He moves too fast
to notice what he's doing.

In Section 7, the poet catalogues the Hero's virtues and describes his path:

The Hero
begins his research
into the matter of dark woods.
It will lead him
to an act
he will confuse with himself.

Or are we hearing a heroic understanding of a poet's virtues?

a syntax
elaborated
a year & a day

Must not the poet also *suffer his appetite, to know... the people of earth,
to be guileless, gracious to receive, who digs in his senses, responses,*

& let him be moved
by what he finds
in him to move.

and from birds learn to

yield, yield our yield
all at once, keep

had never been finished; even the canniest builders tended to confuse the structure itself with the conscious goals they happened to have in mind. So as far as we can tell, the tower still stands unfinished, and no one can say where it actually could go. (SE p. 54)

“(The) tower still stands unfinished, and no one can say where it / actually could go,” and the mystery of silences continues. To be sure, Kelly has devoted a great portion of his literary output to addressing the question of that mystery. He speaks of it through an *absolute metaphor* — *absolute* in the sense that the philosopher Hans Blumenberg has spoken of universal experiences when they are referred to in archetypal ways; for instance, Blumenberg has written about the image of a shipwreck as one that rouses an experience familiar to all, and as one that lies deep within the recesses of our consciousness, manifesting as a shared sense of history and narrative, as a kind of collective memory.⁶⁸ Kelly’s absolute metaphor is wordlessness, an idea that the poetry in *Spiritual Exercises* explicates. Yet, like the palpability of an image such as a shipwreck, wordlessness reveals its universality gradually, the more one proceeds on the footpath into the book. Silence is one figure used to say the wordlessness Kelly intuitively feels as the world. Another is emptiness. His embrace of emptiness, but even more so silence, not at all proposes a rejection of poetry, however. Words, spiritual expression, arise from silence, and at times also signify it. Like a deep meditation, silence can be particularly fecund, never inert.

3. *sentencing*

Indeed, as the starting point and provocation for his writing, which in turn leads back to it, silence is anything but inevitable — for the language that has emerged out of the silence is striking, as when Kelly, in what stands out as one of two monumental poems of the collection, “Sentence,” a four-part, polysyntactic piece, printed in bold, interrupted occasionally by italicized non-bold:

68. David Adams, “Metaphors for Mankind: The Development of Hans Blumenberg’s Anthropological Metaphoring,” *Journal of The History of Ideas* (1991): 52.

**the pure consuming ardor
that keeps a word crossed out
lives longer than a lover than a son
word I wont even say but harbor.** (SE p. 84)

Silence is Kelly's vital cause, as much evident in his long poems as in his short.

Yet, what underlies this sentencing of silence, for Kelly, is the wordless word everywhere he turns, the words he apprehends are shadowed by wordlessness. That sentencing of wordlessness is universal is truly ironic-universal what, if there is no word? But for Kelly there can be no world without wordlessness. He defines a relationship between the actual word and a wordless word imposed upon him but which is not really present in his mind or in any actual word he experiences through his senses. Where could this word *be*? These questions Kelly finds irrelevant; all that is ultimately important to him is that in some way he discerns the unreality of the actual word and the truth of some other word he does not know.

**this kindlier magic that is our merchandise
these tuned apocalypses are our ornament
bring down ecliptic into beastly order
and sell to you. They say so you will soon sing to us.** (SE p. 89)

If this were the case, one could rightly ask, what good can such a point of view be in trying to live for that kind of word. Yet, in Kelly's poems, the word is precious, to be conserved. Indeed, the word is beyond all comparative value. This is so exactly because he senses a word other than the one before him. The realized word, the word spiritually exercised, then, may exist within the greater process of birth and death, appearance and mystery. The real, wordless word, lies beyond the knowing of it, as Kelly explains:

**finally utterly all the old gardens
spectacular harmonies of what is seen
till the spirit work thee in thine own deed
exalted testimony of particular sense
whoever is not mine is mine whoever**

really, that would impose its understanding of tradition & history encoded through a process that keeps the word from somehow coming through directly.

That distinction takes me back to the seemingly self-canceling phrase “natural articulation.” Such a concept implies a universe in which articulation would be unmediated & inevitable. Not simply that the flower of my sermon should be its own message, but that nature itself is just such an ultimate discourse. But Kelly’s phrase continues: “natural articulation *of ideas*.” Thus ideas themselves must exist both prior to & outside of any embodiment in words.

If the lion could speak we would have to write it down.⁸⁰ Kelly is aligning the poem here with a discourse that is literally inhuman — though not necessarily anti-human. Rather it exists prior to & outside of our merely secular discursive behaviors. The *mantram* of the first line is, if we follow this logic, a subliminal hum within the universe. The role for a poet is not to alter or direct that energy so much as to enable it to come through revealed.

All of which, I would argue, takes us back to the question in this poem of the moon. It is not only that “Finding the Measure is finding the mantram,” but that it is also “finding the moon, as index of measure, / is finding the moon’s source.” The question of the moon, its relation to Sun (the absence of article here marking it as more than a little like an Egyptian god) & that mysterious idea of “source” traces the other thematic thread that weaves through this text. Read strictly, the entire line of reasoning about the trinity of organisms should apply only if Sun is understood as “source” for the moon. Moon of course being a loaded term for a poet who has already published a volume of short poems called *Lunes*.

On the one hand, the attributes of the tides & their impact on any number of worldly phenomena is certainly present, but at a level of obviousness that makes it a So What. Ditto the question of gravity from earth to moon or vice versa & of sun to either. At a more significant level, though, I don’t think this image is decidable except insofar as it pins the question of articulation up into a cosmology of effects. The poem resonates precisely as that which cannot be reduced to an argument, a good test of any poem.

80. As indeed Michael McClure already has.

The third book in this sweep of writing, *Finding the Measure*, is full of poems of great interest beyond the “prefix,” only five of which (out of 43) make their way into Kelly’s selected *Red Actions*. While the “prefix” is included, among my favorite of the excluded works is “On a Picture of a Black Bird Given to Me by Arthur Tress,” as close to an objective poem as *Measure* contains. It opens:

Raven in Chiapas
 beak up open to
 flat white Mexican light
 against which an arch
 is breaking its back to join the broken sky

barbs of its feathers hang down, it cries out
 for a world full of carrion
 but its claws
 hold firm & flat
 the top of the ruined sill

The poem demonstrates Kelly’s ability to be far more than a poet of pure statement. The prosody of that first stanza is simply stunning — not a single syllable that does not contribute above & beyond the denotative level of the words or their connotative resonances.

Another wonderful poem can be found on the facing page, “To the Memory of Giordano Bruno,” a poem in two columns, the right one of which has its lines, words, & letters printed in reverse, so that one need read it in a mirror. A third excluded poem that certainly had its impact on the young Ron Silliman as reader is “First in an Alphabet of Sacred Animals,” a meditation on murder that begins:

The ANT for all his history is a stranger
 & his message is the gospel of an alien order
 & his & his & his

works are furious in the crust of the earth
 his house & his bread

familiar European vision of the *poète maudit* à la Rimbaud, Nerval, Du-casse, etc. Thus anything related in any way to the ‘academic’ was sus-picious. I was aware that the best energies in the field were in America, having been turned on to American writing by the work of Ginsberg, Kaufman, Snyder & Burroughs — the only modern Americans some-what available in Europe at that time, & here was Kelly, a poet involved at least as much with the European as with the American Renaissance. I had gone to the US to get rid of a heritage I had felt hanging around my neck like a millstone all my life.

& I was suspicious of what I saw as Kelly’s ‘style.’ (“*Style is death*.” Sensed a kind of ‘high style,’ something close to ‘discourse,’ a mode I saw as a root-symptom of European sterility in matters of literature as well as politics and life in general. Saint-John Perse came to mind, & Perse is the end of something, not a beginning, l’ambassadeur, the high-priest, the psychopomp...)

“European whiteness is sepulchre to us & European consciousness a museum.” (Gerrit Lansing)

((The one Modern European I love, then as now, is Paul Celan. For my thesis I decided to translate his book *Atemwende*, and it was suggested to me that Kelly would be the person suited to supervise that project. Earlier on I had made the decision not to get too close to Kelly: I saw myself as a comet, a yet unsolidified gaseous mass, happily hurtling through the new spaces that had just opened up to me: the American Space. Kelly was too massive a star, surrounded by a powerful magnetic field — if I let myself approach too closely, get too involved, I feared I would get caught, pulled in, lose the precarious fire of my comet & become a dead moon on a fixed orbit circling a sun I wasn’t even convinced was a sun))

“A man almost himself is conspicuous, a man fully himself becomes invisible.”

((I was wrong, working with Kelly on the Celan translations turned out to be one of the most exciting & fruitful periods of my education.

What first made me like R.K. was his immense curiosity, a basic sense of wonder he had kept intact at a time when ‘coolness,’ a blasé stance of disconnection, an arrogantly assumed negativity, was the order of the day.

The breadth of his concerns. His vision of the modern poet as a man to whom all data whatsoever are of use, like Pound, Goethe, Coleridge, because “they do not have hobbies they eat everything.”)

“... the fact
that there can be (& at historical times
has been, now is)
a scientist of holistic understanding,
a scholar,
a scientist of the whole

the Poet—

be aware that from *inside* comes
the poet, scientist of totality,
specifically,
to whom all data whatsoever are of use,
world-scholar”

((This realization, and the joy that comes with it, finally enabled me on my return to Europe to begin dealing with, looking at, those European roots of mine I had so frantically tried to shake off by going to America. And found myself able to read and love Kelly’s work.))

*

aug 30th, 1969, Luxembourg

*“It does not matter
if you do not understand, I am unfolding
a necessary story, putting the blocks out clear on the floor,
whether you want to or not, you’ll pick them up
when need sings.”*

October 73, London

What is needed now, for anybody coming to Kelly’s work for the first time, is a way in. The massiveness of the published work to date — 32 or 3 volumes — demands it. There are, to my mind, two distinct possibilities to achieve this:

— an essay (not necessarily of the ‘critical’ species) laying out the main concerns that Kelly brings to his work. To name but a few:

Alchemy (Kelly’s notion of the “Alchemical Work,” his vision of that Process trans- & in-forming his writing/life day by day)

Woman (Here RK irritates at times; too much mytho-logizing going on.)

The Hermetic Tradition (the main directions thereof, & K’s use of these. Here Frances Yates’ works, especially *Giordano Bruno & The Hermetic Tradition*, were of use to me, as were Gerrit Lansing’s instructions in his SET essays)

Geography

Geomancy

Narrative

Ecstasy & Enstasy

etc.

Until such an essay is available (& it ought to be available now, my hope being that the occasion of this issue of VORT, which is providing the locus and motive for such a work, has been taken up by someone), a new reader in need of a fix on Kelly’s aims & methods ought to look at the various Prefixes, (specifically those opening Finding the Measure, IN TIME, and THE MILL OF PARTICULARS)

*“The organism
of the macrocosm, the organism of language,
the organism of I combine in ceaseless naturing
to propagate a fourth,
the poem,
from their trinity.”*

...

*“Finding the Measure is finding
the natural articulation of ideas.
.....
is finding the
specific music of the hour,
the synchronous
consequence of the motion of the whole world.”*

*

“Language is the only genetics.”

*

“... language itself is the psychopomp, who leads the Individuality out of Eternity into the conditioned world of Time, a world that language makes by discussing it.”

*

“Eternity, which is always there, looms beyond the grid of speech.”

*

— the second possibility for a way into Kelly’s work would consist in setting out those works that stand out as his most successful attempts, the books / poems / essays in which he manages to state his vision most accurately and accessibly. My own choices for such a list would include:

Finding the Measure (Kelly’s best collection of short poems to date, notwithstanding some excellent poems in his latest book, *The Mill of Particulars*, such as the “van Eyck Workings”).

In Time (A book I turn back to at least as often as necessary. Some of it does infuriate me, i.e. his takes on Rome, Empire, the Emperor... “All feofs, forts & taxes to the emperor”...) I do not care for the politics that result from those takes, but most of the essays are illuminating, especially:

Re The Occult
Identity Preference
Temple-Complex
The Dream Work
Re Snow Job
Labrys: Twelve Matters

Songs I—XXX (the pleasure I get from these perfectly successful ‘experiments in the extended lyric’ grows with each rereading.

The Pastorals (lovely, lovely, music? & it’s all there, compact, clearly laid out, *no-blame*.)

desert of isolated self into something much more reassuring: the warmth of cosmic unknowing. I purposefully evoke the mystical tradition here in order to add a further distinction: even those who have experienced the “totality” through mystical vision cannot replicate that experience except through endless spirals of inadequate, if evocative, signs: small steps & intimations, something akin to poems.

As a poet of the quest Kelly is unsurpassed. His poems, from early to late, constantly evoke the long tradition of questing literature in the West. The English word *quest* comes from the Latin *querere*, “to seek, to look for,” but also “to ask, question, inquire.” This is the double bind of Parsifal, the hero of the quest in the heterodox Christian Tradition. He must combine these two definitions in order to fulfill his quest. His name appears variously as Perceval (in Chrétien), Parzival (in Wolfram), and Parsifal (in Wagner) — Kelly prefers this latter spelling, which served as a title for a lengthy work of fiction he was writing in the 1990s. Parsifal is the young innocent who heads out into the world knowing and following nothing but his own desire — a disruptive desire that lives outside of the civil society’s sense of right and wrong (if there’s another kind of desire, “truly wot I never what it is” — as Malory would say). He initially fails in his quest because he does not question:

The youth who had come there that night beheld this marvel
and refrained from asking how this could be. He remembered
the warning of the man who had made him a knight, he who had
instructed and taught him to guard against speaking too much.
The youth feared that if he asked a question, he would be taken
for a peasant. He therefore asked nothing. (Chrétien (379))

The marvel he beholds is, of course, the ritual of the Grail and the Wounded Fisher King. Parsifal does not question because he is following the advice of the worthy or wise man Gornemant de Gohort (Chrétien), also called Gurnemanz (Wolfram; Wagner). He allows his education to override his compassion. Kelly’s poetry often moves from the space of Parsifal’s double bind to that of Gurnemanz’s sage, if too restrictive, wisdom. His narrators and lyric subjects can take either role. They can wander in a space of wondrous confusion, and then suddenly display great wisdom. But in either case the quest and the question remain the drivers;

it is just a matter of *who* — lyric voice, narrative character — is placed in which role. This accounts for the disarming doubling effect of many Kelly poems: they can perform percipience dispensed with great confidence and then suddenly seem innocent and unknowing. They are peppered with questions. His 1975 epic *The Loom* is, arguably, *the* great quest book, but as late as 2006 Kelly, the 75-year-old innocent, can still ask, “When will my childhood end?” (*Sainte-Terre* n.p.).

From a formal perspective Kelly’s actuation of “open field poetics” employs a narrative meandering indebted to questing literature and Medieval Romance, using episodic structure and encounter more often than apposition and juxtaposition. The figure of Ariadne, unraveling her thread through the labyrinth, is also an appropriate analog. Like Ariadne, Kelly knows intuitively (or is it through long reading?) how to guide us with his threads of syntax and grammar. One never finds formal devices or figures used as tricks in his poems, and even when he pressures his matter into predetermined forms, such as the five-line stanzas used in *Axon Dendron Tree*, the result *feels* organic and necessary. The work is earnest in its wonder, *foolish*, if you will, in the tradition of the Christian hero who baffles the militaristic Romans with his disinterest in politics & disregard for warcraft. His poems never cease to remind us that there are much more pressing things to attend to.

Kelly’s publishing career spans 50 years, and the work of the sixties, while already well along its way to establishing his signature earnest tone, remains under the formal influence of his “company.” I am thinking, for example, of the Creeleyesque lines in the 1965 book *Her Body Against Time* or Duncan-like gestures in the 1964 *Round Dances*. The work of the 1970s, notably *The Loom*, is brilliant, if occasionally marked by “period style.” Unlike Ginsberg, or other poets who could never be of any time other than the one that produced them, Kelly is at his strongest when he eschews the jargon of his day. Colloquial outbreaks, such as the following from section eleven of *The Loom*, “because she was the first / pair of tits he saw,” fall flat when placed beside his more typical use of literary, though not necessarily ornamental, diction. By the 1980s Kelly has freed himself of his elders, as well as most traces of period style, and begun to stretch out in the full comfort of his formidable skill at weaving narrative and meta-physical complexity. There is, at the heart of this lyric writer, a raconteur, a poet with a deep knowledge of the power of prose as well as its mechanics.

Women have a central role in questing literature. They play the role of prophetesses, guides, or disruptors (*femmes fatales*). There is a mythic trap to this, much documented and rightly objected to by feminist criticism, and which Kelly recognizes from early on:

A woman who is herself
 steps up
 from the murky shallow of the poem
 & on proud hips walks away
 from this & every
 mythology
 out into morning. (*The Loom* (66))

Yet in spite of these liberationist lines, if every woman mentioned in Kelly's poetic *œuvre* got up and walked out, little would be left for us to read. For this poet, who wrote with some degree of pride and scolding toward other men, "I'm never surprised at the wisdom of women" (*The Loom* (75)), women are central, real and mythic, desired and desirous, divine and mundane. As in the quest, they guide and baffle, but ultimately (and quite in contrast to the emotional frustration they cause, say, in a Creeley poem), they almost always serve as a catalyst for "meaning making," that is to say, they give the poet and the poem a "motive," to use Nicole Brossard's word for *what keeps a poet writing* (74–75).

It is beyond the purview of these notes to globally address the representation of women in Kelly's poems, so I'll limit myself to two striking instances. In the first woman, or the "feminine," exists and exerts itself *inside* the male body.¹¹⁵ In the second, the poet identifies with or even inhabits the role of the mother.

115. Though I am choosing to go in another direction here, issues of masculine and feminine principles, as well as sexuality as a spiritual gate, can also be read through Carl Jung's thought, as well as various Eastern religions and practices. For those interested in these aspects of Kelly's poetry, Edward Schelb's article "The Charred Heart of Polyphemos: Tantric Ecstasy and Shamanic Violence in Robert Kelly's *The Loom*," may be a good place to start. Jed Rasula's article "Ten Different Fruits" is also very insightful on these issues.

It is the obvious assumption behind the concomitant search aroused by the question "Who is it that I desire"? The dignity this polarity imparts to the work may become indignities in personal relationships and an affront to readers for whom Text is not, strictly, primacy. The hyperbolic ventilation Kelly's poetry establishes between 'I' and 'You' often works in the mode of the "desiring / that contaminates its object and then falls sated back." But it is also this which gives the drive and energy of the work the feel of austerity which most characterizes Kelly and Stevens, candidate for his closest twin. They are the grand poets of American solipsism, most disarming and solemn prophets of the strength of singularity.

The difference between them may finally be that Stevens was mastered by his tone, where Kelly's mastery has always played off the tone, submitted to it often enough, but remained free to assume other proportions. Without that freedom, that disengagement from habit, preference and the solipsistic engines of 'open poetry' (as it came to be called at about the point Kelly was, in the late Sixties, its foremost practitioner), *The Loom* could not have been composed. *The Loom* stands high among Kelly's books not only for its relentless epiphanic drive, but for its commitment to the cosmetic (from kosmos: making up) properties that compel the poet to balance every vision and every triumphant perception with some registration of failure, incompetence, deceit. The wall of women's breasts and hips and thighs moving down on the poet in reproach (L 388) is the only fitting authentic outcome of all the deliciously dizzying fantasy encounters with women which have generated throughout the poem. What can be brought out in reproach by readers who have not penetrated *The Loom* to that point is that these 'encounters' are demeaning to women, that Kelly is something like a colonialist of the imagination (comedian as the letters RK), practicing deceptions on the female natives and consoling them with the notion that sex is a Universal Principle.

This reproach can be addressed to the body of Kelly's poetry in general. There are equivocations of sexual issues throughout; the practice, one feels, is to sanction whatever is desired at that moment, then repudiate it later on. The cycle that this establishes is, not surprisingly, Christian in its exultations, Islamic in its reprisals. Again, to detractors: find the proof of this.

Whatever can be brought out by way of reproach, it is not that there has been any effort at concealment on Kelly's part. Whatever one would fault him with is written clearly again and again throughout the work. He is his own most accurate critic, as when he observes that "I've always been much too willing to jettison the specific place for some lyric observation comes to me out of it" (*Credences* #7, p. 122). It cannot be said, as he has written it of Goethe's creation of Helen, whom "Faust / watched the glory of & forgot to sing" (*Songs* 41), that Kelly has held back anything. The rebuttal is on the contrary that it has all been dispensed too generously, so that the principle of concealment, such as there is, lies in there being too much to have to sort through in order to arrive at any synthetic or analytic grasp.

The single dominating theme of Kelly's work also suffices as the most exacting pronouncement of his poetics: "nonstop imagery of making love salvation" (SE 154). A visionary appetite can engender material abuses, and while some may read love as the heart's gift of a salvation made or attained, others may cringe at 'making love' as anybody's mode of salvation, particularly as a practice of 'nonstop imagery.' But the accurate undecidability here is — let us be reminded — Kelly's. And if we struggle exasperated or flushed with excitement as the case may be, immersed in the materiality of his visions, we are in the end left with the image of Kelly buying a pair of needle-nosed pliers and spark plugs in a hardware store, "as if I were a man on earth" (C 44), likely to be moved or aggravated, according to our lights, by the stubborn grace of his as if.

FINDING THE MEASURE

Not the least of the potencies inhering in *Finding the Measure* is the fact that Kelly most clearly articulated his poetics in the book's "prefix." Since the book has been out of print for some time, it seems advisable to reprint it here:

Finding the Measure is finding the mantram,
is finding the moon, as index of measure,
is finding the moon's source;

He who is a scholar and subscriber to so many gods, holds one, the logos, supreme. Thus he comes full circle, for who made him he makes, and remakes, daily.

In his "Russian Tales" (*Cat Scratch Fever*, 49–72) morphemes burst into story: charming fairy tales, whose playful nod to linguistic/grammatical structures makes for sheer delight. Once again, language, and here linguistic *organization*, generates story, but not through strict procedural mechanisms. That's how it is for Kelly: he does not write systematically — though one might say, religiously! — and can range loosely since his brain contains a plethora of paradigms. Both enamored and suspicious of systems, in his voraciousness he consumes them whole. He alternates ingeniously between third person and second person narrative, creating in the former, endearing figures who inhabit a magical realm as white as *The Scorpion's* is black, and in the latter, offering playful instructional narratives, that would seem to be the province of the fortune-teller. The catechistic gravity of "Toward a Day of Liberation" recedes. He casts his incantatory spell, but tongue-in-cheek, and by the time we get to XXXII, "An Old Couple Who Live Toward the End of the Alphabet," we surrender to the masterful improvisatory riff that builds sound into sense even as it suggests an irresistible lyrical nonsense. (Its effortless momentum suggests *Sentence*, to which we have yet to get!) In the afterword of *A Transparent Tree*, he tells us that a story's ending reveals the writer rather than ends the story. And this seems borne out in almost all the small pieces; they resist closure of any traditional sort.

As to personæ, he also plays the voyeur in much milder forms than those already discussed, in his persona poems, for example. He does explore family history, and history in general; he dons masks, he probes myth, but his huge mythological preoccupations are not, in other than a formal sense, masks. Unlike other poets who might hide behind them to avoid confronting real emotions, or the messier realms of self-ness, Kelly, in his poetry, traverses deep emotion without squeamishness, but his autobiographical impulses / gestures are never merely personal. For him, the personal is always part of a larger network that encompasses as well the linguistic, the cultural, the mythological, the historical, the philosophical. The 70's confessional gesture in poetry is transformed into something so much larger through his unparalleled erudition, passion, and imagination. He reconstitutes *how it is* as dream.

And we can also turn that idea inside out. He who knows etymology so thoroughly can authoritatively say (as in the epilogue of *Underwords*), “words are narratives intact in themselves.” He is fully aware as he uses this or that word, of the evolutionary chain that brought it to its current state, and yet, as he says, a spiritual etymology is of interest to him; there is not only historical derivation but a more subjective one as well, & we’re not talking *langue* vs. *parole* here, but something anti-scientific (or extra-scientific), almost a magical property, that Kelly, who just as he does not distinguish between genres, does not distinguish between the ‘hokey’ systems (homeopathy, astrology, alchemy) and the sanctioned systems (science, history); he uses these tools indiscriminately, one might say, democratically.

Everything connects to something else for Kelly, he can’t really stop himself, or end a story, for breath must issue until death, continuous, during waking, during sleep. In the prose-poem, “The Nature of Metaphor,” he playfully posits a hypothetical causal chain of misinterpretation, signals of threat that are passed on, like dominoes, and come full circle, with a gendered component: man fearing chaos, woman fearing man, boy fearing maternal fear etc. — not quite slapstick. The imagery is, as always, arresting. And Kelly is a master at peering under gestures as well as under words. We flee from each other and make of our interpretations alienation? But so often, he uncovers the opposite; the chain is of attraction of communion of connection. In either case, he brings all such tendencies to the mythic level. And as always, form and language itself lead the way, enact the proposition. Take *Sentence*, the lengthy poem first published as a square-shaped *Station Hill* chapbook, then included in *Spiritual Exercises*. By my reckoning, its objective might be formulated thus: to say the word a single sentence and let there be song! He fashions a thought which in turn absorbs everything in its path, the sheer linguistic exuberance of which propels it forward, as it embraces many elements, themes, reprises, tropes, what-have-you.

...where even the fashions of language disclose
 a mode of infinite analysis infinitely ready
 to do the will of what will it is that savvies
 the system we speak before we know its sense (*Spiritual Exercises*, 93)

Sentence's form truly is organic form. The stanzaic regularity available to the eye disguises its unique music, which, like an aerialist's death-defying, protracted acrobatics, defies gravity in the form of never needing to land, i.e. break the line, suspending itself majestically. (It does, however, find epiphany in exploration of divinity, and thus achieves a species of apotheosis.) The utter rigor of its stanzaic composition, against the anarchic freedom of its only-incidentally-causal confluence, makes for the music of a mythic mentation. The reflection's lyrical drive is as inexorable as narrative drive, but it seems determined to elude to the exact degree that it engages. In Part I, for example, the enjambment occurring between the last word of one stanza and the first of the next might be only vaguely logical, while in Part II, consistently "coherent," then drop away again in Part III. This is a poem that speaks in tongues; it traverses so many worlds of thought and feeling, floating and grounded at once, in its inscrutable ongoingness. It concerns itself with language, love, lust, nature, myth, the cosmos entire (writ both large and small). Here again Kelly sits at his linguistic loom weaving language from nursery rhymes and folksongs with complicated discursive propositions, and the language becomes its own motor with the momentum that is uniquely his. It is, again, organic, it is oceanic.

The topics are simple, elemental ones: light water earth stars weather sun wind, yet each as invoked shimmers with an immanence, with visionary fervor: a mythic ethos. The word joins word, they make chains, form aggregates, and often as not incline themselves in causal direction, but that might be just another option, another form of linguistic tropism; because if a reader stands back and receives them with appropriate negative capability, they can also shimmer in exalted anarchic splendor — not to the explicitly, polemically deconstructive objective of LANGUAGE POETRY, but in the service of a more musical, sensuous order that comprises an exalted, ineluctable riffing of the gods. Here we see, in action, the visionary as medium. There are so many rich strands of meaning; a line or thought is constantly undergoing conversion to a new thought or thing and thus interruption is transposed to continuity in that inimitable Kellyian fashion. Ultimately there is no irrelevant matter, as the poem achieves a zero degree of separation between any thing and any other thing. Flotsam and jetsam conspire benignly to form constellations.

while creating a poem entirely his own, a poem that is pure R.K. Shelley's original poem is lovely but dated, written "in the still cave of the witch Poesy"; the Romantic hero contemplates the vastness of the mountain, and of the universe — "the everlasting universe of things" — while firmly positing himself as Poet. Robert's poem transcends the self of the Romantic Poet and investigates the actual universe of things: "The problem with most of me nowadays / is not sure where I end and it begins —." The world outside — the Dranse, the mountains, the "one grocery," the reblochon full of maggots — is more important than the one perceiving it. Every thing has its place in this poem, and somehow all the things fit together beautifully, and convincingly, and powerfully. It is a breathtaking poem in its ability to work with what is given and create something at once greater than the 'original' and greater than itself.

Mont Blanc was written while we were staying with my parents in the village of St. Jean d'Aulps, in the Haute-Savoie, in the summer of 1993. Robert and I would stay there several more times over the years; there was something in the bracing mountain air, and in the sound of the rushing Dranse river at night, that was good for the mind, and the soul. The deep ravine of the Dranse, meandering all the way from Thonon-les-Bains by Lac Lemman to Morzine, was breathtakingly beautiful, and unlike any other landscape I have seen. I think it lends itself to creativity in the same way that Cuttyhunk Island does, for Robert.

FROM THE DIARY OF PARACELSUS

Waxed over sea the sun
 is a bee — the light is wax
 someone eats the honey
 I need a pseudonym
 to say what's on my mind

the sun is God's monocle
 the poet said, slipping
 on a wet plum stone
 in market dawn

forty years before I was born
 the sun was also shining
 amazing things
 knew how to be
 before me and to do

one thing leads to another
 that is the great rule the E at Delphi
 the vav at Jericho to die
 and not let it matter to be born
 in no one's way the light decides

Sainte-Terre, or The White Stone (2006)

Sainte-Terre, like *Mont Blanc*, is a tiny book, but equally monumental in scope. I think of it as the beginning of Robert's *Island Cycle*, which includes *Fire Exit*, *Uncertainties*, *The Hexagon*, *Heart Thread*, and *Calls*. All were written on/from Cuttyhunk Island, my childhood home in Massachusetts. I think the seeds of each of those books can be found in *Sainte-Terre*: "I need a pseudonym / to say what's on my mind." In the *Island Cycle*, we see a great mind becoming even greater through the Dharma: a surpassing-of-self to reach something beyond Self, beyond identity, something that is inherent in the sea. "To die / and not let it matter to be born / in no one's way the light decides." This is the alchemy of the Dharmakaya at work, turning one thing not into another but into something that is still itself but greater than itself, *chö nyi*, the essence of reality, the 'ordinary mind' which is anything but ordinary. I think Robert's work is phenomenal in its ability to go beyond itself, to study one thing leading to another until the truth of "the everlasting universe of things" is found, and revealed. I know of no other writer who is so selflessly true to the Word, and to where the Word can lead.

I have learned so many things from Robert over the years: how to pay attention; how to listen; the importance of gratitude and reverence; the pettiness of one's own emotions, and the ability to let go of them and forgive the world for all its shortcomings. My own translations have grown and flourished thanks to Robert's editing acumen and constant

encouragement. There is a generosity in Robert that I have found in only a few other people in my life, & that generosity is apparent in his work: he gives all of himself, & more, with passion and conviction. There is a word, *energeia*, which means the quality of extreme vividness, radiance, or present-ness, derived from the Greek ἔργον (*ergon*) meaning “work.” I think all of Robert’s work derives from this *energeia*, which is boundless and endless, like the rays of the sun; like the sun, it replenishes both self and other, and creates more energy and work. “Write everything,” Robert said, and he has, and he is.

products of evolution. But I am sad when I look at them, because they seem to be descended *from us*, from humans; they have continued evolving in directions I find comprehensible but immensely sad. They are my lost children. Of course they'll retain some linguistic enterprise (as we retain coccyges and appendices) — vestiges of what they were. I think we should look away in modesty and pudor from the simians, and leave them to the sensuous journey, so different from our own, on which they have perhaps willingly embarked. We can't help them except by carefully refraining from harming them by hunting, imprisonment, vivisection. Vivisection of any creature is hellish — of a simian it's a blasphemy.

Atlantis

RK: Well, I've had a lot to say about this in many places, most recently, and most explicitly in a long review of Peter Lamborn Wilson's book on Atlantis (Shivastan Press) which I think is the best and briefest of all books on that subject. I have only one contribution to the idea or practice of Atlantis — it is this. Consider how so much of the ancient scriptural and mythological material that has come our way over the past few thousand years often has to be understood in rather a special sense — typically, backwards or upside down from the “plain” meaning. (I have been working secretly for years on a Project Achorei that reads Genesis and Exodus that way — hint: Cain means strong, Abel means vain, empty. Hint: we are born from women's bodies — when Genesis shows the opposite, it is teaching us how to read the rest of sacred history.) Back to Atlantis. I know how to find Atlantis, the real Atlantis. Follow this thought experiment: the sea level changed. But the sea did not rise, it sank. Atlantis did not sink invisibly below the waves. It rose invisibly to be part of the land — it is hidden in plain sight to this day. Now find that hill on which the seven terraces of its citadel once rose.

Bugs Bunny

RK: His is the voice of my childhood as much as any other — Bugs's sassy sagacity, decency, and teasingness, struck me as plausible armor in a Fudd world, full of softy dopes with guns. Here he was, impossibly long ears, in and out of every hole. But those tiresome carrots. I ask you, did you ever try to eat a carrot? No wonder they call them *crudités* in the Old Country.

closet

RK: Ah, my closet. I love the word, the thing, the environment. I'm very, very claustrophobic — so in all my life, *par example*, I've only twice ventured into a cave, and the last one was a pretty modest cave indeed. But in the closet: fear turns into desire, as Dante says. The closet, stuffed with tender garments and floored with weird obstacles — boots, vacuum cleaners (maybe even your old Kirby) boxes of ornaments — what a place this is to experience the fear, and inside the fear find oneself, the only breathing entity (you hope) inside the closet, alone. What a place of discovery! And the only thing to discover there is yourself — body and soul, time sense, space sense, trusting the hands to touch and know, trusting the nose. Total darkness. For a kid living in a crowded small apartment, the closet was heavenly silence and solitude. The smallest, tightest place became a glorious and innocent Mohave of silence. (This is the paradox, I come to know now, that is the heart of poetry. The smallest is the largest: a poem is a topological solid whose interior is larger than its exterior.) (As an aside, I'd refer here to the collaborative work I've done with the German poet Birgit Kempker, exploring the trope of the closet (*Ein Kollabor*) and shame (*Scham / Shame*).

CE: Around 1980, I believe, you lost a lot of weight, some 200 pounds as I recall. What effects has this regenerational act had on your life and work? I recall that you once wrote that doctors had told you that you would not reach your 35th birthday. Your weight loss at 45 must have been a tremendous second life confirmation.

RK: The real affirmation was passing 35 — and right after my 36th birthday — as you well know, we were together in Los Angeles, you in Sherman Oaks and me in Altadena — I began *The Iqom*, the longest single stretch of poetry I've ever done. And it was with a "Look, we have come through!" (DHL) attitude that I began it. I felt freer than I had ever felt in my life. I was in the clearing now, and all my time was free.

Then, as you say, losing all that weight in 1979–1980. That was affirmation too. Suddenly, the greatest thing (something most people will never experience) suddenly I was invisible. That is, I looked like anybody else. Talk about freedom! All my life I had been cynosure, collected every stare and many a rude remark. Now there I was, mid-40s, healthy, and in-

distinguishable half a block away from any other tall white male. I could walk down a street all to myself, and people passed with the celestial civility of inattention! It was wonderful. I still enjoy it. Even thirty years later I still expect to see those eyes swivel toward me. And they don't. And if they do, it's because someone knows me.

CE: One of your salient self-commands is "write everything," which has appeared in *Finding the Measure*, *The Loom*, and *Kill the Messenger*. How are we readers to understand such an admonition? What role does it play in the size of your body of work?

RK: Write everything. It came to me that way, the way certain words or sentences do, coming from on high, or from down low, it's not up to me to decide about that, just to listen. Listen and think it through. You call it "self-command," a phrase with a whole other range of meaning, but I can accept it here — certainly a command to myself, but I'm not sure if it was, is, a command from myself. Doesn't matter. To me, the command (and that's what it does amount to) to write everything meant this: when something comes to mind, deal with it. When a word or phrase comes into mind or mouth, deal with it. Deal with it = write it down. Inscribe it, and work with it. Work with the words that are, as Olson said, before us, there, on the paper, under hand. With the same fidelity that Jackson Mac Low addressed the results of his chanceful procedures and strategies, I try to address *the words that begin*. So what comes to mind becomes the matrix, casual, random to whatever degree the neuronal processes of a human are random, the matrix from which poems come. Another thing that "write everything" means is something trivially like Keats' great articulation of Negative Capability, in this case, meaning never to resist the words under hand if they say, or seem to be saying, something "I" don't like or don't believe or don't want. "I" have no business in that stage of the poem. If the poem is ever going to be greater than the poet's self-awareness. If the poem is ever going to be *itself*.

Incidentally, write everything doesn't mean write *anything*. So I don't think my obedience to that stern command has much to do with the size of the body of my work.

What it does influence, though, is the variegation of my work, all the kinds of writing that come to me to want to be done. Let me tell you an anecdote. In a London pub once, standing around with some English

we are nourished by mysteries alone
 calm this morning like a book you read before.

One way to track a work is to look for its very own poetics. Where there is no discernible tradition-based prosody, procedure, concept, or theoretical dogma, we might allow a given textual process a *parapoetic permission* by which it defines its “rules” as a singular dynamic. I’ve been calling it here, ad hoc and sui generis, an Uncertainty poem, written it seems in flexible units: numbered sections made up of a variable number of two-line stanzas in distinct (more or less separate but linked) lines, wherein, so to speak, the deuces are wild. They *contain*, but somewhat like corkless bottles as stopovers for genii in passage.

The poem does not progress; it lives along. The journey home is uncertain, perhaps in the sense of the Taoist classic: *The land that is nowhere, that is the true home*. Speaking from where it is, it can say: Today poetry doesn’t quite know what it is. And so it feels its own “true,” its ways of being true to its moment, with no room for apologies. How long it takes to reach a fecund not-knowing and offer no resistance to sudden awareness, that’s how long the poem is *in every line*. And every line is a site of possibility only available as singularity.

The mind can’t help trying to say something true. Nothing wrong with that, unless it *believes in what it says*. We become fundamentalists of our own constructions. Perhaps poetry is what saves us from ourselves, from our continuous surrender to the siren of our own voice claiming to tell the truth. The will of the poem to continue, to keep coming back, to leave behind the already said—a rescue mission from a part of the mind that knows better. But this too is uncertain.

2.

Smart ones would tell you too much
 be a mirror until you break

be a tumbler till you fall
 fill or drown, just be unsure

uncertainty is all and your appeal
 the way your eyes so steady are clear

while your fingertips are roving
 through the frantic jungle of what you really mean ...

The present is the greatest uncertainty — the precarious edge over the abyss below. “Form” here is not a wall of protection against unintelligibility or an aggressive instrument of reform, analysis, satire (social, psychological, political...) which presumes intellectual certainty and a standard of correctness (inheritance of 18th century “Age of Enlightenment” values) but a sort of valve for release of the unknown “through the frantic jungle of what you really mean.” Its social/political function is to clear linguality of false occupation and the coercive discourse of control. In this view the distracting, dubiously intentioned, controlling duplicity of public discourse, limiting freedom of mind and being, exploits an absence of actual complexity and subtle polyvalence of language. Discursive health requires the self-true multiplicity that speaking bears when we allow it to show itself. A moment of true speech contains more than we know how to hear, but the poem hears more.

The embrace of multiplicity shows it to be far more than a rhetorical strategy or proliferation of effects. It’s a discipline of the mouth obedient to the *more* that mind can say. The art of poetic *aporia* — the intrinsically unresolvable because replete with variable yet irreducible mental directives — is a reality challenge, a state of presence within complexity, and its access is rooted in acknowledged doubt and uncertainty. In the realization of the Uncertainty poem it’s a call, not to resolve or explain, but to stand within the oscillations of possible meaning until mind knows a sudden and necessary *sense of the present moment*. Meaning as a residue of the process of engagement does not detract from the intensity of self-aware presence.

In a parallel to the contribution of Corbin to the poetics of *récit*, another scholar of Islam and a range of medieval ontological hermeneutics, Michael A. Sells brings traditionary perspective to a poetics of apophasis that goes beyond rhetorical denial, often associated with so-called “negative theology.” He shows a tendency in mystical writing (Plotinus,

Eriugena, Ibn 'Arabi, Porete, and Eckhart) where saying the unsayable is worked through apophasis as saying/unsaying ("speaking away"). "Genuine *aporia*," he states, "instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse."¹⁷⁸ I'm interested in how such an approach can help us see wherein a poetics of singularity is connected to a profound problematic of language-thinking, with a range of historical antecedents outside what is usually considered literary history, and how it has led to many practices of saying/unsaying and what I call *further saying*.

Further saying in this sense is more than avant-garde innovation and experimentalism, but it can be that too; I think, for instance, that Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics, the "science of imaginal solutions," understood as a poetics of singularity, has broad implications that go beyond any particular exploitation of them (such as OuLiPo). One could read aspects of Kelly's *Uncertainties* as at once in an alignment with the 'Pataphysical & with a tradition of apophasis, and both as modalities of dealing with the always newly unsayable requiring further language invention in step with mind-opening initiation. They lead to new ways of reading in which passage through the text is "the operation," the alchemical working that alters both the possibilities of reading and consciousness itself — "be a mirror until you break // be a tumbler till you fall / fill or drown, just be unsure..." Uncertainty could be viewed as something like a Nigredo stage within the alchemy of reading, and its recognition can help discover a power of the *mind-degradable* within discourse. Such a power makes our need for positive assertion, the kataphatic or "bringing down" the elusive real into speaking, a constructive possibility of the moment which, by virtue of sustained transformative intensity, is reabsorbed into the open processual.

Blake gave us permission to escape the "mind-forg'd manacles" of belief while remaining *poetically* respectful of our acts of faith and attachment: *Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of the truth*. Truth in poetry is viewed as a multiplicitous play of images, indeed a species of *play*, not a hierarchy of more or less valid truth claims. Perhaps in the Uncertainty poem we are at the threshold of a Blakean *ta'wil*: Any possible

178. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (1994) 2.



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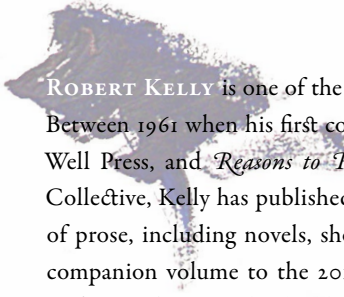
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ROBERT KELLY is one of the major & most prolific American poets of our time. Between 1961 when his first collection, *Armed Descent*, was published by Hawk's Well Press, and *Reasons to Resist*, brought out in 2019 by Lunar Chandelier Collective, Kelly has published some 66+ books of poetry as well as 14 volumes of prose, including novels, short stories, & essays. *A City Full of Voices* is the companion volume to the 2014 *A Voice Full of Cities*, *The Collected Essays of Robert Kelly*, also published by Contra Mundum Press.

This book gathers a wide range of commentaries — from single-phrase response to full-blown essay, personal meditation & various forms of book reviews — on Kelly's monumental oeuvre. It covers early reception by a previous generation of poets — such as Charles Olson and Robert Creeley — welcoming Kelly among their company, mid-career assessments via an array of *compañeros & compañeras* for whom Kelly's work has been sustenance and inspiration over many decades, and goes all the way to critical investigations by those younger readers & students of the work coming to Robert Kelly's poetry today. Eminent voices among the contributors include Guy Davenport & Stan Brakhage, Paul Blackburn & Diane Wakoski, Jerome Rothenberg & Clayton Eshleman, George Quasha & Charles Stein, P. Adams Sitney & Sharon Mesmer, John Yau & Jennifer Moxley, Jed Rasula & Mary Caponegro, among many others.

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It may seem surprising — & in fact it is — that an oeuvre of such distinction, complexity, and depth has had to wait until the poet's 84 year to be fêted with a volume of essays. But here it is: *A City Full of Voices*, the first substantive multi-voiced gathering of writings about one of the absolutely opulent, lavish, generous & bountiful life-works by one of the great contemporary American poets.

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