I Am Writing a Biography. . .

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Preface

- 1 Literary biography is a slippery genre. However splendid or useful individual examples of it may be, the genre itself lags behind fiction, poetry, and drama in star quality; its readership and shelf life depend as much on the prestige and currency of the subject as the skill of the biographer, and it requires a dogged willingness to stay with a single project for many years. Worse, on publication the biographer risks the ire of other scholars or sometimes living friends and relatives who don't remember things quite the same way. Then there is the digital archive that threatens to supplant the genre altogether.
- 2 I have come to think of biography as a "why this and not that" kind of genre: why this writer and not that one? why recount this incident and not another? why tell a story rather than mount a digital archive? My purpose in this essay is to lay out these conundrums as I have encountered them and to explain my choices in trying to respond. It is meant to be a personal narrative of my venture in the genre rather than a scholarly defense of one biographical method over another. "Why would you want to write a biography?" a colleague asked me, when I was already deep into the project. Well, why indeed?

Me 'n Robin

- 3 For those readers who might not know us, I want to introduce my subject and myself first by way of getting around to my colleague's question. Robin Blaser was a poet, born in Denver, Colorado, 18 May 1925, and raised in Idaho. Denver, it was, to cover up a pregnancy that came before the marriage it made exigent. His father and grandmother worked for the railroad and he was raised at train stops in the Idaho desert until his

parents moved to the town of Twin Falls in 1936, when he was eleven. Blaser was clever, ambitious, good at school, and socially graceful. He was also motivated to succeed in ways best understood by the alienated. Place a young gay man who writes poetry, plays piano, studies French, and takes secret ballet lessons in a depression-era working class household where the family business is trucking and all expectable hostilities follow.

- 4 From Twin Falls High and the College of Idaho at Caldwell, Blaser transferred to the University of California, Berkeley in 1944. Two years later, he met poets Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan, and began to study with the medieval scholar Ernst Kantorowicz, formerly of the Stefan George circle.¹ These Berkeley experiences were the beginning of Blaser's life in art and language. With Duncan as *animateur*, on-campus studies of the canon were counterpointed by off-campus readings in modernist poets who had not yet made the curriculum—Pound, Lorca, Joyce, and Mallarmé, to name a few of the most formative.² Blaser remained at Berkeley for eleven years, working in the campus bookstore and library and reading not for the credential but to school the intellect. At Berkeley, he met his first long-time partner, the biochemist James Felts. They would live together in varying states of intimacy for 16 years.
- 5 Blaser graduated finally in 1955 with an MA and an MLS, the latter taken after he decided not to complete the PhD he was working on. The MLS got him a job at the Widener Library, Harvard. In Boston, 1955–59, he met John Wieners, Ed Marshall, and Steve Jonas; New York was close enough for weekend trips to visit Frank O'Hara and Don Allen. Charles Olson he pored over, corresponded with, visited in Gloucester, admired, borrowed from. The day job, however, took a lot of energy and Blaser was restless. In a way that may seem quaint today, he understood his calling and main employment as poetry, despite the fact that it didn't come with a salary, and he worked feverishly in Boston in his off-hours to become his own poet, distinct from his powerful mentors in San Francisco. In 1959, he quit the Widener, took a European tour, and then returned to San Francisco in 1960, urged to the old companionships by Duncan and Spicer. Over the next five years, Blaser would write some of his best pieces—*Cups*, *The Park*, *The Moth Poem*, *The Fire* essay, and the first four *Image-Nations*, the latter a serial³ that would continue until his death.
- 6 Back in San Francisco, Blaser looked for the old Berkeley magic, but the scene had changed. Spicer had gone deeper into alcoholism and he and Duncan were feuding. Blaser's relationship with Jim Felts had also run its course. By 1963, Blaser had separated from Felts and was living with Stan Persky, then a feisty young poet in Spicer's circle. Duncan didn't like Persky, or so he expressed himself in letters and notes to Blaser, perhaps because he felt himself mocked by the Spicer crew.⁴ Hence mutual hostilities all around. Then Spicer collapsed in the summer of 1965. He died in the alcoholic ward of the San Francisco General Hospital, Mission district, on August 17th. He was 40.
- 7 With Spicer gone, the scene fell apart for Blaser. In 1966, he accepted a teaching job at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. SFU was a brand new, Arthur Erickson-designed campus, draped over Burnaby Mountain.⁵ The doors opened for the first time in September 1965; over the next few years, SFU quickly went from 1950s preppy to 1960s radicalism. The hair got long, the politics longer. Blaser taught in the English Department for 20 years, taking early retirement in 1986. He remained in Vancouver, although actively writing, touring, and guest teaching in the summer writers' program at Naropa University, until his death from a brain tumour in 2009. Persky had moved north with Blaser, but the relationship didn't last. After a period of short, heart-

breaking affairs, Blaser found the love of his life in David Farwell. His last 33 years were spent with Farwell.

- 8 Blaser belonged to the New American generation of postwar poets, so-called after Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* anthology of 1960, but he remained lesser known than his peers because he was slow to bloom and, I think, because he moved to Vancouver before ever really establishing his reputation in the US. Another reason for the relative obscurity is that Blaser's particular contribution to poetics is a long meditation on the sacred. Unlike many poets and intellectuals who lived through the theory decades, Blaser thought that the sacred had to be reimagined rather than ironized or deconstructed because it is an important human way to relate to the world. It was necessary, he thought, for the arts to give us a language for the *felt world*—earth and sky, human and non-human—that was free of dogma and yet attentive to the otherness of things. In "Image-Nation 5 (erasure" (1965),⁶ he writes:

one may believe in a god-language
behind us, but god moves to the end
of our sentences
where words foment
a largeness
of visible
and invisible worlds (Blaser 2006b: 153)

Twenty-five years later, in "Image-Nation 21 (territory," he was still at it:

wandering to the other, wandering
the spiritual realities, skilled in all
ways of contending, he did not search
out death or courage, did not
found something, a country,
or end it, but made it endless,
that is his claim to fame, to
seek out what is beyond any single
man or woman, or the multiples
of them the magic country that
is homeland (Blaser 2006b: 299)

- 9 Biographers are sometimes asked why and when they chose their subjects. I could say that the reason I have chosen to write about Robin Blaser is that I think of his work on the sacred as an important and neglected *topos* in modern and contemporary poetics. I could say that, as a scholar, I consider it my task to make visible a poetry and poetics that is in danger of disappearing. I could say that the importance of such a task is that it preserves the flora and fauna of cultural history—that without such stewardship, history flattens out like a Hollywood period piece. Yet these are reasons I can give after the fact of having begun the biography. I'm not so sure one chooses biography. I am certain that I did not. I had no intention of writing a biography of Blaser when I first began to read him. I was a student of his, unfortunately long after all the interesting campus radicalism of the 1960s had dissipated into the neo-conservative "there-is-no-alternative" budget cuts of the 1980s. Then when I began to write about Blaser's work as a literary critic we advanced from student-teacher to friends. I helped to organize a Blaser conference in 1995, celebrating the publication of the first edition of his collected poems, *The Holy Forest*, and his 70th birthday. I collected some essays and archival materials on his work that were published as a special issue of *Sagetrieb*, titled *Even on Sunday*. Finally, I became his editor in 2004 when I began to collect his scattered and out of print essays. *The Fire: Collected*

Essays was released with a 2nd edition of *The Holy Forest* by the University of California Press in 2006. But a biography?

- 10 It started with phone calls. Ellen Tallman, Blaser's very close friend from Berkeley days and house partner (they shared ownership of an up-down duplex), suggested sometime in 2002 that I should really get down there—to San Francisco, she meant—and interview Jess Collins before it was too late. Jess (he used only his first name) was Robert Duncan's life partner and a well-known painter and collagist—a very old and important friend of Blaser's. Blaser had been collecting Jess paintings and collages since the 1950s and the art in his living room featured the Jess ovals—oval paintings with themes from Hawthorne. Then it was the Burtons, Hilde and David, that Ellen figured I had to talk to. Hilde was a psychoanalyst and old Berkeley friend of Duncan's. Duncan had overheard her speaking at the White Log Tavern in 1947 and had leaned over to ask her if she spoke German; his friends, including Spicer and Blaser, needed help with their Rilke translations.⁷ David Burton was an architect and the designer of their beautiful west coast modern home in the Berkeley hills. The house was stuffed with San Francisco paintings, including seven Jesses. I still remember the German chocolate Hilde gave me when I did the interview—because she hadn't baked anything, she said. I remember, as well, her insistence that I had to identify myself in the biography and describe my relationship to Robin.
- 11 Finally, it was Tallman herself demanding the tape recorder. You'd better get over here, she said. One did not say “no” to Ellen, but I did as bidden without really ever accepting the role I was slowly being assigned. Finally, in 2007, I applied for a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant (SSHRC) to write the biography. The grant came through the next spring. By this time, Blaser had placed most of his papers in the Contemporary Literature Collection at Simon Fraser University. He celebrated my new job with a two week, all expenses tour of his childhood Idaho, me in the back seat of a rented SUV, trying to figure out how to use the camera that SSHRC had paid for, and David Farwell driving us. We visited Blaser's sister and brother, we went to graveyards and museums, and we walked the places that had mattered. When we got back, I put a couple of my best students to work in the archives, courtesy of the grant money, cataloguing and describing the contents of what amounted to approximately 65 moving-sized boxes of random documents—letters, tax returns, transcripts of grades from school and university, personal documents, photographs, Curriculum Vitae, course materials, lecture notes, drafts of poems and essays, book orders, notebooks, domestic bills, and department store receipts. Then there were the archives at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, to be visited—plenty of Blaser material there in the Spicer collection. And the house. David Farwell continues to live in the upper suite of the duplex; Sarah Kennedy, Tallman's widow, lives below. There are closets full of stuff and photos and paintings, and there are books, some of them piled three deep in front of the overflowing shelves in Blaser's office which remains as he left it in 2009. So it continues—me chasing my poet over 83 years of living through a jumble of documents and interviews, and him light as a feather floating in front of me, now that he has kicked off from the earth.
- 12 There is one more thing. Because I too came out of a small town, socially conservative, no-money background, I felt a recognition, both of Blaser and from him. We saw each other across the room, as it were, and I felt, as I began to assume the role of editor-biographer, that Blaser was “my” poet to put in the language. He was often described as elegant by those who knew him, for his sharp clothes, handsome households, and nice manners. The unconvinced sometimes called him pretentious. In a talk on Jack Spicer,

given at the Spicer conference in San Francisco (1986) and published as “My Vocabulary Did This To Me,” Blaser says that he arrived in San Francisco “dressed as Hiawatha,” meaning, in this context, no big city experience (Blaser 2006a: 253). The urbanity had to be acquired and I speculate that it came not only from choosing the arts as a way to join the world, but from a deeply felt need to build an alternative to the ugliness of small-town anti-intellectualism and the lack of grace in living that came of depression-era poverty. Even Spicer, who prided himself on a working-class background, had no experience of living eight people to a railcar, the quarters so cramped that Ina Mae, Blaser’s mother, and Robert, his father, had to sleep outside in an unheated lean-to.⁸ Although the family fortunes improved with the economy, such an experience leaves a mark. So Blaser became “my” poet, partly through intellectual choice, partly through chance, and partly through the determinisms of birth and upbringing: me in rural British Columbia, in a shack that my father parked us in before finally building a house, long after I’d left home; Robin in that railcar—me with my fundamentalist Baptist mother; him skedaddling over to Catholicism from a paternal Mormon heritage. The Catholics were hardliners but they had *style*. In such contexts, elegance and beauty are not pretensions; they are the stuff of survival.

Models and methods

- 13 To the business now, of method. The main problem that any biographer has to address is the nature of the source material (quality and quantity) and the question of how to select from it. The Blaser papers at Simon Fraser University and the University of California, Berkeley are overwhelming in quantity but they are also random. This scrap of correspondence, these lecture notes, this receipt get saved, and others do not. For example, one of the glaring gaps in the Blaser archives is the paucity of documents from the Berkeley years (1944–1955), when Blaser was a student there and friends with Spicer and Duncan. This was a crucial, formative period, but there is very little record of it from Blaser’s perspective. He was not writing much poetry then and there was no need for correspondence with his peers and mentors because Duncan and Spicer were right there, as were key professors such as Josephine Miles and Ernst Kantorowicz. Blaser has filled in some of this gap himself in *The Astonishment Tapes*, a series of autobiographical talks given in Vancouver in 1974 that is now published in book form. However, he had a set repertoire of stories about this period of his life and he deviated very little from these, whether on the *Tapes*, in autobiographical poems,⁹ or in conversation. To what extent the stories were fictionalized is a matter of speculation; certainly they had congealed, by the time I knew Blaser in the late 1970s, into set pieces that had the weight of examples. What the stories leave out could doubtless fill volumes. Those people in San Francisco who might have remembered things differently are now mostly gone. The ones I was able to talk to remember Duncan best because he was the more senior and vivid of the Berkeley poets in the 1940s. He had, as Blaser remembers laughingly in “My Vocabulary Did This To Me,” already been to New York. He had been published for goodness sake, and he had read *View* magazine (Blaser 2006a: 254).
- 14 The availability of source materials for a biography is also partly determined by technology. I mention this obvious point because we are currently in transition from a print culture to a digital one and the change raises the question of what is to be preserved. The Blaser archive at Simon Fraser University is almost exclusively a print

archive. There are a few documentary videos of Blaser,¹⁰ but mostly the fonds consists of print on paper. In some cases, the paper is falling apart; in others the print on the page is in the process of vanishing as I write this. In the mid-1990s, Blaser acquired a fax machine and instantly fell in love with it. It allowed him to avoid long telephone calls and to keep a record of his conversations as well. He could hand write messages and insert them in the machine, so the technology felt manual to him rather than digital. He resisted computers right to the end of his life and never learned to type beyond hunt and peck. However, fax machines between the 1970s and 1990s came with printers that took rolls of thermal paper. This was the kind of fax that Blaser owned and he did not see the need to update it. Unfortunately, thermal paper does not hold print well. The result is that the mountain of faxes Blaser sent and received are literally disappearing because the print is fading to illegibility. The disappearing faxes, soon to be smudgy blank sheets of paper, sit in the archives as placeholders for what isn't there. To re-purpose the oft-quoted phrasings of Donald Rumsfeld, they reproach the biographer with the known unknown.¹¹

- 15 So how to manage the gaps—that's one side of the problem; the other side of it is how to select from the materials that *are* available. Two models may serve to illustrate contrary approaches to these questions. The first of these is Jay Leyda because he simply avoids the problem. Leyda published *The Melville Log* in 1951,¹² a two-volume collection of all the documents that Leyda could find on Melville, presented in chronological order without commentary. The aim of it, Leyda says in his "Introduction," is to make each reader a biographer—to render Melville and Melville's America visible to readers (xi) and then let them thread their own way through. In a striking metaphor, Leyda describes his purpose as recording the *weather* of a life (xii). Still, he points out, documents are as fallible as memories and they don't say what did NOT happen—what exclusions from journals or social circles or events might haunt a life. As well, Leyda points to stunning gaps in Melville documents—burnings of correspondence that he says add up to a "staggering record of destruction" (xv). Such gaps he leaves open for the reader so that all may "guess for themselves" (xvii). In this tremendous work of scholarship, the biographer is as little present as possible; Leyda avoids the difficulties of managing gaps or selecting from an overabundance of documents by publishing everything available without comment. The result is a valuable scholarly resource but without the reach for meaning and relationship that comes with narrative. This model also makes a considerable demand on the reader. Leyda is secure in his confidence that Melville's significance and place in literary history can be taken for granted—that readers can be asked to undertake the considerable commitment of time it takes to negotiate the *Log*.
- 16 A contrary model of biographical method is Leon Edel's five-volume biography of Henry James. Recognized as the leading Henry James scholar of the twentieth century and an experienced biographer, Edel is the kind of scholar that I think of as heroic. Like Leyda, he aims for a thorough mastery of source material, but contrary to Leyda he brings an intense interpretive focus to this material. In an interview with Jeanne McCullough, "The Art of Biography No. 1" for the *Paris Review*, he says that the biographer must read everything—laundry lists, stray signatures, expense accounts—in addition to the more obvious sources such as correspondence and working papers. Edel's objective is to pull form out of archival chaos. A biography explains, orders, analyzes, he says; without these creative inputs, the result would be a dull record of dates and facts (Edel 1985: 8). So, for example, Edel notices that Henry James seemed to dislike the "Junior" attached to his name. James signed it diminutively, and when his father died, he dispensed with it

altogether. For Edel, this confirms something about James's personality—his need to be first. Edel is after the “life myth” of his subjects—the fancies that coalesce into the persona that the subject wants to be (18). This is a form of “literary psychology,” pieced together from documentary evidence (nothing is too small) and from the writings of the subject. In other words, Edel insists on rigorous scholarship—not a single fact can be left unconsidered (20)—but unlike Leyda he aims for a definitive interpretation rather than no interpretation at all.

- 17 For both Leyda and Edel, garbage is gold. This garbage is gold standard is also operative in the politics and poetics of contemporary archival practices—and these are crucial to biography because the archive is its material base. Jerome McGann, in his *A New Republic of Letters*, says that the philologist, as opposed to the philosophical critic (note the rebellion here against “theory”), refuses “systematic and ethical coherence” (McGann 2014: 66). Instead, he or she aims to preserve the “inorganic [organization] of memory” much as one might preserve the “rocks and stones and trees” of a landscape (67). The archive is thus not a story of the past but the *territory* from which stories come, like Leyda's weather. McGann's philologist consciously and conscientiously refuses to choose which past future generations will inherit. In effect, this argument says who are we to decide what will matter to future generations? Would we not now pounce upon Sappho's laundry list or Dante's grocery bill? McGann makes a case for the “philological conscience” as the “critical monitor of our interpretive moves to remember and understand” (198).
- 18 McGann envisions the possibility of a comprehensive, digital archive of the world's knowledge. The dream of it is unlimited storage, easy access, and searchable data bases. Yet this possibility—and at the moment it is only a possibility until the matter of stable platforms can be addressed—brings forward a contradiction between the theory and practice of archiving, and by extension, the craft of biography. The creation of a digital archive is labor intensive and it raises the question of who and what gets preserved. We have dismissed Matthew Arnold's idea of a canon as the best works of art a culture has to offer, where “best” implies universal and ahistorical, or, in the twentieth century, maybe “avant-garde.” But the absence of contemporary theoretical support for a canon belies the way we actually practice archiving, biography, and history-making. On one hand, there is a *de facto* canon that might be described untheoretically as a beaten path to those authors and works that many people, past and present, have considered “great,” however reprehensibly fuzzy and ethnocentric the descriptor may be. On the other, there is an embrace of inclusivity and a concern for hitherto marginalized voices. So who gets the full scholarly treatment? Is it the big names—the names in the *de facto* canon like Henry James or Herman Melville—or is it every maker of documents and cultural artefacts? If it is only the big names, then the theoretics of archiving, biography, and history-making are out of sync with practice. *Some* garbage is gold. But if it is everyone, who supplies the resources? It is one thing to approach a humanities funding agency with internationally recognized names like Shakespeare or Milton and quite another with names that not everyone will know—like, say, Robin Blaser. If archivally-based scholarship of the kind McGann advocates is supposed to counter the commercial investments of agents like Google, how is it not caught up in similar investments at the funding level? This is to say that if scholars cannot make an argument for choosing one cultural item over another, the decision will be made for them by whoever holds the purse. Hence we might catch a glimpse of the specter of evaluative criticism rising from the dead. This point is of

particular interest in the context of the Blaser biography because Blaser's reputation is modest. The larger point to be made is that the limit concept of the archive as all-inclusive and of biography as based on the complete extant record suggests an *aneconomic* spiritual or intellectual good at odds with pragmatic questions of economic scarcity and distribution as well as the limitations of chance and positionality built in to any form of human knowledge. By "economic" I do mean literally the funding available to support archival and biographical projects but also the attention that scholars and readers might be asked to pay to these projects.

Genealogy as method

- 19 I am aiming for a biography that is neither as inclusive as Leyda's *Log* nor as focused on the "life myth" of my subject as is Edel's work. I have no wish to challenge the methods of these stellar scholars, but rather to propose an alternative focus. If the archive is our cultural underworld, the literary genealogy is the tale of the writer's descent to it, and it is a *story*—a point of view on what that writer has seen and heard and what he or she wishes to bring to light. Blaser was passionate about what he called the public world. This was a concept he adapted from Hannah Arendt¹³ and presented in his poems and essays as a collaged conversation about the state of things—a kind of on-going commentary on what was happening around him in poetry, philosophy, politics, science, and society. Dante was his *cher maître* because Dante's great *imago* in the *Commedia* gave him (Dante) a handle on the cosmos as well as a way to tell his story. Yet Blaser's Dante is not the Dante of philology or high scholarship, but rather the beloved companion of a poet anxious to create a picture of his times. The serial form that Blaser worked in is about opening the poem to the contingencies of time-space. I use the geo-historical metaphor of location with consideration: the past is not a line but a territory, vast and shabby like Jean Cocteau's underworld in the film, *Orphée*, a film Blaser loved. The wager of the lifelong poem is that by most thoroughly living and performing a localized time-space the poet can bring a perspective to the world necessarily inhabited by all. Once installed in that public space—and living up to one's historical moment is not easy or self-evident—one may find the companionship of others who have done the same. Hence a way to be at home. In his "Author's Note" to *The Holy Forest*, Blaser writes: "The whole thing: just trying to be at home. That's the plot" (Blaser 2006b: xxv).
- 20 And so back to the task and method of biography. I have adapted my method from Blaser and his fellow poets (Charles Olson in particular) because, like them, I am interested in the way that a life's work can make articulate the problematic of a certain geo-historical moment and illuminate the present in so doing. Certainly this was Blaser's idea and I suppose I share the bias: he complained vigorously, for instance, when biographies of his poet-friends paid what he considered too much attention to the person with too little focus on the big questions that the work was meant to answer. My aim is to balance the all-inclusive claims of the archive with those of a genealogy tailored to Blaser's project. This genealogy has to include the adventures and idiosyncrasies of the man, but as these provide context for his poetic vision, the company he kept (living and dead), and the problematic he addresses. So a Blaser genealogy has to acknowledge Dante and Joyce, two writers who were not just sources but everyday companions of a venture in poetry, because the first offers a world image and the second the shattering of it. Hence Blaser's early poems are fraught with images of broken mirrors and glass—"strewn pieces, / his

pieces in the forest” (Blaser 2006b: 130). Through the long time-span of the serial poem, however, these fragments begin to soften and bend into “the pleats of matter, and the folds of the soul,” as Blaser writes, quoting Gilles Deleuze from *The Fold* (396 original emphasis). In response to the *divine* view of the *Commedia*, where the *imago mundi* comes to Dante from a vantage point beyond the earth, Blaser offers a view-from-here.

- 21 I consider Blaser’s biography to be inseparable from his effort toward a *poiesis* for his times. From a childhood fascination with the Gustave Doré illustrated *Inferno*¹⁴ to an adolescent love of Catholic pomp and after school Latin lessons from Monsignor O’Toole in Twin Falls, Idaho, Blaser moved from a medieval Christian world view into the twentieth century through the American romantics—Hawthorne’s “Artist of the Beautiful” is key, with the shattered mechanical butterfly—and the moderns. *The Holy Forest* takes its title from Dante’s Purgatory: it is the forest at the entrance to the earthly paradise—the paradise, Blaser maintains, that it is the task of the living to build. In “The Fire,” he says that in order to find a self, one must create a world (Blaser 2006a: 6)—that one is unimaginable without the other. This isn’t a hard idea to intuit: begin with the person, the birth place, and the family, and you will find a world; begin with a world and you will necessarily find the tracks of a person. So, for example, Blaser’s search for a way to integrate the sacred into a contemporary world view is both personal and public: it comes out of his Catholic adolescence but also the state of the humanities after modernism. It is neither separable from nor reducible to a life experience. For Blaser, *poiesis* was a thinking-through of relationships to the othernesses of human life and nature’s things—a slow recognition that transcendence is not a supernatural realm but just how any one of us is to another.
- 22 My hope for the biography, then, is that it will convey a sense of Blaser’s project as much as his personality and it is this focus that guides my decisions on what to include and what to leave out. When Blaser was at home, he was, much of the time, a beautifully coiffed white head bent over a book and a notepad at the kitchen table. Ready to hand was a little cart on wheels from which he supplied himself with the books he needed right then. When he travelled, even on vacation, he haunted the art galleries and bookstores of the cities he loved—New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston, London, Paris, and on and on as he liked to say. He knew the good restaurants too, or coaxed them out of hotel concierges. Don’t trust anyone who doesn’t like food, he remarked to me once. Each morning, he would go around to the paintings, sculptures, and *petits objets* that filled his house to greet them and remember the makers. Dante was certainly as alive and vivid to him as his buddies across the street, and not merely as a literary source. Blaser called such figures “companions” to think with. So the man and his world reversed into each other daily. I cannot think of personhood as a kernel; it seems to me more like an aura or a gravitational field. Blaser understood himself to be a small man, but as his reach for the world got longer, his eyes grew wider and so may those of the reader of his work. He was graced with the capacity for astonishment,¹⁵ as in a poem called “An Appearance” where a poet, a nightingale—anybody—he writes, “falls back / on his dusty shoes, pointing” (Blaser 2006b: 59).
- 23 I don’t know if I have answered by colleague’s question of why I am writing a biography. I can think of no unassailable resolution to the biographer’s dilemma: why this and not that? Why Robin Blaser? Maybe after all the academic huffing and puffing the best answer is still a Gallic shrug. I will leave it to Montaigne: “Si on me presse de dire

pourquoy je l'aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer, qu'en respondant: Par ce que c'estoit luy; par ce que c'estoit moy" (quoted in Blaser 2006a: 163).

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NOTES

1. Blaser describes Kantorowicz as a charismatic and stellar intellectual. When he took classes with Kantorowicz at Berkeley, the professor was teaching the material that would later become *The King's Two Bodies*. For a description of the classes, see Blaser's *Astonishment Tapes* (Blaser 2015: 76–93).
2. Blaser describes these off-campus reading sessions in several places. In *The Astonishment Tapes*, he discusses the reading of Joyce at Throckmorton Manor, a rooming house close to the Berkeley campus where Duncan was living in 1947 (Blaser 2015: 168–70). In an interview with me in *Even on Sunday*, Blaser says that the Throckmorton readings included Pound, Joyce, Mallarmé, and Lorca (Blaser 2002: 356).
3. Blaser and Spicer both wrote in serial form. Blaser describes it this way in *The Fire* essay: “I’m interested in a particular kind of narrative—what Jack Spicer and I agreed to call in our own work the serial poem—this is a narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves. The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which run out when so much of a tale is told. I like to describe this in Ovidian terms, as a *carmen perpetuum*, a continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected” (Blaser 2006a: 5). The *Image-Nations* is a serial within the serials: these poems are interspersed throughout Blaser’s books from the mid-1960s onwards.
4. This note from Duncan to Blaser exemplifies some of the tension: “. . . that you make it a condition of accepting invitations at all that Stan Persky also be invited and that, being aware that we do not enjoy Persky’s company and being thoughtful of us as friends, you make it an added condition that we not be embarrassed by being invited at the same time. . . you have set up a formula of total acceptance of Stan Persky and total rejection of Jess and me” (Duncan 1963). The friction between Duncan, Spicer, and Persky, however, has to be treated with some caution, since all of them would have defended the poetry of the others against outsiders.
5. For a history of Simon Fraser University, see Hugh Johnson’s *Radical Campus*. David Stouck’s chapter on SFU in the biography of Arthur Erickson, *An Architect’s Life*, is also useful for a discussion of the campus design and the egalitarian ideas that informed it (Stouck 2013: 181–99).
6. The titles of all of Blaser’s *Image-Nation* poems end with an open parenthesis, as in “Image-Nation 5 (erasure.”
7. This story comes from Lisa Jarnot’s biography of Duncan, *The Ambassador from Venus* (Jarnot 2012: 103).
8. Mark Samac, Blaser’s nephew from Boise, Idaho, told me this story in a telephone interview, 12 July 2013.
9. “Image-Nation 24 (‘oh pshaw,’” is an autobiographical poem, for example (Blaser 2006b: 377–91). The stories Blaser relates in this poem are very similar to those he tells in *The Astonishment Tapes*.
10. Olson scholar Ralph Maud created a video interview with Blaser in 1991; Colin Browne, poet and filmmaker, recorded an interview with Blaser in 1999. Both were long time friends and colleagues of Blaser’s at SFU.
11. The Contemporary Literature Collection at Simon Fraser has now undertaken the digitalization of the faxes in the Blaser archives. However, this does not change my point about the instability of certain types of documents.
12. I am indebted to Ammiel Alcalay for drawing Leyda’s work to my attention in the present context.

13. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes what she means by a public world: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (Arendt [1958] 1959: 48).

The collage work in Blaser’s later poems and essays is precise to this view of public space: the poet brings his or her perspective to the “table” as others bring theirs. Through quotation, Blaser gathers a community of voices into the poems. Arendt’s idea is that we develop an “enlarged mentality” from such conversations, and from this we cultivate a capacity for judgement.

14. Blaser writes of his early fascination with the Doré illustrated Dante in a poem called “The Hunger of Sound”: “Read Dante without words. / (By Doré.) / I try now to remember / what I thought of hell. / A small head / bent over the big pages” (Blaser 2006b: 21–22).

15. “Astonishment” was one of Blaser’s favorite words. He used it in a common sense way, but also more precisely after Ernst Bloch’s definition in *The Principle of Hope*: “Astonishment is the very source or origin of the world itself, ever at work and ever hidden away with the darkness of the lived instant” (Bloch [1954] 1985: 306).

ABSTRACTS

This essay reflects on the adventure and trial of writing biography and engaging in archival research. My subject is Robin Blaser (1925–2009), an American poet who emerged from the Berkeley Renaissance of the 1940s and 1950s alongside fellow poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer. Given the extensive archival holdings on Blaser both at the University of California, where he studied as a young man, and at Simon Fraser University where he worked in the Department of English for 20 years, this project has brought me face to face with the biographer’s dilemma: how to select? Between the “garbage is gold” dictum of contemporary archivists and the publisher’s imperative to produce a text of manageable length lies the problem of developing a principle of selection. I argue that there is no unanswerable solution to this dilemma, that in fact biographers and archivists face an irresolvable contradiction between the imperative to include and the practical need to limit. In this essay, I look at contrasting biographical methods before outlining my own. My principle of selection centers on Blaser’s *project* as a poet: certainly the biography will include life events, but the focus will be on the problematic Blaser’s work addresses.

Cet essai réfléchit sur l’aventure et l’épreuve de l’écriture de la biographie et de la recherche archivistique. Mon sujet est Robin Blaser (1925–2009), un poète américain qui a émergé de la Renaissance de Berkeley des années 1940 et 1950 aux côtés des poètes Robert Duncan et Jack Spicer. Étant données les vastes collections d’archives de Blaser à l’Université de Californie, où il a étudié, et à l’Université de Simon Fraser où il a travaillé pendant vingt ans au sein du département d’anglais, ce projet m’a confrontée au dilemme du biographe : comment sélectionner ? Entre le dicton des archivistes contemporains « les ordures sont de l’or » et l’impératif de l’éditeur de produire un texte de longueur raisonnable se situe le problème du développement d’un principe de sélection. Je prétends qu’il n’y a pas de solution sans réponse à ce dilemme, que les biographes et les archivistes font face à une contradiction irréversible entre l’impératif d’inclure et le besoin pratique de limiter. Dans cet essai, je considère les différentes méthodes biographiques avant de décrire la mienne. Mon principe de sélection se concentre sur

le projet de Blaser en tant que poète : la biographie inclura certainement des événements de la vie, mais l'accent sera mis sur la problématique spécifique que présente le travail de Blaser.

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Mots-clés: méthodes de recherche archivistique, biographie, poésie américaine, Robin Blaser

Keywords: archival research methods, biography, American poetry, Robin Blaser

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