SYNTAX OF THE HEART:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE POETRY OF ROBIN BLASER

by

Miriam Faith Walker
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NAME: Miriam Faith WALKER

DEGREE: Master of Arts

TITLE OF THESIS: Syntax of the Heart: An Introduction to the Poetry of Robin Blaser

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Chairman: Prof. Michael Steig

Prof. Roy Miki,
Assistant Professor of English,
Senior Supervisor

Prof. Rob Dunham,
Associate Professor of English

Prof. George Bowering,
Professor of English

Prof. Peter Quartermain,
Associate Professor of English,
University of British Columbia.
(External Examiner)

Date Approved: 2 July 1982
ABSTRACT

For at least the last hundred years, writers from Edgar Allan Poe and Stéphane Mallarmé to Ezra Pound and Charles Olson have argued against the closures of a transparent literary language and have furthered, in their own work, non-representational modes of writing. Robin Blaser has chosen his literary companions from writers such as these, and his poetry grows out of this tradition. In his essays, Blaser speaks of a transparent language as a reduction of the world to an ideality. He argues that form is alive, and therefore unstable. A transparent language in which the relationship between signifier and signified is fixed implicitly denies the mobility of being and falsifies the world. Against such a discourse, Blaser poses what he calls an "operative language," a language in which the unknown is a primary element of the composition.

In Blaser's work, the unknown or "Other" -- the beloved in Dante's Vita Nuova or Eurydice in the story of Orpheus, two of Blaser's many sources -- replaces a transcendental signified at the center of language. The absence of an ultimate meaning carries two major implications. Because words are not tied to a single signified, they may generate an endless proliferation of meanings. This decentering creates a dense, non-representational language which brings the sovereignty of the author into question. In terms of the techne of Blaser's
work, the syntax of the poem is profoundly disturbed, because the subject simply disappears as commander of the sentence. Jack Spicer, Blaser's friend and fellow poet, called this kind of narrative a serial poem, and Blaser explores this form in all his major works.

Blaser's concern with Otherness, the unknown or potentiality of being, actually constitutes an interrogation of the nature of the sacred. In Blaser's serial poems, the sacred is not a presence, but an absence, a latency which lies beyond the limits of form. The importance of this exploration of the sacred rests in the fact that it is only by stepping outside the limits of present form, or outside the limits of our mortality, that our condition as mortals may be imagined in its totality.
I live in a room named East
on the map of the West at the edge

(Robin Blaser, "Suddenly")
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Working with Robin Blaser's poetry for the past year, I have become newly aware of Pound's comment that poetry -- live poetry, that is -- is never far away from music. In Blaser's poetry, music seems to live at the center of the words. I am thinking here of Victor Zuckerkandl's discussion of music and language in *Man the Musician*. Zuckerkandl speaks of the musical tone as an intrinsically inarticulate depth, a kind of substratum of all things which precedes their formal differentiation. Language, unlike the tone, functions as boundary. Words circumscribe, distinguish, give form to things, but they are always two-dimensional. Although they can follow the musical tone wherever it goes, and trace around its depth, they never directly express depth. A language which ties itself to music then, always moves toward a region at its center, an inarticulate dimension, which it can never quite reach.

The musicality of poetry is a kind of silence -- not silence as void, but as a potentiality out of which the words are pulled, a pre-formal ground which, in the language of philosophy rather than in that of music, has been called the "unthought," or the unknown. Over and around this ground, language shimmers, the words appearing and disappearing into a depth they indicate but do not touch, non-sensical, strange,
a language which snatches the breath away. I have often heard Blaser's poetry described as "obscure," and the Latin root of that word gives us a literal meaning of something "dark," or "covered over." In an interpretive essay such as this is intended to be, the obvious task is to lighten the text, or uncover what is "obscure." But such an effort has its paradoxes. If indeed the poems move over an ontic, musical ground, then they will, ultimately, however particular the critic may be in explaining them, remain partly shadowed. A critical discourse can pursue that ground only so far, or rather it can indicate the presence of something which it cannot but fail to completely enclose. Blaser frequently speaks of "Otherness" in his essays, and perhaps the most profound meaning of the term is also the most obvious. What is "Other" is just what any form -- word or thing -- is not. It is Other than "this," no matter what "this" may be, which is to say that it is Other than being itself. Certainly Blaser's poetry initiates an implicit interrogation of Death. For what else indeed is that substratum of form, the un-formed, but the death of form-as-it-presently-is, a region both of potentiality and dissolution. As beings, we understand the world only when it coalesces into a form. But to fully possess form, we must imagine its outer limits and sing our death. Such is the wisdom of the Bacchantes, who, out of their minds, ecstatically dance their affinity to the ground which will eventually and literally, take them in. The argument gets back to Pound's *ABC*, the other half of the
dictum, that music is never far away from dance. The critic of a musical poetry finds that it rarely stays still long enough for it to be caught. And if it does get caught, well, the specimen poem, like a specimen butterfly skewered to the wall, tells him little about the subtlety of its movements.

I am not implying, however, that a poetry such as Blaser's is untouchable. If a critical discourse finally fails to possess the text, it can most certainly map the geography of it. That is, it can locate the poetry for other readers. Blaser's poetry invites meetings because it concerns itself with the possibility of a public world. What it obscures is the obscurity common to all beings, the darkness of being. What it presents is no more than the uniqueness of a being.

Speaking of Blaser's translation of Nerval's *Les Chimeres*, Robert Duncan says that "Blaser as an artist aims at signature or style . . ." and the implication is that the idiosyncratic cannot be meaningful to a public audience. I am reminded by this comment of one of Mae West's infamous lines, which goes something like this: "A man's kiss is like his signature. I can recognize it anywhere." Indeed the signature or style of a piece is what allows us to recognize it as real, for all form, all being, has a style which distinguishes it as being. Strangely, distinction is what we have in common -- "a concurrence the poet's kiss / given."  

In the essay which follows, I have attempted to trace the play between distinction and that depth which is both center and ground of being. Blaser says in "The Fire," that he has
often adopted the Orphic story as a metaphor for his poetry. From Orpheus, we learn that the poet who would bring Beauty to light must never look back at her. It is only at the back of the words, or perhaps out of the corner of the eye, that we catch a sense of the reason for the trip, which, in the breaking of form, moves down to an underworld of language -- a non-sense which may be sensually felt, more than intellectually appropriated, as a kind of cool frisson. For the shudder, the critic can only shrug and direct the reader back to the poems.
CHAPTER 1
POETICS

Language

a laughter of the sun-wheels
the glittering entanglement of ocean
the laughing alphabet flames of the air
where the dead letter breaks off
into a garden a starfield
a city

Since the nineteenth century, language has existed in modes other than representational discourse. As Michel Foucault says in *The Order of Things*,

The threshold between Classicism and modernity (although the terms themselves have no importance - let us say between our prehistory and what is still contemporary) had been definitively crossed when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, they rediscovered their ancient, enigmatic density; though not in order to restore the curve of the world which had harboured them during the Renaissance, nor in order to mingle with things in a circular system of signs. Once detached from representation, language has existed, right up to our own day, only in a dispersed way: ... .

Once its representational unity has been fragmented, language may appear as a structure, the implications of which must be interrogated rather than taken for granted as a transparent "grid for the knowledge of things." It may also be entered as a density, since words have a past which can be brought forward into their present, and a future onto which they open.
They have a being or depth, then, which extends beyond the ideas of the speaker and beyond their representational function. The process of writing becomes an act revelatory not of the ideas of the writer, but of the being of language and of its capacity to generate form out of its own density or potential.

While I do not wish to belabor this analysis of representational vs. non-representational language which has been discussed not only by Foucault, but by writers from Stéphane Mallarmé to Charles Olson, I will point out a few of the major implications of the theory, which I believe forms the ground of Robin Blaser's poetics.

In a strictly representational discourse, the fixed relationship between signifier and signified presumes that our experience of the world can be limited to a single appearance of its forms, and that those forms are unchangeable. If we assume that any form is not fixed, but is in the process of changing, and that it cannot therefore be perceived all at once, then a transparent language which claims to present form in its entirety becomes not representational of the world, but of our own thought about the world. In "The Stadium of the Mirror," an essay which seems to crystallize the poetic implicit in much of his earlier work, Blaser says:

... I did not believe, but had been taught - the ownership of the poet, the transparency of the language, the imposition of form upon the real, the cogito. Form is alive, not a completion of the heart or of the mind (emphasis mine).\^10

Or again, in the same essay,

The poetic left to an ideality or transcendence
is not a poetic at all - but merely a substitute for the limitation my (our) thought has become ("SM," p. 63).

A perfectly coherent language assumes an ideal or abstract conception of time, in which form, the form of any thing, can be perfectly expressed because it is perfectly continuous. Such a language implies that being is separable from the discontinuities of experience and so ordered by an absolute time and space located within a transcendent system of ideas. The limitation of such a style of thought lies in its inability to imagine form as possessing a depth, a past and future not structurally separate from it, but which it must compose. I am suggesting that experience consists of a rupturing of the unknown in which being articulates itself upon the darkness of a past lost in the rupturing, which it must re-create, and upon that of an unknown future. Being is held not within an ideal logic, but within its own potentiality. Using language as an ideality, the speaker sacrifices, for the sake of consistency and understanding, the depth and unexpectedness of what Blaser calls "the real," not that "reality" which is a product of a representational discourse, but the real as any man creates it, and is in turn created by it, in his lived experiences. In a discourse of singular meanings, the real simply disappears. Which is to say, that to lose sight of the actuality of experience as it is held in language, is to lose the world. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno put the problem succinctly in The Dialectic of Enlightenment:

Instead of making the object experiential, the purified word treats it as an abstract
instance and everything else (now excluded by the demand for ruthless clarity from expression - itself now banished) fades away in reality.

Within the limitations of the "purified word," man loses not only a world, but the density of his own being. Expression becomes merely self-expression, in which the ego, Blaser's "cogito," makes the world transparent to its own ideality.

As I have suggested, it has been the effort of writers, since the nineteenth century, to rediscover that instability in language which restores the instability of things -- to loosen the tie between signifier and signified sufficiently to allow the mobility of being to re-enter the language. In a note at the end of "The Stadium of the Mirror," Blaser names a number of these writers whose work forms the ground of his thought, and I will mention just a few to mark out the language field in which he moves. Mallarmé, then, to begin with. He says:

Contrary to the function of any easy representative currency, as the crowd treats it at first, saying, before all things, dream and song, redisCOVERS WITH THE PoET, NECESSARILy constituting an art devoted to fictions, its virtuality.

"Virtuality" here suggests that language functions behind or beyond its name, its "representative currency." In dreams the syntax of daytime perception is disrupted. The ideal continuity of conscious perception is relaxed to the point where something other than that order gets in. Song, as I have noted in the Preface, opens onto a pre-articulate depth which is simply the possibility of form, a silent potentiality. This silence resonates with the absence of a transcendental
signified in the language. In "L'Azur," Mallarmé addresses an empty sky, but the very emptiness of the sky, the absence of a definitive, significant presence, renders the sky opaque, enigmatic, a silent mystery which obsesses the poet. The words move over that absence and recall the density of a sacred text in that they always move toward, but never reach, an ultimate significance or clarity.

In America, there was Poe, a key source for Mallarmé. At first glance, Poe seems to possess just that ruthless clarity which Mallarmé lost. Poe's descriptions are precise; his sentences, with their carefully placed punctuation and well-chosen dependent clauses, are perfectly balanced, perfectly free from the stammerings of la parole:

In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and even emaciated. The parallel structure unfolds like a mechanical rose. But what it reveals is not the being of the Lady Ligeia, but the pure linguistic reconstruction of her. Ligeia exists nowhere but in the sentence. Indeed she is quite dead when the story begins. What Poe presents is not the busy ambiguity of real experience, not the longing for an absent coherence, but the beautiful, calm, structure of a language which offers the dead bodies of "Ligeia," or "Fall of the House of Usher" ("We have put her living in the tomb.") or walled up, as they are, in the "Cask of Amontillado," in a house of language. A pathologist of language, Poe gives us the structure of language as structure. William Carlos Williams, who looked
upon Poe as the pioneer of American literature, pushes this sense of language further, so that in an early text like *Kora in Hell*, the sentence, drained of its semantic content, comes forward as pattern, an order of thought. The emphasis is on an order, not absolute order, but style or design as something made. It is only when the structure of the language, which so embodies and limits our thinking, becomes visible, that we can begin to interrogate its assumptions. Only then can its forms be broken.

In Ezra Pound's work, closed form, as a linear, historical syntax, is dispersed. Pound assembles, in the *Cantos*, events from a plurality of cultures which have existed over the last two thousand years. As Blaser says in "The Metaphysics of Light," Pound risked "the cost of going back and gathering the world." But Pound does not "gather the world" in order to reconstruct a coherent history. History exists in the *Cantos* as a vast number of events, brought forward into the present and recomposed in a text. In "Canto IV," for example, Pound moves from the ruins of Troy to the founding of Thebes (in the reference to Cadmus), and from there to the rape of Philomela and the corresponding story of Cabestan and Marguerite. Through the death of Actaeon and Zeus' visitation of Danaë, the Canto gathers events like the "heap of smouldering boundary stones" which open the scene at Troy. All these disparate events are foundations of one sort or another, in which cities and lives are either established or destroyed. The poem, to use Pound's word, becomes an "arena" in which
the action of the world, of its founding and dissolution, takes place. The important assumption Pound makes is that history is not a structure independent of the historian (as time and space are not structurally distinct from being). It is rather a field of action in which the past may be re-articulated in the present.

It is Charles Olson, student of Pound, who explicitly offers the field as a metaphor for an open method of composition, and as Maximus, he takes in the particular time-space field or geography he inhabits and breathes out, in the poem, the "islands hidden in the blood." Olson ties the compositional field back to lived experience. As he says in "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,"

one loves only form,
and form only comes
into existence when
the thing is born
born of yourself, born
of hay and cotton struts
of street-pickings, wharves, weeds
you carry in, . . .

In proposing that the composition is a "thing . . . /born of yourself," Olson also assumes an intimate relationship between language and the body of the speaker, "the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath." He speaks of language as both "discrimination (logos) and shout (tongue)," and his effort is to get the "shout" back in the language:

Logos, or discourse . . . has . . . so worked
its abstractions into our concept and use of
language that language's other function,
speech, seems . . . in need of restoration . . .

Olson argues that being is made present to us not as an
abstraction or generalization, but as individual, phenomenal, particular -- "street-pickings." So with Olson we move about 180° from Poe, past the dispersal of closed form, into a constructive space in which the ideal discourse gives way to la parole, grounded in the life of the organism. History becomes his-story.

More recently, Foucault offers a negative definition of open form in his "Discourse on Language," an essay in which he says that discourse (a closed language), is based on exclusion -- exclusion of contingency, the unknown, the power of words to move in directions not anticipated by their speakers. He says:

I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.²⁶

A closed discourse is safe, because the speaker has eliminated the possibility of any appearance other than his own. He controls language as a sovereign subject governing a world of objects, but he pays for that sovereignty with his isolation. Once locked inside a subjectivity his language posits as reality, the Protean nature of the real escapes his notice. The desire for meaning is also a desire for power, a desire to organize the world according to one's Self. As Blaser says:

It is a misapprehension to enter this movement [of language], empowered to order it, and then not recognize that the order of your will is only yourself. And an aggrandizement ("SM," p. 53).
To give up that sovereignty is to open the language, in which one has hoped to appropriate being, to the unknown. It is here, in this act of giving over control, that Blaser's poetics are to be located. For in Blaser's poetry we find the density of the radiant word, yes, but also a broken syntax which enacts the discontinuities of experience and founds itself upon an ontology of being.

The operative language, as Blaser defines it, is grounded in Otherness. As he says in "The Stadium of the Mirror," "The seat of the language in the Other is the necessary exploration" ("SM," p. 62). Otherness is central to Blaser's poetic, and it implies an acknowledgement of that which has been excluded by absolute (closed) form, of that which form, when it breaks, breaks onto:

The Other is not an object, but acts chiasmatically (Merleau-Ponty's word). Not a stillness. Not a rest. Always the opposite and companion of any man's sudden form. This is the unrest given to thought. And to our invisibility. Perhaps this is also the life of Beauty whose companion is Terror or a coldness ("SM," p. 55).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Foucault are among those writers whom Blaser names as companions in thought, men whose work parallels the concerns of his own. Since their language intersects with Blaser's here, the above quotation can be informed by certain passages from Foucault's *The Order of Things* and Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*. First, Foucault on the Other. He says:

Man has not been able to describe himself as a configuration in the episteme without thought at the same time discovering both
in itself and outside itself, at its borders yet also in its very warp and woof, an element of darkness, an apparently inert density in which it is embedded, an unthought which it contains entirely, yet in which it is also caught. The unthought (whatever name we give it) is not lodged in man like a shrivelled up nature or a stratified history; it is, in relation to man the Other: the Other that is not only a brother but a twin, born, not of man, nor in man, but beside him and at the same time, in an identical newness, in an unavoidable duality.  

The point here is that the "unthought" is both center and ground of being. Because being always has an as-yet-untold-depth, it makes its appearance not all at once, but by inventing time, by founding a past and future. But that depth at its center is also that in which being is held, its outer parameters, beyond which it has yet to think. Foucault goes on to say that the thinking of Otherness is not new to contemporary philosophy:

... the unthought ... has received the complementary form and the inverted name of that for which it was the Other and the shadow: in Hegelian phenomenology, it was the An sich as opposed to the Für sich; for Schopenhauer it was the Unbewusste; for Marx, it was alienated man; in Husserl's analyses it was the implicit, the inactual the sedimented, the non-effected ....

To this list we could add Jack Spicer's comment in the "Vancouver Lectures," in which he is talking about the "outside": "I prefer more the unknown."  

Now the "Other" or "unthought," Blaser says, "acts chiasmatically," and to catch the drift of his thought here, we must go to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the chiasm. In "Eye and Mind," and The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-
Ponty says that we are elementally entangled with the world. We experience the world because we are of it and in it. We have a conversational relationship with things and others. We cannot see without being seen, touch without being touched. We do not face the world as a subject facing a miscellany of objects, but as both subject (beings for ourselves) and object (beings in ourselves), in a world which shares that doubleness with us. But this conversational relationship we have with things and others assumes their invisibility or latency. Merleau-Ponty says:

... the visible counts so much for me and has an absolute prestige for me only by reason of this immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere, which it announces and conceals.  

We perceive things because we ourselves have dimensionality, the latent potential to articulate or recompose what we see. What we perceive as being must also have this ability to continue to initiate itself -- both in time and as a founder of time. It must share that basic condition with us. Perception involves not simply an exchange of sensual information, but a transformation too; that is, perception is a taking in of the "object," a transforming of the visible surface into the invisibility of the mind:

The chiasm is not only a me other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the "objective" body, between the perceiving and the perceived: what begins as a thing ends as consciousness of the thing, what begins as a "state of consciousness" ends as a thing.
Rilke has described this same process metaphorically in a passage which Blaser quotes in "The Practice of Outside":

> We are bees of the invisible. . . . At the work of these continual conversions of the beloved visible and tangible into the invisible vibrations and excitations of our own nature, which introduces new vibration-frequencies into the vibration-spheres of the universe ("PO," p. 305).

As we transform the visible, so we are transformed in the eyes of others, into their invisibility. The word "chiasm" comes from the Greek "chi," the letter \( \chi \) of the Greek alphabet, and it literally means an "intercrossing" (graphically demonstrated by the two crossed lines of the letter \( \chi \)). So the reality of perceiver and perceived is composed of a continual crossing over, of the one into the other.

Blaser's statement (that "the Other . . . acts chiasmatically"), suggests this double movement of being. We take in the unknown, transform it into our consciousness, and are in turn transformed by it. But because being is always composing itself, it always faces an Other, a latency which is still unknown to it. There is no finite body of knowledge which can be fully appropriated. There is, instead, a process of articulation which occurs at the edge of the thought-unthought, Self-Other, visible-invisible. However tightly we may try to hold onto form -- "Beauty," as Blaser has it in the above passage -- our knowledge of it must include a space for its latency; which is to say its immanent disappearance into a future as yet unknown, which Blaser calls "Terror or a coldness." The Other can only be defined in negative terms. It is "not an object," "not a stillness," but the "opposite and
companion of any man's sudden form," a darkness into which we repeatedly cross over (emphasis mine). As Blaser says,

We have on our hands then an instability of forms, an instability of ourselves and an unthought manhood. This proposes simultaneously a death of forms, a return of past form, and a disclosure of unknown forms of thought and experience ("SM," p. 60).

A language consonant with this instability will bring a plurality of appearances or events into a play in which meaning is both destroyed and constituted. In "The Practice of Outside," Blaser tells us that the "dictation of the outside brings us up against a number of words that float in and out of a meaning ("PO," p. 277). In a language founded in Otherness (the "outside" or beyond of form), meaning, like forms of the real, comes and goes.

In his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play," Jacques Derrida offers a useful discussion of language which I find illuminates Blaser's sense of meaning in language. Derrida points out that western metaphysics is a history of centers, of being-as-presence:

It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designed an invariable presense - eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth.33

He goes on to say that the disturbance of this center in the deconstructive work of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger has opened language structure to play:

The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain of play of signification infinitely.34
Because there is no absolute, external meaning to the words, the relationship between signifier and signified is disturbed and this condition calls forth a proliferation of meanings. Truth, in the absolute sense, gives way to the real. In its density or being, language repeats the real of the world, the appearance and immanent disappearance of form. Paradoxically, in just that moment when language has been freed of its referential burden, it once again corresponds, as a double, to the reality of being. Blaser's statement in "The Stadium of the Mirror," that "All true language is thought and so reverses into experience," implies that in the multiplicity of meanings latent in the decentered language we are suddenly returned to the darkness of experience, to an elemental relationship with the world which precedes the understanding mind's representational hold on it ("SM," p. 63). There is, Blaser says, "no luxurious ownership of language or of a consequent knowledge" because there is no fixing of the word. The desire for meaning in language -- "syllables of / a longing / for completion," as "Image-Nation 5" has it 35 -- is met with the generative activity of the word. The lines at the end of The Moth Poem (written 1962, published 1964), "there is all meaning here / there is no meaning here" 36 speak of an actual condition of the language in which Blaser works.

It is this recognition of language in its being which prompts the question Blaser borrows from Nietzsche and Foucault, "Who is speaking?" ("SM," p. 63). The play of words can never be fully realized by the speaker of them. As Derrida says,
"The absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author." Mallarmé understood this long ago:

The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, who hands over to the words, set in motion by the shock of their unevenness; they are lit by each other's reflections virtually like a trail of flashes on precious stones, replacing the breath noticeable in the old lyrical inspiration or the direction of the sentence's personal enthusiasm.

To speak then, is not to command a language, but to "set [it] in motion," to set vibrating a multiplicity of meanings in each word which combine with and alter those of every other word. And it is to cross over into the silence before and after words, into an absence of the ultimate sound which is the missing center and ground of speech.

* * * * * * * * *

Ruptured Syntax

Olson said, 'I'd trust you anywhere with image, but you've got no syntax' (1958)

Blaser's position inside the fabric of a dense language accounts for the displacements in his syntax. The poet's loss of sovereignty over the language means that "the man in the poem becomes an incident in his own narrative" ("PO," p. 300). In terms of the techne of the work, he moves paratactically. In a paratactic language, events are arranged as they occur, temporally, while in a hypotactic language, the logic of the subject commands the sentence. The former imitates an experience in which the "subject" acts as a being among others;
the latter expresses an ideality in which the subject separates itself from, and acts upon, an object. In "The Stadium of the Mirror," Blaser says:

Through the arrangement of words (parataxis) - there is a speech along side my speech, which allows a double-speech. A placement. The Other is present and primary to our speaking ("SM," p. 59).

The presence of the Other in the language is, paradoxically, an absence of center-as-presence, of the absolute meaning of the word, and the absence of the logical connectives by which the subject imposes the form of his ideas on the world. That Blaser has worked in a paratactic mode from the beginning, is made obvious in the opening lines of the first serial, Cups (written 1959-60, published 1961):

Inside I brought willows . . .

Here, the "I" is between place, "inside," and event, the verb "brought," so the subject is located within the geography of the poem, surrounded by place and action. "I brought willows inside" would be the hypotactic version of the sentence in which the "I" is unambiguously the subject-doer and the willows are the objects of his action. As the "I" controls the action ("brought"), place ("inside") is assigned a subordinate role as modifier of the verb. As arranged in the poem, however, the syntax permits each element in the phrase a certain mobility. For example, "Inside I" may mean the inside of "I" in which case "I" is not the commander of the event but the place of its occurrence. If the first two words are read this way, then we could read the subject as absent, as in "the willows
were brought, by some unknown subject, inside I." The authority of the subject is missing. Although we immediately understand the phrase as "I brought willows inside" the syntactic base for the assumption has been slightly shaken. Especially since the poem never says into what the willows are brought. We can assume the poet means that he brought willows inside a room, but then we are stuck with supplying the missing logic ourselves. To tie down the phrase, we have to rewrite the poem, because the subject has refused to give us its meaning. Or to take an even earlier example from "Song in Four Parts for Christ the Son," a poem written in 1947 and reprinted in "Syntax" (an unpublished manuscript completed in 1982), we find a sentence like this one:

Dance like a gamecock, spurred,
God ("S," p. 35).

Here the word "spurred" is grammatically restless. Does it modify "gamecock" or "God"? Or is it an adverb, modifying "dance," as in "dance as if spurred"? The meaning of the sentence simply cannot be fixed. It dances.

As an element in the narrative, the "I" as subject in Cups is frequently led astray, or set wandering. The "thread" of his thought is invaded by the activity of words which cannot be fitted into a linear pattern. There are several major images in the serial poems which hold this syntactic mode. One of them appears in "Cups 2":

You take the far side
of the street from the bus-stop
Geary and Presidio
following the car lights,
shop-windows, street-lamps.
So that. A path emerges without the necessary guide.

The path, or The Way, which is, of course, the syntax of a life, is where one goes. Here the directions simply tell us to follow the lights (I hear a presentiment of the "small lighted words" Blaser speaks of in "The Stadium of the Mirror," p. 55), and let the wake of the steps form the path. The composition includes contingency, includes the givens of experience, so that the pattern which it composes is formed retrospectively, behind the forward movement. But this does not mean that the syntax is completely arbitrary. The subject's desire for meaning acts as a polarity to language-as-being, so that the syntax of these poems is composed of a pulling "back and forth" between the two extremes (MP, "Atlantis"). I have found this movement to be especially pronounced in "Image-Nation 1," and I will try to show how it works with a reading of this poem. (Image-Nations 1 - 12 was composed between 1962 and 1973, and published in 1974).

If the reader has followed Blaser's comments on language and read the earlier serials, the opening statement of "Image-Nation 1 (the fold," "the participation is broken," should come as a simple statement of condition (I-N, p. 9). "The participation is broken" because we no longer have a public language capable of holding a common world. (By public language I mean a language which holds the movement of a common world, not just the ideas of an aggregate of individuals.) This condition is discussed in the last poems of The Holy Forest (written 1962-67, published 1970), the serial
For the reader who is not familiar with the earlier work, the statement simply enacts what it says. The reader's participation with the poet here is broken, because the former is left to wonder in what and with whom he has been participating, and why this unrecognized participation has now, without consultation, been "broken." But the very fact that the reader is tempted to ask these questions dramatizes the absence of any community prior to the poem, and the point here is not only that the reader does not share a community with the writer, but that there is no community or public space, period.

Most importantly, however, this opening statement is descriptive. It is a general observation about a political or cultural condition, in fact, a conclusion which demonstrates an understanding of the cultural milieu, presumably reached after some thought about that milieu. As such it assumes the form of a declaration. But the thought is interrupted almost as soon as it is made, by an image:

fished from a sky of fire
the fiery lake pouring itself
to reach here

The "sky of fire" invades the conclusive thought, and yet grows out of that thought because the image implies a broken symbology. The "sky of fire" and "fiery lake" gather clusters of meaning about them, traces of an absent cosmology in which we no longer participate. Hence the image does pour itself to "reach here," "here" being the poem which began with a thought about participation. Yet we can make a connection
between the opening thought and the image only if we interpret the image symbolically. There is no strong evidence in the poem to suggest that we should be thinking of the "sky of fire" or the "fiery lake" as emblematic of anything more than perhaps a sunset. A conjunction between the first statement and the image is missing.

Instead of weaving a symbology, the poem turns back to reflect upon itself:

that matter of language caught in the fact . . .

Again, this is a movement toward understanding: the image, that "matter of language," is "caught in the fact," in the being of language. So the activity of the poem seems to be explained. But the meaning of these lines is elusive. They may also hold the sense of a transparent language which is caught up with "facts," with a crude positivism exclusive of all language play. In such a language there are no chiasmatic meetings (participation), because the Other, as a common surround, has been excluded -- and a few lines later there is an "I" which consumes itself, thrown back on its subjectivity, because it has no Other. Thus the explanation which seems to be held out in these lines dissolves, and the understanding, or meeting is postponed:

. . . so that we meet in paradise . . .

There is a logic implicit in the structure of this phrase. "So that" implies a conclusion, which is missing in the semantic content of the fragment. The meaning of the sentence
that matter of language," escapes us, and instead of the conclusion promised by the grammatical frame, "so that," we get "paradise." But "paradise," a center-as-presence, is precisely what is missing from the language. So the mind closes on thin air. To complicate matters further, paradise may also be thought of as an image of a condition other than that in which we dwell -- a possibility opposite to whatever or wherever we are. That is, paradise is included in our thought, but as an absence, not a presence. In this case, the absence paradise is, is exactly where "we meet," in a language which posits the depth of being as a common ground. The loss of meaning begins meaning anew.

Loss of meaning, however, is always accompanied by desire for meaning, so the poem documents a continuous process of loss and reappropriation, abstract thought and interruption. The lines "in such / times, the I consumes itself" parallel the opening pronouncement, "the participation is broken." Both are statements of conclusion, and here, as in the first section, the thought is disturbed by an image:

white trees rings around them,
wander and roll, the fog breaks
the sky, blue in the window

The image functions both as an interpretation of the thought and as an opacity. The "white trees," with "rings around them," may refer back to "paradise." Paradise is, after all, a walled enclosure (a literal etymology), and the trees may, if the reader wishes them to, take on the mythic proportions of the world tree. The lines in which the trees "wander and roll,
the fog breaks" and the sky appears "blue in the window" enact both the thought and its interruption in the preceding passage. The language is at once a fog (opacity), and a clear sky (understanding). The window, a recurring image in the poems, is something to look out of, and something to look at, a mirror if the light is right, which throws the desiring "I" back on its own experiences. But meaning is snatched away, almost as soon as it is given. In the next section, it

sits up there, out of reach
hands full of beautifuls-uglies,
justs-unjusts, halves-doubles,
pulls the strings . . .

In a re-opened language, the abstraction is out of reach. The subject who would pull the strings is constantly being distracted by the non-sense inherent in his speech. The words simply will not stay still long enough for a complete thought to develop.

The next sentence of this section, and the only complete sentence in it, "I saw the cat," is as simple a statement as is possible. Here the subject "I" makes his first explicit appearance, even though we can sense his presence throughout the poem as that element which repeatedly tugs the language toward his understanding. In this sentence, the "I" attempts to reinstate himself as the see-er, the subject who makes the cat the object of his seeing. It is another effort to grasp the "beautifuls-uglies" which remain "up there," as if by reducing the sentence to its minimum components, the subject could get out a completed thought before the language disturbs it. But again, the contrapuntal movement of the language is
the births begin on the bed,
shaped as it is
by a god, four kittens
when they are there
she comes to his feet
picked up and held, she
fills his hand with blood
the red pool flows over
his silver ring, drips
to the floor

The "I" as subject is displaced by an event which preempts its grammatical position, and, significantly the displacing event is a birth. Foucault speaks of man as an "empirico-transcendental doublet" because he contains the conditions for being, and is in that sense an Origin (a transcendental absolute), while at the same time existing as a finite being (an original) upon the already given world:

Actual experience is, in fact, both the space in which all empirical contents are given to experience and the original form that makes them possible in general and designates their primary roots.

The implication is that the transcendent meaning the desiring mind reaches for (the "sky of fire," the "beautifuls-uglies" in "Image-Nation 1") cannot be separated from the actual event. So the birth, which seems to interrupt the subject's desire for clarity here, really enacts an initiation of meaning, in which transcendental truth is rearticulated in the life of the organism. It is there, in the mundane, that the "god" who shapes the bed, the locus of the event, may be found. Thus the "sky of fire" is answered by the "red pool" which takes the poet right down to a literal ground — "drips/to the
floor." In the event the "I" of "I saw the cat," becomes a "he," a third person who participates in something over which he has no control.

But it is not possible for the poem to rest in this recognition. To do so would be to transform the event into an ideality. In the last lines of the poem, the weaving back and forth, between the desire for understanding through abstraction, and the non-sense of the language, continues:

the language sticks to
his honey-breath she is
the path of a tale, a door
to the perishing moonshine,
holes of intelligence
supposed to be in the heart

The language of the poem is transformed in the process of speaking. Its materiality "sticks" to the breath, so that "his" (the speaking subject's) intentions are subverted. Each time the movement of the poem becomes clear, our understanding of it is immediately deflected. In this passage, the statement, "she is / the path of a tale" may be construed as a comment on the literal/symbolic narrative of the cat told in the preceding lines. But when these words are spoken, the pun on "tale" (cat's tail), becomes obvious, and the content of the statement turns into non-sense, or rather into a laughter which returns us to the physiology of the cat and leaves us here, at the end of the poem, not with "hands full of beautifuls-uglies," but holding a cat's tail. Yet the tale of the cat is, at the same time, a door, a metaphor, through which we understand the nature of language. That understanding resides not in the reclamation of meaning, but in the knowledge that meaning, as
soon as it is grasped, dissolves into the ephemerality of an uncertain light -- the "perishing moonshine." Moonshine is literally a deceptive kind of light, full of shadows and shapes which seem different at a distance than they do up close. It also has the colloquial sense of something imagined, dreamed, "unreal," and there is a pun here on moonshine as liquor, a home brew of legendary potency which clouds the senses. Language offers a similar kind of illumination. To recall Mallarmé, in performing a language, the speaker sets it in motion, and must suffer the endless reverberations. The desiring mind merely punctures this fabric with "holes of intelligence," the illumination of which, a little moonshine, vanishes almost immediately into the absence suggested by "holes." I have mentioned that there are several major images in the poems which hold Blaser's sense of syntax. The "holes of intelligence" at the end of "Image-Nation 1" seem to me to propose the doubleness of language as an opacity riddled with rays of light. The syntax of the poet who moves within that doubleness will necessarily be ruptured, lacking connectives. "Image-Nation 4" provides an important image which is related to that in "Image-Nation 1" almost as a photograph is to a negative:

this is a surface of the moon
black and crusted we ran
out on it, calling
'you're it,' jumped, rang with laughter, the crust broke, his
bare feet slipped into the burning
The "surface of the moon," in Blaser's native Idaho, refers literally to the lava beds of a national park in southern Idaho, called the Craters of the Moon. But if we take this passage as an image of language, then the surface of language, the everyday transparency of the words, is like a crust which at any moment, the speaker may find caving in beneath him. Significantly, the surface which is so close, "we ran out on it," is as far away as the moon. It is laughter, the dissolving power of non-sense, that precedes the break in the crust and the eruption of the "dead" volcano beneath. Within the eruption, the speaker is returned to experience. In "The Fire," Blaser says:

The heat I'm after is not simply the personal heat of the meeting, the recognition, but a heat and passion which are of the nature of existence itself ("F," p. 21).

Blaser's sense of fire, as suggested by the above passage, holds an image of the chiasmatic process. Fire is the element of transformation which both feeds on and changes whatever it touches. It is this wild being onto which language opens. So we have the two faces of language: non-sensical in "Image-Nation 1," punctured by "Holes of intelligence"; a transparency in "Image-Nation 4," which breaks onto a raw density, a volcano that erupts through the syntax.

* * * * * * * *
Theory of the Heart

'you must be a master of the heart
in order to be a master of windows
and that is very difficult'.

I have avoided mention of the last line of "Image-Nation 1" until now because it suggests another aspect of Blaser's poetics. The "holes of intelligence" are "supposed to be in the heart," and the heart here is more than an emblem of sentiment. Speaking of Spicer's poetry, Blaser says in "The Practice of Outside,"

At the end of the Book of Magazine Verse, the final poem takes issue with love - that it is not oneself - that it is a commotion and information of the real, and an enlargement that has political consequences. . . . The word love, which may be taken softly and personally or as the difficult understanding that it is in Jack's work, proposes an entangling that is the mode of the real ("PO," p. 319).

A public language is composed by the heart's knowledge, what Blaser calls "an entangling that is the mode of the real." To discuss Blaser's understanding of the heart in the above quotation, I would like to present interpretations of two narratives which hover around most of his work: Dante's Vita Nuova and the story of Orpheus.

In La Vita Nuova, Beatrice is the beloved Other. When Amor first appears to Dante in a dream, he gives Beatrice the poet's heart to eat, "a thing that was burning in flames." Dante's vision implies that the Self is no longer capable of consuming the beloved, of drawing her into the Self, but rather is drawn outward to the seat of its desire within the
Other. But as Dante tells the story, the Self is never allowed to come too close. Amor always stands between the poet and the beloved. For example, in this passage, Dante describes an accidental meeting with Beatrice in which Love intervenes:

And when I perceived her, all my senses were overpowered by the great lordship that Love obtained, finding himself so near unto that most gracious being, until nothing but the spirits of sight remained to me; and even these remained driven out of their own instruments because Love entered into that honoured place of theirs, that so he might the better behold her. And although I was other than at first, I grieved for the spirits so expelled which kept up a sore lament, saying: "If he had not in this wise thrust us forth, we also should behold the marvel of this lady."49

Unmediated desire, desire for complete apprehension, is ultimately a desire for unity -- a death wish which demands that the Other either be consumed by the Self or the Self be subsumed in the Other. Amor blocks both of these possibilities, first by giving the poet's heart to the Other, and secondly by stepping between Self and Other. By acting as an intermediary, Amor prevents the Self from erroneously thinking it has appropriated the Other, which is precisely the error inherent in a transparent discourse that eliminates Otherness from its vocabulary and loses the density of being. Amor also prevents the Self from being drawn too far beyond its limits toward the unknown the Other is. Such loss of self would lead to madness or death. What Dante proposes then, is a kind of blind seeing, an oblique method of perceiving which moves perilously within the chiasm where Amor mediates between Self and Other. Essentially, this knowing of the heart is that kind
of knowledge which permits the Other to exist, which posits a beyond to the consciousness of the desiring mind, and recognizes, in its own finitude, a common ground of being which breaks onto something not the Self.

Desire mediated by Amor, which is not allowed to resolve, becomes a dynamic condition which keeps the poet always moving toward a completion that he knows will never come. In "The Metaphysics of Light," Blaser says:

And the way in which you should think of Beatrice is that love is actually the movement of the world and as a consequence if one's beloved dies that love is still active. Beatrice's love of Dante remains because love is part of the movement of the world. It's desire - and I've already stated it with contemporary and philosophical terms, desire for the other and all that - and language tends to hold that ("ML," p. 45).

As we have seen in "Image-Nation 1," the desire for the beloved, whether we call it paradise, or meaning in language, is what keeps the back and forth movement of the poem going. Certainly, Dante, as a Renaissance writer, gives us the Other as a presence, whereas Blaser, as a twentieth century poet, moves toward Otherness as absence. But the point is that both poets act within desire as that mode of being which constantly keeps the Other at a distance -- in Blaser's language, keeps the unknown in the vocabulary:

... We were on that business of the unknowing.
... We now call that agnostic, but the agnosia was the business of working always with the darkness, the unknown, and the incomprehensibility. Each point at which you knew the world, you then by discipline, meditative discipline not unrelated to Jack's emptying himself, you forced yourself to let that which you did not know enter again, so that you made an incomprehe-
nsibility out of every comprehensibility and you lost at this point your actual ability, you lose your ground. You lose your ability to hold and know and possess, and it does begin to be a nature of at least one order of love ("ML," p. 52-53).

The depth of being is also the death of being-as-it-now-is, an "outside" beyond the limit of form. This limit begins at the borders of the conscious mind, as a non-articulated space which, in a literal sense, is hidden in the body's heart, its time keeper, its mortality. In "Out of the Window," Blaser says, "the consumed heart / has the courage to be lost" (HF, p. 43), and yet the lost heart, literally and metaphorically, keeps being alive. Its rhythm establishes a measure, a distance between Self and Other which nevertheless always brings being near its dissolution. A living metaphor, the heart gives form to the formless, rhythm to the depth of being.

The knowledge of the heart is essential to a recognition of the doubleness of being as surface and depth, and there are few stories which hold this doubleness, or which document the movement of desire, better than the story of Orpheus. Blaser says in "The Fire,"

I think every poet has a favorite imagery which helps him to explain the preoccupations of his world. I have repeatedly chosen the Orphic, and in so doing, I will remind you of certain elements of Orpheus' story. . . . In some peculiar sense, Orpheus is really repeating the life of Dionysius, the god who is both joyous and terrible, who is bringer of wine, who can be defeated, thrown into the sea by a mortal, locked in a chest, torn to pieces by giants, and who dies. That he holds within himself all the contradictions, the change and process of the world as it is known, and the terror that goes with the process, as Orpheus contradicts his power,
has the power to charm with his music, but cannot charm the Bacchantes, has the power to bring Eurydice back from the dead, at least metaphorically, but cannot look at her. It is precisely in the image of the scattered body and mind of Orpheus that I place whatever I know about the poetic process---that scattering is a living reflection of the world ("F," pp. 19-20).

The contradictions embodied by Orpheus may first be approached in the story of his descent to the underworld, a descent which corresponds to the descent of any poet to the non-sense of language, the substratum of meaning. The object of the trip is, of course, to retrieve beauty, to bring a meaning to light. Orpheus nearly succeeds in this endeavor by the power of his music. He is, primarily, an enchanter, and this word suggests that the poet is both a musician and a magician. (The word "enchant" comes from the Latin "incantare," meaning "to sing upon." ) It is song which initially liberates Eurydice from the underworld.

Here I want to return to Zuckerkandl's sense of music, which I believe helps to illuminate the Orphic story. I have mentioned his remark that the musical tone belongs to a pre-articulate or pre-formal ground. By showing how a simple tune can accommodate itself to different sets of words of very different meanings, Zuckerkandl concludes that,

... in the layer of reality whence the tones come and toward which they lead, not only the antithesis of "I" and "it" but also the distinctions between things are transcended. There must be a layer in which all things have their roots; then tones must, so to speak, activate this layer and thereby bring us closer to the roots of things. Mystics speak of a place where "all things are together," implying not an undifferentiated mixture of all things, but
the common source that feeds each particular thing. This source is also the domain of tones.50

"This source" is the realm of magic, of pure possibility, a state which Zuckerkandl describes later as

the world experienced as one; existence as egoless, timeless, spaceless; the opposition between man and world not yet present to waking consciousness...51

The magical state then, is a state of unity, a pre-formal condition preceding consciousness. Magic, Zuckerkandl says, is followed by myth, a condition in which there is an emerging consciousness of a Self that begins to feel the world as a polarity.52 Music and language belong to this latter state. But in song, the tone is caught up in the musical structure, in a form which contains the magical state. So Orpheus' song is a structure capable of holding the doubleness of being. It is at once a form of the conscious mind and an enactment of the pre-conscious, a blind seeing (singing) which releases Beauty, as both form and depth, from the shadows.

But Orpheus loses Eurydice when he looks back. The conscious mind cannot resist turning around, and when it does, it faces only the death of meaning. Beauty, or meaning, as we have seen in "Image-Nation 1," must always remain behind the words. The path emerges in the wake of the steps. It is only thus that the Other is kept at a distance, where it works to open the language and yet is neither consumed in the void of a noisy transparency nor is allowed to subsume the language in the silence of the inarticulate tone.

This is only half the story. Orpheus' song is powerless
against the fury of the Bacchantes, those celebrants of the state of magic. The Bacchantes ritually enact their affinity to nature, their biological being which joins them to being in general, and which anticipates the death which will finally obliterate their uniqueness. As we learn in Euripides' play, The Bacchae, these celebrants tolerate no observation or conscious assimilation of their rites. In the play, Pentheus approaches them as an observer and pays for his curiosity by being dismembered by his own mother. Ultimately, all consciousness is dissolved in death, and even Orpheus' song must fade into the silence it has tried to realize.

In Orpheus' death, however, there is, once again, an image of the relationship between magic and myth, tone and word, or Self and Other. The scattered body, like a fragmented discourse, is shattered by the presence of Otherness -- or rather by the absence the Other is. Yet paradoxically, the head goes on talking. Out of the silence, the non-sense, the music, speech is reformed. In death, Orpheus finds a prophetic voice to rival that of Apollo, and he has to be silenced by that god, who is angered by Orpheus' paradoxical ability to speak of and from the beyond, a region which belongs not to mortals but to gods. I am suggesting that the strength of Orpheus' prophecies lies in the doubleness of his condition. His body belongs to the underworld, his head to the world of light. It is only when the body has been invaded by death that the mind intuits its own form and speaks its future, just as any discourse must be broken before it can hold its unknown.
The story of Orpheus implicitly proposes a musical language as an impossible enchantment, which takes us beyond our limits. This language is actively metaphorical in that it is always carrying us into an imagined space outside the conscious Self, into a blindness or a dark. But it is from this point that we return to being both in its actual and non-effected state -- the speaking head, the torn body. And that doubleness is given to us in the image of the flaming heart, the fire of a primary experience, in which the Self is interwoven, chiasmatically, with the magic and music of its ontological ground.

* * * * * * * *

Serial Structure

the man with a thousand hearts
flaring the substance shattered
of what form that is his movement?54

I have been arguing the necessity of a language in which the linearity of thought is disrupted by the density of a musical ground, and now I want to suggest that this procedure, which takes place within the sentence, also governs the form of the poem on a larger scale. In "The Fire," Blaser says,

. . . the beauty of the idea that you can write a single poem is a lie. The proce-ssional aspect of the world has to be caught in the language also ("F," p. 15).

In "The Practice of Outside," he tells us that Jack Spicer first used the term "serial poem" to distinguish his own work as a narrative of the unknown, a process which was always "to
Speaking of the beginnings of Spicer's serial
go poetry, Blaser says:

The poetry of The Collected Books begins in
1957, when that composing factor—the
dictation, the unknown, or the outside—
enters the work, and Jack began to construct
a poetry that was not lyric but narrative.
This narrative he came—"jokingly," he said
—to call "the serial poem" ("PO," p. 273).

That Blaser was thinking of his own poetry in terms of the
serial narrative is made explicit in "The Fire":

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 storyline, 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 ("F," p. 17).

Robert Duncan also talks of some of his early work as
composing a serial, and in the Preface to Medieval Scenes
(first published in 1947), he names that book as the first
serial poem recognized by Spicer as such:

For Spicer Medieval Scenes was the initial
spectacle of the dictated poem and of the
serial poem—by which he meant nothing as
recondite as serial composition in music
might lead one to believe, but the episodic
appearance of the movie serial.55

For the purposes of this discussion of serial structure
in Blaser's work, I would like to use the three analogies
Blaser gives for that form in "The Practice of Outside," since
I believe they gather much of what is active not only in Spicer's
poetry, but in his own work as well.

Jack worked in that long form without looking
back and without thought of the previous poem, so that the poet could be led by what was composing. The serial poem is often like a series of rooms where the lights go on and off. It is also a sequence of energies which burn out, and it may, by the path it takes, include the constellated. There is further a special analogy with serial music: the voice or tongue, the tone, of the poem sounds individually, as alone and small as the poet is . . . but sounded in a series it enters a field. In this way the dictation and the serial form join to bring the poet, his voice, tone and stance into a dimension where he is either lost or found. A "necessary world" is composed in the serial poem ("PO," p. 278).

The first analogy in this passage, implicit in the phrases, "without looking back and without thought of the previous poem," takes us back to the Orphic story. In the serial poem, as in the fractured sentence, meaning accumulates behind the elements of the poem. It is not directly apprehended, but forms in the wake of the movement of thought. The poet is "led by what is composing," moment by moment, so that the poem is continually dispersing the darkness behind and in front of it. These dispersals may be compared to a "series of rooms," since taken together they suggest a topography -- points on a field. The notion that the serial poem is somewhat like a house implies that the field of inquiry is a structural coalescence. The poems, as bursts of light, give us a number of rooms, making a design, in which no one event or room is completely meaningful in itself. As Blaser says in "The Metaphysics of Light," it is the movement of being, its rhythmos, that gives it form ("ML," p. 53). The serial poem, then, records the tracks of being as it acts in the visible world and out of its own invisible potential. The elements which are drawn into its
activity assemble the field of inquiry. In Blaser's serials, certain elements recur, always in a changing context. The reappearance of an element in a new "room" sets up a web of correspondences between rooms, so that we begin to recognize a design, a "house." Behind each element, as meaning accrues, we get a composition, a plurality of tenuous appearances which gradually weave a story.

Perhaps the greatest similarity between the serial poem and the musical serial piece lies in the fact that serial music has no tonal center. Each musical note is of equal value, and has no meaning outside the tone row. The tone row itself is "made up," a design founded on a whole range of possible sounds. Its nature is revealed in the course of the composition, as it is presented in different positions. (Schonberg said the tone row could be sounded in any or all of four different ways: original, inverted, backward or backward and inverted, on any degree of the chromatic scale.\(^5\) As in the serial poem, there is no perfect cadence in atonal music -- "no definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems [or tone rows] themselves." Instead there is a network of relationships established among sounds which allows us to recognize an area of musical concern. A tone row, or a serial poem is analogous to a unique being which shows its uniqueness by articulating itself in a series of events. The meaning of the piece resides in the activity of its making an appearance.

So the serial poem is an initiation of form which both builds and reveals a "house," a place where the poet "is either
lost or found." To show how the elements in a serial create such a structure, I will point out just a few of the geographical implications set up by the water element in Cups.

The title of this serial, first of all, suggests a form/content doubleness, since a cup is a container of fluids. The image holds that sense of being as circumscription and depth. But "Cups" is also a suit of the Tarot deck. In the Tarot, the four suits of the Lesser Arcana correspond to the four elements, earth, air, fire and water. According to A.E. Waite, Cups, the water suit, is analogous to the Hearts of the ordinary playing deck. There is, then, a connection between water and hearts. Moreover, in the context of Blaser's work, water, in its physicality, may double as a metaphor for the knowledge of the heart, because water is literally a primal, pre-formal source, the substance from which we crawled. Now we can add to this literal image of water the territory suggested by the Tarot, "an unexplored parascience" as Spicer calls it in an unfinished plan for a book on the Tarot. A.E. Waite describes the cards as a symbolical presentation of universal ideas, behind which lie all the implicits of the human mind, and it is in this sense that they contain secret doctrine, which is the realization by the few of truths imbedded in the consciousness of all, though they have not passed into express recognition by ordinary men.

Other writers of a more generous bent associate the Tarot with the Jewish Kabbalah, the latter consisting of a process by which one moves toward a reunion with the godhead — metaphorically, an intuitive apprehension of the Origin.
Mouni Sadhu even goes so far as to say that the "Tarot includes four elements of occult wisdom: Alchemy, Astrology, the Kabbalah and Magic," and connects the four suits of the Tarot with the letters of the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name of God. 62

I am, of course speculating about the title of this serial. Certainly the word "cups" does not provide enough conclusive evidence to support an occult interpretation. But the word "speculate" comes from the Latin "specula," a "watch-tower," and the verb "spec-ere," "to see," and I am suggesting that the elements of the poem illuminate a certain space. The things assembled within the "room" do not explain the light. Nor does the light provide any causal connections between the things it assembles. In a sense we are talking about a "black sun," as Blaser has it in Les Chimeres, 63 which illuminates but not in a way we can recognize as logically coherent -- "perishing moonshine." (In "The Metaphysics of Light," Blaser says "logic is the human will," and the will is the imposed ideality ("ML," p. 41).) Meanings constantly gather around the poem's elements, but as soon as we look for ways to tie them conclusively or allegorically to the words, they disappear. The reference to the Tarot may be implicit in the word "cups," but the poem offers no assurance that the association is not somewhat arbitrary. The point is, however, that an open language includes the arbitrary.

A few more examples, then. "Cups l" begins with a reference to "willows" and the "blue / iris." Both plants grow beside water, and the iris has a mythological significance
in that the plant bears the name of Iris, Hera's messenger. Further, the root of the word "iris," comes from the Greek "ipis" meaning "rainbow," the same root which gives us "iridescent." (A few lines later in the poem, we find that it is raining.) The rainbow acts as a kind of messenger, in that its glow (iridescence) joins or assembles sky and ground, water and light. The iris also belongs in the eye, and it is with the metaphorical eye (the heart), that we see rainbows and goddesses in a flower -- a kind of vision which puts together a geography. In "The Metaphysics of Light," Blaser talks about "the original task of poetry" as assemblage, a Heideggerian notion which proposes that earth, sky, gods and mortals are woven together in a "necessary world" where one can begin to feel at home. ("ML," p. 38). The effort of the serial poem is to join without imposing, to put together a world without reducing it to the human will, and to hold its meaning as a fluidity. Water . . .

In "Cups 3," the link between water and the heart is made evident again in the lines:

We opened the rock. This time I saw the god offer with out-stretched hand the heart to be devoured. The lakes flowed into my hands. Dante would say the lake of the heart.

The rock opens to reveal the god, the heart, and the lake of the heart, overlapping metaphors which suggest something of the plasticity of the imagination, its power to create image from darkness, a god from a stone. The reference to Dante, of
course, opens another room, and the geography of the poem expands to include Dante's vision. As Blaser explains in "The Metaphysics of Light," Dante gives us an image of heavenly light in *The Divine Comedy*. Such an image is heretical according to the Jewish tradition which says that God is unknowable ("ML," p. 59). In effect, Dante has given us a doubleness, the transcendental within the empirical, rather than a dichotomy in which the transcendental is separated out (recall the "hands full of beautifuls-uglies," out of reach), because he has not distinguished between the visible light of the world and the divine light of God. The creatures of light in the *Paradiso* can actually be seen. Dante's phrase, "lake of my heart," comes from the first Canto of the *Inferno*. Dante, lost in a forest, looks up and sees the sun:

> Then the fear was quieted a little which had continued in the lake of my heart during the night I had spent so piteously; and as he who with labouring breath has escaped from the deep to the shore turns to the perilous waters and gazes, so my mind, which was still in flight, turned back to look again at the pass which never yet let any go alive.  

The sun's light, which flows into the lake of the heart, is the beginning of the image of the world, wrested from "the deep" (notice that Dante does not hesitate to use water as a metaphor both for what is inside the heart and what is outside it), which Dante imagines in *The Divine Comedy*.

The lines I have quoted from "Cups 3" combine the image of Amor giving the flaming heart to the Other in *La Vita Nuova*, and the heart's reception of the god as a visibility in *The*
Divine Comedy. The god in "Cups 3" is not named, and he could be Amor, or the substantial/divine light of the sun, or simply a figure of the Other. The region suggested by this passage includes "the whole business of the substantial" as Blaser calls it in "Metaphysics," the entwinement of the visible and invisible. In this essay he talks of

. . . the occult tradition which holds on to this whole business of the imagery of light, the analogy of intelligence and light, and the analogy that the substantial world itself is light ("ML," p. 45).

He includes in this tradition such diverse writers as Dante, Blake, Spicer and Mallarmé. In these lines in Cups, they are there and not-there. What we are told in the poem is that the "god" is to be found in the substantiality of being, and that this knowledge can be taken in by the heart. But at the same time, this style of thinking contains an entire world of thought which turns on the reference to Dante.

The analogy between water and the imagination comes explicitly in "Cups 6," where the "imagination's dark" is the source of the "dew" which waters that Idaho desert, the literal setting of a number of the poems. Cups moves back and forth between San Francisco and Orchard, Idaho. The latter is not an orchard, but a desert, "so far from water / tank trucks bring it in" ("Cups 6"). But between these two places, one by the sea, the other far inland, the imagination weaves an orchard, an image field, from its own interior desert, so that suddenly, in the middle of the desert, there is a pond:

The hands dip out of the water
the shell or sperm dropped
there in passing ("Cups 6").

The "shell" dropped into the poem "in passing" opens another area of the occult. Luria's interpretation of the Zohar is a creation story (sperm of the imagination), in which the broken vessels (cups) of the sefirot combine with divine light to form the created world. Isaac Luria (sometimes referred to as "the sacred lion") was a sixteenth century Jewish Kabbalist. He taught that creation began when God withdrew into himself, leaving a primordial space, the pleroma, in which his powers of judgement were concentrated in a single point. The image of God's withdrawal doubles that of the heart given to the Other. Both images imply that we must allow the Other to exist. In Understanding Jewish Mysticism, David Blumenthal summarizes Luria's story:

In the beginning there was only God. And God decided to create the cosmos. So He withdrew some of Himself into Himself (tsimtsum), creating thereby a realm of transcendent space-time (tehiru). This realm, because it was finite, had inherent in it the principle of finitude, of limited-ness. Then God caused His light to penetrate into this realm. But His light was infinite and could not be contained by the realm of transcendent space-time. So the light and the forms of finitude which had tried to contain it shattered (shevirah), leaving fragments of finitude (kelippot) and fragments of divine light ("sparks"). God, however, tried again and caused His light to penetrate the realm of transcendent space-time once more (God's tikkun of Himself). This time He succeeded in balancing the infinity of His being against the finitude of His cosmos, and He formed ten sefirot. These ten sefirot are the "World of Emanation." These ten sefirot interacted with one another and overflowed into another set of ten sefirot, lower in rank and purity than themselves. The second set of ten sefirot bear the same
names as the first set, but they comprise the "World of Creation." The second set generated a third set, called the "World of Formation." And the third set generated a fourth set, called the "World of Making." The fourth set generated the world of the angels and the physical world in which man exists. In this last world, Adam was set. Before his fall, Adam was a very spiritual being, and his task was to gather the sparks which had been scattered through the worlds and to return the sparks to the Godhead (Adam's tikkun). Adam, however, failed, and mankind was condemned to its current existence. It is still the task of man, however, to redeem the sparks wherever he can find them (through meditation) to the Godhead (man's tikkun).

The kelippot are the shells, and these fragments of the broken vessels, along with sparks of divine light form the demonic. The mixing of the World of Making with the demonic has given us the materiality of the natural world. Most importantly, Luria's creation story suggests that being is a finite form of a potentially infinite light. So we may return to the physical-transcendental continuum proposed by Dante. The demonic is so not because it is substantially different from God, but because it is by definition limited. It is a finite infinitude, a paradox which so offends the ideal conception of transcendental Resolution (Blake's old Nobadaddy in the sky) that the notion had to be tossed out of the discourse into that fiery hell in the underworld of language. In the broken vessels, we find yet another image of a broken language, which leads us to the "demonic" non-sense of language-as-being, the demon/daimon/god inside the rock.

To gather the geography proposed by the water element, we have then the world of the Tarot, the Kabbalah, the synthetic
rainbow, which joins the Olympians to the earth, Dante's cosmos (which does the same thing), the cosmogony of the Zohar, and most essentially, the "imagination's dark" which takes all of these metaphorical procedures and grounds them in the unknown. The water element, of course, does not disappear with the last poem in *Cups*. It turns up in "Sophia Nichols," for example, in the eyes of a cat, which Sophia says are like the sea. It recurs as an absence in "Winter Words," of *The Holy Forest*, where the fountains have dried up and the words will not come. It washes away the imaginary city of Atlantis (chimera of a center-as-presence) in *The Moth Poem*, and simply floods *The Park*, so the subject cannot get in an abstraction edgewise. It reflects the sky, in an image of an inverted cosmology at the end of "Image-Nation 12," so that finally, we see the descended heavens, upside down. It is always literally a plastic power, and usually an assembling metaphor.

The unity of the serial poem, then, is not thematic. The meaning of any one of its elements cannot be stated clearly at the beginning of the poem and then developed, like a sonata, into a final perfect cadence. But as each element reappears, it carries behind it -- its past -- an ever-increasing shadow land, constantly shifting and disappearing, like a sea of images held in the heart. In this movement ("movie") there is always another episode to be told. The serial poem is a very long poem indeed, because the final episode is only complete when the poet dies. In his introduction to Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, Claude Lefort speaks of the work of a man
as the composition and interrogation of the movement of lived experience:

He must also effectively conduct the questioning, provide a route for it, act in such a way that, in the work the answers aroused by the questions nowhere terminate the reflection, that the passage from one domain of experience to another is always preserved, that meaning unveils itself in our impossibility to remain in any place, that the whole discourse is as one sole sentence where one can distinguish, certainly moments, articulations and pauses, but whose content in each proposition is never disassociable from the total movement.66

To this I would add Blaser's comment in "The Fire," that the serial poem is "the story of persons, events, activities, images, which tell the tale of the spirit" ("F," p. 16).

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In 1958, Charles Olson said to Robin Blaser, "I'd trust you anywhere with image, but you've got no syntax" ("S," p. 26). The comment is ironically true. Blaser has consistently refused to possess the language. In his poetry we find not only the active word, but the sentence invaded by an ontic silence. In place of an ideal syntax there is the movement of desire, the rhythmos of the heart. That movement is recorded in the serial poem, which maps events that open onto a "necessary world." Poetry, Blaser says in "The Practice of Outside," is an "event of the real" ("PO," p. 271), and in "Lake of Souls," quoting Geoffrey Hartman, he speaks of it as a performance which

... made us notice smallest things and ciphered greatest things, and gathered into a few terms, magical, memorable, barely meaningful, the powers of language ("S," p. 38).
CHAPTER 2
NARRATIVE OF THE SACRED

white flowers unsheathe to resolve language
back of it behind the fire
from unknown mouths
the wind rises
where he would not become god

If Blaser's poetry is consistently about anything, it is about the sacred, and although I have not mentioned the sacred in my discussion of language, it has been there implicitly in the notion of Otherness. In this chapter, I will try to show that the sacred is primary to the serials, indeed must be primary to any poetry concerned with ontology. The word "sacred" comes from the Latin "sacer," to "make holy," and "holy" is allied to the Teutonic "hailoz," meaning "whole." The relationship between the sacred and wholeness is embedded in the language, and the thinking of the sacred has, in most religions, involved a thinking of wholeness, or a speculation about how the many come from the One. Whether the One was conceived as a primal slime which generated a world egg, as the Orphics thought, or an "Unlimited," as Anaximander had it, or a shining heat-stuff, the pyr aezoon, as Heraclitus says, the problem of the One and the many, in W.K.C. Guthrie's words, "obsessed every Greek philosopher."
This same problem remains at the center of modern philosophical thought. I have already mentioned Foucault's sense of man as an "empirico-transcendental doublet," or an Origin-original. In this passage from *The Order of Things* Foucault shifts the vocabulary slightly, so that it is possible to see that the Origin may be thought of as the Same or the One, and the original as Difference, or the many:

. . . modern thought is one that moves no longer towards the never-to-be-accomplished formation of Difference, but towards the ever-to-be-accomplished unveiling of the Same. Now, such an unveiling is not accomplished without the simultaneous appearance of the Double, and that hiatus, minuscule and yet invincible, which resides in the 'and' of retreat and return (of the origin) of thought and unthought, of the empirical and the transcendental, of what belongs to the order of positivity and what belongs to the order of foundations. Identity separated from itself by a distance, which, in one sense, is interior to it, but, in another constitutes it, and repetition which posits identity as a datum, but in the form of distance, are without doubt at the heart of that modern thought to which the discovery of time has so hastily been attributed. 69

I have described the Double or Other as the center and ground of being. It resides within being, and yet is also separated from being by that "hiatus" which places it simultaneously beyond form. This "outside" (outside because it is constituted "by a distance"), is the area which traditionally has been the realm of the sacred. It is by imagining the outside of form that we imagine its wholeness, and perceive a world, or a totality of being, which is larger than ourselves. In "Image-Nation 5," Blaser says, "... god moves to the end / of our sentences" (I-N, p. 17). The implication is that the Origin is
not only manifest in the articulation, but ultimately moves beyond the period. The Other/Same proposes the death of form. Death is the final dissolution of the body’s limit, and a literal return to the One. But the One is also a generative possibility, because the very mortality of being involves being in the foundation of time, a continual process of initiation. In the thinking of the pre-Socratic philosophers, the Origin was always a latency. Guthrie describes Anaximander’s “Unlimited,” as “an undifferentiated mass, in which the qualities of sensible bodies existed as it were potentially.”

As a decentered language proposes a proliferation of meanings (i.e. it functions as potentiality), so the thinking of the sacred in Blaser’s poetry brings forward a plurality of chimeras. Paradoxically, the Same, which is imageless, suggests the monster or the god, some figure which, to the imagination, seems most Other to being. As Blaser says in “Image-Nation 10,” “absence immediately enjoins / presence and vice-versa” (I-N, p. 34). The events of the serial poems are always Different and yet they ultimately return to the Same. Certainly a comprehensive reading of each serial would occupy several volumes of interpretation. But what I want to do here is simply to trace the movement between the two poles of the double, which constitutes the primary narrative of the poems.

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Cups is the first of Blaser’s serials, and in many ways
it lays out the ground to be explored in the later poems. It is a creation story, and its principle elements are doubles. I have already talked about the literal and imaginative significance of the water element, which not only suggests an actual Origin, but also an interior geography composed of a multiplicity of creation stories. As "imagination's dark," water generates a sea of images which range from the pond the poet finds in the desert to the intricacies of the Zohar. Similarly, the brush fires in the desert act, in the interior landscape, as images of the transformational process in which the world is taken in perceptually. In "Cups 4," the "heat of the meeting" allows the poem to take shape:

The coyotes, burned out of their lairs, follow the railroad. Shapes of poems fly out of the dark.

Like water, fire is an image of the imageless, not a thing, but a movement of energy, like the imagination, which draws shapes from the darkness of a primary experience and makes of them metaphors for its own depth.

These two elements, water and fire, correspond to the two places of the poem; the damp coastal area around San Francisco, and the dry Idaho desert. Coincidentally, perhaps, the hot and cold, the wet and dry, figure in Anaximander's primeval "Unlimited." The created world comes about when these elements are separated from each other. In Cups, the elements are not separated but con-fused in the movement back and forth between California and Idaho. (In "Cups 11" there is a brush fire going in the rain.) This con-fusion is a return to an
Origin, a pre-formal place which is held in the imagination. Amid the rain and the fire, "you ride for the dark," singing ("Cups 11"). The music begins at the end of the lines, and here, "where Amor sits, the body renews itself." Form breaks to begin again.

As Guthrie says, Anaximander's cosmogony is similar to that of the Orphics, and the latter especially, offers striking parallels to Cups. Anaximander's Unlimited is answered by the Orphic Night; his Gonimon (generative seed held in the Unlimited), by the Orphic egg; the hot and cold, or sun and earth, by the Orphic Heaven and Earth. Anaximander posited a "moist" between his sun and earth, which synthesized the properties of both and had the power of generation. The Orphics suggested that the two halves of the world egg, which make Heaven and Earth were broken apart by Eros-Phanes when he was hatched from the egg. Eros, the love principle, Guthrie says, . . . was necessary to serve as the principle of union and bring about the marriage of Heaven and Earth and the rest and render possible the birth of the younger gods and of men.

Not only does Cups repeatedly fuse the fire-water elements, each of which suggests a Heaven and Earth of images, but Amor corresponds to Eros. I have shown that desire is both a movement of the world and a way the mind reaches toward the unknown at the edge of its thought. But desire is also the generative power which draws the chimera from the formlessness of the Same. Amor acts as a metaphor of form, or more accurately, of the image-making power of the imagination. In "Cups 8," he is a snake skin -- "if he fits he lets you in" --
and the suggestion is that Amor holds the body of something other than himself. As Dante's Amor keeps the body of the beloved clothed with his presence, the Amor of Cups gives shape to the Other. In "Cups 10" he is "disguised as grass," another kind of skin or surface of the body of the world. And the first thing he gives the poets in "Cups 3" is a "trinket of flesh," a body, in whose density the sacred is housed and hidden.

As a shape-changer (snake skin, grass) Amor holds that sense of the Origin as potentiality. He is, like Proteus, many forms in particular, no one in general. And thus he is also an image of language with its many meanings. In "Cups 12," he moves toward the music which is the ground of the decentered word:

The breath stutters in limbs where Amor swings.
The realism he's after cheats and sings.
He drops the steel scales of his body down where one eye out, the lover turns round and round.

The steel scales echo Amor's snake skin, shed when it can no longer hold the movement of the Other. But they also suggest a musical scale, each tone of which resonates with an ontological depth. The scale is also a measuring device, as the body is a measurant of the world, a dimensionality (visible and invisible), corresponding to that of things, which establishes that conversational relationship between Self and World Merleau-Ponty speaks of. Amor's descent ends at a musical place of doubles. The lover here is blind in one eye, or more precisely, he has one eye turned out toward a
darkness, and there, in the dark, he spins "round and round," in his desire for and denial of that which is wholly (holy) Other.

If the lover, or the subject, approaches an ontological ground in *Cups*, he finds himself lost in it in *The Park*. (*The Park* was written in 1960, published in 1965). There is a connection between the story about bringing water into a desert in the former and the elemental terrain of the latter. Watering the desert, the poet ends up with a park. In both a literal and metaphorical way, *The Park* is flooded. It is "a field / of water-filled pits." What this means is that the poem simply swamps the desiring mind. "Abstractions," the subject says, are "beyond my capacity / to write" (*P*, p. 29). The narrative is afloat, anchorless, so the reader is let loose in a field of events and must find his own way around. The desiring mind surfaces here and there, but it is allowed only an oblique comment or two before it is submerged again. The opening lines provide an example:

Cleo on the Section Gang
75 miles of railroad    Checking
the ties    Repairing the washouts

More than one animal

Duplications tick in the leaves
like insects
sucking the bitter green (*P*, p. 28)

First, there is the event -- literally a piece of the poet's history which has that curious quality of meaning nothing and something at the same time. The activity of working on the railroad "lines" and "checking / the ties" is somewhat
analogous to the poet's job of composing a poem which will hold his ties with the world, but, as in "Image-Nation 1," such interpretation is essentially ungrounded, because the poem does not develop as a consistent symbology. Indeed, this first event is interrupted by a fragment which seems to come from nowhere. "More than one animal." What animal? where does it come from? what is its significance? The point is that significance here is questioned. The movement toward it in the next line, "Duplications tick in the leaves," is immediately blocked when the abstraction, "duplications," is tossed back into the particularity of "the leaves." Typically, the grammatical frame promises explanation. "Like insects" sets up the simile by which the mind expects to draw the unknown into itself, through the known. But the simile explains nothing, or rather no-thingness is precisely what is presented. The language turns back on itself and begins to talk about its own being. From the absence at the center of the event, come the familiar proliferations:

Cleo swears
the god-damned rabbits
mate with the sagebrush (P, p. 28)

Rabbits, meanings, images, "more than one animal" spring out of the hollow center, that place where there is "Nearly no sound at all" (P, p. 28).

In such a place, the "guide books," which explain the meaning of a life and language are of little assistance:

Around us, the city imagines
the tourists The guide books
are full of facts
The fountains
play on Monday and Wednesday

A light of desire among
the monuments,
   wet to the skin (P, p. 30)

Here "the city," the whole fabric of the language as it is
adrift in The Park, "imagines / the tourists." The reversal
of roles between tourist and city is analogous to the
relationship between the poet and poem. The poem imagines the
poet (who becomes "an incident in his own narrative"), while
the poet gets lost in its densities. "Among / the monuments,"
among words, or bodies, which are the dwelling places of
meaning(s), the tourist, visitor to his own poem, finds the play
of the fountains. The action, a fluidity not to be held, goes
on "among" the monuments. A silence. The guide books, be they
treatises on grammar or cosmology, only give some general
indication of when the event is to happen. They refer to it.
For the poet in The Park, though, it is not the reference, but
the "trinket of flesh" that catches the formal instability
suggested by the fountains ("wet to the skin"). His desire is
for the movement, the life of the elemental as it comes forward
in the play of water, a play which keeps him returning to that
which he cannot quite grasp. A few lines later, we find him
peering into a pond:

The oath between us
for 1 hour
   to see
nothing that did not appear
in the water (P, p. 32)

The oath, in the literal context of the poem, is perhaps a
child's game, but it parallels the poet's commitment to an
unnamed Other. The pond, like the surface of language, reflects the face of whoever looks into it, but its depth is resonant with that depth of being concealed by the face. The lines have another meaning too. "Nothing," or no-thing, is the desired source, the center which is a hollow, and of course it never appears because it is not an image but the source of many images. "Sights float on the ponds" in a multiplicity of appearances (p, p. 31).

Picking up the "sights," The Faerie Queene, immediately following The Park (the former was completed in 1961, published with The Park in 1965), begins with "An Appearance,"

Okay A nightingale
does sing
outside this window

A mirror of leaves and noise

This monument
has torn to pieces our guide book
of facts??

The window does not clearly reveal the bird, but rather turns into a con-fusion of sound and image, a "mirror of leaves and noise" which conceals at the same time as it intimates the presence of the nightingale. Syntactically, "the monument" could be the window or the bird, but in either case, the phrase suggests a kind of impassable physicality which destroys the guide book. To recall Merleau-Ponty, the visible appearance conceals an immense latency. The "facts," the face of the monument, do not reach the depth of being. It is the ontological orientation of the thought here which disperses the facts (guide book). "In pieces," the guide book presents
another image of the fragmented discourse, and in the space created by the dispersal, the nightingale suddenly makes an appearance:

This startles

A nightingale, the bird so ancient
he ( anybody )
falls back
on his dusty shoes, pointing

The event darkens So like
our trembling, we caught at it
breaking the skin (FQ, p. 33)

A nightingale, not the nightingale codified in the guide book, is caught up in the event which makes the unknown present to the language of the poem (the disappearance of the window in a "mirror of leaves and noise"). The event erupts from the inside, "breaking the skin" of the language and the "givens" of thought. Against the dark ground of the rent, a startled bird coalesces into an appearance, like a brief flash of light. The event reveals the actuality of the bird, its mortality, its immanent disappearance into the formlessness of the "leaves and noise." Thus the bird is brought back to life, rescued from ideal conceptions of the nature and symbolic value of nightingales.

Just what is at stake in this appearance becomes clearer in "So," in which the mundane (the actual) is presented as the house of the mundus:

You speak against the mundane
which is for instance
the sidewalk

and, I suspect, the gods
severed and loose
like architectural adornments

The word means worldly
but requiring the mundus (FQ, p. 34)

The mundane, the sidewalk, ordinary path or syntax of anyone's life contains the "mundus," the world and the gods. "So" is the first poem to face the gods directly. The question is, are they simply "architectural adornments," anthropomorphic projections of primitive societies, which now serve as quaint decorations on old buildings. About twelve years after The Faerie Queene was written, Blaser offers this comment on the gods in "The Metaphysics of Light":

The saying of the world and earth, the saying of the arena, the field, of their conflict becomes the place, only in language, only there, of the nearness and remoteness of the gods. Gods are names and narratives of the World ("ML," p. 39).

The gods come from outside, and they are images of the strangeness of that place. (Recall the Greek tales of the gods appearing to men as strangers, foreigners, asking for hospitality.) As immortals, they are the "wholes" (and holes) in which the story of mortals is held, the Origin (rent) which is infinitely far away from ourselves, and yet terribly close, the mundus held within the mundane. They make possible "an appearance" because they give being back to itself as a totality. But in an age which resolves all ambiguity, all doubleness into the human, in which the stranger is summarily dismissed, the gods conceal themselves. In "So," they sleep:

... Dionysus lay sleeping against
the corner stone
the wall broke into pieces of glass
Again and again
I saw myself about to wake him (FQ, p. 34)

I have often thought of Blaser's poetry as haunted by the old gods, but if this is so, it is because the gods were once vital images of the other side of being. Dionysus, perhaps more than any other god of the Greeks, encompasses the style of mortals. To recall Blaser's discussion of Orpheus, Dionysus, like Orpheus "holds within himself all the contradictions, the change and process of the world as it is known." He gives human life to itself. I have noted that the Bacchantes celebrate unity, destruction of man-made order, of social distinctions and finally, of death. Even wine, the gift of the god, destroys social structures and turns people out of their heads. It is this power which lies "sleeping" against the "corner stone," the foundation (Origin) of any form, this power of no-thingness which will eventually cause any wall to break into pieces. This is the sacred which the poems "again and again" trace around. In "From a Fortune-Cooky," the image (like the "sights" on the pond of The Park), "floats as in water," and the "dismemberment happens / like rain against the sidewalk" (FQ, pp. 34-35). Or there is a "broken mirror on the floor," in "For Gustave Moreau," which is like the bits of language, image, form the tongue "play[s] in" as it reaches for the Other. But the Other constantly removes itself, inhabits a new form. In "So," it is Dionysus; in "For Gustave Moreau," it is the Queene of Faerie:
This magical image, like the chimeras of the gods, is imaginary. But the word "imagination" too often rings with the triviality of sheer fantasy. The imago is not formed just in the perceiver or just in the perceived. It involves the transformation of the one into the other. The imagination moves between Self and World, and the creatures which it presents, gods and faeries and blue-winged griffins (the image comes from a painting by Gustave Moreau), are not images of fantasy, but a way of "seeing" the Otherness, the strange, the outside, which bubbles, imageless, around any visible appearance, "untouched by" the rational consciousness of the mind.

Gustave Moreau's faerie queene sits on a blue jewelled throne in what looks like a cave. The cave is cracked with openings of the same deep midnight blue. The queen is white, naked, sexless, a little gossamer over her loins, no breasts. There is a yellowish nimbus around her head which is echoed on the neck of one of her griffins. Her features are suggested rather than stated. Because she is looking down (at her hand? at the griffin?) her eyes are turned away from the spectator. The white of her body seems to bleed into the darkness of the cave. Her left arm and her right leg disappear into her surroundings. At her feet is a pool of the same blue revealed through the cracks in the cave, the same blue which colours the wings of the griffins, who sit on either side of her. There is the suggestion of a sceptre, blue, on her left, but
since her left arm is indiscernible she can hardly be said to be holding it. A curve of blue curls in the lower right hand corner of the painting. The griffins drift into the dark brown of the cave, so it is impossible to tell where their bodies end and the cave begins. The queen seems to generate the light of the painting. Her body forms one diagonal line from the top left to the bottom right of the canvas. The griffins form an intersecting diagonal from the bottom left corner to the top right, and the intersection point of the two lines runs through the queen's groin -- an off-centered center. The queen and her griffins are confluent with the cave. They are imaginary rays which gather the darkness into which they may fade at any moment, harmonies on the verge of disintegration.

For in the next moment, who knows but the griffins' wings may fade into the blue at the queen's feet. The sceptre, sign of her sovereignty, already disperses its colour into the depths of the cave, dots of blue flying off it. Or the setting of the gems in her throne, almost indistinguishable from the darkness, and lit only by the queen, may suddenly release their hold on the stones. And what is the queene of faerie, one arm already gone, but a momentary, shimmering assemblage of the blue and the brown which surround her. Such is the nature of the beautiful.

Beauty haunts The Moth Poem (written 1962, published 1964). The moth is always attracted to light, which metaphorically embodies the beauty of intellectual clarity. But the moth is an artist of the unclear or the unformed, of "this / that /
now scattered," in "Between." In "A Literalist," it flutters against the strings of a piano, its wings making "almost a tune" (emphasis mine). In "The Borrower," it seems to literally come apart:

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the interior
of his body
red water
with white threads
the bone
a ghost of his thigh
pale
blue gut holding the shit
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The moth is subject to decomposition. In "Awake" it is "dying in the window." It is most of all mortal, carrying its "moth body" sometimes "into corners," the dark places it comes from, sometimes toward the desired light ("Supper Guest"). It "flies overhead to the floorlamp" in "Invisible Pencil" and the movement is not only literal but also a movement toward what "The Medium" describes as "the clarity desired, a wish for true sight." The moth's fluttering (in "Invisible Pencil") interrupts the poet's reading of The Death of Virgil, and the mention of this book, no less than the interruption (rupture of the thought), is significant. Hermann Broch (The Death of Virgil) talks about beauty as harmony, as the "infinite in the realm of the finite" which is "an earthly symbol of time's annulment." Beauty is a coalescence, a balancing of time and space in a completed form. It is center-as-presence. But, Broch continues, beauty is a "symbol of the symbol," a desire for the completion which is missing in the temporality of being. He describes it as a game, "art's despair, ... to build up the imperishable from things that perish ... so that
space, being formed, / might outlast time."79 At the heart of the beautiful, "form fixed and mute," is laughter:

the inborn nature of beauty, born out of beauty again and again, its unformed lack of creativeness, impervious to form, born out of, tumbling out of, hurled out of beauty,

Laughter:
the laughter of the pre-creation,

. . . in the realms of the visible and invisible and in the beauty that turns to song, there, trembling from restraint and ready to break out forcibly tickling and strangling, lurked the sultry laughter akin to beauty, the lowering, tempting desire for destruction was there within and about him, it embraced him yet lurked within him, expressing horror and bringing it to pass, the language of the pre-creation, the language of the void, to bridge which nothing ever existed, nameless the space in which it functioned . . .80

The moth, befuzzed travesty and laughter of its beautiful butterfly counterpart81 inhabits the desire for beauty, while its very being destroys the beautiful.

The lines in "Invisible Pencil,"

one element
participates in his travels more than another, watery source

refer to the sea journey of Virgil in Broch's book, but the pronoun "his" is loose, and it can also refer to the moth. Water is the element of dissolution. In the two Atlantis poems, that city of an earthly paradise crumbles under water. The "pieces flow unattached" in this scene played "in moth-time" inhabited by the mortality of the "riotous moth," amid "dazzling clock sounds" (emphasis mine). And so the mortal moth invades.
Poet and moth, in seeking the beautiful, come closer and closer to the underside of beauty, and therefore closer to the Same. In "Salut," form breaks again. Things get into this poem, without reason and without distinction:

this flower which is no flower this new land the day filled with invisible princes, Dr. Dolittle, the moon, the flow of rain lighting the ivy there is no meaning here, there is all meaning here Fran and Stan laughing, the blue glass is $9.00, the Houssin Isadora Duncan, looking more like Rodin's Balzac is $350 there is nothing here but an intense, interior monologue with moments of color, forms flowing toward beloved plants . . .

Dr. Dolittle sits beside the moon. The recognition of the poem-for-itself, in the lines "there is no meaning here / there is all meaning here," is crammed together with the ivy and Fran and Stan and the price of the "blue glass." All these chaotic particulars are "forms / flowing." Difference is in the process of dissolution.

The last (and first) line of the poem, "you, priest / must know why you strike," goes to the heart of the sacred. The line, taken from H.D.'s translation of Euripides' Ion, is spoken by the Pythia at Delphi, Apollo's prophetess, at the moment when Ion is about to strike the woman he does not at that point know as his mother. The potential violence of the situation comes about through a series of misapprehensions about the identities of Ion, his mother, Kreusa, and his stepfather, Xouthos. Such internal family violence is of the essence of the sacred, because it dissolves the distinctions which make up a community at its most primary level. The violence in Ion is averted by the gods and their agents, who are the very
chimeras or strangers at the center of that disruption. As Apollo and Athene protect against the loss of difference in the play, so the imagination's images in the above passage in "Salut" partly conceal the imageless "terror, or a coldness" which accompanies beauty.

The paradoxical nature of the chimera, as a form of the formless, comes through most dramatically in Blaser's translation of Nerval's *Les Chimères* (written 1964, published 1965). This serial presents a multiplicity of gods, each, to paraphrase Heraclitus, living the death of the other. The volcanic god Kneph gives way to Horus, a sky deity. Abel replaces Cain in "Anteros." Christianity overcomes the sybil in "Delfica." The white roses of heaven "fall / from their burning sky" in "Artemis." Christ, in "Christ Among the Olives," when finally left to address an empty universe, seems to be looking at the last incarnation of the gods. It is nothingness:

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but no ghost exists
in this largeness

seeking the eye of God
I saw only a socket,
huge, black and bottomless,
where night which inhabits it
sends rays over the world
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The proliferation of gods implies the grounding of the gods in nothingness. But in nothingness, the old cosmologies return. The "black sun" of "The Shadow," like the Orphic Night which engenders the world egg, functions as a positive negation. Night "always thickens," and

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a strange rainbow
encircles this darkness
door-sill of the old chaos ("Christ Among the Olives")
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"Old chaos," like that state of pre-creation Broch mentions in *The Death of Virgil*, is the source of the chimera. The original chimera or "Chimaera" was the daughter of Echidne, half woman, half serpent, granddaughter of Phorcys, a "wise old man of the sea." The Chimaera was part lion, part goat, and part serpent, a symbol of the "Sacred Year - lion for spring, goat for summer, serpent for winter." In other words, she was a metaphor of Time, of the same family as the changeable sea. Her shape holds the doubleness of Sameness and Difference -- one body composed of different species of animals. Her figure implies that it is impossible to look upon the Same without seeing Difference, or upon Difference without seeing the Same. The two aspects of being are inseparable bound in the fact of being's finitude. So in the socket of the eye of God, in the "Golden Poem" of *Les Chimeres*,

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a secret god exists
in the darkness
and like an eye born
with the lids closed,
a real ghost comes to be
under the surface of the stones
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The eye of God is always closed because the Origin is that part of being which is concealed; but out of this "void" which is never void, the beautiful chimera makes an appearance.

In *The Holy Forest* it is possible to trace the genesis of a poetry, place and politics from a linguistic, geographical and political "void." In "Translation," the first poem of the serial, the forest is petrified. The "stone-filled trunks" may be "rooted in springs," but it is the petrification which comes through in the early poems of *The Holy Forest*. The
throat, in "Winter words," is "a silent partnership" to the fountains, and these seem to be frozen. Instead of the play of sights on the water in The Park, in "Winter Words,"

the diaries of friendships have almost won a nest for themselves (HF, p. 25)

The diary hints of a reduction of the world to personality, the play of polarities petrified into a dangerous sameness. The question, "has the cold caught / my hand in the game" implies a stasis, an arrest of the language play. Similarly, in "The Stories," the "flasks of sound, / sharp intensities / /are[ botted up for a time" (HF, p. 26). But the moment that the silence or hollowness becomes apparent, the imagination begins to move in the space created:

the white buildings must be miles back with invisible windows

where secret birds fall (HF, p. 27)

The buildings, invisible windows and birds, are brought into the poem by a language which is, as Blaser says in "Stadium of the Mirror," "older and other than ourselves" ("SM," p. 61). The inability to speak of something becomes a condition in which the Self falls silent and the language goes on talking "about" nothing but its own power to generate form. In "The Prints," the poet follows the path of a snail which may lead him "anywhere," like the words which are the traces or tracks of being as it moves both out of and toward an unknown.

Following the tracks in "The Prints,"

the marvelous we had lost came back arms, stone, bristling hair bend toward the heart (HF, p. 28)
From the blindness of the heart and the sense of being lost comes the condition necessary for the movement of form. The marvelous, in "The Stadium of the Mirror," is that "promontory of thought from which darkness is perceived" ("SM," p. 56). In "The Private I," the way out of the "I" comes when the syntax suddenly solidifies into a materiality outside of the mind's logic:

a conjunction of tall glass buildings and Greek pillared banks (HF, p. 30)

The prosody holds the pun on "conjunction," a corner, yes, but also a conjunction in language, and this connection, made by the "private I," turns into a non-sense: a "conjunction of tall glass" in which the transparencies which keep the "I" private are subverted into language material. The non-sense brings a movement back into the poetry:

. . . the alphabet washes the sidewalk. The years taught the personal to stand on a rise of ground within the sign out there. Water runs in across the fingers (HF, p. 30)

The "personal," the diary, stands within a sign referring to an "out there," but the "out there," in this passage, turns into an outside, in Blaser's sense of that word, and, as in The Park, the fluidity of the language washes the body. That experience brings the poet to "Song," a poem in which "a / bird curled out of the leaves / in one shape or another" (HF, p. 31) (emphasis mine). The musical counterpoint, back and forth, between a proliferation of shapes and an ontic sameness, is active again. In "1st Tale: Over," "a congress of birds collects / to drop those sounds / . . . upon your tongue," and
the inarticulate noise (recall the "mirror of leaves and noise" in *The Faerie Queene*) accompanies the poet's voice and opens the silent throat of "Winter Words."

As the non-sense of language moves into the silence of the personal voice, so the condition of being lost, in "2nd Tale: Return," generates a geography:

the oldest one and his sister and brother were lost and he thought, telling a story will keep fear away. so he began (HF, p. 33)

In this narrative, the unknown elements of a "nowhere" are gathered by Love. Water is "most like love" because "it has an amazing / ability to surprise travellers." The hitch-hiker, too, is like love because he has the "ability to pass on."
The similes in the poem do not define love or water or hitch-hikers or highways. They do not specify the name of the place where the two are lost. Nor do they say how the lost ones are to get "home." Instead, the narrative creates a home by catching up the unknown as a correspondent in the story. Love teaches that any place is nowhere, because being is always in motion, and the unknown is always, primarily, a foundation.

Positive identification of the elements in the story entails an encounter with death:

. . . the rule is, walk on the left side facing traffic if you don't want to be killed. this love did until after a very long time, he entered the watery air, which, I remember, is when they were found

When the elements lose their distinctness, when the highway and the water and the air and love all fade into one another,
the nowhere in which the two are lost turns out to be the mortality on which the human geography is founded.

The bits of broken glass in "Aphrodite of the Leaves," "Bottom's Dream," and "The Finder" recall Orpheus' death and the torn body which functions as an image of the world, partly concealed and partly revealed in pieces:

in fragments
in some object
the city is loved, (HF, p. 35)

The polis, tangled geography of doubles, comes forward again in "The City," as "a fluid / that is a body," and a "mirror . . . to be read" (HF, p. 36). This image of the polis acts against the politics, presented in the last poems of The Holy Forest, of a "president, this old man" whose "government prove[s] at last to be the enemy because / there is no presence in his thought" (HF, p. 43). The relationship between the poet and the American political system is caught in the reference to Merlin in "Merlin" and "The Cry of Merlin." According to the Arthurian legends, Arthur's polis is held together by the council of Merlin. But Merlin is entrapped by Viviane, who tricks him into telling her his secrets and then uses the information to imprison him under a stone. He is invisible to passersby, but sometimes it is possible to hear him singing. The poet too, becomes invisible to a political arena which, paradoxically, is founded on a certain invisibility. Blaser's sense of what constitutes a public realm parallels Hannah Arendt's thought, and to clarify the political position he takes in The Holy Forest, I want to digress here to take in the
In *The Human Condition*, Arendt says that human uniqueness is revealed in speech and action. Action involves the taking of initiative, beginning something, as an original being against the vast fabric of biological sameness. Action moves against sameness, as the original articulates itself on an ontic ground. Arendt says:

> This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. 85

Beginnings are always events, unexpected differences etched upon the Same. Accompanied by speech, action answers the question, "Who are you?"

Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. 86

This combination of speech and action constitutes a public realm in which human beings can meet on a common ground. Arendt defines the polis as the "space of appearance":

> The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, . . . action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or
inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly. In making an appearance, or telling about events, the speaker inaugurates meaning. He not only says who he is, but where he is, since an event involves him in the particularities of place and things. An event is a dispersal of sameness, a discontinuity, and perhaps what Blaser calls an "astonishment." The geography of a life, personal, idiosyncratic is not the ego of a man, but the terrain over which he moves, and it is this that is offered to others as something to be shared, as what Arendt calls a "between," a common world held between men.

In "Particles," an essay written in 1967, Blaser discusses North American public life as an arena which does not admit the appearance of men because it is founded on generalities which are limited to the strictly private biological movement of life. The irony is that this society which discards the sacred as Other, proscribes death and talks constantly of distinction, is actually a mechanism of the Same. (This notion will reappear in "Syntax.") Blaser says:

We have to face the meaninglessness which destroys the minds of whole areas of the North American populations. I have blamed it upon the absence of thought in this giving up to large generalities.

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In the social realm, tied as it is to the necessities of biological life, we can be measured by our function, and our outward behavior is the direct result of our social function. The disaster comes when everything is defined as behavior or as an expression of society. . . . The difficulty is in the word express. Art, literature, and religion are none of them expressions of either
society or the self. They are activities of content - passion and thought - the relation of a man to the world as the world calls to him, and the activity is not simply relational. . . . No serious poetry can be described as self-expression. This is to confuse the strictly private with what is defined as public and permanent. . . . The strictly private can only be read in terms of behavior and generality. Otherwise the private is invisible. Behavior becomes a substitute for the public, knowledgeable "inter-est" what is between us, and we wind up with problems in our cities.90

Blaser's sense of polis, as he presents it in "Particles," or indeed in any of the poems, includes an insistence that the general, the Same, the dissolution of difference, remain Other to the articulation of being. The Other must be there to keep the thought moving, but it is there as a double, not a tautology. The "invisibility" of the modern state lies in its resolution of the double into an imageless universality. In terms of language, I have discussed this already as the transparency of a discourse which gives only the Self of the speaker. To return to "Particles,"

And it is my contention that knowledge (logos) is an activity, a revelation of content, requiring the specific, the particular, the place. If this seems dangerously close to the argument that there can be no public world which is not an immediate situation - no city, no province, no federation, then you have misunderstood me. Greek and Roman political experience argues that to act intelligently in the public realm requires a vision of things. The words themselves, vision and things, are telling. Vision, full of the sense of seeing and image, which are basic to knowing - and things - even bits and pieces. There is no vision of things without the emotions of particularity.91

Against the politics of a president with no "presence in his
thought," the poet offers the heart, with its capacity to allow Otherness to exist as Other, its ability to admit metaphorical knowledge (image) into the thinking. In "Out of the Window," he says, "I would / have you eat of it, the betrayers" (HF, p. 43). The image once again recalls Dante's Amor, giving the heart to the Other. In "Cry of Merlin," the performance of doubles is offered in answer to the closure public life has become:

out of the blue that moves the curtain  
out of the stone that smooths the body

statuesque that spiritual thing inside outside
on and on over us out of us to be

joined and sundered the active image
of a man who stepped out from a cracked egg (HF, p. 45)

"Out of the blue," ontogenically, from the constriction of the throat, the placelessness of "nowhere," the absence of a public realm, "the active image / of a man" is articulated against the "cracked egg," the Origin and the violence it implies. The Holy Forest is "holy" because it is a forest of the unthought, where the image-nation begins, the "stone-filled trunks / stretch out" and "an oak grows / from the rock . . . (HF, p. 24).

To this point in the discussion I have tried to pick up the narrative of the Same and the Different as it runs through these serial poems, and to that end I have emphasized the continuity between them rather than the disjunctions. But the Image-Nation poems, the next published work after The Holy Forest, are meant as interruptions. In "The Stadium of the
Mirror," Blaser says that "these poems are like squawking birds, events of the peril of the narration" ("SM,", p. 62). In the short biography of Blaser at the end of The Collected Books of Jack Spicer, the Image-Nations are described as "some very noisy poems" that appear "out of order," and "operate to reopen the condition of the poet's thought." Although Image-Nations 1 - 12 appear in one volume, Blaser has told me in conversation that they were meant to be interspersed with the serials, so that the form of these poems, as it comes forward in "Image-Nation 11," is that of an explosion and constellation:

the dark imagined land disappeared as they came to the edge in the air across the vertical road leading up to the sky of that constellation by an explosion • (I-N, p. 39)

The constellation, suggesting points of light in a dark space, should be a familiar image by now. The event of the explosion is caught in the phrase, "enormous mobile," which is not a thing, but an action that keeps the language moving in and out of the black holes in the syntax. In "Image-Nation 8," Blaser says,

a black hole is the name given a star-remnant,

it is the interchange the form took like walking in and out of a star (I-N, pp. 27-28)

The fragments of an exploded consciousness, remnants of a syntax, may also be compared to the pieces of glass the poet finds in The Faerie Queene or The Holy Forest. If one imagines what the poet would see if he looked into those pieces (and I
am treating them as pieces of looking glass, too), the form of the Image-Nation poems becomes obvious. To begin with, the poet would see himself, or rather a part of himself. He would also see what lies behind him, to which, like Orpheus, he is denied direct access. Since the pieces of glass may also be looked through, he would see what was in front of him. He would, in fact, be looking at an image-nation, a field of images held in a single fragment. Merleau-Ponty calls such an image field a "ray of the world." As he explains it,

It is the idea not of a slice of the objective world between me and the horizon, and not of an objective ensemble organized synthetically (under an idea), but of an axis of equivalencies - of an axis upon which all the perceptions that can be met with there are equivalent, not with respect to the objective conclusion they authorize (for in this respect they are quite different) but in that they are all under the power of my vision of the moment.93

The Image-Nation poems are composed of such rays which assemble a range of things and events joined to each other because they occupy the same area of thought. What occurs here is similar to what occurs in the lighted room of the darkened house, the analogy Blaser uses to describe serial structure. The poetry in question, then, is extremely dense, and its explication is well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, I will attempt to show how these rays or mirrored fragments work, and indicate, at the same time, the extent of the concern with the sacred.

"Image-Nation 2," for example, comes after "The Translator." The latter was first published as part of The Holy Forest, but Blaser has since included it as the last poem of The Moth Poem.94 In "The Translator," the poet finds "the clear print of a brown
moth" under "last night's coffee spoon" and beside it a full ashtray. The poem talks about translating Catullus' story of Attis, a priest of Cybele, who in imitation of the goddess' feminity, castrates himself (and is therefore translated into a women). But in the last verse of the poem

the mound of cigarette butts moves, the ashes shift, fall back on themselves like sand, startle out of the ashes, awakened by my burning cigarette, a brown moth noses its way, takes flight

Somewhere, among the traces of the moth on the drainboard, the mound of burnt out cigarettes and the story of Attis, the poet discovers a live moth. The story implies a theory of translation as transformation, or as Spicer explains in *After Lorca*,

Things do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time. The tree you saw in Spain is a tree I could never have seen in California, that lemon has a different smell and a different taste, BUT the answer is this - every place and every time has a real object to correspond with your real object - that lemon may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. One does not need to imagine that lemon; one needs to discover it.95

What is "translated" is not the literal sense of a passage. Indeed the non-sense of language precludes literal translation. The translator is actually given the task of finding a density in his own language which corresponds with that in the foreign language. "The Translator" begins with "the pool of water," the source or ground of the other language, from which the poet must release that complex of sight, sound and intellect which
adheres to it. 

Attis is out of his mind when he is transformed, a bee in his brain (resonant, in Blaser's poem, with Rilke's bees, perhaps), and it is from the outside that the translator begins to re-form the piece to be translated.

The fire of "Image-Nation 2" catches this sense of translation:

but there, it was
there 'you' saw
the head of a horse burn,
it's red eye flame 'you' stepped
to the fireplace where the meta
morphosed log lay without a body
and put 'your' hand over the seeing (I-N, p. 10)

Fire, the alchemist's element, implies a chiasmatic transformation. The poetry itself is a "fireplace," where the "log" is suddenly translated into the invisibility of the imagination to return as "the head of a horse," burning. The image moves backward to gather the "fiery lake" of "Image-Nation 1." Fire is the central metaphor of "The Fire" essay ("the heat and passion which are of the nature of existence itself"). It moves ahead to anticipate the fire beneath the moon's crust in "Image-Nation 4." It resonates with the brush fires in Cups which make the "shapes / of poems / fly out of the dark" ("Cups 4"). Perception, in fact, is a kind of translation.

This image of the fire overlaps with another "ray" in "Image-Nation 2":

the name of the bird who fell
from the hands of O-moon
is Naught . . . (I-N, p. 10)

Blaser explains "Naught" in "The Stadium of the Mirror":

In the poems I have asked you to read,
Naught appears now and again in the
sequence. He is the first drunkenness of the poems - always there at the point of the pencil. He is like a zero-phoneme - first in opposition to the absence of phonemes . . .
("SM," p. 62)

The zero-phoneme is analogous to the source of the chimera, or the fire which produces the image. The bird ("Naught") recalls the sparrows of The Holy Forest who drop inarticulate sounds on the poet's tongue. It resonates with the "following / angel" who makes an appearance a few lines later in "Image-Nation 2."

In the root sense of the word, an "angel" is a messenger on horseback. So the angel, winged bird/word doubles back to the horse playing in the fire. And that image belongs to the same field as the "night / light" of the last two lines of the poem. A "night / light" takes in the "black sun" of Les Chimères and anticipates the black holes of "Image-Nation 8."

From such black holes, between the words, or under the language, the chimeras gather in "Image-Nation 7." This poem follows the "Cry of Merlin," and the voice of the magician seems to return here in "the strange ghostly / speaking speaking / as if woven." Under the surface of stones, perhaps,

the fearful noise and
the archaic smile
who is the physical
source of all things
gods and men included

and the city

the city
is the human grasp
and its madness (I-N, p. 24)

The "fearful noise" and "archaic smile" recall the "non-sense he cried out of" in "Cry of Merlin," the non-sense which is the underpinning of language. On that foundation, the city
(recall Atlantis, awash in *The Moth Poem*) is built. The city constitutes our uncertain grasp of the unknown, and the madness of man; literally it is the madness he is trying to hold onto, the outside which surrounds his understanding. To imagine it, he has the chimera, and that invisible city of the imag(e)ination is what is composed in the serial poems.

The strangeness which the gods (chimeras) hold for us comes through in *"Image-Nation 9":*

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they come from the dark, under
many names the blue wind
they are not ourselves... (I-N, p. 30)
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In the same poem, "they come from the black-fire," "they are / the flowing boundary." "They" are not named because they have many names, all of which lead back to the Origin, the "black fire" which joins the fire element of the poems with the black holes and the black sun. "The blue" of the above passage is perhaps resonant with Mallarme's "L'Azur," the brilliant sky which captivates the poet with its radiant emptiness. The wind works as a world breath, a force which moves things around and yet cannot be seen. A ghost of god.

"Image-Nation 10" addresses the question of the spirit directly, and from the word "soul," the poet draws a host of meanings. First, there is the soul's "profound duality," a condition which haunts all the serial poems. The soul is also the "eye in the wind," or the "hole in the wind." It is "a haughty standing alone," or a "light and shadow" which becomes "the substance of men." It is the "immortal part given" and "it floats / in the language as the opposite," a "primal ambiguity,"
a "convulsive beauty," "the blue stream at the edge of thought," and the "blackness of milk." In Arapaho, it is "the heart, the brain, the breath / as well as a word meaning your body moulded / as a living man." In Keokuk, "there are fire shapes." The Navaho say it is "that which stands within." The Snake people "say it looks like a hailstone." It is "the Far West of / the mind." It is a "hummingbird" and the unspoken rhyme to this phrase is 'singing-word.' Finally, it is "the power to move outward" (I-N, pp. 32-37) (emphasis mine). These images together form a field around the word "soul" and act to gather and intensify the doubles active in the other serials.

The whole complex array of images which surround the sacred/mundane double is brought home in "Image-Nation 12," in an image ray which is all inclusive:

in the Cold Mountain
pool black water struck by the wind,

speaking and silent upside-down trees
and sky at the bottom (I-N, p. 50)

An earth and sky, a here and elsewhere (paradise), is reflected in the viscosity of the pool, a substance of "flowing boundary," and the image is disturbed by the wind so that it is both "shape and shapeless alive." The sacred as it is presented in the serial poems as water, a blackness, a chimera image, a reversal of the ideal into the real, rests here.

The Image-Nation poems, as Blaser says in "The Stadium of the Mirror," are devoted to "the unthought and the unknown" ("SM," p. 63). "Syntax" seems to be dedicated to the known. But the effort of the book is to show that the latter is
inseparable from the former, that indeed, explanation, as it is given in the discursive sections of the book, does not erase the Double. Explanation simply demonstrates the fact that the Double cannot be disposed of so easily.

In the first "Truth is Laughter" poem ("art is madness . . . . .") Blaser lets the strangeness of the goddess melt into the reassuringly explainable phenomenon of the northern lights, the aurora borealis. In "moving from one room to another," there is the suggestion that the gods are merely "projections of our own violence" ("S," p. 8). "Dreams, April, 1981" approaches the question of infinitude quite unambiguously in the statement, "death is the condition of infinite form" ("S," p. 23). And "Lake of Souls," the long poem which ties this serial together (another form of explanation), brings in quotations from René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* and Bernard Henri Lévy's *Barbarism with a Human Face*. These two books in particular apparently explain the relationship between humanity and the sacred.

Blaser chooses the following quotation from Girard:

> The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires, and plagues . . . may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these . . . stands human violence. . . . Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.97

As Girard argues, violence is set off by the dissolution of social differences within a community. A violent act may initiate an explosion of reciprocal violence which can destroy the group. Ritual murder of a surrogate victim unites the
community and polarizes it against the destructive potential of its own violence. The sacrifice is also cathartic in that it is a performance and release of the violence which always threatens to erupt. The terror of the Same, the destructive potential, is expelled from the community in the guise of the monstrous: the gods, the dead, the divine twins. Girard stresses that the ritual act is based on the necessary misunderstanding that the sacred, which is at the heart of the community, is actually that which is most Other to it.98 (I need hardly point out that Girard's thesis parallels Foucault's sense of man as both Origin and original.)

Bernard-Henri Lévy's analysis of power and the politics of the left is similar in certain respects to Girard's thesis. Lévy says that power (the will to live, he calls it99) is not an oppressive layering on top of an originally ideal community, but at the center of the community, its founding principle:

> It has always been said that the ruled internalize violence, identify with the Prince, and swallow his orders. Why not, on the contrary, imagine a hemorrhage, an expulsion of the Prince, and an externalization of the Law? . . . The cop isn't in our heads, he hasn't been there for a long time, because we have expelled him precisely in order to sublimate him and give him concrete form.100

Lévy goes on to say that the modern age, in getting rid of the sacred, has opened the way for totalitarianism. The Otherness of the divine distanced final authority from the head of state and acted as a check upon power as it was concretized by the state. Without that check, "the Prince" becomes equivalent to the absolute. The quotation Blaser chooses from Lévy is
from a chapter entitled "The Twilight of the Gods" where Lévy says that the decline of the gods is "a prelude to the twilight of men." The real message of Hitler was, "You will be like gods." What this implies is that the modern state has absorbed all Difference. (To return to Blaser's remarks in "Particles," the state is based on generalizations which do not permit the particularities of human uniqueness to appear.) In an ultimate act of consumption, the state becomes an embodiment of the Same. It has swallowed the Double and made itself tautological:

The Prince takes himself for the Sovereign, and in turn he takes himself for civil society. He abolishes the distance between authority and its deputies only to be better able to fill the gap between political unity and social multiplicity. The atheist State is first of all a State that takes complete charge of the lives and passions of men. The idolatized leader is first of all the one who leaves no haven for the establishment of division and contradiction. . . . Stalin believed in the classless society, and he was not entirely wrong when, in 1936, he declared it had been realized. He was not entirely wrong, because it was the socialist expression of the totalitarian dream of the advent of unity, the homogeneous, and the universal (emphasis mine). The "universal" is the danger performed by "Syntax." The explanations demonstrate the tautological condition of our language and politics: a transparent language in which all thought is resolved in the "I," a politics which is the embodiment of Sameness, both of which yield a vast generalization wherein the particulars making up a world are lost. By explaining the sacred, or rather by allowing the sacred to be explained by the found passages in the poems,
Blaser shows that, far from disappearing, the sacred as the pure imageless power of the One, is simply everywhere. It is precisely in the tautology that the sacred resides. Hence the warning in "Dreams, January, 1981," that "one may not lose divinity / -- there in our violence -- " ("S," p. 10), or the recognition in "Image-Nation 17" that "the sacred returns with all its faces, / fiery-footed" ("S," p. 31). In the atheist state, a face is just precisely what the sacred does not have, and in the absence of the chimera there is nothing to stand between the culture and the violent dissolution the Other is.

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Twenty-two years before "Syntax," Blaser had written in "Cups 5,"

Neither dark nor light
is my true love.

In "Syntax" the play of light and dark returns in a passage Blaser takes from Henry Corbin:

Light rising in the east and light going down in the west are two premonitions of an existential option between the world of Day with its criteria and the world of Night with its deep and insatiable passions. At best, on the boundary between the two we have a two fold twilight: the crepusculum vespertinum, no longer day but not yet night; the crepusculum matutinum, no longer night but not yet day. This striking image, as we know, was used by Luther to define the being of man ("S," pp. 39-40).

The being of man is caught in the play of light and dark, sacred and mundane, and when Blaser follows the quotation with the remark, "and Bach knew that definition," he is thinking,
perhaps, of the endlessly contrapuntal movement of doubles in Bach's work, a musical movement which has become part of his own poetic. If the "light" of the language of "Syntax" seems to carry the sacred easily, it is only the better to return to the hard recognition that the sacred is also a darkness that can erupt through the transparency of a life and language like a "screaming and / demented oyster" ("S," p. 23).
CONCLUSION

As a final note, I would like to draw attention to the activity Blaser's poetry offers the reader. The syntax of the poems, first of all, demands the reader's participation in its performance. Indeed, the fact that the syntax is a performance and not a description of events means that the reader must engage in the movement of the poetry if he is to approach it at all. The desiring mind, of the reader as well as of the poet, is not permitted to rest, to consume the poem, because what clarities it can gather are dispersed in the depths of the language. The poems provide interpretive, radiant images for themselves, images which are actual and therefore infinitely meaningful, and these image-rays will be necessarily re-designed in any single reading. Because the poet as sovereign has disappeared from the text, the reader is invited to bring his own idiosyncracies into the language play. What can be seen in an image-ray will depend to a certain extent upon the eye-sight of the see-er.

But this dramatic and literal quality of the poetry, while it offers no resolutions, is not deconstructive in the same way as is so much of the work which is generally classed under the problematic catch-all of the term post-modernism. The deconstruction of meaning often implies that because there is no center-as-presence, meaning does not exist. Blaser's
poetry, however suggests that meaning (Arendt's action and speech) is composed by the events of lived experience. In "Diary, April 11, 1981," Blaser discusses the desconstructive fetish of contemporary culture as exemplified in a recent film of the Arthurian legend:

. . . Boorman's arthurian realism, illuminated by Time and Newsweek, seems to dwell in his first syllable midway, the tough in the men's room -- after the lady of the lake floated to the surface, dressed in Sears' lame or fishskin, smiling -- said, 'I've got those books at home, this isn't it' pop-art doesn't ring twice, even Andy Warhol, unless the orange electric chair sits in the kitchen -- comfy well, they are our questions: was Arthur an idiot? didn't Uther take his armour off? was Merlin a charlatan of the dragon air, who maybe, knew something? was Gwenivere easy traffic? and Lancelot a beach boy in his Sunday best? it is true you can get art out of anything as it comes to be the backside of itself you see the actor acting in an anti-novel you see the novel noveling in the anti-poem, an aesthetic raspberry is thrilling and worn-out if all civilization is somebody's childhood and somebody sits there forever x-ing it out civilization it's called de-construction it is there and not there, so his this-isn't-it is exactly what it is perhaps ("S," p. 25)

Blaser's objection to the film lies in the fact that the filmmaker has reduced the "real" to the "true." In disarming the Arthurian myth of its magical qualities, in making its figures just like the boy or girl next door, he has ignored the power of the story as a composition of the imagination -- a polis which includes the invisible, as well as the materials
of everyday. Or more precisely, forgetting that the mundus resides in the mundane, he has disregarded the power of the imagination to assemble a meaningful story from the discontinuities of the events of an ordinary life. The "anti-novel" or "anti-poem" Blaser mentions does the same thing. It rejoices in the fact that the "absolute" or "transcendental" can be pulled down, as Philip Stevick says, in "Scheherezade runs out of plots":

New fiction consolidates an attempt rare in fiction before the modern period to present elements of its texture as devoid of value; yet new fiction, in contrast to certain areas of modern fiction, seeks this value-less quality not as an act of subtraction, or dehumanization or metaphysical mystification, not as a gesture of despair or nihilism, but as a positive act in which the joy of the observer is allowed to prevail as the primary quality of the experience.105

The key word in this passage is "observer." In such writing or visual art, the reader-audience is left to watch the spectacle provided by the author. He cannot approach the spectacle because the spectacle has already interpreted itself. The novel "novels," self-consciously. It tells him that it is an arbitrary arrangement and that it has already thought of all possible interpretations and has included them in the parade, so the reader may as well just sit back and watch. There is no opportunity for either action or speech.

Blaser's poetry, by sharp contrast, holds out the possibility of participation. The play of meaning is no less inconclusive than in the anti-poem or novel, but because the composition relocates, rather than dispenses with, ontology,
it holds out the possibility of a story -- one that the reader must help to compose. And by including the "gods" or the outside of being, Blaser's poetry offers a way to imagine being as a totality once again.

The tautology proposed by Boorman's Arthur constitutes the malaise of anthropocentric man. By that term I mean the man or culture which thinks the absolute equivalent to itself. As Blaser says in "Image-Nation 17,"

... this societal dream of itself as absolute reality, then practiced as uniformity and barbarism, is the oily turn-table of the round-house where we repair the engine again and again -- it is the absolute humanism that is repulsive -- reason darkened in the Enlightenment, a transparent manhood ... ("S," p. 30)

The reason of the Enlightenment, as Horkheimer and Adorno discuss it in Dialectic of Enlightenment, is that style of thought which is relentlessly positivistic, and which allows no metaphoric elements to disturb its ideal organization of the material world. In this kind of enlightened "reason" in which metaphor has no place, there is no way to include the unknown in thought. Assuming divinity, humanism forgets the particularities which compose its humanity and in so exalting man, loses him. As Bernard-Henri Lévy says, life, in such times, is a form of death. The state expels death in order to become it. In allowing the death/potentiality double to enter his poetry, and in restoring a distance between Self and Other, Sacred and mundane, Blaser offers a space in which it is possible to think the life of mortals, or, as "Lake of Souls" has it, the "acts of light" ("S," p. 40).
NOTES


I am referring to the following passage:

The author's conviction on this day of New Year is that music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance; that poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music; . . .


. . . the metaphor of the sphere comes to mind. The prelinguistic stage could be represented by the undifferentiated sphere. With the emergence of speech a differentiation sets in, the sphere articulating into a center and a spherical surface seen from within—as we see the horizon, for instance, or the starry sky. The center stands for speaking man, the surface for his world. The words trace boundaries on the surface; the figures they delimit are things named by words, "objects." This does not, however, reduce the sphere to a central point plus a surface. Not only speech exists; there is also music, tones, and the tones do not trace figures on the surface, do not extend in two dimensions on the surface but cut through it; they move outward and inward without creating something confronting them; they are pure beings of the third dimension, depth; they are, so to speak, perpendicular to the surface that represents the words. Consequently, we must assume the reality of such a "perpendicular": before and behind the surface there is not nothing.
The sphere is not merely a central point plus a surface; it also has depth.

3 The term "unthought" belongs to Michel Foucault. He explains this term in The Order of Things, in a passage I will quote and discuss in "Language."


5 Robert Duncan, "Returning to Les Chimeres of Gerard de Nerval," in poetry/audit, 4, No. 3 (1967), 49.


7 Blaser, "The Fire," in Caterpillar 12, 19; hereafter cited as "F."


In "The Practice of Outside," Blaser speaks of "the real" as a composition of the visible and invisible:

From After Lorca on, Jack works in a poetry that is a "compound of the visible and the invisible." These words are not so difficult once one realized that the visibility of men in speech opens on an invisibility he has not spoken or thought. This fundamental polarity extends into a space that is not recognized. The movement of Jack's work is to retie language and experience as they are composed in the exchange of visibility and invisibility. Perhaps, it was his knowledge as a professional linguist that brought him to this point in an understanding of a composing "real," --as a "sense" seems visible and a "nonsense" seems fallen out of the
visible or about to enter it ("PO," p. 276).


-Heaven is dead. - To you, I run! O matter, Blot out the cruel Ideal, blot out Sin For this martyr who comes to share the litter The happy human herd is bedded in,

For there I, since my brain, scraped clean as if The jar of greasepaint lying by the wall, Can no more daub the sobbing idea with life, Towards a dim daub would yawning fall . . .

In vain: I head the Blue, triumphant sing Among the bells. My soul, it takes a voice To scare us with its evil carolling, From living metal a clear angelus:

It rolls through mist, ancient and to the hilt Sinks in your native throes as blades strike true; Which way in pointless and perverse revolt?


The first improvisation in *Kora* takes the form of a discursive argument: proposition, qualification, conclusion, but the content of the improvisation is "nonsensical."

Fools have big wombs. For the rest?--here is penny-royal if one knows to use it. But time is only another liar, so go along the wall a little further: if blackberries prove bitter there'll be mushrooms, fairy-ring mushrooms, in the grass, sweetest of all fungi.

18 Blaser, "The Metaphysics of Light," in *Capilano Review,*
No. 6 (Fall 1974), p. 51; hereafter cited as "ML."

This essay was excerpted from a series of taped discussions Blaser gave concerning the biography of his work and life. The unpublished series is called The Astonishment Tapes, and they are in the possession of Professor Warren Tallman, of the University of British Columbia. Professor Tallman hosted the talks, and I am indebted to him for lending me the tapes.


And by the curved, carved foot of the couch, claw-foot and lion head, an old man seated
Speaking in the low drone . . . : Ityn!
Et ter flebiliter, Itys, Ityn!
And she went toward the window and cast her down,
'All the while, the while, swallows crying:
Ityn:
'It is Cabestan's heart in the dish.'
'It is Cabestan's heart in the dish?
'No other taste shall change this.'
And she went toward the window,
the slim white stone bar
Making a double arch;
Firm even fingers held to the firm pale stone:
Swung for a moment,
and the wind out of Rhodez
Caught in the full of her sleeve.


Edward and Vasse summarize the story of Cabestan as follows:

Guillem da Cabestanh, a late 12th century Provencal troubadour; because he loved Marguerite . . . wife of Raymond of Chateau Roussillon, Raymond killed Guillem and had his heart cooked and served to Marguerite; upon learning what she had eaten, Marguerite declared that since she had eaten such noble food, her lips should touch no other and threw herself out the window.


21 Pound, p. 20.

22 Charles Olson, "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You," in
23 Olson, "I, Maximus," p. 616.


27 In the Notes at the end of "The Stadium of the Mirror," Blaser says,

This operational language as distinct from the transparent language whether ideological or fictive - my sense of it must have come very early. My care has been to act in it. Recently, where I have moved to make it the ground of a changed consciousness, I searched every where for companionship. These men turned up as if waiting: Foucault in The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Thought Merleau-Ponty in his essay 'Eye and Mind' and in the last great book, The Visible and the Invisible ("SM," p. 66).


29 Foucault, Order, pp. 326-327.

30 Jack Spicer, "The Vancouver Lectures, #1," in Caterpillar 12, 3, No. 4 (July 1970), 179.


32 Merleau-Ponty, p. 215.


34 Derrida, p. 280.
Havelock discusses the differences between the oral, paratactic style of speaking of the pre-Socratic Greeks and the hypotactic, written discourse finally pushed to fruition by Plato. The orally based language was mimetic in nature. The written language placed a distance between subject and object, and made possible the growth of western science, but at the same time it cut off man's ties with his world. Havelock says:

It was his self-imposed task, building to be sure on the work of his predecessors, to establish two main postulates: that of the personality which thinks and knows, and that of a body of knowledge which is thought about and known. To do this he had to destroy the immemorial habit of self-identification with the oral tradition. For this had merged the personality with the tradition, and made a self-conscious separation from it impossible.

In referring to The Holy Forest I mean that section of the entire serial so entitled. All the serials together compose The Holy Forest, but within the oeuvre there is a Holy Forest section.

I am indebted to Professor Robert Dunham of Simon Fraser
University for pointing out the play on the word "moonshine" (moonshine as liquor, or moonshine as the light of the realm of the imaginary) (personal communication, 1982).

45 Professor Dunham has also suggested that there is a pun on "holes of intelligence" and "wholes of intelligence." "Wholes of intelligence" in the heart would imply that the outside of being, in which being is held, is intuited or held in the heart (personal communication, 1982).

46 In "The Stadium of the Mirror," Blaser quotes Claude Lefort and Merleau-Ponty in The Visible and the Invisible on the "wild logos":

The wild-logos
the reversability of experience and language
neither experience nor language is a reality that will suffice to itself alone
two aspects of the reversability which is ultimate truth
there is no frontier between language and world
A wild-logos to recognize the movement that prevents the fixing of the meaning of the thing, visible and invisible, and makes arise indefinitely, beyond the present given, the latent content of the world ("SM," p. 55)

These lines are taken from different places in The Visible and Invisible. The above passage, which informs my reference to "wild being," is Blaser's own assemblage.


49 Dante, p. 556.

50 Zuckerkandl, pp. 41-42.

51 Zuckerkandl, p. 73.

52 Zuckerkandl, p. 73.

The mythical stage: awakening of the individual spirit, opposition between man and the world felt as a polarity; awareness of self as existing in time; the individual in the process of emerging from the group.

pp. 190-204.


57 I have been led to make this connection between Cups and the Tarot partly through conversations with Blaser and his associates which have revealed Blaser's long standing interest in the occult.


60 A.E. Waite, p. 59.

61 Blaser treats the Kabbalah metaphorically, but this is not to say that many readers and/or initiates do not assume a strictly transcendental relationship between the godhead and mankind.


63 Blaser, Les Chimeres (San Francisco: Open Space, 1965), n.pag.; hereafter cited as LC.

The "black sun" is introduced in the first poem, called "The Shadow."


My argument here is informed by Girard's discussion of violence (the dissolution of social differences), as the source of the sacred image. (I will discuss this theory in more detail in the section on "Syntax.") Girard says:

This transformation of the real into the unreal is part of the process by which man conceals from himself the human origin of his own violence, by attributing it to the gods. To say that the monstrous double is a god or that he is purely imaginary is to say the same thing in different terms.

In the collective experience of the monstrous double the differences are not eliminated, but muddied and confused. All the doubles are interchangeable, although their basic similarity is never formally acknowledged. They thus occupy the middle ground between difference and unity that is indispensable to the process of sacrificial substitution—to the polarization of violence onto a single victim who substitutes for all the others. . . .

We can now appreciate the atmosphere of terror and hallucination that accompanies the primordial religious experience. When violent hysteria reaches a peak the monstrous double looms up everywhere at once. The decisive act of violence is directed against this awesome vision of evil and at the same time sponsored by it (emphasis mine).

In this line "Amor" is spelled "Amore" in the text. Blaser has told me this latter version was a misprint.
When Blaser was about nine years old, he met Cleo, a young man of about twenty-three, who befriended him, told him stories, took him for walks. Cleo's sensitivity and imagination (agates are pieces of blood that fall from the moon), made a strong impression on Blaser at that time.


Broch, p. 122.

Broch, p. 130.

I am indebted to Professor George Bowering of Simon Fraser University for suggesting the moth-butterfly double (personal communication, 1982).


Graves, p. 254.


Arendt, p. 158.

Arendt, p. 177.

In a note at the end of Image-Nations 13 & 14, Blaser quotes Ernst Bloch on "astonishment,"

Astonishment is the very source or origin of the world itself, ever at work and ever hidden away within the darkness of the lived instant, a source which becomes aware of itself for the first time in the signatures of its own estuaries as it resolves itself into them.


The world lies between people, and this in-between--much more than (as is often thought) men or even man--is today the
object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe. . . . The withdrawal from the world need not harm an individual; he may even cultivate great talents to the point of genius and so by a detour be useful to the world again. But with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men.


92 Here is the order of the Image-Nation poems as Blaser gave it to me in conversation:

Image-Nation 1 - before "The Translator," at the end of The Moth Poem

Image-Nation 2 - after "The Translator"

Image-Nation 3 - before Les Chimères

Image-Nation 4 - before Les Chimères

Image-Nation 5 - after Les Chimères, in two versions, one written in 1965, one in 1973 (with revisions in the intervening years)


Image-Nation 7 - after "The Cry of Merlin," at the end of The Holy Forest

Image-Nation 8 (1971), 9 and 10 (1972-3), 11 (1972), and 12 (1973) follow each other in order. Image-Nations 13 & 14 were published separately in 1975 (written in 1974) and were interrupted by "Luck Unluck Oneluck," "Sky-stone," "Suddenly," and "Gathering" which appear in the same volume. Image-Nation 15 was first published as a broadside by Barbarian Press, for William Hoffer, in Vancouver, in 1981, but along with Image-Nations 16 and 17, it will be included in "Syntax."


As it appears in The Holy Forest, "The Translator" is on page 37 of Caterpillar 12.

95 Jack Spicer, After Lorca, in The Collected Books of Jack Spicer, p. 34.

96 The phrase "sight, sound and intellect" belongs to Louis Zukofsky. Blaser prefaces "The Fire" with this paragraph:

I am writing about my poetry in relation to poetry. The writing had an occasion: for a few in San Francisco, where I read it last March 8th. I want to talk about the personalism and the so-called obscurity of my poems in relation to the sight, sound and intellect that compose them. "The test of poetry," in Zukofsky's words, "is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound and intellection" ("F," p. 15).

97 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, p. 31. In Blaser's "Lake of Souls," this passage appears on page 37 of "Syntax."

98 cf. footnote 71.


100 Lévy, pp. 13-14.

101 Here is the quotation Blaser takes from Lévy:

Totalitarianism is the new fact in our time? Yes, but we must emphasize that the crisis of the sacred is primary and decisive. The barbarian state is a forecast of our future? Yes, but it must be rooted in the inaugural oracle represented by the birth of the atheist state. . . . this is the first time the world has gone without a point of reference, an attachment to the divine ("S," p. 38)

The passage is taken from page 135 of Levy's Barbarism.
Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities. To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature.

The denial of absolute death no longer means an attempt to block the movement of time. In fact, the opposite occurs, since we constantly speed it up, accelerate it, and there is no pocket of immobility whose resistance is not broken. Nor is it in fact true that we attempt to halt the process of death. There is no end to the ways of provoking it and programming it, in the form of the "obsolescence" of commodities, and the "rotation" of capital, or the "cycle" of production. It is even less the case that we live close to death, as with a monster who has become reassuring through familiarity. Capitalism lives death, indeed it lives on death, all the while denying it and refusing to represent it.
Primary Sources: Works by Robin Blaser


*The Holy Forest.* *Caterpillar* 12, 3, No. 4 (July 1970), 24-47.


"Syntax." Unpublished manuscript in the private collection of Robin Blaser, in press.
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