

**CLAYTON ESHLEMAN**

**INTERVIEW WITH IRAKLI QOLBAIA**

**IRAKLI QOLBAIA:** Your poem, *Short Story*, begins with “Begin with this: the world has no origin”, and yet, there seems to be, in your poetry, a constant quest for origin - personal origins, origins of imagination / of poetry. There is even a Blakean “character”, Origin, in your early poem of the same title (referring to Cid Corman and his ‘origin?’). Could you talk about that sense of origin in your poetry, and more specifically, about your origins as a poet?

**CLAYTON ESHLEMAN:** My relationship to origins has been multifaceted. I think my first engagement was hearing at 16 years old on a 45 RPM record the bebop pianist Bud Powell play his improvisation on the standard tune “Tea for Two.” I listened to Powell’s version again and again trying to grasp the difference between the standard and what Powell was doing to and with it. Somehow an idea vaguely made its way through: you don’t have to play someone else’s melody--you can improvise (how?), make up your own melody line! WOW--really? You mean I don’t have to repeat my parents? I don’t have to “play their melody” for the rest of my life? Later I realized that Powell had taken a trivial song and transformed it into an imaginative structure. While reading the Sunday newspaper comics on the living-room floor was probably my first encounter, as a boy, with imagination, Powell was my first experience, as an adolescent, with the force of artistic presence and certainly the key figure involved in my becoming a poet when I was 23 years old.

Soon after starting to try to write poetry at Indiana University in 1958 I found Cid Corman’s poetry journal called *Origin* in the library. I began a correspondence with Cid and when I was living in Kyoto, Japan, in 1962, I went to the coffee shop where Cid, also living in Kyoto at the time, could be found every evening. For a couple of years I watched him edit *Origin* and learned a lot about translating poetry from him. Corman was the first American translator of the great German poet Paul Celan and, while in Kyoto, as my poetic apprenticeship project, I decided to translate Cesar Vallejo’s *Poemas humanos* into English.

During this period I worked on Vallejo most afternoons downtown in another Kyoto coffee shop called *Yorunomado* (the word means “night window” in English). In the only poem I completed to any real satisfaction while living in Japan, I envisioned myself as a kind of angel-less Jacob wrestling with a figure who possessed a language the meaning of which I was attempting to wrest away. I lose the struggle and find myself on a seppuku (or suicide) platform in medieval Japan, being commanded by Vallejo (now playing the role of an overlord)

to disembowel myself. I do so, imaginatively-speaking, cutting the ties to my “given” life and releasing a daemon I named Yorunomado who until that point (my vision told me) had been chained to an altar in my solar plexus. Thus at this point the fruits of my struggle with Vallejo were not a successful literary translation but an imaginative advance in which a third figure emerged from my intercourse with the text. Thus death and regeneration = seppuku and the birth of Yorunomado, or a breakthrough into what might be called sacramental existence.

While Bud Powell and Yorunomado (via Vallejo) provided brief, if essential, adventures with origin, the crucial event after leaving Japan in 1964 was my 1974 discovery of Upper Paleolithic, or Cro-Magnon, cave art in southwestern France. My wife Caryl and I had, at the suggestion of a friend, rented an apartment in a farm house in the Dordogne countryside and after visiting some of these Ice Age caves I was completely caught up in the deep past. This grand transpersonal realm (without a remaining history or language) was about as far away from my background as could be, and I revisited and researched the painted caves throughout the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, becoming the first poet anywhere to do what the poet Charles Olson called “a saturation job” on the origins of art as we know it today. To follow poetry back to Cro-Magnon metaphors not only hits read bedrock--a genuine back wall--but gains a connection to the continuum during which imagination first flourished. My growing awareness of the caves led to the recognition that, as an artist, I belong to a pretradition that includes the earliest nights and days of soul-making. Wesleyan University Press published my book, a study composed of both poetry and prose, *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*, in 2003.

**IQ:** Clayton, there are many possible questions contained in your response and I would like to come back to several of them at later points; but at this point I wished to ask about the American poetry scene at the time of your decision to become a poet. You mention the year 1958, as a sort of starting point for you – in two years Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* was to come out. Can you talk about that moment, as well as that informal, but interconnected (it seems to me) movement that was afoot at the time you started? You mention Olson and Corman; could you talk about other poets who were important to you, older or your generation? You talk about Vallejo, as a master poet; who were some initial American masters? Is it possible to talk about what that wave of New American Poetry (generally / personally for you) represented?

**CE:** In 1957 I took a course in 20th century American poetry at Indiana University

in Bloomington, Indiana with Professor Robert G. Kelly. I was an undergraduate senior majoring in Philosophy at the time. We studied mainly early 20th century poets and I recall writing a term paper on Robinson Jeffers' long poem "Roan Stallion."

The following year I met the graduate student and poet Jack Hirschman and his wife Ruth. The Hirschmans had come to Indiana University from New York City where they knew the young poets Robert Kelly and Jerome Rothenberg. The Hirschmans were also aware of a number of major 20th century European poets (Lorca, Breton, Rilke, for example) and they introduced me to many of the poets I am still reading today. Jack and Ruth ran a poetry recital club called Babel, and I gave my first poetry program there by reading translations of St.-John Perse. It was at this time that I also discovered the poetry journal *Origin* in the university library, and became aware of poets like Allen Ginsberg (whose poem *Howl* published in 1956 was notoriously popular at this time), and Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Paul Blackburn whose writings also began to be published in the 1950s. At this time I also found the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo in a Latin American poetry anthology and began to inspect the translations with bilingual dictionaries (I was shocked to find how inaccurately a lot of the poetry had been translated and I think that awareness was crucial in my later becoming a translator of Neruda, Vallejo, Aimé Césaire and Antonin Artaud). This was the epoch when thousands of young Americans were "on the road" and in the summer of 1958 I hitchhiked to Mexico, a journey that inspired my subsequent years spent in Japan and France. While in Kyoto from 1962 to 1964, I read all of William Blake's poetry and struggled through the jungle of his long prophetic poems like *The Four Zoas*, *Milton: A Poem*, and *Jerusalem*. Without the inspiration from tackling Blake's writing (I once passed out in Kyoto while reading *The Book of Urizen*) I do not think I would have had the courage to birth *Yorunomado*.

All of the poets mentioned above, along with Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Gary Snyder, Adrienne Rich, have informed my sense of what poetry is and what it can be. Of all of these poets I think Hart Crane has meant the most to me over the decades. Poems like "Lachrymae Christi" and "The Wine Menagerie" stopped me in my tracks in the way that some of Blake did. I was being asked to stretch to accommodate an uncommon sense of things that I was intuitively convinced was not nonsense or pointlessly obscure. Crane's metaphoric shifts recall Powell's pell-mell bebop riffs or Soutine's earthquake rumba landscapes.

Here are a few comments on other poets I have mentioned, all of whom have been very important to me.

Since the 1950s, when he read his poems about the Native American trickster Coyote in San Francisco when Allen Ginsberg read Part One of *Howl*, Gary Snyder has been developing a sensual landscape-attuned poetry of change and becoming that in the light of our current awareness of planetary potential and doom has become a clearing in American consciousness. It presents itself as ruggedly and thoroughly as monumental Chinese Sung Dynasty landscape painting in a context of interconnectedness involving lore, research, meditation, and a range of living and mythical companions. *Mountains And Rivers Without End* (1996) was Snyder's 16th book, 138 pages of text, 39 poems in 4 sections or movements. This work was struck off a Sung Dynasty scroll painting as, scene by scene, it unfurls, redirecting Whitman's "adhesive love" from solely human comradeship to a comradely display that includes Artemisia and white mountain sheep. Snyder adheres to the Buddhist principle of emptiness: there is no self, everything we see and are is empty. Thus the absence of the sensitive or tormented psychological subject in his poetry. To overturn 2000 years of Christian dominion over "unchristian" nature, the scale of values had to be massively rebalanced. *Mountains And Rivers Without End* was the first major Western poem to sweepingly foreground the natural world from a Buddhist perspective and, without cynicism, to present civilization on a sharply diminished scale.

Robert Kelly is probably the most prolific American poet of the 20th and (so far) 21st century, being the author of over seventy collections of poetry, several novels, four works of short fiction, and two theoretical/critical books. Kelly is inventive in the way that Picasso was: he can improvise intelligently and imaginative on anything that strikes his ear, heart, or gaze. Kelly thinks of the poet as a scientist of holistic understanding. Guy Davenport has written: "No American poet except perhaps Wallace Stevens has his sense of balance in a line. What Eliot and Pound slaved over Kelly seems to have an innate gift for balancing out. He has the Chinese sense of bringing diverse things together into a stark symbol, and is happiest when he himself can't quite see the meaning of the sign he's made. I should think he would be interesting to the philosophers (had we any), for he seems to me to be a man determined to think deeply and carefully about Being itself (perhaps the one subject that pervades his poetry)."

Jerome Rothenberg's *Khurbn* (1989) is the great middle-length (40 pages) poem of our times; it takes place with a handful of other poems of similar length and scope, such as Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* or Vladimir Holan's *A Night with*

*Hamlet*. The Jewish agony in the Nazi killing centers has been researched, testified to, and documented: *Khurbn* is the first American poem I know of to engage this agony emotionally, intellectually, and imaginatively. It pulls Adorno's "After Auschwitz, there can be no poetry" inside out, to read: "After Auschwitz, there is only poetry." Such a revisioning charges all poets everywhere to consider to what extent poetry itself is the language of the one hundred fifty million "violently departed" of the 20th century. *Khurbn* is precisely personal, horrifying, tender and structurally astute. Hearing Rothenberg read it several decades ago, I felt the eels of the brutalized, invisible for so many years, begin to move under my skin.

From 1996 until her death in 2012, Adrienne Rich and I wrote to each other regularly and exchanged poems in progress. In the summer of 1999, she wrote to me: «I am trying to imagine a poetics of absolute resistance which has critical resistance as its stable field yet can invoke many kinds of bending of language, but which does not depend for its testimony of resistance, simply on bending the language. A poetics that would be, both in spirit and method, resistant to the calculated destabilizations of content and context of our time--language proceeding from an indignant, outraged, undomesticated consciousness that is torqued and fired so that it indents that consciousness indelibly into the page." Rich has also written: "Self-trivialization, contempt for women, misplaced compassion, addiction; if we could purge ourselves of this quadruple poison, we would have minds and bodies more poised for the act of survival and rebuilding" and "Art means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage."

**IQ:** Every careful reader of your work, I trust, will recognize the points you share with the poets you have so carefully considered above. But about Gary Snyder you write: "the absence of the sensitive or tormented psychological subject in his poetry". I have a belief that one of the major (often devastating) forces of your poetry has been exactly the refusal to empty the poem completely of the sensitive and tormented self. Even in your poems directly concerned with the Upper Paleolithic, the self is present. In this I think your writing might be closer to the poets you have translated – Vallejo, Artaud, Césaire, Holan – that personal, "darkness in the heart" should be ever present, no matter what transpersonal depths the poem might reach. Do you think this an accurate view of a certain aspect of your work? If so, could you comment on that necessity, for the poet, to be "the other", but only at the cost of drilling through oneself?

**CE:** I disagree that, to quote you, "personal darkness in the heart should be ever present,

no matter what transpersonal depths the poem might reach.” I want the blackness in the heart of man to be engaged as part of my primary stabilizations and concentrations, but I do not want it to rule. The imaginative world that I have attempted to create includes my twenty-five year research via the Ice Age painted caves of southwestern France on the origin of image-making, a number of poems on such artists as Caravaggio, Soutine, Leon Golub, Unica Zurn and Hieronymus Bosch, and book-length translation projects including Cesar Vallejo, Aimé Césaire, Antonin Artaud, Michel Deguy, Bei Dao, Vladimir Holan, and Jose Antonio Mazzotti. While I seek to build an atmosphere of political awareness into much of what I write, I realize that being beholden to an agenda can be as undermining to imagination as self-censorship. I primarily agree with Wyndham Lewis’s view that the basis of art is that of clearing new ground in consciousness. Unless poets stave off and admit at the same time, keeping open to the beauty and the horror of the world while remaining available to what their perceptivity and subconscious provide them with, one is pretty much left with an unending “official verse culture.”

Gary Snyder became in his twenties a life-long Zen Buddhist and he believes that religion is a central part of his psychological/spiritual being. In an interview in the Winter 1996 Paris Review, he said: “I don’t think art makes a religion. I don’t think it helps you teach your children how to say thank you to the food, how to view questions of truth and falsehood, or how not to cause pain or harm to others. Art can certainly help you explore your own consciousness and your own mind and your own motives, but it does not have a program to do that... I think that art is very close to Buddhism and can be part of Buddhist practice, but there are territories that Buddhist psychology and Buddhist philosophy must explore, and that art would be foolish to try to do.”

I was raised in Indianapolis in a Presbyterian household. My father was a deacon in the nearby Fairview Presbyterian Church, and my mother sang in the choir there. I never had any interest in religion and when I discovered poetry I realized that this would be my life commitment and that I did not require any additional philosophy or religion to help me realize what I wanted to accomplish. I have a negative view of religion, not only for humankind in general but specifically for artists. I think religion acts as a governor on the imaginative auto and that poets who become religious in their 40s or 50s do so at the risk of compromising their imaginative focus and energies. From time to time I have speculated that Gary Snyder is potentially a wilder man than he has allowed himself to be. At the same time I recognize that his background and sensibility are so different from my own and that his accomplishments as a poet and naturalist are extraordinary. Unlike writers who

become religious as part of some sort of midlife crisis, Gary Snyder's Buddhism appears to have taken root during his early 20s when he was a timber scaler and fire lookout and his masterpiece that I mentioned earlier is part of a long and daily meditative practice out of which that poem was generated and designed.

**IQ:** I quote, once more, Gary Snyder from your response, in relation to art / religion "there are territories [...] that art would be foolish to try to [explore]." Do you think there are territories that art would be foolish to explore? Should the poem not be open to everything?

**CE:** I don't know what Gary has in mind by that claim, which to this day appears questionable, even naïve to me. I wish that Eliot Weinberger, the interviewer, has challenged that assertion. If the poet and Buddhist Gary Snyder knows of such "territories" that Buddhist psychology and philosophy "must explore" it would appear that Snyder himself should explore them. "Foolish" is the troubling word here.

**IQ:** Can we dwell on some of this for a little longer?

I wanted to clear up my ideas about the "darkness" I referred to. I think there is a presence of radical image and thought in your poetry and this makes me think of your description of a certain kind of poet as the "the conductor of the pit", not of the orchestra. This I understood as your command that poet (and poem) be concerned with the unconscious, unknown, uncharted. In the book of the same name, besides the poets you already mentioned (Vallejo, Artaud, Césaire, Holan) there was also Rimbaud. I also thought another poet who could qualify as a conductor of the pit is Lautréamont. In your essay (from *Companion Spider*), you quoted Bachelard: "there is "a need to animalize that is at the origins of imagination. The first function of imagination is to create animal forms.""

Could you comment on your interest in that "pit", as well as the motive of animalizing (oneself? imagination?) as an important one in your body of work? I also thought that your relation to the radical, the hybrid, the "pit", darkness, or the "animal", have taken a new, deeper function since you started exploring the caves and the Upper Paleolithic Imagination.

**CE:** My primary belief concerning poetry is that it is about the extending of human consciousness, creating a symbolic consciousness that in its finest moments overcomes the



dualities in which the human world is cruelly and eternally, it seems, enmeshed. Here I think of Paul Tillich's words: "A life process is the more powerful, the more non-being it can include in its self-affirmation, without being destroyed by it." Affirmation is only viable when it survives repeated immersions in negation. The problem of focusing at large on brutality and filth is that in doing so symbolic consciousness is flattened out by agit-prop and poetically-disguised journalism. I see the blackness in the heart of mankind as an important aspect, no more, of the imaginative world I am attempting to create.

I have come to believe that the "I," that selva of the self, along with its chauffeur, the ego, should be opened up and explored in what might be identified as the antiphonal flow, in Northrop Frye's words, "of a bicameral mind in which something else supplants consciousness."

When I proposed to forget the orchestra and conduct the pit, I had in mind not only the subconscious but the Ice Age realm of the decorated caves. I wrote the poem "Deeds Done and Suffered by Light" in northern Italy in 1979 when I was about five years into my twenty-five year "saturation job" on the Upper Paleolithic underworld. You mention "animalizing oneself." My thinking concerning the origin and elaboration of cave image making began with an intuition while visiting the Combarelles cave just outside of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac in the French Dordogne: that it was motivated by a crisis in which Cro-Magnon people began to separate the animal out of their about-to-be human heads and to project it onto cave walls as well as onto a variety of portable tools and weapons often made out of the animals themselves. In other words, that the liberation of what might be called the autonomous imagination came from within as a projective response on the part of those struggling to differentiate themselves from, while being deeply bonded to, the animal. This would be more like a deanimalization than an animalization.

The separating out of the animal as a formative function of Cro-Magnon imagination indicated, on a daily, practical level, the increasing separation between human and animal domains. I conjecture that this separation was brought about in part by action-at-a-distance weapons (the spear, the spear-thrower, the harpoon, and probably the bow and arrow). Shamanism, or what might be more accurately termed proto-shamanism, may have come into being as a reactionary swerve from this separation continuum, to rebind human being to the fantasy of that paradise that did not exist until the separation was sensed.

In the poem in which I urge conduction of the pit I also write: "Hanged Ariadne giving

birth in Hades is the rich black music in mother's tit." To integrate Hades (the first version of which was surely those ancient decorated caves) would be to assimilate subconscious information and patterns, via dreams, fantasies, slips of the tongue, and the recognition of impulsive behavior. Were every American man to get up in the morning and state out loud: "I am a potential killer and am responsible for everything that I do and that happens to me today"—and mean it, America might become less lethal. I attempted to deal with the potential killer in me near the end of my poem "Coils" (in the book, *Coils*, 1973). I let my darkest specter speak. When I read that poem in poetry readings in the mid-70s, I put a paper bag over my head with eye slits (a kind of cartoon of a Ku Klux Klan hood) when I read that section. Audiences must have thought I was crazy. Which in that speech I was.

**IQ:** I thought the quotation from Northrop Frye is very important for understanding some of the directions you (as well as some others, close to you) seem to have taken in your poetic practice.

You have reinforced my belief that the darkness and the pit are to be related with unconscious as well as (and in your case, probably more importantly) with the cave, the cave-art, the Upper Paleolithic. This means that no matter what negativity may need to enter the poem, that darkness is mainly a positive, an affirmative force related to the imagination and the extension of consciousness. Could you explain a little more how you "entered the cave"; how your 'saturation job' began and how did this actual, physical practice of cave exploration become the principal fire-source of your poetry?

**CE:** The most complete response to this question is in my essay, "The Back Wall of Imagination: Notes on the Juniper Fuse project," to be found in my book *Archaic Design* (Black Widow Press, 2007). In the spring of 1974 we rented a furnished apartment in a farmhouse outside of Les Eyzies-de-Tayac in the French Dordogne, and soon after moving in we met the archeologist H.L. Movius Jr who had been doing research on sites near Les Eyzies for decades. Movius arranged for us to visit the original Lascaux cave (which had been closed to the public since 1963; in 1974, groups of up to five people were allowed in the cave for forty-five minutes four days a week). The guide, Jacques Marsal (one of the original discoverers of Lascaux in 1940), made us all wait in total darkness at the entrance to the Rotunda (having passed through three steel doors and having cleansed our shoe soles in a formalin solution tray). He walked away and after a minute or so turned on the muted lights. Four immense aurochs, at once moving swiftly yet static, appeared, occupying nearly sixty feet

of a curving, crystal-white wall space. Across and below them, as if sprinkled there, moving in different directions, were small horses and deer. All of us were spellbound. I think that “moment of moments” sounded something in me that I could only respond to and realize through the writing of a book.

To begin to write into what I had experienced in such caves as Lascaux, Combarelles, and Font-de-Gaume entailed mounting a research project from scratch, and undertaking a poetic investigation that ended up spanning twenty-five years. While I had other projects during this period—poems not associated with prehistory, a translation of Cesar Vallejo’s book, *Trilce*, the essays collected in *Antiphonal Swing*, and editing *Sulfur* magazine for 19 years—the caves were the over-arching preoccupation project. Ideally, every poet should undertake at least one big investigative project that brings into poetry materials that have previously not been a part of it. This is one way that we keep our art fresh and not diluted with variations played on tried and true themes. The investigative project also makes one responsible for a huge range of materials, the assimilation of which goes way beyond the concerns of the personal lyric.

Caryl and I initially went to France at the point when I had worked through my apprenticeship to poetry—in *Indiana* (1969), *Altars* (1971), and *Coils* (1973)—years of self-confrontation involving an excavation, at times ruthless, of my Indiana background, in effect, my given life, including its racist, Christian, and sexist values. In 1973, I was hungry for an alternative to myself. Going to the Dordogne the following spring was utter serendipity. I was suddenly faced with an ancient transpersonal world, one that is still, decade after decade (starting for the most part at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), revealing the shards, as it were, of its once magnificent vessel.

**IQ:** As the affirmative aspect has been brought up, I thought it fair and important to ask you about another major affirmation throughout your work, namely, love and your manifold relation to your wife, Caryl, that many poems (say, from earlier “Eternity” to later “Combined Object”) directly address. I believe your poems addressing love are an extremely powerful and original extension of “love poetry”.

And beyond that, desire to integrate the woman, unhinged by the moulds of male imagination (while addressing the history-long male oppression), seems yet another principal aspect in your work. Am I somewhat correct in thinking so?

**CE:** Caryl and I rented a Volkswagen one Sunday in the spring of 1970, drove to Harriman State Park (New York) and ate LSD in the woods. Filled with that poison I began to shout for Hollie, my “new” Marie, another person I had chosen to desire as self-torture. We came back to the car at dusk, the parking-lot filled with picnicking Puerto Ricans. Caryl had her camera and we started taking pictures of each other over the back of the car. Once, looking through the lens I saw her—Caryl—not La Muerte, femme fatal, or mousewife but an exasperated, sweating woman who was original! Not the image of Woman, not superficial: fresh. This was the crucial moment in the early phase of our relationship. There is a more detailed account of this event in the last two pages of the poem “Coils” in my book *Coils*.

In the fall of 1973 in Paris, I began to regularly show Caryl poems I was working on and to ask her opinions about whether they made imaginative sense or not. For some forty years she has defined the meaning of “reader” and “editor” for me. As a sounding board, she has been invaluable. Her responses, mingling confirmation and resistance, have helped me see through superficial clarities as well as groundless obscurities. More specifically, she has rewritten passages (while in draft) or changed the direction of certain poems with a deft phrase and has taught me to allow another person to enter my creative space with rapport and love.

In the beginning, I was unsure as to whether I should share this activity with anyone. Being unsure meant that to share it with Caryl was a constant assault on my ego, putting my convictions on this or that to a test that often came down to whether what I had written made any kind of uncommon or even common sense. I think that this activity has been, and continues to me, one of the best things that has happened to me as a poet. I am confident that my body of work as it stands today would not have been realized without her key presence in my life.

Here is the dedication to my book *Juniper Fuse, Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*: “Lespinasse, 1974: we carried our dinner outside to the stone table on the landing by the door to our second floor Bouyssou apartment. The farm was on a rise which slopped down through an apple orchard. When we sat down to eat, well before sunset, we had for entertainment an extraordinary sky. Clouds would come floating over the woods, spreading out over us. Puff collisions Mickey House ears, shredding gargoyles, turrets, vales, mammoth apparitions densifying and disintegrating as they appeared. Many reminded us of the images we were trying to make out on the cave walls. To sit at that stone table—what an experience—to be in love there, at one of the most vital times in our many years together.

Much of what happened—the ‘event aspects’—during our first spring and summer in the Dordogne is now as dispersed as the clouds we used to watch—yet it billows in us, an inclusive cloud whose heart is ours.”

From my first summer in Mexico, 1958, to the present, women have continually been one of the main focuses in my writing. I wrote about my mother in the poem “Hand,” my complicated 1968 girlfriend Marie Benoit in “Diagonal,” Adrienne Winograd for whom I left my first wife Barbara for in 1966 in “The Golden String,” Caryl Eshleman’s childhood in “Sugar,” and in the book *What She Means* (1978) there are many poems in which she appears. In 1981 I wrote a poem on the life of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, and in 1986 addressed my mythological heroine Ariadne in “Ariadne’s Reunion.” Some of my most ambitious poems have been on women painters like Nora Jaffe, Unica Zurn, Nancy Spero, Joan Mitchell, Laura Solorzano, and Dorothea Tanning. And in my poems concerning the Upper Paleolithic caves I address a vulvaform I call “Our Lady of the Three-Pronged Devil,” “the mothers of Lascaux,” a three-inch tall female statuette carved from mammoth tusk, “The Venus of Lespugue” in “Matrix, Blower,” and the great Black Goddess in the cave of Le Combel that appears to be one of the first visions of The World Tree.

**IQ:** There is a notion you bring up, here as well as elsewhere, that I thought might interest those yet unfamiliar with your work and practice in general: that of apprenticeship. ‘Apprenticeship’ might sound bizarre to many people interested in poetry today and I think it is something utterly unique that you have (re-)introduced in the poetic practice. Could you shortly explain what poetic apprenticeship means to you?

**CE:** The most complete response to this question is to be found in “A Translation Memoir” at the end of my translation of *The Complete Poetry of Cesar Vallejo* (University of California Press, 2007). One afternoon in Kyoto in 1962 a friend, the American lithographer Will Petersen, mentioned that he had just visited a bonsai gardener who had completed his apprenticeship and was doing very interesting work. I had never thought of apprenticeship before, and I asked Will how old this man was. “He’s in his early sixties,” Will responded. Other than being moved that an artist would have such a long apprenticeship before doing his own work, I began to think that my difficulties in writing meaningful poems might be involved with my never having put myself through an apprenticeship. So I decided that instead of just trying to read the eighty-nine poems in Cesar Vallejo’s *Poemas humanos* which I had brought to Japan, maybe I should try to translate them as my apprenticeship to poetry.

To do that meant an awesome commitment of psyche as well as time, especially since my Spanish was poor and self-taught, and Vallejo's poetry was very dense and complex. And in committing myself to such a project, was I simply evading the hard work of trying to find my way in poetry of my own? Or could I think of working on Vallejo as a way of working on myself?

In the afternoon I would ride my motorcycle downtown and work on translations in the Yorunomado coffee shop. Now, both in translating and working on poems of my own, I felt a weird resistance as if every attempt I made to advance was met by a force that pushed me back. I was as if through Vallejo I had made contact with a negative impaction in my being, a nebulous depth charge that I had been carrying around with me for many years. I also began to have violent and morbid fantasies that seemed provoked by the combination of translating and writing. I realized that I was struggling with a man as well as a text, and that this struggle was a matter of my becoming or failing to become a poet, and that this man I was struggling with was the old Clayton who was resisting change. The old Clayton wanted to continue living in his white Presbyterian world of "light"—where man is associated with day/clarity/good and woman with night/opaqueness/bad. The darkness that was beginning to spread through my sensibility could be viewed as the breaking up of the belief in male supremacy that had generated much of that "light."

In an earlier response to one of your questions I mentioned a poem about struggling with a figure in this coffee shop. That poem is "The Book of Yorunomado."

The above should give you and your readers some idea of my apprenticeship, which also involved my conversations with Cid Corman, and once back in America in 1964, discovering the text of the Vallejo *Poemas humanos* that I was trying to translate had many errors and that the original manuscript was in the hands of Vallejo's French widow in Lima, Peru. In the spring of 1965, with my first wife Barbara pregnant, we left for Lima with a few hundred dollars. Once in Lima, I met Georgette Vallejo who refused to give me access to the worksheets upon which the various editions of *Poemas humanos* were based. It was not until 1974, when I was living in Los Angeles with Caryl, that I was given access to the Moncloa edition of the book which for the first time reproduced Vallejo's worksheets.

**IQ:** We have touched upon the early stage (the apprenticeship/coming in terms with Indiana past) of your work, as well as what could be viewed as your maturity or gaining the fully formed singular voice as a poet (saturation job/involvement with the sacramental existence)

that has culminated in *Juniper Fuse* (around two decades in making), which I would consider a work in many ways central not only in your body of work but, more generally, in the poetry of our time. There is yet another stage that you have been pursuing since and that you have elsewhere called “summational.” As a reader, I first sensed it intensely in a poem called “The Tjurunga”, where the lifelong work and involvement of the poet comes together as a constellation. From the few poems that have been available, your new book, *Penetralia*, struck me as central to this summational stage. Could you talk about this? Further, sensing that the word “penetralia”, as related to your work, could be important in many ways, could you explain what it means for you/in the context of the book?

**CE:** I often open my 1955 *Webster’s New International Dictionary* and read a few pages at random. Doing so, one day a few years ago, I came across the word “penetralia” which was defined as: “The innermost or most private parts of thing or place, especially of a temple or palace.” A second definition followed: “Hidden things of secrets; privacy; sanctuary; as the sacred penetralia of the home.” Since I like words and phrases for book titles that to my knowledge have not been used by others as titles for poetry collections, I decided, then in my late 70s, that “penetralia” would be an appropriate and unique title for what might be my last collection of poetry, one that often ruminated on end matters, or summational engagements. There are, of course, a number of poems in this collection that do not directly do this, but the tone of the writing, along with the end shadowings, justify such a title.

You mention a poem, “The Tjurunga,” published in *Anticline* (Black Widow Press, 2010) that I mentioned was one of the two “soulend” supports, along with the 1964 “Book of Yorunomado,” holding the rest of my poetry in place. In this later poem I propose a kind of complex mobile (invoking the poet Robert Duncan’s re-reading of the mysterious Aranda ritual object) made up of the authors, mythological figures and acts, whose shifting combinations undermined and reoriented my life during my poetic apprenticeship in Kyoto, Japan, in the early 1960s. At a remove of some forty-five years I saw these forces as a kind of GPS (global positioning system) constantly “recalculating” as they closed and opened door after door. Thinking back to Vallejo pointing at my gut (in “The Book of Yorunomado”) and indicating that I was to commit seppuku I was struck by the following quotation from James Hillman’s *Animal Presences*: “The theological message of the Siva-Ganesha, father-son pattern can be summarized in this way: submit that you may be saved, be destroyed that you may be made whole. The sacrificial violence is not the tragic conclusion but the necessary beginning of a passage into a new order... the God who breaks you makes you; destruction and creativity ultimately spring from the same source.”