



Robert Kelly : A Celebration

Presented by :
The Poetry Project
& Ta'wil Productions
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Video & interview by Pierre Joris & Nicole Peyralitte
Interview recorded in Robert Kelly & Charlotte Mandell Kelly's garden
on the afternoon of Sunday August 30th 2020

The Book(let)
including texts of
introduction,
interview
& poems



Hylonoetic:
everything that is or was
in any sense alive
has consciousness.
And everything with consciousness
can talk. And does talk.
And we can learn to hear.
Wood or metal,
carapace or bone,
winged or worm—
they all report.
Things think.
Matter sings.

Mark Kelly

INTRODUCTION BY PIERRE JORIS

Welcome to the virtual Poetry Project for real poetries! The pleasure of the occasion tonight is double: We celebrate the poet Robert Kelly's immense oeuvre with the second volume of a 2-volume set of books, the first of which came out in 2014 and is called *A Voice Full of Cities : The Collected Essays of Robert Kelly*, edited by myself and Peter Cockelbergh. The second one, coming out today, is *A City Full of Voices: Essays on the Work of Robert Kelly*, edited by myself with Peter Cockelbergh & Joel Newberger. Both are published by Contra Mundum Press & I would like here to thank the publisher Rainer Hanshe (from whom you'll hear briefly later on this evening) & Alessandro Segalini, CMP's masterful designer for making these 754 + 591 = 1345 pages possible. The covers are — & may they be deeply thanked — by Nicole Peyrafitte for the first volume, and by Carolee Schneemann for the 2nd. Carolee left us before the book went to the printer's — but she is in our hearts and minds even tonight. I would further like to thank the poets & writers & friends — 53 in all — who contributed to honoring Kelly's work with and through their writing.

The doubleness I spoke of is however not that of the two books. It is that of celebrating both the books and the man Robert Kelly who's 85 birthday is tomorrow, 24 September. Joyeux anniversaire & Many Happy Returns, from all of us, dear Robert! My quandary was of course this: what should come first, mention of the oeuvre or mention of the man responsible for the oeuvre. If I had a forked tongue or two mouths, I would speak to them simultaneously, but given the way things are I have to proceed sequentially: so I mention the new book first, as it speaks of your books, 100 plus by now, they all make a mountain on which you can stand, or sit or

lounge, and look out over that gorgeous valley slopes down from the Sawkill to the Hudson.

A few words about the new book: What we wanted to accomplish was what Robert had proposed in the mid 70s, a turn away from traditional “literary criticism” toward what he called the “deictic,” — deictic from Greek *deiknumi*, I demonstrate, rather than “criticism” which comes from *krino*, I judge. Thus a writing that “gestures towards, walks along beside, asserts ontologies, abstains from evaluations...” An open gesture that shows & accompanies the work it reads is exactly the kind of writing our contributors are proposing. As in the first volume, we organized the materials into 12 “books” combining a broad chronological focus with one of the key concepts that traverse both volumes, such as image, narrative, the occult / knowledge, line & measure, etc. Picking up a cue from the tantric weavings of *The Loom & Threads*, we wove 24 *THREADS* into the books consisting of interview excerpts that directly or indirectly, speak to the “books” they precede. Thus these books, ostensibly a *Collected Essays* of RK & the first major collection of essays on his work, thus also contains a secret *Selected Interviews* of R.K.

Tonight, after this introduction you can watch a film by Nicole Peyrafitte & me consisting of an interview with and readings by Robert. It being impossible to fit the immense & innumerable worlds of Robert Kelly into one short film, we decided to ask him about only 4 things: South, West, North & East. After the film you can watch a range of videos made as homages to Robert Kelly by a number of the contributors to the new book.

Thank you, Robert for your work, from me and from all of us! I have been reading this work since I arrived at Bard College from Europe in 1967 & it has been & remains a pleasure of continuous discovery, succor in times of distress like these, and a way to orient (or should that be occident?) myself as I move about this, our common shore. And now, as we called those “Threads” in the book, *Robert Says*:



RK Interview: SOUTH

I'm looking at our Linden trees right now remembering that the major thorough fare where I grew up is called Linden Boulevard. It ran along the edge Brooklyn, beyond it were the marshes where I spent much of my childhood. Pierre reminded me recently that when I first moved up here I said that I had moved to 2097th street — actually now it's 2092nd Street because I moved five blocks further south. I wanted then very much to be connected with the city, I had not spent a lot of time in the country, but I had dread of being isolated from, not the Manhattan of business, but from the Brooklyn of neighborhoods, Brownsville, Greenpoint, Ridgewood — the places I loved the old... the marshes. I was afraid I would never find anything like that — I never have found anything that remotely looked like my neighborhood until we spent some time in Venice some years ago on the mainland Mirano, and there the streets were, had a feel, just like Brooklyn, the old roads in the 1940s and 50s. South. So I am... the problem with Brooklyn — I won't speak of New York I don't know New

York, I know Brooklyn — the problem with Brooklyn is that it does not go away: I dream there when I dream at all, I dream in Brooklyn. Sometimes I have some not scary dreams of been stuck in New York, Manhattan, not being able to get back to Brooklyn, to an apartment I haven't even seen in 70 years. But the dreams tell me that. Dreams are important because of... I will be trying to explain that this afternoon when I'll read. Dream is the main science we have to embrace. Dream is the one unopened door that's left to us in this great edifice of the mind. Despite the fact of pussycats like Freud and Jung prowling around and mewling at the threshold, we have to open that door but — back to New York: though I miss the city in my mind I feel very connected because half the people I know are there and email and zoom and all the rest of it make the city just another part of your house nowadays, and you in Brooklyn must have the same sense of that... the way in which isolation has actually brought people together. An extraordinary technological feat that I think should be celebrated some day; it took the pandemic to remind us that the further we are apart the closer we can get together in some curious way... like my friend in New Zealand. So I'm looking into the Southern trees, the linden, the fern break, beyond that there is a little ridge of glacial sorel. Beyond that is the stream, the Metambesen — they call it the Sawkill up here from their Dutch days — it seems to have been called by the Indians the Metambesen, a “healing stream,” and beyond it in turn is the southern stretch of land, now an orchard, and going down south and south and south — this is a glacial country, a glacier that left Park Heights and Park Slope in Brooklyn and that left the hills of Long Island, left us here too, that same glacier gave us our ridges our fields and now this land...

THE SAINT

He kissed the leper
he tore off all his clothes
and ran naked,

wrote poems and never
became a priest,
never took vows,

wrote poems instead,
praised God in everything
everything he saw he said,

he said it with the sun
and with the wind, the rain,
and every word was praise.

Tore off his clothes
and went naked to the world
knowing God was all he needed

maybe the tunic that hangs
in that secret room at Assisi
is the very garment he threw off,

or maybe all the cloth
has blown away
and only the words remain,

he kissed the leper.
he stroked a cloud
the petal of a roadside rose.

21 August 2020
Of John Bernardone, whom they called Frenchy)



RK Interview: WEST

The problem with West, I think, is the problem in that phrase: the long poem. When I think about the long poem I find myself naturally — like most educated people — thinking of things like the *Aeneid*, *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Paradise Lost*, or the *Divine Comedy*, things of that character — all of which are products of emperie. They are all about established governments' policies. The *Aeneid* is written to flatter the emperor Augustus. Who did not do very kindly to Ovid who wrote a long poem too, that wasn't about the empire and vanished to the black Sea, where he learned German and wrote the *Getica*, which some day we'll have to find — that is the long poem we need, the *Getica* by Ovid.

When I think about the long poem I think it's not possible today as Olson demonstrated, as Williams demonstrated, as Pound demonstrated. Pound said the epic is a long poem involving history — but it isn't that. The epic is something else, it had a hero, it had a story — one of the great things about the *Cantos* as about *Patterson* as also *The Maximus Poems* is that there is no story, there is no story there, nothing happens, nothing happens but reality. So the long poem in our time — and I tried my own experiments therewith often enough — the long poem in our time is a suite, a series, of one thing after another as a, in Ford's definition of “one goddamn thing after another,” one song after another, song after song after song after song, and that's what *Cantos* means: *Cantos* are songs, *Maximus* had its songs, I have mine among the five, I have the so-called *Island Cycle* of mine — I call it the *Island Cycle* — *Fire Exit* and the other four. They are short poems, some of them very short, cubic, little cubic poems, some of them very long, but they all constitute what I would think of as the only possible long poem now, unless we have something that could still honor the republic. We use the word “republic,” we don't have a “res publica” we have a “res privata,” we have something where the rich people own, 2% of the population, owns the whole world and as long as that's the case it can't be exactly a “res publica,” it is something else. But the joy of the long poem now is that he can be as multifarious and as eloquent as trees, as birds, as we can be, it can move among us, all of our breath can go into it, and keep singing, keep singing and that is, from my point of view, the point of the long poem. And what a long poem can do for the republic is what any poem can do — teach it to love, teach people to love. Most poetry when you come down to it is about loving, it's about loving drugs, loving women, loving boys, loving whatever, but loving, and that love can extend even to a love of God, even to the love of your cat, those loves gradually change the world.

THE EPIC

You can tell I feel lonely,
at the port of embarkation
and no ship,
not even a passing cloud.

Africa is beyond reach,
and there are no islands,
remember, where types
like me can brash ashore.

If I got there at all
I would have to simper and smile
up the beach by night
and hope the terns don't screech
to give my pilgrimage away.

You can see I have been there before,
the island of Anyone But Me.

But it's time to leave
so I have to walk out on the sea
singing her name
who sent me.

Anyone can do it,
just linger in the image—
I walked across the Thames
to Lambeth once
dry-shod in an ordinary dream—

I felt a little fear
but not much now,
just the salty tang
of being where I shouldn't be—

there is a kind of pleasure there,
you know how it is,
the window's dirty
but the sky is clean.

Recall how the song began:
across the frozen Baltic
to the gates of Troy
on foot to free her
from winter...

something like that.
The land is nowhere near me now—
I must be almost there.

(Epyllion they would have called this song, a little scrap of epic leading nowhere. But here we anywhere are.)



RK Interview: NORTH

When I think of North, I think of it as the land from which so much came to us... well, specifically in America, the population, which were Europeans, came pouring down. I think of the Baltic, my favorite lake in all the world, where, if we have to believe [Felicj] Vinci and others, and Bill Mullen, the *Iliad* took place. Where across the frozen Baltic, they travelled to rescue Helen from the Finns. I think of the north as the place from which those legends came, the Greeks came down, not just the Virangian god that protected the Byzantines, but so much came down from the North. Nothing comes down from the north now, I can understand President Trump's wish to acquire Greenland for America, one of his better ideas, I don't like it that he was going to give Puerto Rico away to get it...But what is Greenland, this frozen thing, covering a curious, sea-shaped land that some day will be inhabited. But for the moment, the North is where dreams come from, and that's what I think about

when I think about North. When we go to sleep — I learned this in Brooklyn curiously, you may find it true too — we lived at that time on Presidents street off Nostrand avenue, not the rich end of Presidents street, but down the block from the great rabbi actually, Schneerson, who lived on the same block. We lived in an apartment there, and I discovered that I had a lot of trouble sleeping — unless my head was pointing north. If you have trouble sleeping make sure you're sleeping with your head due north. The magnetic field of the earth flows through you and brings you the precious, the most precious gold of the north, much finer than Yukon gold, the dream. And the dreams I want to talk about, because you asked about North, that flooded my thought with the desire to say at least once, publicly, that I think the science that we need in the future is the science of dreams. Not the intuitive science of Freud and Jung, noble as they were, interesting as they were, but the same quality that goes into studying the virus, studying the bacteria, studying the behavior of plants, animals, cells... That kind of activity, that kind of scientific scrutiny should possess the study of dreams. We take dreams as trivial, because only you have it, so what, who are you, you are not... population, and yet therein is the beginning of wisdom. If we could some day discover the emperie of dream, the kingdom of dream that each of us inhabits, we would discover a new kind of way of understanding ourselves and our place in society. Our society is shaped by dreams in ways we can scarcely imagine — well, I can imagine them and I want to imagine them and I want people to consider them. Now that's absurd and ridiculous and the scientists will laugh at it and the reason the scientists laugh is because it is about the individual and science loathes the individual.

THE REAL STORY

Another word was waiting.
The Trojan War. An empty
bottle floating in the surf,
volleying gently back and forth.
The shore. A spoon
to catch the sky in.
Mesdames et messieurs,
an ocelot for sale
on the left bank of the Seine
Sunday morning,
what kind of church is this.
Tumult of religion
when race is bad theology enough.
Open the side door. A moped
with a priest on it, all in white
and going fast. Car left idling
while the driver pees in the woods.
A familiar story
obscurely told, to quote a review.
What was the matter with the war,
why did it fizzle out, like rain,
is human violence
just a part of the weather?
An alabaster urn
to hold and honor emptiness.
Strange packages in the mail,
seven little roughly paper-wrapped
items covered with stamps,
how expensive to send me
and who would and what are they
small, each one a few ounces,
can rest on my palm, feel
soft inside, and seven of them,
stars? Dollars? Gleam
on the windshield of cars,
evidence of the sun,

water of the saint's canal
gently oozing south,
really, we always call water
by the wrong names,
wrong color, we don't understand
water, we use so much of it,
our bodies are mostly it, yet,
we gaze on it as a thing apart
when all you are is ocean am.
You are not the first person
to lose your way in these woods,
I have been wandering here
a thousand years at least
and all the roads lead further in.
Maybe the core is what it means,
like the old alchemists' vitriol,
what you seek is deep inside
but you must purify yourself
and it to find it — something like that
their motto meant. Please,
feel free to use my telephone —
remember when you had to pay
long distance rates to call abroad
(five dollars I recall to buy a book
in Oxford once and thought it cheap)
but now everything is here.
That language on the notepad
is Slovenian, from a city
where dragons guard the river,
water is sacred, like language
but some find it easier to learn.
I wish Achilles had stayed in Thessaly,
he'd speak good Turkish now
or maybe even Bulgarian —
Helena was so happy here,
lovely she looked studying us
from up there on the parapet
as if the whole world

were in her hands. Stay home,
traveler! Turn your daggers
into tuning forks, to coin a phrase,
get all the instruments in tune,
sing it, play it, sing it louder,
drown out the actual
and your city will not fall.
This is what magic means,
and magic is all we have.
They read the wrong book
and the gate is gone.



RK Interview: EAST

I think everyone should have his own Stonehenge. I'm looking at mine there, the trees going up the little glacial ridge, the sun rises through those trees every morning, and defines obviously what we mean by East. The question Pierre asked has an interesting cast for me, of implying — I think it's his Muslim background — that East is where holiness comes from, or the sacred, or the secret. Sacred, secret, are they the same? I think English wants to tell us that they are very close, if not the same. Anyway, I know the Jews thought they came from the East, the Christians thought they came from the Jews, the eastern Jews thought they came from further East, there's always, especially among the Shiite Muslims, the sense of the East being a very special place, and by that they don't necessarily mean, though they might very well mean, Tibet, Ladakh, Persia and so on. For me though, East seems , from my Buddhist perspective, and I have acquired one, East is the land from which... Boston comes, Charlotte comes to me from Boston, Boston is the East, yankees are the East, yankees were tough and

angry, Akshobhya, the god, the Buddha of the East, whose color is blue, is angry, he uses anger to wipe out our obscurations. In that sense, if you go far enough East, from Europe you get to Tibet, and in Tibet you get this other perception of East — as being the place from which correction comes. Not the correction of angry people, hurting other people, but that of correcting oneself, and that's where I think the Shiites and other Muslim groups, and the Christian mystics are at one with the sense of the East: the sun rises and shows us something, the sun rises internally and shows us something. For me, as an American, growing up in New York, growing up on the South Shore of Long Island, where the East was reality, East was Europe, East was ocean, East was the good stuff, the real place, where people like Pierre & Nicole came from... real people, not dumb Americans shlepping around on the street. The food came from Europe, the great german food my father ate exclusively if he could, the great jewish food ate exclusively if I could. All that came from abroad. So the East in that sense to me is this contradiction-direction, fascinating. The love of Boston, the love of New England, the love of Harvard, Yale, of the great eastern mind-set, Olson, that east... Steve Jonas, that east. Jonas, who comes from the deep dark black South, and finds himself at home in Boston, in the eastern most place. The east of that place, and for me the excitement of its spirit, coming from the East is exactly matched by the intellectual power that comes into America from the east.

4.
How slow this is
to get where it's going!
That's because it's here
already, and you are
(as we used to say
in hide and seek), you are it.
It's up to you to find
the god or goddess
hidden in the woods.
Or their word left over
in wood itself.
Hold a piece of it
up to your ear and hear.

5.
See, there's an image.
A piece of wood.
None too clear. Taut maple,
easy pine, the text
won't say. Just wood.
Hold it, hear it, let
it tell you what it is
and what it knows.

6.
When years ago I moved up here
from Asphalt Island
there were trees a-plenty.
And now there are so many more.
The density of the dendropolis
has grown more than even I
could have hoped with all my
over-the-top romantic wish.
The trees are many and men few.
I feel like an intruder as I walk
among them, reverent, and they
don't see to mind, some even

welcome me and tell me this and that,
I am not at liberty yet
to tell you all they tell.
But they do talk, they are kind to me,
I feel like a cat in a crowd of people,
tolerated, even liked by some,
allergen to others, a furry foreigner.
But no fur, just little me among
the gigantic trees, fifty foot oaks
and ninety foot tulipiferas.
This is what I've been getting at
all along — we are in the minority
on land, a bunch of noisy immigrants.
We would do well to take care
not to offend these innumerable elders.

7.
Hylonoetic:
everything that is or was
in any sense alive
has consciousness.
And everything with consciousness
can talk. And does talk.
And we can learn to hear.
Wood or metal,
carapace or bone,
winged or worm —
they all report.
Things think.
Matter sings.

[...]

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Poems by Robert Kelly :
The Saint
The Epic
The Real Story
Texts Towards a Hylonoetic Canon

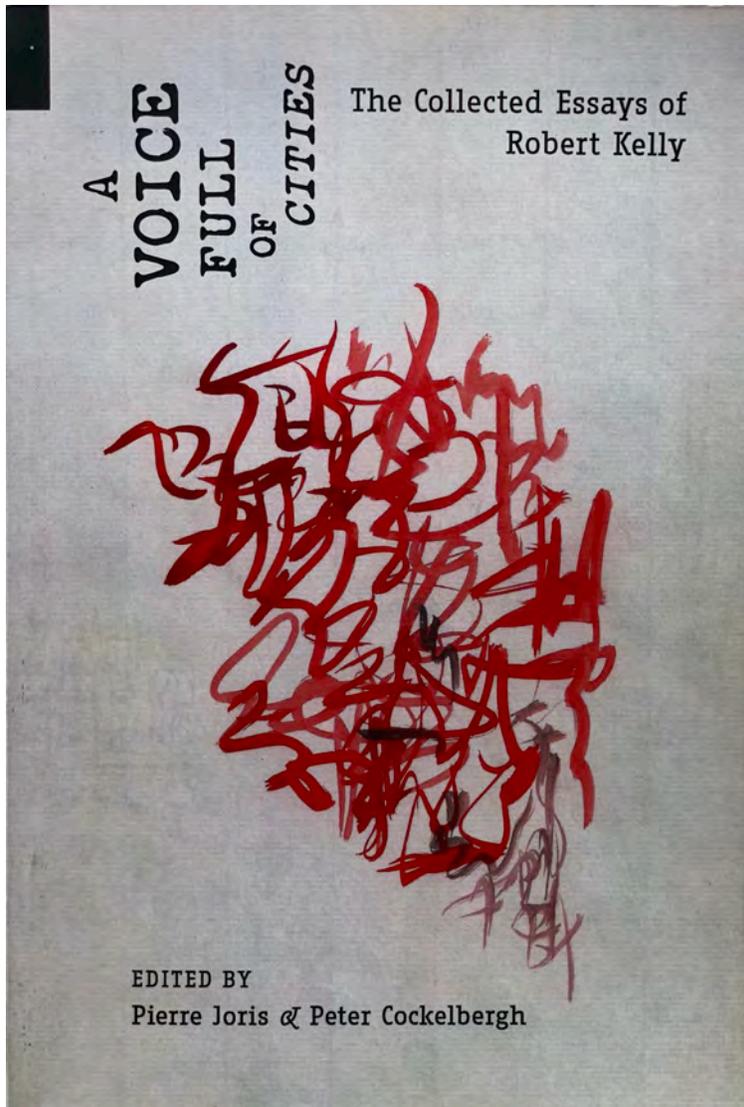
Music:
Extracts of poems by Robert Kelly from the book :
Not This Island Music (Black Sparrow Press)

Voice : Nicole Peyrafitte
French translations : Charlotte Mandell
Live Recording by Kush @ Cloud House Poetry Research Center:
*A Day of Poetry, the 40th anniversary celebration for Robert Kelly at Bard College
on November 10 , 2001*

Transcript of introduction, poems & interview available on The Poetry Project website



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