Sounds Anglo-American

Robert Vas Dias interviewed by Robert Hampson
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Robert Vas Dias was born in London but at an early age moved to the United States, where he started his literary career. He is the author of seventeen poetry collections, published in the US and the UK, and has been the editor/co-editor of four literary journals, two in the US and two in the UK. He was, among other things, founding director of the Aspen Writers’ Workshop in Colorado and organiser and director of the National Poetry Festivals at Thomas Jefferson College in Michigan, where he was also poet-in-residence; when he returned to London, he was General Secretary of the Poetry Society (1975-78) during a turbulent period in the Society’s history. He has been involved in the poetry scene in the US and the UK for several decades and has contributed to the advancement of poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.

In this interview with Robert Hampson, which focuses on his American career, he discusses his introduction to modern poetry through a reading by Langston Hughes; his early grounding in Yeats, Whitman, Pound, and Eliot; his first New York reading at the Five Spot (during a break by the Thelonious Monk Quartet); his friendship with Paul Blackburn; New York in the 1960s; his collaborations with visual artists; the founding of the Aspen Writers’ Workshop and his meetings with poets and artists including Mina Loy, Jonathan Williams, Basil Bunting, and Claes Oldenburg in Colorado; his return to New York where he joined the faculty of NYU with the poets Jackson Mac Low, Michael Heller, Clayton Eshleman and Charles Levendosky; and the organising and directing of the National Poetry Festivals (1971 and 1973) at Thomas Jefferson College in Michigan.
Robert Vas Dias Interview: Part 1
RGH: Robert, you wrote a piece for *Clasp* which described your return to the UK in 1974 and your experiences as General Secretary of the Poetry Society (1975-78). I know that you founded Permanent Press in Michigan in 1972 and continued to run it when you came back to London. And I know that you edited a new series of *Atlantic Review*, beginning in 1975, which merged with Ian Robinson’s *Telegram* and *Oasis* and Tony Frazer’s *Shearsman* to form *Ninth Decade*, which began publishing in 1983 and then turned into *Tenth Decade* in the 1990s. I knew who you were through these earlier decades, but I don’t think we really met until the 1990s. Since then, you have mentioned various parts of your life in poetry in the Contemporary Innovative Poetry Research Seminar, but I am conscious that I don’t have a clear picture of it. I know you went from London to the States in 1940, and you have warned me that your life in poetry begins in 1949, but I don’t know where or how it begins.

RVD: The morning of Wednesday, February 2nd 1949, was the day my life in poetry really began. That week in my high school senior English class, we’d been struggling – at least I had – with *The Waste Land*, close-reading slowly through the sections, as one did in those days, with the help of the teacher and the notes to the poem. I remember feeling despondent, frustrated. Was *this* what modern poetry was all about? An intellectual game choked with recondite references and literary and cultural allusions, followed by pages of ‘explanatory’ notes? Where was the *frisson*, the rush I got from Keats and, on my own, I mean not in class, from Poe? When I was in my early teens I learned by heart “To Helen” and repeated it in my head at odd moments:

*Helen, thy beauty is to me*

*Like those Nicéan barks of yore,*

*That gently, o’er a perfumed sea,*

*The weary, way-worn wanderer bore*

*To his own native shore.*

That day a poet was to speak at our mid-day high school assembly. I should explain that ours was a very ‘progressive’ school in New York City, left-wing, advocating and developing compassion and tolerance and a highly motivated social consciousness, particularly in relation to the overt racism of the time. The invited poet was Langston Hughes, a name I just about recognized but who was not represented in our white-edited anthologies. I was enraptured, totally hooked by his reading. Here was a poetry in the vernacular – not my own but which I’d heard on the streets and in music – vivid, by turns angry and comic, a poetry I could understand and relate to. Afterwards, on a
table in the front hall, there was a small pile of books, *One-Way Ticket*, for which I splashed out my remaining lunch money for the week, $2.75, and Hughes signed and dated it (which is why I can be so precise about the date).

*I pick up my life  
And take it with me  
And I put it down in  
Chicago, Detroit,  
Buffalo, Scranton,  
Any place that is  
North and East–  
And not Dixie.*

Hughes’s work, a little later, led me obliquely to William Carlos Williams, Paul Blackburn, and Ginsberg, who were to play a significant role in my development as a poet.

**RGH:** Did this lead to your writing poetry at that time or did that come later?

**RVD:** In the autumn of that year I went to Grinnell College in Iowa; I’d had several U.S. private colleges that had accepted me and decided, as a British-born transposed New Yorker, that I ought to enlighten myself about a different kind of America than an eastern seaboard urban environment: the middle-west, what is now disparagingly called the flyover states. Grinnell gave me a generous scholarship, which pleased my parents.

I skipped English 101 because I could string a sentence together and even write a creditable paragraph. After a false start, I ‘majored,’ that is, read English and Comparative Literature. At first I wrote short stories and later, as an upperclassman, co-edited the college lit mag, feeling my way into writing poetry, which I felt quite insecure about: I considered anything I wrote resembling poetry as worthless. Nevertheless, my close mates – there were three or four – and I read poetry to each other. It was during these intense sessions that I discovered, perhaps recognised is the better word, an aptitude for the musical arrangement of words, a faculty that I must have absorbed from my long-standing love of music; I experimented with putting words into some sort of pattern that would satisfy me, which took a protracted amount of time. I remember spending the better part of three weeks, to the near exclusion of my academic work, sitting in my room putting one poem together. I submitted this
poem, whose title I have now forgotten, for a prize at Grinnell’s annual writers conference, at which the judge was Robert Lowell: I won first prize.

My other ‘extra-curricular’ activity during this time was scanning, I mean subjecting to scansion, most of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* in an effort to understand his metrics, how he employed iambic pentameter in different contexts, and how, and why, he varied the metrics. It was his practice of varying the metre when the emotional charge of the speech or passage required it that amazed and delighted me.

Part of my initial difficulty with writing poetry stemmed from the attempt to reconcile or compare my efforts with the poems we were studying in my classes, a fatal mistake and bound to intimidate. The text we used, edited by Louis Untermeyer, was a weighty tome consisting of thousands of poems. The American part opened with a very large selection of Whitman, whom we totally ignored; I’d been exposed early to his poetry in high school and assumed we would deal with it at length. In those days in undergraduate institutions, Whitman simply wasn’t considered an appropriate subject for serious academic study. A small selection by Langston Hughes was also included in the book but of course was also not considered serious enough. I still have this book and I see I have made extensive annotations in the Yeats section and, yes, Eliot, Pound, and even cummings; I learned a lot from the latter, about word arrangement, lineation, use of punctuation, spacing, sound correspondence, and music. William Carlos Williams had to wait. An upper-class course was wholly devoted to Emily Dickinson, taught by a Dickinson specialist. I grew to love her poetry, which has lasted me throughout my life. We used the Thomas H. Johnson edition of the poems, which had just been published. At that time, of course, the work done by Ralph Franklin on the manuscripts and fascicles had yet to radically change readers’ attitudes to Dickinson’s orthography, punctuation, and spacing, to say nothing of the revelatory writing on Dickinson’s facsimiles by Susan Howe.

Meanwhile, however, on my trips during vacations back home in New York, I was frequenting the bookshops and going to readings at the 92nd St. ‘Y’ Poetry Center (this was before the readings downtown I attended and contributed to).

**RGH:** You mentioned that Langston Hughes was using a vernacular that was familiar to you from music. I was wondering what exactly that music was. What music were you listening to? I am also very struck by the intensive training that you describe – the annotations to Yeats, Pound and Eliot and the extra-curricular study of Shakespeare’s metrics. It reminds me of my own efforts (around the same age) at analysing how short
stories worked – with the hope that I would write them myself. When did you start taking part in readings, and who were the poets who were reading with you?

**RVD:** Music has been with me from my earliest memories. One of the pieces from my next book (in preparation as I write this), Poetics of Still Life: A Collage, an ekphrastic work, is after a still life, Musical Instruments, oil on canvas, by Evaristo Baschenis, 1617–1677, the outstanding still-life painter of 17th-century Italy:

1 Four, maybe five years old, sitting at the top of the stairs in London when I was supposed to be in bed, listening to my mother (piano), father (cello) and friends playing chamber music; 2 apex of my career, as boy soprano of eleven, singing “He shall feed his flock,” from Handel’s Messiah in Carnegie Hall, New York; 3 depth of career, not sticking to piano lessons through lack of motivation, likewise the flute; 4 proudest moment, as the narrator of Aaron Copland’s Lincoln Portrait in front of a full orchestra in Huddersfield Town Hall; 5 compulsive teenage playing of 33 rpm records: Bach suites and Brandenburg concertos; Handel’s Acis and Galatea (O the pleasures of the plains! / Happy nymphs and happy swains! / Harmless, merry, free and gay / Dance and sport the hours away); and then a little later seeing Lotte Lenya sing in Brecht and Weill’s The Threepenny Opera, following up by reading the poems of John Gay and The Beggar’s Opera; Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday; Rachmaninoff piano concertos; Mussorgsky, Pictures at an Exhibition; Stravinsky, The Rite of Spring and Petrouchka; Debussy, Ravel, Satie, Poulenc, Bartok, Gershwin, Copland; 6 music for my funeral: enter to Bill Evans’s solo piano improvisation ‘Peace Piece,’ and/or Modern Jazz Quartet’s ‘The Golden Striker,’ conclude with Mozart, Serenade No. 10 in B-flat Major for Winds, Gran Partita, 4th movement.

(The above is one of the very few autobiographical pieces in the book.)

Meanwhile, my high school friends introduced me to bebop, which at first repelled me and then, after I got used to it, entranced me – Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, which we listened to while playing handball during lunch hour and after school; in the 50s, it was Coltrane and Bix Beiderbeck and Dave Brubeck, and still Billie Holiday, and then cool jazz, with the MJQ, Miles Davis, and Paul Desmond; it was Davis that led me a little later to Bill Evans (see above). At some point in the 50s, after my US Army service, I went to performances of the MJQ in the garden of MoMA.

During the latter half of 1957 Coltrane was part of the quartet led by Thelonious Monk at New York’s Five Spot, and it was there that in the breaks by the quartet I had my first ‘real’ New York reading together with three or four other poets, organised by Paul...
Blackburn; this was well before the readings started by Blackburn and others at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project in the mid-sixties. Before that, too, the Lower East Side coffee house readings functioned as meeting houses for poets; it was in 1961 at, I believe, The Tenth Street Coffeehouse, that I met Ed Dorn when he had his New York reading there to launch his first book, The Newly Fallen, published by LeRoi Jones’s (as he was then) Totem Press.

It was towards the end of the 1950s that the 92nd Street ‘Y’ held a workshop led by W. H. Auden, which I joined. It was a fairly large group (which included Marianne Moore!), and individual critiques were relatively few, but I recall that he had assigned us to write a sonnet (I forget which kind). On mine he scribbled exclamations on my failure to adhere to the strict form called for. For me the value of the sessions were his lectures and impromptu remarks on poetry.

RGH: I have heard you talk in the past about Blackburn, but not about Auden. Was this a one-off workshop? Was Auden an important poet for you?

RVD: Was Auden an important poet for me? Very much so. In my late teens I ‘liberated’ the first edition of his Collected\(^5\) from my parents’ bookshelves and started to read through it. Certain poems and lines have become iconic for me and have stuck in my memory to this day. The poems: “Musée des Beaux Arts”; “Something is Bound to Happen” – particularly the latter’s first and last lines: Doom is dark and deeper than any sea dingle, and Lucky with day approaching, with leaning dawn (the consonance and metre strongly attracted me); the sestina “Paysage Moralisé” – its first line, Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys; “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”:

\[
\text{He disappeared in the dead of winter:}  \\
\text{The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,}  \\
\text{And snow disfigured the public statues;}  \\
\text{The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.}  \\
\text{O all the instruments agree}  \\
\text{The day of his death was a dark cold day.}
\]

“September 1, 1939,” and the phrase a low dishonest decade; “The Unknown Citizen”; and “Song XIV,” the whole poem, beginning Look, stranger, on this island now, which had a mesmerising effect on me and which I read over and over. Besides its compelling music, and because I was a war refugee in the U.S., this, for me poignant poem, had the effect of making me homesick for England, the land of my birth, and times I spent by the sea there.
Speaking of the sea – let me go back for a moment to the early 50s – I spent several summer vacations on Cape Cod where I stayed with Thomas Bouchard and his daughter Diane, who were friends of one of my college buddies, Chris. I thought I would stay only for that early summer (was it 1951?), when Chris had invited me because I had acted in one or two productions at the college and Diane needed actors for her production of “King Lear,” which she mounted in an outdoor theatre in front of their magnificently converted barn; Chris played Lear and I Gloucester. As it turned out, I became close friends of Bouchard (Tom) and Diane, and Tom became my mentor in many important ways. It was through him that I learned much about the School of Paris artists. He made films about Miró, Leger, Hélion, Duchamp, and Soutine, and the composer Edgard Varèse; he was also a photographer of modern dancers: Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman.

A number of poets and artists lived near them: Conrad Aiken, the poet and nature writer John Hay (who played Edgar), Ted Enslin (the King of France), the artists Eugene C. Fitsch and Howard Gibbs, the sculptor Arnold Geissbuhler, and further afield (in Provincetown), Hans Hofmann. The artist, architect, and theatre designer Frederick Kiesler frequently came to visit. He once advised me, “Don’t be too literal!” and presented me with a pen-and-ink abstract drawing. That advice conflicted with the examples of William Carlos Williams and of course with Blackburn’s work, which was more to my nature.

During one of those early summers, three poets passed through on their way to visit Enslin and Hay: Paul Blackburn, Paul Carroll, and a third whose name I can’t remember. This was the first time I met Blackburn, whom I wasn’t to connect with again until I came back to New York after my military service.

**RGH:** What was the nature of your military service? What impact did this have on you?

**RVD:** Drafted, U.S. Army, 1953-1955. Basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas (just outside of El Paso) and the desert, where we marched, had target practice, and bivouacked:

*Watch where you place your sleeping bag in the desert*

From “Desert Prose Poems”

*A hollow isn’t a good idea because you might disturb a rattler, or worse, a coral snake – the deadliest. Choose a flat place, no gopher holes, and don’t worry about the coyotes, they’ll howl around you for what seems all night, but*
in the morning when you awake and slither out of the bag, 
you’ll notice coyote tracks not a foot from your sleeping head. 
This is called coyote stealth reconnaissance.

And, a more formal treatment, the first two verses of a villanelle:

**Passion in the Desert**
Fort Bliss, Texas

*Observe how the light strikes the plain:*
*shuddering down the spectrum of the hill*
*It forces the morning and day maneuvers again.*

*My eyes, slow to acquire color, would strain*
*to attach lavender, hold mauve to the hill,*
*did not observe how the light strikes the plain.*

[etc.]

Then specialised training in AAA (Anti-Aircraft Artillery). I was posted to the eastern (Atlantic) side of the Panama Canal Zone where instead of serving in a jungle anti-aircraft installation as I was meant to, the Army in its wisdom assigned me to the Base Education Center. There, I administered USAFI (United States Armed Forces Institute) courses and tests: these were an opportunity for servicemen and women to obtain high school qualification or gain credits toward a college degree. At that time the Army was composed largely of draftees, mainly from the southern and south-western states or places like Puerto Rico, numbers of whom were poorly educated or came from disadvantaged areas, so the USAFI system represented a chance to better themselves upon their return to civilian life.

Later, I was also appointed Troop Information and Education (TI&E) NCO for my unit, which entailed giving a weekly lecture on the news and government policies. Naturally I had to follow an official script, but by subtly varying word order and choice of phrases, I was able to inject – perhaps too strong a word – instil a more nuanced, ‘progressive’ account. I fancied myself using the tactic trade unionists and communists did in ‘boring from within,’ obviously on a very modest scale. I was never found out. If I had been, the discipline would have been severe: the Army-McCarthy hearings were in full swing. This was the extent of my ‘literary’ endeavours, with the exception of a few poems later published in a magazine in the States but which have not been reprinted. I did compose a poem right after I got ill with a flu-like virus, which I later slightly revised:
Viral Matters

All viruses enter the world naked,
they are clothed with our bounty,
warm bodies they embrace, so many
feverish lovers who act out
intimate fantasies ’til all the gates
cry out, ‘Surcease!’

They are the enemies given us by friends
and others we treat with, their existence
is an instance of their need for us.

My viruses are like your viruses and respond
well to the same care and feeding: they pillage
the land of sister and brother alike and dry up
the granaries and carry on their own kind
of animal husbandry.

They employ us as vessels which they pour out,
refill and have their fill of again,
and when they leave they appear
unrequited always and desire us still,
with their infiltrate ways,
their peremptory, sensual movements.

So: what effect did military service have on me? First and foremost, I met the most varied group of Americans I would otherwise never have met. In basic training, I lived in a former Japanese prisoner-of-war hut with a semi-literate Basque shepherd from Arizona, a Ph.D. from Cornell University, an African American with an STD, and an Italian American from Brooklyn, New York. Where else on earth would I ever have met a California beach boy? I never knew Puerto Ricans in New York; they lived in the ‘barrios’ of the south Bronx and east Harlem and were the object of the whites’ prejudice. I developed a great respect for them and their dedicated efforts to get an education.

I think military service gave me a broader conception of America and its peoples, enabled me to experience cultures I wouldn’t have otherwise done, stimulated my
growing passion for art, and contributed to widen the subject-matter of my poetry, to focus on ‘minute particulars.’

**RGH:** So, at the end of 1955, you were back in New York and heading for Columbia. You had written a few poems, but I would guess that you weren’t necessarily thinking of yourself as a poet. It must have been very exciting being in New York in this period. In the Spring of 1955, Auden had awarded the Yale Younger Poets Prize to Ashbery for *Some Trees*, which came out the following year; O’Hara was working as an assistant in the International Program at MoMA, and, in the autumn, wrote his James Dean elegies; Pollock was near the end of his career, but de Kooning had just finished his *Woman* series and was thriving; Miles Davis had just come back to New York and, in September, brought John Coltrane into the Miles Davis Quintet. The poets, musicians and artists were moving from the Cedar to the Five Spot. But that was also the year that Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi and Rosa Park refused to move to the back of the bus in Alabama. What was your sense of New York and your engagement with New York in this period?

**RVD:** My priority when I got back to New York and ran through my mustering-out pay was to get a job and find my own place – I was staying temporarily in my brother’s cold water flat in 18th Street, heated by turning on the oven gas in the galley kitchen. One thing followed the other: the job was with the publishers Prentice-Hall as an Assistant Editor, where I received an invaluable training in copy-editing, proofreading, book design and production. The other thing was moving into my own studio apartment on East 7th Street (with heating!), $50 a month plus utilities. This turned out to be a fortuitous location because it was one block from McSorley’s,7 where Paul Blackburn, Gil Sorrentino, and other poets hung out. (Paul’s poem, “The Island,” in the section, “The Ale House Poems,”8 describes an afternoon in the Tavern.) It was here that I re-connected with Paul after I’d met him on Cape Cod. The neighbourhood was composed mainly of Poles and Ukrainians, with a scattering of young upwardly-mobile professionals (yuppies, as they were later known), and was before it became known as the East Village.

New York in the 1950s: the Eisenhower years (1953-61), the Cold War, the ‘Silent Generation,’ though bubbling under the surface, a time, as you point out, when poets, artists, musicians were creating the work that would define the next decade. After my day at Prentice-Hall, which was located in an old building on Fifth Avenue at 13th Street, I’d wander down to Washington Square and 8th Street and haunt the 8th Street Bookshop. I’d heard about the readings in San Francisco by Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Michael McClure and others (October 7, 1955), and found a slim

One Saturday, sitting on a bench in the sun in Washington Square, I came to a life-changing decision. While I knew I could act, and though I’d had thoughts of trying out for parts in the off-Broadway theatres where so many actors had begun, I knew deep down I could never make a really good actor. The only thing that truly mattered to me was poetry – the kind of poetry I was becoming familiar with, written in the spoken language of real people, poets like those I was reading, including, importantly, William Carlos Williams whose *The Desert Music* and *Journey to Love* I was devouring, before I got to *Pictures from Brueghel* in the early 60s. That said, I didn’t lose my passion for the theatre and playwriting, which I took a step further at Columbia University at the end of the decade.

I quit Prentice-Hall when they made me Staff Editor on condition that I moved to their office in Kansas City (a fate worse than hell, I felt). I then worked as a freelance editor for a variety of publishers, including Macmillan, Pantheon, Houghton Mifflin, and Norton, and then took a position with IBM World Trade Corporation as a public relations writer; my main job there was to work on an information pack on the Dead Sea Scrolls, for which IBM had created a concordance. While there, a colleague who was writing poetry and I agreed to write a poem a week which we would take home and bring back the next day with our critique. This arrangement worked pretty well and produced a number of poems.

One of my freelance jobs was particularly rewarding. I was commissioned by The Asia Society to edit – not only to copy edit and proofread, but to edit for style and coherence – a book of *Sijo* by a Korean scholar. It led me first to research the form, a traditional three-line, popular (as opposed to courtly) form based on syllabics; the first line introduces a concern or idea, the second a ‘turn’ or switch, and the third a conclusion. There are other conventions, more or less strictly observed. Modern *Sijo* in English are often written in six lines, the division occurring at a natural pause or caesura in the original line. The job resulted in my composing a number of *Sijo* and eventual publication in a book.⁹

**Hermit Crab Sijo**

*Where is that place where the home is, he is, the hermit crab, cold wanderer and perennial*
borrower, never building
and always moving in or
moving out, finding the fit.

One evening, a few poets and I walked up the stairs to Blackburn’s apartment on East 7th carrying beers and sat around listening to jazz. I remember drinking a couple of cans, sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling out my notebook, and writing out a complete poem in about 20 minutes. After a little tweaking it was later published and turned out to be my most frequently anthologised poem:

\textit{Dump Poem}

\begin{quote}
This is a genuine used poem
last year’s model poem
shirt off someone’s back poem
chair minus a leg poem
scrap husk and rind poem
steakbone poem.

You can smell this poem when the wind is right
for miles, around it swoop
herring gulls and great-black-backed gulls,
leaves of a rainsoaked paperback now dry
flutter around it, and graffiti of stripped wallpaper.

This poem is to be thrown out
sprinkled with kerosene
set aflame so you can hear its juices
sizzling and its light bulbs popping:
bulldozed, buried, used for fill.
\end{quote}

In 1958 I enrolled in the Master’s programme in Dramatic Literature at Columbia, studying under Robert Brustein, and attending lectures by Robert Gorham Davis, Mark Van Doren, and Moses Hadas, among others. My motivation reflected my theatrical experiences in college, on Cape Cod, and in the Canal Zone, as well as lots of theatre-going in New York: for instance, I’d been completely amazed and hooked by the New York premiere of \textit{Waiting for Godot} (April, 1956), with Bert Lahr as Estragon: I was entranced not only by the humour but the poetry of the play. I must have thought that by studying drama and writing about it (in the seminars with Brustein) I would develop
a sense of dramatic construction which would better prepare me for writing plays. I did manage to learn a lot but the task of writing a script was another matter; somewhere in boxes in our storeroom are piles of the beginnings of scripts. Still, when it came to teaching theatre, which I did much later for the University of Maryland in the UK, the Columbia programme was indeed useful.

The other memorable event, early in 1959, was Allen Ginsberg’s premiere reading of Kaddish at Columbia University (which Allen had attended as an undergraduate). The auditorium was jammed and I was lucky to get in. It was, as you may imagine, a tremendously emotional performance, and I went home in a kind of daze. It was much later, in the next decade, that I got to know him.

RGH: well, we have now got to where we started from – the influence of Williams, Blackburn and Ginsberg on your poetic development. These seem quite a diverse trio. I wonder if you can unpack what you drew from each of them. I am also interested in your use of a Korean poetic form. Was that collection a one-off – out of the run of your poetic work? Snyder had a deep interest in Japanese culture; Ginsberg was to travel in India in 1962-3. Did you also experience that ‘Drang nach Östen’?

RVD: Where to start with this question? Why, with Walt Whitman, of course.

One’s-Self I Sing

One’s-Self I Sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,  
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I  
say the Form complete is worthier far,  
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,  
Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine, 
The Modern Man I sing.

Since I left high school, I’d always been reading Whitman. What I admired in Leaves of Grass I admired also in the work of those three: their audacity, originality, experimentation, rhythmical language, incorporation of prose passages, courage in dealing with large themes, the inclusion of the personal (though you don’t learn very
much about Walt as a person). He is the prodigious poet, as were the three, the poet of capaciousness who attempted to get the whole damn country of America and Americans into ‘a poem of a life.’ Admittedly there are longueurs and repetitiveness but it’s the attempt – and successes – that count. You’re bowled over and return to the book again and again.

There were specific attributes of each poet which had an effect on my work and which I’ll try to enumerate. Blackburn first, because his was the most immediate and long-standing example. He was the poet who gave me permission to leave myself open to the mundane, the quotidian, who encouraged me to write quickly in the first place, even in note form, before returning to select, shape, and form the material into a poem. However much it looked hastily or casually composed, Paul’s work was carefully constructed. Creeley wrote: “Paul was without question a far more accomplished craftsman than I.”

There were three main aspects of his craftsmanship I took on board. First, his ear, that is, his internalising of the way people speak and the way he conjured the demotic into the musical fabric of the poem (which I’d first picked up on when I heard Langston Hughes); second, the way he used the whole space of the page to lay out the poem and its discrete elements – letters, words, phrases, punctuation; third, his focusing on ‘minute particulars.’ These elements had lodged in my mind earlier in cummings, who clearly had listened carefully to contemporary speech rhythms. I feel certain that Paul had paid attention to cummings’s pioneering work but eschewed the earlier poet’s cuteness and occasional sentimentality. (I say ‘pioneering,’ though Mallarmé had paved the way in “Un coup de dés”.)

Some of the work in my first major collection reflects Paul’s influence: “Song, After Hearing Tapes of Humpback Whales Singing,” and the following Sijo:

**Sijo Beginning with Words Overheard in the Sandbox, Prospect Park**

*So ya don’ have t’fall, I fell*
   *for ya, he said nosediving*
*off the four-foot fence, ornately*
   *rolling, super stuntman for*
*his buddy walking the highrail*
   *deliberately . not . falling.*
Paul was a poet of cities – New York, Paris, Málaga, Barcelona – a characteristic of much of my earlier work; see, for example, “Urban Crisis,” in Speech Acts. Finally, Paul emphasised the performance quality of poetry. He advised me always to speak the poem aloud to determine its effectiveness: if it didn’t sound right it wasn’t right. He was famous for carrying his heavy reel-to-reel tape recorder with him to readings in New York and all over the country. His recordings are housed in The Archive for New Poetry, the University of California San Diego.

My heart rouses
    thinking to bring you news
    of something
that concerns you
    and concerns many men.

[...]

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
    yet men die miserably every day
    for lack
of what is found there.¹³

The importance for me of William Carlos Williams is primarily because of the poems themselves – what they are saying – but the how of what they are saying was what I was trying to get at. I began by making marginal indications of passages in “Asphodel” and parts of Paterson that were particularly resonant with the view of getting at the secret of their hold on me. This exercise was of some help, as my earlier task had been in scanning Antony and Cleopatra. But this was of a different order and had to do with my starting life as a speaker of British-English as distinct from American-English: my American schoolmates and college friends always remarked on my ‘English accent.’ When I visited Britain on a reading tour in January 1974 during the three-day week, my American accent was commented on. In Scotland I shared a gig at the University of Stirling with Norman MacCaig, who was complimentary about my ‘American’ poetry and with whom I shared my bottle of Jim Beam Black Label Kentucky Straight Bourbon the night through. But I’m getting off the track.

It brings me to Dr. Williams’s ideas as expressed in “The Poem as a Field of Action,” in his book of essays which I bought shortly after it came out.¹⁴ He talks of ‘a new way of measuring,’ reflecting the world we live in and the language we speak: “Where else can
what we are seeking arise from but speech? From speech, from American speech as distinct from English speech.” I was perplexed by Williams’s idea of the ‘variable foot’ until I recognised it as an attempt to define the poetics of his kind of free verse which was not based on measure as it was traditionally described by the kind and number of ‘feet’ in a line, but by speech rhythms. Hugh Kenner summarised it well:

That different English-speaking people pace their stresses differently in the sentence, also that a rising inflection is one form of what we loosely call ‘stress’: these are truisms we’re apt to forget when we talk of poetry, where ‘meter’ is supposed to be supranational. But meter codifies the small units of rhythm, and Williams was right about the individuating rhythms that run sentence-long, utterance-long, and aren’t usefully described by the micro-units of meter, the iambics and anapests.

I’d always been faced by people in Britain asking me if I considered myself an American or British poet. My usual answer, in an effort to forestall a long explanation, was ‘mid- or north-Atlantic.’ But as you can tell from the foregoing, my years exploring contemporary poetics were in America. Beginning with Blackburn’s example, I then read and re-read Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” in my now disintegrating and yellowing copy of The New American Poetry. When Olson writes, “And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes...” it’s clear that Williams is being recalled.

That same question used to vex me mainly when I was composing: was my diction, stress, rhythm, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, British or American? And did it matter? I decided it didn’t. If I was submitting for British publication, I conformed to English orthography, otherwise American. I left the stresses and rhythms as they were.

Another feature of Williams’s poetry that affected some of my work was the triadic stepped-line verse, which I seemed to fall into naturally on occasion; the principal example is “The Lascaux Variations,” in Still · Life.

Williams was a pivotal figure for American poets in the second half of the twentieth century – for Blackburn and Ginsberg – as well as the Black Mountain poets, particularly Olson and Robert Creeley, as well as a number of West Coast poets. He was the poet to look up to as the great innovator, the progenitor of a truly American twentieth-century poetic voice.
Ginsberg is an entirely different poet altogether, a poet of chants and rants, insights and hallucinations, madness and sense. His pedigree is the Whitmanesque structural tradition and the Blakean world of visionary constructs. His acceptance – and use – of the most intimate personal material and references to gay sexual practices is either admirable or repugnant, depending on one’s outlook and preferences: it’s a quality I couldn’t emulate in my work. What interested me was the rhythm and music of the long lines of his long poems, frequently attained by the repetition of words and phrases as, of course, in “Howl.” This feature made for mesmerising reading performances, as I’ve mentioned earlier with respect to “Kaddish.”

My breath is long – that’s the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now, but it’s a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-dailytalk short breath. I got to mouth more madly this way.¹⁹

Several of my poems in Speech Acts reflect the effect Allen’s poetry had on me, a few structured in long lines, others more in their subject-matter:

**Recycling Poem**

I am the 5 pounds of garbage I dispose of every day: man woman child: in the ground airways waterways I am conscious of space I take sitting here I present a living threat to all beings! The life on me is legions eliminating exhaling ingesting reproducing: the use of my natural resources: how I affect the ecology of the northeastern United States!
[etc.]

The other important feature of his poetry is the prose element, starting, as he pointed out, with respect to “Howl.” He wrote a letter to Ferlinghetti on 3 July 1956 complaining that the printer of the first printing of the poem re-lineated the lines: “The one element of order and prearrangement I did pay care to was arrangement into prose-paragraph strophes; each one definite unified long line. So any doubt about irregularity of right hand margin will be sure to confuse critical reader about intention of prosody. Therefore I’ve got to change it so it’s right.”²⁰
These ‘prose-paragraph strophes,’ and the Biblical cadences of “Howl,” “Kaddish,” and other poems, crept into some of my early work (“Ars Amatoria,” and “My Fight Against Crime,” in Speech Acts). But it was later, when I, like a number of poets in the US and UK, turned to the writing of prose poems that the traditional distinction between poetry and prose became blurred. Referring to the Old Testament, Gertrude Stein wrote in 1935, “In the beginning there really was no difference between poetry and prose in the beginning of writing in the beginning of talking in the beginning of hearing anything or about anything.”

Three prose poems in Still Life are “Woodpigeons,” “Moving Bodies,” and the following:

**Meditation on a Return Ticket**

_I have a return ticket I will never use because East Midlands Trains made me an offer: it was cheaper to buy a return than to pay for just one way. The offer was that I could go somewhere and come back for less than it took to get there. We're talking money, but time, as they say, is money, and so is space: I could go as far again as the distance I covered in the first place. By standing there I'd have gone twice as far, gained more than I lost, arrived before I left, wishes become actualities. In fact there would be nothing to be imagined, no anticipation or fulfilment, no pleasure, no sorrow, all feeling already felt. It would be like being in a railway coach going forever backward into a dark tunnel leading into the terminus._

[etc.]

The work of these three prolific poets: Paul Blackburn, William Carlos Williams, and Allen Ginsberg, I held up at that time as the future of poetry, what it was possible to do, although it wasn’t always possible for me. Nevertheless, I was impelled to experiment, to let myself go, to admit the quotidian into my poems, to relax into my natural rhythms. My indebtedness to them is fundamental to my writing life.

Was the Korean form a one-off? Did I also experience that ‘Drang nach Östen’? Well, as I said, the Sijo book was the result of a commission, so I can truthfully say that it was not an instance of my seeking Lebensraum in Asia. Besides, I was never much of a Buddhist, as were so many of my New York and West Coast friends. Having said that, one of my collaborations with artists was the production of a Surimono with the British artist Ian Tyson; this kind of print traditionally combined Japanese woodblock printing and poetry. My most recent connection to Japanese culture is the major book I’m preparing, *Poetics of Still Life: A Collage*. The
assemblage of the book’s poems and prose poems is the outcome of my reading a *Haibun* by Bashō, *Oku-no-hosomichi*, 1702, translated as *Back Roads to Far Towns*, by Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu. It’s a hybrid form comprising a travel journal that includes descriptions of place, accounts of people and events along the way, reflections, poetry and prose poems. The ‘travel’ aspect of the *Haibun* is represented in my work by a journey through still life, beginning in earliest times and ending with contemporary work.
Notes for Part I

4 The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson (Boston, Little, Brown, 1951).
7 McSorley’s Old Ale House, 15 East 7th Street, is New York City’s oldest Irish bar, founded in the mid-19th century. It serves two types of ale, light and dark. Besides Blackburn, e e cummings wrote “VIII: i was sitting in mcsorley’s” (in A: Post Impressions). The bar was painted by John Sloan, of the Ashcan School, in 1912.
15 Ibid., 289.
18 Ibid., 389.
Robert Vas Dias Interview: Part II
RGH: I feel we have now reached the end of your apprentice years with the end of the 1950s and that things are just about to start hotting up. Would that be a true impression? Did you stay in New York? What were the new developments in the early 1960s? You have mentioned the Lower East Side coffee houses and the St Mark’s Poetry Project. Could you say more about how they started and how you became engaged with them?

RVD: The 1960s definitely was a period of ‘hotting up’ for me, and for so many others: poets, artists, rock groups, students, activists, drop-outs, draft-evaders, druggies, flower children.... The effect of countercultural questioning, confrontation, and restructuring was evident in the avant-garde writing and performance of poetry, which was in part a reaction to the cold-war, Vietnam, civil rights, academic criticism, and the kind of poetry that was accepted and published by the traditionalists and mainstream publishers and journals.

In New York this division was reflected by two distinctive reading venues, the uptown readings at the 92nd Street Y Poetry Center and the Guggenheim Museum on upper Fifth Avenue, both of which in the early and mid-60s presented the more mainstream poets (though I did hear Basil Bunting read at the Guggenheim), and the downtown coffeehouse readings in the Lower East Side, complemented by the New York Poets’ Theater on East 4th Street, run by Diane di Prima and others, where I heard, or tried to hear, Robert Creeley (who read in a very low voice), the Judson Poets’ Theatre on Washington Square South, and, in 1966, the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery. This ‘alternative’ poetry scene was augmented in 1965 by Max’s Kansas City on Park Avenue South, north of Union Square, and a little later by Dr. Generosity’s, 73rd Street and Second Avenue, and by St. Adrian’s Company at the Broadway Central Hotel on Lower Broadway.

First, in 1961 (well before the Poetry Project started in 1966), the Rector of St. Mark’s, Rev. Michael Allen, in his laid-back manner, instructed me in the tenets of the Episcopal Church to prepare me for my marriage to my first wife in Massachusetts, as stipulated by the vicar there. Later, in 1966, Rev. Allen officiated at the baptism of our son Jason at which Paul Blackburn was his godfather.

Together with Toby Olson (see the next section on the Aspen Writers’ Workshop), we organised the Saturday afternoon readings at Dr. Generosity’s; I remember that when it was my turn to select the readers (we alternated week by week), I invited Erica Jong to give her first reading in New York. After we turned over the Dr. Generosity readings to others, I read and contributed to the St. Adrian’s Company readings at the formerly
renowned Broadway Central Hotel (which had a lurid history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but was then a ‘welfare recipients’ hotel). It partially collapsed in 1973, killing four people.

An invitation to run a poetry workshop at the Aspen School of Contemporary Art in Colorado during the summer of 1962 led to many summers there. Leland Bell was the head staff artist, and a young artist from New York, Jack Bosson, and I became friends. Together we produced a book, *Ribbed Vision*, published the following year in New York; it contained three original lithographs by Bosson, printed on the stone at the Pratt Graphic Arts Center, and my title poem. The text was letterpress set by hand and printed by an old jobbing printer in the Lower East Side, and the book was meticulously hand-bound in paper-covered boards in the Japanese style by a German bookbinder in Spring Street. I flogged copies up and down the Madison Avenue and 57th Street galleries and, with copies sold by Jack and me to friends and relatives, managed to dispose of virtually the entire edition of 150 copies. A copy is lodged in the RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) Museum of Art in Providence.

The Aspen School resulted in my appointment as a lecturer in the English Department at Long Island University in downtown Brooklyn. There I met the late poet, translator, and scholar George Economou, who in turn introduced me to Jerry Rothenberg, Armand Schwerner, and David Antin. Armand and I were friends for years, and my second wife Maggie and I visited him in his home on Staten Island in 1999 not long before his death. LIU ran a fine series of readings by, if memory serves, such poets as Tomas Tranströmer, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Al Purdy (whom I visited at his home in Canada in the early 1970s).

After a second summer at the Aspen School, I founded and directed the Aspen Writers’ Workshop, with Toby Olson, who’d been a student at the Aspen School and went on to be a prolific poet and award-winning novelist, and Edward Pomerantz, novelist, playwright, scriptwriter and prize-winning filmmaker. The AWW ran for eight weeks in July and August and provided the writer of poetry, fiction, and drama with an intensive period of workshop sessions, readings, conferences with instructors, and performances of scripts and plays. Writers-in-residence were invited to stay for one or two weeks to give readings and consultations with students. They included Jeremy Larner, Donald Barthelme, Harvey Swados, and Sol Yurick, fiction; Paul Blackburn, Robert Creeley, and Robert Sward, poetry; and Gabriel Dagan and Barry Pritchard, playwriting. International guest writers under a grant administered through the Institute of International Education were Joseph W. Abreuquah, Ghana, Alberto S. Florentino, Philippines, and Ngugi wa Thion’o, Kenya. Andrei Voznesensky was scheduled to be in residence
during the 1967 session but had to cancel. The poet and Director of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Paul Engle, was a visiting writer. Among the students who went on to have careers in poetry and to publish books were Bobby Byrd, Tim Reynolds, Wendy Salinger, Judith Emlyn Johnson (formerly Judith Johnson Sherwin), John Taggart, and Carl Thayler.

The preparation for each summer’s session took place during the year, beginning in the autumn: the brochure was written, produced, and sent to thousands of college and university English Departments, creative writing programmes, and individuals; applicants’ work was evaluated for acceptance decisions; resident writers were appointed; housing in Aspen was reserved; and so on. Most of this work was done by me with the help of a secretary.

Once the sessions were underway, my workload consisted of teaching in the poetry workshops, along with Toby Olson and Paul Blackburn, student conferences, and dealing with occasional crises. This left time in some afternoons and most evenings to enjoy the attractions of Aspen, and concerts given by soloists and the orchestra of the Aspen Music Festival, which took place in a specially constructed gigantic tent during the week and at weekends. Among the American and international performers and composers were Benjamin Britten and Darius Milhaud, the cellist Zara Nelsova, the violinist Sidney Harth, the pianist Grant Johannesen, and the duo pianists Yvonne and Jeanne Loriod, who performed the ravishing work of Olivier Messiaen.

The other draw of Aspen and its surroundings were the fabulous Rocky Mountains. One memorable climb was the gruelling ascent to Pierre Lakes, in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness (“No maintained trail reaches the lakes, however a strenuous and navigationally challenging route follows Snowmass Creek and Bear Creek up to the basin. Only experienced hikers should attempt this route.”) How True! Aspen is at an altitude of 7890 feet/2405 metres, so you already needed to allow your body to acclimatize. A group of us, including Paul, Toby, and a couple of hardy students, packed sleeping bags, food, and water bottles and managed that very difficult unmarked trail (except for occasional cairns which were easy to miss). The last hour was particularly difficult because we had to stop and try to catch our breath in the thinning air. We finally reached the lakes (altitude 12,174 feet/3711 metres, well above the timber line) where we set up our camp. Under the cloudless, deep blue (I want to say Klein Blue!) sky it was warm but at night the temperature plunged to near freezing. The dawn light arrived early but getting out of our sleeping bags and lighting a campfire for coffee was absolutely bone-numbing. The whole day and night, and the following day exploring the lakes and then making our way down – which had its own difficulties – was
fabulous: a city boy, I never felt more in touch with the beauties and magnificent ruggedness of the mountain environment.

This was in contrast to a tourist’s idea of these fabled mountains, as evidenced in an encounter with Toby which I wrote up as a poem:

**Pleasure & the Naming of it**

*For Toby*

A tourist in his Impala stopped us:
which way to the cave of ice mister,
he sd in earnest of which there was none,
& you a woodsman who knows his woods,
stumped – and I thought to tell
of the ruby grotto, emerald cavern
& gulch of diamonds & such
Arabian-type holes for his pleasure,
lover of W C Fields
that I am. Lies like truth, sd the lady,
we drink waters infested with
Giardia lamblia, ingest carcinogens
& the germs that love us
for what we are, filled with clap-trap visions of the secret scene.
[Etc.]

Aspen was noted for the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies (now the Aspen Institute), which ran a series of seminars throughout the summer for the cultural, moral, and social enlightenment of business leaders. As part of the seminar program a number of artists-and-writers-in-residence contributed to the seminars, including Claes Oldenburg and Jonathan Williams; I was in residence for a week in 1967. It was Jonathan who introduced me to Basil Bunting whom Jonathan had brought to Aspen that year. I knew of Bunting through *Briggflatts*, which I read in in the January 1966 issue of *Poetry* (Chicago), its first publication anywhere: its first book publication was in February 1966 by Stuart Montgomery’s Fulcrum Press. Bunting read the poem to a small group of us one afternoon in the crisp open air of a sunlit grove on the outskirts of town. (When I moved to Britain in 1974, I went to Newcastle-upon-Tyne to give a reading at the Morden Tower, after which I visited Bunting in his home in Wylam,
where we reminisced about Aspen, I read him some of my poems – “You have a very good ear” – and we talked about my relative, the actress Selma Vaz Dias, whom he had known, or known of.)³

Two communal events of that same summer were organised: the first, by Jonathan, was a poetry reading with several of us in the Institute’s sauna; we’d each been asked to bring two or three poems, and it was lucky that I’d brought typescripts rather than pencil or pen copies, because by the time I came to read, the steam was so thick and I was sweating so heavily that I’d had to take my glasses off and peer at the sodden papers to decipher the text and rely mostly on memory to recreate the poems.

The second event was an outgrowth of the games that pitted the artists and writers against the musicians (who, of course, were more numerous since they had a whole orchestra to choose from). This event was organised by Jonathan, who asked Oldenburg, noted for his soft sculptures, to make a long stuffed baseball bat with which we were meant to hit a softball. Very few of us managed a hit because when you raised the limp bat and swung, it tended to fold and made you miss. I can’t remember which team won.

Also in Aspen, Paul and I interviewed Mina Loy, after I’d obtained an introduction through the Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer, the husband of Joella, daughter of Mina Loy. I’d met Bayer after I bought a silkscreen print of his, the first art purchase I ever made. The interview took place in 1965 in the home of a German woman, Mrs. Gertrude Bibbigs who, as I understood it, acted as Loy’s carer. Although Loy was quite frail, she was an animated and delightful reader of her work. She died a year later. A complete transcript of the original tape recording was made by Carolyn Burke and Marisa Januzzi, and Burke wrote the introduction to the interview, which is printed in full in Mina Loy: Woman and Poet.⁴ In addition to her readings, the interview contains her commentaries about her poetry and other matters. Since the transcript is so detailed, I recommend that interested readers consult it, rather than my trying to summarise it here.

Back in New York, I was offered a position as lecturer in the American Language Institute and English Department of New York University, where I and my colleagues Michael Heller, Jackson Mac Low, Clayton Eshleman, and Charles Levendosky formed a ‘poets’ cell.’ Clayton’s Caterpillar Press published a chapbook of mine, The Counted, from which I read along with several other poets on the back of a flatbed truck as we drove slowly through upper Manhattan and Harlem during the Vietnam protests; we used a loudspeaker, and people leaned out of their windows clapping as we passed.
Another protest event was a mass lie-in on the avenue in front of the United Nations Building; I was never so frightened in my life as the police, mounted on enormous horses (as they appeared if you’re lying flat) rode into our crowd, trying to break us up. NYU students and faculty boycotted classes and, so that our students, particularly those from abroad, wouldn’t miss too many, we met in various places around the downtown area.

At NYU I formed a lifelong friendship with Jackson and took part in his ‘simultaneities’ performances in the Judson Poets’ Theatre, which took place in the Judson Church hall, Washington Square South. Over the course of the years, I learned a lot from him, not only about aleatory works (which I have also written, in my case with the help of a roulette wheel), but about poetry generally. He was very widely read, as can be seen from the sources for his chance-composed works in Stanzas for Iris Lezak, which I reviewed, for the litmag Mulch; I sent a copy of the review to John Cage, who was very complimentary. I wrote in a paper presented for the Contemporary Innovative Poetry Research Seminar: “If genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains (Thomas Carlyle), Jackson had that quality.” He published some of my work in The Nation, of which he was Poetry Editor at the time.

In the spring of 1968, the organiser of events for the World Council of Churches, located in the Riverside Church, Upper Manhattan, asked me to take part in the WCC’s support for the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington, DC, organised by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). After the big march on Washington, the demonstrators set up a 3,000-person camp on the Mall. We were bussed down to Washington and, together with others who gave speeches, I read some poems in front of a bank of mikes. I wasn’t certain how the reading went down, but there was a lot of whooping and clapping, which could have been a general burst of enthusiasm for our efforts. The WCC were pleased.

For four days in January 1967, I was invited to take over junior and senior high school English classes in Monett, Missouri, to present and discuss contemporary American poetry. The Monett School District had received a grant from the U.S. Office of Education to conduct a cultural programme to “increase exposure of students in a rural area” to the arts. Two of the poems I used, by Gary Snyder and Robert Creeley, which I had mimeographed for the students, were objected to by a number of parents, and in order not to “seriously jeopardise good relations between the school and the community,” my participation in the programme was curtailed and arrangements were made to put me on the first plane out.
Three things resulted from what I considered to be this farce. First, I wrote “Memorandum to Monett,” an essay in which I gave a blow-by-blow account of what happened, including the two poems and an examination of each, focusing on the specific objections and the reasons for their use in the poems. The Snyder poem was “Things to do on a lookout”. Creeley’s “I Know a Man” which is well-known, was objected to because “the name of the Lord is taken in vain”:

_I Know a Man_

As I sd to my friend, because I am always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his name, the darkness surrounds us, what

can we do against it, or else, shall we & why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for christ’s sake, look out where yr going.

Second, Creeley wrote a mini-essay in response in which he said:

As Mr. Vas Dias makes clear in his comment, my poem is not involved with outraging senses of propriety – though even if it were, surely its place in the world would be no less evident. Nor would it be less to the point to consider how varieties of states of feeling and experience do exist and how their recognition may gain for any of us an understanding on which the possibilities of life itself must depend. Nothing goes away by saying it can’t be there.

Third, nearly half-a-century later, in March, 2013, I received, out of the blue, a heart-warming email from the art teacher in Monett who had managed my visit. He was now retired, having left Monett at the end of the academic year in which my visit took place. He said my expulsion had sickened him and had “changed his life.” He moved to
Oregon where he received his terminal degree at the university there and devoted his life to teaching and practicing his art.

RGH: It is very interesting hearing all this in the current climate with the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US, UK and elsewhere. I am also very interested in your account of these counter-cultural, alternative infrastructures and the way your career moves between these and official institutions. I hadn’t realised how long your involvement in teaching poetry was. I am also struck by your collaboration with Jack Bosson – and how such collaborations with visual artists are also a long-established part of your practice. There are also odd cross-overs with my own experience: Bunting became president of the Poetry Society in the early 1970s and gave a number of readings in London; I heard Mac Low perform various works by Schwitters in New York in the 1990s; Clayton Eshleman and Michael Heller have read at events I have organised in London; Jerry Rothenberg has been a regular visitor to London for as long as I can remember. I never met Schwerner, but The Tablets has long been one of my favourite books. I suppose one of the other big events of this period was the Apollo space-flight programme. This had a particular importance for you, I believe.

RVD: Yes, at the end of the 1960s I, like so many others, was fixated on the space race and keenly anticipated the Apollo 11 Moon Shot on 20th July 1969 when astronauts would set foot on the moon. Starting in 1968 and working through the following year, I contacted hundreds of American, British, and Canadian poets for work responding in some way to space exploration and its implications. The result was Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age which I edited for Doubleday; the cover painting was by the American artist Allan D’Arcangelo; it contained work by 105 poets. I wrote the following poem in 1969 in celebration of the moonshot and gave its title to the collection:

Inside Outer Space

Have seen oasis
earth, her gates
very beautiful even
in winter arriving
at relatively quick
rate of thrust
minutely corrected by
pitch yaw roll
gentle engine
dilate sea in
royal blue
curvilinear Yucatan ear
and gulf shore
conjoining hemispheres where
there is no space but ye
gates I’m getting you OK
looking good
the taste of space
your tongue connects –
d’you read me?

[It] is not a collection of poems about space. In fact, many of these poems are about other concerns, but how they go about these concerns is the concern of this book.... space associations act as a force in the making of the poem. The space-derived image, for example, is the unifying element of many of these poems; a number utilize the language and terms of astrophysics and astroengineering, or depend on information that has become available as a result of space-age science and technology; a few go beyond even this sort of dependency to employ a construct that stems directly from mathematics, statistical probability, and relativity theory.\(^{10}\)

Among the poets included were W.H. Auden, Paul Blackburn, William Bronk, Robert Creeley, Larry Eigner, Ted Enslin, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Jerome Rothenberg, Armand Schwerner, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky.

As befitting its subject, I wanted to have experimental work represented: David Antin’s “from ‘The Black Plague,” Ronald Johnson’s “The Unfoldings,” Robert Kelly’s prose poem “Astronomy,” Jackson Mac Low’s four poems, Michael McClure’s “To James B. Rector,” and Mary Ellen Solt’s concrete poem, an elegy for three astronauts, “A Moonshot Sonnet” are the chief ones.

The book rode the crest of the space-race wave; once the historic feat of the moon walk had occurred, Americans’ interest in space-related things waned, and the book was allowed to go out-of-print: I have to say that, regardless, the book does contain some fantastic poems!
In 1970, at the recommendation of the poet and editor Dan Gerber, I received an invitation to apply for a position as Poet-in-Residence and Tutor at Thomas Jefferson College (TJC), a constituent college at what is now Grand Valley State University near Grand Rapids, Michigan. The invitation provided for a paid visit to present myself to the students and faculty at a specially convened meeting. I talked briefly about myself and my accomplishments, the kind of teaching I believed in, why I wrote poetry, followed by reading some of my poems, and then answering questions, mainly by the students. I said that one of the things I’d like to do was attract a dozen or so nationally recognised poets to take part in a festival at TJC. The response was enthusiastic, and a few days later I received an offer of the post.

Here I have to explain that Thomas Jefferson College was founded (1969) along progressive, experimental lines, somewhat modelled after Black Mountain College. The curriculum was proposed anew every semester by the faculty and students; each course proposal was posted on the walls in the common room and consisted of a short description, name(s) of the proposer, and space for the students to sign up: if ten or more signed up, the course ran. Faculty proposals tended to emphasise subjects they thought should be part of a liberal arts curriculum, while student-inspired ones were often counter-cultural or trendy: thus I found myself one semester ‘teaching’ the work of Richard Brautigan (which I actually enjoyed; I think I learned as much from the students as they did from me). The curriculum emphasised the arts: the faculty included a musician/composer, a theatre director, a dance instructor/choreographer, and an artist (Basil King, whom I recommended).

One result of this artistic cross-disciplinary fertility was a performance in the autumn of 1971, held in the college’s modern theatre, of my specially written poem, “Text for the Fall Appearance Opera” (later published in Partisan Review), set to music, danced by students directed by the dance instructor, and directed by the theatre director.

**Text for the Fall Appearance Opera**

*The burgeoning scatter of black-birds this dawn awoke  
me: fall, which had not  
yet appeared, appears & then begins  
to disappear as one by one they leave  
this place of many trembling,  
precarious leaves, the turning  
not yet done, not the flight*
away, but the dance of these leaves among my eyes.

During the first (autumn 1970) semester at the college, I put together a proposal for a National Poetry Festival to take place in the summer of 1971: “The Festival is seen as a place and circumstance in which, for a week, the human, aesthetic, and practical resources are available for a sustained experience of the art of poetry and engagement with the artistic personality.” I didn’t conceive of it as a spectator-oriented, performance situation attended by a passive audience (although there were readings by all the poets), but as an opportunity to take part in workshops, discussions, seminars and informal, ad hoc meetings.

For the first, 1971 Festival (a second took place in 1973), I wanted to challenge conventional expectations by making sure there was adequate representation by African American poets; conferences and festivals I’d attended in the past had been mostly white affairs. Accordingly, five African Americans attended. The complete list of poets: Ted Berrigan, Paul Blackburn, Robert Bly, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Donald Hall, David Henderson, Anselm Hollo, Robert Kelly, John Logan, Jackson Mac Low, Toby Olson, Joel Oppenheimer, George Quasha, Dudley Randall, Jerome Rothenberg, Sonia Sanchez, Armand Schwerner, Diane Wakoski, Tom Weatherly, Philip Whalen, and Al Young.

The Festival was such a great success that I proposed another, to take place two years later. The second one was built around an older generation of poets, the Objectivists, who influenced the generation of poets who followed, and who had never before been gathered together in one place (they were ‘together’ in An “Objectivists” Anthology, edited by Louis Zukofsky). Zukofsky was invited to the Festival but had to decline for reasons of health. The complete list of poets:


Audio and videotapes were made of some of the sessions, including a video and transcript of ‘Objectivists and After,’ a seminar including the three Objectivists and others. Most of the audios were destroyed in a flood caused by a fire in the GVSU library and A/V Center. Three days of readings, workshops, and seminars are preserved.
on Penn Sound (National Poetry Festival, June 14-25, 1973). I also have black-and-white large-size photos of the poets.

Meanwhile, before I left for Michigan in 1970, Joel Oppenheimer introduced my work to the Editor-in-Chief of the trade publisher Bobbs-Merrill, who accepted the manuscript.¹² Paul Blackburn wrote the Foreword (“This is a step. This is a step forwards. This is a foreword.”), and the Michigan artist R.B. Hart did the cover painting, a somewhat restrained version (this was 1971!) of a colourful psychedelic landscape. Jerry Rothenberg’s blurb read, in part:

There’s finally the possibility that poetry actualizes – makes real – more life than it loses. Something like that has been the intention of many of our tougher poets, & Vas Dias’ reality quotient is, in that sense, very high indeed.

During the summer of 1972 I went to San Francisco to visit Robert Duncan and Mary and George Oppen, staying with Ron Loewensohn in Oakland across the bay. Stimulating conversations (for me) with both Robert and George and Mary, and I talked about my plans for the National Poetry Festival the following year which they agreed to attend.

My original appointment at Thomas Jefferson was for two years, but the Dean asked me to stay for an extra year (1973-74). In June 1974 my wife, son, and I packed our worldly possessions and set sail for London on the Russian ship MS Mikhail Lermontov. (The liner subsequently hit rocks and sank off the north coast of New Zealand in 1986. The only other trip I took on an ocean liner was in June 1940, on the RMS Cameronia from Glasgow bound for New York; in 1942 she was torpedoed but managed to limp into port in Algeria, whence she was escorted to Gibraltar for repairs. I don’t think I’ll be sailing on another ship.)
Notes for Part II

1 https://www.protrails.com/trail/807/aspen-snowmass-pierre-lakes
3 Selma Vaz Dias (1911-77), British actress, writer and painter. She appeared in Hitchcock’s The Lady Vanishes (1938) and Powell and Pressburger’s One of Our Aircraft is Missing (1942) as well as the premieres of Genet’s The Maids (1952) and The Balcony (1957).
5 Jackson Mac Low, Stanzas for Iris Lezak (Millerton, NY, Something Else Press, 1972).
6 This and the following quotations are from Robert Vas Dias, “Memorandum to Monett,” in Cultural Affairs 3 (New York, Associated Council of the Arts, 1968, 15ff).
7 Robert Creeley, “The Province of the Poem,” ibid., 19.
8 The Russians had taken the US by surprise, when they launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, into earth-orbit in 1957. In 1961, John Kennedy had announced the goal of ‘landing a man on the moon by the end of the decade’. NASA’s Apollo programme made this true on 20 July 1969.
11 (To Publishers, Le Beausset, Var, France, and New York, 1932). In addition to the four Objectivists plus Kenneth Rexroth alive at this time (1973), William Carlos Williams, Basil Bunting, and Lorine Niedecker were also included in the anthology.
About the Authors

Robert Vas Dias was born in London but at an early age moved to the United States, where he started his literary career. He is the author of seventeen poetry collections, published in the US and the UK, and has been the editor/co-editor of four literary journals, two in the US and two in the UK. He was, among other things, founding director of the Aspen Writers’ Workshop in Colorado and, when he returned to London, General Secretary of the Poetry Society (1975-78) during a turbulent period in the Society’s history. He has been involved in the poetry scene in the US and the UK for several decades and has contributed to the advancement of poetry on both sides of the Atlantic.

Robert Hampson was Professor of Modern Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London, and is now a research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, where he runs the Contemporary Innovative Poetry Research Seminar with Amy Evans Bauer. In the 1970s, he co-edited Alembic with Peter Barry and Ken Edward, and he has been active since then as poet, critic and editor. His publications include the new british poetry: the scope of the possible (Manchester University Press, 1993) co-edited with Peter Barry; Frank O'Hara Now (Liverpool University Press, 2010) co-edited with Will Montgomery; Clasp: late-modernist poetry in London in the 1970s (Shearsman, 2016) co-edited with Ken Edwards; and The Allen Fisher Companion (Shearsman, 2020) co-edited with cris cheek. His own poetry publications include an explanation of colours (veer, 2010) and reworked disasters (kfs, 2012).