

Conversations With William Everson

~ poet and printer ~

at Kingfisher Flats near Swanton, California

Recorded, transcribed, compiled and edited by Frances Tompkins.

“Antoninus Everson”

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I discovered him in a second-hand store, picked up the book with his picture on the cover. It was frightening, and fascinating. He looked like a monk from the dungeons in the Inquisition. The Crooked Lines Of God by Brother Antoninus. William Everson. I carried that book with me everywhere, but I didn't read it. That was in 1975.

In January, 1978, he was lecturing at Kresge College, UCSC. I went. And brought the book with me. Afterward, I waited for the crowd to clear around him, slipped quietly up to sit beside him and whispered, “Brother Antoninus.” He looked at me. “My dear friend. No one has called me that for years.” The tears ran down his face. That was the beginning of a close and lasting friendship. It took another three years and a new husband to get an invitation to the house, the old forestry cabin in the Swanton woods, Kingfisher Flats.

EVERSON: They put in that fish hatchery right up here next to us last year. Somebody's always there, even at night. The feeling of it being a wilderness has pretty much vanished. But it was time, I guess, because I'm not really into wilderness anymore. I'm going some other way, I don't know what it is ... maybe I still am into it and don't know it. There's nothing really new. I'm exhausted. I think I'm coming to the end of it. My life kind of works in cycles that way. I went through the USO in one theme and then I'm back in the vineyard. I went through that vineyard and when I was still living in the vineyard it kind of

closed off behind me and I had to go on to something else. And then the war came along and solved that. So after the war the same thing had happened, but I joined the church and then I entered into the Order, and that was a whole new dimension. And then finally after I began to have nothing more to say along those lines, I ran away and got married and it all began again. And now, after ten years of teaching, I'm back on my own again. The wages of professionalism. The pro has to take on the job when it comes, the amateur can follow his own cycle, his own life. It's the only way to do it. Eternal amateur. [Laughter.]

EVERSON: I was just reading a phrase, let me see if I can quote it. 'The best life is to be a genius and not recognized for it.' But I can't live with that. I changed my course so often. It threw the public off. It's only been in the past thirteen years that I finally began to pull it together. I remember when I was in Albuquerque they played that film of me before I read, when I was back in the monastery, when I was still Brother Antoninus, they played that film first and you know I'd been so uptight. Since the Parkinson's came I've been so uptight about not being able to find my pace or get my stride on platform because I can't pick up the book, you know. I used to read with one hand, left hand, and gesture with the right. Now I can't do that. I have to stay tied to the podium, put the book in front of me. My hand shakes so bad I can't read it. I felt like I was under a kind of curse that night too. But suddenly, when they played that film and I had to see myself there when I was in top form and then start up, the way I am now ... but you

know I finally threw that monkey off my back. I got up the next morning and realized that I was liberated. I don't have the control of the audience and the command of it, but something comes through.

FRANCES: Your presence comes through, and your timing is independent of what you do with your hands. There's no slip in that.

EVERSON: It hasn't gotten to my brain, I can still think. [Pause.]

FRANCES: When did you start to write poetry?

EVERSON: After my mother died. 1941, just before Pearl Harbor. I think there's a psychic caul? A membrane, a psychic membrane, that's born in you with your birth. And this is a sensual thing and you carry this with your life with the mother. It's physical at first, on the breast, you know, and held. You gain a psychological dimension and you keep it there. The male writer doesn't really break through until he loses his mother. And there's that psychic caul, it splits and you emerge into a creative man.

FRANCES: Was your poetry strong from the very beginning?

EVERSON: No. I found Jeffers, and that's what made the difference. There's kind of a shift in the center of gravity within the self when you find your master. Everything that happened before, you're rubbing your head and suddenly you find out what it's supposed to sound like.

FRANCES: Did you ever meet him?

EVERSON: Best thing I ever did was not to meet Jeffers. It wouldn't have worked. He hated disciples and I couldn't go as anything less.

FRANCES: How did you get the name Antoninus?

EVERSON: The provincial gave it to me.

FRANCES: You mean you can't pick your own name?

EVERSON: Sometimes they let 'em choose 'em,

but in my case the provincial said, "We've had three Antoninus's and none of them stayed. I'm going to keep naming them till I get one that stays."

FRANCES: So you were the fourth who didn't stay?

EVERSON: Well he was dead before I left. [Much laughter.]

EVERSON: I was in there eighteen-and-a-half years.

FRANCES: And you left to marry Suzanna.

EVERSON: Yeah. There's not enough church in the women and there's not enough women in the church. [Laughter.]

FRANCES: Tell me about your first reading.

EVERSON: Robert Duncan had taken over the management center at San Jose State and he had called me up, when I was Brother Antoninus, and asked me if I'd read and I said I would. And the night came and I wasn't there. Everybody came to hear me read. That was my bad karma, and I've had it ever since. I discovered that one when they called me on the phone at five minutes to eight wondering where I was.

FRANCES: Did you get there at all?

EVERSON: No. People didn't think it was my fault, they thought my superiors had stepped in and prohibited it or something. [He picks up a medicine bottle.] This stuff, L-Dopa? If you get too much of it, and you have to take it long enough to make it effective, then you go into those convulsions? Well what happened was I got a stiff neck from sleeping exposed, and when it ties in with the L-Dopa ... dyskinesia it's called, this posturing like I'm doing now, with that stiff neck in there, the pain is excruciating, it just becomes excruciating. I load up on the L-Dopa and it takes me up there till I start the dyskinesia. Then as soon as I get off that, I slide right back down into it. And I'm pissed off. [He picks up a fountain pen, opens the bottle of India ink; his

hand is shaking.] This is dangerous. [He starts to write.] I got too much ink on it. See it start to bleed there? One thing about when you're doing signatures, you can do any damn thing you want and nobody can say anything, because you're the big cheese. [Laughter.]

EVERSON: My public life has been taken away from me. I have to make my pen talk.

FRANCES: Maybe you should go out more, do more readings.

EVERSON: Well that's all right, but the Parkinson's will make me think twice. I still go out. I got on the plane and flew to Albuquerque and came back. But in the Parkinson's group I'm working with, that's unheard of. It's my life. But I have to change my whole act to fit my ... condition. There's no appetite in it for me. When I go out and read I get good results, I get more standing ovations than when I was.... I cowed the audience in those days. Now they cow me. [Laughter.]

FRANCES: You say there's no appetite in it for you. Do you mean you don't like to go out and read?

EVERSON: I don't like it. I can't do on platform what I want to do. It doesn't matter me if my unconscious is communicating to them something. My ego says [in a funny, old lady voice], "This is awful, Bill." I forget my lines and I misread them. But the audience doesn't seem to care.

FRANCES: It hurts your personal ego.

EVERSON: My pride of craft, certainly. But the poetry writing hasn't fallen off a jot.

FRANCES: From the audience's standpoint, you're just as strong as ever.

EVERSON [Softly]: Yeah.

FRANCES: Not because they feel sorry for you.

EVERSON: No it isn't. I talked it over with the doctor and he said it's an example, the way I've

tackled my ... disability, and have overcome it.

FRANCES: You just need more and bigger audiences, that's all.

EVERSON [Picks up his wine glass, holds it out in front of him]: Salud!

FRANCES: How's your memory?

EVERSON: Well the immediate things I don't remember too well but the things in the deep past I remember vividly. It's supposed to be one of the signs of growing old. I used to attribute it to the medication, but I don't think that's it. I think it's just growing old.

FRANCES: Do you ever perform your poems from memory?

EVERSON: I don't like it when a poet reads, completely memorized. It's disconcerting to me. I use the book to let the audience know when I'm reading poetry. There's a guy I met said he heard me in Harvard, he indicated as a fault that he couldn't tell the difference between the poetry and the meditation and I looked back to say, "I beg your pardon, I always let the audience know when I'm going into a poem, I pick up the book." [Laughter.]

EVERSON: The closest I ever came to the big time was so early on that I wasn't prepared for it. This was in Chicago; my first trip into the Midwest was to Detroit. 1959. There was a big craze on then about the Beat Generation, *Life Magazine* had been running articles about it and I came into Detroit as "The Beat Friar." They did a bang up job of promoting me so that I drew an enormous crowd. I had the television cameras there and the reporters ... and when I went into Chicago the next week my fame preceded me. And this is when I rose to the challenge of defending the beat movement. And the next night I read at the University of Chicago to a thunderous response. But I flew home and just pulled the militia in behind me. If I had worked from that point I could have moved onto the circuit, but I was so new, to come out of the

monastery and just to go on platform that way was so ... there's such a glare, psychologically it's very difficult to keep your sensitivity and your depth in such exposure. So I didn't go out again then. I was ready to go whenever something happened, but it never happened that way again.

FRANCES: You're not into pushing for things. If you had, it would have happened.

EVERSON: I put a terrific amount of pressure on the audience, charismatic pressure, trying make a relation to the audience and break my way through there, make a breakthrough, boring in, boring in, boring in, silence and poems just throwing it in like hand grenades. You go in after and you mop up. [Laughter.]

EVERSON: Well after I began appearing on platform and my reputation began to grow, people began to seek me out. And I was into depth psychology and so it was normal for me to respond. As for the women, that part of it, the religious habit is a cut above everything. [He picks up a pamphlet, reads], "William Everson, AKA Brother Antoninus, Rogue Catholic." I wanted to make that the title of my biography but they didn't know what to do with it, said it was too much like, what's that sensational newspaper, the *National Enquirer*. "Rogue Catholic." [He chuckles.] I tell you it's the state of Jesus. The rogue elephant gets kicked out, he's a male and the others kick him out of the herd? His temperament or what not. They get fed up with him and they kick him out. So he's excluded, but he stays on the outside there and he services by warning when predators come, and often he'll defend the herd. And I say that he's a kind of pariah, like Jesus was, he was a kind of a pariah and he died a rogue. [Pause.] The poet has two main thrusts in his life that motivate him. One's the thrust for vision and the other's the thrust for recognition. [Pause.] I want to try to get the last part of my life in order, in the sense of marking a resolution, resolving it? I've been an agonizer all my life, my whole work is fraught with agonization. I want to end on a happier note. It

seems to me if I can't do that, in some way, I've not made any advance. It's as if I'd got caught in a rut, and I'm just not about to be caught doing that. So that's one of the reasons why I don't quite know where to move next is because I usually follow in the area of most pain. Because my writing's the only way I have of assuaging that. So now that I'm not painful, now that I've been more realized ... and happy ... and calm ... I'm in a new place. I haven't yet learned how to handle it. I've learned it in my regular life, I know how to laugh and be human. On platform I can be humorous too. But not in my writing. So that's what I have to learn to do, to get some of my new strength back into the writing. I can see it coming. [Long pause.] I had a dream I died last night. I was dying. And it was wonderful, a great adventure was opening up. I was going on a journey. I knew it was death but I knew it was good. It was just kind of a vision, no scenario, no narrative. Light set through a path. Not a well defined earth path, but light with a distance factor in it. And I was on the threshold of this, that's where I was going. I was getting ready, getting my soul prepared for the journey. Sue had tucked me in last night, into bed. Last night she was very loving and she came to tuck me in and ... very maternal. I got the idea of the Blessed Mother. And the deposition of being taken down from the cross. I think that has something to do with the dream. I was going on a journey and it was going to be great. Everything was all light, the light stretched ahead a little ways, not anything distinct. But there was a purpose there, of where I was going to go. And I woke up wanting to make out my will.

FRANCES: You're not going to die. You're not done, not yet.

EVERSON: [Looks over the top of his glasses]: Thanks a lot.