

Conversations With William Everson

~ poet and printer ~

at Kingfisher Flats near Swanton, California

Recorded, transcribed, compiled and edited by Frances Tompkins.

“Silenced”

(Father Blank)

FRANCES: Is it true that your superior in the Order forbade you to go out and read?

EVERSON: It was the Archbishop of San Francisco. My Order stood by me, but they couldn't fight him in his own diocese ... so I was prohibited from giving any readings in San Francisco for twelve years. He wanted 'em to curb me from going to other parts of the country. They didn't do that, but they did forbid me from doing interviews ... because of the sensational press I was getting. They also wouldn't let me read in the religious order. And then the Archbishop died.

FRANCES: That's a good solution.

EVERSON: In one interview I said the worst thing an archbishop can do is to suppress a poet.

FRANCES: And then he died!

[Laughter.]

FRANCES: So how long did that go on ... before he died?

EVERSON: Happened in 1959, and it must have gone on ... maybe five years, around 1954.

FRANCES: Right in the heart of the Beat Generation.

EVERSON: 1953, around in there, four, five years. It was between the Beat Generation and the hippies.

FRANCES: The early sixties?

EVERSON: Yeah. The Beat Generation was really the fifties, and the hippies came in the middle of the sixties. That period. Fifty-nine

saw the supreme newsworthiness of the Beat Generation. And then the Kennedys. It was that bland Eisenhower second administration. The media were looking for something! The only rebellion was what Life Magazine called the Beat Generation in their feature, and they were just looking for somebody. The youth was into panty raids, remember? It was awful, just awful! Crew cut?! And the Beats stormed that citadel and Time Magazine picked 'em up and ... that's the way they'll do, they'll ridicule it ... but they'll use it. They'll give it negative but they'll prominently display it. [Pause.]

Then in 1964 Johnson escalated the Vietnam War and that caused ... that gated the social dimension for the hippies. And then we started into the protest movement.

FRANCES: By which time you were free to read again.

EVERSON: Yeah. We had a new bishop and archbishop in San Francisco and my provincial went to them and... Actually, what happened was that our former provincial, Father Blank, he was a tough drill-master type, and he had his own man hand-picked for a successor, this would be the 1956 election, the Dominicans elect every four years ... but when Father Futon got the nod and was elected provincial, Father Blank was outraged. He had a very close relationship with the archbishop. In fact, Father Blank had illegally held too many ... several elections and they tried to elect him out and the archbishop would write a letter back to Rome and say, “I think Father Blank should be permitted to go on because I don't think the order can....” You see the order was in difficulty

because.... The Dominicans came out to California in the mid eighteen fifties. But after the original padres died off they didn't get the vocations out here. And the Order began to be run from the East Coast as a, I forget the technical name for it, but it's something like a ... somebody sent from another place, and they don't have the best interests of the local organization in mind. The calls almost went under then, in the early teens of this ... in fact it wasn't until Father Blank got in there and turned it around with his ruthlessness. He just began lopping heads. He had more brass than a top sergeant. Dreadful man. Wore hard heels on his shoes and they'd go click down through the halls, click. And when Father Futon backed me, Father Blank went to the Archbishop and complained. And then I got a piece on me in Time Magazine called 'The Beat Friar.' And that made the archbishop's eyes rise. Then I gave a reading at Santa Claire University, and because I had been in Time Magazine, they sent a reporter from the Examiner, and he quoted me out of context. The editor of the Examiner decided to get revenge on me for supporting the Beat Generation, and so he rewrote the story. First he squelched the story, but after the Time Magazine thing he went to the bishop. The bishop says, "Hit him", and so they published this sneering photograph of me and had a headline of a sensational kind. It was on the basis of this that the archbishop then was free to smack me down. When I passed that test, I kind of grew my spurs. I'd earned my spurs, proved my mettle.

FRANCES: By not protesting. By being patient and waiting out your time.

EVERSON: Yeah... Once I gave an interview with a young Jesuit on a panel in the Midwest and he was asked what he would do if the censors forbade his work to be printed. He says, "If you're smart enough to be in this business, you ought to be smart enough not to be backed into a corner like that!" [Laughter.] They asked me the same question. "God will not long

permit me to remain silent." Somebody said that's the difference between the Jesuits and the Dominicans. Actually I said it kind of tongue in cheek. And the audience loved it. But the clergy and the Establishment were not amused.

FRANCES: You could have taken the bull by the horns and run, with headlines of a sensational manner ... you could have gotten very famous. But you chose to stay with the Church.

EVERSON: Yeah.

FRANCES: Why did they tell you to stop reading?

EVERSON: Because of the imprudent things I said.... I said that Jesus was the Supreme Beatnik. That's the one that did it.

FRANCES: Good line. I didn't know you were funny then. The picture on the front cover of The Crooked Lines Of God isn't comical. When was that taken?

EVERSON: Fifty-six.

FRANCES: After you got to go out and read again?

EVERSON: No, before.

FRANCES: What were you so bitter about?

EVERSON: One of the brothers was telling me about his Roman Catholic childhood in Germany. The policy there was that they went by villages. One village was Catholic, one village was Protestant. If you were in one village you worshipped Protestant, if you were in another, you worshipped Catholic. Then they switched from Catholic to Protestant when he was an adolescent and I was scandalized at this arrangement. And I was registering profound disapproval.

FRANCES: Well it's a god awful picture.

EVERSON: Those were my fasting days, I was an ascetic in those days. You see my bony face there?