

On Richard Sieburth

Festschrift for his 70th birthday

Larch Road

James Clifford

“It was our Rue Blomet,” he once said, only half in jest.

The three of us sitting around a stained coffee table, littered with books. 11 pm, the appointed hour for scotch. Anna pours from a half-gallon of Cutty Sark. Richard fills his pipe. I find a corner of the table for my feet.

Talk ensues: Nabokov and Flaubert, Pound and Hölderlin, Lévi-Strauss and William Carlos Williams. University gossip, The Boston Red Sox, national politics and culture...

It was the Fall of 1977, a more innocent time: Nixon gone, Jimmie Carter just elected. The oil shock and energy crisis dominates the news. (Carter installs solar cells on the White House roof.) As sixties radical sophisticates, we thought of this president with a certain condescension--a devout Christian and a technocrat. How much better he looks today! Rising inflation, the Iran Hostage debacle, Reagan's landslide victory, were still a few years off. Did we understand that we were living through a historic transition: from the expanding post-war economy, to recession, cyclical instability and the rise of neo-liberalism? In the Spring of 1978 the Red Sox were off to a fast start. Carl Yastrzemski and Carleton Fisk came up more than Tip O'Neil or the chairman of the Fed (whoever that was).

Anapaola Cancogni and Richard Sieburth were PhD students in Comparative Literature at Harvard. I was in History, but drawn to Anthropology. Anna and Richard seemed to me a kind of literary power couple. They had read almost everything—erudition that was intimidating and, with help from the scotch, inspiring.

I had gotten to know Richard in 1973, when we co-taught a sophomore seminar for Harvard's History and Literature program. The topic was nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, and the assumption was that Richard would hold down the lit side, I the history. Somehow, through the alchemy of juxtaposition, coherence would emerge. I can't speak for the students, but for me it was a very agreeable experience. I was more into the novels than the history readings, so it often fell to Richard, who was into everything, to interpret the revolutions of 1848, the rise of industry, the modern city, The Great War, etc.

Four years later, we had both finished our degrees, after some research time in Paris. Richard and Anna were living together around Cambridge, with their auburn-haired and increasingly

neurotic cocker spaniel, Fyodor. in Fall 1977 when I needed a place, they invited me to share their apartment-- two floors of an older house near Fresh Pond.

Life on Larch Road had its routines, which suited all of the apartment's bookish residents. Anna was working on a Nabokov dissertation and perhaps imaging her eventual novel. Richard was a new Assistant Professor at Harvard, and I was preparing for the job market. We spent a lot of time reading and writing. The 11 pm break was our most immutable ritual. Anna summoned us downstairs in stentorian tones that brooked no delay. As the scotch flowed and conversation progressed, Richard might sprinkle a little sweet-smelling weed on top of the tobacco in his pipe.

We talked a lot about literature, much of which was news to me. The exact colors of the furnishings in one of Flaubert's interiors mobilized considerable energy, as did mysteriously luminous phrases from Nabokov's *Ada*. Richard was beginning to focus on his Hölderlin translations. I was learning more about surrealism, broadly conceived. While in Paris, researching the intellectual history of French anthropology, I had discovered Michel Leiris, Aimé Césaire, Raymond Roussel, Victor Segalen, Georges Bataille, and Raymond Queneau. The relationship of anthropology, literature, and travel was becoming central to my work, and I could not have found a better place to explore those pathways than around the coffee table at Larch Road.

I made the acquaintance of Walter Benjamin's "lyric poet in the age of high capitalism." Beginning with Baudelaire and the *flâneur* we could move on to "Sketches by Boz" by the young journalist, Charles Dickens; then the talk might turn to Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, to the informal economy of urban rag-collectors, to Dr. Williams's New Jersey, Nabokov's America, the streets of Somerville. The category of the "ethnographic" was opening up for me, detached from anthropological description. We considered the marvelous in everyday life, Victor Schlovsky's *ostranenie*, the surrealists' *insolite*, Barthes' *effet de reel*. The term "oneirography" made an appearance.

Those who have ever had a conversation with Richard know his incredible breadth of knowledge and intellectual generosity. Effortlessly and entirely without pretense, he takes up your idea, leads it in a new direction, and returns it translated and made-new. . . inviting your next thought. "On Ethnographic Surrealism," the essay I began to imagine in 1978, owes its existence to Richard's library. Its intellectual/aesthetic method of collage was acted out in our late-night exchanges and divagations.

Concerned with the possible cohabitation of poetic energy and academic discourse, we wanted to be scholars-with-a-difference. I remember Richard bringing me Walter Benjamin's famous quotation from Baudelaire:

Who among us has not dreamt, in his ambitious days, of the miracle of a poetic prose? It would have to be musical without rhythm and rhyme, supple and resistant enough to

adapt itself to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the wave motions of dreaming, the shocks of consciousness....

I've carried that with me over the years—a recurring instigation. Instead of trying, unsuccessfully, to be a poet, couldn't I search for the poetry in prose?

Stumbling upstairs to bed after midnight, I see Richard heading outdoors with Fyodor tugging on his leash. A last round of sniffing and scratching along Larch Road. Not the Rue Blomet, but not quite Cambridge Massachusetts either. Perhaps Richard is turning over some lines from Hölderlin that he'll bring into American English.

O Land des Homer!

Land of Homer!
By the scarlet cherry tree, or when
The young peaches you sent to me
Are still green in the vineyard,
And the swallow arrives from afar and, bringing endless news,
Builds her house in my walls, in
Maytime, and under stars,
Ionia, I think of you.

(Hymns and Fragments, 65)