

Pierre Joris

“How to manage the fire:” On Gerrit Lansing



Photo by Pat Smith

1. A Life.

Gerrit Lansing passed away February 11, 2018 in Gloucester, Massachusetts. A man of wider & deeper knowledge than almost anyone I have known, Gerrit Lansing was as familiar with, and brought as much care to contemporary poetry & poetics than to older literatures, to the traditional sciences than to modern science, to the making of music than to the preparing of food. A conversationalist *sans pareil*, he moved with grace, enthusiasm & profound *savoir* & *savoir-faire* from, say, a poet such as Henry Vaughn to his friend Charles Olson, or from the likes of John Dee to the likes of Harry Smith, or from Roland Barthes to Stephen Jonas — and knew the trceries that connected all of them. Before I try to address the work, let his hometown newspaper, *The Gloucester Times*, have the first word with David Rich's obituary of Lansing's exoteric life:

Gerrit Yates Lansing was born on February 25, 1928, in Albany, New York, the son of Charles B. and Alice (Scott) Lansing. After a brief stay in Colorado Springs, Gerrit and his family moved to the Cleveland area, where his father, an engineering consultant and metals executive, served as Chairman of the Western Reserve University board of trustees. At Harvard College, which Gerrit graduated from in 1949, his social set included the artist Edward Gorey, poets Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, and childhood friend Kenward Elmslie. After graduation, Gerrit moved to New York City, working for Columbia University Press, and receiving a master's degree from Columbia in 1955. In the heady atmosphere of 1950s New York City, Gerrit partied with theatrical and literary celebrities too numerous to mention, but the stand out figure in his social circle was the lyricist John LaTouche, who at one point hired Gerrit to adapt the writings of H.P. Lovecraft into a film treatment.

Through LaTouche and Harry Martin, Gerrit befriended the inventor John Hays Hammond Jr., prompting Gerrit to move to Gloucester, where he initially lived in Hammond Castle. In Gloucester, Gerrit met two men who greatly shaped his life: poet Charles Olson and sailor Deryk Burton. Olson he surprised with an unannounced visit to the poet's Fort Square apartment. Gerrit became not only a friend and correspondent with Olson, but also the quiet expert on the role of tarot, astrology, and the estoteric on Olson's writings and thought. At the Studio Restaurant on Rocky Neck, Gerrit met the love of his life, Deryk Burton, a sailor born in Wallasey, England, who skippered private yachts. Together, Gerrit and Deryk sailed these vessels to their winter berths in Florida and the Carriibbean. Intrigued by the occult since high school, Gerrit became an encyclopedic resource on the topic, opening his bookstore Abraxas, which specialized in magic, philosophy, and rare esoteric volumes.

It seems to me that Gerrit would have delighted in that misspelled word “estoteric” for esoteric — in fact I wouldn't be surprised if it was his mischievous humor that returned in the shape of a typo-gremlin to slip that “coquille” as the French say, that (oyster, clam, whatever) shell into his own obit.

2. An Approach.

If, as the above summary shows, Gerrit Lansing delighted in and took full advantage of the avant-garde & anti-conformist fifties — at both the personal sexual & the wider artistic levels — that life in New York City made possible, there came however a moment when another side of Gerrit's made itself felt: his love and need for an

actual daily connection to the non-urban, to nature. Settling in Gloucester fulfilled this (& all the other facets of his) character. Besides the city's duality — and the dual was dear to him, see the appendix to the editorial/manifesto, "The Burden of Set 1" of issue 1 of his magazine SET (of which, btw, there would only be two issues) — of sea and land & all that entailed, there was the delight in wild walks (I remember him showing us Dogtown Commons which under his guidance took on another dimension than it had in Olson's *Maximus Poems*), in his mushrooming & herbalizing (I made that word up & auto-correction immediately changed it to "verbalizing" — unless that was the Gerrit-gremlin again...: both are accurate indeed).

Thus the intricate duality of nature & culture — "kulchur," he spelled it elsewhere, quoting Ezra Pound, & "cultsure" when he criticized its reactionary priestly embalmers — weaves together ("to tether" the Gerrit-gremlin corrected) the life & work into a richly complex fabric. How to approach this work now, after the disappearance of *il miglior fabbro*, as Dante called Daniel, & Eliot, Pound? One way into the thought and work would be via his own identification in an interview with Charles Bernstein & Susan Howe: "From the very beginning I regarded myself as Emersonian in many ways — because of Whitman... and as Robert Duncan is in many ways." No better entry then into Lansing than to reread the opening paragraph of Emerson's *On Nature*:

OUR age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose

floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

And that is exactly what Lansing set out to do, in the poems as much as in the two essential essays (editorials, he calls them) — ‘The Burden of SET #1 & #2’ — that constitute his theoretical-practical advice on how to go about living & making art here in & under America’s dispensation.

3. SET 1:

In 1961, Lansing saw the need for a magazine of poetry actions and community [see #4] and created SET — the polysemic title resonates from jazz to tennis (well, in a minor, more humorous way) to stance (a word I hear as an Olsonian term, but also as Paul Celan’s “stehen,” as equivalence of being alive, still) to Egyptian hermetic godhead — which will be “fix & dromenon / & to the poem.” The inside front cover starts with the word “onset” and then, to the right and further down begins a poem/ statement he will elaborate on in the essay/manifesto “The Burden of SET 2:”

o.k. let it come down, in on us, all of it, so much as we can, & then to get it out again. That was an Epitome of Yoga... ‘SET still, stop thinking, shut up, get Out,’ & yoga is concentration of experience (exclusion too, yes, but not of experience itself, rather of experience not really experienced

enough, restraint of the modifications of mind in order to feel their source) whose enemy is abstraction, distraction, retraction, any thing or way that hinders the going traction.

An “epitome of yoga,” and indeed this is an excellent description of the process of that art/discipline which GL practiced throughout his life, but it is also & especially as set here at the head, the “onset,” of the magazine, an epitome of poetry. These directions for poetry are developed in more (the Gerrit-gremlin changed that momentarily & inexplicably to “kore” thus bringing in “core” but also Kore, or Persephone, the queen of the underworld) detail in his “editorial” — set further in the body of the magazine as it comes after work by Robert Duncan, Charles Olson & Stephen Jonas. Work of the latter, in fact, surrounds the editorial showing the importance Jonas had, as a friend & poet, for Lansing. The character of these poetic explorations, “here and especially now,” are “conceived as dual, *historical* & *magical*, the emphasized characters of Time.” Lansing goes on to develop these characters of Time in what to this day remains one of the clearest & most useful statements of an active poetics we have.

4. The temptation

now would be to pull, to cut back my own words, to just quote, cite, inscribe Gerrit Lansing’s words, the full essays, then the poems, they speak loud enough & better than I can. Can’t do this, however, have to speak up & honor GL, in a laudatory manner his own modesty & discretion would never have permitted him to do. But, this hint: even before reading this homage, get, buy, order, or steal these two books: *Heavenly Tree, Northern Earth*, which is a collected poems (at least of those poems GL wanted to retain) augmented by the two “Burdens of SET” essays (North Atlantic Books, 2009, lovingly designed by poet Jonathan Green & worth to have in

its inexpensive hardback); and *A February Sheaf*, a sort of selected (“uncollected, old and new”) poems followed by a large (70 pages) section of “reviews, essays, gists” which gather all such prose writings, including the two SET editorials, Lansing wanted to make public. It was published in 2003 by Pressed Wafer, the press founded by William Corbett, a recently deceased poet & friend who in their long barzakh will be companion traveling side-by-side with Gerrit.

5. The Company or a constellation, i.e. Breaking Bread.

Long ago, coming into American poetry, I read an interview with Robert Creeley in which he is asked if he had any advice for young poets. “Company” was his answer, or more exactly: “I think company is immensely useful, by which I mean finding some company that lets one feel respect and less than paranoid about what it is one cares for.” For the European I was back then & for whom the image of the poet as isolated holed up in some ivory tower or some caravanserai in Aden was still somewhat active, this discovery was major. (As was GL’s thinking about the culture I came from, pithily put in the 2nd of the *Burden of Set* essays: “European whiteness is sepulcher to us & European consciousness a museum” — I have ever since worked at overcoming that heritage.)

The poet who gave Lansing to me by giving me a copy of his first book — *The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward*, Matter Books, 1966 (I still cherish that long “legal size” mimeographed & side-stapled item with green covers & yellow-orangey inside pages printed in brown ink) — was Robert Kelly. And Kelly also spoke of the magic of “company” in an interview where he said: “The individuals back then, you ask about them. What a great company we were, what a fantastic chevere I was permitted to be part of. The company of those days – like Gerrit Lansing’s wonderful phrase ‘the

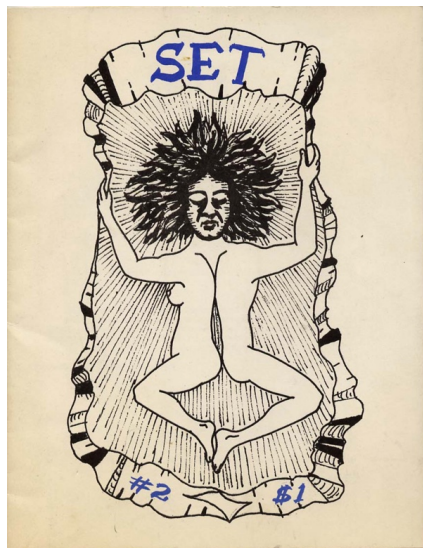
company of love / safe in the garden that is themselves.’ How can anyone work without a company?”

Company comes from “con pan” – literally “with bread” – to share bread, to break bread with someone, and this action, to cook and share food around a table in talk was an essential part of Gerrit Lansing’s art of living. The company he held was manifold, but besides the New York poetry scene’s denizens already mentioned above, it is necessary to mention three or four other companies, distinct from each other, though overlapping in various ways. There is of course the local Gloucester area community of friends, too innumerable to all list here. Let me just mention those I had the pleasure of being introduced to by Gerrit & which included artists & writers such as Thorpe Feidt, Amanda & James Cook, John Giglio, Kristine Roan, Patrick Dowd, Joe Torra, Jim Dunn *und so weiter*. Beyond Cape Anne is the Boston group of poets, “the occult school” (dixit GL) that includes (with John Wheelwright as forerunner) John Wieners (who prefaced Gerrit’s first book of poems) & Stephen Jonas (whose literary executor Lansing would become together with Raffael De Gruttola), & further away the likes of Jack Spicer & Robin Blaser on their passage through Boston. The latter also indicates the company’s overlap with the Black Mountain group, Olson of course, & Robert Duncan, but also Robert Creeley and Edward Dorn. Beyond that, Lansing was a major influence on & friend of what I like to call the Ta’wil poets, among them Robert Kelly, Kenneth Irby, Charles Stein, Don Byrd & George Quasha. Or another more diffuse constellation affiliated with the Beats & beyond would include Diane Di Prima, Amiri Baraka, Diane Wakoski, etc. But such a diagrammatic literary layout does not give the full picture: Gerrit was open to every man or woman that he met, giving every visitor, old friend or new acquaintance, his undivided attention. As Nicole Peyrafitte put it: “Gerrit’s was a unique presence, and I mean unique because he had the incredible gift of making a multi-level personal connection not only at the moment of the encounter, but one

that would remember every detail over the years. It was as if each of his friendships had its own DNA that recorded each particular of that specific relationship.” Driving to Gloucester to visit with Gerrit for an afternoon or a day or more was always at least a double pleasure for us: the pleasure to see Gerrit, and the surprise pleasure of meeting old or new friends who were already there, sitting around the table, breaking bread, sharing food, drink & talk...

6. SET 2

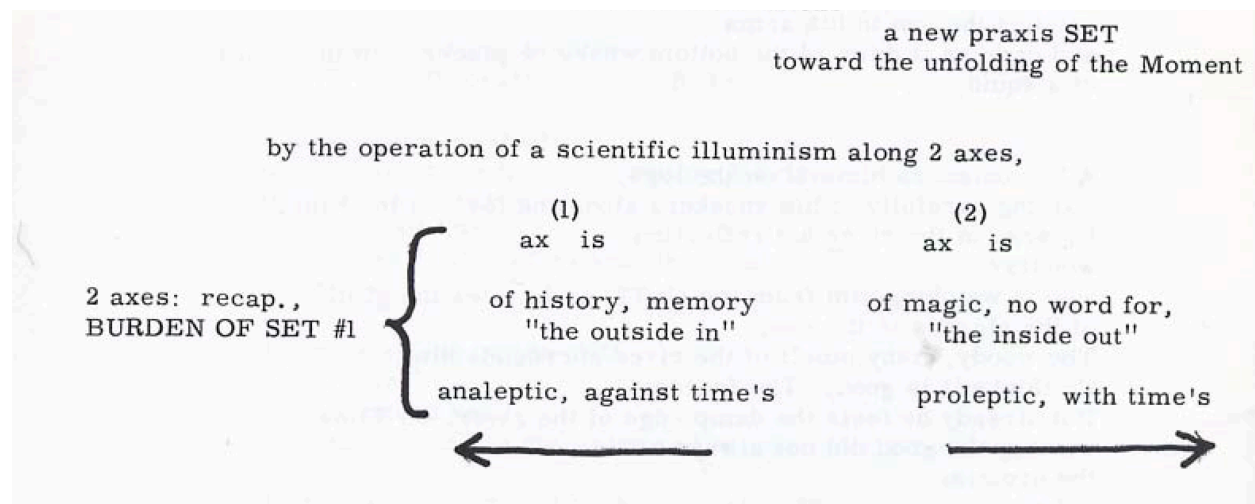
The cover of the second issue of SET is a drawing by Gerrit Lansing’s friend Harry Martin representing a hermaphroditic figure.



Before, or besides, associating this figure with the traditionary sciences which were a lifelong interest & practice of GL's, we can also directly link it to the realm of poetry. In his essay “François Villon,” the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam writes: “The lyrical poet is a hermaphrodite by nature, capable of limitless fissions in the name of his inner monologue.” In a essay from the mid-eighties on Mandelstam & Bakhtin,

“Dialogue as Lyrical Hermaphroditism,” Svetlana Boym comments as follows:
 “Mandel’shtam’s ‘lyrical hermaphroditism’ does not signify a Platonic ideal of androgynous wholeness, a reconciliation of two polarities. On the contrary, it is viewed as a peculiar kind of poetic *dvupolost* (hermaphroditism) that reveals multiple splittings of the poet’s self and suggests an open-ended and continuous interplay of sexual and social roles, of nuances of intonation and artistic styles.”

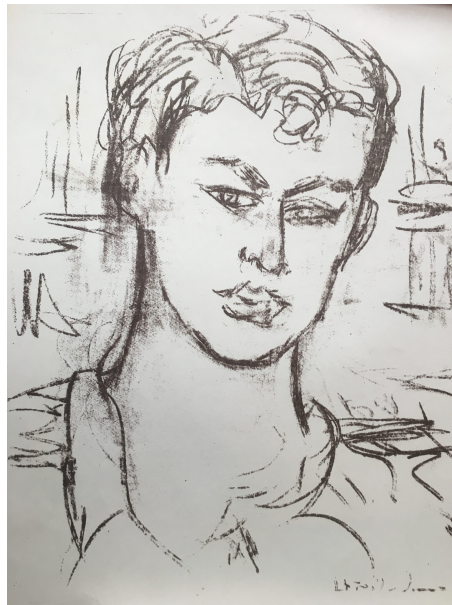
GL himself in the editorial of issue #2 creates a fascinating dual layout that mirrors in a way the cover figure:



Another way of thinking through this would be via the couple enstasy/ecstasy, a balancing act that enables & generates the energy from wherever one gets it, even from absence, or nothing, for, as GL says elsewhere: “From zero jumps two, two being how something is apprehended. Only a stone’s throw from writing to root. The rite of winter is the root of spring.”

7. A writ a route a root a rite:

“a writ is a route,” Lansing wrote in his great sequence “The Soluble Forest,” and he traced this route in one book, one ex-foliating gathering of poems, re-organised & added to over time, re-published in time, and that started out with the already mentioned 1966 edition of *The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward* by Robert & Joby Kelly’s matter books. Jane Freilicher’s portrait of Lansing reproduced below was the frontispiece of that book.



In his preface, John Wieners begins by commenting on the title, saying that “the title is wrong; alchemically it is right; but the essence of purpose is not downward. It is upwards toward heaven... These poems reach that way. // And the devil steps between each word.” The devil’s step is the necessary dance the reader has to do to follow the route the poem traces. I would caution the reader not to take Wieners at his word, exactly: this is not a xtian or similar transcendental metaphysics where “heaven” is up in the sky while we lowlifes are mired in this material world, inescapably or at least until death. Gershom Sholem, the great scholar of Kabbala,

suggested that in these days of “a great crisis in language,” — & culture, I’d like to add — where those older knowledges & traditions such as Kabbala & the various hermetic traditions and, most importantly at this ecological turn of our Anthropocene, those traditional knowledges concerning botany, geology & the animal kingdoms, where all those realms of knowledge have fallen silent & in disrepute, we must turn toward those “who still believe that they can hear the echo of the vanished word of the creation in the immanence of the world.” And, Sholem goes on: “This is a question to which, in our times, only the poets presumable have the answers.”

8. Opacity.

Yes, the poems are not transparent, & yet, as Wieners also says in his foreword to the HTGD : “The obtuse is clarity.” Lansing, in that sense, writes in a different tradition than that of his old New York School friends. Or has different aims, even given the often humorously witty surface, debonairly urbane (& more open in terms of the language he uses) as any O’Hara poem, especially in matters of the sexual. Thus the poem entitled “The Joint Is Jumping” starts with the lines “Whose joint? Pass me one please, *et suce ma bite*. What’s the time?...” Though the sexual, core to Lansing’s work, is more often linked to Reichian, Crowleyan or tantric themes. In the poem just mentioned, the second stanza has moved this theme elsewhere: “We lop the moon, invoking hazard’s sorites / our sorties through the orient gates.” I link the “orient” of those (Blakean) gates “where we slither out of time,” to aspects of esoteric Sufism, as laid out in Henry Corbin’s work. Lansing’s realm, what Kenneth Irby calls his *kosmanthropologia*, I see as corresponding to that in-between realm, “ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect,” Corbin finds in Sohrawardî & others where it is called ‘*âlam al-mithâl*, the world of the image, the *mundus imaginalis*.

This realm is opened by the creative imagination, an organ of both perception and creation, & which for the poet becomes incarnated in the multi-layered, poly-semantic & -symbolic levels of language, where both the writing and the reading of the text presuppose a hermeneutic act. In the esoteric Sufi tradition, this specific hermeneutic act is called *ta'wil*, a concept which Tom Cheetham, our best commentator on Corbin, describes as follows: “The apprehension, the reading and understanding of these symbols, is not merely an intellectual exercise but an exegesis that transforms the soul — it is spiritual exegesis,” because (Corbin again) “the *ta'wil* enables men to enter a new world, to accede to a higher plane of being.” In that sense, a poem can be seen, writes Robert Kelly, as “the *ta'wil* of the first word written down.”

To return to that deep root of Lansing’s work, the sexual as transformative action that links the various realms (as much as poetry does?), here is a line from another poem: “Sex on earth is rhymed angelic motion.” Unsurprisingly, this can make for symbolically multi-layered “obscure” or “esoteric” poems, but I’d like to suggest that all poetry in the lineage of a visionary poetics (in the lineage, of say, Blake, Hölderlin, Rimbaud & even Whitman) presents, has to present, a often opaque though never impenetrable surface. In a prose fragment, Paul Celan put it this way:

Imagination and experience, experience and imagination make me think, in view of the darkness of the poem today, of a darkness of the poem qua poem, a constitutive, thus a congenital darkness. In other words: the poem is born dark; it comes, as the result of a radical individuation, into the world as a language fragment, thus, as far as language manages to be world, freighted with world.

But such darkness is never a willed obscurity, an obscurity created for the sake of itself, it corresponds rather to the real darkness that surrounds us & that is inside us as much as it is inside the outside world. The poem does not try to throw some “light” (or fake “light-ness”) on either inside or outside worlds. It is an accurate witness to this darkness that should not, however, discourage us, but should remind us to read poets like Lansing & Celan with negative capability, i.e. with what Keats defined as the needed ability to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Lansing himself was fully aware of this, and in an essay on the work of Clark Coolidge, after citing Ezra Pound telling William Carlos Williams that “the thing that saves your work is *opacity*, and don’t you forget it. Opacity is not an American quality...,” he goes on: “that was true then, but by now [1987] native American instances of opacity have become much more visible.”

9. Alchemy

If I just now approached the complexity of Lansing’s work through Corbin’s work on Sufi esotericism, that has to do with my own predilections. Gerrit was well-versed in all traditional sciences (he was certainly Charles Olson’s major source of such knowledges throughout the sixties) & one other helpful way of approaching the work would be via alchemy. His connection with the Jungian approach is remembered by Ruth Lepton in her insightful piece on GL’s passing: “He came across Jung at Harvard, and later in New York met the secretary of the Bollingen Foundation, which published Jung. In the summer following that meeting, he took a train from Rome to southern Switzerland, where he attended the Eranos meetings (eranos meaning ‘love feast’) on symbolical, archetypal and mythological themes, and continued to go to the Bollingen in NY while he was working at Columbia in the publications department.” Therefore may I suggest volume XIII of the Collected Jung, *Alchemical Studies*,

published in the Bollingen series as essential reading. For the core image of the “tree that grows downward,” for example, the reader can go directly to page 311 & the subchapter “The Inverted Tree.”

However, alchemy here is not just a Jungian archetypal analytical approach on the psychological or psychoanalytical levels. There is also Lansing’s life-long interest in Crowleyan & other practical magicks, thus a desire to be involved with a practice (“piratic” the Gerrit-gremlin tried to auto-correct my misspelled word) more or at least as much so as with analysis. I’ve already mentioned yoga as one such practice, and here is how the poem “In Northern Earth,” which in all editions of his *Heavenly Tree* is placed as the closing poem of the *oeuvre*, concludes, with images that move from alchemy to tantric yoga:

Dissolve, coagula, the chemists say:
but the first darkness blinds the human eyes
that climb the ladder of the visionary spinal chord to issue in
the thousand-petalled sun.

Yet, to see him as a “magician” is only valid, I believe, if we use Robert Duncan’s warning re Jung’s own identification as Magus: “...our difficulty and our necessary politesse about the Magus is that whenever you find the Magus, you only find him in the creation of art. When you look back to find the Zoroastrian Magus, you find him wherever he is found in the work of Shelley, and the work of Goethe.”

This wonderfully accurate, practical & down to earth quality of Lansing’s approach to a traditionary science such as alchemy, is visible in a sentence from *The Burden of SET*: “Alchemists & cooks have the same problem, how to manage the heat.” And poets, too — when they are cookin’. As Gerrit does just about always in the work he decided to keep & offer. Nor is — despite my talk of opaqueness — the

work inaccessible at all. Like all great poets, Lansing is first of all moved by love, & some of his love poems are among the best & most readable of this last half-century. Take the simplicity of the following stanza from his poem “Amazing Grace and a Salad Bowl” written in memory of his friend, the poet Stephen Jonas:

I have a salad bowl,
unpolished wood
I cherish as of you best memory
The courtesy and purity of greens
lemon juice and olive oil.

And the final lines of the poem:

You denied the ecstasy I claimed,
said tricks were only tricks,
which I in turn denied.
but you and I together knew
bright words hanging on the boughs of dawn.

Amazing grace.

Gerrit Lansing: amazing grace, indeed. And these poems, these words of Lansing’s, as John Wieners put it at the end of his introduction to the beginning of Gerrit’s work, we have “to learn to carry them.. over the streets of the city — and dismay the madness of a nation with their magic.”

RESOURCES

Gerrit Lansing. *Heavenly Tree, Northern Earth* (North Atlantic Books, 2009)

Gerrit Lansing. *A February Sheaf* (Pressed Wafer, 2003)

Gerrit Lansing. *Heavenly Tree Soluble Forest* (Talisman House, 1995)

Gerrit Lansing. *The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward* (matter books, 1966)

Talisman #15: Gerrit Lansing Issue (Winter 1995/96)

Spring #59: *Opening the Dreamway in the Psyche of Robert Duncan* (1996)

C.G. Jung. *Alchemical Studies*, Volume XIII of *The Collected Works*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (Bollingen Series, Princeton University press, 1967).

Tom Cheetham, *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings*. (North Atlantic Books, 2012)

Henry Corbin. 'Mundus Imaginalis' or the Imaginary and the Imaginal (Golgonooza Press, 1976)

George Prochnik. *Stranger in a Strange Land: Searching for Gershom Scholem* (Other Press, 2017)

The Svetlana Boym Reader. Edited by Cristina Vatulescu, et al. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018)

A Voice full of Cities: The Collected Essays of Robert Kelly. Pierre Joris & Peter Cockelbergh, editors. (Contra Mundum Press, 2014)

The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials by Paul Celan. Translated by Pierre Joris (Stanford U.P. 2011)

To hear GL read & to listen to his interview with Charles Bernstein & Susan Howe, go to Pennsound: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lansing.php> .

A link to the Gerrit Lansing Memorial Reading on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/1X4erKKKYM0>