

David Michael Slater

The Book/The Phrase/The Word/The Symbol

Dr. Broussard,

Below is a copy of the document discovered yesterday morning on the body of Jacques Blanchard. I believe you will find it as fascinating as I do.

To Whom It May Concern:

The following is a summary account of my work on Professor Jose Lezo Berbeo (1901-1968), former professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Bogota, and his work concerning a Frenchman named Joseph Ben Simon. Ben Simon was an unremarkable seventeenth century priest who, after a thoroughly undistinguished career in the Church, reputedly became obsessed with a book of blank pages. He wound up in Lyons, in a nameless and abject branch of the great Parisian madhouse, L' Hôpital Général, frantically turning the pages of his book with his nose. Details of the life of Ben Simon are scarce, chiefly because there has been little or no historical interest in the clergyman, but also because the branch of L' Hôpital in which he was confined burned to the ground in 1661. Until the investigative work of Professor Berbeo surfaced, it was assumed that both the man and his presumably sinus stained pages were consumed in that forgotten conflagration.

In a blinding storm of indifference, Berbeo began an inquiry into the life of Ben Simon. He authored an article for *El Mundo*, in September of 1963, in which he claimed he had evidence that Ben Simon did not die in the inferno with the entire staff and inmate population of L' Hôpital, but rather escaped as the fiery catastrophe perforated the asylum walls. Furthermore, he claimed Ben Simon expected the impending apocalypse, and thus, somehow, managed to be unfettered when the flames struck (most of the pathetic inmates were devoured by the flames while still in their shackles).

Berbeo wrote that he could prove Ben Simon fled the fire and took refuge in a series of caves in Le Jura, where he became hopelessly lost in the labyrinthine bowels of the mountains. On his final journey, Berbeo claimed, the beleaguered refugee took with him a page copied from his beloved book. The professor declared, with his characteristic tendency toward the hyperbolic, that he had procured for himself the "very self-same page that will render [these] claims irrefutable and immortalize [his own] name!" (*El Mundo*, 11 September, 1963, pg. 17).

The response to Berbeo's article was virtually non-existent, with the exception of a brief but acerbic missive sent to the editorial offices of *El Mundo* from Professor Jonathan Zigman of Oxford University. The professor, oddly enough, seemed to know something about Berbeo. He wrote: "I only wish *El Mundo* could think of something (anything!) more interesting to print than the irrelevant ravings of one mad man about another. Perhaps next month you will print the copied text of a blank page on the cover of your esteemed periodical!" (*El Mundo*, 18 September, 1963, pg. xi).

Both Berbeo and *El Mundo*, apparently undaunted by the sarcastic note, pressed on with these strange claims. In October of 1963, the magazine printed another article by Berbeo about his "discovery." In this piece, Berbeo hurled invectives at Zigman and "all other blithering recalcitrants," ridiculing them for "unfathomable ignorance and incomprehensible short-sightedness," (9 October, 1963, pg. 44). He went on to describe a spelunking expedition in the Jura mountains during which he came upon a rusting metal box nestled among the partially decomposed bones of a human being. Inside the box Berbeo discovered an ancient sheet of paper. This artifact was, in fact, the supposedly transcribed page that had thus far been responsible for the stirring of negligible interest. (The dampness and cool temperature of the caves were apparently responsible for the paper and the bones not being reduced to several unassuming heaps of dust.)

It was Berbeo's next theatrical claim that changed the course of the issue irrevocably (and paid no small dividends for *El Mundo*). In the 23 October edition (pg. 21), Berbeo wrote the following: "Professor Ben Simon may very well have been insane, but, if his acumen was cast into the abyss it was because he was unprepared to cope with his monumental discovery. This mean ecclesiastic had in his possession the rarest and most valuable book in the universe: *The Book of Letters!* And I have proof."

The response to this article was voluminous, although the vast majority of it condemned both Berbeo and the editors of *El Mundo* as kooks and

publicity hounds. Most of the letters expressed, with substantial perturbation, that no one had ever heard of *The Book of Letters*, and whatever it was, it certainly wasn't the rarest or most valuable book in the universe. Berbeo's credibility (if he had any to begin with) was stretched to the limit as he resisted mounting pressure to adduce any proof whatsoever of the discovery.

Retrospectively, it seems Berbeo knew what he was doing by bringing his case to light in such a curious manner. He understood that he could not produce a *copy* from the book and expect to impress anyone; the professor was clearly stalling for time, and this is unfortunate as the page has been lost to the vicissitudes of Time. By happy accident, though, I discovered a copy of a portion of the transcription put down by Berbeo's wife Allison in her diary, which I obtained by placing a successful bid by telephone on a collection of 1960's women's diaries during an auction in Bogota, 6 July, 1988. (Could Mrs. Berbeo ever have imagined her daily habit would one day spark an interest that could consume the mind and soul of a man like myself, so far removed from her in Space and Time?) Allison made the copy shortly before Berbeo's own institutionalization.

It seems Mrs. Berbeo was utterly frantic about coming to terms with her husband's unflagging obsession with the page he brought back from France. He studied it voraciously and continued printing a steady stream of articles that offered unsubstantiated claims about his progress toward obtaining this mysterious *Book of Letters*. Mrs. Berbeo's diary reveals that her constant attempts to learn what irresistible fascination the crusted page held for her husband were thwarted with increasing vehemence. The entry dated 14 December, 1966, details how she covertly positioned herself in a loft above the kitchen, procuring a view over her husband's shoulder, and how she began to quickly copy the text. Mrs. Berbeo managed to copy the top portion of the page before Berbeo became aware of her subterfuge. In his subsequent rage, the professor apparently crossed the same mental border traversed by Ben Simon so many years before. He became deranged and ate the entire page. Nonetheless, the fruit of the intrepid Mrs. Berbeo's espionage survives in all of its imperfections. The following is a translated copy of her work. It must be noted that there are several missing words in her text, though it is unclear to whom to attribute the gaps (the original text, the yellow page, Allison's poor angle, etc.):

This is the Book of Letters

Ben Simon Ben Simon, Ben-Simon,

There will be a fire, There be
 The book perish
 The word you seek the letter the
 There will be a fire tomorrow

Though what is revealed in this copy is certainly provocative in terms of Berbeo's claims about Ben Simon's pre-knowledge of the fire, it is safe to assume that Berbeo knew he needed a great deal more corroboration and explanation before he could publish it. Amazingly enough, just such support came among the squadrons of vitriolic epistles that descended upon *El Mundo* in the wake of several more issues containing Berbeo's increasingly arrogant claims to first-hand knowledge of the apocryphal work.

It arrived in the form of a note from the precocious daughter of an illiterate French farmer, one Dominique Russel. At age fourteen, the girl had been discovered by two lost Parisians who had asked her for directions on the road. Stunned by the contradiction between the girl's shabby appearance and her self-taught eloquence, the wealthy couple had removed her from her lowly circumstances and boarded her at a school in Paris. At eighteen, Dominique had seen the French edition of *El Mundo* and was prompted to respond. She indicated that, according to her family's oral history, one of her great-great ancestors, a Nicolas Russel, had taken in a "madman" on the night of the burning of that small branch of L' Hôpital. The fire, a mere footnote in mainstream French history, was apparently a watershed event for this peasant family.

According to the story Dominique received from her father, the lunatic had appeared from nowhere, sprinting wildly toward their famous ancestor, who stood in the entrance of their hut holding an empty iron box in which he had planned to bury his savings. The madman drew near, revealing himself to be in possession of a small black book, which he held in one hand, while clutching a single page in the other. The man's eyes darted erratically, and he was drenched in dirt and sweat.

The unlikely pair suddenly found themselves standing face to face, speechless and in mutual terror. After a prolonged moment of mute communication, the lunatic snatched the box from the farmer's grasp and handed him the small black book in apparent exchange. Before the

stranger fled toward the mountains, he looked gravely into the bewildered farmer's eyes and warned him to guard the book with his life. The experience had been so harrowing for the old farmer that he would never be the same again. Dominique offered no speculation as to why the meeting between lunatic and farmer had been so moving to the latter party, except to say the old man's religion "moronically" held sacred the insane and infirm.

In the diary of Mrs. Berbeo, in an entry dated 10 February, 1966, she recalls the visceral state of excitement in which Professor Berbeo returned one day brandishing a letter from someone (obviously Dominique) whom he would only refer to as "God's peasant prophet." She goes on to detail his spasmodic behaviour as he devoured his dinner and left for France and the shadowy edges of the Saone Valley. (Again, I marvel at Mrs. Berbeo's small decisions; she tucked the note into her diary behind this entry.)

Apparently, Berbeo was under the impression that *The Book of Letters* was within his reach. Upon his arrival at the shoddy hut, just along the base of the mountains, he was shown a worn and beaten wooden box in which he found, not the elusive text he sought, but the remains of the diary of Joseph Ben Simon. One can imagine his great disappointment, but he must have realized that such a discovery was, by all estimation, anything but a complete failure. I say remains of the diary because, despite the generations of reverence the book received, it was ultimately not immune from the ravages of nature. Specifically, while the book was under the care of Dominique's grandfather, Nicolas Russel (there is a steady line of Nicolas Russels dating back even further than the singular man who received the book on that stormy night) it was kept on a special table in the rear of the hut. One rueful Sabbath morning, the unsupervised text fell pray to a hungry family goat. (The ignorant beast was immediately slaughtered in retribution for its heretical culinary selection, and the book was placed in the aforementioned worn and beaten wooden box.) I received this information from Dominique herself, when I reached her at the very same school to which she was promoted almost thirty years ago. As luck would have it, she teaches there now.

Ms. Russel recalls vividly Berbeo's arrival at her family home. She had returned home for a week's visit the day before Berbeo burst into the hut. He was undoubtedly the strangest man she had ever seen. In correspondence, she related to me Berbeo's great frustration at not being permitted to liberate the diary from the dwelling. The book had taken

on talismanic proportions to the illiterate paternal line of the family, and the strange man's interest in the book only solidified the Nicolases' fascination with it. Even so, the elder Russel allowed Berbeo to study the text, which the professor did feverishly for three days and nights. The farmer even agreed to let Berbeo make a copy.

Dominique remembers watching the odd man as he produced dozens of translated copies (clearly as a ploy to remain as long as possible with the original work). She never spoke to Berbeo, choosing to remain aloof from what she regarded as a pageant of lunacy. As a female, her father would not permit Dominique access to the book, despite the fact that she was the only member of the family capable of reading it. This, not surprisingly, embittered her towards the entire subject of "The Book." Dominique does admit, though, being impressed forever by the visitor's devotion to his bizarre studies. The professor seemed to have memorized most of the diary in the process of his transcribing, and this was fortunate because the unlucky man lost the only copy he took back with him not one day after his return home. Allison, in a eerie moment of parallelism, accidentally fed her husband's papers to the evening fire.

Dominique told me, in a letter she sent with one of the copies Berbeo left behind, that she never understood her father's or brother's ridiculous obsession with a book they couldn't read. In 1975, after her family's death at the hands of a contaminated well, she refused to look at it out of lingering spite. Dominique simply had her family's meagre possessions boxed up and deposited in her cellar. She wrote that I should do what I liked with the copy and that, if she could track down the original, she would send it along as well, adding that she'd be "thrilled to be rid of the rotten thing." There was no explanation for the damaged condition the copy arrived in.

As the original did not seem forthcoming, I made my own translation and study of Berbeo's copy. The following entry dated 12 August, 1659, is a particularly revealing insight into the state of mind of Ben Simon before his descent into insanity. [...] is used to indicate missing or illegible passages.

I have become plagued by representation, for I see it does not exist. The horrid logic of it all is beginning to crystallize. The blasted mythology we call the alphabet! [...] Component parts have no meaning beyond their contingencies. [...] a fantasy world full of ghosts pointing to each other-a circle of hideous countenances, a confusion so vast [...] My own name, Ben Simon! I am caused by my father, not by myself. He was caused by his father... I begin to fear for my sanity.

Another surviving passage is even more startling. It is dated 6 February, 1660.

I have heard talk among the mystics and scholars I find myself relentlessly pursuing in my fever, about a certain phrase, a certain word, or a certain symbol in a divine book. On the street, a man told me there is one word from which all words emanate, from which all words are differentiated and given meaning. In a brothel, a prostitute told me it was not a word at all but a single sign, the missing sign from all the world's linguistic codes. A child whispered in my ear that if I could only utter the phrase I would be initiated. In a dark antechamber, I felt the raised spherical letters of a blind man's text. I have wandered in a pathetic stupor about the streets of Paris and have become dizzy and weak from peering into the voids of strange and frightening codices and listening to the murmuring of the insane. I am now certain that I will soon be counted among their numbers.

In the midst of several illegible pages can be read the following extremely provocative phrase: "I have found a book." The few pages that follow the mangled section are fascinatingly incoherent ramblings with nuggets of tantalizing hints about this book. (Again, I do not know to what extent the incoherence is attributable to the copyist.) Here is a sample of some of the scrawled comments; I have divided them into three categories: phrases that seem to describe his opinion of the book, phrases that seem to describe the content of the book, and phrases that describe his reactions.

Opinion: Astounding discovery/Unprecedented/Holy/Incomprehensible

Content: few pages/changing/rearranging/It seems to live

Reaction: I will go blind/I do not understand/I can not maintain

Later, I identified these phrases: "I begin to see," "It is only a matter of time," and, "It is inevitable, now."

It seems obvious to me that, at the very least, Ben Simon thought that he had discovered *The Book of Letters*. As Fate decreed, Gustav DeWitt's seminal study of the Loharians, a heretical underground derivative of Hasidism, was published during my period of research. As it turns out, this neglected sect is chiefly concerned with *The Book of Letters*, which they believe to have fallen from the hands of God in his wrath. The disciples of Loharianism describe the book as a cauldron of signs and symbols from which the various nations of human-kind were assigned language systems. They contend that the most sacred symbols were never revealed, and some believe that the Word itself can be found among its pages. In a variation of the story, the book's pages are said to change their symbols, sometimes rapidly, sometimes very slowly, but

nonetheless perpetually. The constant alteration creates new and old languages, and reveals both the most non-sensical and profound insights in perpetual cycle. One mystic told me in correspondence that if one was to sit in front of a single page of *The Book of Letters* long enough, all the truths of the universe would eventually be revealed, either in "The Phrase, The Word, or The Symbol." Given Berbeo's expertise in the field of religion, it would not be outrageous to assume that Berbeo had managed to gain some secret knowledge about the Loharians. He must have decided to keep the information to himself until the book was his.

Ben Simon's diary seems to suggest that he did indeed have such a book in his possession. Church records indicate that he was excommunicated for an "abnormal obsession" and an "ungodly attachment to an empty book." Could not the letters have been revealed for his eyes only? If the pages were indeed empty, might we consider the possibility that non-symbols are just as much signs as non non-symbols? There are apparently no records of a challenge to his dismissal and no records of any resistance to his confinement. Perhaps Ben Simon did not care where he lived as long as he could wait for his sign in the pages of the book.

Berbeo returned to Bogota in June of 1966, and, undaunted by the loss of the transcribed copies (he no doubt realized their ultimate worthlessness), he wrote several more articles proclaiming he would soon be in possession of the magical book. Caustic and acrimonious letters continued to pour into the magazine, but it soon became obvious that Berbeo had done more than just distract and annoy readers with inanities. An attempt was made on his life later that same month: two unidentified men in an olive pick-up truck tried to run him down outside the down-town offices of *El Mundo*. Shortly thereafter, Berbeo wrote an article in which he renounced his "little hoax" and apologized for "any psychical abuse [he] may have inadvertently perpetrated on [his] esteemed readership," (3 July, 1966, pg. *iv*). Such a retraction seems only natural in the face of potential assassination, and need not be considered telling. Indeed, Mrs. Berbeo's diary confirms that Berbeo was foisting anything but a hoax. The following is the relevant entry from 14 August, 1966, one week after the attempted homicide:

His behaviour is incomprehensible! I will not stand it much longer. I have been trying my best to please him. This morning I warned him again that he will some day go blind if he continues to read without his spectacles, and suddenly, after weeks of ruminating about homicidal lunatics and idiotic French illiterates, and of utterly ignoring

me!, he threw over the table and leapt out of his chair. "Braille!" he screamed. "What a fool I am!" "Braille! Braille!" He kept repeating this for half an hour like a madman. He has rushed out once again, claiming he's on his way back to France. The hell with him, I don't care!

What came next can only be described as absurd. Dominique Russel was not present during these events, but relates the story told by her brother, Nicolas. Immediately following the incident described above, Berbeo returned to France and to her father's hut, and commenced to try everything in his power to win the diary from the aging farmer. Apparently, nothing worked. Mr. Russel offered Berbeo the copies he had left behind on his first visit, but the professor refused and hovered over the book for as long as he could.

Upon expiration of the third night of Berbeo's visit, Nicolas Senior asked him to vacate the premises. Berbeo became desperate and offered the farmer more money than the countryman had seen in his life. The stubborn farmer, steadfastly dedicated to maintaining the family relic, refused to relent under any circumstance. He offered Berbeo one more hour to study the text, but the old man received only a shower of expletives and insults in return for his kindness.

Confused, Russel allowed Berbeo three more day's access to the original work. It was during this time that the frantic professor attempted to abscond with the book. And, as Time is apt to repeat itself, *Le Jura* once again looked down upon a wild-eyed man stumbling frenziedly over its territory with a small black book pressed desperately to his breast.

Unfamiliar with the terrain, Berbeo was captured quickly by the Russels and their neighbors, who subsequently drove him out of the area. French police records show that Berbeo was later arrested as a public nuisance and deported to Colombia on 8 December, 1966. It was only days after his return that Mrs. Berbeo attempted to glean once and for all the appeal of the notorious page, and the unfortunate incident occurred in which the said document was forever lost to the violence of the professor's gastro-intestinal cycle. As mentioned, Berbeo was institutionalized shortly thereafter, and, apparently, lived out the rest of his life uttering repeatedly the same word, "Braille, Braille," as if it was the very Word he sought.

I can draw only one conclusion from the strange and tragic culmination to Dr. Berbeo's inquiries (which were quickly forgotten after his institutionalization confirmed the worst suspicions of his detractors). This is simply that the book carried out of the blazing asylum and

handed to Nicolas Russel by Ben Simon was not the priest's diary at all. Indeed, no records survive that indicate how many books he had with him in the asylum, but it stands to reason that he would devote every minute of his concentration to *The Book of Letters*, if he possessed it. How could he risk blundering into missing The Phrase, The Word, or The Symbol by scratching away at a diary? Indeed, it is unthinkable that this book was his diary.

It is now painfully clear to me that the cruel twist of fate engineered by that most vicious of the gods, Coincidence, arranged it such that on the day Professor Berbeo laid his hands on *The Book Of Letters*, the letters were arranged such that it only appeared to be the diary of Joseph Ben Simon. This cruel realization was the deadly epiphany that struck the poor professor when his wife mentioned his precarious vision on that fateful day. He undoubtedly remembered the passage of Ben Simon's describing his encounter in a dark room with the "spherical letters of a blind man's text." Had he only realized sooner that no such language existed until 1854--Oh, cruel Fate!--how he could have planned a better way to get that book.

About the page found during Berbeo's caving expedition: it seems only logical to assume that it was not a transcription at all but actually a page torn from *The Book of Letters*. (If Berbeo thought the page was a copy, the letters must have appeared handwritten. Both form and content fluctuate!) Perhaps Ben Simon had some small hope that while he hid in the dark labyrinth, a single page of the book would be enough to reveal what he sought. After all, Providence had apparently provided for him warning enough to escape the fiery catastrophe. How clever of the "lunatic" to entrust the rest of the book to the hands of an illiterate! How unfortunate for the miserable Berbeo that the page appeared exactly as it did the day he liberated it from Ben Simon's bones. Why did the letters not change in the book or the "copy" during the long hours he stared at them? Could Berbeo, in all his zeal, have failed to notice that a page was missing from the "diary" he examined so thoroughly? Who can say? Perhaps, given this star-crossed man's luck, the letters only rearranged and altered when he was not looking. I will not speculate on how the poor man felt if and when he realized that he ingested a portion of the very prize he sought. Is the book evil? Is such a phenomenon distinguishable from co-incidence?

I have tied up the loose ends of this fantastic saga to my satisfaction, with the exception, of course, of indicating the whereabouts of Dominique Russel's troublesome book. She did, in fact, send it to me here. I

received it just this morning with a note saying "Here is the lousy book, burn the lousy thing if you like—it would be an appropriate end to the legacy of a long line of idiots." One might consider it just another unforgivable prank of Nature that a man my age (and in my condition) should be the one to open this book and see what indeed I saw. You will not be surprised that my insight has set me free from the unholy dialectic we call life, but you may be angry that I feel neither the need nor the desire to share it with you in these pages. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, and I am content. I will die tonight, but doubtless for reasons other than those you assume. I would like to thank the entire staff of the hospital for their kind and generous treatment of me over these last twenty years, and for allowing me the freedom to conduct my research.

Sincerely,

Jacques Blanchard, 8 May, 1995

P.S. Please do not bother searching my room for "The Book." My wife has taken it away with instructions to leave it on any street corner in the world. When she came in yesterday, the book said "The Aleph" on it. When she left, it said, "See Spot Run." Who knows what its title is by now.

J. B.

Dr. Broussard:

I humbly request a leave of absence during which I plan to investigate this matter further. The unfortunate death of Mrs. Blanchard yesterday, and the family's lack of close relatives stands in my way, but I feel it necessary that the matter not be dropped here. I would appreciate your support in my application for funding on this project.

Sincerely,

David Michael Slater.