

## ROTHENBERG, JEROME (1931-)

Poet, translator, anthologist, performer, and theoretician, Jerome Rothenberg's career consists of an interlocking series of volumes of poetry, translations, anthologies, and performance events. Embracing both international poetics and the American place, he has been the driving force behind several poetic initiatives to connect, from a deliberate position of marginality, **avant-garde** movements and Native American, Jewish, and other "ancient" or "primitive" poetic traditions, to uncover and connect subterranean and often sacred forms of poetic vision, and to incorporate performance and translation in **postmodern** poetic revivals. A transnational figure mediating between continents as well as eras, Rothenberg has published over seventy books of poetry and over ten highly innovative anthologies, or assemblages, as he calls them, and has translated extensively from German, Spanish, and Czech, as well as various Native American languages.

Born in the Bronx, Rothenberg's first language was Yiddish. His Jewish identity came not with his upbringing, however, but rather with his awakening to poetry in the 1950s. He got his B.A. from City College in New York (1952) and an M.A. from University of Michigan (1953). His marriage to anthropologist Diane Rothenberg since 1952 has proved to be a secure intellectual partnership, resulting in various joint performances and collaborations, among them the editing of the anthology *Symposium of the Whole* (1983). Between 1972 and 1974 the Rothenbergs lived at the Allegany Seneca Reservation in Salamanca, New York, where he was adopted into the Beaver Clan and his wife and son into the Heron. Rothenberg was Visiting Professor from 1972 to 1974 with the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where he helped to organize "the first international symposium on ethnopoetics" in 1975. From 1976 to 1986 he taught at the University of California, San Diego, where he has been a professor of visual arts and literature since 1989. Between these two appointments he held various visiting professorships, including Distinguished Aerol Arnold Chair in Literature at the University of Southern California in 1982 and the visiting New York State Writer in Residence of the New York State Writers Institute in Albany. From 1986 to 1988 he had a tenured appointment with the State University of New York in Binghamton.

Rothenberg won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1974 and a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1976. His collection of writings on poetics, *Pre-Faces*, received the American Book Award in 1982. The PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award went to Rothenberg for *The Lorca Variations* in 1994 and for *Poems for the Millennium* in 1996, and he received two translation awards from PEN Center USA West, in 1994 and 2002. He received an honorary Doctorate of Letters from the State University of New York in 1997 and was elected to UNESCO's World Academy of Poetry in 2001.

Rothenberg's early refusal of poetry as self-expression, of the first-person lyric voice, stems from his desire to speak in an unlimited range of voices, and to use the first person pronoun rather as the means of testifying to, multiple and overlapping human experience. He found inspiration to create a new poetic voice, he recalls in the interview given to the Brazilian magazine *Sibila*, in the cantillations in the neighborhood synagogues, the rhythms of black preachers on the radio, the talking blues of Woody

Guthrie and Pete Seeger, the chanted Latin and Greek in Catholic and Orthodox churches, and later in sound poetry, Dada, and the “spontaneous jazz prosody” of other poets of his generation. This was the cultural context out of which grew his commitment to performed poetry, poetry as event, process, and ritual. In the 1950s and 60s he forged alliances with then New York poets **David Antin, Robert Kelly, Diane Wakoski, Clayton Eshleman, Paul Blackburn, and Jackson Mac Low**; these alliances deepened his belief in poetry as sacred ritual, process, and event. With Kelly he developed the poetic thesis called **deep image**, which in Rothenberg's case meant less a surrealist-mystical realm of the subconscious and the dream, but rather a "visionary consciousness" more acute than rational interpretation, or a "view of reality" where "perception [acts] as an instrument of vision" (*Pre-Faces* 56).

The **oral impulse** permeates his poetry of the 1960s, providing a link between avant-garde poetic practices and archaic tribal cultures. Rothenberg launches what he would call **ethnopoetics**, an open-field poetics aiming to bring together two alternative traditions, the vocalism of tribal chant and the experimental operations of avant-garde verse, in the ritual of the poem. Ethnopoetics shares with ethnic poetics the desire for self-investigation, but goes beyond it in its insistence on opening to the other, whether ethnic group, religion, cultural tradition, or form of writing. The theory and practice of ethnopoetics evolved while reviving, translating, and performing tribal/oral/archaic poetries in the alternative venues of contemporary poetry and jazz performances. Orality provides a corrective to much of what high modernism—as academically defined—had been associated with: it relies on a speech-based rather than a print-based poetics; emphasizes language as object rather than a signifying system; takes away the material transparency of language by foregrounding technology and embracing the physicality of poetry as sound event; and allows poetry to re-grow its roots in the communal, the first person plural, instead of the singular 'I' of lyrical-subjective self-expression. Moreover, the "sounding of poetry," as he puts it in the *Riverside Interview*, means the "actual individual presence of the poet" in a "public situation" (9). In *Poems for the Game of Silence 1960-1970* (1971), he places himself in a continuum or global tradition of shamans, seers, singers, bards, rabbis and messiahs, and of all poets who have managed the leap from perception to vision and have understood the always timely teachings of primitive and archaic cultures.

Rothenberg's insistence on poetry as event and ritual connects him to shamanistic and Jewish mystic traditions, as well as to modern and postmodern avant-garde experiments, among them Dada and chance events and other secular happenings. A highly visible member of the **poetry performance** scene, he has participated in several forms of performance, including two radio sound plays created for Westdeutscher Rundfunk of Cologne, Germany (1985, 1987), the theatrical versions of *That Dada Strain* in San Diego (1985), *Poland/1931* in New York's Living Theater (1988), and *Khurbn/Hiroshima*, based on texts by Rothenberg and Japanese novelist Makoto Oda, in Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater (1995).

His individual volumes of poetry often stand together as **serial poems** demanded by common themes and occasions such as the celebration of the imaginative and visionary faculty. Among inspiring ideas and events we find the Spanish *duende*, Muse and Angel of García Lorca, as well as the lower-body, the city, the immigrant experience, his Jewish roots, the syncretism of identities (best captured in the figure of the wandering Jew,

probably, in *Poland/1931* [1969]), all placed in larger transnational contexts. In Rothenberg's conception identity is never a given, an essence, but rather a matter of imagination and vision, capable of metamorphosing. More precisely, he is interested in those levels of identities where such ironically conceived metamorphosis—most conspicuously, from Jew to Indian, rabbi to shaman, and back—becomes possible. It is on this visionary and ironic realm where Jewishness and Indianness are reconciled for the poet who spent two years among the Seneca Indians, learning not only to reach this visionary realm but also to capture it via "total translation." Total translation means expanding the object of translation from the "meaningful" (partial translation) to the "non-meaningful," physical and vocal, elements as well: pure sound, music, noise, and other vocables. The two years on the reservation resulted in three books embracing the avant-garde, Jewish, and Native American elements of his syncretic identity: *Revolution of the Word* (1974), *A Big Jewish Book* (1978), *A Seneca Journal* (1978).

His **anthologies** celebrate unexpected connections made between various pasts and presents, Western and non-Western, written and oral, Judeo-Christian and shamanistic, sacred and secular traditions. *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968, revised ed. 1985) collects tribal and oral poetry from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania); *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972, revised ed. 1986 and 1991) presents traditional Indian poetry; *America a Prophecy* (1973), edited together with George Quasha, puts several North American poetries (aboriginal poetry, Afro-American oral forms, the sacred writings of radical religious groups, meditative and visionary traditions, and innovative-experimental writings) side by side; *Revolution of the Word* (1974) selects from American experimental poetry 1914 to 1945; *A Big Jewish Book* (1978) collects poetic and other texts from the Jewish visionary tradition; *Symposium of the Whole* (1983), co-edited with Diane Rothenberg, uncovers the boundaries of anthropology and poetics, or ethopoetics; *Poems for the Millennium* (1995, 1998), edited jointly with Pierre Joris, brings together avant-garde writings from several continents; *A Book of the Book* (2000), co-edited with Steven Clay, is a major collection of writings concerning the book as object and inspiration.

His **translations** include the rendering of German writers Rolf Hochhuth, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Kurt Schwitters, Czech modernist Vítězslav Nezval, the innovative translation of the concrete poetry of Eugen Gomringer, the creative adaptations of Federico García Lorca, the experimental translations of diverse Native American texts, where his aim has been to preserve both sound and meaning in his total translations, and most recently the Spanish and French writings of Pablo Picasso. Translations (of Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Francis Picabia, and others) figure as well in the background of the volume *That Dada Strain* (1983): translations and appropriations of Dada texts—what Rothenberg, after Haroldo de Campos, calls “transcreations”—are now parts of the **collages** and performance versions of his poems. The performance of the soundwork of Hugo Ball can also be considered a form of translation, where sounds and sound events are recreated in an American context.

Some of the anthologies, the books of poetry and the translations seem to stand in groups of twos, threes, and more, creating echo chambers for one another. Indeed, several anthologies can be read through their corresponding volumes of poetry and translation. For example, *A Big Jewish Book* stands together with *Poland/1931*, *Esther K. Comes to America, 1931* (1973), and the later series of numerological poems, *Gematria* (1994);

*Shaking the Pumpkin* with the Aztec translations in *The Flight of Quetzalcoatl* (1967), the translations of *The Seventeen Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell* (1970), and the poetry in *A Seneca Journal; Revolution of the Word* and *Poems for the Millennium with That Dada Strain* and the various volumes of translations (*New Young German Poets* [1959], Hans Magnus Enzensberger [1968], Eugen Gomringer [1968], Kurt Schwitters [1993], Vitezslav Nezval [2001], Frederico Gracia Lorca [2001], Pablo Picasso [2004]). If Rothenberg's poetry consists of attempts to direct, as he claims in the *Riverside Interview*, "the attention away from the self and to incorporate by various means that which is *not* the lyrical subjective voice" (14), then the anthologies and the translations only expand the horizon beyond these attempts by evoking multivoiced, multiform, multimedia, and multitemporal traditions.

Rothenberg has also been the editor/publisher of Hawk's Well Press in the early 1960s, and editor of four **poetry magazines** over the years since: *Poems from the Floating World* was issued between 1960 and 1964; *some/thing*, edited jointly with David Antin, came out in New York, 1965-1968; *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*, "a first magazine of the world's tribal poetries," he co-edited with Dennis Tedlock, 1970-1974 and 1975 and 1977; while *New Wilderness Letter* was published between 1977 and 1982.

His selected poetry has appeared in French, Swedish, Spanish, and Flemish editions; his poetry has been translated into French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Serbian, Polish, Japanese, Lithuanian, Chinese, Finnish, and Hungarian.

Representative poems include "That Dada Strain," "A Glass Tube Ecstasy," "In the Dark Word, Khurbn," "Dos Oysleydikin (The Emptying)," "Dibbukim (Dibbiks)," "Three Paris Elegies," "I Come into the New World" (from *A Book of Witness*) and "The Times are Never Right" (from *A Book of Concealments*).

**Further Reading. Selected Primary Sources:** Rothenberg, Jerome, *Poland/1931* (complete version: New York: New Directions, 1974); –, *Poems for the Game of Silence 1960-1970* (New York: Dial P, 1971 [revised ed. New York: New Directions, 1975]); – *A Seneca Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1978); –, *Vienna Blood* (New York: New Directions, 1980); –, *Pre-Faces and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1981); –, *That Dada Strain* (New York: New Directions, 1983); *New Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1986); *Khurbn* (New York: New Directions, 1989); *Gematria* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993); –, *The Lorca Variations I-XXXIII* (New York: New Directions, 1993);; *Seedings* (New York: New Directions, 1996); *A Paradise of Poets* (New York: New Directions, 1999); *A Book of Witness* (New York: New Directions, 2003); *Writing Through: Translations & Variations* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004). **Selected Secondary Sources:** –, "A Dialogue on Oral Poetry with William Spanos" (*boundary 2* III/3 [Spring 1973], 509-548); *The Riverside Interviews 4: Jerome Rothenberg*, with Gavin Selerie (ed.) and Eric Mottram (London: Binnacle P, 1984); Gitenstein, Barbara. *Apocalyptic Messianism and Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry*, State University of New York Press, 1986; Paul, Sherman, *In Search of the Primitive: Rereading David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986); Polkinhorn, Harry, ed., *Jerome Rothenberg: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1988); Joris, Pierre, ed., *Joy! Praise!: A Festschrift for Jerome Rothenberg on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday* (San Diego: Ta'wil Books and Documents, 1991); Lazer, Hank, *Opposing Poetries* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1996); Davidson, Michael, "Technologies of Presence: Orality and the

Tapevoice of Contemporary Poetics" (*Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*. Ed. Adelaide Morris. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997. 97-125); "Somos todos de Chula Vista: Conversa de Jerome Rothenberg" [*Sibila* Interview] (*Sibila: Revista de Poesia e Cultura*, Sao Paolo, Brazil, 4.6 [2004]); Christine Meilicke, *Jerome Rothenberg: Experimental Poetry and Jewish Traditions*, Lehigh University Press, scheduled: 2004.

Enikő Bollobás,

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest