

Poland/1931: Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag & Smile, Smile, Smile, From Diaspora to Galut

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The Journey:

It is, perhaps, George Oppen who most precisely sets out the terms of this particular journey when he writes "Semite: to find a way for myself." Rothenberg's response takes the form of a rich and varied exploration of ancestral roots and of their meaning in the uprooted context of the New World. *Poland/1931* tackles the problem of establishing a coherent cultural identity in a reality defined essentially by tension and contradiction. To know who you are implies, of course, knowing where you've come from: self-definition is more generous, less aggressive, when it comes from a sense of continuity. Such a push into the past might appear simple but for many Americans it is a complex and confusing occasion:

vot em i doink in dis strange place
mit deez pipple mit strange eyes
could be its trouble
could be

Rothenberg's past is a web of knots and broken threads. It's made up of snatches of conversation that filtered through the air of a Brooklyn ghetto where his parents were struggling to get their own lives into a semblance of order, and of impressions and stories about a country he's never seen. It's made up of a childhood where the symbolical confrontation between the old and new was the norm — a childhood where Tarzan & Torah coexist, where circumcision meets revolver, where Sabbath changes into Sunday. Rothenberg disentangles the complexities by letting the urgencies speak. We listen to testimonies, histories, and ancestral tales. We read the writings and the sacred texts. We buy the Americana, the hard sell of "the way of life." Rothenberg's specifically Jewish world of "mystics, thieves, & madmen" becomes a true meta-language for the "tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor" world of the modern American. Rothenberg holds these two worlds within him and has experience of both the profusion of imagery that stems naturally from a rooted and traditional way of life and of the erosion of much of its significance in the circumstances of its newly adopted home. *Poland/1931* documents the struggle, the compromises, the gains and losses of this clash between a closed way of life and an open-ended loosely-defined society. The first generation child is, of course, an active agent in this process of transference and adaptation. He is the one who dries the peasant sweat, neutralizes the prohibitions, prefixes the market with super, and marries the gentile. Yet the echoes remain, and when the time comes for a man to map himself they ring insistently:

thy underwear alive with roots o poland
poland poland poland poland poland
how thy bells wrapped in their flowers toll
how they do offer up their tongues to kiss the moon

Rothenberg is a Shaman of transition, he takes the inner voyage of the imagination through dispersion to exile and creates his own space-time out of this journey.

Poland/1931 deals with ancestral roots and the abruptness of cultural fusion. The American language is itself a major protagonist in the text, providing in itself the tool for the new identity. Williams had already pinpointed the American idiom as the key to understanding the particularity of the American experience. For Williams this meant above all gaining the recognition of new rhythms, and showing how this blunt, direct, and active language had set about the task of conveying the newly-coined intimacies of a racially and ethnically mixed society. Williams was, paradoxically, able to concentrate on refinement in that he was looking for the distinctions and ruptures between two cultures that shared the same linguistic experience: to focus on how English became American. Rothenberg's experience, however, took place in a situation where the cultural break was traumatic and just as typically American.

This break involved loss of continuity, separation from the language of one's cultural past, and a dazed stumbling at the threshold of some immense permission. Rothenberg, a Jewish "cokboy" with a literary bent, steps into a land where he's both cowboy & indian, both hunter & hunted:

a shadow
ariseth from his buckwheat
has tomahawk in hand
shadow of an axe inside his right eye
of a fountain pen inside his left
vot em i doink here

This move out of the Jewish ghetto into an America, such as it was in the fifties, literally encapsulates its own time explosion — from honey cakes and barrels of gherkins in brine to chewing gum and frankfurters, from strong shoes and known distances to motorbikes and open space. *Poland/1931* places Everyman on Turtle Island in Cinerama:

am a hundred men
a hundred fifty different shadows
jews & gentiles
who brings the Law to Wilderness
(he says) this man
is me my grandfather
& other men-of-letters
men with letters carrying the mail
lithuanian pony-express riders
the financially crazed Buffalo Bill
still riding in the lead
hours before avenging the death of Custer
making the first 3-D movie of those wars

In a society where the myth of individual freedom is supposed to compensate for loss of communal identity *Poland/1931* is a much needed counter-weight. It's a transcultural and open-ended epic that allows the poet and his word to move back towards the social center.

Rothenberg's journey flits back and forth easily and convincingly between Galicia, Poland, and Brownsville, New York. Brooklyn is the place to change trains. It's the place where the Jewish immigrant merchant learns new names and puts on new clothes to set up as a trader of cotton reels in Kansas. The barszcz, kvass, and kasha lose their centrality of meaning and reappear as condominiums, convertibles, and wonder loaves. Rothenberg's gentle irony embraces the event, creating new rituals and restating the old ones — the fleshpot pleasures, the "honkeytonk" joys, the move westward, the scramble for crumbs from the golden cake, the long long hours, the face-lifts and trimmed beards, the submissions:

my father
left for the U.S.A. the next day
no one told him of his father's death
he would never be a talmudist
would go from shoes
to insurance
from insurance back to shoes
later & entrepreneur & bust
he was always clean
shaven my grandmother
the religious one I mean
saw the first beard
I'd ever grown got angry
'jews don't wear beards'
(she said) no
not in golden U.S.A.

Rothenberg traces a specific autobiographical journey, yet autobiography is only one of the elements in this conversation with ancestral sources. He uses it to stress communal identity not individual distinction, a substantial statement in these days of the ego dance:

i deny autobiography
or that the life of a man
matters more or less
'We are all one man'
Cézanne said

Poland/1931 makes a return to origins and provides a measure of the distance covered, but the "i" of the autobiography doesn't display itself as a force which drives into history but rather as a poetic intelligence, a receptacle into which history flows and is carried by the vector of the poem into the present. The changing structure of the family, the confusion of selves, the colorful fantasies that burst from his past act as the contours to his new definition of identity in Disneyland. Autobiography is an access to a new understanding of self, at a time when, to use Corbière's words, identity has become "*une mélange adultère de tout.*" In other words, what interests Rothenberg is the interplay between man as an element in history and man as a moment of history. He finds part of himself surfacing, as a descendant of Ishi, somewhere in the Lassen Hills just northeast of Sacramento — the same staring eyes uncomprehending comprehension, the homeland foreign, the promised land still the illusion on the horizon. The eye scans the Pacific only to retreat again into the landscape of the mind's eye and continue its wandering:

ghost of Ishi was waiting on the crest
looked like a Jew
but silent
was silent in America

The Method:

In 1913 Apollinaire wrote in *Cubist Painters*: "You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards, candelabra, pieces of oil cloth, collars, painted paper, newspapers." He goes on to make his point by reference to two exemplary gentlemen – a Frenchman who, during the French Revolution, painted in blood, and an Italian who, at some less momentous historical occasion, painted in excrement. Rothenberg, fortunately, makes no attempt to trump these accomplishments but settles for opening his text to a wide range of materials and sources that stretch from the Kabbalah to the Chicago Mafia. "Collage," as Gide says of Paludes, "seeks to arrange facts in such a way that they conform to truth more closely than they do in real life." Gide went on to apply the techniques of Cubist collage to his own work, but Rothenberg's opening poem, "The Wedding," suggests another presence:

my mind is stuffed with tablecloths
with rings but my mind
dreaming of poland stuffed with poland
brought in the imagination
to a black wedding
a naked bridegroom hovering above
his naked bride mad poland
how terrible thy jews at weddings
thy synagogues with camphor smells & almonds

I'm referring, of course, to Chagall. Both of them use the tradition of the fable as an active source of their imagery; they live in a world peopled with figures from Peretz or Aleichem. Neither of them is purely telling tales, but both use this tradition for their own ends – to make the reality of their imaginative world adhere. Chagall writes: "I am against the terms fantasy and symbolism in themselves. All our interior world is reality – and that perhaps more so than our apparent world. To call everything that appears illogical, 'fantasy,' fairy tale, or chimera – would be practically to admit not understanding nature." *Poland/1931*, again and again, conjures up the freely associated, but finally homogeneous, world of "The Fiddler," "The Dead Man," or "I and The Village." We find the same intermingling of memories, the same obsessional recurrences, the same magic incantation of beings and objects. Both Rothenberg and Chagall have the power to fuse separate events into one image:

thy grooms shall work ferociously upon their looming brides
shall bring forth executioners
shall stand like kings inside their doorways
shall throw their arms around thy lintels poland
& begin to crow

The Whiteheadian principle applies, that the whole is constitutive of each part and each part is constitutive of the whole. The surge is not simply of impressions, but of roots, identities, locations, and roles. Rothenberg and Chagall have created their own space-time. Their collages have an organic shape that results from their being formed of details from the cultural organism that are vividly embodied in memory, and that subsequently spring to life again in the image. For example, Chagall's memory of his grandfather climbing up on the roof of his house to eat carrots while the rest of the family rush through the home and the village looking for him has obvious affinities with Rothenberg's accumulation of presences around an archetypal babushka:

the oldest woman in the world kicks off
her shoes dances on the table
she chews fat & garlic wipes bread
around the rim of plate & croaks
for water at midnight

The simultaneous presentation of collage breaks through the cumbersome effects of narrative and produces a sharp and immediate fusion of disparate fragments. The urgencies order. In Rothenberg's world, just as in Chagall's, a man can sit on a roof while a cow stares blankly at him on her easy flight across the village or while a bride falls in wedding dress haste from the sky. A man can temporarily be separated from his head should the occasion so demand.

Apollinaire's view of collage was more disruptive to language than Rothenberg's, but their understandings of the psychological overtones have much in common. Apollinaire sets out his position in *Soirées de Paris*: "Psychologically it is of no importance that this invisible image be composed of fragments of spoken language, for the bond between these fragments is no longer the logic of grammar but an ideographic logic culminating in an order of spatial disposition totally opposed to discursive juxtaposition . . . it is the opposite of narration, narration of all literary forms is the one which most requires discursive logic." Rothenberg makes use of this "ideographic logic" in the way he exploits a system of echoes to bind the parts together, to set up a climate of free interplay. His insertions of histories and quotes register on us as fragments of actuality erupting within an imaginative environment, and function like the interpolations of non-art materials in the cubist picture to provide an

internal frame. These fragments of actuality obliterate distance in time and emphasize the openness of the work. They provide the excitement of interruption, and of fracture by dissociation. Rothenberg refuses to resolve them, knowing that they belong and that they create a condition more typical of life.

Rothenberg's collage is thus of the actual: of amulets, of histories, of literal circumstances:

Circumstances in a Jewish house.

Circumstances of Esther K.

Circumstances of men exchanging wallets in front of the guildhall.

Circumstances of carts circumstances of leather lines in the hands of the master drivers.

Circumstances of farewells. Of parades of gymnasts on the road to Warsaw.

Circumstances of Bialystok & what lay beyond.

Circumstances of buttons circumstances of sewing each thread into place not leaving the ends untied.

The actual creates its own unity. In this case simply the listing of the surface events draws the reader into the web and obliges him to supply the associative images and, consequently, the effect of a collective collage. *Poland/1931* is a transcultural poem, and, although Rothenberg draws heavily on ghetto cultures, his point is ethnic rather than political. The emphasis falls not on the oppressive condition of the Jew but on the energy of a tightly defined system. The Polish or New York Jew, the American Indian, are cellular units who gain their sharpest definitions in terms of opposition to the surrounding cultures. They are both dependent on it and separate from it. In *Poland/1931* Rothenberg is making both a genetic plunge and a tribal projection, and to that extent McClure is correct when he calls him a "DNA spaceman." The journey into his roots locates certain values that act as admissions of loss and as measures of change, underlining the need for continuities and the satisfactions. The poem, also, superbly exploits a range of textures that extend from oral traditions to experimental modes of twentieth century poetry. Rothenberg walks with a complexity of shadows and speaks with many voices, and once again it is the collage method that best allows them to maintain their independence, while, at the same time, forming a whole. This is the same point that Picasso made when he wrote in a letter to Françoise Gilot: "The purpose of the *papier collé* was to give the idea that different textures can enter into a composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature. We tried to get rid of the '*trompe — l'oeil*' to find a '*trompe d'esprit*.' . . . If a piece of newspaper can become a bottle that gives us something to think about in connection with

newspapers and bottles, too. This displaced object has entered a universe for which it is not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring." Rothenberg is not, of course, interested in deception and he has already determined the nature of his materials, but he knows that their convergence of meanings produces a new strangeness of question.

Rothenberg, like a character out of Beckett, has been carrying bundles of newspapers around with him and allowing them to accumulate as commentaries on his life. In *Poland/1931* the moment has come to open up the bundles and let his imagination take its own path through the faded photos, smells, and sacred texts. He gives us what is insistently present, not meanings or interpretations, but events, things, and actions. His exploration is not an occasion for sentimentality, but a conviction that these real surfaces are a powerhouse of new meanings; *Poland/1931* gives fresh usage to Tzara's instructions:

Take a newspaper
Take a pair of scissors
Select an article from the paper roughly equal in length
to the poem you wish to write
Cut out the article
Carefully cut out each of the words in the article
& put them in a bag
Shake it gently
Then pull out the cut-up words one by one, keeping them
in the same order as you draw them out of the bag
Write them down carefully
The poem will look like you.

Rothenberg has taken the Warsaw-New York-Allegheny *Examiner*, and he's been a subscriber since childhood.

The Elements

Schwitters has remarked of the technique of collage: "Poetry arises from the interaction of these elements. Meaning is important only if it is employed as one such factor." The elements of Rothenberg's collage include the Kabbalah, the Zohar, numerology, primitive verse, fluxus events, literature, and autobiography.

1. *The Texts*: The Zohar and the Kabbalah permeate the poem, providing taboos and prohibitions that link scripture-based religions with what we've loosely called the primitive. The myth of the Shekinah is one of the energy centers of the poem, a figure who is both primitive goddess and divine manifestation. Shekinah is a frequently used Talmudic term

denoting the visible and audible manifestation of God's presence on earth. In later Midrash literature she appears as a feminine divine entity who, prompted by her compassionate nature, argues with God in defense of man. She takes various guises ranging from Matronit, the daughter Goddess of the Kabbalah whose attributes include chastity, promiscuity, motherliness, and bloodthirstiness (an astounding kind of con-artist!), to Inanna, the Sumerian Goddess of love and war. The Shekinah is the major link between the above and the below, a central character in divine happenings and relationships. She is Ishtar in Akkad, Anath in Canaan, and in her transference to the New World she becomes the Charmer, the Crooked One, the Stiff Necked One, the Stick, the Howler. She also takes on the identity of a modern Lilith, a continuation of that lineage that had its lowliest origins as Adam's intended wife, and then became a paramour of lascivious spirits, and finally rose to become the consort of God. Rothenberg's Shekinah becomes personified in the figure of Esther K., who, ironically, has the role of a "Jewish Soul Healer and Adviser." The Shekinah, having acquired her physical aspects, consequently becomes subject to historical events. Her mythical attributes remain intact:

She Shekinah
She Kingship
She Dwelling

She Daughter
She Lady
She Pearl

She Precious
She Cornerstone
She Female

She Floweth
She Male
She Garden

Esther K. searches for a multiple or communal identity. She appears sometimes as a character in search of an author, sometimes as the K. in Kafka's *The Castle*. She carries the clue to her identity in the seed syllable of her alias, Mme. Shekinah *née* "E.K." As a manifestation of the Shekinah, Esther K.'s story is clearly joined to that of the fate of Israel: her *novel in progress* is that of a nation's history, and given the fact of her additional male identity her novel truly becomes *his/tory*. She suffers the vicissitudes of her people and accompanies them into exile, whether the exile be in China or in New York. She experiences their hopes and despairs. She becomes, in fact, the Knesseth Yisrael, the personified female

community of Israel. Esther is trapped between the demands of her archetypal roles and her dreams of becoming a modern American miss, free of her roots and forever dancing on top of the pumpkin pie:

Esther K. wonders: how was I ever trapped
inside this body?
in another life she would have been
a playgirl: not she
but someone else threw roses
in the Dnieper
danced on the drifting ice floe
to America
not someone else but she
opened the fly of the Shanghai dog-merchant
& greased his cock

Rothenberg presents us with a composite figure who exploits the puns, the Steinian games, the riddles, and the network of references. He uses her characteristics and personae to produce a figure who straddles cultures, locating the centers of energy of her myth and remaking it in modern form.

Rothenberg's gentle irony also gets to work on Esther K.'s spouse, the Joycian Leo Levy, whose erotic capacity threatens to explode with the same extravagance as Bloom's. God usually "lets his Shekinah rest only on him who is heroic, rich, wise, & modest," but, in this case, she falls on the dubious Leo Levy, the false prophet, who:

. . . is SET APART from all his brothers
& held in service to the shrine

Leo Levy is, of course, the L.L. of the mysterious signatory to the letter:

The letter bears a lion in the lower corner
& a sacred lemon

Rothenberg gives us another figure of multiple identities, "a wonderful man" who sits cross-legged like a tailor, a man who might be both the Lion of Judea and the Moses to whom the Shekinah, according to the Zohar, is married. He settles in China, or Sinim, as Isaiah calls it — a scrap of knowledge of such eminent respectability that he's led to include it as a seduction in his letter to Esther. His style mixes religious proprieties with suitably gross interpretations; when he points out that the climate is "ideal" he means lax:

. . . There is also in the city a good theater, several
western-style beauty parlors, & at least one kosher restaurant

managed by a family of Russian exiles. Charity abounds here. The Sisterhood flourishes. The study of the Law, while not brilliant, is steady, & at least it imposes few new burdens

Such permissiveness is irresistible, and Esther falls for the visible glamors of Western life, shown second hand with all the vulgarity of ostentation somewhere in the Orient. Mme. Shekinah *née* Esther K. marries to become Mrs. Leo Levy and finds herself coupled with a cheap salesman, "a lion by birth a liar later," or Lecherous Leo as he might have been known to his friends.

Rothenberg weaves his own Kabbalistic system around the two characters. Levy has *H* as his letter, the month of peculiar holiness that, according to Genesis, receives either curses or blessings from Jacob. His color is blue, his stone the Lapis Lazuli or L.L., symbolizing the blue sky as yet untenanted by heavenly bodies. *H* is also the letter of the Shekinah, the brightness of God, the mystic female emanation. Esther K. and Leo Levy can, therefore, also be seen as one person, the male and female presences of the Shekinah. The multiple derivations of *Shekinah* back up this system of echoes in the text: *shekan*, "act of dividing," and *ah* to indicate feminine gender; or, alternatively, according to Carlos Soares, *shakan*, "to abide," giving the Shekinah as the one who dwells in the flesh of the Sheen, the cosmic living Breath. Mrs. Leo Levy lives one flight up at her home in Attorney Street. This also can be interpreted in terms of the myth, since, on the appearance of Adam, the Shekinah had removed herself from earth to the first heaven. Rothenberg succeeds, in this way, in raising the female power into consciousness and perpetuates the centrality of her myth. He shows that the archetypal images are operative in all men and that the images appear spontaneously as soon as the collective unconscious is activated:

the bride with
70 crowns

with the King who
hovers above her

crown above crown in
Holy of Holies

this lady all worlds are
formed in

all's sealed
within her

shines out from
Ancient of Days

I have dwelt with some insistence on the presence of these archetypal figures in *Poland/1931* because they are, perhaps, the most intimate register of Rothenberg's return to ancestral sources, and they show his awareness of the possibilities of making the Judaic tradition into a living organism with the power to bridge cultures. Rothenberg's interest in the Kabbalah lies in its effectiveness as countermovement to the general trend in Judaism towards consciousness and morality. The esoteric doctrines of the Kabbalah seek to retain the whole realm of the psyche and the mythologizing tendency so prevalent in early Judaism. Neumann draws our attention, for example, to the mythopoeic potential of the doctrine of evil in the Lurian Kabbalah: "Man is not only the end purpose of creation, nor is his dominion limited to this world alone, but on him depends the perception of the highest worlds and of God himself." This comment emphasizes the distinctly anthropocentric standpoint of the Kabbalah that Rothenberg picks up on. Neumann continues: "In the view of the Kabbalah original sin consisted in essentially this: that damage was done to the Deity. Concerning the nature of this damage there are various views. The most widely accepted is that the First Man, Adam Kadmon, made a division between King and Queen, and that he sundered the Shekinah from union with her spouse, and from the whole hierarchy of the Sephiroth." Rothenberg makes of the creation myth an active ongoing consciousness that takes many forms in its journey across time — from the Lilith who escaped to the desert when Gilgamesh killed the dragon at the base of the Kaluppa tree to the modern Lilith who is usually the product of the morbid imagination such as that of the barren or neurotic woman.

2. *Jewish Tradition*: In *Poland/1931* Rothenberg explores the meaning of being a Jewish poet; he gives "testimony" to that fact. He points out that it was Duncan who first insisted on the need to explore the meaning of being a Jewish poet and that Celan also referred to the "Jewish challenge." Rothenberg's exploration takes the form of letting his memory wander among his own past and letting his imagination range through photos, texts, and traditions that provide the larger context of autobiography. Both memory and imagination impose their own patterns of insistences and establish, as it were, a flow of echoes and recurrences that continue throughout the poem. Amulets, food, smells, bodies, blood, prohibitions, the family, dreams and defense make up the solids of the text and are taken up again and again. For example, "A Book of Histories" is something like a collage of sources, and the incidents relocate ancestral past into the myth of the present:

poland
has no eyes
& so we live without associations