

in the past we live
nourishing incredible polands
lazy & alive remembering
our mothers' pictures in the grass

The *family* acts as a cluster of meanings and Rothenberg avoids the trace of autobiography by introducing us to composites, to plural prototypes. Both Rothenberg and Snyder feel the loss of the extended family acutely and try to reaffirm its potentiality. They feel threatened by a situation where the poet has no focus for his voice and where, as Biemann puts it, "the collective has detached itself from me." Rothenberg's definitions of the family are definitions of a way of life, redefinitions of the tribe. He wants to reaffirm the role of the poet at the center of his tribe. "The Mothers" represents the mysteries of creation and continuity:

all is secret sing the mothers
all is innocent
& draws a white circle
behind their eyes
the circle starts to swell moistens
& leaves a trail of fat
how beautiful she says

"The Fathers," similarly, pulls together memories, motives, desires, and confusions. They've fought for survival and they'll fight again, *les jeux sont faits*. The words are in the Book, and toil is salvation:

some broke through a wall others
fatter with a smell of fish
around their lips threatened & choked
eager lovely forgetful violent
they waited at the dock
some told them it was nearly daylight
others didn't know & others
spoke of night as though they lived in it
in love with colors some were tolerant
of sleep but nervous at remembrance
some were kings others knew kings
& dreamed about the weather
when it rained our fathers left their cities
as we were always being told

The Kabbalah was written as a defense of God and wasn't intended to be penetrated without effort. Rothenberg's games with numbers, letters of the alphabet, and amulets are, consequently, protective rituals. The

strengths of the amulets are tested in their new circumstances. They appear as traces of more complex stories, of continuities, since they were, indeed, quite common in Eastern Europe up until World War II. They were worn in pregnancy to prevent miscarriages and often placed above the head or under the pillow of a woman in labor to ward off Lilith. The amulets resonate with other sections of the text. The amulet in Hebrew is, for example, directed against Lilith and gives the same list of names that turns up in "A Book of Histories." The amulets serve to concentrate the power of word, image, or story and as such closely link Rothenberg's submergence into his Jewish roots with his interest in "primitive" verse. The collage technique acts as a gathering of powers, of proven amulets that can be worn outside the home on the Sabbath.

The symbolism and power of the *alphabet* are also integral elements in the complexity and tightness of the collage. Rothenberg's references to specific Hebrew characters introduce us to a language capable of conveying a depth of meaning without limit, yet one which, at the same time, remains accessible to the limitations of our thought. The individual characters renew and proliferate their meanings. Just as with Rothenberg's treatment of the myth of the Shekinah this renewal of meaning helps to make tradition active. In fact the letters are part of the myth of the Shekinah, since the Kabbalah specifically refers to the letters as being feminine and representing the ever present aspect of the Shekinah. Language is a divine manifestation and belongs to the man who holds the power. "His name," says Rothenberg, "shapes 22 verbs." In other words, it is a complete power that comprises the 22 letters of the alphabet and gives to each one of them the force of an active verb. Hirschman points out that if we are going to grasp the meaning of the alphabet we will have to learn a living language where "everything depends upon everything else and is connected with everything else." Such a concept only adds to the cohesion of Rothenberg's collage and sharpens the power of the poem as a series of oral fragments. Aleph, for example, means both unthinkable life-death and unthinkable immense energy. Carlos Suarez tells us that the first nine letters symbolize nine archetypal activities. They are exemplified in the functions of all living organisms. Of Aleph he writes: "As existence is a mystery so is the existence of life a mystery. ALEPH tells us no more. There is no more to tell." Consequently the poet's use of them, his oral projection of them in the context of his society, makes him symbolic of his culture's particular understanding. He has the power to push forward and define the limits of its thinking. The poem, as a spoken entity, becomes an assertion of existence itself, a temporal projection of the timeless energy of Aleph. Aleph, says Suarez, becomes Yod when projected into existence and Yod is one of the letters of Leo Levy, a temporal manifestation of the Shekinah.

Rothenberg exploits the symbolism of *numbers* in a similar fashion. Their effectiveness and meanings are largely hermetic, "tribal,"

but they also provide an obvious network of echoes throughout the text. The number 7 has its own labyrinth of roots and significances. As such it brings each member of the tribe into the poem. 7 refers to the seven openings on the face, the seven righteous men who act as mediating influences between god and man, the seven archers who emerged from primeval chaos, the seven branched candelabra (so often seen on amulets), and many more symbolical & arithmetical meanings. Such a spread of significances inevitably produces fresh reverberations in other cultures.

Rothenberg also uses the massive symbolism built up around the Jewish *code of sexuality and selfhood*. These fragments from the social culture anchor the poem in shared patterns and add to its presence as an oral vehicle. They emphasize Rothenberg's preference for the primitive aspects of the Kabbalah by giving full play to its suggestive, mysterious, and superstitious aspects, by concentrating on enigma as opposed to logic and science. Rothenberg follows the various cultural ramifications of beards, candles, wedding rituals, circumcision, and the Sabbath. He shows the ritualistic power of the prohibitions and the masturbatory fantasies of the Jewish student pouring over the sacred texts and sliding down his "frankfurter" into the greater confusions of the American dream. The beard, with its history of wandering and adaptation, symbolizes the excursion of the tribe into other cultures. It indicates accepted and expected modes of behavior: the Semites had thick beards, the Babylonians groomed and curly. The importance and definition of roles fashions a society. The barber acquires an identity and is permitted to attend ailments in a quasi-medical fashion. In America the beard made the Jew a foreigner in his adopted home, an over-obvious outsider. But Jewish culture is one of survival and adaptation, and just as, in Roman times, permission was given to traders to clip their beards with forceps, so in America the beard can streamline itself into the crowd. The prohibitions of the Sabbath are listed like a massive chanting of the taboos. They sing out the sacrifices and obediences made for the sake of a collective identity. The list sets up its own echoes of individual stories:

sowing plowing reaping sheaving threshing winnowing

....

& did not walk out with
a needle but only with a pin
for clothes
a watch became a burden
though a silver key was more
for show & eyeglasses
wouldn't be carried not even
in a silver frame

The desire to adhere and the difficulties of adherence are shown in the transition from the Old to the New World. Rothenberg presents the

fragments of evidence; he doesn't judge or state preferences. He's a free wheeling Shaman narrating inconsistencies as history.

The Chabad states that *organic functions* are wholly evil because by nature they imprison Light in Darkness. The Shekinah, in her earthly form, is considered to be a vessel of filth and has a reputation for promiscuity. But, for Rothenberg, her sexuality and eroticism are life-affirming values. The male swelling or the female flow of blood convey the vital continuity of the "tribe." The male-female Shekinah, in her journey to the New World, becomes "the hippie god of light pure beard & hair," an androgynous figure:

a phallic beard his but on a woman's
face

We get the rich glistening oil eroticism of Rothenberg's earlier *Gorky Poems*, the explosion into life of love-making juxtaposed against the sacred vessels, of religious symbolism and physical needs, of the straddled bride nibbling the earlocks of choirboys against a backcloth of colored glass and candelabra:

humming the eighteen benedictions
he entered

or of the student reading the Kabbalah:

snapping paperclips
against the rabbi's silks reliving
the poland of old friendships pork & fish

and of dreaming about women:

with moist hair in their armpits
moister below

It's an earthen sexuality thriving on its ancestral roots and on its defiance of a code that sees the body as a device for keeping the soul at a distance from God. One does not become a Tsaddick, or saint, until all of nature's impulses are crushed and purged. The body is seen as a necessary evil that has to be beaten into submission. Rothenberg, however, makes his Tsaddick embody all the fantasies of his people:

breathless my demon would mount his
from the rear the tsaddick
slept on in innocence of
heart & purpose

barely
could feel her hand
betray him
but blamed it on
the tightness of his linens

The Shekinah's promiscuity as manifested in the checkered career of Esther K., and the cokboy's rediscovered vigor are new forms of the myth and carry it over into the New World, where Light has developed its own synonym of Electricity:

o thou my Shekinah
do not be thus far from us in our Galician wildernesses
who scratch under our prayer vests alive alive
in dreams of Shekinah's entry to the tents of God
one Sabbath with not prunes to eat but grapes
would crush them on the tongue of Him
shoot colors down his beard light bursts of sex
of lightbulbs colors in the flesh of brides their marriages
to light ordained from Paradise . . .

Food is another element in the semiotic code. To name the food is to name centers to which myth, social tradition, ritual and religious belief can adhere and from which they can emanate. The network carries over into the individuals, their signs and letters. Leo Levy's sign, the lemon, has as one of its connotations a reference to Succoth — the feast where the Cantor, holding the Lulav (branch of palm leaves) in one hand and the Esrog (lemon) in the other, sings a prayer at the end of the harvest season. He is calling for the self to come together in a unity of heart and mind. As such it might indicate, once again, the fusion of the identities of Leo Levy and Esther K. into that of the Shekinah. The references to food (those to clothing also have a similar function) establish the constants that ensure the continued well-being of the tribe as a religious and social entity. They are not simply "local color" but binding symbols. Radish and sausage throw up a profusion of associations that unite sexuality and social traditions. The market place truly becomes the venue for a trade in meanings:

let us tread thy markets where the sausages grow ripe & full
let us bite thy peppercorns let thy oxen's dung be sugar to
thy dying jews

In an American context the network starts to fall apart, and we're left with titillation and frankfurters. Only the American Indian has a similar wealth of symbolism. Both Jew and Indian have understood that the

rituals and traditions of eating contribute to setting up a permanent present, or "mythic" time. The Shohet, or slaughterer, is a Shaman: a doctor of his people who with a different Cholef for each animal examines their lungs for traces of internal disease. In *Poland/1931* Rothenberg draws abundantly on the rituals of separation of milk and meat, on the patterns of meaning of bread and honey, and on the rich associations of blood and egg:

don't eat the blood
in eggs (she said)
the blood in fish wd satisfy her
but don't serve it gathered
in a vessel fearing
people wd talk . . .

The centrality of symbol defines the strength of the links of the tribe.

Sources:

Rothenberg makes abundant use of Jewish literature as an element in the collage. It offers its own history that enriches the chain of associations, exploits the echoes in the tradition and opens up the text to include the participation of others. The sacred texts, the Zohar, the Code of Jewish Law, give us the language of the tribe. This language used by authors such as Buber, Singer, Babel, Kafka, Stein, and Dahlberg is a rich part of Rothenberg's past and shows the insistence of roots in the most experimental of forms. The literary references in *Poland/1931* provide cornerstones for the text. Buber's concept of "husk and kernel," already of major importance to Rothenberg in his poetic of the "deep image," is again relevant. Buber's term is a leading one in Jewish mysticism and is a way of stating our gnostic sense of a myth of lost meanings: of a "merely" externalized world without resonance. The poet discovers or rediscovers these resonances in the activity of making the poem. *Poland/1931* brings them vitally back into the world, and in so giving firm identity to one "tribe" restores the connective between all men. Buber's text, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, a collage of sparks in its own right, defines one of Rothenberg's starting points. Buber argues: "Late Kabbalistic teaching, within the framework of which Hasidism developed, removes the penetration of evil back into the event of creation itself. The fire-stream of creative grace pours out in its fullness over the fast created primal shapes, the *vessels*, but they do not withstand it, they break in pieces — the stream showers an infinity of *sparks*, the *shells* grow around them, the uncleanness, the evil has come into the world. Now the incomplete cleaves to the completed creation; a suffering world, a world in need of redemption lies at God's feet. But He does not leave it to lie in the abyss of its strugglings. After the sparks of His creative fire fall into the things,

His glory itself descends to the world, enters creatures in the mud of their uncleanness – desiring to redeem them.” Husk and kernel, perception and vision, outer world and inner significance, the individual in his tribe: these are the essential tensions of Rothenberg’s poem.

Poland/1931 shares with Kafka’s *The Castle* an origin in Jewish memories that are both personal and collective. It is a fable of a wanderer through an awesome eternity and achieves a similar disturbing intensity of presence. Rothenberg’s irony, a trait shared with writers of the so-called Jewish novel, acts as brake on any tendency towards the dramatic or rhetorical. Yet Rothenberg’s “silence in America” remains for me an image of frightening proportions and has all the terror of K.’s final remark: “Nobody will read what I say here, no one will come to help me, even if all the people were commanded to help me, every door and window would remain shut, everybody would take to bed and draw the bedclothes over his head, and the whole earth would become an inn for the night.”

Rothenberg’s wanderings between Poland and America also chart out the same journey as those of Babel and Singer. Babel’s Odessa Jews “bubble like cheap red wine” and include among their number an imposing Amazon who presides over a den of thieves and a brothel and a dignified beggar who oversees the Jewish cemeteries and discourses on the vanity of human existence. These are characters whose presence could burst into *Poland/1931* at any minute. Indeed the legendary Benya Krik, alias Bennie the Yell, does make such an appearance – this colorful gangster, who preyed on Odessa’s merchants, serves as a direct predecessor to Lansky and “Dutch Schultz.” Rothenberg’s imagination clearly coinhabits Babel’s world of Odessa cart drivers, waterfront philosophers, and ritual slaughterers. Babel preserved it as it disappeared before his eyes, victim to secularism, pogroms, and Revolution. Rothenberg recreates it from memorabilia, from scraps of letters, from photos, from clippings.

In his interview with Barry Alpert (*Vort* 7), Rothenberg directly acknowledges the importance of the Singers in his rediscovery of the world of Polish Hasidism. I.J. Singer, for example, a master of the family novel, also treats his material kaleidoscopically, allowing the elements from a common heritage to form their own patterns of unity. In *Yoshe Kalb*, he fuses into a coherent fiction this same world of 19th century Galician Hasidism, using, as Rothenberg himself does, a sinner-saint protagonist. But perhaps even more important is I.B. Singer’s evocation of the Brooklyn world that Rothenberg had himself inhabited as a child. In *The Enemies*, he tells how “last year’s posters, announcing Cantors and Rabbis and the prices of synagogue pews for the High Holy Days still hung on the walls. From the restaurants and cafeterias came the smells of chicken soup, kasha, chopped liver. The bakers sold bagels, egg cookies, strudel, and onion rolls. In front of a shop women were groping in barrels for diced pickles.” This kind of impressionistic detail sparkles in *Poland/1931* as fragments in the collage, but Rothenberg’s use of it is not for surface effect but because it binds and

secures roots and because the vitality of these images is part of a movement from outer reality to inner conviction. The sources become, thus, part of a collective speech. The poet as Shaman is the singer of the song.

Shaman of the Jewish Song:

Rothenberg's journey back into traditions and sources becomes an articulation of a collective identity. Rothenberg is a Jewish Shaman and *Poland/1931* a collage of voices. We hear the rabbis and the cantors, the archetypal figures of the Steward, Beadle, Student, Slaughterer, and Merchant. According to the Copper Eskimos, the Shaman is "one who has eyes to see," and as a "technician of the sacred," or protopoet, as Eliade terms him, he creates his own linguistic circumstances. Rothenberg's voices include those of seer, traveller, curer, and memory, and his journey goes back into the collective unconscious of his tribe. He finds a language that speaks for them, and he fashions out of this language a tool that allows them to move on into the future. As he has already pointed out, the "technician of the sacred" is not merely a narrator, but an event-maker, an enacter of orders. He is the pronouncer of the "I's" and assumes responsibility for the tribe. From fluxus events he makes primitive rituals:

Recite the 221 alphabets while walking in a circle
Repeat the event 442 times.

The event or ritual is once again a bridge across time and cultures. Michael Nyman points out in his book, *Experimental Music*, that George Brecht's *Exercises* can just as easily be considered as pre-Zen centering texts. Brecht's:

Take a part from the object and add it to the
"other" to form a new object and a new "other."
Repeat until there is no more object.

comes very close to the Zen instruction:

Feel an object before you. Feel the absence of all other
objects but this one. Then, leaving aside the object-
feeling and the absence-feeling, realize.

For Rothenberg these events form part of a participation mystique: they introduce the tribe into a situation of theater. They reverse the performer/audience roles and make the audience active. LaMonte Young's *Composition No. 6* made a similar point — the performers sit and watch the audience, thereby reversing the normal situation. These events can become sexual, ritualistic, violent, dangerous, or meaningless, but, in any

event, they involve the "group" in shared activity. Ben Vautier, for example, locked the audience into a theater and the event ended when they found their way out. Rothenberg's series of "Woman's Events" are essentially ritualistic and reverberate within Jewish traditions. One of them:

A woman crawls under the belly of a pregnant mare

sounds like a milder echo of Nam June Paik's infamous *Danger Music 5*, when the performer is instructed to crawl up the vagina of a living female whale! Or was Paik himself exploiting the earlier tradition of the Shaman's uterine voyage?

These psychic or visionary events also provide an initiation into poetry, into the power of the word and the magic of breath. The Shaman has the power to see and to name. *Poland/1931* makes a dialogue with roots. It has "not subtlety . . . but energy; the power of word & image. It's not the logic & simile that break through the line but something deeper that might be called vision" (Rothenberg: *Technicians of the Sacred*). Vision names and naming produces the song. The Netsilik Eskimos insist that "songs are thoughts sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. [Then] it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves — we get a new song." The songs are keys to understanding:

From the skin of a hare
the blood of a black hen
or a newly killed sheep
& occasionally the meat of animals & birds
the food is steamed with pleasant odors.
Stand at the eastern corner.
Bless this carpet.
Burn a dove's feather.
Point to westward

They are the keys that unlock the obstacles on the journey to Heaven or Hell, the journeys that mark the history of the tribe. The Altaic black Shaman in his descent to Hell reaches "the chinese desert of red sand" and "rides over a yellow steppe that a magpie could not fly across." These symbolic colors are the same as those of Leo Levy:

But his longcoat (black) was on a large chair (yellow) in which
a lion (red) was carved

and they represent the *exile kept alive* (ironically enough, in terms of 20th century history, they're also the colors of the German flag). The Shaman is

able to create new meanings from the old ones, to keep the names alive and resonant. This passion for the names of things that set the limits of primitive cultures was seen by Stein to be the basis for poetry. Rothenberg shows this power of the noun to create its own field of energy in his "Satan in Goray: A Homage to Isaac Bashevis Singer." He uses Stein's method to present the vocabulary of Singer's world:

Messiah.
First a holiday malice.
Abyss.
Ark bares Levi.

As a gloss to this, one might easily use Rothenberg's own commentary in *Technicians of the Sacred*: "Partly it's a question of resemblances & analogy, but at this point where we are, what's of still greater importance is the possibility of a kind of tension, energy etc., generated by the joining of disparate, even arbitrary images. Observe: every new correspondence acts on its subject which it changes, & on the entire field; every change a measurable burst of energy."

It is Rothenberg's commitment to the Shamanistic role that gives the oral force to the poem. *Poland/1931* is the result of Rothenberg reducing himself to the skeleton condition, an equivalent to re-entering the womb of primordial life. He achieves a mystical rebirth as "cokboy," or to use Duncan's term, a "Chasidic cowboy-and-indian American Bicentennial comic voice." What Rothenberg particularly shares with the Shamans is the fact that he functions within a particular world view whose fundamentals, if not its numerous elaborations through time and space, are rooted in an ancient way of life. Eliade has shown in his book on Shamanism that Shamans from different cultures share a similar fundamental *Weltanschauung* and cosmology, with similar techniques, and even similar symbols. The journey from the Old World to the New in *Poland/1931* is in itself a transference of symbols from one culture to another as well as a projection of these symbols out into the cultures of the World. There are, of course, very many instances of the reverberations of Jewish symbols into primitive cultures, and Rothenberg is clearly very sensitive to such occurrences. For example, the symbolism of milk and honey finds an echo in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. When the Great Shaman kills his animal brother, Vainamoinen, he reassures the dead bear that:

We shall never treat thee evil.
Thou shalt dwell in peace and plenty,
Thou shalt feed on milk and honey.

In *Poland/1931*, Rothenberg constantly makes use of the techniques of oral recitative that are found in primitive poetries, using narrative modes

that shift the perspective from third to first person, "both to make the historical time immediate & to freely interiorize some of the objective material." "A Book of Testimony," "A Book of Writings," "Galician Nights," and "A Book of Histories" all function in this way. They are the words of the tribe to which the poet adds his own. Rothenberg's own roots stretch back, in fact, to a tradition where oral poetry was very prevalent. Eastern Galicia is part of the Ukranian culture where the *dumi*, a long narrative poem that was broken up by improvisations on the kabja or 20 string lute, was the dominant form. The *dumi* also dealt with the history of its people and used the direct language of the herders and shepherds. Rothenberg sees the local and particular nature of oral poeties as a base for the universal. In *Poland/1931*, Rothenberg is the maker of the plot but not of everything that occurs within it. His collage method amounts to an invitation to others to create alongside him, to give us their own "angry songs," their own ancestral stories, their own histories.

Poland/1931 is a profoundly Jewish poem, but Rothenberg's exploration of ancestral roots as a means of mapping his own understanding of himself seems to me to be central to the concern of both poet and man today. He knows from his tradition what it means to be as obscure and lost as it is possible to be, he knows that he must be attentive to the differences and peculiarities of being a man alone, and he knows that to safeguard them he must keep his distance from the eternal. He has to define his own way as an earthly manifestation of the Shekinah. Rothenberg, a modern Shaman, uses irony to mark out his distance from the eternal. Strangely enough, it's an attitude that links him to the modern Polish poet, especially to a poet such as Herbert, who has also produced his own "Mythology" in reduced form:

First there was a god of night and tempest, a black
idol without eyes, before whom they leaped and smeared
with blood. Later on, in the times of Republic,
there were many gods with wives, children-creaking beds, and
harmlessly exploding thunderbolts. In the end only superstitious
neurotics carried in their pockets little statues of salt,
representing the god of irony. There was no greater god
at that time.

Then the barbarians came. They, too, highly appreciated the
little god of irony. They would crush it under
their heels and add it to their dishes.

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