

Jerome Rothenberg
A Dialogue on Oral Poetry
with
William Spanos

He who reads without melody and repeats without song, concerning him the scripture says: Therefore I also gave them statutes which were not to their advantage.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai
(J.R.)

*without invention the line
will never again take on its ancient
divisions when the word, a supple word,
lived in it, crumbled now to chalk.*

W.C. Williams, *Paterson*
(W.S.)

The following dialogue on the oral impulse in contemporary American poetry had its origins in an "interview" I conducted with Jerome Rothenberg at the end of a three day visit to the S.U.N.Y. at Binghamton campus in February 1973, sponsored by boundary 2. In the process of our conversation, it became clear to both of us that the emergent horizon was important enough to warrant exploration in a more deliberate way than our constrained circumstances – and the conventional "interview" – allowed. We agreed, therefore, that I would formulate a number of the crucial questions about oral poetry that we discovered in the process of our discussion to which Mr. Rothenberg would respond at his convenience. At the same time, we were also very much aware of the inevitable loss of spontaneity that such a deliberate method would entail. To sustain the dialogic impulse, therefore, we decided to leave the question/response process open-ended, to be terminated only after we mutually agreed that we had "concluded" the dialogue or after our time had run out. (As it turned out, it was the latter circumstance that brought our long range discussion to a "close.") I am, of course, aware of the irony of a written "conversation" on the subject of oral poetry. But in beginning by talking and thereby discovering our topic, I believe we have overcome the danger of vicious circularity, that is, have leaped into the hermeneutic circle, and achieved a dialogue on oral poetry in a very real sense. Whether or not this is true, however, must ultimately be left up to the reader.

William V. Spanos

Spanos: The contemporary German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, keeps insisting that the fatal mistake of Western civilization was made when the post-Socratic philosophers translated the word *Logos* in the sentence "Man is the animal who has *Logos*" to mean "reason" or "judgment." This metamorphosis, he says, concealed the word's primordial meaning as "talk" or, rather, "oral speech" (*Rede*). And as a result the West eventually built up a civilization on the foundations of a coercive propositional language, a language of assertion, that in seeking to "take hold of," to master, the world, has ended up alienating "civilized" man from Being, the sacredness of existence, that it is only in the power of human speech to dis-close. As I see it, one of the fundamental defining characteristics of contemporary literature, especially of contemporary American poetry, is a similar reaction against *Logos* as the rational Word or Final Cause – as the Omega, so to speak – in favor of an effort to dis-cover and recall the *Logos* as human speech which the West has covered over and forgotten. So, for example, Charles Olson, who has made Keats's Negative Capability a governing principle of his poetics, says in his seminal essay "The Human Universe" that

We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since
450 B.C. And it has had its effects on the best of men,

on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, has, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language's other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphics or to ideograms to right the balance. (The distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant.)

I'd like to begin, or, rather, to open up our "conversation" by asking if *you* think that the effort to recover the oral impulse is a central and determining concern of contemporary American poets, and, if so, how you would interpret the motives informing this effort.

Rothenberg: I'm glad that you stressed the *you* in that question, which immediately personalizes it & allows for a more positive response. But let me start anyway with some qualifications about the word "oral" & whatever it is that we take to be its opposite. I think you present some usable terms in your statement, & I'm glad too that you avoid contrasting it with "written." But others don't, & it seems to me that the idea of writing is kicking around somewhere in the background & making for a good deal of confusion about the issues involved.

Speaking for myself, then, I would like to desanctify & demystify the written word, because I think the danger of frozen thought, of authoritarian thought, has been closely tied in with it. I don't have any use for "the sacred" in that sense — for the idea of book or text as the authoritative, coercive version of some absolute truth, changeless because written down & visible. That isn't to say that our problems with what Blake called "single vision" begin with writing, or to push for a tactical illiteracy by way of solution. Mr. Nixon or any man in power will be as dishonest verbatim as from written notes, & when the argument reduces itself to that, it becomes a triviality or worse: another kind of authoritarianism in so far as it coerces poets or others to give up any skill, any means whatsoever. I don't think that writing is the ultimate cause of our troubles, but that writing itself comes about in response to a more fundamental change in human organization: a need to institutionalize laws, to control change & the uncertain acts of the individual, in the name of a tribe, of a class, of a nation, of a god, whatever. I'm not social scientist enough to dwell on this, but I want to at least acknowledge the wider picture — not to find a McLuhanesque scapegoat for civilized dilemmas — or if one is going to do that, to recognize the electronic media as similar threats to the idea of the oral.

But I've never thought of "oral" in this sense as my personal shibboleth, & I probably use it much less than you suppose. Because I happen to *write* — as do the other "oral poets" you mention later — & I'm

not going to undo that. I'm much more honest as a writer than as a speaker, although one going view of *the* oral seems to equate it with *the* truthful. (I'm writing this reply, for example, not speaking it, because I don't want my statements conditioned by our face-to-face interview or by my own awkwardness: a combination that doesn't do much for my love of the truth.) And in part — the simplest part — my attitude towards "oral" poetry has nothing to do with my criticism of literature & the written word, etc. It is only that I'm responding to a conventional & deeply entrenched view of poetry that excludes or minimizes the oral; & I'm saying that the domain of poetry includes both oral & written forms, that poetry goes back to a pre-literate situation & would survive a post-literate situation, that human speech is a near-endless source of poetic forms, that there has always been more oral than written poetry, & that we can no longer pretend to a knowledge of poetry if we deny its oral dimension. All of which seems obvious to me, & yet when I do a book like *Technicians* or *Shaking the Pumpkin*, it still seems to flush out those who can't see or hear beyond the written word or printed page.

In that sense — of an oral medium prior to the written — I think we're using the word as it turns up in ordinary discourse. But you're into much more in the question, touching on what for me are fundamental issues of poetry & reality: what we know & say, & how we say & know it. For this the contrast isn't "oral & literate" (written) but "oral & literal," where by literal I mean what you, or Heidegger, present as a kind of closed *logos*, Final Cause, coercive propositional language, mastering the world rather than participating in it. Obviously the concern here isn't with a refinement of style, although as poets we may have some difficulties in disengaging ourselves from an old-fashioned literary context. That context itself may be part of the trap of categorical thinking, & it's certainly under attack now from a number of different directions. So I can as easily expect to find allies among scientists & linguists & other generally turned-on people as among those specifically engaged in the business of literature. (Notice that Olson, as a poet, isn't talking about poetry — isn't calling it "poetry" — but about language & discourse & speech, which is usefully the way we should be talking.)

Now if I try to get at some common idea that poets — the poets I still read — have particularly been into, I might start with a fairly open, ostensibly "irrational" proposition about the communication of the unverifiable: of an experience deliberately mediated by the /, therefore truly an experience. It seems to me that when the domain of discourse got split up, the poets ended up on that side, in the conflict between poetry & philosophy / shamanism & theology / individual & state / oral & literal / that Plato first called to our attention. (They didn't all stay there but that's a different matter.) More recently it's become clear that it isn't a bad place to be & that the scientists (who picked up from the philosophers after the literal theologians had caved in) may be edging towards a

reconciliation. But where earlier scientific language had attempted to evade the individual experience, poetry was becoming radically empirical & phenomenological. From Blake & Whitman on, modern poetry has assumed an accumulation of selves — of poets writing out of their own experience — that will together make up a total image of the world. It has gradually abandoned generality (including the subjective lyrical kind), while going as doggedly after its objects as science after its. But its particulars are the particulars of *this* immediate experience, & (or because) the experiencing "self" is itself in a continuous process of change.

Let me take the "Objectivists" as an example, since the word, the official tag, might seem to contradict what I was saying about the mediating *I*. But Zukofsky is clearly pointing to a dialectic, derived from a metaphor of "vision," in which the poet's "clear physical eye" (pronounced *I*) must be the instrument which brings the "rays of the object . . . to a focus" / "thinking with the things as they exist," etc. — or what Oppen gets into a very neat phrase: that the "virtue of the mind is that emotion which causes to see." In other words, the return to the object ("the direction of historic & contemporary particulars" — Zukofsky) also implies a "seer" — an *I* through which subject & object are joined — as in Rimbaud's earlier formulation or the even more distant Copper Eskimo name for a shaman: "the one who has eyes."

It took me a long time to see the value of the "Objectivist" strategy in relation to "vision" — the getting rid, as Olson described it, "of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects." But none of this denies a "seer" so much as it refocuses our attention on the object of sight — its purpose & the process by which it occurs. So, taking it a step further back & connecting it to that change from "literal" to "oral," Bucky Fuller wrote:

Heisenberg said that observation alters the phenomenon observed. T.S. Eliot said that studying history alters history. Ezra Pound said that thinking in general alters what is thought about. Pound's formulation is the most general, and I think it's the earliest.

And in that "most general" formulation, I find a connection (as Pound would probably not have) to that equally important strategy once hammered home by Breton & the Surrealists, in which the dream vision was brought into waking life; or even (& still in pursuit of the "vision") to the Dadaists' "discovery" that chance & accident could themselves create poems & structures which in turn became the thing seen ("free of lyrical interference," etc.), but following the work of art rather than before it.

Except for that last view, I've been limiting myself here to concepts of vision & thought, which can presumably exist without a construct or a visible performance. But clearly all these poets — Surrealists & "Objectivists," etc. — were construct-oriented, language-oriented people. That would be the principal distinction between the visionary & the poet, the contemplative thinker & the artist — what the "Objectivists" got at in the second reading of their name, the idea of the poem-as-*object*: "a big or little machine made of words" (W.C. Williams). Of the early American modernists, Williams remains the most convincing in his stress on the structural & linguistic side of the "oral vs. literal" proposition:

The mutability of the truth. Ibsen said it. Jefferson said it. We should have a revolution of some sort in America every ten years. The truth has to be redressed, re-examined, reaffirmed in the new mode. There has to be new poetry. But the thing is that the change, the greater material, the altered structure of the inevitable revolution must be *in* the poem, in it. Made of it. It must shine in the structural body of it.

So, just as the (modern) poem derives from a particular vision (an experience deliberately mediated by the *I*), it takes shape in a particular structure & a particular language, with the *I* again at center. And there is again, or there should be, no recourse to higher authority — neither to a coercive closed vision, nor to a coercive closed form, nor to a coercive poetic vocabulary or syntax — but instead the poem emerges from the linguistic particulars of *this* experiencing self. At least I would see that as the second consequence of that "most general formulation," which Fuller credited to Pound & which in some form or other (automatic writing, *free* verse, organic form, etc.) was shared by most of those early modernists who had begun to sense the consequences of their break with literal thinking. The idea of the oral — of a source of forms renewed in each instance — remains germinal; so important in the end that some of us have come to see it as concurrent with, or prior to, that other ("visionary") business of the poem. And the way you've set it up in the question, it would now seem to cover whatever other anti-literal approaches — chance operations, say, or concrete poetry — develop the idea of each poem as a separate structural & cognitive instance. In which case the poem becomes the field of the poet's action, & as he opens up that field, his action becomes coterminous with that of anyone who recognizes his own immediate relation to the world & speaks it.

In fulfillment of Blake's prophecy: "Would that all God's children were poets!"

Spanos: Your response is provocative all along the way. But it's your definition of the poets that interest you in terms of the "I" which is also "eye" (an equation that Olson too seems to make, especially in Letter 6 of the *Maximus Poems*: "polis is/eyes...") that I find especially interesting. I notice from this point on a gradual but rather definite and perhaps definitive shift from the oral to a visual context, from the metaphor of voice to the "metaphor of 'vision,'" from the notion of poet as speaker to poet as "see-er" or, to pin down what really whets my interest, "seer." I'd like to pick up on this movement later on, but for now let me take my *first* question a little farther.

Your deep interest in the oral ritual expression of "archaic" and tribal peoples, especially of the American Indian, is, of course, reflected in the "ethnopoetics" of your anthologies, *Technicians of the Sacred*, *Shaking the Pumpkin*, *America a Prophecy* (with George Quasha), *Revolution of the Word*, and *Alcheringa*, the journal you co-edit with Dennis Tedlock. This interest clearly suggests to me your personal commitment to the task of recovering the — or *an* — oral tradition in behalf of the renewal of American poetry — and, I take it, of modern Western man. What, in your view, has the "primitive" or tribal oral tradition to offer contemporary American poetry in particular?

Rothenberg: First off it raises the idea of "oral tradition" itself (no matter whether *the* or *an*) & its compatibility with, centrality to, whatever schemata of a "poetry of changes" we've developed among ourselves. I'll get around to "primitive" & "tribal" shortly, but for the moment a perfectly good formulation (of the two terms "oral" & "tradition") comes, say, in Gershom Scholem's "Revelation & Tradition as Religious Categories," where he's talking about the survival, in an otherwise "literal" context, of the Jewish "oral law" as process or kabbalah:

Tradition, according to its mystical sense, is Oral Torah, precisely because every stabilization in the text would hinder and destroy the infinitely moving, the constantly progressing and unfolding element within it, which would otherwise become petrified. The writing down and codification of the Oral Torah, undertaken in order to save it from being forgotten, was therefore as much a protective as (in the deeper sense) a pernicious act.

In that sense, the persistence of the question among the Jews — Jews who take themselves seriously as the supreme people-of-the-book — indicates to me how deep the whole subterranean culture, the tribal-&-oral, can run, has run in fact in all our histories. And for ourselves, now, for those of us who think of poetry as linked to, as that very process of unfolding &

changing, let me venture a guess that what we're recovering is *the* oral tradition (the idea of that per se) but what we're creating is *an* oral tradition — & that we'll get to the first only by shooting for the second.

Over all, however, I would want to expand the context of recovery: not to isolate it but to see it as part of a greater enterprise: a greater scheme or strategy described by Duncan out of Whitman as the composition of

a symposium of the whole . . . (in which) all the old excluded orders must be included. The female, the proletariat, the foreign; the animal and vegetative; the unconscious and the unknown; the criminal and failure — all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admitted in the creation of what we consider we are.

This, it seems to me, is a terrific paradigm of what's possible to us today: what we've come to by a number of different roads: as poets (if that's the right word) or simply as people to whom many awarenesses are now present. If so, then the history of the west (that particular niche of so-called civilization) has come to a point of possible qualitative change: what I can hear Olson describing as a completely new ball game — or the great subculture surfacing at last. Because it seems to me that for 2000 years at least (or, more accurately, 5000) the impulse of "civilization" has been to supercede & annihilate its past: to remove from our psyches & flesh, therefore from our institutions as well, the "old man" (& certainly the woman, animal, etc.). Religion & science, as we woke up as kids to find them, are both very militant, very absolute philosophies in that regard: tough & progressivistic in favor of the "new man" & "dying to the past": transforming that old savage/adam nature so as to get us full-clothed & scrubbed before return to paradise. Obviously they haven't utterly succeeded but been plagued by heresies & intellectual eccentrics — which failure acts finally to keep the options open: an option that the "romantics" seized to start a reconsideration of the totally human experience, the totally biological experience as well. Science — paradoxically perhaps, & here's the clincher — begins the reconsideration of human continuities, & really good science supplies the information about ourselves as a species & part of a biological continuum, etc., that the poets will then transform from the idea of something to be superceded to the idea of something to be accepted & extended. (But carefully, let me tread carefully at this point, so not to demand in turn the obliteration of all that's accrued over the intervening years, pushing a new literalism — in the name of the tribal sub-cult & so on — but willing to stand with Blake's continuous desystematization, or Whitman's contradictions, Olson's "will to change," or Duchamp's "I have forced myself to contradict myself," etc.: those modernist proposals for a present poetry of changes.)

So I don't see, to get back to your question, that it's a matter of a return to the primitive, but a recognition of the primitive, the source of what we are, as a necessary part of the human inheritance, both because it very simply is that (& we deny its present existence, in us, at our peril) & because it has something (some things) to offer, now. Therefore, in outline:

- the traditions in question add to any reconsideration of poetry as "vision" & "communion" a series of authentic instances (historical & cultural) in which such functions were realized;

- they provide the idea of the oral & mythic as self-corrective tellings, & the evidence of how it works;

- they give a functional dimension to "meaning" or "significance" in the poetic act: the evidence that even apparently minimal forms may have a great complexity of function ("the smallest things can turn you on" – P. Blackburn), & that without the Kabbalists' *kavvanah* (i.e., intention), the weightiest expression can be the most trivial, etc. – but at the same time, an expanded notion of alternative poetic & linguistic structures;

- they point to the existence of what Snyder calls "models of basic nature-related cultures": this at the beginning of what may be a post-technological age (post-modern, let me say, in the only sense that term has meaning for me), in which we may have to recover certain basic human tools with reliance on unavailable sources of energy (or: what happens to the light show when the lights go out; how much sound can you generate without Con Ed, etc.): towards a fusion of ecology & poetics;

- they lead to a recognition that cultures like species are irreplaceable once extinct: the product of millenia;

- in the Amerindian instance, etc., they afford a means of enlarging our experience of the continent – in time & space;

- they comprise a necessary body of knowledge at a time when "the wave of the future would seem to be the growing awareness of Europeans that they are themselves on the other side of the frontier of developing and expanding people . . . (when) we are being told (and a few are listening) that Europe is brutal and brilliant, successful – and dead . . ." (thus the anthropologist, Paul Bohannan: 1966).

And for all of this, the term "primitive" – except for the useful dichotomy with "civilized" that thinkers like Stanley Diamond still would stress – is not only a debased coinage, a block to our consideration of our total needs, but hides the truth it should most helpfully make clear: that the models in question don't so much bind us to the past, as ease our entry to the future.

Spanos: Despite the beautiful and almost persuasive way you commit your ethnopoetics to the future in your last remarks, I'm still a little

uneasy about your account of the "greater enterprise," as you call it, especially about what I see as a tendency to minimize man's historicity. On both the cultural level and the level of literary history, what you say seems to me — I may be exaggerating — to emphasize universals, organic, to be sure, but universals nonetheless — inclusive/timeless paradigms or models (myths) — at the expense of historical differentiation. Historicity loses its priority to form, tends to get absorbed, in other words, into a timeless structural whole in which change is, in fact, extension from a fixed and stable center. You seem to be aware of this danger in the parenthetical warning to yourself against the possibility of "pushing a new literalism in the name of the tribal sub-cult and so on."

But, again, I'd like to postpone this crucial issue until later on when we can confront it directly. For the time being, I'd like to pursue the thrust of my question about the potential contribution of the archaic oral tradition to contemporary American poetry. In a well known passage from *Paterson* (II), Williams says

unless there is
a new mind there cannot be a new
line, the old will go on repeating
itself with recurring deadliness

What you've emphasized so far in your response is the kind of contribution the "oral" tradition can make to the contemporary consciousness, to the achievement of the "new mind." Can you be more specific about its potential contributions to the formal character of American poetry? What kind of "line," in other words, does the "new mind" you envisage imply?

Rothenberg: Of all the formal characteristics of the new American poetry, the line is probably the most language specific, conditioned at only second or third hand by what we know outside the language. The paradigm, set by such as Whitman, Williams, Stein, & so on, probably still holds, unless the pattern in Cage's lectures or Antin's talking poems — or the work of Bernadette Mayer & other, even younger poets I know who work outside all verse conventions — is a true paradigmatic departure. Yet even here I'm mindful that someone like Dennis Tedlock, say, shows the possibility of translating from an oral tradition precisely those turnings in spoken narrative that follow from the model of open verse in English. What's more, his insight into that has not only been influenced by American open-verse practice but has then come to influence the way that Antin, e.g., sees talking as essentially "poetic" in its movement.

Aside from line, though, the possibility of formal influences isn't at all limited or ambiguous, but involves all those analogies between "modern" & "primitive" forms that I've tried to show in *Technicians &*