

Shaking the Pumpkin. (I'm still leaving open the question of whether the "primitive" is influencing the "modern" or the "modern" is directing our attention to forms we may now recognize as poems in tribal/oral cultures. Most probably it goes both ways.) Repetition patterns – the nearly universal practice of redundant utterance, or what Antin calls "phrasal poetry" in his discussion of the "prose" work of Gertrude Stein – would be the most obvious example of a shared formal process that emerges in the move toward a new "orality." That kind of influence or reinforcement can come not only through translations but from oral modes in English, like the phrase & intonation patterns out of blues, which have had an obvious & *direct* impact on most of the new Black poets, as well as any number of White ones from the '60s on. (And here, in interchange between two forms of "English," the *line* itself comes into play!)

I don't want to go over too much old ground, so let me just tick off a few key concepts, & for the rest refer you back to the Pre-Faces & the Books of "Events" & "Extensions" in *Technicians & Pumpkin*. It seems to me that since the 1950s (in some ways for several decades before), we have been working increasingly with a performance model of the poem, for which the written versions serve as the notation or the score. Forms of performance such as "sound poetry" obviously can be related back to the wordless poems/songs of the older tribal cultures, & contemporary sound poets have clearly been aware of this from the Futurists & Dadaists on. In my own work (I'm thinking particularly of the "Horse Songs") I've used translation as a process for the composition of mixed forms (words & "pure"-sound) based on mixed forms in the Navajo, & there the influence of the tribal/oral is clearly one to one. (But remember here that Mac Low or that Cage in his *Mureau* pieces, & so on, have themselves created mixed forms in the normal, headon manner of the avant garde inventor.) Redundancy & repetition would again come into the performance area, to remind us that the poem isn't the single utterance, the synopsis, but the totality of the event – much as a musical composition like Satie's "Vexations" suggests a performance model akin to repetitive Plains Indian chanting or to the Hebrew "Alphabet Event" I give in *Poland/1931*:

(1)

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

(2)

Do the first Alphabet Event walking backwards.
Recite the alphabets starting from the end.

(I am here thinking also of the systematic language happenings – including systematic chance – that have been crucial to kabbalistic & oracular

poetry throughout the ages.) The result of all of this is an alteration of our actual time sense: in these examples towards an extension of time, or in others (like the "Osage Simultaneities" in *Shaking the Pumpkin*) towards the kind of synchronous performance of which Mac Low, again, has been the principal advocate on our own terrain.

Poetry on some such model runs the range from the "stand-up" poet (the stance most common to our poetry "readings") to forms of intermedia as complex in their inclusions as traditional, tribal ritual-events in theirs. Once we're into these, we learn as much from other arts & artists (or from the experience, simply, of other human beings) as we do from poetry & poets — moving into a situation in which the boundaries begin to blur, as if to bring us back to a time before they were established. And it's for this reason — along with the energies, the sense of powers implied — that so many poets & artists have looked for both analogues & spurs to their own work in the tribal/oral cultures & in the subterranean, often "magical" traditions that have survived the ages of division, of separation into isolated modes.

Spanos: I have noticed that in the "Pre-Face" (as you put it) to your influential anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*, which is a sometimes persuasive manifesto announcing the new American poetic imagination, you don't make a clear distinction between an early and a late Modernism. But there are rather glaring omissions in your references to modern and contemporary poets: T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, for example. You also rather pointedly celebrate poets whom the early Moderns and their critical counterparts the New Critics held in suspicion and in some cases even disdain: I'm thinking, for example, of William Blake and especially of Walt Whitman. Does this mean that you do, in fact, distinguish between a Modern and a Postmodern American Poetry? If so, why do you think early Modernism has run its course or arrived at a dead end? What in your opinion, in other words, are the essential limitations of the "classic" modern American poem?

Rothenberg: I find here that we're working on two very different sets of assumptions, so that I can't even start to answer without first giving my own sense of "modern" & "postmodern." The second of those terms has bothered me since I first heard about it — not among poets who talk about continuities but among academics who don't — & the question helps me understand why.

To begin with, in my own chronology of modern poetry (& for me "modern" means the recovery of that sense of "oral" or "non-literal" we were discussing earlier), that string of poets you reeled off is largely out of place. They're 20th Century poets, most of them skillful & even intelligent, but working for the most part within very conventional

limitations as to form & content — & with varying degrees of hostility to modern poetry. If we were talking about modern painting, you wouldn't throw Burchfield & Grant Wood at me & expect a serious discussion. And my point is that modernism in poetry has to be discussed at its extremes — just as it does in painting — otherwise you can't know if you've gotten past it. Now, by "early" modern poetry I'm talking about the term as it came into use around the First World War, not only in America & England but throughout the so-called western world: a poetry of changes, experiment, destruction & creation, questioning old structures & inventing new ones, blurring fixed distinctions, opening the domain, & so on. I'm very grateful for all of that as a beginning, as a paradigm of poetics & creative work in the 20th Century; & what disturbs me about most of the poets you mention is that they raised an opposition that tried to halt the modernist ferment, to pull back to a conventional poetics somewhat modified by the modernist turn of events but fundamentally conservative in outlook: a familiar anglo-saxon & class-oriented view of language & high culture. I don't know if they ever used the term *post*-modern about themselves, but they could have (more easily than most of us, in fact), since what they asserted was that "modern poetry" (read: Eliot's tudor verse style) had established itself, & that the next step was a return to standard metrics & a beefed-up "great tradition." It seems ridiculous in retrospect, but as late as the 1950s, Delmore Schwartz can describe all of that as a "poetic revolution" or a "revolution in poetic taste," which I would take, at the least, as a contradiction in terms: a deception based on Eliot's criticism (literary & social), & on Pound's reluctance to follow through on the implications of his own poetic practice. What Schwartz was defending, anyway, was a middle-ground strategy: a rear-guard response (by Eliot, Tate & others) to the "anarchistic" thrust of modern poetry & art (free verse, free thought, free love, etc.), which shows up also in that "suspicion" or "disdain" of Blake & Whitman that you mention. It was with a clear awareness of this that Williams spoke of *The Waste Land* as "the great catastrophe to our letters," because he saw that beneath the cover of an actual structural innovation (as much Pound's as Eliot's) was an impulse to pull up stakes & get back to the narrow & comfortable limits of the inherited past.

Now, if there were only Eliot's criticism & that of the New Critics to define the "classic" modern poem, I would write off modernism as the dead end you mention. But, as I said, we must be talking about two different things to start with, & for me all that tasteful, middle-ground retrenchment is almost wholly opposed to what I would see as early modernism (Stein, Williams, Cummings, Pound, Duchamp, the Dadaists, Surrealists, Objectivists, & so on) — work that stands in a germinal relationship to the poetry that's been developed in my own generation. I'm aware of differences here too, though I don't need the prefix to define them — that the early modernists are more immediately concerned at some

point with Tzara's "great negative work of destruction," or that they hold back conversely in fear of the consequences; that they affect a purity of stance that breaks them into warring camps with manifestos, -isms, & the rest; that they're elitist & defensive, uncertain of their roots & cultures; that they have the possibility & the "problem" of coming at new forms from nowhere (even in the act of breaking forms), so can't, like Olson in "Projective Verse," say, build from work already done, or, like Blackburn, acknowledge

We have had our generation of innovators, 19
15 & the rest.
What Pound and Williams & Moore have done
is in the air, is, perhaps, the air.
Let the species now give rise to a few
m a s t e r s
(since the fields are open
and the air cleared)

— or, as someone might say of another set of innovators, the Dadaists had no "dadaists" before them.

So what has run its course — if I can get back to the language of your question — is the absurdity that filled the schools, etc., when I was growing up. The other I would hope has fulfilled itself in us through whatever continuity of intentions is possible in a poetics of change — so that we can work out our own awarenesses, function as poets in the sense I spoke about before: to allow the revolution to go on. We may — as Antin finally agreed, I think — be at the start of some kind of post-modernism, a focus on "truth" or content, say, where we don't get bound by polemical stances. But that's for the future to decide.

Spanos: Yes, I think we're working on two somewhat different sets of assumptions about the definition of "Modernism" (and it very well may be that mine derives from being a captive of the New Criticism during my student years, though I doubt if that's completely the case). But before addressing the issue — it's related to or rather it includes the questions about where your emphasis falls between oral and visual, timelessness and historicity — let me develop the immediate line of questioning a little bit more.

In reaction to nineteenth century positivism and its Technological City — the "Crystal Palace," as Dostoyevsky calls it in *Notes from Underground* — the early moderns (I mean the Symbolists and Imagists) also searched for models outside the "Western" humanistic dispensation. They followed the lead of sculptors like Epstein, Gaudier-Brzeska, Brancusi, and painters like Picasso, Wyndham Lewis, Modigliani, and in the

process "discovered" the art of Africa, ancient Egypt, and above all, the orient: India, China, and Japan — and a way of breaking poetry out of the coercive linear time track of the Gutenberg Galaxy into a more "visionary" and "sacramental" mode. As a matter of fact, Mircea Eliade, one of the most important sources, I take it, of the renewed interest in the "primitive" imagination, has said in *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* that the works of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce — and he certainly could have added Yeats and some of D.H. Lawrence — is "saturated with nostalgia for the myth of eternal repetition," which is at the heart of the nonhistorical, pre-literate tribal consciousness of primitive societies. How would you distinguish between, say, Eliot's and Yeats's sense of "primitivism" (I'm using the word not in resistance, but for lack of a better) and yours? Lawrence, like Pound, though clearly for different reasons, seems to have survived the general reaction against early modernism. Where does he fit into your differentiation?

Rothenberg: This follows out of the same view of modernism as the previous question, so there's again a problem, in answering it directly, to make sure we're speaking about the same dichotomies & cast of characters, & so on. I don't, for example, see as fundamental a split as you do between the "modernists" & the 19th Century "positivists," when so many of the modernists I would name were in fact incorporating aspects of the technology into their own work. And certainly by the time it gets to my own generation (with its pick-up on pop culture & the machines that transmit it) we're at the very least primitivizing the media & choosing what still speaks to us in that "technological city." Anyway there are too many shadings here for me to simply agree that the earlier painters & sculptors you list, say, were all that "saturated with nostalgia" for tribal consciousness & myths (I hope you don't take the myths themselves as nostalgic) — & if you would consider some of the poets who were more truly the painters' equivalents than the "symbolists" or even the several big guns you mention, you'd see that that was the case with modern poetry as well. I mean, however it works out in any individual case, to count oneself into an "avant garde" is to set up at least a little hedge against nostalgia. And the point, anyway, is that they weren't simply longing for the past, but were actively changing our idea of what the present & the past are, both together. So I think it's poor judgment to think of those discoveries of "primitive" Africa, & so on, as mere "nostalgia": a condition I would take as more of a desire for the near or familiar past (the day before yesterday, so to speak), whereas here it's a recognition that the outlook of that day was too narrow to truly define & explore the multiple dimensions of the human that were then emerging. A Chinese poet may be nostalgic about Tu Fu: an American looking at Tu Fu's work can see the opening of possibilities other than those given by our culture. And this need to hold or incorporate diverse chronologies

simultaneously (“non-linearly,” if you want to use McLuhan) can produce as experimental a condition as that generated from our day-by-day experience — is in that sense not antiquarian but, as I understand the term, essentially “modern.”

Now, most of that latter quality I find to be missing or badly compromised in Eliot’s criticism, though the yearning for the near past is clearly very strong. It’s this nostalgia & the accompanying despair about the other possibilities, both “primitive” & “modern,” that endeared him to the middle-grounders: an essentially conservative position, pushing history or poetry back a little in the name of, let’s say, “law & order.” So what Lawrence & Pound “survive” isn’t the reaction to modernism but to the attenuation of modernism: the resort to “church” & “monarchy” & “picking up the meters.” Their relation to the past — even if I don’t find it as serviceable, say, as that of the surrealists — at least maintains a sense of continuum with the “pagan” & the “primitive” (Snyder’s “great subculture” or Olson’s “paleolithic”), rather than with the genocidal institutions that sought to wipe them out.

Lawrence was very much into the new verse, but even more so, the “reactionary” side of the change in consciousness — all that “primitive” & erotic energy he postulated & wanted, though he was probably as terrified of it (with a thoroughly Anglo-Saxon, racial fear) as Eliot. And at the same time he was put off by almost every other aspect of the “technological city,” with the kind of aesthetic disgust you run across in turn-of-the-century “decadents” & symbolists — much more there than with the typical early modernists from, say, the 20s on. Pound’s paganism, in that sense, was a prettier, clearly more literary proposition, closer to Eliot’s classicism, I suppose, though the drift of his politics was more extreme & dangerous, getting himself bogged down in the Renaissance & so on, then with fascism & the perpetuation of the nation-state. But think of what he contributes even so: the collage composition of *The Cantos*, the pivotal breakthroughs in translation, the sense of history as vortex, the transmission of an actual alternative tradition.

In my own generation, as contrasted to Lawrence more than to many other modernists, the anti-technological side is muted, although the dangers of technology are now more clear. We don’t on the whole insist on a *pure* “primitivism,” a death of the machine, say, unless the conditions naturally arise: & having grown up with motors & electronic media, we aren’t against them from aesthetic disgust or nostalgia but on ecological grounds. In that way, then, a composer like Pauline Oliveros can fluctuate between electronic performances & something as rudimentary as banging rocks together. And even Gary Snyder drives a car & rides in airplanes.

But all of that can change of course — may be out of our control even now & pulling us toward some kind of truly post-technological situation. In which case the *pure* primitivists will turn out to have had the greater insight. Anyway I don’t find that in conflict with the “modernism”

of my generation: just a more extreme fulfillment of the critique of civilization: the "primitive" side of the vision.

Spanos: Since contemporary American poets of your general persuasion — Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, David Antin, for example (I could have named a dozen more) — have been reacting against the "school" of Eliot, they must also be reacting against the *Tradition* as Eliot, his contemporaries, and the New Critics in the English and American universities canonized it. I mean, of course, the tradition which makes irony and paradox the essential characteristics of the greatest poetry and which goes back from Eliot through Laforgue and Baudelaire to Donne and the Metaphysical poets, Dante, etc. What, then — to bring what you've been saying into clear focus — is the *tradition* as you and your generation see it (including the key contemporary figures — ideologues as well as poets)?

Rothenberg: I'll break this into a couple of stages: first give as general a statement as I can about the characteristics of poetry (whether "great" or not) that interests me, & then fill in some names & works, both contemporary & ancient.

The most sweeping generalization in *America a Prophecy* spoke of a "tradition (or poetry) of changes" — a term I prefer to Quasha's "metapoetics," with its echo of metaphysical & so on. I think of that not only as a "modern" strategy but as underlying the poetic process back to its beginnings: the root idea of metamorphosis & the poet's freedom to reconsider & review the common sources. In our own time especially, when our knowledge of the past (in fact & dream) is constantly expanding, it would be selling ourselves cheap to slip back into an idolatry of the sources as fixed or the "tradition" as absolute & static. So, by contrast to the "literal" view that repeats the past by rote, the alternative tradition makes-it-new at every step — & in this sense "tradition" & "experiment" or "change" come very naturally together. But that much should be obvious from my remarks about the "oral" earlier along.

It should be obvious too that in a poetry that accepts contradictions, irony & paradox aren't just the marks of a "superior" literary style but very human, very natural responses. And that may be one reason why I've turned to the so-called "primitive" more than to the kind of "eastern" view that annihilates the contradictions — why I find in tribal narrative & vision that realism & "principle of ambivalence," which Stanley Diamond tells us are "incorporated into the myths and rituals of primitive peoples to an extraordinary degree . . . and most directly realized in the figure of the trickster." This isn't irony as something devious or clever, but at the very heart of things: as part of a continuum, another aspect of that *direct* treatment of event or object as immediate (unmediated) image that the analytic critics couldn't deal with, but had to

interpose their own interpretations into prose. Dante, of the poets you mention, seems incredibly direct in that sense. And even a "metaphysical" like Donne is interesting or exciting because of what he *first* presents: the numinous in physical assault upon the body; lovers becoming compasses; the moon producing tides & tears; stage-sets with lights & shadows; eyes that flash *real* pictures; angels who appear in flames & voices. If a poet doesn't have that from the start, then irony & paradox won't pull it out for him.

So as I go along, I'm more & more for taking poets' statements as given — as a way to transform my own sense of space & time — in contrast to which "irony" (as a literary device, like "symbolism," by indirection) would seem to function like a kind of dodge. In that sense the class of unimaged metaphor of which "my love is a rose" is a pretty but trivial example, gives way in my mind to Gertrude Stein's insistence that a rose is a rose: "that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years." But when Dante comes at his great image of the rose at the end of *Paradiso*, that's different: not because he's talking about God & Burns about a lady (ladies do mean more to me than God), but because of the *envisioning* that's taking place there: what George Oppen speaks of elsewhere as "that virtue of the mind . . . which causes to see." Or again, when the Cuna Indian shaman "enters" the body of his patient & travels her womb in search of the animals & the Lilith-like goddess who have prevented childbirth, one recognizes the condition described in Levi-Strauss's quote or paraphrase from Rimbaud: that "metaphor can change the world."

It's such occasions that I've tried to explore or draw from — in the same sense, I think, in which one speaks of a "tradition." If we're going to adapt the word to where we are (some would suggest just dropping it), we can't restrict it to a monolineal inheritance, but have to use it in a new sense as "discovery" or "map": a mapping of those times & places, simply those works in which envisioning occurred. These can include the "western" classics as presumably familiar ground, but should in no sense be taken as culminating in them. And the beginnings would be as far back as we can see them, which in the "west" would get us to Lascaux or to that glimpse of language Marshack teaches us to read from marks on bone:

Moon of the Thaw
Moon of the Spring Salmon Run
Moon of the Calving
Moon of the Flowers
Moon of the Moulting
Moon of the Rutting Bison
Moon of the Nut
Moon of the First Fruit

– these “Upper Paleolithic notations” which, in their relation to “Siberian and American traditions,” bring us back to something universal maybe: the last truly intercontinental culture until our own.

This is the source of that “*mainstream* of poetry that goes back to the old tribes & has been carried forward by the great subterranean culture” – *the* tradition if I were finally to name it. In ancient Europe & the Mediterranean (three continents included in that one), we’ve by now unearthed a range of poetries that includes Sumerian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Hittite, & so on, along with those Greeks & Jews who once made up all of our known beginnings. If we can still relate to distant Homers & Isaiahs (both historically &, in Pound’s sense, as “contemporaneous in the mind”), then it should be possible too to relate to the poetry of *Gilgamesh* & the *Enuma Elish*. And I don’t see that this denies “history” (you would do better to confront the old-line academics on that one), but rather fulfills it – gives us a new opening through which we’ve discovered whole networks of connections & found that even the full accounts of Jew & Greek had been obscured for us. That much was Olson’s insistence, as I understand it, & I’ve recently tried to get it down myself, writing the “pre-face” to Doria & Lenowitz’s *Origins*: translations of cosmogonies from the Near East (including gnostic & other heretical sources) that for the first time use the language & structures of our new poetry to translate, bring across the old *poesis*. So, if I can quote from what I say there:

Hesiod & Homer, Ovid & Vergil, the Yahvist & the psalmists, are here seen freshly, surprisingly, as part of a world with rhapsodic, light-struck Orphists, with Pythagoreans mapping out their worlds through numbers, with early kabbalists exploring alphabetic powers. The work moves from the simplicity of Euripides’ “. . . not my story / but one my mother tells” to surreal assemblages of hidden forms & names: the hermaphroditic Elohim & snake/cunt woman of Justin’s *Baruch* (leading by stages to the primal god, Priapus) or that recurrent female body-of-the-world qua dragon whom even Yahveh knew. And this allows that “clash of symbols” which, those like Ricoeur tell us, both is natural to mind & forms our one sure hedge against idolatry.

To which let me add (for the record) that it’s this outlook, applied to similar materials, that makes poetry, as a faith, more central to me than religion – & why, while I understand the move to particular myths & mythic systems, I feel no urge to join it.

What holds for those other times & places carries into the “new” world as well. For years we’ve internalized (or so it almost seems) a sense of our traditions on this continent & of ourselves as makers & inheritors of a poetry in conflict with the accepted orders. From my own perspective (but shared, I think, with many others) I see the Indian *poesis* as our primary ground, including the great Meso-American poetries still preserved. I don’t mean this as an accomplished fact of poetry & consciousness but as a possibility to be explored. And I don’t see it either in a narrowly native context but again as part of that wider, still emerging “world” picture I’ve spoken of above. So while I would project the “Indian” as our base or widest ground, I would look also towards those later lines that come together in our works. Thus

: European poetries, with a particular stress on the numinous & mystical (both literary like Edward Taylor & self-developed, even “oral,” like the Shakers), & that anti-puritanical thrust first mapped by Williams in *In the American Grain*;

: similar & often crucial “eastern” lines (again both “literary” & “tantric”);

: the new poets & transcendentalists of the 19th Century, notably Emerson & Thoreau, Melville & Hawthorne (both in verse & in prose);

: the essential presence of Whitman & the emergence of isolated verse experimenters like Dickinson;

: the continuing input of European poets from Blake & the Romantics to Rimbaud & the Surrealists, & so on;

: & from the first world war on, the development of a continuous movement toward the exploration of consciousness, language & poetic structure — what we can see & say & make.

This latter movement (which I’ve tried to reinterpret in *America a Prophecy & Revolution of the Word*) explodes circa 1914 in a series of transformative moves, then continues UNBROKEN to our own time. And it produces a number of major figures, both known (like Pound & Williams), forgotten (like Loy & Crosby) or played down (like Stein, Duchamp, Zukofsky, Rexroth, Patchen).

That, anyway, is how I would start to construct a “tradition” alternative to Eliot’s & appearing at its extremes (I see Blake & Milton, for