

example, as major European predecessors) to be a nearly total reversal of values. Yet I think (without claiming more than my own particular & still limited perspective from the U.S.A.) that it's truer to our actual circumstances than the Leavis-like "great" tradition you outlined in your question — & a lot more complex in its interweavings. So, if you'd like me to take off on your wording in that condensation from Eliot & Leavis, to put it in a nutshell, I would say that I'm speaking of THE TRADITION WHICH TAKES VISION & CONFLICT AS THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF POETRY; SEES THESE AS BOUND TO THE STRUCTURE OF THE POEM & THE DYNAMICS OF ACTUAL SPEECH; & TRACES A "LINE" FROM THE INNOVATORS OF OUR OWN TIME & THE CENTURIES IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING, BACK BY WHATEVER ROUTES, TO REACH THE FIRST MYTHOLOGIZED SHAMANS OF THE LATER PALEOLITHIC CULTURES. I can't get it any simpler than that, & filling in the names & key events (although I've done a little of it earlier) would be to set a limit that I can't admit.

**Spanos:** The "tradition" of the "school" of Eliot was given establishment status in the American universities by the New Critics in the fifties, and in the process also established an educational methodology based on the kind of tightly constructed paradoxical "metaphysical" poetry they admired. I'm referring, of course, to the ultra close reading, the *explication de texte*, of Brooks's and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, that implies a hermeneutics that begins from the end. Do you think the frame of reference of the New Criticism is capable of reading, I mean of perceiving what's central to the oral poetry you've collected in *Technicians* and *Shaking the Pumpkin* and *America a Prophecy* or even to the emergent poetry of the new "oral" imagination — to, say, Olson's *Maximus Poems*, the poems of Creeley's *For Love* or more recently *Pieces* and *A Day Book*, or Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, or Snyder's *Earth Household* or Antin's *Talking* or your *Poland/1931*?

**Rothenberg:** My temptation here is to say "unfortunately yes." I think the "frame of reference" could be applied to the kinds of poems you mention & probably to anything else. (I won't argue its centrality as yet.) I remember that the "method" was applied, as parody, to "hickery-dickery-dock," where it was at least enjoyable. I remember too that it used to be applied to the poetry of the New Critics themselves (those who wrote poetry) & to other works far less complex than Olson's or Snyder's & less "paradoxical" than Creeley's, whose early stuff is like a kind of public Dickinson (a favorite target poet for the "method"). I don't think the "method" would apply to most of Stein, say, though if the New Critics had been as serious about "language" & "linguistics" as they claimed to be, they should have recognized her as the modern poet most serious in turn about grammar & syntax, & would have found a way to speak about her.

I don't know what they might do about Antin's talking poems, except to dig the irony & take the chance of talking back — which would be more fun than what they're noted for. And I can easily imagine "new critical" explications of my own work, but feel lucky to be living at a later time.

In regard to "primitive" & "oral" poetry, you do in fact have something like the New Criticism in Levi-Strauss's "structural" studies of myth. A number of the predecessors (Jakobson, & so on) are identical, & the process of reducing myth from a particular language event to a synopsis that transforms & rationalizes contradictions is very much the same. That kind of reductionism seems far from the idea of poem-as-process — rather implies that the synopsis is itself the structure: the message, so to speak, except "in other words." (I would guess that if the New Criticism were to resurface, it would be in a "structuralist" disguise.)

So here I am, already into the "unfortunate" side of it — to wonder if any "study" that evades the questions of "function" & "performance" (thus turns, as you quote Olson, from "language as the act of the instant" to "language as the act of thought about the instant") can still be of much use to us. And that would be a problem, as I see it, even if the New Critics hadn't been committed to a very limited view of form & a general conservatism about language. Poetry has rarely been composed as an occasion for criticism (the "new critical" poets may here be an exception). It has other, very different functions for those who make it, & may (as a process) appear in situations that aren't easy to define within the framework of "literature." When it does, all kinds of factors "outside" the poem — the intention of the poet, his relation to a community, the conditions of his life & time, his politics, the claims he makes to vision or experience, & so on — all these (& more) become important, even central. And the "criticism" that doesn't recognize them, that can't, with Cage, reverse the roles of life & art (& share that life, at least by way of challenge), can only obscure the function, push the poem into a different realm, one with far less at stake.

It's no surprise either that Brooks & Warren called their book *Understanding Poetry*, since the thrust was towards "understanding" as the main activity of the reader/listener: to exploit the need to understand apart from hearing or participation. (What do you understand then?) There's a tremendous amount in fact that precedes "understanding" in that sense — particularly with oral poetry & poetry as performance. And there are poems not meant to be "understood," so to speak, as much as *presented*: offered up. The act of *sounding* the poem, like that of making it, may (as in ritual or prayer or incantation) overshadow the urge to understand it. I'm certainly not ruling "meaning" out in saying this, but it does seem to me that an unbalanced emphasis on "understanding" is a Western hang-up that has too often, in Paul Blackburn's words, "wracked all passion from the sound of speech." And you find, in returning to the

“oral,” in making the poem sound (& the listener hear & sound the words in turn), that if the mind is only tuned to understanding, it may miss the poem & its occasion in the effort to keep up. Poetry is too intense an event for the New Criticism to be more than peripheral.

And I’m saying that, remember, as a poet mad for content — let me make that clear!

**Spanos:** I share your reservations about “understanding poetry” — the impulse to suspend the process of a poem for the sake of seeing (understanding) the whole poem from the end (as an object) — and your commitment to “performance,” which, as I too have tried to suggest, are indeed grounded in Olson’s distinction between “language as the act of an instant” and “language as the act of thought about the instant.” What kind of “interpretive” consciousness, then, does one bring to this oral poetry that’s not mediated by print? (Incidentally, a book like Robert Scholes’s *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* [Yale University Press, 1974] goes far to verify your guess that if the New Criticism were to resurface “it would be in a structuralist disguise.”) When, in *Technicians of the Sacred*, you speak of the anthology as “limit smashing,” are you also proposing a radical transformation of modern reading habits? What does this mean for poetry in the college classroom, or does it mean that poetry doesn’t belong in the classroom?

**Rothenberg:** First let me say that most of the new “oral” (i.e. “sounded”) poetry appears in, or “is mediated by,” print — but we’ve already spoken about that in answer to your first question.

As for poetry “belonging” in the classroom, it’s like the way they taught us sex in those old hygiene classes: not performance but semiotics. If I had taken Hygiene 71 seriously, I would have become a monk; & if I had taken college English seriously, I would have become an accountant. But I do teach from time to time, so realize that the classroom becomes a substitute for those places (coffee shop or kiva) where poetry actually happens & where it can be “learned” (not “taught”) in action. To shift all that into a classroom is a little like preserving a language not normally spoken by those learning it — like the Hebrew of the Americanized “talmud torahs” when I was a kid, or the efforts I’ve observed, by Senecas & other Indians, to maintain languages that children no longer use at home. If there isn’t some carry-over, the classroom will be a burden to those entering. And the situation is the same for poetry — as long, that is, as the root activity, the function, fails to come across.

I’m not sure that “oral” poetry, & so on, offers a way out, but if it does, the change in “instruction” would have several aspects. First off there would have to be a stress on “function”: even possibly the development of some kind of anthropological approach to poetry, from the “primitive,” highly functionalized uses to the literary forms in which

“function” is more oblique, dependent on a changed relationship between the poet & his culture. In coming at it from the “oral” side, an effort should be made to let “life tyrannize over art,” at least to bring auditors into closer contact with the situations in which poetry occurs

: by “introducing” poetry, as far as possible, without compulsion — toward that “oral” situation, in which the novice can enter the experience, can learn by hearing & participation;

: by reference to “primitive” & other materials in which the art & life relationship is clearest (or biographical, not necessarily “psychological,” information, where the social bond has broken down);

: by utilization of poets within the classroom or adjunct to it (live readings, tapes & video, & so on), to help re-establish aspects of the “tribal” situation in which poetry is learned in association with poets & other “keepers of the high words”;

: by “sounding,” discouraging silent readings of the text: to remember that even where poetry is “mediated by print,” the mouth moves with the mind in learning;

: by having students hear & notate their own speech, compose poems & perform them, integrate them with the other “arts”;

: by encouraging, to start with, a reconsideration of those forms of poetry (song & ballad, street rap, heightened speech, & so on) which may be part of the auditors’ lives (i.e., the poetry they really use) — before moving on to other, more familiar forms.

All this of course would be by way of “introduction.” In the advanced study of poetry, I would again urge what I’ve urged so often: the expansion of the field, in line with present practice, to include the widest range of forms & poetries, & to supplement the study qua literature with other studies qua anthropology, psychology, & so on. It will be clear, if this is done, that there are responses (from ecstatic listening & participation to discussion, even challenges, of ideas & content) that are more compelling than those methods favored by the old New Critics.

**Spanos:** David Antin, with whom you are often associated, is also committed to recovering the or at least an oral poetic tradition in the context of a totally "literary," which is to say, print-oriented culture. But it's also clear that there's a very great difference — at least on the surface — between your interest in the collective tribal voice and his interest in, say, Homer or the peripatetic Socrates. You're into the visionary and prophetic potential in the wordless sound poems or the ritualistic incantatory oral poetry of archaic and pre-literate societies, the occasions of which are collective and ceremonial, and Antin is committed to what I would call the dialogic potential of the Platonic dialogues, the occasions of which are individual and (if we're talking about Socrates) existential. Your poems and your adaptations from the oral poetry of the Seneca nation are intended to evoke magically and at once the primordial religious experience of Man. His "talk poems," on the other hand, are intended — or so I read them — to evoke the primordial historical experience of man. Assuming that I'm anywhere near right, are these modes of oral expression irreconcilable or are they different masks of the same face?

**Rothenberg:** You must remember that Antin & I have been friends — & sometimes collaborators — for close to 25 years. If you take what we've done & how we've developed over that whole time, I think the differences will seem less great. Fairly early, when we were both exploring the so-called "deep image" & the possibility within that of picking up from basic surrealist propositions, our working was much closer in anybody's view of it. While he was much less active then (as far as output & publication), his neat turn-of-mind & intelligence helped underscore a shared insistence on the sanity, even "logic," of the project — so "rational" in fact that he would move (like Wittgenstein, who was a crucial influence) into an area where rationalism *per se* no longer was the issue.

We also began — pretty much together in the middle 1960s — to explore new means & structures, involving collage, disjunction & a modified use of chance operations & white-spaced silences. I may again have briefly taken the lead, with *Sightings* & so on, but this (unlike "deep image") was a mode ideally suited to his intelligence; & what he did with it, after "Definitions" & "Black Plague," was really extraordinary. He was also very much with me in the first extended presentations of tribal/oral poetry: one of the readers (along with Mac Low & Rochelle Owens) in the series of performances that led to *Technicians of the Sacred*. And on his end, the talking poems, though later, derive at least in part from the "oral" side of the "alcheringa" enterprise — as Antin's take on that through Dennis Tedlock. There's no poet in fact with whom I've worked as closely as with Antin, & even now, with 3000 miles between us, the interchange goes on.

I don't mean any of that to hide the differences, because that's where the greatest interest lies. But it may be, as you say, that there are

“different masks, only a single face” — or what he wrote about me recently: “the poet I feel closest to & look the least like.” He also once called me the “most reticent” poet in America, which isn’t really true, but close enough to indicate why I could never follow him into something like the talking poems. Not because I’m “collective” & he’s “individual,” or because we have such incompatible views of “history” & so on, but because I draw too many blanks in those public situations in which he seems to thrive. (I’m also more guarded about my public “scepticism” — unless I really want to spill it out.) All of us are both individualized & collective, enculturated beings, and I doubt (because I’m reading Radin here instead of Eliade) that it ever was much different. So, if you don’t hear the “collective” voice in Antin’s *Code of Flag Behavior & Meditations* — his beautiful use of “collage” that picks up from whole bodies of languages not “strictly” his own — then you’re missing a great deal of what he’s done. Take, for example, the two pieces called “Autobiography,” & consider the exchange between his own “individual” experience & something that was told him (an “oral tradition,” so to speak). Or “History,” with its chant-like list of losses drifting into mysticism. Or his appropriations of those “delusions” (myths) of the “insane,” which have their striking force as the experience of all of us at this time &, by implication, all times. I would think too that the idea of “mind” in “Separation Meditations” (although the pick-up is from Epictetus) leads, as much as anything I’ve ever done, to some kind of a “primordial religious experience”:

\*I WOULD RATHER BELIEVE ALL THE FABLES OF  
THE LEGEND THE TALMUD AND THE ALCORAN  
THAN THAT THIS UNIVERSAL FRAME IS  
WITHOUT A MIND

— at least one of the possibilities *in illo tempore*.

Maybe it’s going too far to say that the talking poems are an act-of-faith in that “mind,” but in a sense they are: an extreme, almost absurd insistence on the presence of *poesis* at the very heart of discourse. I don’t know if he proves it there (probably we never “prove” that much), but I read the talking poems as his side of the dialogue between us in that “dreamers” poem I sent you. In it I’m arguing the uses of the word “imagination” to designate the fundamental “process” (I take it this is what he likes to call a strategy), & I say about the “gods” or “powers” in the old religions:

they would appear in words  
our language hides them  
even now  
the action of the poem brings them to light

dear David  
not in the business man's  
imagination  
but asking  
"who is Beaver?"  
forces them out of the one mind  
to surface in our tongues  
in mything  
mouthing the grains of language

which I trust is not irreconcilable or totally without regard for "history."

The point, anyway, is that if you take him through his full career (not just the present contrast between "talking" & almost anybody else's "reading" stance), you find he's not as one-sided as in your earlier description. And I think that similar qualifications would hold for my own work as it's gone along. At least I assume that I'm present — in *Poland/1931*, say — as an individual mediating history (not only *in illo tempore*, but as a single focus into many times), & that what I assert in relation to the past in *Technicians* & those other books, doesn't annihilate history but tries to extend it. Or if you feel less of an individual presence in the Indian workings, & so on, you would have to measure that against Antin's use of found poetry, say, before putting us into separate niches. In the same way, attempts by others to make me out as "hot" & Antin as "cool" (but just consider his playing with affect in "Definitions for Mendy" or "Is This the Right Place?" & my retreat from it in "Further Sightings" or "A Steinbook") seem pretty arbitrary — as does Kathy Frazer's introduction to our reading that led to Antin's "What Am I Doing Here?": her attempt to distinguish us by orientations, respectively, to "past" & "future." But I think that disregards our point of meeting in the "present" — the point of our meeting, I could almost say, in which the common strategy has always been to baffle expectations.

**Spanos:** There's no question that the attempt to emphasize the prophetic, the visionary, dimensions of the oral tradition in behalf of recovering the sacredness — "the underlying relatedness of all life," as you and Quasha put it in the introduction to *America A Prophecy* — is an important and necessary one. This is made dramatically clear when it's seen in the light of the dehumanized — to say nothing of desecralized mentality that has made Vietnam, the Watergate, the exile of Solzhenitsyn, the representative history of modern "civilized" life. On the other hand — as it should by now be obvious — I'm uneasy about the accompanying commitment to a poetry of collage that is insistently committed to a *synchronic* sense of time, which to me implies a desire to abolish history or at any rate the consciousness of man's historicity. Let me quote in full the passage where Eliade talks about modern writers' "nostalgia for the myth of eternal

repetition and, in the last analysis, for the abolition of time." For it strikes me as remarkably prophetic in the light of the emergence of this enormous interest in the oral "primitive" tradition and its uses for contemporary poetry:

Some pages earlier, we noted various recent orientations that tend to reconfer value upon the myth of cyclical periodicity, even the myth of eternal return. These orientations disregard not only historicism but even history as such. We believe we are justified in seeing in them, rather than a resistance to history, a revolt against historical *time*, an attempt to restore this historical time, freighted as it is with human experience, to a place in the time that is cosmic, cyclical, and infinite. . . . There is also reason to foresee that, as the terror of history grows worse, as existence becomes more and more precarious because of history, the positions of historicism will increasingly lose in prestige. And, at a moment when history could do what neither the cosmos, nor man, nor chance have yet succeeded in doing — that is, wipe out the human race in its entirety — it may be that we are witnessing a desperate attempt to prohibit the "events of history" through a reintegration of human societies within the horizon (artificial, because decreed) of archetypes and their repetition. In other words, it is not inadmissible to think of an epoch, and an epoch not too far distant, when humanity, to ensure its survival, will find itself reduced to desisting from any further "making" of history in the sense in which it began to make it from the creation of the first empires, will confine itself to repeating prescribed archetypal gestures, and will strive to forget, as meaningless and dangerous, any spontaneous gesture which might entail "historical" consequences. It would even be interesting to compare the anhistorical solution of future societies with the paradisaical or eschatological myths of the golden age of the beginning or the end of the world.

Eliade's point of view here is, more or less, neutrally empirical (though phrases like "artificial, because decreed" give away at least his doubts as to the possibility of recovering *that time*). I quote the passage because it points specifically to what makes me uneasy about the contemporary attempt to, how shall I put it, "retribalize" poetry. How would you



respond to the charge that the primitive-oriented oral poetic you're emphasizing in your work disregards the imperatives of human historicity?

**Rothenberg:** I assume that Eliade is working off the Christian distinction between "time" & "eternity" (a proposition I find meaningless) & referring to poets like Eliot who had a stake in that. In terms of my own contemporaries, I don't have a real sense of a move to "abolish" or "prohibit" history, & I certainly don't see it as inevitable to the proposals mentioned in your question. Obviously one can make "dream-time" & "history" into an either/or situation, but that would be a result of categorical thinking & not a real response to it. A basic thrust of my own work (since I assume your challenge is directed to that) has been to re-explore the past on the basis of information that has become available to us since the 19th Century. In doing this, I've felt my "consciousness of our historicity" increased rather than diminished. And I don't understand how a "view of history" that clings to a limited, linear image of the past along Hellenic-Hebraic, western, even Indo-European lines can be said to be historically oriented in contrast to the "view of history" I've been offering.

The question, then, is who in fact has the desire to "prohibit" history? Who is so terrified by the rise of new forces in our world & the increased "freight of human experience" that, against all the facts & the new knowledge coming to light, they cling to a myth of European hegemony, & so on? (Here the connection between the "making of history" & "the creation of the first empires" makes me wonder if the decline of the most recent of these isn't the unstated issue behind the desire to make time stop.) And why does an emphasis on "the prophetic, the visionary . . . the underlying relatedness of all life" (in part made possible by a new historic & evolutionary consciousness) seem to be in conflict with a sense of history as something "lived" & "made"?

This is the first occasion when I've felt compelled to answer question with question, because I'm astonished that an enterprise which seems to me not only "important & necessary" but (in its emphasis on the "relatedness of life") empirical as well, is taken as a sign of an escape from history &, by implication, from reality. I'm not saying that the methods proposed (collage & synchronicity & so on) may not be inadequate or inappropriate, but the thrust of your question seems more basic than that. And if it is, it seems to me that you're making it in spite of the fact that so much of our poetry (& the ideology behind it) represents a unique attempt (by those like Pound & Olson, but also the Surrealists, say, who learned from Marx as well as Freud) to make a poetry "including history": the re-introduction of empiricism into the center of our poems for the first time in how many centuries!

What I've spoken of so far involves history as a record of the past — by now a much expanded record — & there I don't really see a problem.

But the idea of history as a process, like the idea of what time itself is, has also changed so much in this century, that the actual nostalgia seems to occur in clinging to the older linear model, feeling that if that goes, history itself goes — whatever that may mean. So, I see the process in time as non-linear & multichronic (including but not dominated by dream-time), though synchronic & simultaneous in consciousness: i.e., the mind bringing together a large number of elements from culturally & spatially separated chronologies. That's a way to deal with time, as cubism dealt with a multiplicity of spatial perspectives without, I think, denying roundedness. The idea has been to intensify our present consciousness — our sense of past & future not as distant & ourselves as alienated, but as open to our immediate & useful apprehension.

I can hardly understand what it is to be ahistorical, so I likely miss it in the work of others. But I listen carefully to an anthropologist & social historian like Stanley Diamond, who has been sympathetic to our work & tells us:

Human consciousness is historical; in order to understand ourselves, to heal ourselves, in this age of abstract horror, we must regain the sense of the totality and the immediacy of human experience. In order to determine where we are, we must learn, syllable by syllable, where we have been. The sense of history is, for society in crisis, what relentless self-searching, psychoanalytic or otherwise, is for the individual in crisis, that is, it can be releasing and enriching, cathartic and creative; it may be the only thing that can save our lives. History implies exhortation, because it is confession, failure and triumph. It is the measure of our capacity, the link between man and man, the key to ourselves.

Or when Pound writes that "*all* ages are contemporaneous *in the mind*," I take that as having been a useful start & underline the first word & the last three words as crucial. The danger may not be with the poets at all — may come in fact from those historians who try to reify the past, to keep it separate, since that may in itself be an evasion. I don't see that the poet's proposition (of bringing history — the past & future — into presence) evades the issue but lives it out.

**Spanos:** Clearly, the literature of the absurd, which has its source in the emergence of existentialism as something like a world view since World War II, is a "post-modern" (or at least "anti-modern") phenomenon, especially in its effort to create a literary form that, unlike the formalism of the symbolist art of, say, Mallarmé or Yeats, or Eliot, engages men on