

one level or another *in their history*. Given your primary interest in the visionary and magical potentialities of poetry, it might seem that the postmodern imagination or, at any rate, the postmodern literary scene, is characterized by a radical split between its impulse to enter history and to transcend history. Yet each has in common a total revolt against the causal and rigidly linear temporality (beginning, middle, and end) of the coercive positivistic imagination and the "totalitarian" technological city it has produced. Is the "postmodern" imagination in fact divided against itself? Or can you see some connection between such contemporary existentialists and absurdists as Sartre, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, Barth and Pynchon — who also, by the way, are obsessed by the question of language and, in some cases, are trying to recover the *Logos* as speech — and the postmodernism you're articulating in your poetry, theoretic statements, and your visionary editing?

Rothenberg: I think I've covered most of this already, but there are still some points I want to respond to or make clearer. The "world view" in question, if it's that, is more post-"symbolist" than it is post-"modernist," &, along with the "question of language" & "the LOGOS as speech," is a principle link between what you present here as disconnected movements. My own discomfort isn't with the "symbols" *per se* (though I read them as "images" & that makes quite a difference) but with that "symbolism" which substitutes interpretation for presentation: the kind of distinction that put the surrealists into conflict with the symbolists & the New Critics with the surrealists, & so on. The surrealist "image" is unmediated, its associations implicit & directly perceived, as in the experience of "dream," which was of course their model. In that sense I've always assumed a continuity between the surrealists & the absurdists — with someone like Kafka or Breton, say, in his collections of "black humor," as an intermediary figure. For the absurdists the idea of the absurd itself (like "dream" for the surrealists) serves as the great simplifying image, which allows for a direct presentation of conflicting impulses. This immediacy (which is also the issue in post-symbolist collage, in automatic writing, systematic chance, projective verse, objectivism, concrete & sound poetry, & so on) seems more central to me than the formalism/non-formalism you presume to see as marking the symbolist/anti-symbolist split. (I also see it as more critical than the "subjective"/"objective" splits within the post-symbolist scene, since those have generally been mediated by concepts like Olson's "proprioception" or Zukofsky's favoring of "the clear physical eye against the erring brain.") But I differ from you, remember, in that I think the move away from symbolism is characteristic of modern poetry from World War I to World War II, though not clearly articulated or divested of symbolist traces until the 1950s. (I wonder, if put this way, it doesn't give us more basis for agreement than we seem to have had before.)

So, the fundamental division, as I understand it, is along the axis described. I would emphasize that division by all means, while playing down (for the moment at least) the post-symbolist differences: not “a house divided against itself” but contemporaries working towards mutual completion. The model in my own case has been, increasingly, the so-called “primitive” or “ethnopoetic” — at least as the “myth of the primitive” has been developed over the last two centuries — & that myth, at least as I’ve gone at it, has been of an essentially non-symbolist situation, in which chance, concretism, vision, even the absurd, aren’t separate impulses but part of a larger “world-view.” If you read *Technicians* carefully (& don’t confuse me throughout with Eliade), you’ll see that I really don’t tend to symbolize in that, but as far as I can, by selection & arrangement, to present the poetry in immediately apprehensible terms. (Obviously, where I’m also quoting a range of earlier commentators, I can’t be really consistent — but then I’ve never taken consistency as a fundamental value.) And, to get back to what started off your question, I think I clearly imply, though I may not directly state, a connection or parallel between the “absurd,” say, & something like Malinowski’s “coefficient of weirdness” as part of the myth of primal consciousness & language. It is, let me say, central to my own thought & work — right up through *Poland* & *A Seneca Journal* — & I prize the old shamans & the oral poets as much for that as for the transcendental symbols, & so on, which to me are meaningless without it.

Spanos: I pointed earlier to a gradual shift from the oral to a visual context, from voice to eyes, from speaker to “see-er” in your response to my first question. And I have noted that this “visionary” emphasis — it is, it’s true, *only* an emphasis — has continued to hold more or less throughout our dialogue. But I begin, I think, from what you’ve been saying, to understand the relationship you’re trying to suggest in equating the eye with the *experience* of the I (and on a broader level, your commitment to a “poetry of changes” and your choice of an anthropologist like Stanley Diamond over someone like Mircea Eliade as your authority on the “primitive” mind). And, like you, I begin to glimpse agreement where there have been apparent differences. For the sake of clarification, however — even at the expense of some repetition — I’d like to invoke the emergent critique, especially among phenomenologists like Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (who also criticize the humanistic/linear view of history for evading history) of the supremacy of the eye over the other senses, especially the ear, in western civilization from Plato to Hegel and Kant, which, I think, can be applied to a poetry grounded in a similar “visual” prejudice. Sartre, following the distinctions Lessing makes in *Laocoön*, would say that this prejudice is virtually inherent in poetry as such (over against prose). But I am referring, above

all, to the Symbolist/Imagist poetry of the beginning of the century — which, as you have correctly inferred, is what I have meant all along by “Modernism.” I mean, more specifically, the “dehumanized” poetry, as Ortega puts it (with no pejorative connotations), that finds its essential model in the abstract plastic arts — in Cezanne (*Women Bathing*); Picasso (*Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)*); David Bomberg (*Ju-Jitsu, In the Hold*), Wyndham Lewis (*Eisteddfod, The Evening of the Stars*); Modigliani (*Madame Pompadour*); Jacob Epstein (*Fenite Carvings*); Gaudier-Brzeska (*Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound, The Red Star Dancer*); Brancusi (*Bird in Flight*) etc. — in its effort to transform temporal experience into timeless pictures or images (“epiphanies,” to use Joyce’s telling term) or, to put it in another way, tries to force language out of its natural (oral) orbit into an iconic mould capable of being seen all at once. Understood in terms of its impulse to see temporal events synchronically or, as Joseph Frank put it a long time ago, spatially, or, even better, in-clusively, the eye-oriented perspective on reality, whether of the philosopher or the poet, is essentially a coercive activity, the motive of which is to *shape* and thus to achieve aesthetic distance from or psychic repose in the shapelessness of experience. To quote Wilhelm Worringer, the German art historian whose account of the “primitive” will to art — the art outside the western humanistic-empathic tradition (African, Egyptian, Cycladic, Byzantine, Oriental, etc.) — influenced T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and through these, modernism at large, in a fundamental way, the first maxim of the eye-oriented imagination “is the forcible accommodation of [existence, i.e., temporal flux] to the framework of cubic forms”:

Tormented by the entangled inter-relationship and flux of the phenomena of the outer world, such peoples [in primitive societies] were dominated by an immense need for tranquillity. The happiness they sought from art did not consist in the possibility of projecting themselves into the things of the outer world, of enjoying themselves in them, but in the possibility of taking the individual thing of the external world out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, of eternalizing it by approximation to abstract forms and, in this manner, of finding a point of tranquillity and a refuge from appearances. Their most powerful urge was, so to speak, to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e., of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its *absolute* value.

As such the visual or visionary (I want to distinguish a phenomenological understanding of "visual" from McLuhan's restriction of the term to the post-Renaissance print culture) impulse to take the whole into the eye at once militates against a radically oral poetic, that is, a language conceived as speech, the act of an instant. Anxious about "the flux of the phenomena of the outer world" (the existential phenomenologists would call it the Nothingness of temporal existence), it sees from the or an end (*telos*) and in doing so tends to negate the openness, the primordial orality of language, i.e., language as speech act. In thus refusing to let being be (a failure of Negative Capability), the eye-dominated poet, to adapt from Sartre — and to put it in extreme terms — becomes a Medusa, whose terrible eye turns vital process, the temporality of experience, and the language that expresses it, into stone.

The phenomenologists, too, want to "return" to the object (Husserl's version of Williams' "no ideas but in things" is "*Zu den Sachen selbst*"), but what is dis-closed by way of the phenomenological reduction and the return to origins is *primarily* the *Lebenswelt*, which, as Heidegger and, perhaps, Merleau-Ponty interpret it, means temporal existence (Being-in-the-world) *and* the ontological priority of speech — and the ear — over writing (literal if not symbolic, expression) and the eye, not only historically but within the particular poem itself.

It's pretty clear from your acknowledgement of contradiction, of the "particulars of immediate experience," your continuing commitment to "making it new" — from your last remarks in general — that the kinds of poetry you include in your definition of an alternative "tradition" neither have their source in an effort to transcend the real world, "to arrest and raise the mind above desire and loathing" as Stephen Dedalus calls the kinetic realm of historicity, nor do they take any obvious form of object-ivization. On the other hand, one could conclude, if he did not pay careful attention, from much that you have said about poetry and the tradition (i.e., the centrality of myth, which may be defined as a "world picture" or "world mosaic," that *places* and thus neutralizes contingency) and from the way you say it (i.e., the powerful — and astonishing — assimilative or analogical quality of your argument or, perhaps better, the inclusive impulse of your imagination) that, in spite of your commitment to a poetic *tradition* of "changes," you tend to conceive the particular poem (and the history of poetic utterance) in spatial terms, so that the word "oral" does not preclude closed or pre-determined forms. Can I go back once more to that identification of "eye" with "I" to ask you to amplify, in the context of this phenomenological critique of Symbolist/Imagist modernism (if not of Modernism at large), on your understanding of the relationship between oral poetry and your visual (or visionary) emphasis? In other words, how would you distinguish between the iconic or spatial poem of the Symbolist/Imagist tradition (as I've defined it) and the "oral" poem envisioned in your definition of the alternative tradition?

Rothenberg: This reminds me of one of those hypothetical questions as to which of our senses we would rather do without. I always assume I'm not being prodded towards an actual deprivation, but in the present instance I'm not all that sure. I don't know, anyway, if I can make more than scattered comments in response.

(1) In a truly oral culture (which is not what ours is), there are no mute poets & probably no deaf poets. In some cultures there have been *blind* poets, including some deliberately blinded. But it isn't clear whether this was to intensify the other senses (or speech & memory) or to turn sight inward. (Maybe it was to keep the poets from running off.)

(2) Yet you quote Worringer stressing a primitivity related to the "eye-oriented imagination" of "modernism" & seem, at the same time, to endorse a concept of the "primitive" or "primordial" defined by its "orality." I assume you're favoring the second view, while I favor neither or both.

(3) For myself I think, in spite of the blind Homers, that eye-orientation isn't western but human — back even to the earliest primates, when the muzzle shrank & the eyes moved forward in the skull. The consequent adjustment of the brain towards vision made of puny man a hunter & a seer. It "defined" thought & imagination (imaging) just as speech "defined" poetry. But not so neatly either: the two, I mean, aren't separated in real life, & in any sane society would be thought of as inseparable. (If you'll look at that neat phrase in your last sentence — "the 'oral' poem envisioned" — you'll see that your own language allows the possibility of saying what I mean.)

(4) Blake, as a "prophet" of the new poetry, called for an opening of *all* the senses; at the same time he demanded a freeing of speech & verse ("Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race!") & developed it further in practice. I see this as a totalization of energy: anything less already represents a form of entropy.

(5) But assuming, as you seem to, that "visual" & "oral" involve a contradiction, it may be just that contradiction which is the basis of the tension that informs our poetry. This tension, as you describe it further, is between "repose" & "flux" — both of which, to borrow again from Blake, "are necessary to human existence." As a poet I can sustain such contradictions; in prose I'm helpless to conclude the conversation.

(6) To force a choice, one way or the other, where contradiction is irreducible, would be the intention of thought devoid of dialectic. This, it seems to me, is the real issue, in poetry as elsewhere. I would, anyway, be very careful about disposing of "modernists" or "post-modernists" because they seem at any point to be favoring the "wrong" side of the

dialectic. (Do dialectics have wrong sides?) If you do that, you end up with very little, earlier in the century or now.

(7) But to get to specific cases: I'm concerned, e.g., about the too easy linkage of "symbolism" & "imagism," as if to ignore the latter's attack on the former or that one of its key proposals (at least in Pound's or Williams' formulation) was to restore speech as the poetic ground. (What poet was into that restoration who wasn't also identifying as a "modernist"?) As with the painters you mention, there are some complex figures operative here, i.e., who were exploring, working, several ways at once. And while I hate to keep saying it, the clincher for me is still how often the "visual" & "oral" openings appear in the work of the same individual — from Blake or Whitman to the very present. The articulation of that is unprecedented, except back to the oral/visionary cultures.

So I have no doubt, e.g., that Pound, as he emerges from the 19th century, carries some of the symbolist baggage with him. But the idea of *image* (as "direct treatment of the 'thing' " or "an intellectual/emotional complex in an instant of time" or "vortex") is, along with the other dicta of his "imagism(e)," already away from "symbolism" & towards "a language conceived as speech, the act of an instant." (I assume that one who speaks that language isn't sightless.) Or, to cite a further inconsistency: if Stein is an early modernist concerned with the "act of the instant" (& she is with her "continuous present," & so on), she is also the one most into a "cubist" poetics. What's attractive in fact is just that double concern — for "flux" & "timeless picture" — whether in her *Four Saints*, say, or in most of those other Cubist works you mention. And Stein, our one great "cubist" poet, is the direct American predecessor to many of the poets you identify as *post-Modernists* (Antin, Cage, Mac Low, & so on), just as Pound is to most of the others.

If we're going to be empirical & into history, we might as well indulge a little rage for chaos — at least that nothing in the real world is that tidy. And right there is my argument with post-modernism as a discrete category: that without a sense of continuities (from such as Pound & Stein & so on) the "break" from modernism may itself be exploited against the post-Modernists you name. So it's not that we aren't done with symbolism — unless we find some other use for it — but that the effort to divide speech & sight on our behalf is a further instance of that literal or linear thinking that has always sold us short. The paradigm, in other words, remains totalization, which means in our time that no single-aspect art can have more than a few years' currency, unless it's seen within the larger framework.

(8) A poetry of changes is a poetry of contradictions, i.e. of the dialectical imagination, perspective by incongruity, & so on. The world in which we live lies between formlessness & form: it shapes itself at each pass we make, & we who are changing as well are called on again & again

to remake it. The variety of our ways (& the recognition of the will to change) defines our modernism — our living in this time. And hopefully as we go on, we can accelerate the process rather than repeat what will become more & more rigid pictures of the real. Certainly the grubbiness of contingency has been more appealing to later than to early modernism — has, in my view of it, kept us more honestly human. However that may be, we're now able to draw from predecessors confronted by the same necessities. These include earlier modernists & "primitives," along with a range of other human beings, poets of all times & places, who remind us that we're neither the first poets nor will we be the last.

Spanos: I have, indeed, been favoring a concept of the "primitive" or "primordial" defined by its "orality," but *not* because I prefer blind poets with ears to earless poets with eyes. I certainly do not *disagree* with your last remarks stemming from Blake's call for an opening of *all* the senses. My emphasis on the voice/ear — like McLuhan's as well as the phenomenologists', — has its source in my desire to recover the vitality of the "vulgar" senses narcotized by the primacy of the "spiritual" eye throughout the history of Western civilization. So I think our disagreement is more a matter of emphasis than of substance. There's nothing radical about it.

Anyway, I don't want to end without asking you at least one question specifically about your own poetry, which I like very much. As a matter of fact, for me at least, the "Poland" poems you read at the *boundary 2* reading at Binghamton in the winter of 1972 were the highlight of a great oral performance. These poems are clearly in the oral tradition, but they don't adhere in any strict sense — either in the sound of the line or in what the line contains — to your broad theoretical commitments. What, as you see it, is the formal relationship between the "primitive" oral impulse and the poems of your latest volume of the Poland poems — *Esther K. Comes to America*, which, as the allusion to Kafka in the title suggests, is the work of a very acutely "civilized," i.e., sardonic, if also prophetic and meditative, consciousness:

the contradictions were almost a relief
for some for you the clock kept spinning
wheels hummed in the tower
everything ran by electricity & worried you
nickels & dimes sparked into life they bounced
off counters into your cuffs now you were always bending
looking at your shoes would even stick chewing gum
on broomsticks sought lost gold down manholes
from there you took the steamer
to Alaska trudged endless miles from Fairbanks
with your Yukon love howling you wore a derby

suspenders pulled your pants up to your chest
& left you gasping visions from last year's snowstorms
filled your eyes & mind with gold
gold were your watch & chain your teeth were gold
you walked on a gold carpet America was gold to you
a gold boat drifted on a lake of gold
in the cabin gold men sat around a table
their smiles were gold & frozen like the gold fly
halfway between the ceiling & the floor
suspended in your dream of gold
becomes a gold pin for your tie the golden girl clips off
will let you stroke a gold tit in return
she smiles for the demonic newsmen
flashbulbs shatter the limits of your wakefulness
at midday in forfeit of all love

Rothenberg: If the last sentence of your question is accurate, then you've answered it for me: i.e., the poem has brought together, fused, the diffuse input in a single structure. I don't know if that "works" – I certainly have to keep the process going – but I hope the breaks aren't too visible: that the collage, as it develops, doesn't keep the fragments separate but joins them, makes a "good tight fit." Or to paraphrase what a hasidic rabbi said of prayer: POETRY IS COPULATION WITH THE SHEKINAH.

It seems to me that you're setting up a number of mutually exclusive categories & expecting me to honor them as such. But that confuses who we are & where we come from – thus what image-of-the-world we carry. Like you I come out of this "civilization" & will never come out of any other. I have a certain stance, a certain turn-of-mind, & while I have an urge to simplify or not to symbolize, & so on, that stance or turn is complex & I think it's irreducible. But so is any turn-of-mind in any culture – not least of all in those tribal/oral cultures marked, as Radin tells us, by a strong sense of realism ("reality at white heat"), or Diamond "(by) modes of thinking (that) are substantially concrete, existential and nominalistic, within a personalistic context" & supremely able to "sustain contradictions." So I would hope, as a poet, to be able still to use my full powers – & as long as I do that, I can't "adhere in any *strict* sense" to anybody else's sense of boundaries.

Spanos: You've been living in Salamanca, N.Y. on the reservation of the Seneca nation for quite some time now. What kind of effect has your research in such close proximity to the life of the Senecas had on your recent thinking about your own poetry?

Rothenberg: It wasn't "research," you understand – or nothing like that since early along (1966 or 1968, say) when I wasn't living there but going

up to do “experiments” in translation & so on. The last two years (June 1972 until just recently), we lived in Salamanca out of choice, & I responded to the human &, in some sense, the *natural* possibilities, not only in relation to the Senecas but to the resident Whites as well. It was a very special *place*, & I was turned on to that also: the first time that not just “people” or “ethnos” but “place” & “city” got into my work. I mean by that the *actual* place & the *actual* people, who aren’t simply story-book romantic Indians & so on. The reservation, if you’ve ever passed through it, doesn’t look that way at all: tract homes in fact since the old houses were burnt down to make way for the Kinzua Dam. The town is an old railroad town & mostly White, & the Senecas themselves are working class, subsist by that & not by hunting or agriculture. So we aren’t as far apart as you might think, because we’re all in some way, to some degree, exiled from the *ancestors*. We’re all trying to keep a hold on history, to know ourselves *in time* — & in the longhouse, people still sit & ponder the meaning of this or that event: who are the “uncles,” the men in the bear robes? or why is the rifle fired in the air? or how was it that the dish game came to be played at the end of Midwinter? But old traits, however otherwise weakened, do remain. People are in fact sensitive to animals & to growing things, but so are many of my friends from elsewhere — for all the inconsistencies.

So, it’s a good place to think about all that, to locate from another direction what has long been on my mind:

ethology the visions
of McClure & Chomsky all
the speakers of deep tongues point
a route this generation
will be privileged to assume
a universal speech
in which the kingdoms of the world
are one

as the first poem from there had it: & to let the “torsion,” as Quasha likes to call it, enter in & push me to a sense of being

exiled in Salamanca
& driven mad by
Image of the Temple —

or to swoop at a synthesis & wonder if I even want it:

(1)
a city on
a turtle’s back

a longhouse
/
was like Jerusalem
's temple resting
on a whale

(2)

impossible to bring it all
together.

But as a local friend said, Didn't the poem just do that?

Spanos: That word "together" really says it all, doesn't it?

