

THE LANGUAGE HE OWNS: A Few Notes on Jerome Rothenberg, on his 80th Birthday

For myself I was after all the son of European parents – to put it that way – and was coming into poetry in a New York City multilingual/multicultural context. I remember in fact an early conversation with Donald Allen, who edited the great anthology of that name (“*The New AMERICAN Poetry*”) and who pegged me then as belonging to something he called “the international school of poetry.” I was uncomfortable with that to start with and then I got to like it.

Mark Weiss: An interview with Jerome Rothenberg

<http://www.kaurab.com/english/interviews/index.html>

I once introduced my good friend the Cuban poet José Kozer at a reading. After the usual brief bio and critical commentary I ceded the podium to José, who thanked me for my generous words. “Of course,” he added, “you got a few things wrong,” and launched into five minutes of correction. A claiming of turf, a way of saying “Nobody owns me.”

This to illustrate the awkwardness of talking about a friend's work when he's in the room. And it's difficult not to repeat what Jerry himself has said, during sixty years of reflecting on his craft—he's the most self-aware of poets. But it's clear that nobody owns Jerry: he's at once too consistent and too various, and his voice is already present in the earliest work of his we have, written before his 17th birthday.

Memory Number 1, Market Place (a beautiful short story)

She take me along. Gar mamma I hear me I cry: where way we are going?

Ho she is laugh laugh laugh. You now you are to see the world. Gar mamma I say what is world? what (gar mamma) is world?

She take me along. She me not tell of this thing: world. Are young too young she doubtless are think.

I were young by lot I guess when she are take me along.

She are doubtless think that.

I are run along in back of the head of her. She me not see I are think. Are laughing am I. Ha and ha and ha for long time for I are as before I was. I are now young.

We are go in bigger than where I are sleep in dark room with bunches of people who are walk in ones and threes all around. Gar. I are see food in benches like they am there sit. Me guess that the eyes of me are pop doubtless out from the head of myself as I are look at this thing. Gar doubtless.

She take me the hand (my child she say) and me she drag and at what bench she like she buy or this or that or if not she like she spit (pfeh) and not she buy.

Ho and I are laugh laugh laugh. My heart of my body he are so happy he are jump with joy of so happy to be.

Gar mama I hear me to her I say. Am happy happy ha ha ha. She are say: good.

We then (in order) we are return to street to sun to sky with white of cloud like pussy tail. Oh I are smell the air of lovely street. The air is smell so lovely.

I know I are in love though doubtless young. Gar I say I are in love mamma I are in love. Ha ha ha.

Ho she is laugh laugh laugh. Are you with what in love to be?

Ha I are smile smile smile. I are in love with sun and sky and also cloud like fluffy pussy tail I are in love. I are in love to smell how good are smell the smell of these I are in love with.

Gar I are cry Gar oh gar oh gar. I are in love though doubtless young.

She take my hand of me and hold it strong. I see she are in laughing.

I think I are laugh also for the mouth of me it are in smile.

From *Retrievals: Uncollected & New Poems 1955-2010* (Junction Press 2011, junctionpress.com)

Even then Jerry was experimenting with language, here inventing his own dialect, a sort of ethnopoetic action in the ether.

Dialect, and the play of language, must have come naturally to Jerry. Raised in a bilingual household and on the polyglot streets of New York, he would develop a fluid, inclusive, evolving demotic, the influence of source languages rebalancing over time. As he informs us in the recent interview cited above (and which I will cite again), “My first language was Yiddish—a monolingual speaker to the age of three or four, and that was probably the *duende*, in Federico Garcia Lorca’s terms, the force of language that I later came to struggle with or through. (Or possibly—Lorca again—my *angel*.)”

We tend to think of dialect as the idiom of a class or district within a larger unit. At one level it’s a political definition. We have recently seen the elevation of what were always considered dialects—Bosnian, Croatian—to national idioms. As the great yiddishist and linguist Max Weinreich put it, “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” But dialects, or maybe subdialects, what have you, are more intimate still. Every family has its own, and every individual. Jerry’s is its own mixture, the language he owns. Here, from “Cokboy”:

saddlesore I came
a jew among
the indians
vot em I doink in dis strange place
mit deez pipple mit strange eyes
could be it’s trouble
could be could be
(he says) a shadow
ariseth from his buckwheat
has tomahawk in hand
shadow of an axe inside his right eye
of a fountain pen inside his left
vot em I doink here

etc.

(from *Poland /1931*, 1974)

One can read three different dialects here. Or one can read a single dialect inflected by several influences, unselfconsciously trimming and retrimming its sails. And probably impossible to translate.

Dialect is the bane of translators, and I could tell dozens of stories about my travails and the travails of others—there’s a panel on the subject at almost every annual American Literary Translators Association meeting, and we get no closer to solving the problem. Here, for instance, closer to home—I was at Jerry and Diane’s when an email arrived from his Chinese translator. Everything was going fine, he said, “but I’m having a little difficulty with the Black dialect in ‘Cok Boy.’” Which led to musings about what a Black, as opposed to a Jewish, dialect could be in China, which has substantial minorities of neither.

We all carry within us versions of the speech identified with other groups in our linguistic environment, if only in the form they take in ethnic entertainment. I’m suggesting that we consider them a part of the repertoire we call our dialect.

The development of a spoken dialect that draws from multiple sources was common enough on the streets of the Bronx, and it emerged into writing with a degree of frequency. But there’s a key difference between the Yiddish-sourced dialect of the period and its contemporary Italian-inflected

dialect. Italians, then and now, could imagine refreshing their idiom with frequent trips to the homeland, as Mexicans and Dominicans do now, or as the Greeks that George Economou writes of, who would visit the homeland to return with a bride. For Jews a trip to the past became a placing of pebbles on gravestones. In its homeland the language, and the people who spoke it, had been eliminated. So Jewish immigrants, to use a Spanish word that's become a part of my own demotic, are *desterrados* in a way that most others aren't.

From that loss, that lack of an anchor, comes, I think, a part of the linguistic freedom I've been suggesting. And also an ease of movement, an expansion of one's definition of one's context and oneself within it, a literary and social mobility. In Jerry's case this happened with extraordinary speed in the late 50's and 60's of the last century, as he tells us in some detail in the interview cited above.

What emerged was an expansion of the context in which Jerry saw himself and poets at large, not, as is still usually the case, as part of the lineage of any one language or state, but in an international, multilingual republic of poetry—what Jerry has called “a paradise of poets”—that includes what we call the primitive, the performative and the non-verbal.

This is a moral and political stance.

I've never seriously thought of English as my second language, though in some sense I suppose it was. More to the point than that, if I read my own life correctly, the presence of another language probably fed an interest in what came to be called subaltern cultures by anthropologists and others – all that in the shadow of the racism, chauvinism, and ethnocentrism that was a part (and a threatening part at that) of the world in which I grew to self-awareness. In those years, before anthropology was challenged (wrongly or rightly) as itself a product of eurocentric colonialism, it appeared to many of us as an antidote, a remedy, as far as it went, for the neglect and scorn of the oppressed by those, wherever found, who reigned as their oppressors.

More than that it brought to light the order and complexity of that which the arguably civilized world had consigned to the lowest (“primitive”) orders of the human. And for me it brought up stores of poetry – largely oral works transcribed by outsiders, but showing modes of composition and performance that we had scarcely known before. Such texts – “myths and texts” in the nomenclature of those who first came on them – became manuals for me of a new ethnopoetics, a repository of forms of expression and thought long suppressed but rhyming with our present works and necessary now for our continued development as fully human creatures.

Note that there were other possibilities. I'm not suggesting that Jerry's origin predetermined the broad generosity of his stance. There were those from his own background who turned inwards, became parochial, saw themselves as a perpetually endangered remnant, and sought refuge in their Jewish identity and an irredentist zionism that still unfolds with catastrophic effect. Instead, in Jerry's work there's an insistence on the larger context—the world of peoples and cultures beyond the poem and beyond the world of poets, where our profoundest compassion lies, the world we inhabit and in which we are implicated.