

THE ANTHOLOGY AS A MANIFESTO  
& AS AN EPIC INCLUDING POETRY, OR THE GRADUAL  
MAKING OF *POEMS FOR THE MILLENNIUM*

Jerome Rothenberg  
University of California, San Diego

ABSTRACT

The author discusses the making of the anthology, *Poems for the Millennium*, or of “the anthology as an epic poem and/or a manifesto.” Both Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris were able to show too —if it needed showing— that multiculturalism and avantgardism were not incompatible but historically, though not inevitably, related.

KEY WORDS: American poetry, anthologies, *Poems for the Millennium*, *Technicians of the Sacred*.

RESUMEN

El autor analiza la construcción de la antología, *Poems for the Millennium*, o su consideración “de la antología como poema épico y/o manifiesto”. Los editores de esta antología, Jerome Rothenberg y Pierre Joris supieron mostrar —por si ello fuese necesario— que el multiculturalismo y el vanguardismo no eran incompatibles sino que estaban, aunque no de manera inevitable, históricamente relacionados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía americana, antologías, *Poems for the Millennium*, *Technicians of the Sacred*.

I would like to go back over my own relationship to anthologies & to contrast it to a general discomfort I have with anthologies as such, before entering into a discussion (however it falls out) of this anthology, *Poems for the Millennium*, or of “the anthology as an epic poem and/or a manifesto.” In 1979 I had done five anthologies, the most recent of which (*A Big Jewish Book*) had been published by Doubleday the year before. It was with relation to this that Charles Bernstein, who was then editing the important (poets’) journal of poetics, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, asked me to write a piece on my own work &/or “on anthologies.” I began it with a quote from Gertrude Stein about the new & the old, since the anthologies I had then made were a conjunction of modernist poems with ancient or culturally distant works of near-poetry that I wanted (in Robert Duncan’s words) to “bring into



their comparisons.” What Stein wrote (words that I’ve quoted a number of times since, as I have a way of doing with quotations) was: “As it is old it is new and as it is new it is old, but now we have come to be in our own way which is a completely different way.”

With that as epigraph, what I tried to do was to distinguish two, at least two, kinds of anthology (a point that seemed to me self evident): those that deceive me/us by a false sense of closure & authority, as over against those that I had hoped to do with regard to the past & those still more rare & useful ones that opened up & thereby changed the present. (Both of the latter I took, rightly or wrongly, as instances of a single impulse.) The canonical anthologies we all know as the —great conservatizing force in our literature(s), against which— as artists of an avant-garde —many of us have had to struggle. As gatherings of acceptable/accepted poets their conservatizing thrust is evident; as gatherings of contemporary poets it is to rein in or exclude those moves that challenge too overtly the boundaries of form & meaning or that call into question the boundaries (genre boundaries) of poetry itself.

The other possibility of anthologies is to use the form as a kind of manifesto-assemblage: to present, to bring to light, or to create works that have been excluded or that collectively present a challenge to the dominant system-makers or to the world at large. In my time the great American work of this kind was Donald Allen’s (1960) *New American Poetry* (replete with its appended section of poetic statements/manifestos), but also LaMonte Young & Jackson Mac Low’s *An Anthology* (as a manifesto of the 1950s/60s Fluxus movement) and Emmett Williams’ *Concrete Poetry* as a first summary & presentation of the movement of that name. Still earlier works were Pound’s *Imagiste* gathering & later *Active Anthology* or (better yet) Louis Zukofsky’s “Objectivists” anthology of the early 1930s (a prime example, that, of the construction of a movement through a book —& little else by way of publication).

From these I sensed the possibility of the anthology as (1) a manifesto; (2) a way of laying out an active poetics —by example & by commentary; & (3) a grand assemblage: a kind of art form in its own right. My first anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*, grew from premises (theory) within experimental modernism, rather than from critical authority situated outside it —what Tristan Tzara implies in his (1918) postmodern divergence, that “Dada is ... not a modern school ... [nor] a reaction against the schools of today ... [but] more in the nature of an almost Buddhist religion of indifference.” Beginning in that general area I was able to explore an open-ended range of deep cultures, of culturally embedded poetics & related language works, many of them subsumed as poetry by resemblance to contempo-

---

<sup>1</sup> In *Poems for the Millennium* such detournements extend to the overblown subtitle (*The University of California Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry*), the Board of Advisors (largely themselves experimental poets), the quasi-scholarly commentaries, & the various other accoutrements & paraphernalia of the *official* book.

rary work & in that comparison also opening the range & giving a new depth to the experimentally modern. So too I used the back of the book to include a section of commentaries that not only gave some ethnographic context to the traditional pieces but allowed the entry & comparison (for better or worse) of a number of more contemporary works (an early revival of Gertrude Stein & a mix of new & old voices, of the modern & the postmodern: André Breton, Diane Wakoski, Tristan Tzara, Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman, Allen Ginsberg, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Simon Ortiz, Hannah Weiner). This was of course the hidden (secret) heart of the collection, what made it (I hope) not a book of antiquities or orientalisms or primitivisms, but a manifesto for our time: each commentary a pointed statement of a way of poetry long overlooked.

All of the anthologies I've assembled since then —by myself or with others— have shared in this; or, to use a key word of the 1960s European Situationists, who helped so much in the development of a strikingly “appropriative” postmodernism, they have been a *detournement* (a turning or a twist) on the structures & presumptions of those fixed anthologies that continue (like the darkness) to surround us.<sup>1</sup> After claiming it as a right, I later found that I had gotten leverage to continue & to expand this work & (with Pierre Joris as a powerful co-worker) to construct an assemblage of the twentieth-century that would bring together (on a global scale) works entirely of this time that had been (the greater part of them at least) too often kept beyond the pale or, if present, had been kept from those comparisons, those co-existences that were so real to our generation of poets throughout the world. In that sense I would bow also to those many others who have been our companions, even forerunners in this attempt: cultural hunters & gatherers (or, simply, formal & experiential innovators), who recognized that the common work cut across boundaries; that alliances & strategies were international, intercultural, in scope; that it was possible to seek wholeness or completeness while knowing that we never would achieve it; that the explorations & discoveries of a new poetry & art were precisely what made the attempt at wholeness possible.

That work, which Pierre Joris and I called *Poems for the Millennium*, is now complete and its two volumes and 1600 pages (some twelve years in the making) are generally available. The first volume (“From Fin-de-siècle to Negritude”) covers the century up to the second world war and is the first such gathering to put the avant-gardes and movements of that time into a place of principal consideration. With that in mind we were able to devote whole sections to six of those movements (Futurism, Dada, Expressionism, Surrealism, the American “Objectivists”, and the African & Caribbean Negritude poets) and to draw on individual voices from a still wider range of languages and cultures. And we were able to show too —if it needed showing— that multiculturalism and avantgardism were not incompatible but historically, though not inevitably, related. Our last section, in that sense, was devoted to ethnopoetic explorations from throughout the century.

The gathering —in so far as it smacked of “anthology” in the ordinary sense— was replete with problematics & anxieties. This intensified of course with the second volume, which moved us into the (almost) present; moved us, literally, into a time & poetry in which we shared. The tough thing here —and we knew it



from the start— was that as an anthology (& I mean a largely contemporary anthology) it had to be a flawed book—a compendium of absences as well as presences; & we knew too that there was no way that it would not be read as an anthology in that sense. For me, though—and I’m sure this holds for Pierre as well—it was conceived, like other gatherings of mine or his, as something else: an assemblage or pulling together of poems & people & ideas about poetry (& much else) in the words of others and in our own words. That imago—that representation of where we’ve been and what we’ve lived thru—is something in fact that I would stand by—like any poem. (It’s also why we’ve allowed ourselves to end the book—as epic poem replete with histories & voices—with two poems of our own.)

What is missing from that gathering exists in the still greater gathering we carry with us—as a mental, a spiritual, construct. It is in this sense that every one of us has his or her anthology, that every one of us, given the opportunity, could bring it into some kind of form or structure in the outer world. At the end of a joint interview with Chris Funkhouser, following the publication of volume one, Pierre suggested that as far as future projects went, the two volumes were (for us at least) “the anthology to end all anthologies.” To which I added that the only anthology still left to do was “an anthology of everything.” In saying that I suppose there was an echo of Mallarmé’s intuition that “everything in the world exists in order to be put into a book.” By that measure, of course, Mallarmé continues to be a guardian angel for the work—one of those who led us into the domain of the impossible, which is really where we want to be.

