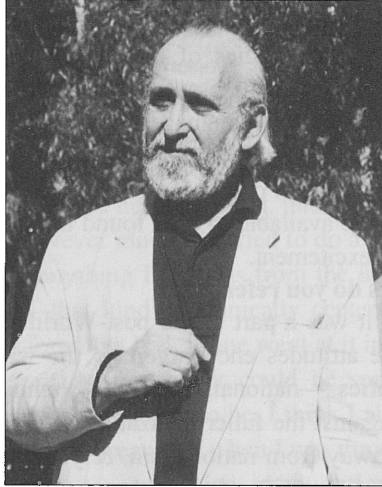


AN INTERVIEW WITH JEROME ROTHENBERG

Manuel Brito

Jerome Roghenberg is a major figure in modern American poetry. He has written many books of poems such as White Sun Black Sun, Between, The Gorky Poems, Poland/1931, Poems for the Game of Silence, and The Lorca Variations (1990). His most famous anthologies are Technicians of the Sacred, Shaking the Pumpkin, America a Prophecy, and A Big Jewish Book, and



more recently his New Selected Poems has been published by New Directions. He has also been the editor of Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics and of several other important literary magazines. He now teaches at the University of California in San Diego.

M.B. You seem a very complex poet. We can observe in your poetry a universe characterized by its relations with myth and history, and in *The Postmoderns*, edited by Donald Allen and George Butterick, you speak about your interest in a simultaneity of ages, places, discoveries, and witnessings that defines Man as a species.

J.R. Yeah, in that sense I think of myself, if the term still holds, as a *modern*, even a *modernist* poet, an experimental poet, and I don't think of that modernism, as it's sometimes given back to us by those outside it, as being, essentially, a process of disintegration, a poetic psychosis so to speak. My concern has been with a constructive or constructivist modernism that has opened up the possibility of going beyond ourselves as poets. If we start out by deconstructing (a term I'd like to borrow), I continue to have an optimistic view—that poetry isn't merely a record of our fragmentation as a species or our alienation, although that has to enter it too as part of the common experience. Rather, certain advances in our ideas of language or of what a poem is and can contain appear for our use, as sometimes similar & sometimes very different ideas did in the ambition of a Pound or of an Olson, say, to

find a way of constructing a new, large work as a kind of a comparatist poetics. I think of myself as really a very different poet from either of those two, & yet I have no trouble at this point to consider myself as sharing an idea of poetry, an overall sense of a new & still developing poetics with a great number of twentieth-century poets, from American & Europe & other places in the world. It seemed to me at an early point —& this is what led directly to the idea of an ethnopoetics— than an opportunity that was given to us as poets in a time of change was not only to create this new work out of whole cloth, to begin it strictly from ourselves, but to look as well to other cultures, other worlds that had been opened up to us by circumstances of imperialism, by new technologies of travel & communication, by the world becoming smaller, smaller in the process. It was our inheritance, our opportunity to be able to get a truer sense of how language has been used toward poetic ends in a wide range of cultures. So we now have the chance to see what poetry is, what it might come to be in the future, in part because the past—the idea of, the contents of the past—is more & more available to us. I found that realization, when it came to me, was a thing of great excitement.

M.B. Which years do you refer to?

J.R. Well, I think it was a part of the post-World War II awareness. It must have been one of those attitudes encouraged by the war, or in its aftermath. An attitude toward boundaries —national, cultural, & ethnic— that we found to be stultifying and acting against the fuller realization of what we were or could be. It pretty much pulled us away from nationalism, & yet it coincided with a period of intense American chauvinism, with a feeling that we had come at last & forever into the great American moment, that our art, poetry, music were suddenly thrust forward, were now a center of attention. The dominance of American power puts a lot of what we want as poets into doubt, in part because we enjoy playing that central role, although it blinds us, *even us*, to the greater human *being* that has opened up before us. So there's room there for both optimism & despair.

M.B. I think that this fact can be clearly seen in *A Big Jewish Book*, where you added some notes on the sources of selections and related materials. Is there an intent to be the man/poet who approaches wisdom and at the same searches for the discovery of origins?

J.R. But I would be careful not to connect the search for origins too closely with the *Jewish* book. The same search goes on in the other books, from *Technicians of the Sacred* on. And I have trouble with that other term as well—a mixed attitude shared with others toward what Olson called “wisdom as such”. He proposed himself to be against that in Duncan’s work, & I’m not sure if I share that attitude or not. But there’s definitely a concern all around with “origins”— like the fact that Cid Corman’s magazine which was so early into Olson & the rest was titled *Origin*. I want above all to be clear about the word “origin” as it relates to *A Big Jewish Book*, because given that title one can take it, in current American terms, as being a personal ethnic search for Jewish origins. To me that’s somewhat off the point. The



process that began for me with *Technicians of the Sacred* was a search for human origins, for the common and uncommon ground between the world's cultures, including very much those cultures that had been endangered in this time, this century. These were cultures that contained not only a tremendous amount of human wisdom *as such*, but very useful, very fruitful forms of human imagination, ways of structuring & restructuring reality through language. So what I had in front of me was the possibility of seeming to go backwards, to explore those things—those traditions, oral & other—as they may have developed in this or that culture. In *A Big Jewish Book* I chose specifically to focus on that complex of traditions—not a single tradition but a complex of traditions—that might come together under a single designating term like “Jewish”. Part of the attraction was that I could enter into it as a direct participant in a way that I couldn't, say, with the American Indian poetry. With the Native Americans there was always the sense of being the outsider looking in on it, you know, perhaps intruding on it, interfering with it, doing perhaps a certain amount of harm, however much one tried to do a little bit of good. With *A Big Jewish Book*, I felt that anything I did was from the inside. I also felt that the Jewish anthology as such—that kind of ethnically centered configuration—was itself a debased form, but a form that had, if one went at it in a total way, all sorts of lovely possibilities. It seemed to me that it could be something richer & more complex than it had previously been made to be. I think I also did it when I did out of a certain feeling of frustration. I regretted when I was through with *Technicians of the Sacred* that it had had no European section, although I wasn't about to launch a huge European anthology as a way of compensating. But since the fate of the Jews was so much tried into the history of Europe, since the Jews through diaspora had gone into so many places & adapted themselves to so many languages & cultures, it seemed to me that the resultant Jewish complexity reflected in its special way a larger world complexity. In this way, then, the Jewish book was a substitute for the large European anthology, & throughout I felt a real excitement in putting it together, in being able to discover examples of poetry that resembled but diverged sharply from what I knew as European—forms of poetry that I had previously not imagined to have existed. All kinds of language constructs, poems built on numerological principles, & so on, appeared to me through this investigation of Jewish poetry across the board. That's something I've continued to pursue—that there was a verbal/visual tradition, a sense of language & reality, that went very far back: the idea of language as an instrument in forming (as well as describing/mapping) the entire universe, the possibility of describing reality itself through the elemental or constituent forms of language, the relation that this assumes between the alphabet & the structure of the world as such. And I guess it's for this reason that Einstein's formulation $E = mc^2$ is presented in *A Big Jewish Book* as a kind of highly compressed poem...

M.B. ... But not only this conversion of Einstein's formulation into poetry. You say in the section, "Work of Creation", that "all numbers and all sounds converge".

J.R. The Einstein was my single scientific "example", seeing that as an act of poesis, & I certainly didn't want to belabor the point by including a whole series of such equations. Putting one such equation into that particular context (of language & reality: a universe of letters & of numbers) was enough. That sentence in "Work of Creation" relates more closely, anyway, to a *musical* concept of numbers (in terms of measure, a *poetic* one). At a certain point in human history, the same kind of imagination that was creating a mathematics was also creating—in formal terms—a music. So the relation between music & mathematics seems very close. In poetry, which also opens other avenues of meaning, there's an inherent music—of the metrics & the measure—in what was spoken of traditionally as "numbers". To write in numbers meant in English that you wrote in metered language, as when Alexander Pope, boasting of his ability as a small child, says: "I lisp'd in numbers ere the numbers came". And along with that there was of course a whole mysticism of sacred numbers, magic numbers, number symbolism. But I think what I was particularly interested in was how, in one line of the Jewish mystical tradition, letters & numbers converged, because the same symbols (the letters of the alphabet) were used for both. They were both the building blocks of the universe (a kind of mystical algebra) & a means for showing associations between words and phrases and utterances whose letters/numbers added up to the same sum. Those associations then were something to consider: to accept, reject, or simply meditate on. And I was really surprised to see how far they had taken it—and interested in my own way in how that related to what seemed to me to be similar experiments in contemporary poetry, as in the work, notably, of artist-poets like Kurt Schwitters.

M.B. Also we can observe that you speak about a movement that goes from myth through history to language and poetics per se and that you work by analogy with contemporary forms of poetry and art.

J.R. Well, I found that early in the twentieth-century there were a number of very interesting painters who were simultaneously writing poetry. That itself was of considerable interest. Schwitters for me may be the most outstanding of them, and Hans Arp the most accomplished. There's also very interesting poetry by Paul Klee, theatrical experimentation by Kandinsky, and a lot of back & forth movement in general between the poets & the painters. I've always found it curious how many poets have secret ambitions to be painters or painters to make poetry or to recognize an essential poetics in their approach to what they do as artists. So at certain points there has been a kind of unifying concept—of "art" as something bringing all these forms, approaches, mediums together. There is that which we have in common & that lets us learn about poetry from these artists' practice, not just with words as such but with colors, shapes, & visual forms. Some people are turned off by the big unifying movements of the early twentieth-century but I find a lot of kinship with

them all along the line. Again, it was very interesting to me how much of the past began to open up & change through what I took to be an intense concern with how things were being done in the present —how much of the past in fact had opened up already for those predecessors. I think that if you work intensely in the present, it allows, even compels, an intense reconsideration of the past. Where the present idea of the poem changes sufficiently, then looking backwards at things that have been passed over, dismissed as not being poetry, shows them clearly as poetry, as very interesting, germinal poetry from which we can then learn in our attempts to create something like it in the present. The most obvious example, or the one at least to which I'm always referring, is the sound poem, the experiments by twentieth-century European & American poets to create a poetry without words. With that in mind it was possible to look back at the past —or to look at cultures very different from ours in the present— & to find in them songs, chants, structures that resembled language works but had no recognizable words in them. In other words, a poetry without words had existed, traditionnally, different times & places: magic formulas from the old Greeks & Hebrews, from Russian peasant cultures & many others, throughout the Indian Americas, & so on. Not simply a modernist invention, then, a Dadaist joke, but a part of a common human inheritance. I don't know if that's the best or only way to view the past, but the impulse is there & very strong: to get past innovation for its own sake, or to let it link us to our origins as human beings *everywhere*.

M.B. Is this related to the ambitious approaches you have been involved in —“deep image”, “ethnopoetics”, “total translation”, “poetics of performance”? Eshleman himself says that to read poets such as Olson, Duncan, Mac Low, Spicer, or you is more climbing a mountain than going to church.

J.R. I think what Eshleman is driving at is something I would suscribe to. The ambition of poetry in all of these cases is to go beyond literature, to go beyond what is narrowly described as poetry, to see it as part of common mental & imaginal, even physical activity. The way the world —the mental, intellectual world— was divided up into units, compartments of academic studies —philosophy, history, art, & poetry, & so on— had a way of narrowing all those (call them) projects. And I think that at a certain point the effects on the making of poetry were disastrous. Poetry became too restricted in its possibilities. With predecessors like Blake & Whitman I find that it already begins to break open, to allow the poem to become involved with that whole range of human activities that the ambition you were speaking about clearly implies. I don't know if that creates a necessarily more difficult poetry in the process or that Eshleman has that in mind with the image of climbing the mountain. I think he means too that when you go into a church you have a fixed notion of what you're going to find, because the activity & ritual are so prescribed that everything that happens there is pretty much expected. By contrast the adventure of the mountain is that it takes one into new & possibly enchanted territory: wild & without borders. So

it's part of what we carry over from Romanticism: poetry as an act of discovery rather than a reiteration of what was always known to our *common* sense. Probably my own poetry, if it's what Eshleman says it is, seems to be more difficult than the poetry which simply explores immediate experience, although some very good things have come out of that too, so that if functions even now as a basis for most of our poetics. It hasn't been my practice to deny the poetry of the immediate or the experiential, but I'm not satisfied to let it go at that. I would try in my own way to open to those other possibilities —to question what we get both from experiences & from tradition.

M.B. In this sense are you interested in the reader in some way?

J.R. I think of myself as trying to be generous toward those who are reading my poetry or listening to it. I remember, when I was first working on *Technicians of the Sacred*, Louis Zukofsky questioned me about the large number of explanations I was putting into the book: those commentaries & so on that come in at the end. He said, "Maybe it's not necessary to explain that much", but I've always had an impulse to explain. I have a reluctance, like Zukofsky & others, to put the explanation right in the poem, to crowd the poem itself with explanations. But then it seems to me, because I do want that interplay with the reader, that there must be other ways of allowing the reader an entry into areas of the poem, to points of reference that seem perfectly clear to me but may not be clear to them. What Dada is, what hasidism is: all simple surface matters. So when I did, say, a book like *That Dada Strain*, I tried with a short introduction to provide just a little bit of context, although I knew that for some, maybe most of my readers it was probably unnecessary. And I tried to pitch it not so much as explanation but as statement, letting some context come through in the course of it. Certainly it's something most of us do when we're giving poetry readings —that kind of poetry reading which is in part a lecture, a talking about & around one's poetry before one reads it. A poet like Olson would invest a lot of time in talking between poems, so that finally a poet like David Antin can come along & make the talk itself into a kind of poem. An then a lot of poets who most interest me have written a great deal *about* their poetry, their ideas of poetry at large, & the poetics that emerge from that kind of situation are the ones that I find of greatest value. Those make up the basic poetics that I read: the poetics of Pound, Breton, or Lorca, people who have written about it from the point of view of the practitioners. But about any particular poem what might be said about it or around it is what might otherwise be known if we still had a shared mythology, those things that might be held in common by a culture with a single body of tradition. Such a poem can be condensed, compact, because it carries all that knowledge that doesn't have to be expressed directly. As someone from one of those old cultures says (I'm paraphrasing from *Technicians*): "The poem says so little because we know so much". A lot of contemporary poetry carries that idea along as a kind of fiction —as if we really knew these things together.

M.B. Which are the main theoretical lines behind ethnopoetics? What has been the role of the academy in its acceptance?

J.R. I saw it [ethnopoetics] as one of the working assumptions about the nature of poetry shared by a great number of contemporary poets. Although very little of the poetry in question had been gathered together in any systematic way by poets & artists as such, I'm sure there were aspects of ethnopoetics in the American line of Pound & Williams, in the European surrealist line, in cubist & expressionist concerns with African poetry & ritual art: in short, a lot of predecessors for that work. Ethnopoetics was the term I made up & used to talk about those interests, particularly as related to tribal cultures that preceded the nation state or continued to exist outside it or at times within it, and in which the dominant form of communication was oral rather than literate. I suppose someone else might have a larger or narrower definition or framework for an ethnopoetics, but the term anyway was the one I chose for speaking about poetry over an expanded range of cultures, & I've continued to use it to the present. I don't otherwise know to what degree the word as such has come into any common usage. I suppose—as with other terms I've coined, like “deep image” & so on—that it ultimately creates as much confusion as clarity, but it remains for me a quick way of referring to that particular range of interests. The history of ethnopoetics in the academy it that it's been taken over by some people who, from a basically academic or scholarly perspective, are studying things like American Indian poetry and literature. The connection that I was trying to make—between ethnopoetics & the experimental poetry of the contemporary avant-garde—has largely been disregarded there. Even more radical academic movements like deconstructionism don't seem to have a corresponding interest in that sort of radical poetic practice—not even, say, in the work of the “language poets”, who because of their own absorption of deconstructionist theory might be thought to have a special appeal to deconstructionist critics. But those critics, with some notable exceptions, seem to deal largely with conventional texts (if they deal with texts at all) & have turned largely toward a consideration of fiction & prose & away from any real concern with poetry as such. And, although it's very difficult for me to judge it, I would assume that the attitude toward my own work follows along those same lines, at least that I'm not one of the poets most studied or worked on at universities. I think that ethnopoetics has, if anything, become a kind of subfield in anthropology, as in the work of people like Dennis Tedlock & Dell Hymes, & that there's been a still more limited approach to it in academic literary studies, applying standard literary methods to things like Indian poetry & storytelling. (All of that shows up most clearly in a couple of anthologies edited by Brian Swann for the University of California Press, which have very little overlap with what Diane [Rothenberg] & I were doing, say, in *Symposium of the Whole*.) Ethnopoetics has also sometimes been confounded with the current interest in “ethnic” poetry to which it has some obvious relationship, although (I have to emphasize) it is clearly not the same thing. I don't think the academy, then, has any

fundamental interest in most of these areas —certainly not the ethnopoetic & experimental, which don't even have a constituency to bring some pressure on it.

M.B. Can we speak about myth? Your poetic vision mixes different myths of various cultures, such as American Indian and Jewish. How is your approach & assimilation in relation to them?


J.R. Well, for me that's partly an experiential question. The Jewish mythology is something that I've been carrying around since childhood but that has opened & expanded for me over the past twenty, maybe twenty-five years. I was slow to come to it as a resource for my own work, but once I was into it, it began to shape a good part of my poetry. I don't know how necessary it is to a superficial reading of much of that poetry, but there are myths [mythic images] that very much prey on my mind & from there get into the work. I don't know if I would talk of them as *speaking* to me, as Duncan somewhere does [?], but I would be willing to say that as they speak to Duncan, so they speak to me. I can't comment on Duncan's experience of any of that, but in my own case, say, I might think of them appearing at times in dream & speaking to me in that sense, the idiomatic English sense of saying something speaks to me. They have meaning & resonance for me as soon as I become aware of them. I experience a great sense of excitement & agitation about them until they finally find, make their way into the poetry. Even so I would hesitate to dramatize them as mythic beings who come to me directly & offer themselves to the poetry, & so on, & I would think that my experiences or Duncan's are in fact different in that way from the mythic & mystic apparitions that turn up for Blake. At least from my conversations with Duncan I don't think that he was really into *seeing* things in that way but again in the way that one can say " 'this myth 'really speaks to me' ". The same to some extent with the Indian myths. There it really entered into my work at a point as which I had placed myself, experientially & for a number of years, in an Indian situation, until it was possible for me, to some degree, to use that in my own work. Not with the sense that I had somehow been transformed, had become an "Indian" in that process, but that something of that was now a part of the field of my own experience, that it could therefore speak to me, closely enough at least to make an entry to the poetry. I'm here talking about *A Seneca Journal*, say, or "Cokboy", rather than the anthologies, but I mean to say, even so, that I'm not seeing myself here as an Indian person but in another aspect of my own diaspora, the wanderings that take me into this or that place. Alternatively I suppose that I could deny the experience: I could pretend that I hadn't seen or been there, as if to satisfy those who might suppose that I *shouldn't* have been there in the first place, or I could remove it from the body of the poem. But obviously I've chosen there to let it all come in. Probably too there's a connection between the Jewish & the Indian myths —on some "deeper" level that ties myth into dream & other imaginal processes, while maintaining its reality in the world of *this* experience. Clearly in *A Big Jewish Book* or in "A Poem of Beavers", say, I'm exploring some of that common ground, even the curious way in which the Jewish tradition looks back to the period of the

tribes/the tribal as a kind of golden age from which the people have emerged in movement toward their later disintegration/scattering. As another instance, the Jewish experience, while highly focused (as we know) on writing & the book, carries along a significant oral tradition [“the oral law” or “spoken torah”] that is reminiscent in its centrality of other tribal notions of the oral. Also there’s yearning, as with other displaced peoples, toward the place-of-origin, which is not only one of the complexities & difficulties of the current Israeli situation but has fostered for centuries the idea of displacement from that homeland which is at the same time the center of the earth, the center of the universe. And that has also got a very American Indian sense to it (& a chilling relation, let me add, to the Palestinian situation, as it now unfolds itself). I think of Jews & Indians alike as survivors at least that with Indian poetry, as far as I’ve written about it, I’ve always tried to put a stress on survival or to not lose sight of the fact that while many Indian groups have experienced defeats & even genocide, others have survived & continue to survive into the present. I’ve tried to avoid the pathetic view of the Indian as the person who simply disappears, the person in the process of disappearing. That isn’t to deny at the same time that some of these situations are culturally critical or desperate, that many of the Indian culture are in a continuing state of crisis in which there’s no absolute guarantee of their survival.

Some people have been making those analogies between Jews & Indians for a long time, & some of them is retrospect now seem absurd or comical. The nineteenth century was filled with theories that tied Indians to the lost tribes of Israel, & certain aspects of American Mormonism, say, have carried that along. Many Indians I’ve known—older ones without a doubt—have had a kind of belief in some sort of relationship between Jews & Indians. *Lame Deer* I think it was made an interesting comment on Moses as a kind of Indian figure in the desert, the wilderness, listening like a shaman to the voices in the desert. But, again, you can do that kind of comparison between many different cultures, & I don’t know if the Jewish & Indian comparison is any more or less valid than the others. It sounds funny, however, because of other preconceptions about Jews & Indians that get in the way of it. For me at one point, anyway, I wanted both the reality & the absurdity of just that kind of juxtaposition, that quirky mix of myths & cultures. And the three “myths” I brought together, if you want to use that word, were those of the Jews, the Indians & the Dadaists.

***M.B. Poland/1931* is a good example of the influence of myths in your literary experience. And it’s very curious how the recurrence of some designations such as “Testimonies”, “Ancestral Scenes”, “Polish Anecdotes”, & even the graphics contribute to the myth/history depicted in the book.**

J.R. Yeah, I think those are ways in which I can name certain kinds of experience in the writing that are recurrent for me. Certain poems, say, are presented as essentially small, anecdotal pieces, telling a little story or giving a rapid picture. The “histories”, which make up another category, are simple collages from



fragments of prose material that I had been previously collecting as a file of details for inserting in the poems as such (That is to say, the “histories” were larger chunks left over from the note-taking that was a part of my research for *Poland/1931*). Then there were some poems presented as “amulets” in the book that came directly out of a magical tradition (or were made to look so) by translation or transcription. A number of my own poems look like they were influenced by that kind of poem-making as it shows up in kabbala or kabbala-related mysticism, & the “amulets”, in relation to that, are like markers to indicate that this kind of work isn’t one of a kind but that it emerges in traditions outside of literary poetry. I think that all of that gives me a sense of shaping a book —something more comprehensive than the individual poems as such; that it lets me juxtapose the poems in the book in some sort of relationship to one another. It’s in the nature of assemblage as it works itself out both in the book as a whole & in the separate sections. In that way the “testimonies” come together to form “a book of testimonies”, the scattered descriptive bits & anecdotes come together to form “a book of histories”, & so on. But the “histories” aren’t confined to the “book” so named, but turn up again within the other sections, & that kind of recurrence, I think, adds to the sense of unity, of the book as a whole: a total work. My tendency has been to build up books in segments. In *Poland/1931*, for example, I’m bringing together a number of connected series that first appeared as separate smaller books or editions: *A Book of Testimony* that Tree Books published or *Esther K. Comes to America* that was first published by Unicorn Books. It’s been my way of working or publishing for a long time now.

M.B. You also seem interested in the role of the unconscious in the poem. What role does that concept play or what form does it take in the poetic process?

J.R. I think I spoke in terms of the unconscious during the “deep image” period, in the work I was doing in the fifties & early sixties. What it offered me then was a release from the dangers of overthinking a poem in the act of composition, & in that sense it was, I think, an instrument of liberation. Now I’m not sure if... I can never be sure of what’s involved in any given poet’s view of the unconscious. It first came into prominence with the French surrealists, the stress they put on automatic writing, which they defined in Freudian terms as the unmediated entry of unconscious thought processes into conscious, at least written form. But what emerged from all of that had a curious resemblance to a kind of poetry that had been developed in Europe by poets up to & including the symbolists, and I came to wonder: if you got somebody else to write in that spontaneous fast way, someone without their *literary* background, mightn’t the result be something very different? These after all are poets who are steeped in Baudelaire, Lautreamont, Rimbaud, Reverdy, & so on, by the time they come into their own experiments. And then they find that by dropping what feels to them like conscious intervention, by seeming to write automatically & unconsciously, so to speak, they create a written work that has



striking resemblances to what seems like *poetry* to them. But there's already, I think, an idea of poetry that underlies that, so that what emerges from the process is conditioned in fact by the tradition that they're coming out of. There's more to it than that, but to put it in the most positive terms I can, I think that the encouragement toward writing without overthinking the process of the writing can at times be of the greatest use for any poet, that it can make all the difference at critical moments in the development of one's own work: a recognition that a poem can be destroyed by too much as well by too little thinking. So I see it in that sense as part of a tradition that moves us into areas of spontaneity and improvisation in writing that remain important, whether or not you cast them in terms of the unconscious. It's of a piece, you know, with Tzara's declaration that "thought is made in the mouth" or with Ginsberg's well-known generalization about "first thought, best thought", & so on. Don't labor the thought, in other words, but a certain point, break down the barriers of premeditated thought to let something spontaneous, even surprising, rise up in the process of composition. That the mind—whether unconscious or not—is the reservoir of certain kinds of images, of mythic processes, is another very interesting and useful proposition, though I don't know if automatic writing is necessarily the key to that or if the usefulness of automatic writing is limited to the release of only those energies or possibilities. And if ideas of the unconscious are sometimes liberating, at other times I think they may involve a certain kind of self-delusion. You know: I've done this in a spontaneous, automatic way; therefore it must be good because I've gone about it in this good way... Chance operations, which the surrealist and the dadas were also concerned with, may curiously lead us in a similar direction.

M.B. Clayton Eshleman recalls that Kenneth Rexroth once described you as "a swinging orgy of Martin Buber, Marcel Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, and Sitting Bull". Do you recognize this "definition"?

J.R. Well, that's one of the nicest things anybody ever said about me. I've always liked the combination, though I suppose what he's really pointing to there is the three-fold mythology I was working out of: Jewish, Indian, experimental. Maybe a few others could be added.

M.B. Your *New Selected Poems* has recently been published by New Directions. How does this make you feel, and what kind of poetic work will you be involved in from now on?

J.R. The "new" selected poems, as I say about them in a kind of pre-face to the book, are an attempt to show the continuity in the work since the earlier selected poems, *Poems for the Game of Silence*, which came out over fifteen years ago. My sense is that the poetry took a new turn with *Poland/1931*, that it continued with *A Seneca Journal* and *That Dada Strain*, and that it's still renewing itself in a very recent work that some people have been referring to as the new Poland poems & that New Directions will be publishing next year. I've also been continuing with experimental work using traditional Jewish numerological processes [*gematria*] of

the kind we were speaking about before. *Poland/1931* was recently presented as a theatrical piece by the Living Theater, & I performed myself in a theatrical version of *That Dada Strain* in San Diego & then again in New York State. I continue to be interested in advancing the performance work, mostly in association with musicians, although it now seems possible to it with theater people also. I've been doing a big translation work from Lorca, & I also want to do some serious translating from certain twentieth-century European poets like Kurt Schwitters, who still haven't come into English & so are largely disregarded here. But my overwhelming ambition, which I may or may not realize because it's such a big work, is to do a huge book of twentieth-century experimental poetry on something like a global scale. And that of course is not only an artistically difficult work to pull off, but an economically difficult one as well. So I'll either do it in the next few years or else I'll assemble & publish whatever notes I make about it, & I'll let it go at that.

Note

Since this interview was made, Jerome Rothenberg has completed the selected poetry of Kurt Schwitters (to be published by Temple University Press) & has been commissioned by the University of California Press to prepare a two-volume anthology of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Both books are being written and assembled in collaboration with Pierre Joris. The Lorca translations (of Lorca's *Suites*) are being published by Farrar Straus Giroux and *The Gematria* by Sun & Moon Press. What were referred to as the "new Poland poems" were published by New Directions under the title, *Khurbn & Other Poems*, in 1989.