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How to be a conduit: performance, translation and the reflexive poetics of Jerome Rothenberg

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an exploration of the difficult ethics and possibilities of Jerome Rothenberg's ethnopoetics/omnipoetics and total translation which includes performance, assemblage and reflexive poetics. I discuss Rothenberg's performances such as the "gift events," the Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell as well as the poem "Vienna Blood" and works of poetics. I work through complex ethical terrain in Rothenberg's ethnopoetics which sometimes re-enact the erasure of source intertext cultures via dehistoricisation. I then show how Rothenberg's methods of performance, total translation, reflexivity and collaborative poetics create friction and open dialogue. His techniques of performance and approaches to poetics and total translation foreground embodiment and reflexivity thus offering the possibility of an ethics and a "poesis" that must be considered if acting as a "conduit for others." Using the metaphor of a river and the idea of an embodied friction in the reading and writing process, I think through how Rothenberg's poesis arrest the flow of transfer. The poet, performer or translator, as well as readers and listeners, encounter a poem through their bodies and contexts, thus they are conduits and mediators themselves.

KEY WORDS: Jerome Rothenberg, poetics, experimental poetry, ethnopoetics, translation, poetry performance, embodied practice, poetry publics.

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HOW TO BE A CONDUIT FOR OTHERS

How can a poet be a "conduit for others"? How does a poet translate, perform and assemble the poetries and voices of others? How can a poet as a "conduit for others" (*Eye* 429) be ethical whilst channelling the voices of other poets and the dead? In this essay I am concerned with Jerome Rothenberg's conduit and its form. Is the conduit a straight smooth transfer from source to destination or is there some friction and meander? I discuss how and what poets channel in performance and translation and explore how Rothenberg understood this not untroubled role as mediator. I focus in particular on Rothenberg's approach to "ethnopoetics" or, later "omnipoetics," the uses of performance as a form of "total translation" and the reflexivity and ethics which emerge in his own poetry across both staged and textual mediums. As well as critical readings of poetry and poetics, I draw on reflections from my practice-based research and experience from the Anthology as Manifesto symposium held in Rothenberg's memory in Glasgow in March 2025. Performance, intermedia, "total translation" and embodied approaches to writing, translating and performing, I argue, can mediate, alter perceptions and give pause for reflexivity among both poet and reader-listeners. In this essay I think through the metaphor of a river to suggest that performance and reflexivity offer poets like Rothenberg a friction that mediates flow. These techniques offer chances to rub against the rapid flood, or slow the transfer of poem from person to person; friction offers moments to touch and hold the materiality of the poem and perhaps look back and consider the ethics of being a conduit.

POETRY IN ITS PERFORMATIVE TURN

I want to expand firstly on the understanding of poetry as a performing art. In order to conceive of the idea of a poetry as a conduit, it is worth thinking through some of the techniques and processes poets draw upon in order to activate or make present a poem in the moment of reading or live composition with others.

In a talk in 1978, collected in the 2013 assemblage, *Eye of Witness: A Jerome Rothenberg Reader*, Rothenberg wrote of a turn in poetry towards performance, or "ritual models." In the century after Dada, "a wide range of artists have been making deliberate and increasing use of ritual models for performance, [this] has swept up arts like painting, sculpture, poetry (if those terms still apply) long separated from their origins in performance." Rothenberg speaks of poets blurring the boundaries between poetry and other art forms and turning to liveness "as a process that's really happening." The emphasis in this movement is on process and presence, "accordingly the performance or ritual model includes the act of composition itself." He speaks of "the increasing use of real time, extended time, etc., and/or a blurring of the distinction between those and theatrical time, in line with the transformative view of the 'work' as a process that's really happening" and as "ritual models for performance" (*Eye* 207-9).

The field Rothenberg was observing and working within – Anglophone poetry in the 1960s and 70s – was alive with new avant garde torquing and reconfigurations of mediums, with poets and artists turning to the stage, embodiment and the arts of theatre and dance. Jackson Mac Low and Simone Forti moved between embodiment, language and spacetime. This moment includes Carolee Schneemann's events and "votive" erotics of text and movement, performance and feminist

political provocation (Sandford 247), Dick Higgins's "Intermedia" (1966), and in the UK, Bob Cobbing's experiments and assertions that poetry is not a "branch of literature" but "one of the performing arts" (Cobbing 1985). These are just some in a movement Rothenberg is describing in his 1977 talk and which theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte has contextualised more generally as the "second performative turn" which came with a distinctive aesthetics (Fischer-Lichte).

Whilst observing and analysing this turn, Rothenberg himself was experimenting with performance and its arts of presence, voice and embodiment: the theatre of people being in a room together for a certain time attending to what is happening to the poem therein. Often performance is part of Rothenberg's approach to translation, what he termed "total translation." Total translation is an expansive multi-media transformation from source to receiving intertext, to use Lawrence Venuti's terms for the rich and complicated cultures of translation (*Eye* 193-207; Horacek; Venuti). "Total translation" emerges in the 1960s in Rothenberg's work of assembling collections of what he termed ethnopoetics (poetry of the ethnoi) in influential anthologies such as *Technicians of the Sacred* (1967, 1983, 2017), *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972), *A Big Jewish Book* (1978) and others to follow. Like the poets, artists and "technicians of the sacred" he collected and translated, and the contemporary poetries with which he drew parallels with in commentaries and addendum, Rothenberg was expanding and deepening the idea of poetry. Rothenberg turned to poetry's affinities with other art forms and to what he termed poesis, the transformative process of poetry making. "'Poesis' is also described as a language process, a 'sacred action' (Breton) by which a human being creates AND recreates the circumstances & experiences of a real world" (*A Big Jewish Book* xxxiii).

Performance, with its embodied techniques and "transformative view of the 'work' as a process that's really happening" (*Eye* 209), presents a particularly interesting method for total translation and poesis. This poesis offers a possibility for activating a poem through the medium of bodies alive together in a particular space and time. But there are several approaches to performance and embodied poetics which offer different kinds of conduits and pose ethical questions for how to channel the voices of others. In the next sections of this essay, I will discuss some examples of Rothenberg's total translation and performance, starting with what Rothenberg termed the gift events in New York in 1967.

GIFT EVENTS

One example of an early use of performance and ritual as "total translation" is a happening, in the context of the happening movement of the 1960s initiated by artists such as Alan Kaprow (Sandford). This particular poetic happening is described by Rothenberg as part of a series of "gift events." These begin in 1967 with Rothenberg's live notes from a Seneca Indian Eagle Dance on January 21st, at Coldspring Longhouse, "an event for orators, dancers, musicians & people. Blessing 'and Curing. This ritual event he describes as part of the Winter 'Doings'" (*Eye* 356). These notes come from Rothenberg's residency project when he lived and worked with the Seneca people as part of anthropological field work with his partner Diane Rothenberg. Notes from the Coldspring Longhouse read, "Whoop. Music. Dance. (Each dance ends with a sound: hmmmmmm or whheeeee.) New speaker. Raps with the stick before speaking. More crackers. Deposit or mouthing of crackers" (*Eye* 357).

Two months later, a "total translation" is made of this event in New York City as a happening, another gift event:

> GIFT EVENT III: A CELEBRATION FOR POETS, MUSICIANS & DANCERS, BASED ON THE ORDERS OF THE SENECA INDIAN EAGLE DANCE & PERFORMED AT THE JUDSON DANCE THEATER, JUDSON MEMORIAL CHURCH, NEW YORK CITY, MARCH 21ST & 22ND 1967. A PART OF THE SPRING "HAPPENINGS" (*Eye* 358).

This event convened artists from different disciplines and involved sound, music, dancing and eating together. It included Carol Ritter, Philip Corner, Jackson Mac Low, Dick Higgins, Susan Sherman, Clayton Eschelman, Robert David Cohen, Hannah Weiner, Carol Bergé, George Kimball, Eleanor Antin, David Antin, Carolee Schneemann and dancers and musicians, including Steve Reich. This celebration for poets, musicians and dancers at Judson, held at a moment of intensive experimentation in performance at the Judson theatre, seems to have included many techniques of ritual and performance, with dance, actions, props, threshold drawing and crossing, sound-making, music and poetry readings. The translated or transposed ritual is here inspired from the Seneca source and adapted into a score for a contemporary multimedia happening, a new ritual, an event structure constructed for improvisation and play. The intention is thanksgiving; "the second poet (Jackson Mac Low) receives the sounding-stick from the m.c. & raps for silence. He reads a (thanking)-poem of his own" (*Eye* 359). The poems read include those from the adaptation of the Seneca ritual and poems of the poets' own. At one point in the event at Judson, graham crackers

(instead of the Seneca's saltine crackers) are passed around the participants who reach out to each other.

Rothenberg's retrospective comment reminds us that this is a work of translation. It could also be said to indicate a "communitas." Communitas is a term the anthropologist Victor Turner, who drew extensively from theatre and performance, coined for the bonding and community formation that takes place in the liminal stage of ritual (Turner 94-95). Rothenberg notes that in this gift event, "the act of finding-each-other (between participants & audience) was the principal departure from the Seneca source. The event continued to change under this impulse, from a situation where community is taken for granted to one where the activity may finally create it" (*Eye* 359). The formation of some kind of community was part of the creation of meaning in the work, the act of finding-each-other coming to the foreground. This process is what Erika Fischer-Lichte describes as a crucial part of the performative aesthetic, that through techniques of embodiment, liveness and acting together, a temporary theatrical community forms (Fischer-Lichte 51). There might be alterations in the usual "orders of perception" (Fischer-Lichte 148) and an exchange between people and energies. This exchange in the room is what generates the performance through what Fischer-Lichte terms the "autopoietic feedback loop" – a cyclical exchange between performer and spectator (Fischer-Lichte 51). In such a moment, meaning is generated through the emergent phenomena that come forth in the course of the performance and the interactions between its participants. The Judson gift event created a new work of art in a different cultural context, its participants activate poetry through transformations of multiple kinds of media and

their embodied co-presence. But the text from this event collected in *Eye of Witness* (2013) is somewhat brief and light on detail. Something feels missing to me as a reader.

TO CELEBRATE OR ERASE?

What happened to the poetics of the Seneca source? In the text that survives of the gift event at Judson it is hard to see the distinctive features of the Seneca source intertext. We have here a ritual emerging from an indigenous culture, which has historically been the subject of violent colonialism, transposed into a receiving intertext (Venuti). The receiving intertext is a Judson happening which just happened to be situated very close to, if not ideologically aligned with, the imperial centre of Metropolitan Anglophone culture, just a couple of blocks away in Manhattan. Despite whatever counter-cultural and celebratory intent Rothenberg had in mind with the Judson gift event, it didn't seem to involve any Seneca people. In this brief description of the event, it seems to me, as a contemporary reader of *Eye of Witness*, that the Seneca culture has been pushed into the background. Total translation here could in fact be total erasure, as the third gift obscures rather than celebrates the first.

There have been several critiques which see cultural appropriation and primitivism in the ethnopoetics projects. Critics such as Clements (1981) for example challenged the translations in the ethnopoetic Native American anthologies such as *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972). The criticism of ethnopoetic translations is one of dehistoricisation and decontextualization where linguistic cultures with distinct diverse poetries have been slipped into the stream of one total whole. In the case of the "[g]ift events," that total whole is 1960s New York. Later, Peter Middleton, in his

important 1998 essay on the poetry reading, noted the primitivism in ethnopoetics and other declarations around the oral origins of poetry by Cobbing and others of the time (Middleton 272). Primitivism idealises distant or unfamiliar poetic cultures, often bundling them into a homogenized moment, in this case that moment is a particular and omnivorous sixties New York avant-garde. As the document of this event survives in anthologies as a brief description, the details and particularity of source intertext are lost or come to appear part of a universal or timeless whole. Rothenberg is aware of the problems of these ethical issues around translation and of primitivism; he repeatedly stated the idea that "Primitive means complex" (*Technicians of the Sacred* xxx; *A Big Jewish Book* xxv). In the assemblages there are attempts to gesture to this complexity in layers and proliferating reconfigurations, adding new affinities with the receiving culture in commentaries.

These politics and ethics of translation have been much discussed, and Josef Horáček's (2011) reassessment of this discussion shows the complexities of this in regard to ethnopoetics. The contradiction, which I'd like to draw out from Horáček and wider discussions of the ethics of ethnopoetics, is between, on the one hand, the celebratory intention to bring these poetries into new worlds, revive their energies in inventive new forms and to potentially transform the moment and poetry of the destination cultures and its publics. On the other hand, the anthologies and translation events such as the Judson gift event, may simply feed an omnivorous contemporary cultural economy of novelty, where the only culture nourished by the source's distinct knowledge and perspective is the imperial centre of late capitalism. The ethnopoetics anthologies present all poetries in what can feel like a false "universal" poetics of the destination intertext, as Horáček terms it (166).

One way Horáček poses the problem here is temporal. There is a sense of timelessness around ethnopoetics texts once they are placed in the large assemblages alongside vastly different other works. In anthologies and events such as these, the source intertext's historical specificity disappears. "Rothenberg's anthologies obfuscate the historicity of their material by collecting and juxtaposing sources recorded by Westerners at different points in time across several centuries" (Horáček 170). This flattening creates a "synchronicity and simultaneity of multiple histories" (170). Rothenberg himself says of the ethnopoetics translations in the anthologies that he "suppressed all reference to accompanying mythic or 'symbolic' explanations" (*Eye* 352). In the transfer of poem from one culture to another, the sacred purpose may be changed or erased. In the rush of the moment of a live happening, or in the heft of pages of an anthology, the detail and material texture of the source can be lost. It is hard to see how the Judson gift event foregrounded Seneca culture, and this piece risks adding to a history of annihilation.

And yet, as Horáček discusses, it is precisely for this reason that Rothenberg is attempting a new kind of translation. Given the inevitable loss in translation, one might argue that the most ethical translation of cultures on unequal footings, is no translation at all. But not translating means obscurity, continuing the oblivion of the many poetries of the world; this is not an option for Rothenberg. 1967 was in fact only the start of his efforts to extend and deepen the methods of total translation. And parallel to this work, Rothenberg was also turning to his own connection to Jewish cultures and the idea of witness. And to face Khurbn, the Yiddish word for the Nazi holocaust. An ethics of "witness" was emerging, as Rothenberg considered the nature of the conduit in his poetics. "The poems that I first began to hear at Treblinka are the clearest message I have ever

gotten about why I write poetry" (*Eye* 306), he writes of his encounters that lead to Khurbn. I will return to this poetry of "witness" in discussing Rothenberg's poem "Vienna Blood" later in this essay.

"WWWIDESHELL"

In total translation, Rothenberg was seeking out alternative methods from various fields and mediums to find novel ways of making poems come alive in performance and embodied acts of total translation. Total translation adopts experimental techniques such as uses of performance and visual media in order to translate more of the sensual elements of the original poem or text. Many of the source texts of ethnopoetics had been collected in unethical or violent circumstances and translated poorly. Rothenberg's intention was to unearth these nearly forgotten works and foreground them as poetry and knowledge with affinities and relevance to the contemporary moment. There had to be a way to bring new energy and formal experiment to the dry, literal or anachronistic translations, often made by ethnographers on the fly. A dramatic use of form and media in a translation might speak to something sensual, affective or energetic of the source (discussed in "Total Translation: And Experiment in the Translation of American Indian Poetry," *Eye* 193-209). Alongside these methods Rothenberg used contextual commentaries and notes such as letters with ethnomusicologist David McAllester with regards to the Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell.

Horáček argues that these methods of performance and other radical multimedia methods are a "subversion" of the universalising tendencies of ethnopoetics. Total translation complicates the idea of a smooth transfer from source to destination and

> assert[s] the irreducible difference of the source texts. They do so by emphasizing the unique moment of performance: rather than providing a transcript of a hypothetical typical performance in the source culture, they enact a performance of their own, a performance that is visibly inscribed into a specific context of the target culture (Horáček 167)

But how to do this, how to enact this subversion in the "unique moment of performance," how to "inscribe" in the target culture? I would like to bring to this conversation another layer of understanding of performance and embodied practice and later, in reading Rothenberg's "Vienna Blood," suggest these techniques offer a means of reflexivity. Instead of smoothly straightened transfer where source intertext is scantly referred to, presented in already familiar form or made palatable for the receiving culture, total translation attempts friction and provocation. This friction comes through activations of the medium of the body and senses and considerations of relationality and reflexive ethics.

In the performative aesthetic Fischer-Lichte theorises, the techniques performers take from across the sensual spectrum create responses on the part of the spectator, finding ways of altering perceptions and provoking or causing participants to pause and see or hear anew. The "orders of perception" are altered, initiating what Fischer-Lichte terms a "re-enchantment of the world" (180). Performers activate energies in the performance space through methods such as sound and voice work, movement, vigorous action, self-injury or extreme exertion, aroma, and exchanges with a spectator, in Fischer-Lichte's idea of the "autopoietic feedback" loop. Richard Schechner even

describes altered states such as an "'omnipotence/vulnerability, tranquillity/readiness' arising from sustaining repetition in embodied practice" (239).

For poetry performance, embodied practices allow attention to embodiment, sense, the materiality of language and the context, the time, space and the beings co-present in it. In the company of a poet experimenting with performance and embodiment, listeners might have their attention drawn to the materiality of voice, to time and the body, unusual uses of rhythm, or to the social nature and ecology of poetry through works that emphasise co-presence and relation. When poetry is the rhythmic force in a performance, we might even start to move along with the poem becoming part of its activation as a performance.[2] This activating poesis then, is what Rothenberg describes as a poem becoming "a process that's really happening" (*Eye* 209). In the context of ethnopoetics/omnipoetics, we can see a use of chant and song in Rothenberg's "Songs from the Society of the Mystic Animals" with Richard Johnny John, visual pieces turned into a performance in chanting, rhythm, vocalisation, and humming. Rothenberg made a rendition of this in his birthday reading ("90th birthday"). Another example of experimentation with the voice are the Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell (White):

NNNOOOOW because I ws (N gahn) I was the boy ingside the dawn

but some're at my house now wnn N wnn baheegwing

& by going from the house the wwwideshell howanome but some 're at

my house N wnnn baheegwing

[2] I have written elsewhere about how these techniques of performance may play out in the context of poetry such as in the work of Maggie O'Sullivan (*Song-Song Stare*, 2023; *Votive Mess*, 2024).

& by going from the house the darkned hoganome but some're at

my house N wnn baheegwing (*Eye* 376)

To read these songs, even on the page while alone, requires a defamiliarizing form of bodily response, a difficulty one confronts in the vocal apparatus. There are nasal ticks and an invitation to perform absurdity. A reader might feel clownlike or childish. In Glasgow, at the "Anthology as Manifesto Symposium" for Rothenberg in May 2025, we heard Scottish poet Peter Manson perform the Horse Songs. Listening, I felt moved in a way that I will, with difficulty, try to describe. Perhaps it was the feeling created by Manson's particular accented voice, accumulating pacing and rhythm and the resonance of his voice echoing in the space. The hushed and rational atmosphere of an academic symposium was ruptured by Manson's intervention, in a poem that felt eerily strange even for the avant garde context. The piece borders on song and chant but I also felt some other strand of music. There was a quality I cannot pinpoint in prose, an odd uncomfortable quality, something even uncanny and filtered through my own consciousness. In my own talk I did not feel comfortable reading the Horse Songs aloud. I think this discomfort, felt uneasily as a bodily phenomenon, is a crucial part of the challenge of total translation and performance.

The Horse Songs are provocations for readers-listeners to explore, via the vocal apparatus, a mythic terrain of the "boy ingside the dawn" (*Eye* 376). This mythic terrain is Frank Mitchell's horse song, which in many ways is a "suppressed" mythic context of the Navajo, a world mediated to us here through Rothenberg's conduit of total translation. Aware of the responsibility of this conduit work, Rothenberg extensively detailed the context and process of translation, explaining the decisions and the collaborative processes. Important contextual backdrops were described: the

Rothenbergs' residency with the Seneca in 1968 and Jerome Rothenberg's work listening to recordings of Mitchell's Navajo (1881-1967) on tapes in a collaboration with David McAllester. "I followed where Mitchell led me," he writes of the process of listening to the tapes (*Eye* 205). Most often in publication, Rothenberg includes a showing of this process alongside the Horse Songs (*Eye* 193-207). But in other publication spaces, the Horse Songs might appear without this commentary and context. They might be presented as a straight translation. In these cases, something, for me at least, can seem to be missing; the texts seem to require reading aloud. Perhaps it is this missing quality that creates a sense of the uncanny, the haunting of the erased voices of the dead. Or maybe this total translation is an invitation to you as reader or listener to inhabit the poem, to extend the conduit and vocalise the horse songs through your own corporeal means. See what happens.

Most hopefully, the use of experimental techniques in the work of being a conduit for others prompts a reader or listener to sense the materiality of language and the context of reception. In other words, the conduit is you, the reader-listener. Instead of a slipstream rush of unfamiliar poetry made stereotypically fitting or palatable, or just like other poetry you've already heard, in total translation and there are obstacles to move through and over. It is almost as if the invitation is to get your mouth, nose and throat around the Horse Songs is a prompt for the reader to consider their position, place, time and embodiment when they try to read aloud or listen to something strange. Although this prompt to be reflexive and ethical can of course be ignored, there might be friction in the flow, some material in the river that causes it to slow down, linger or pause. Slowing down we may feel the poem as a "process that's really happening" (*Eye* 209).

In the version of this essay I gave in Glasgow, I was thinking about rivers. I likened friction in the conduit to the rocky murk at the bottom of a biodiverse river. With rivers, "diversity of flow" and "sinuosity" is needed for the flourishing of life and flood protection, to the slow the flow of water over the landscape. So perhaps similarly, total translation offers ways in which a source intertext is not just smoothly delivered to a destination but flows complicatedly through the listener-reader's bodymind and environment. We make frictive conduits.

LIMINALITY

There is a moment of possibility in the heady rush of play in performance, its poesis – poetry as process and change. In performance and ritual there is a space and time which is marked out by thresholds to be somehow special. Poesis could be seen then as a liminal process, it can be a door, a window allowing vision or even transformation to emerge. Senses enlivened, perceptions shifting, realisations and changes may occur in the open fluid moment of poesis. My voice speaking the poem feels strange to me. Anything can happen, roles may be reversed, costume and masks make us uncanny, rhythmic action creates altered states, people may be meeting you in the moment, a world turned upside down, a dog may pee on stage. Rothenberg called this "poesis" but some might call this open space liminality. Liminality is theorised by Victor Turner, who saw it as the key processes of ritual and performance. In 1969 writing on rites of passage, Turner had observed that ritual process holds much in common with performance and described three stages, a preparatory separation, a liminal middle where there is the possibility of reversals, action, play and communitas, which is followed by a re-incorporation into society.

In a piece on ethnopoetics (collected in *Symposium of the Whole* [1983]), Turner directly addresses poetry, specifically ethnopoetics. Viewing poets through the lens of an anthropologist regarding ritual, religion and culture as text, Turner offers an excited and perhaps idealistic idea of (ethno)poets as redeemer or messengers between worlds, bringing together communities after their dispersal: "to [a] recovered membership (retotalization) in a 'risen body' of human kindness redeemed through 'mutual forgiveness of each vice' (Blake), forgiveness made possible through radical, existential, reflexivity" (*Symposium of the Whole* 342). This sounds as if it could be aligned with Rothenberg's approach; he often writes of poetry as a door or window as well as a conduit. In his postscript to *A Book of Witness* in 2002 Rothenberg writes for example: "I had come to think of poetry, not always but at its most revealing, as an act of witnessing, even prophecy – by the poet directly or with the poet as a conduit for others" (*Eye* 429).

There is much sacred material in play in ethnopoetics. But Rothenberg has a secular interest in vision and formal transformations in poesis. Whilst not beguiled by any specific religious or metaphysical purpose or divinity (*A Big Jewish Book* xxxiv), he is conscious of the matter of poesis, the mystery of words in flux, in potentia.

Rothenberg was at this time also thinking through what his own ethnopoetics might be in his own ancestral culture as a Jewish American child of immigrants, a poet "in the world of Jewish mystics, thieves and madmen" (*Eye* 419). And he was thinking at the same time through his idea of a poet as conduit, as seer, an "I of Witness." Being a conduit means asking how a poet or translator can speak with or for the dead, especially the murdered, unmourned or forgotten dead. "Vot em I doink here?" he asks in the poem "Cokboy" in mask or costume in the voice of a wandering exile or

trickster clown (*Eye* 234). This consideration of the ethics of conduit, means turning his eye (or the poetic I) to Khurbn.

Rothenberg is uneasy at Turner's idea of liminality and the romanticisation of the ethnopoet. And in his poem, "Vienna Blood" Rothenberg addresses this directly,

> the liminal he writes
>
> or "place between"
>
> & sees suddenly
>
> the terror of that situation (*Eye* 293)

For Rothenberg here, there is something "terrifying" about the idea of a ritual bringing huge numbers of people together en masse, in synchronised or symbolic community, under one sign, "communitas." This poem can tell us more about Rothenberg's ethics, vision and reflexive doubt in being a conduit for others.

"COMMUNITAS, I MEANT TO TELL YOU, IS HOLY FIRE"

Rothenberg wrote "Vienna Blood" after a 1977 trip to Austria for a conference on ritual with Turner (and another ritual and performance theorist Richard Schechner, also criticized for primitivism [Bharucha]). The resulting poem has, according to Rothenberg's commentaries, "an atmosphere charged by Turner's ideas of 'communitas' & 'liminality' & by a sense of ghostly European histories, the shadow of Hitler's home town (Linz) nearby etc" (*Eye* 295). He uses the poem/poetics to think through the liminal,

uncertainty: a zone

a fruitful chaos

& the sacred's what's inside

the frame

Whose sacred, we might ask. In this poem the Danube is haunted by Khurbn. In a part called "*The Danube Waltz*," he writes "I found a river" on the last day "on road to 'airport'/ saw it unwinding" from the bus and observes, "how pale / & shy / thy houses" (*Eye* 291). The Danube occasions a

waltzing

waltzing

in your grave

where is thy river

& thy woods

so old like Jews

forever gone (*Eye* 191-192)

In the idea of liminality, Rothenberg senses the clearances and the impulse to annihilate as well as the absented voices of those not included in communitas. This poem studies fascism's persistence through time, even in eras of peace and eerie silence.

He meets good people in Vienna and they walk in "solemn procession" through hushed streets,

among ghosts

the sounds of poetry

—ka ka—

the only music left us

The quiet emptiness of Vienna haunts the poem:

the liminal he writes

or "place between"

& sees suddenly

the terror of that situation

terror in glass

in camphor

the eye inside the eye

looks back

finding the place he shades off

is not himself

now is not

some other self (293)

He shades off, is not himself, – "I is another." Rothenberg often uses this idea of Rimbaud's, exploring this eye/I in the *Book of Witness* poems (*Eye* 472-479). In "Vienna Blood," Rothenberg's subject is at times an "I" and other times "he," so it seems he has given himself a mask, a new eye/I who is in the process of making his poetics a "conduit for others" but coming face to face with this eye/I "looking back." The line "the eye inside the eye / looks back" remains ambiguous, but might

there be some kind of reckoning with human capacity for violence – who am I here? What am I doing here?

(but what's inside it

if the terror

isn't there?

or what's inside me

if I play the prince

in Nerval's tower

reading my poem in the heart of

empty Europe

—luckless—

knowing too well these things

but hoping like Artaud

"to break through language

"in order to touch life" (294)

In sensing unspoken histories of genocide, Rothenberg looks into the mirror. In the glass is an eye looking back, but whose eye is that?

"Vienna Blood" ends in a direct address to Turner: "Communitas / (I meant to tell you) / is Holy Terror" (294). Here Rothenberg considers the uses and limits of the "ritual models" he describes in his 1977 talk. There are types of ritual far removed from artists joyfully re-enacting ritual in a happening of "finding each other" (*Eye* 359). Ritual can be deployed by a state or religious

apparatus, emptied of meaning. It is a technology which may be used in voluntary artistic elaboration, or perhaps, it can be a "terrifying" zone of chaos, a means by which people move en masse to affirm an oppressive structure. Perhaps the rituals of the structure are those of an authoritarian fascist regime. We might ask, who is not here in the rituals of state? Who has died on the threshold trying to reach a communitas? In the final phase of ritual, after the ecstasy of liminality, Turner described a return to the society which has been consolidated by a brief moment of topsy turvey. This is "re-incorporation," and in the context of "Vienna Blood," I think of an empty pale and ghostly Europe cleared of Jews, or the assimilation of peoples cleared from lands stolen under colonialism.

KA KA: HUMAN POESIS IN EXTREMIS

Rothenberg, nearly half a century after Khurbn, is writing in what appears to be a period of peace in Austria. He includes the words "Ka ka" in "Vienna Blood" which also can be found in his other poems on Khurbn and in the poetics "Khurbn & Holocaust: 'After Auschwitz There is Only Poetry'" (*Eye* 392). "Ka ka" refers to Antonin Artuad's shit of a violent death. But even "ka ka" could be a form of poesis, human language at its most extreme moments of expression and transition. In this writing, Rothenberg discusses how poetry for him must face a conception of reality which is also the Ka ka in Khurbn; poesis is human and this includes the shit and madness of industrialised murder.

At the end of "Vienna Blood," Rothenberg wishes like Artaud, "To break through language in order to touch life," signalling a desire to pierce a veil of amnesia cast over Europe (*Eye* 294).

This "breaking through" then is perhaps a desire for an Artaudian theatre of cruelty.[3] Ritual can be one community acting under the sign of a total symbol such as race or nation. Or ritual can be an empty gesture. But as a technology, a set of processes and actions, ritual and its artistic siblings in performance, including poetry as a performing art, ritual process can also break through to something. I see this breaking through as ways of questioning and testing the medium of people in a room together experiencing language, or more intimately in the act of reading, writing and translation. Here is the potential for a reflexive "eye inside the eye," which "looks back," to be in a dialectic with the other and the other inside the I, whoever they may be. Rothenberg writes elsewhere of how he has or has not been able to approach Khurbn and it is suggestive of this "eye inside the eye," the "I of Witness," looking back on itself. Poetry must face

> the reduction, the degradation that the modern world allows. I do not intend to set the Jews apart as victims, as if the lesson is only there for us—or the suffering. Nor do I want to see us only as victims, the innocent sufferers, though Auschwitz and the holocaust are at their most horrible the accounts of an innocent suffering.
>
> To be only the victims, as the founders of Zionism knew, was to be only partly human—a perception that has led on its negative side to the tragedy of Palestine and the ongoing wars and murders. It is for reasons like this—reasons still unresolved for me—that in writing *Poland/1931* and *A Big Jewish Book*, I did for the most part let the holocaust speak without being spoken. (*Eye* 393)

[3] As an aside, it might be worth thinking of the Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch here who also turned to ritual to break through the amnesia of postwar Austria. In the same place and time, but with a great deal more blood and viscera, Nitsch held happenings which tested the artistic models of ritual and performance as communitas to their limits (Fischer-Lichte).

IN A ROOM TOGETHER

In *Eye of Witness*, we can trace how ethnopoetics, with a persistent reflexivity and experimentation, becomes ethnopoetics and then "omnipoetics" (26). And in "Vienna Blood," Rothenberg keeps going, walking along the Danube,

> waltzing
>
> in your grave
>
> where is thy river
>
> & thy woods (*Eye* 291-292)

Thinking about rivers, influences and confluences, I was also thinking of rivers and the influence Rothenberg's anthologies have had; an influence which continues to flow. Rivers need frictive mess. Biodiverse rivers need friction, filters, rubble, "diversity of flow" and murky plant life to stop the flood waters slipping off downstream, sponges to absorb toxic run off. Rivers need mediation, resistance, remnants of history. Anything can wash up in a river, good and ill. Perhaps a biodiverse river, with its diversity of flow, can help us understand the fullness of total translation and performance for Rothenberg. Poetry, taken from a source text, however "complex" could just slip too easily into the imperial tongue via mainstream methods of translation, or generative AI writing and translation tools.

There is no direct immediate access to the spring at source. Many of the sources of ethnopoetics have been obscured. These poetries and the voices of those Rothenberg hears in the "heart of empty Europe" and Treblinka (*Eye* 309) are mediated through a conduit. And the conduit

has a bodymind which affords friction. Or, to use Simone Forti's words, we have a "body-mind-world!" (Forti).

Total translation and omnipoetics, with its embodied methods, draw attention to materiality and relationality of language, together with a reflexive ethics and willingness to witness horror; these are methods which might slow down the flow. The methods of total translation, sound and visual materiality like chant, song and, elsewhere, visual mediums – which warrant further exploration beyond this essay – create friction. Or at least these techniques offer moments to stop and feel the present in the reading or spectating experience, perhaps to become aware of why we feel what we feel in our uneasy or unexpected responses.

Or in other words, "thought is made in the mouth" said Tristan Tzara, which Rothenberg was fond of quoting (*Eye* 207). Poetry here has something to rub against in the mouth, slowing the easy transfer into data, immersion or even the "moving poetry" of the AI bot. Such methods might work against the slip into the mainstream of immediacy, to use Anna Kornbluh's concept for the dominant style in late capitalism. Our body-mind-worlds are difficult abrasive conduits for others.

"Communitas / (I meant to tell you) / is Holy Terror" (*Eye* 294). And the "I meant to tell you" here, in "Vienna Blood," signals to me that we are still in a conversation here, and the eye is looking back on its self and its other. I meant to tell you too of an important collaboration in Rothenberg's work throughout all of this was the influence of the anthropological reflexive and feminist turn of the 1970s. Ethnopoetics/omnipoetics was formulated through collaboration with Rothenberg's anthropologist partner Diane Rothenberg (see their co-edited *Symposium of the Whole* [1983]). Thus the reflexivity of anthropology is also at the heart of an "I of witness." The eye inside

the eye is not a fetishised or mysticised flattering of the other but a back and forth, a mediating dialectic whereby the self is confronted over and over with the space between self and others. Or, in Jerome Rothenberg's own words, "I hear myself speak and in that moment of performance I am both subject and object: the one who listens and the one who speaks" (*Eye* 392). A voice heard in our own voice, like the eye inside the eye looking back.

In Glasgow we were offered a moment to consider the ethics of translation and be confronted by our own listening experience through the medium of Peter Manson's performance of the Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell. The discomfort I felt was a friction that opened onto a reflexivity and a question around the ethics of being any kind of conduit for others. Friction and the methods I have been describing do not necessarily lead to an ethical poetics or translation free of the traces of the violences of history. But performances such as Manson's might allow us to feel ourselves as conduits and the possibility of reflexivity as we look back on our own eyes and ears through the eyes and ears of others.

There is a risk of this omnipoetics, to place oneself among others who also have the capacity for love, violence and collaboration, and keep talking, assembling, translating, voicing and looking back and through. Translation allows this meeting, as does performance and collaborative reflexivity, ever mobile, in flow. Thus, at his ninetieth birthday event in 2021, Rothenberg was still inhabiting these ways of poesis in a room of people, who join in with him in chant, song, voice, action, "hoping 'to break through language/ 'in order to touch life')" (*Eye* 294). Performance, total translation and reflexivity in omnipoetics prompts us to slow down and consider what is happening

to us when we are gathered together in a room that is also a page, how we reader-listeners look back on ourselves as conduits and come towards this thing between us, the poem.

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