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Author(s): Jerome Rothenberg

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# Ethnopoetics & (Human) Poetics

*Jerome Rothenberg*

A FEW WORDS, FIRST, AS ONE of the makers of the plot for the present gathering.

The underlying theme is what we've elsewhere called ethnopoetics and the question of its possible expansions, but we didn't (deliberately didn't) use the term in the conference announcement except in the title of my own presentation. This is, therefore, not (strictly speaking) a conference on ethnopoetics as discussed on other occasions by many of those here.

Nor is it limited to "non-western" traditions.

This is not from any lack of devotion to ethnopoetics on the part of the organizers—the present one in particular—but an ethnopoetics conference or a non-western conference per se would have had to focus on other energies than we could presently assemble, and wouldn't be true (without a great deal of stretch) to a "symposium of the *whole*," which is meant to be what is literally says. Not that we're that symposium of THE WHOLE either, but we're here to talk about what such a symposium, such a configuration of energies, might possibly mean.

We have therefore decided to let it spill over, while starting (from my own perch) with a sense of ethnopoetics as a necessary part of whatever new poetics we may now hope to develop...and a necessary part of a search not for "the primitive" (as Stanley Diamond would have it) but for a primary poetics, an idea of poetry, based on the interplay and clash of cultures that may in fact now be a part of our human possibility.

I would like to begin my own contribution with the preface to the book *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, which Diane Rothenberg and I assembled and which is published by the University of California Press, and to add to that, in particular, my sense of some still unresolved questions, some new proposals, and some (to my mind) necessary cautions as we begin the present work.

"When the industrial West began to discover—and plunder—

'new' and 'old' worlds beyond its boundaries, an extraordinary countermovement came into being in the West itself," and ending with the sentence, "The clincher, in fact, is the transformation, beyond that, of our consciousness of the human in all times and places."

That ends the opening section of the preface and in reading through it, it occurred to me, first of all, that there were already many different kinds of ethnopoetics at work among us. I will list some of these without in any sense pretending to exhaust the approaches and with the certainty that any ethnopoetics, my own included, would necessarily involve some fusion among them. I'm not trying to be precise here—rather to give some idea of how we've sometimes gone at it.

Nathaniel Tarn has spoken of ethnopoetics as "the intersection of poetry and anthropology in our time." Conceivably any culturally-based approach to poetry or any poet's poaching on the anthropological territory would make it under this "definition."

A second approach centers on the idea of the "primitive" or of a primitive/civilized dichotomy. Diamond in anthropology, Snyder in poetry as two primary examples—with a strong emphasis in Snyder's work on poetry's roots in the paleolithic and its projection of ecological and communal/tribal alternatives.

Closely related to the "primitive" is the approach that focuses on the idea of oral poetry—though the dominance of the oral clearly continues in cultures that could by no stretch of the imagination be thought of as technologically "primitive." The approach through "performance" over a wide range of cultures might almost be synonymous with that through the oral, while spilling over as well into cultures with a fixed system of writing.

The equating of ethnopoetics with non-western or with third-world cultures is common enough—and, again, the divergence from a purely oral circumstance should be apparent.

Ethnic poetry, in an American context, sometimes dovetails with ethnopoetics, sometimes not. I sense/acknowledge the relation, though I suspect it can lead to as much confusion as clarity.

Yet another approach identifies certain traditional forms of poetry and performance with certain "experimental" moves in our own time. Richard Schechner was explicit about this in an earlier ethnopoetics conference, including the "avant-garde" in the "category" of traditional ritual theater viewed as "transformational"; and I suppose my own use of analogues to experimental work in *Techni-*

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*cians of the Sacred* and *Shaking the Pumpkin* is an implicit gesture in this direction. As is the attempt—whether by a Simon Ortiz or a Gary Snyder (or by any of us, in short)—to incorporate some aspect of the ethnopoetic into our own work.

And, finally, there's a more technical, usually translative approach practiced by anthropologists like Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Allan Burns, and another very useful approach that would reveal or present whole poetic systems from *within* particular cultures.

What I see all these approaches having in common is, negatively, a rejection of the *supremacy* of western ideas of high art (not by any means the art itself) and, positively, an intention to encompass all those art forms and gestures excluded by that western and European hierarchy. In that sense too, ethnopoetics can be seen as a strategy—one of many—aimed against closure and the “authoritative” version—allowing the individual voice to emerge and to free itself (in Richard Huelsenbeck's old Dada prophecy) “from the tutelage of the advocates of power.”

All such ethnopoetics tie in also—at least for the poets involved—with an idea that has been strong among us at least since the time of the Romantics: a sense of poetry engaged with the exploration of beginnings: a new start toward an art in which (in Duncan's words or my own) “everything was possible.” Eliade used much the same words to describe the art of the traditional shaman, and William Carlos Williams, speaking in the name of a “new localism” (ethnopoetics is in a certain sense an interweaving of such localisms), identified the new poetry as “a movement, first and last to clear the ground...a strong impulse to begin at the beginning.” And the beginning, he made clear, involved a rediscovery/recovery, a reconsideration of origins, in the past and as developed in the present.

I find something like this wherever ethnopoetics has become a part of our present concerns rather than a study of the remote and exotic to which we can have no vital relation. This seems to me equally true in the work of our predecessors, poets and thinkers like those Diane Rothenberg and I chose to present in *Symposium of the Whole*:

VICO, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the age of the gods and of the gentile nations;

HERDER, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the nature-people (as the German language has it);

BLAKE, who gave us an ethnopoetics of Albion and of our antedeluvian energies (a gnostic ethnopoetics);

MARX AND ENGELS, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the communal;

THOREAU, who gave us an ethnopoetics of wilderness;

RIMBAUD, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the seer and of the internal nigger;

FENOLLOSA, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the ideogram as "a splendid flash of concrete poetry";

POUND, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the tale of the tribe and as the new vortex;

TZARA, who gave us a DADA ethnopoetics;

CÉSAIRE, who gave us an ethnopoetics as negritude;

LORCA, who gave us an ethnopoetics as duende and black sounds and the blood culture of Manuel Torre;

GRAVES, who gave us an ethnopoetics of the goddess and the muse;

ELIADE, who gave us the ethnopoetics of a universal Shamanism;

OLSON, who gave us an ethnopoetics of myth and history, and a projective ethnopoetics of voice;

SNYDER, who gave us ethnopoetics as a new ecology/a buddhist ethnopoetics;

DUNCAN, who gave us title to an ethnopoetics of the whole.

By the end of the 1960's, I first introduced the term "ethnopoetics" as a necessary part of a poetics (an "idea of poetry") changed by a century and more of such experimentation and mapping. A number of other poets, anthropologists and critics—many already into it by then—responded immediately to the discourse around the term, while others, who remained aloof, were in their own terms implicit contributors to the issues clustered therein. What this marked wasn't so much a first invention as a recognition that the ethnopoetics, once it had entered our work, altered the nature of that work in all its aspects. And behind it was the century itself and a

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crisis in language and thought not of our making: an international avant-garde on the one hand, an American opening to history and myth on the other, and a de facto but rarely acknowledged collaboration between poets and scholars by whom the attack on the narrow view of literature (the "great" tradition, now named the "canon") was simultaneously carried on. Few poets and artists—post World War II—weren't somehow involved in these new mappings, for what had changed was our paradigm of what poetry was or now could begin to be.

The *explicit* discourse—that around an ethnopoetics per se—involved the magazine, *Alcheringa* (founded by Dennis Tedlock and myself in 1970), and included the 1975 gathering, at the Center for Twentieth Century studies in Milwaukee, of the "first international symposium on ethnopoetics," which drew from many of the principal contributors as well as from others working in related areas. On the one hand, this discourse explored the ongoing "intersection between poetry and anthropology" spoken of by Tarn, and on the other hand, between contemporary poets as the "marginal" defenders of an endangered human diversity and poets of other times and places who represented that diversity itself and many of the values being uncovered and recovered in the new poetic enterprises. Much of the ethnopoetic work at that time, my own included, was involved with the discovery and translation of the poetry itself and, for many, with the incorporation of related processes into their own works and lives. The discourse opened as well to include what Schechner called the "poetics of performance" across the spectrum of the arts, and it also tied in with movements of self-definition and cultural liberation among third-world ethnic groups in the United States and elsewhere.

At that conference it became clear—at least to me—that this ethnopoetics could no longer be easily contained within set boundaries—that it had already expanded beyond the "primitive," the "archaic," the "non-western," even the "oral" (that great cornerstone of a new poetics we had taken such efforts to give its rightful place). My own work—I was then assembling *A Big Jewish Book*—was also struggling with such boundaries, as limiting as all boundaries are, however strong the need to bring that forward which has been too long suppressed. And from the time when I had done *Technicians of the Sacred* as a "range of poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania," I was concerned, say, by the absence of the western, the European, from that configuration. As I had presented it there, the

western/non-western dichotomy seemed too sharp, excluding as it did a whole range of (largely) subterranean traditions, still active into the present and emerging often in those contemporary poetics to which I felt the closest. What was wanted, I came to feel, was an expansion of the discourse to include the European and western—despite the fears I had (and still have) about the distortions and political uses of mythology and folklore in the context of nineteenth and twentieth-century European nationalism. This “European project,” so to speak, is a work I’ve now set for myself in undertaking a revised edition of *Technicians of the Sacred*—along with attempts to make clear a number of points about the old poetics (the ur-poetics) that seem to need more insistence than I’ve yet been able to give them.

These ur-poetics, on their western side, would link the present to what Snyder calls the Great Subculture and George Quasha “the Other Tradition,” suggesting a link “from what (Frances) Yates calls ‘The Rosicrucian Enlightenment,’ through Blake, Goethe, and Nerval, on to Alfred Jarry, Erik Satie, certain Dadaists and Surrealists, unclassifiable poets like René Daumal and Harry Crosby, and into the present.” (Something like that, since the lines are complicated and would vary greatly from poet to poet.) (Snyder, e.g. on its Western European side: “a powerful undercurrent in all higher civilizations...which runs...without break from Paleo-Siberian Shamanism and Magdalenian cave-painting; through megaliths and Mysteries, astronomers, ritualists, alchemists and Albigensians, gnostics and Vagantes, right down to Golden Gate Park.”) As fundamental poetic process—still alive among us—the ways presented (not as systems but ways!) would help heal the split between self and other: to locate in the west (as Sylvia Wynter pointed out in the earlier Milwaukee conference) “alternate modes of cognition ideologically suppressed in ourselves, yet still a living force amidst large majorities of the third-world peoples.”

The call I felt at that Milwaukee symposium was to integrate ethno-poetics into a fuller human/(pan)human poetics. The term “human poetics” was David Antin’s, and as someone asked me the other day, what poetry isn’t “human”? As Antin used it, anyway, the discussion ran (in part) like this:

Among (the) grab-bag of human language activities are a number of more or less well-defined universal discourse genres, whose expectation structures are the source of all poetic activity. If there is any place that we should look for an ETHNOPOETICS it is here, among these universal genres, where all linguistic

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invention begins. For by an ETHNOPOETICS I mean Human Poetics. I suppose *ethnos* = people, and therefore ETHNOPOETICS = People's Poetics or the poetics of natural language... [And again:] What I was afraid of in the term ETHNOPOETICS was the historical legacy of the term *ethnos*, a kind of anthropological commitment to exoticism, to whatever is remote from us and somehow different—tribal if we are not tribal, religious if we are secular, dark if we are light, etc. Here *ethnos* = other, so not Human Poetics but the Poetics of the Other.

I take this as an attempt to understand poetry over the fullest human range, including (for Antin centrally) the neglected everyday use of language to discover and transform. A search for “universal genres” and for continuities between the language of poetry and all human language, that can, at the same time, honor distinctions and differences/potentials as a way of undercutting that most arrogant assertion of a difference in kind between one's self and any other.

The project, so stated, probably sounds more magnanimous than it really is—because it's clearly, like all such projects, involved above all with our own benefit, our own enhanced understanding or participation. The “we” in this case are of course not merely Westerners or Europeans but all contemporaries, wherever situated, who live with a sense of a larger world than that of our own locality and culture. For those the possibilities of learning and acting can proliferate—unavoidably, I would think, as in the very nature of the lives we live. The question, then, isn't whether we *should* formulate an approach to the “other” (and therefore to ourselves) or enlarge our discourse and practice by so doing—but whether we do it well or badly.

That question of the “well” or “badly” is crucial and thorny—probably the central issue for any such meeting as the present one. It is late in the game by now, and it seems to me (given whatever experience I've had with it) that we're still overwhelmed by preconceptions as we enter on this work. I have tried, myself, to argue against certain of these preconceptions which I find questionable or disproven by the actual investigation. And again and again I find that part of my work the hardest to get across. A few explicit warnings, therefore:

- that we must, above all, avoid too obvious assumptions about the poetics/ethnopoetics of technologically simpler cultures—which led me to begin *Technicians* with an emphasis on the *complexity* of tribal/oral language and (ritual) art;
- that we must question—by investigation—the idea that traditional art is collective rather than individual, reflective,

as Paul Radin wrote, of "an individualism run riot";

— that we must not assume that it is our culture alone (or those cultures most like our own) that has introduced reflexivity/self-reflection into the creative process, when scholars like Victor Turner have taken such pains to demonstrate the reflexive nature of ritual and art throughout the full range of human cultures;

— that we can no longer assume that the poetry and ritual of traditional cultures aim at stasis rather than change— transformation not only in a mystical sense but in a social sense as well (human nature/culture, where and whenever, is *neophilic* in the ethological sense, or in Olson's paraphrasing of Heraclitus: "What does not change/is the will to change");

and we must be careful not to assume:

— that orality totally defines "them" or that writing totally defines "us" (an expanded ethnopoetics would include an ethnopoetics of writing/of the book);

nor should we overlook:

— that people have thought long and hard, everywhere, about language and performance;

— that a poetics (a generalized "idea of poetry") has arisen again and again in the total human story, no more or less "universal" than the Athenian poetics which gave a start to one such line of thought in the west;

— that even this one line of thought is threatened;

— that poets in our world remain a threatened culture;

— that the poeticide envisioned by a Rimbaud or an Apollinaire is—the N.E.A. aside—a real and present danger;

— that the weapon of annihilation is indifference: a loss of spirit;

— that what threatens the other threatens us as well. . . again, as Sylvia Wynter had had it in the 1975 symposium: "There can be no concept of a liberal mission to save 'primitive poetics' for 'primitive' peoples.' The salvaging of vast areas of our being, is dialectically related to the destruction of those conditions which block the free development of the human potentialities of the majority peoples of the (third) world."

And we must remember, to our own good:

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—that a poetry of the mind (spirit)/a visionary poetry is not only to be found apart from us; that while it permeates many old cultures, it has, since the nineteenth century at least, become a dominant mode among our own poets (and in some sense has probably always been that, as a kind of crypto [hidden] vision). And knowing that, we have the advantage of discovering in the traditional cultures how such modes have permeated whole populations and how they've been carried forward over millenia.

By doing this we can also discover forms we've barely dreamed of or we can ignore them to our own loss and hardly (as far as I can see) to *their* advantage. One result of a continuing ethnopoetics will be that our own poetry will cease to be "modern" (as Tzara, a major forerunner in the work of ethnopoetics, had long ago predicted) and will emerge, with the dissolution of modernism, as what it was all along: "a state of mind (esprit)"...not an interest in a "new technique" but "in the spirit."

If we can do all of this, while maintaining/fostering a respect for both distant traditions and cultures (with their own localisms and particularities) and for the displaced and estranged and pervasive aspects of our own, we will have served both the poetic and the human.