

Tuning as Lyricism: The Performances of Orality in the Poetics of Jerome Rothenberg and David Antin

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Tuning might be the figure best suited to joining this pair of apparently incongruous texts, tuning in the sense defined by David Antin as “a negotiated concord or agreement based on vernacular physical actions with visible outcomes like walking together,” as opposed to understanding, which is predicated, Antin contends, “on a geometrical notion of congruence.”¹ The latter typifies a poetic culture Antin and Jerome Rothenberg would identify as literal, possessing a relatively rigid relationship to language and heritage, wielding text as an instrument for modeling and containing meaning, while the former is characteristic of what Antin has called a “software society” whose programming stresses the continuity of process rather than any final product, presupposing a work’s adaptation to the ambient context at hand.² Tuning as figure situates the poetic act in the realm of the oral/aural without recourse to romantic assumptions surrounding the singularity and presence of lyric voice or naïve “anthropological” notions of cultural origins. A poet working in this mode is simply “someone who could talk when the time came could remember other talking,”³ tuning him or herself to the other as effectively by means of broadcast and recording technology as through immediate communion.

1. David Antin and Charles Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin* (New York, 2002), p. 53.

2. Antin, *Tuning* (New York, 1984), p. 177. *Literal* is a revision of *literate*, a term deemed overly narrow in its conception of the opposition between societies inclined to write and those not inclined; the literal includes mark-making processes not restricted to the alphabetic.

3. Antin, *Talking at the Boundaries* (New York, 1976), p. 185.

Tuning, moreover, suggests a constant reciprocal adjustment akin to that of the dialogue unfolding, explicitly and implicitly, across the multichanneled careers of Antin and Rothenberg.

Though at first the sensibilities at work in the performances herein transcribed might seem to hover at odds with one another, they are products of an intellectual formation shared on many fronts and, indeed, co-created. Since the time of their auspicious meeting in 1950 at Manhattan's City College, the two authors have developed archives and forms of address stemming from a mutual interest in oral and performance culture, evolving particularly inventive responses to the postwar recuperation of orality launched in the American poetic sphere by Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" that same year.⁴ In their individual ways, these bodies of work track the outcomes of listening together to jazz, then to so-called primitive yet rigorously denaturalized poetics for a way out of the crossroads and impasse of Auschwitz—at a moment when both past and future demanded redefinition.⁵ The conversations that ensued took print form as Rothenberg and Antin brought out emergent artist/authors and collaborative translations with Hawk's Well Press, cofounded in 1958 and named, suggestively, after the play by William Butler Yeats based on the stories of Cuchulain, yet inspired by the aesthetics of Noh. This editorial dialogue persisted in the late sixties through their magazine *some/thing*, which collaged the traditional or "tribal" with contemporary experimental poetry and art by Robert Morris, Carolee Schneemann, Andy Warhol, and others. Their magazine *some/thing* insisted on the dissonance as well as the affinities between juxtaposed pieces elicited in the process; *some/thing's* launching manifesto (by Antin) declares, "ALL SPEECH IS AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE TO RECOVER OR DISCOVER AND TRANSMIT SOME

4. See Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Poetry New York*, no.3 (1950): 13–22, which privileges the role of the ear and the breath in poetry. For a reading of the postwar period's poetic phonocentrism and its relation to recording technology, see Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 196–224.

5. Rothenberg often describes the midcentury moment by saying that "past & future [were] up for grabs"; see, for example, his biographical note in *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised*, ed. Donald Allen and George Butterick (New York, 1994), p. 422.

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ORDER YET ALL SPEECH GENERATES SOME NOISE”—placing harmony and noise on a continuum, refusing to favor one over the other.⁶

The poetic culture to be recovered and invented along the way would be plural, an assemblage of many worlds, each an other to the mind presupposed by hegemonic Western culture, as Rothenberg points out here—each defamiliarized and defamiliarizing, that is, even if hailing from a nearer distance in time or space, as in the case of the modernists they regarded as touchstones or the marginal or submerged European cultures (particularly Jewish cultures of exile) later researched. So that while Rothenberg gravitated toward sacred and mythic texts and Antin’s background in linguistics drew him toward the secular, the colloquial, the pop, both were tuning to a range of voices—and noises—to form work that transgressed the boundaries of taste that academic culture had drawn between current and historical or seemingly ahistorical sources, or between literature and variously embodied poetic acts.⁷ The resonance between traditional and modern schools came to be explored in the movement Rothenberg was, in 1968, to name ethnopoetics and that took a cue from Gertrude Stein’s dictum that “the exciting thing about all this is that as it is new it is old and as it is old it is new, but now we have come to be in our way which is an entirely different way.”⁸ This cooperative project—whose core participants have included Dennis Tedlock, Diane Rothenberg, Gary Snyder, and Antin—constitutes an “ongoing attempt to reinterpret the poetic past from the point of view of the present,” as Rothenberg puts it.⁹ Extending and revising the modernist interest in nonascendant aesthetics, it treats traditional and autochthonous poetics not as exotic novelties or receptacles of ethnographic data but as integral aesthetic values ineluctably in relation to our “own,” with the capacity to alter contemporary language and perception dramatically.¹⁰ The critical/creative labor of translation, adaptation, and variation—itself a kind of tuning—crystallizes these relations.

Each of the transcripts presented here documents and reflects upon a

6. *something* 1, reprinted in *The Postmoderns*, p. 37. I delineate here only the core of their editorial collaboration; further work helping found *Chelsea Review* in the late fifties and on *Alcheringa* in the seventies, for example, extended the conversation.

7. See, for example, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetics from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*, ed. Rothenberg (Berkeley, 1985) and *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*, ed. Rothenberg (Albuquerque, 1991).

8. Gertrude Stein, *Narration: Four Lectures* (Chicago, 2010), p. 21.

9. See “Jerome Rothenberg,” writing.upenn.edu/wh/people/fellows/rothenberg.html

10. See Rothenberg, “The Future of Poetry in the Computer Age: The *Medusa* Interview,” *Ideas of Order in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Oliver Scheiding and Diana Von Finck (Bonn, 2007), p. 24.

tuning process. Rothenberg tunes to poets of different sexes and the café traffic in a culture only partially “understood,” responding in full awareness of his status as guest within the *renshi* form, while Antin orchestrates his spiel according to the more familiar stipulations of a university audience in Buffalo. Each improvisation is conditioned further by the terms of a distant but equally pressing succession of poets, storytellers, philosophers, and god-vestiges, alien and akin, stretching epochs back in time; each discursive adjustment has to attend as alertly to *them*. Played by ear before being registered self-consciously as text, each performative utterance is already haunted by ghostly traces of remote company, outmoded contexts. Yet a sense of the permeability of (re)sources radically removed from one another makes a Jewish great-grandmother’s idiom and the formulas of Japanese myth or the tactics of dada and Goliath happy pairs in the gamut of possibly convivial genres of telling. The *soku* or “distant links” between speech acts—acting as bridges and walls—are constructed swiftly and without the demand that references be perfectly corrected or comprehended, in the literal sense. The poetic act emerges as a pulse of potentially infinite rapprochement and estrangement—until time, for the moment, runs out.

Antin’s “talk” pieces, even in their subsequent written forms, insist that argument and testimony are “always internalized in the language and experience of the speaker.”¹¹ A poetics of hiccups takes that notion to its extreme. In scrupulous layperson’s terms, Antin explains that a hiccup is an anomalous esophageal spasm. It turns out that hiccups result most immediately from tic-like spasms of the breathing muscles. But while focusing on the diaphragm would accentuate the interruption of respiration, the short circuit on which Antin chooses to dwell (this disorder’s origin in the movement of stomach acid into the esophagus) shifts collective attention to a discomfiting interference of the functions of speaking and “inspiration” by a digestive function, instigated by the organ whose name means “entry into devouring.” Such interference recalls Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s contention, in their study of Franz Kafka, that “rich or poor, each language always implies a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue, and the teeth.”¹² In clamping down the vocal cords, the hiccup amplifies the inherent disjunction between speech and more carnal compulsions and, in these lines, the even greater disjunction between writing

11. Antin and Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin*, p. 12.

12. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 19. Deleuze and Guattari continue, “Writing goes further in transforming words into things capable of competing with food. Disjunction between content and expression” (*ibid.*).

and consumption. By insisting on the esophageal origins of this telling, foregrounding the stuttered syntax of consciousness it generates, Antin reminds us of the risks, the vulnerability entailed in producing collaborative exchange, the poetic text as both intra- and interpersonal—and stresses that the cooperation of tuning doesn't at all equal consensus.