

**Interview with JR, November 19, 2011 at the NW SPokenword LAB in Auburn, WA, conducted by Paul Nelson [www.paulnelson.com](http://www.paulnelson.com)**

PN: Read the introduction of a typical poetry anthology and you get something like this from William Harmon in the top 500 poems:

*The 19<sup>th</sup> Century seems to have been a golden age for poetry, from first to last. I do not believe the 20<sup>th</sup> will ever look so good. I am not the first to remark that the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century work in prose.*

I guess it depends where you look from. From Jerome Rothenberg's perspective, based on his own work, inspirations and his anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century verse, it looks amazing. Describing his poetry career as an ongoing attempt to reinterpret the poetic past from the point of view of the present, Jerome is a performance poet pioneer, anthologist, translator and author of over 50 books of poetry. The man who helped found the branch of Ethnopoetics, Jerome was the visiting poet for Fall 2001 at the Northwest Spoken Word Lab in Auburn, Washington, and is our special guest today on the program.

Jerry, it's been a tremendous weekend and thanks for being here.

JR: It's been a great weekend for me, too.

PN: Excellent. You told students at Auburn High School on Friday morning that your first poet outside of English was Federico Garcia Lorca, or should I say, Garthia Lorca. You were even younger than they were when you discovered his work. Tell us about that.

JR: Well, I was about 15 or 16. My brother, who is eight years older than me was just out of the Army and studying at New York University, and a teacher of his, a lovely man named Tom-, Thomas Riggs. When my brother showed him some of my poetry, became a very encouraging mentor for me, and began to introduce me to work that, of course, at that point I had not come across on my own, and you know, that included from the Spanish, the martyred poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, who had been killed by the fascists at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. He was the first poet, certainly the first contemporary poet that I had read in another language, or the first poet I had read whose work was in another language. And made a terrific impression on me through my teens and through my 20s, and you know, I've carried that with me into the present. And Lorca, in fact, was an influence on a great many American poets.

So I tried some translations from Lorca because even then I was given to translation much more enthusiasm and I think an ability with translation than with languages, as such. And partly, translation became important for me as a way of coming to grips with other poets and other poetry by entering into a perhaps one-sided collaboration between myself and whoever it was that I was translating.

Then many years later, I was given the opportunity or commission to translate a series of poems by Lorca, early poems of his that he called “The Suites”, using that musical term, suites, and I translated over 200 pages of those and that was, I think, maybe the biggest translation project I’d ever been engaged with, up to that point.

PN: Yeah. Even though you weren’t aware of it as a very young man, 14, 15 years old, you had a sense of the power of the Duende, as Lorca calls it.

JR: Yeah, Lorca in a very wonderful essay that he delivered, I think, shortly after visiting New York and on his way back to Spain, in Cuba, trying to describe a sense of the powers that he felt in poetry. He used the word, “Duende” which is a, oh, a kind of a figure in Spain like a troll or a Leprechaun or in the oldest and most powerful sense of the word, a fairy spirit. But he used it to describe a kind of poetry that fell to the poet as it being engaged in a struggle. And not invocation to a beloved muse but a power battle with a kind of force of nature. And I think Lorca felt that this was, well knew that it was a term that was used by the Flamenco singers and musicians with whom he was in very close contact. “Whatever has black sounds,’ he said, ‘has Duende.” So that kind of power that he was trying to get into the poetry.

Although, aside from that, he was also a very beautiful, elegant and graceful and, you know, and sometimes a comic but witty poet.

PN: Playful.

JR: Playful. Playful poet.

PN: Yeah. And the Duende exists when there is the possibility of death.

JR: Yeah, so death has been a circumstance lurking behind a lot of poetry. We’re quite aware of that, you know, even at the most popular level. I mean, that is to say, when people in our own culture who would seem to be separated from, alienated from poetry, actually get around to writing poetry, it’s so often in relation

to the death of somebody, as if no other language can be used at that point. You want that that special language, and whatever the results may be. There is at certain key moments in life, still today, turning to poetry as a form of expression. And I very happily recognize that, and you see the work of other poets as really not too distant from that. A confrontation with death and suffering. And but also other deep forms of human experience, joyful ones, as well as tragic ones.

PN: We're talking with Jerome Rothenberg. He's the author of over 50 books of poetry. He's a translator, performance poet pioneer, and editor of several groundbreaking anthologies, including *Poems for the Millennium*. I'm Paul Nelson.

*Lorca Variations* is a book of yours that was created after you were not able to publish those translations of the Suites, as you had expected. Maybe you can tell us about that experience, and more importantly, about the process of writing the *Lorca Variations*.

JR: Yeah, the experience was simply that I had been commissioned to do the complete Suites of Lorca by Farrar Strauss, a big publisher in New York, and it was to be part of a large collected poems of Lorca in English. So, the biggest English language version of Lorca yet published. But my understanding was that I would also be permitted prior to that publication, to publish my translations as a separate volume. And I thought of this as my return to Lorca and a kind homage to a poet who had been important to me at the beginning of my career as a maker of poetry.

Well, publication plans changed for Farrar Strauss and they rushed a big book into publication and suddenly I found that, I was included as part of this large volume, but without a separate publication as homage. And I felt very badly about that, but then figured I had other means for carrying through on paying my respects to Federico and so I entered into a process of writing in which I went back to a number of the poems in Suites, and with each poem I extracted all of the English nouns. I mean, that's in other words, this is my translation, you know, and although it's Lorca's poems to start with, the words are words of our language or words that I selected as the poet translator. And I set the words up in columns and moved among the columns, picking out the words, all of the nouns in the Lorca poems, and sometimes in a very systematic way, sometimes in a very free way. You know, but so as to, in each poem, have all of Lorca's nouns attended to. And poems emerged that on the one hand were very different, and on the other hand, were clearly Lorca. It was a step for me beyond translation. You know, it's not paraphrased. It's really a way of creating new poems based on the gathering of

words from the other poet and the result was a book of 33 poems plus one – 34 poems called, I called *The Lorca Variations*.

PN: Yeah, and the key word, I guess, is ‘other’ and when we look at the stance toward poetry that many in the avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century take, as opposed to the mainstream, there’s less of an ego involved and more of a poet as medium, or at least as person who allows other voices into the poem, and chance operations. And you use the ‘othering’ during your workshop. Of course you put that on word processor and it’s gonna red line it as not being a word, but we . . .

JR: Yeah, it does it all the time.

PN: [laughs] Well . . .

JR: That’s why we cut out that function from our computers.

PN: It’s tough for poets, isn’t it? It just . . .

JR: Yeah, ha.

PN: It just doesn’t get poetry, but why don’t you tell us about this notion of ‘othering’ and the notion of trying to, as Olson said, ‘Rid yourself of the lyrical interference of the ego.’

JR: Yeah, well, because we all carry our egos with us so, you know, it is perhaps a vain ambition to think that you’re going to rid yourself of ego. But lyrical interference, I mean, the lyric is taken, if we take it not in the sense of song, but in the sense of a first person poetry in the most subjective form of poetry. Ultimately, this has its limitations. It throws the poet back on himself, herself and that’s OK, but it also narrows down the field of poetry. And when we imagine ourselves to be part of a lineage going back to a Homer or a Dante or a Shakespeare, poetry is a big proposition there. Partly it’s big because Dante, Shakespeare, Homer, worked extensively and these were larger works. But even the possibility that in the shorter work, the short poem then, the medium-size poem, that there would be room for more than that kind of vaunted self-expression. The possibility of being able to express other selves, selves other than me, that the poet can be a spokesman for others and bear witness in the name of others. And this is, I think, has been an ambition of poetry and let’s say, poets in America, you know, going back to the time of the great founding poet, Walt Whitman, who in the great poem cryptically

called *Song of Myself*, attempted to bring all possible selves into the poem for everything belonging to me, as well belongs to you, he said.

PN: Voices of the diseased and . . . and so on and so forth.

JR: Yeah. Also, the long suppressed. ‘Through me, many long suppressed voices,’ Whitman says. And that has, for years been uppermost in my mind. And so techniques of poetry, collage appropriation, chance operations, the kind of variations that I’m speaking about, have seemed to me to be, not just ways of playing around with language, but ways of “othering”, of bringing the voices of others into the poem. And in that sense, also, not just to establish identity, but in a way, to put identity into question.

PN: Yeah. “Othering” and some of those other processes you’re talking about, quite often allow for prophecy to come into the poem, and reading “Second New York Poem” from the *Lorca Variations* in the Olympic National Park, the week of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, we left, shortly after hearing the news, and that was our plan. There was some amazing synchronicity and this, the book, *The Lorca Variations*, was published, what? In ’93 or something like that?

JR: Well, . . . something like that, yeah, in ’93.

PN: Yeah. So . . . Can you read the first two sections of the New York poem? I think I have it bookmarked there.

JR: Yeah. It begins with a quote from Lorca saying, you know, the mask, look at the mask, how it comes from Africa to New York. And the first section, the first *title*, the first section is titled: “They Are Gone, the Pepper Trees.”

[1]

Half of it was sand  
    & what remained  
                    was mercury & made him  
tremble,  
    too afraid to rub it in  
                    while visioning  
a hippopotamus who stalked through  
    everlastings,  
                    & other animals who crossed

those endless bridges,  
whom he could bring down  
with a spear,  
that beaks grown dormant,  
their flesh nailed onto trees,  
from which he used to cut his masks,  
would wear his masks around  
New York, half crazy  
wasn't he,  
the bright Gazelle mask flashing  
where he walked,  
what joy to be among you  
at this gathering,  
he thought,  
to spend this time with you  
here with the wheat rots,  
swan's rut, camels  
plod among the peppers,  
in the mask that shows you fear,  
the mask dissolving into sand,  
like solitude and ashes  
where the light has died away  
so recently,  
the cat is playing with a cork,  
& all things come into this other light  
the phosphorous ignites  
over New York, where death  
's a crocodile, & sunlight  
makes the world  
grow darker, where a sword cuts through  
my throat, my feet,  
where silence covers everything,  
where eyes turn white,  
where time turns inside out  
like valleys  
rife with mutilated buds  
in Africa,  
inviting us to join  
their dance of death.

The second section is called, 'Canyons of Line Imprisoned.'

[2]

A fond farewell  
at the border. See the dead  
    & how they hunker down,  
who bring us hurricanes,  
    those naked masks,  
    those shameless tumulters,  
who tempt us with strange lights  
    horses will ride past,  
    slender mounts for children,  
edging their way through niches,  
    squeezing  
    into bank vaults,  
Wall Street poor and empty,  
    roofs on which manometers  
    break into pieces,  
& the channels they leave behind  
    excite the iris,  
    yes, and voices  
cut across New York, & someone  
    wears a mask  
    that looks like North America,  
& someone else counts up  
    the unemployed, whose numbers  
    brought together in a frozen dance,  
o Lorca,  
    darken the sky.  
    These herds are what we will become,  
their frenzy  
    will be ours tomorrow,  
    o my naked heart,  
we watch the sphinx together,  
    squatting inside this cemetery,  
    she with a bank director's mask  
& you, a chinaman's,  
    your profiles soon identical  
    except that you

still sing your deep song  
while the sky fills up  
with down, & fireflies  
grow faint and then invisible.  
Time hides  
inside you, can you feel it?  
does it press against your mask?  
whose groans  
are rising in this place?  
whose blood is on our blueprints  
even now?  
is there a formula to chart  
the impetus we feel? a yellow thread  
to recollect it?  
when I dance, the naked wife says,  
it is no less for money,  
when I give you tail  
you fade in me and die,  
the stillness  
overtakes you, sky  
is split asunder,  
lime & mire splatter on the snow,  
the night makes even gold  
turn black for us  
who wait here at our windows,  
watch old columns  
lit by flames,  
the impetus returning  
like a wheel that spins  
forever  
in an empty bank vault,  
see it with your own eyes,  
hear it cross this space  
in silence,  
watch her naked body  
in your mirrors,  
feel the sap press upward,  
as if moving among mountains,  
guano everywhere,  
to drown in guano



living,  
buried in its canyons.

PN: Wow. Now, you know, because I set it up as being potentially prophetic, have heard the poem several times, I've read it out loud several times, but it's just amazing how you can just click off -- and maybe I'm reading this into it, but "where the light has died away so recently, phosphorus ignites over New York, the dance of death and old columns lit by flames" -- And you were in New York City when it happened.

JR: Yeah. I . . . we, my wife and I were in New York for a month. We had arrived there a few days before. We were in a friend's loft while the friend was traveling. In Tribeca, so that is close to what then came to be called Ground Zero, close to the World Trade Center, and, yeah, it was [sighs] . . . it was a way, in . . . in a way, the reading of, not just that, but of a lot of poetry took on a sense of the prophetic form. But, you know, if poets have antennae or, if poems have an antenna, I think that apprehensions and anxieties are being . . . It's both prophetic and of course it's also looking back to what one recognizes. Certainly as the devastations and holocausts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and all of this is, there's a potential for violence and destruction in the world that we ignore and always have ignored at our risk. And I think when poetry opens up, it also opens up to these violent cataclysmic possibilities. So here, I'm working with a vocabulary from a poem of the 1930s by Lorca. And I think maybe if you went back to Lorca's *Poet in New York*, that anxious sense, this period, the short 20-year period between one World War and another World War, and already, with that destruction beginning to manifest itself in Lorca's country, Spain, that will make him one of its victims. But I think poetry has intent. Poetry, other arts, other forms of human expression. I don't want to put poetry, sort of, on its own pedestal as the only way that one gets to some accurate and powerful vision of the world.

PN: Understood. Our guest is Jerome Rothenberg, the author of over 50 books of poetry. He was reading from *The Lorca Variations*, which is published by New Directions.

Well, we were talking about *The Lorca Variations* and your being in New York City, and not only were you there when it happened, but it's also your hometown. So tremendous feelings about that. You know, they've talked about potentially flying a plane into the Sears Tower in Chicago, the tallest building in the country, which is

my hometown so even the thought of that happening, just really affects me in a very deep cellular level.

And another poem which . . . well, in a sense is also prophetic, is called “Lorca Variation 19, In a Time of War,” and I mean, poetry and war go back [laughs] many, many years before they’re even, when poetry was just a spoken act so . . .

JR: Yeah, including poets I can think of who . . . who write poetry in favor of war [laughs]

PN: Yes, right [laughs]

JR: And I don’t wanna give poets a . . .

PN: No.

JR: . . . completely lean slate is, you know, the . . .

PN: Right.

JR: . . . but . . .

PN: But maybe, maybe reading that poem, to give us a start for this section of the interview.

JR: Yeah, I mean, again, the words are taken from, nouns are taken from a translation that I did of the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, who himself was a victim of a war.

### The Lorca Variations XIX, In a Time of War

[1]

Snuffed out in mind  
or heart  
the war sucks up the dew,  
dries out the spring,  
the water thickens,  
daisies wilt,  
a stone drops through

a dark lake,  
near a silver mountain,  
nightingales  
lie dead,  
a tremor uproots three  
black trees,  
uproots the memory  
of trees  
& oxen,  
the poppies from another war,  
another homeland.

[2]

War makes a prisonhouse a thousand cells crisscross in:  
a universe we enter down a single road.

[3]

A widow in the darkness gathers roots the slender stem of  
an acacia curving in the love she brings a love that floats  
like butterflies over the road to war.

[4]

Inside the glass a crystal moon lives war will shatter into  
flowers in the endless night.

[5]

Once the night grew tamer once the stars, destroyed by war  
inside their hive fled to the open air.

[6]

Moon acacia water lily star: even a year of war won't hide or  
tame them.

[7]

War waiting in the gateway to the hive.

PN: “Lorca Variations XIX, In a Time of War”. Jerome Rothenberg, the poet, reading from his work. Let’s go to the anthology work. *Poems for the Millennium*, for me, is just absolutely amazing and overwhelming. I don’t consider myself a scholar so perhaps that’s part of it. But it’s just an incredible document, and something that someone could go over, literally, for the rest of their life and still continue to get richness from it. Can you tell us about how that project was initiated?

JR: Well, it was something that was brewing in my mind or a long time and I think, oh, you know, maybe 12, maybe 15 years before, actually getting a contract to do the work, I had begun to propose something like it to the publishers that I had worked with. I’ve been given to making anthologies for some time, seeing the anthology as a kind of massive assemblage and epic work that I could create from many different resources. And always with the idea, not to do an anthology that was a recapitulation of other anthologies that were themselves recapitulations of other anthologies. But the anthology as an instrument for presenting work that had been ignored, set aside, or even despised by literary communities and others. Or, as I once wrote about why I write poetry, that I try to write poems, which are necessary to me and which have not existed otherwise. I try to make anthologies that have not existed otherwise and for which I feel a real need, a real necessity.

My sense was that wherever I look, the assessment of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which was then, moving towards closure, had slighted what seemed to me to be some of the most important product as poems of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. That the books had it wrong or I think at a certain point in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century weren’t even trying to make a general assessment. It’s difficult to bring a hundred years of poetry or anything else into a single place, a single book.

But I thought it was still important in our time, not to let that part of the near past slip away without making some statement on my behalf and on the behalf of other poets with whom I work. Some statement about how we really saw the poetry of the century. So I thought I was not just speaking for myself but, but speaking for others, and I think that actually was true.

PN: And and specifically addressing the folks who I mentioned in-, at the beginning of our chat, Willis Harmon talking about the best work of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and writings in prose. So you’re, in a sense, addressing folks with that point of view.

JR: Yeah, and no, I think it was, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which continues and . . . To Be Continued into the 21<sup>st</sup>, was an extraordinary century for poetry. It was certainly my century. You know, I'm happy to have made it into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but Paul, for you, for me, we are people who have spent our lives in what was called the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

PN: Yeah, and that makes it a difficult situation for you, or could be a difficult situation because here you are, looking back at the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, at the different schools and the different writers from that era, trying to carve out what you thought was the essence, and probably making some difficult decisions. And you, yourself, are one of the leading figures of the American avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. So very difficult where you have to put yourself in. Not only as someone looking at the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but an active and vibrant participant in it. So, was that difficult for you?

JR: Yes and no. I . . . This is not the first anthology that I've done and preceding the anthologies, I've been the publisher/editor of three or four little magazines. And early along I and some others, and in fact, at one point everybody I knew had a magazine. It was [laughs] it was a time in the 1960s. I hardly knew a poet who didn't have a magazine or wasn't on the board of some magazine. Of course the question came up, do we publish ourselves? Or are we that totally self-effacing, that we just put ourselves out of the picture and act as the, you know, the objective selectors. But we really didn't think that that would -- the point was, you know, that we were a part of whatever we did. So when it came to the anthologies, also, you come up against that. Do I put myself into it? Well, I was into it anyway, you know, just . . .

PN: Well, the notion of objectivity, I think, is something that maybe was strongly considered in the 20<sup>th</sup>-, or reconsidered in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I mean, Heisenberg talking about, you know, how if you are viewing an experiment, you're having an effect on it. So the notion of objectivity is really kind of ludicrous.

JR: Yeah. I also thought, there was something in particular as we came to the second volume of *Poems for the Millennium*. Ah, you know, we have come into our own time. This is the time that I became a poet and Pierre Joris became a poet. Most of the poets that I know became poets. But how can I present that part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, that part of my lifetime, without being quite frank about myself as a participant in it.

The more difficult thing, of course, was that some number of poets, could not be because, they're as big as those books are there. There are limits and you end up making some bad decisions. Ultimately, I think I once said, we would like to put out an anthology of everybody. But that exists perhaps in the mind of God, but there's no way of [laughs] of getting a publisher to consider doing it.

PN: The Dadas were quite an inspiration for you. Can you tell us how you discovered them and what it is about them that resonates with you.

JR: Yeah, the Dadas, in both poets and painters, and as far as memory recollects, some dancers that were also connected with it, but the Dada poets . . . Certainly that was one of the groupings that we wanted to get into *Poems for the Millennium*. Certainly, when I was first coming into poetry, the Dadas in the general appraisal of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we're not on television, so you can't see the gesture I'm making with my finger [laughs]. But they were a very, very small part of that story. And yet, when the artist, the American artist, Robert Motherwell, in the later 1950s published a collection and anthology called *The Dada Painters and Poets*, my eyes opened wide, as did the eyes of many others. And although he included very little poetry in it, the talk about the poetry and the talk about the poets led me to look further into that work, and I approached it with a sense of great kinship between us, if we, who are younger poets in 1960, and this generation of my father. And I wanted, at that point, in fact, to do a small anthology of Dada poets, not with anything else what the poems presented there. And I announced it for the little press that I had, and said that I was preparing a collection of Dada poetry to be called *That Dada Strain*, and I never carried through on that. But, many years later I published a book of my own poems, called *That Dada Strain*, in which the poems are addressed to, one by one, to the poets of Dada. And in *Poems for the Millennium*, there is the Dada section, a section that does not exist in other anthologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, along with a section on futurism and surrealism, and the objectivists, the negritude poets. And so, the Dada anthology, in effect, appears within *Poems for the Millennium*, 30-35 years later.

PN: And is it that irreverence, that sense of play? What is it that resonates with you?

JR: It's the irreverence, it's the sense and a movement that grows up during the First World War, of the shock to language and to consciousness, from the century's violence. Not the Dada's violence, so this kind of violence in their poetry and their language and in their art. But the sense of revulsion and the desire that they

express, by strong action on their own part, to cleanse language of the corruption that it's undergone in the name of nation, state and power.

PN: Advertising.

JR: Mm-hmm, and advertising . . .

PN: Yeah, yeah, which might now be more relevant to the situation than the nation state.

JR: Mm-hmm.

PN: You know, you talk about how your eyes opened up. I can sense that peoples' eyes open up when they hear you reciting Dada poetry. And their hearts, as well. Would you grace us with something? Maybe something from the *Dada Strain* or . . . whatever you choose.

JR: Yeah, well, this is speaking of Dada -- you want a long one or a short one?

PN: Well, maybe a short one.

JR: And this is the opening poem of that Dada Strain, called, "That Dada Strain."

the zig zag mothers of the gods  
of science the lunatic fixed stars  
& pharmacies  
fathers who left the tents of anarchism  
unguarded  
the arctic bones  
strung out on saint germain  
like tom toms  
living light bulbs  
aphrodisia  
"art is junk" the urinal  
says "dig a hole  
"& swim in it"  
a message from the grim computer  
"ye are hamburgers"

PN: [laughs] Maybe I should have picked a long one. And maybe some Hugo Ball. You know, when you did that the other night, that just lit people up. And, you know, we don't have the toy whistling device which I saw you do in Taos at the Poetry Circus.

JR: Yeah, well, I don't have the Hugo Ball, if it's the sound poem, I don't have the text in front of me.

PN: Oh, OK.

JR: But I'll do a poem addressed to Hugo Ball. And Hugo Ball was a German poet and these are all young poets who have come, escaping the war to Zurich and in Switzerland and there, set up a movement with a silly name, Dada, you know, as against the highfalutin other names that avant-garde movements have taken, like Acmeism and you know, expressionism, Rayonism. You know, here Dada is the name of the movement and they begin to do performances in a place they call, after the great rationalist philosopher, Voltaire, the Cabaret Voltaire and in one of the early performances, Hugo Ball gets up a . . . a costume, does sound poetry, loses consciousness, thinks he's having a, I guess *is* having, a great religious conversion experiences. Goes off into the mountains of Switzerland and dies there as a kind of Catholic Dada saint.

June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916, for that evening's reading, he made himself a special costume. His legs were in a shiny blue cylinder, which came up to his hips so that he looked like an obelisk. Over it he wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet on the inside, gold on the outside. It was fastened at the neck in such a way that he could give the impression of wing-like movement by raising and lowering his elbows. He also wore a high, blue and white striped witch doctor's hat.

### **A GLASS TUBE ECSTASY, FOR HUGO BALL**

a glass tube  
for my leg     says Hugo Ball  
my hat a cylinder  
in blue & white  
the night     the german ostriches     the sink  
he pisses in  
all these become his world  
his dada song, begun there  
holds the image  
until it comes at us:  
the image from its cross  
looks down:  
a ribbon  
a revolver  
mud



these contribute  
to his death  
also to what his death contributes  
later, too hysterical  
too sick with god  
& time:  
a carousel  
a roasted poet  
fish  
the queen says to his mind  
& enters  
where the street of mirrors starts  
she sees his face  
reflected  
in hunger of the world  
as pain, the consciousness  
of death not why we die  
but why we dream about it  
& why our dreams can't save  
the dying remnant  
Hugo  
as I write this poem  
the voice cries  
from a further room  
the dancer / singer calls me  
from a further room  
I step into an obelisk  
below the waist  
my mouth opens to sing  
but freezes  
shut  
in grief for you  
ombula  
take  
bitdli  
solunkola  
the collapse of language  
tabla tokta tokta takabala  
taka tak  
a glass tube ecstasy  
escapes from time  
babula m'balam  
the image & the word  
over your bed  
hang crucified  
again the cabaret explodes

again again  
fatigue  
one  
foot  
in glass  
a glass nerve  
&  
a priestly gas pump  
pulls  
her hair out

PN: Well, we're just about out of time and there's *many* things I'd like to talk to you about, but I guess I'd like to end on this note: You say in *Prefaces* and in other writings, in your *Book of Poetics* from many years ago. I'm guessing this was 1970s or something like that. You say in it, . . . "No poet solves the problem of vision under these changed circumstances. And by our own time it becomes evident that the function of poetry isn't to impose a single vision or consciousness but to *liberate* similar processes in others." Can you elaborate on that?

JR: Yeah, I think that's expressing . . . a hope for poetry and maybe it's clearer in the post World War II generation than it was for those earlier in the century. There have been kind of tyrannical forms of poetry and art. The Surrealists led by a very brilliant French poet, Andre Breton, tried to establish themselves on a kind of Soviet model, you know, with a board of directors, like a kind of Surrealist Politburo but more with the authoritative voice of Breton, himself. Part of the attraction of Dada, was in Tristan Tzara's declaration, although he could be pretty autocratic, you know, from time to time, and the true Dadas are against Dada. So that you undermine yourself when you're moving in the direction of total authority. You know, and rather, for many of those that I was with, it was possible to see ourselves as initiators of something in which others were invited to join, and to supersede us, rather than our laying down an authoritative rule. I can only say that for myself, this is-, it's been a *hope*, that the work could stimulate work in others, whether it's the poetry or the performances or the anthologies or whatever, you know, rather than . . . The discomfort with . . . there's a discomfort with finality and the and closing the door against anyone else entering.

PN: Well, we're gonna have to leave it at there because we're out of time. So many other questions to ask you. It's been such a delight and an honor to have you in our place and I wish you continued success, and thank you so much for the inspiration.

JR: Yeah, thank you, Paul.

PN: We've been talking with Jerome Rothenberg. He's the author of over 50 books of poetry. He's a translator, a performance poet pioneer and incredible anthologist, and he's been our visiting poet at SPLAB in Auburn, Washington for Fall 2001.