



Cascadian Zen Variations (Homage to Rothenberg)

The work of the late poet, translator and anthologist Jerome Rothenberg is poised to last many decades, perhaps centuries, after his April 21, 2024 death in California.

When he traveled to Auburn, Washington to read and give a workshop at the original SPLAB (Northwest Spokenword Lab) his latest book was *The Lorca Variations*. In the interview conducted in November 2001 about the process which led to *The Lorca Variations*, Rothenberg said:

JR: I entered into a process of writing in which I went back to a number of the poems in [Lorca's] Suites, and with each poem I *extracted* all of the *English* nouns. In other words, this is my translation, 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. But in each poem to 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. 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 I called *The Lorca Variations*.

PEN: The key word, I guess, is “other” and when we look at the stance toward poetry that many in the avant-garde of the Twentieth Century take, as opposed to the mainstream, there's less of an ego involved and more of a poet as medium, or at least a poet as person who allows other voices into the poem, chance operations. And you used the phrase “othering” during your workshop...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: Well, because we all carry our egos with us so, 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, a 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 and 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 has been an ambition of poetry and let's say, poets in America, 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.

PEN: "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, and 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...

Here's a chance for you to extract nouns from poets in *Cascadian Zen Volume I*, Empty Bowl basket. Start with a spread sheet like so:

Poet	Noun	Noun	Noun	Noun	Noun	Noun	Noun
Sam Hamill	years	mud	dirt	pollen	Avenues	teachers	muses

Maybe you will have read so much Sam Hamill that you can start to get into his head and maybe something Sam-ish comes out. This would be a form of othering. Maybe you get that electric feeling Eileen Myles described as “erotic, oddly / magnetic” and can write thru the styles of several of the poets of this basket. Maybe you have a better idea, doing a different poet, such as Lorca, or Bernadette Mayer or someone else near and dear to your heart, or just someone whose work you want a deeper engagement with.

Your task is to write a poem, or several, that provide an other perspective on Cascadian Zen by harvesting nouns that you normally would not use, from the Cascadian Zen text. Do not worry about whether the poems are “Zen” or not. Write in such a way that the language is something that is using you, as Duncan said: “I don’t use language, I cooperate with it.”

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12-MAY-2024
7pm
Casa del Colibrí

Works Cited:

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Rothenberg-Nov-2001-Part-2.mp3>

<https://paulenelson.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Jerome-Rothenberg-Nov-2011-Part-3.mp3>

<https://paulenelson.com/workshops/not-me-my-hunted-poem-exercise/>

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