Jerome
Rothenberg
PRE~FACES
& Other Writings

GEMATRIA (1978)

Gematria is the general term for a variety of traditional coding practices used by the Jewish mystic-poets to establish correspondences between words or series of words based on the numerical equivalence of the sums of their letters or on the interchange of letters according to a set system. The numerical method—*gematria* per se—typically took *alef* as 1, *bet* as 2, *yod* as 10, *kuf* as 100, etc., through *tav* (last letter) as 400—although more complicated methods (e.g., reduction to single digits, etc.) were later introduced. Non-numerical methods included: (1) anagrams, or rearrangements of the letters of a word to form a new word or word series, as "god" to "dog" in English; (2) *notarikon*, the derivation of a new word from the initial letters of several others & vice versa, as "god," say, from "garden of delight"; & (3) *temura*, various systems of letter code, e.g., the common one in which the first half of the alphabet is placed over the second & letters are substituted between the resultant rows, etc., *in search of meaningful combinations*.

Processes of this kind go back to Greek, even Babylonian, practice, & early enter the rabbinic literature. But the greatest development was among kabbalists from the twelfth century on, who used it both to discover divine & angelic names & to uncover correspondences between ideas & images by means free of subjective interference. When set out as poems, the resemblance of the *gematria* to a poetry of correspondences in our own time is evident, as also to instances of process poetry & art based on (more or less) mechanical formulas for the generation of both simple & extended series of permutations & combinations. Thus, Jackson Mac Low's "vocabularies," in which the text (or score) "is a drawing, painting or collage consisting of all the words I can think of (or fit on the paper or canvas) spelled solely with the letters of one person's name," are very close in method—even, ultimately, in intention—to the first non-numerical process described above.

While numerical *gematria* & coded *temura* come easily in a language like Hebrew which is written without vowels, the possibility of similar workings in English shouldn't be discounted. *Gematria*-generated poems can also be composed by translation from Hebrew; thus,

Messiah

Snake.

The Soul of Adam

Lilith.

The Garden

Shadow.
Stone.
The Brain.

The fact of translation may, in fact, add to the apparent "distance & power" of the combinations, a direct relationship that twentieth-century poets like Reverdy saw as the basis of the poetic image. [See above, page 149.]

A Big Jewish Book.

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Pre-Faces & Other Writings is the first collection of poetics by one of the most revolutionary literary innovators of our time. In addition to more than twenty volumes of his own poetry, Jerome Rothenberg has been active in a wide area of contemporary experimentation: poetry performance, both as "reading" and as "happening"; the assembling of radical anthologies and magazines (such as *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Alcheringa*) aimed at the creation of a fresh environment of poetries "freed from the bondage of a monolithic 'great tradition'"; and the exploration of new techniques of translation especially appropriate to tribal/oral poetry. Almost singlehandedly, he founded the interdisciplinary field of "ethnopoetics"—both as the investigation of poetry across the full range of human cultures and its practice in relation to our own. Called an "oral" poet by some, a "post-modernist" by others, Rothenberg's own views—both the theories and their applications—have never before been gathered; the present book is intended to show the continuities in his own evolving poetics. "I see all my work in this regard," he comments, "as a pre-face to something that comes after. If there's still any sense in talking of an avant-garde, then that must be it for me: an insistence that the work deny itself the last word, because the consequences of closure & the closed mind have been and continue to be horrendous in the world we know."

"Jerome Rothenberg is one of the truly contemporary American poets who has returned U.S. poetry to the mainstream of international modern literature. . . . No one writing today has dug deeper into the roots of poetry."
—Kenneth Rexroth

[Also by Jerome Rothenberg: *Poems for the Game of Silence*, NDP406, $3.95; *Poland/1931* (poetry), NDP379, $3.25; *A Seneca Journal* (poetry), NDP448, $3.95; *Vienna Blood* (poetry), NDP498, $4.95.]

Cover design by Denise Breslin