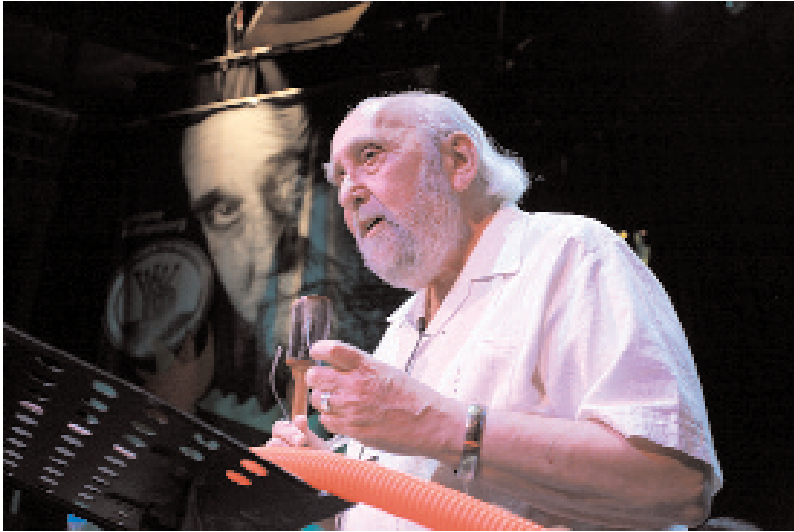


**THE WOLF INTERVIEW: JEROME ROTHENBERG**

**Jerome Rothenberg** is an internationally-known poet with over eighty books of poetry and twelve assemblages of traditional and avant-garde poetry such as *Technicians of the Sacred* and, with Pierre Joris and Jeffrey Robinson, *Poems for the Millennium*, volumes 1-3. Recent books of poems include *Gematria Complete*, *Concealments & Caprichos*, *A Cruel Nirvana*, *A Poem of Miracles*, and *Retrievals: Uncollected & New Poems 1955-2010*. His most recent big book is *Eye of Witness: A Jerome Rothenberg Reader*, co-edited with Heriberto Yépez, and he is now working on a global and historical anthology of 'outsider and subterranean poetry'.

**Ariel Resnikoff:** In the summer of 2013 you and I connected, via Merle Bachman, over a shared interest in the ‘incomprehensible’ poetics of the Yiddish American modernist poet, Mikhl Likht. I had just finished my MA thesis at the University of Oxford, where I had been told I was crazy to write on the relationship between Zukofsky's English-language verse and Likht's Yiddish. You, however, believed in my research and even began advising Stephen Ross's and my translation to English of Likht's Yiddish long poem, *Protsesiyes* (Processions). Moreover, you suggested that there was something highly potent in Likht's poetic legacy that figured into your own work as a poet-critic-translator-anthologist. How did you originally discover Mikhl Likht? Why is his poetics important to you?

Jerome Rothenberg: I invented Mikhl Likht long before I ever heard of him. That is to say, when I was composing *Poland/1931* & later, *A Big Jewish Book*, I imagined a poet writing in Yiddish who brought that language & poetry into the world of truly experimental & avant-garde writing. (I hadn't as yet found anyone like that in real life.) At times, too, I imagined myself as that poet, having a tenuous grip on Yiddish as a first language but still enough to hear & understand in dreams. The discovery of Likht came, not surprisingly, from Merle Bachman's *Yiddishland*, & my first reaction was to think that she had somehow invented him & the excerpt she presented there from his *Processions*. Once I got over that & got in touch with her, I continued to be intrigued not only by the work itself but what felt to me like a close & probably not an accidental resemblance to Zukofsky's *A* & Pound's *Cantos*. The scope of his work became even clearer when I heard from you and Stephen about your big translation project and the material you found tying him directly to Zukofsky. That *Processions* preceded *A* & even the more projective & experimental sections of the *Cantos* made it still more exciting, & its presence alongside those expanded the idea—for me at least—not only of what constituted Yiddish poetry but what constituted American poetry as well. With each new installment of *Processions*, the excitement gets still stronger.

**AR:** I recall you telling me once that Zukofsky's personality as a poet was completely removed from the world of New York Yiddish culture. Yet it is clear in reading his work that he was deeply concerned with the Yiddish language and literature of his childhood. How do you read Zukofsky's relationship to Yiddish? How important do you think it is to his poetic project as a whole? Did it surprise you to learn that he was in contact with Likht?

JR: What seems curious to me here is that in the years that I knew Louie—as a considerably younger friend—there was no signaling from him about any special interest in either Jewish or Yiddish matters. And yet I'm aware,

increasingly, that his work has many more such references and sources than were clear to me when I was spending time with him. For Pound, of course, Louie served as a kind of courier to the Jewish world, something that comes out painfully—embarrassingly, I mean to say—in their ongoing correspondence. Still, given that we both came out of a Yiddish-speaking childhood, it seems strange to me that it didn't show up in talking to him, or maybe it did and maybe I've chosen to forget it. I've written about this before but thinking about it now, I realize that the time when I was seeing a lot of Louie and Celia was in the early sixties, before I had made my own move into *Poland/1931* and 'the world of Jewish mystics, thieves and madmen'. And I think that at that time both of us were playing down, rather than playing up, our Jewishness—an escape from the cruddy side of all of that, if I can say so, and for him, far more than for me, the sense of being in an outsiders generation, which he would express to me in different ways, the Jewish least among them.

With all of this he was an extraordinary poet—the most American of Jewish poets, someone called him, and the most Jewish of American poets. In many ways he was the equal of his master (Pound, I mean) and in some ways (dare I say it?) his superior. (This isn't, though, a question of assessing one poet as against another.) I believe anyway that some part of Louie's despair—or, better put, his desperation—was not so much the neglect so often mentioned in discussions of his work and life, but the feeling of victimization—of being a Jew at a time of widespread and still institutionalized anti-semitism. Far more than me, he must have run the gamut of pre-World War Two institutionalized anti-semitism—a quota Jew at Columbia and a poet hoping to be heard (and failing) in a world where he could think of Pound, say, as perhaps the least anti-semitic of his poet elders. With Pound, then, he was in close touch with one whom he knew to be a great poet and through whom he could address the 'enemy' in familial and open terms—'sonny' to Pound's 'pappa'. He could also play the enemy himself (under the name of 'shagetz' rather than 'goy'), could label himself an anti-semite (as he sometimes did, at Pound's behest), and by so doing, keep the conversation going.

When I first read Merle's translations of Likht, I was struck by their similarity to Louie's most complex work, but it didn't occur to me that he and Louie might have known each other. Now that this is becoming clear it seems to me that Likht can be placed alongside Louie and the others as an American 'Objectivist', while writing, in his own kind of isolation, in that other language.

**AR: That 'playing down' of Jewishness you mention, is something that runs through the early work of many Jewish American poets, I think. Why is this? What led you to transition into 'the world of Jewish mystics, thieves and madman' we find in *Poland/1931*?**

JR: I can't speak for the others of course, but I think that that was true for most of the Jewish poets I knew when I was first getting into poetry. For myself, from what I can remember, there was a desire not to fall into an ethnic trap that seemed burdened with sentimentalities and a narrowing of the possibilities that were then opening up to us. I suppose too that there was a lack of models among the poets who came before us or that whatever specifically ethnic poetry I knew (Jewish or otherwise) seemed embarrassingly *soft* to me. And this was even more the case when a flood of Jewish-themed family poems began to appear in the 1960s, a debased form of poetry, I thought, for which I would later write *Poland/1931* as a kind of antidote or critique, or what David Meltzer would call my 'surrealist Jewish vaudeville'. I felt also, before I got further into it, that anything I wrote was Jewish in itself because I wrote it, much like the *In Zikh* poets, who also didn't want to be hemmed in by Jewish themes, though they of course were writing, unlike me, in a specifically Jewish language. In the same way I shied away from the Holocaust as a theme, though that & the other horrors of the mid-century were underpinnings to much of what I was then writing.

My breakthrough came in part—strangely, I think—from a poem by Gertrude Stein, who certainly played down her Jewishness (as much as any poet I knew), but on rare occasions let it seep out. (David Antin had suggested reading *The Making of Americans* as a shtetl or Jewish immigrant novel, but with the ethnic identity suppressed.) I was also immersed at the time in the dark fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer, whom I had met on a couple of occasions, and the even darker poetry of Paul Celan, whom I met once and had been the first to translate into English. And it was also a time when I was finishing *Technicians of the Sacred* & immersing myself in a range of deep cultures / deep poetries from throughout the world, to which I would add the Jewish as another such culture for which I felt privileged to speak.

So I found myself thinking, among other things, of what a Jewish entry into the world of experimental modernism might look like and finding it—strangely, as I said before—in Stein. It was just a few short lines in a longer serial poem, 'Dates' in *Bee Time Vine*, but when I read it, I thought of it immediately as Gertrude's 'Jewish poem':

*Pass over*  
*Pass over*  
*Pass*  
*Pass*  
*Pass*  
*Pass*

to which I added a final line—‘pass water’—and then went back into the full Stein poem and substituted a darker Jewish vocabulary from Singer’s *Satan in Goray* by a kind of rhyming, word for word substitution, to make in the process a ‘jewish poem’ of my own—the kind of multiphasic, irreverent and knotty ‘jewish poem’ that I wanted and that really got me on the road to *Poland/1931* and, still more expansively, *A Big Jewish Book*, or more narrowly, *Khurbn* and *Gematria*. It also led me to ally with others, both Jews and non-Jews, who were also sharing in that exploration.

**AR: I’m wondering how this question of a Jewish entry into experimental modernism relates to your interest in the work and character of Tristan Tzara (born Samy Rosenstock, 1896-1963), and in Dada, more generally. ‘[Y]ou are dead’ you write in the third section of *Abulafia’s Circles*, titled, ‘The Holy Words of Tristan Tzara’,**

**& dada life is growing  
from your monocle  
ignored exalted  
you lead me to my future  
making poems together  
flames & tongues we write...**

**Do you see Tzara’s work as functioning within a tradition of secular Jewish experimental art? Do you feel that your own work is in dialogue with his?**

JR: In a conversation the other day a question like this came up—about the presence of Jews in experimental modernism and in Dada more precisely—and it struck me in a flash that except for Tzara and for Janco as his Romanian-Jewish compatriot, none of the core Dadas I could think of were Jews. I remembered, too, Hugo Ball’s curious remark about the two little ‘oriental’ men (Tzara and Janco) who showed up at the Cabaret Voltaire before it opened and, twenty years later, the Nazi intertwining of Jews and *entartete kunst*, with Dada foremost. Yet Tzara, as far as I know, never comes forward as a Jew, the ethnic mark as hidden as the ethnic name. And I remember another incident as well, when I was showing Edouard Roditi *A Big Jewish Book*, Edouard, who had known Tzara in Paris, laughed at how a Jewish *shagetz* like Tzara would have responded to seeing himself included in a book like that.

Nor do I believe that there’s something specifically Jewish in Dada and other extreme avantgardisms, although I can find analogs in (largely) mystical judaism as in other deep cultures. As for ‘a tradition of secular Jewish experimental art’, I can’t imagine that that would have meant anything to Tzara—to separate that in some way from experimental art over all. The

milieu in which he wrote was French and European with a strong interest in the remote and ‘primitive’ (African and Oceanian), as it was then being called, or in ethnopoetics as we would later speak of it. It’s curious too that the racist and anti-semitic connection the Nazis made between ‘degenerate art’ (like Dada) and presumably Jewish conspiracies, would sometimes overstate the Jewish presence in the experimental and international avant-garde, with figures like Tzara cited as arch-conspirators—elders or juniors of Zion corrupting the Aryan West. In other words precisely what we take and value as the rehabilitative and cleansing power of the historical avant-garde and the ‘great negative work of destruction’ that Tzara proclaimed was what made it the target of Nazis and others who hated it to start with and found it to their advantage to assert a phony Jewish presence as its defining characteristic.

In another sense Tzara’s late adolescent Dada fury, which I love and still draw from, was no more Jewish at its core than Rimbaud’s a generation or two earlier. The only difference of course was in the blood line—a matter of race (of racism, I almost said) pure and simple.

**AR: Is it only a matter of race, then, that connects Tzara to Jacob Frank and Abraham Abulafia in *Abulafia’s Circles*? How did this dynamic trio come to be?**

JR: Obviously Frank and Abulafia fit into a Jewish context in a different way from Tzara, so the comedy or irony in this involves putting him alongside the other two, which may in some sense be a question of blood line or race if one wants to see it that way. More immediate for me is that Frank and Abulafia were both self-proclaimed messiahs while Tzara, when he came to Paris from Zurich, was awaited by Breton and the other Paris Dadas as a kind of latterday messiah—or as an ‘anti-messiah’ and ‘prophet’ in the account by Hans Richter, which rings truer though it comes to much the same thing. The point anyway is that for the project I was then engaged in I needed Tzara to fill out the messianic trio and that his identification with Sammy Rosenstock allowed me to play off that absurdity as a part of my own ‘Jewish surrealist vaudeville’. Probably, too, that would be closer to Richter’s phrasing than to Breton’s tongue-in-cheek remark, but enough to call up the ‘ghost of Abulafia no ghost’ while having him proclaim:

messiahs are passé  
there is no greater savior  
than this no eye  
so credible

with a sense after the fact that the apocalyptic hopes of his later Stalinism have crashed against the reality that doomed Mandelstam and others (that too, if

you want, in a kind of Jewish context). And when the poem ends it's with a sense of ruination and loss:

like earth  
 the brain  
 the passage to other worlds  
 passage to something sad  
 lost dada  
 an old horse rotting in the garden  
 maneless waiting  
 for the full moon  
 someone leaps into the saddle  
 rushes after you  
 exuding light

Or as I end another poem from that time: 'guess I got nothing left to say'.

**AR: In his recent essay, 'A Re-Vision of Jerome Rothenberg's Poetry and Poetics', the Mexican writer, Heriberto Yépez, tells us that '[i]f after Deep Image came Ethnopoetics— with the former not so much going away as merging in the helix of his total project—after this Deep Ethnopoetics came a poetics of witness'. Tell me about this poetics of witness. In what ways do you see your work serving as testimony? I am especially interested in your most recent book, *Eye of Witness*, and in what Yépez calls your desire to construct an *omnipoetics*.**

JR: To go back for a moment to the end of the previous answer: when I concluded 'Cokboy' with the line about having nothing left to say, I didn't realize at first how it resembled John Cage's definition of poetry: 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry'. In the poem of course I had invoked the reality of genocide—of both Native Americans and Jews—and after crying out four times 'America disaster', had turned from it in disgust, but the *nothing* there, I would like to think in reconsideration, is really *poetry* as I came to understand it. That came back to me—the quality of poetry as both nothing & *everything*—when I write in *Khurbn*: 'After Auschwitz there is *only* poetry'. With this there is also an increased determination to let other voices come into the poetry, to take over the saying for me, so that I become a conduit for their speaking or witnessing. It's already there in *Poland/1931* and in the anthologies; still more explicitly, even painfully, in *Khurbn*; & it's picked up in a different way in the title of my first book in the new century, *A Book of Witness*, or in my first poem for the millennium that starts: 'Voices are dumb until / I speak for them'. And later on: 'I open up / my mouth & hear / a multitude / of voices'. I think all of that is what Yépez has in mind when he credits me with 'a poetics of witness', as something toward which the earlier work had been heading. And that leads me

finally to think of an *omnipoetics*: an assemblage and poetics of *everything*, which is more than I can ever accomplish on my own but seems to me to be the great work that all of us, as poets, have had and still may have in common—a work, as Isidore Ducasse had it, that's made by all, not one. It's a motif anyway that runs through *Eye of Witness* and that's the foundation for the new assemblage—of 'outside and subterranean poetry'—on which I've been working for the last few years.

**AR: Say more about 'outside and subterranean poetry'. I know you and John Bloomberg-Rissman recently finished putting together the book.**

JR: The book, then, is a work with a theme or motif—'outside', 'subterranean'—in search of something like a definition. That anyway is how it started, a sense I had of how much poetry lies outside of poetry as we commonly think of it and how much emerges otherwise from the conditions that Joyce described to us as those of 'silence, exile and cunning'. Or going at it from a somewhat different direction, there was a fascination with what I described in the Jewish instance as a 'world of ... mystics, thieves and madmen'—only extended now as far and wide as we could take it. So the experimental side of the project—the real *experiment*—was to see what we could find and what would happen if we brought together or juxtaposed a number of outside or subterranean works, however defined, from a wide range of times and places. Or maybe another way to put it is that we started with the words 'outside' and 'subterranean' as they might apply to poetry and set out to track and map them with regard to actual poems and poets, but taking poetry not only as a learned practice but as the common inheritance of most of us who open up to language and the world around us. And still the words 'outside/outsider' and 'subterranean' may have been excessively defined or misdefined before we came at them—like 'primitive' and 'archaic' in *Technicians of the Sacred*, where I found myself at the end of the process putting the older notions of 'primitive' in doubt. So as I asserted there that 'primitive means complex', I might assert here that 'outside' and 'outsider' reside at the very center or heart of the overall poetry project.

**AR: Keeping this 'outside' and 'subterranean' poetry and poetics in mind, and thinking also about your concept of an *omnipoetics*, I am wondering about the implications of your work as an anthologist and curator on the internet. The prospectus to your 'Poems and Poetics' blog you reads: 'In this age of internet and blog the possibility opens of a free circulation of works (poems and poetics in the present instance) outside of any commercial or academic nexus'. How did 'Poems and Poetics' get started? How has it changed the way you think about the question of poets publishing their own work?**



JR: The internet opens up the possibility, as never before, that everything we think & write can be made public—published—put on display—for those who want it. The possibility exists at any rate, though what to make of it is something else. There is also at play here a dream—more likely an illusion—of *autonomy*, of each of us having control over the showing of his or her own work. The result has been an explosion of self-publication that we've been witnessing (and mostly ignoring) over the last couple of decades. What's at play isn't so much a numerical question of more readers or followers (it's hard to know if that's changed at all) but a geographical and cultural spread into parts of the world that we may not otherwise have reached. At the same time of course—and much more to the point—it calls into question or challenges the usual means of production and distribution.

My own experience with Poems and Poetics goes back six years now, when I was introduced to the blogger program and found it easy to work from and to draw a modest but substantial pool of readers. I was also able to have the blog become a regular part of the *Jacket2* web site, which was a publishing venture friendly to the kind of work I've been promoting. Even so I feel that I've been comparatively cautious in the amount of work I've been publishing, when I could after all have expanded exponentially what I was showing of my own work and that of others. I could or you could—any of us could—make all of our writings and performances available if we wanted to give it the time and effort needed. The economics would otherwise be trivial for most of us—but not for all—and the results of all of that remain to be seen. For me, however, the amount of rapid interchange that this makes possible is something that I can't or won't ignore. At the same time of course the older technologies—of books and print—offer means of expression and satisfaction that the new ones can't really replace.

**AR: I know that travelling plays an important role in your life as an artist. How do your various travels figure into your work? In what ways have they contributed to your poetic vision(s)?**

JR: There are two ways—at least two—in which the travels figure in. The first is when they lead to writing as a response to things experienced on route—questions of place or of something seen or sighted that might never otherwise have opened up to me. I began to be aware of those possibilities in the early seventies, when we moved for the first time from New York City and lived for most of two years on the Allegany Seneca Reservation in western New York State. *A Seneca Journal* came out of that with a nod to Charles Olson and the idea of history (and poetry) as 'the new localism', but I was also immersed in *Poland/1931* as a book of imaginary localisms & an imagined Poland based on real enough facts and roughly collaged data. It was something like twenty years later that we actually got to Poland, and the brief immersion there—the

visits in particular to Treblinka and to Auschwitz—opened me up to the enormity of holocaust and *khurbn* in a way that wouldn't have been possible at a far remove from where it happened.

On a less epic scale I began by the early 1990s to write in direct response to the places and cultures that I was discovering *in situ*—Greece (*An Oracle for Delfi*) in 1994, Paris (*Three Paris Elegies*) in 1997, Japan (multiple poems) from the early nineties on, Russia and China (*Twelve Russian Ikons* and *China Notes*) in 2002, the Chilean and Argentinian Andes on a trip ('Crossing the Andes') in 2004, plus alternative images wherever I went of ikons and altar pieces (Christs & Buddhas mainly) that we otherwise took too much for granted. These added to the ambition I had to forge a poetry that was international or intercultural (global) in scope and that also took me back into the deeper histories and mythologies of wherever I happened to be. With all of that the ability to move around brought me into close contact with other poets and writers on an international scale, which was and remains the second way in which the movement across boundaries has contributed to my overall project and, for all of my shortcomings, is still a necessity for me up to the very present.