

Reflections on Ethnopoetics

Jerome Rothenberg

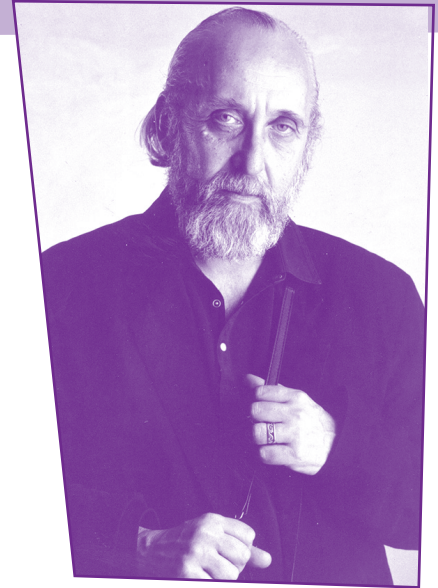
There are no primitive languages. There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. What is true of language in general is equally true of poetry & of the ritual systems of which so much poetry is a part. No people today is newly born. No people has sat in sloth for the thousands of years of its history. People without writing are not without poetry.

A study of indigenous societies — those in particular in which writing has been absent & technological development is assumed to be at its lowest — has shown that poetry, wherever we find it (literally everywhere), involves an extremely complicated sense of materials & structures. If we take poetry to be “language charged with meaning to the highest degree,” as Ezra Pound defined it, or, more simply, as “[structures] allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words” (John Cage), we can observe it even in cultures where no activity is designated by a word like “poetry.”

What I am speaking of here is an ethnopoetics & a range of poetries, many of them from threatened & endangered languages & cultures, that came to light for us in the twentieth century — at the heart of modernism, which welcomed them as a part of itself while knowing that they were truly, inescapably from elsewhere. This was in fact the dynamic of ethnopoetics, as some of us came to speak of it during the second great wave of experimental twentieth-century modernism from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.

The suspicion came to be that certain forms of poetry, like certain forms of artmaking, permeated traditional societies & that these largely religious forms not only resembled but had long since achieved what the new experimental poets & artists were then first setting out to do. Those forms once known — & this came to be understood more slowly for language-dependent arts like poetry — forced a reconsideration of what the work (of art, of poetry, of language, of performance) could be or had been in the course of human (truly human) time. Said Picasso, as if to put his turning toward the “primitive” into other than a merely formal context: “The [African] masks weren’t just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things. ... [They] were intercesseurs, mediators. ... They were against everything — against unknown, threatening spirits. ... They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent.” At that point, he concludes, “I understood why I was a painter.”

It remained for my generation of poets — in league with many many others — to show the extent to which this might be true ... & only then to question it. My own entry into all of this was conditioned — clearly so — by generations of predecessors, most of whom I did not know at the outset, some of them poets but others anthropologists,



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philosophers, biologists, religious thinkers, activist-defenders of a thousand old & new ways. The time of the awakening — in & after World War II — brought a convergence of the need for poetry as a truth-bearing (deconstructing) language (against what Hugo Ball had earlier called “the filth that clings to language” [as it came down to us]) & the need (also brought home by that second [anti-fascist] war) to do away with racism & a culture of ethnic rankings, while preserving the values embedded in historic ethnicities & cultures. The decade that followed also saw a revival of the concern that we later came to call ecological, and realized that just those cultures that were repositories of the old poetries were the models thereby for a more sane relation to the natural world & its other-than-human as well as its human inhabitants.

In that light I would note that while it used to be common to treat the unwritten poetry of indigenous tribes & nations as anonymous or authorless, more recent accounts have brought the poets & singers forward as people with real identities & names. In anthologies of mine like *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Shaking the Pumpkin* a gallery of names comes forward — of putative poets from stateless & threatened cultures: Komi Ekpe (Ewe, from Nigeria), María Sabina (Mazatec, from Mexico), Isaac Tens (Gitksan, from Canada), Eduardo Calderón (Peru), Andrew Peynetsa (Zuni), Frank Mitchell (Navajo), Black Elk (Oglala, Sioux), among many others. “To say the name,” says Samuel Makidemewabe, a Swampy Cree story teller from Canada, “is to begin the story.”