

---

Jerome Rothenberg. *Writing Through: Translations and Variations*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, 220 pp.

---

Charles Bernstein writes in this Foreword of *Writing Through*:

*Translations and Variations* that Jerome Rothenberg is “the ultimate hyphenated poet: critic-anthropologist-editor-anthologist-performer-teacher-translator” whose text is a culmination of the various collected works. But, according to Rothenberg, *Writing Through* is his attempt to preserve “the diversity that still exists in

the world” by incorporating work by German, Jewish and American Indian authors. Rothenberg continues to construct a present perspective of the poetic past not only through previous writing but also through his most recent works *A Paradise of Poets* (1999) and *A Book of Witness: Spells & Gris-Gris* (2003).

Jerome Rothenberg claims that translation for him served as “a form of composition and as an underpinning for a significant part of his work as a poet and a writer”; his creativity stems from the translation of other authors whose experiments with found poems, collage and appropriation guide his own writing. Rothenberg’s imagination has shaped new and unconventional types of poetry, specifically ethno-poetry.

*Writing Through* is a collection of Rothenberg’s translations that cover his output over the last 40 years. The book is divided into three main sections of about equal length: “Translating the New” deals with translations of contemporary authors, while “Translating the Old” focuses on ethnopoetic works of “deep cultures”, and, finally, “Otherings and Variations” includes a vari-

ety of his personal poems that have been derived from pre-existing works of other authors.

Preceding each section, Rothenberg includes opening notes that introduce the reader to specific works. For example, in the section “Translating the New”, before Rothenberg’s translations of Bolivian-born German language poet Eugen Gomringer’s concrete poetry, he explains what concrete poetry is – “poetry on the visual elements (letters or signs) of the written language or on the sonic elements (phonemes or phones) of the language as spoken or otherwise voiced”. Rothenberg also includes an excerpt from a letter that he wrote to Gomringer before his translations in which published where he explains the variety of poetry and approaches to translations that he intends to include in his book. Rothenberg also notes personal references about writing styles and how they influenced his translations. In his note about Kurt Schwitter, for example, Rothenberg comments that he likes the irregular way the author used the second person and how he changed nouns into verbs or verbs into nouns. This is seen in a poem entitled “Thou” where the author substitutes the second

person “thou” for “you”; “Thou art my yearn, thou art thy stride, thy eyes, thy prayers...”

“Translating the New” is the first section of Rothenberg’s anthology and is devoted to the work of “new young German poets”, originally from Rothenberg’s compilation published in 1959. Rothenberg’s interest in the untranslated works of these German poets emerged as a result of his time in the U.S. Army while he was stationed in Mainz, Germany from 1954-1955.

Rothenberg translates works by Lorca, Nezal, Tzara, Arp, Picabia, Neruda, Huidobro, Schwitters and Picasso, all of which involve a different process of translation depending on the structure and composition of the original. He states that some poems presented “normal” problems of translation, some involved minimal choices, while other poems incorporated very restricted vocabulary.

“Translating the Old” is the second section of *Writing Through*, which is separated into three subsections. Each subsection contains ethnopoetic material that affirms different “localized cultures”. *Technicians of the Sacred*, one of Rothenberg’s earliest an-

thologies, represents almost exactly what he assembles in this second section. Rothenberg concentrates on the “tribal” and “oral” aspects of poetry, intending to bring out a “sense of song or speech”.

The works, he includes in the second subsection, are parts of Rothenberg’s *Shaking the Pumpkin*, an American Indian anthology. Rothenberg’s few weeks at the Alleghany Seneca Reservation in western New York and his firsthand experiences with the Seneca people contribute to his ability to create these alternative translations. Rothenberg includes not only a series of songs from the Seneca ceremony “shaking the pumpkin” but also translates works from Yaqui, Chippewa and Navajo American Indian cultures.

The last subsection of “Translating the Old” contains translations of “Jewish poems” from Rothenberg’s *A Big Jewish Book*. In these works, Rothenberg attempts to “modify or change one view or another of what was possible in poetry”. In this particular section, Rothenberg does not draw upon his Jewish heritage. He does include, however, his translations from Hebrew and Aramaic written poetry.

---

In the third section of *Writing Through*, entitled “Otherings and Variations,” Rothenberg includes his own poetry, which he created through the language of other significant compositions. Rothenberg states: “for me the breakthroughs came first with translation – a sense of freedom in the recognition that I could make a poem from words and thoughts to which initially, I had no claim.” “Otherings and Variations” is well-placed as the last section of the book because it exemplifies the technique of “writing through” the words of different authors that Rothenberg mentions in previous sections.

At the end of the book, Rothenberg includes an appendix that he calls “Total Translation: an Experiment in the Translation of

American Indian Poetry”. This essay examines “total translation” which brings forth the “full verbo-vocal-visual spectrum” of a particular work, or as Rothenberg defines it, “the whole-poem-in-performance”. In addition, there are other translations of oral poetry from Seneca and Navajo languages.

As one of America’s most well-known literary translators, Jerome Rothenberg describes his poetry and writing as “an ongoing attempt to reinterpret the poetic past from the point of view of the present.” In the mind of Rothenberg the translator, translation is a collaborative work and writing poetry is an “activity shared with all who are the users and makers of our common language.”

Nicole Aronski

St. Lawrence University

---