

Technicians of the Sacred

A RANGE OF POETRIES
from AFRICA, AMERICA
ASIA & OCEANIA

collected and edited by

JEROME ROTHENBERG

Anchor Books
Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York

1969

PRE-FACE

PRIMITIVE MEANS COMPLEX

That there are no primitive languages is an axiom of contemporary linguistics where it turns its attention to the remote languages of the world. There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity. People who have failed to achieve the wheel will not have failed to invent & develop a highly wrought grammar. Hunters & gatherers innocent of all agriculture will have vocabularies that distinguish the things of their world down to the finest details. The language of snow among the Eskimos is awesome. The aspect system of Hopi verbs can, by a flick of the tongue, make the most subtle kinds of distinction between different types of motion.

What is true of language in general is equally true of poetry & of the ritual-systems of which so much poetry is a part. It is a question of energy & intelligence as universal constants &, in any specific case, the direction that energy & intelligence (=imagination) have been given. No people today is newly born. No people has sat in sloth for the thousands of years of its history. Measure everything by the Titan rocket & the transistor radio, & the world is full of primitive peoples. But once change the unit of value to the poem or the dance-event or the dream (all clearly artifactual situations) & it becomes apparent what all those people have been doing all those years with all that time on their hands.

Poetry, wherever you find it among the "primitives"* (literally

*The word "primitive" is used with misgivings & put in quotes, but no way around it seems workable. "Non-technological" & "non-literate," which have often been suggested as alternatives, are too emphatic in pointing to supposed "lacks" &, though they feel precise to start with, are themselves open to question. Are the Eskimo snow-workers, e.g., really "non"- or "pre-technological"? And how does the widespread use of pictographs & pictosymbols, which can be "read" by later generations, affect their users' non-literate status? A major point throughout this book is that these peoples (& they're likely too diverse to be covered by a single name) are precisely "technicians" where it most concerns them—specifically in their relation to the "sacred" as something they can

everywhere), involves an extremely complicated sense of materials & structures. Everywhere it involves the manipulation (fine or gross) of multiple elements. If this isn't always apparent, it's because the carry-over (by translation or interpretation) necessarily distorts where it chooses some part of the whole that it can meaningfully deal with. The work is foreign & its complexity is often elusive, a question of gestalt or configuration, of the angle from which the work is seen. If you expect a primitive work to be simple or naïve, you will probably end up seeing a simple or naïve work; & this will be abetted by the fact that translation can, in general, only present as a single work, a part of what is actually there. The problem is fundamental for as long as we approach these works from the outside—& we're likely fated to be doing that forever.

It's very hard in fact to decide what precisely are the boundaries of "primitive" poetry or of a "primitive" poem, since there's often no activity differentiated as such, but the words or vocables are part of a larger total "work" that may go on for hours, even days, at a stretch. What we would separate as music & dance & myth & painting is also part of that work, & the need for separation is a question of "our" interest & preconceptions, not of "theirs." Thus the picture is immediately complicated by the nature of the work & the media that comprise it. And it becomes clear that the "collective" nature of primitive poetry (upon which so much stress has been placed despite the existence of individualized poems & clearly identified poets) is to a great degree inseparable from the amount of materials a single work may handle.

Now all of this is, if so stated, a question of technology as well as inspiration; & we may as well take it as axiomatic for what follows that where poetry is concerned, "primitive" means complex.

WHAT IS A "PRIMITIVE" POEM?

Poems are carried by the voice & are sung or chanted in specific situations. Under such circumstances, runs the easy answer, the "poem" would simply be the words-of-the-song. But a little later on the question arises: what *are* the words & where do they begin

actively create or capture. That's the only way in fact that I'd hope to define "primitive": as a situation in which such conditions flourish & in which the "poets" are (in Eliade's phrase) the principal "technicians of the sacred."

(who may also be dancer, singer, magician, whatever the event demands of him) masters a series of techniques that can fuse the most seemingly contradictory propositions.

But above all there's a sense-of-unity that surrounds the poem, a reality concept that acts as a cement, a unification of perspective linking

poet & man
 man & world
 world & image
 image & word
 word & music
 music & dance
 dance & dancer
 dancer & man
 man & world
 etc.

all of which has been put in many different ways—by Cassirer notably as a feeling for “the solidarity of all life” leading toward a “law of metamorphosis” in thought & word.

Within this undifferentiated & unified frame with its open images & mixed media, there are rarely “poems” as we know them—but we come in with our analytical minds & shatter the unity. It has in fact been shattered already by workers before us.

PRIMITIVE & MODERN: INTERSECTIONS & ANALOGIES

Like any collector, my approach to delimiting & recognizing what's a poem has been by analogy: in this case (beyond the obvious definition of poems as words-of-songs) to the work of modern poets. Since much of this work has been revolutionary & limit-smashing, the analogy in turn expands the range of what “we” can see as primitive poetry. It also shows some of the ways in which primitive poetry & thought are close to an impulse toward unity in our own time, of which the poets are forerunners. The important intersections (analogies) are:

(1) the poem carried by the voice:
 a “pre”-literate situation of poetry composed to be spoken, chanted or, more accurately, sung; compare this to the “post-literate” situation, in McLuhan's good phrase, or where-we-are-today;

written poem as score
 public readings

poets' theaters
 jazz poetry

[in 2013, slam, rap, folk, performance poetry]

(2) a highly developed process of image-thinking: concrete or non-causal thought in contrast to the simplifications of Aristotelian logic, etc., with its "objective categories" & rules of non-contradiction; a "logic" of polarities; creation thru dream, etc.; modern poetry (having had & outlived the experience of rationalism) enters a post-logical phase;

(3) a "minimal" art of maximal involvement; compound elements, each clearly articulated, & with plenty of room for fill-in (gaps in sequence, etc.): the "spectator" as (ritual) participant who pulls it all together;

(4) an "intermedia" situation, as further denial of the categories: the poet's techniques aren't limited to verbal maneuvers but operate also through song, non-verbal sound, visual signs, & the varied activities of the ritual event: here the "poem" = the work of the "poet" in whatever medium, or (where we're able to grasp it) the totality of the work;

(5) the animal-body-rootedness of "primitive" poetry: recognition of a "physical" basis for the poem within a man's body—or as an act of body & mind together, breath &/or spirit; in many cases too the direct & open handling of sexual imagery & (in the "events") of sexual activities as key factors in creation of the sacred;

(6) the poet as shaman, or primitive shaman as poet & seer thru control of the means just stated: an open "visionary" situation prior to all system-making ("priesthood") in which the man creates thru dream (image) & word (song), "that Reason may have ideas to build on" (W. Blake).

Blake's multi-images
symbolisme
surrealism

deep-image

random poetry
composition by field etc

concrete poetry

picture poems
prose poems

happenings
total theater

poets as film-makers etc

dada
lautgedichte (sound poems)

beast language

line & breath
projective verse etc

sexual revolution etc

Rimbaud's voyant
Rilke's angel
Lorca's duende

beat poetry
psychedelic see-in's, be-in's, etc

individual neo-shamanisms, etc
works directly influenced by
the "other" poetry or by analogies to "primitive art": ideas of negritude, tribalism, wilderness, etc.

What's more, the translations themselves may create new forms & shapes-of-poems with their own energies & interest—another intersection that can't be overlooked.

In all this the ties feel very close—not that “we” & “they” are identical, but that the systems of thought & the poetry they've achieved are, like what we're after, distinct from something in the “west,” & we can now see & value them because of it. What's missing are the in-context factors that define them more closely group-by-group: the sense of the poems as part of an integrated social & religious complex; the presence in each instance of specific myths & locales; the fullness of the living culture. Here the going is rougher with no easy shortcuts through translation: no simple carry-overs. If our world is open to multiple influences & data, theirs is largely self-contained. If we're committed to a search for the “new,” most of them are tradition-bound. (The degree to which “they” are can be greatly exaggerated.) If the poet's purpose among us is “to spread doubt [& create illusion]” (N. Calas), among them it's to overcome it.

That they've done so *without denying the reality* is also worth remembering.

THE BACKGROUND & STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The present collection grew directly out of a pair of 1964 readings of “primitive & archaic* poetry” at The Poet's Hardware Theater & The Cafe Metro in New York. Working with me on those were the poets David Antin, Jackson Mac Low, & Rochelle Owens. The material, which I'd been assembling or translating over the previous several years, was arranged topically rather than geographically—an order preserved here in the first three sections of texts. *[excerpt ends here.]*

* Throughout the book I use “archaic” to mean (1) the early phases of the so-called “higher” civilizations, where poetry & voice still hadn't separated or where the new writing was used for setting down what the voice had already made; (2) contemporary “remnant” cultures in which acculturation has significantly disrupted the “primitive modes”; & (3) a cover-all term for “primitive,” “early high,” & “remnant.” The word is useful because of the generalization it permits (the variety of cultures is actually immense) & because it encompasses certain “mixed” cultural situations. My interest is in whether the poetry works, not in the “purity” of the culture from which it comes. I doubt, in fact, if there can be “pure” cultures.

