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'Performed Poetics: A two-day event celebrating the work of Eric Mottram and Jerome Rothenberg', King's College London, 12th–13th March 2022

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'Performed Poetics' was a two-day conference celebrating the work of Eric Mottram and Jerome Rothenberg through a series of readings, performances, panel discussions, and film screenings. Organised by Valerie Soar and taking place at King's College London – where Mottram taught from 1975 until 1994, shortly before his death in 1995 – the conference provided a comprehensive overview of the life and work of the two poets, particularly of Rothenberg, who was in attendance.

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‘Performed Poetics’ was a two-day conference celebrating the work of Eric Mottram and Jerome Rothenberg through a series of readings, performances, panel discussions, and film screenings. Organised by Valerie Soar at King’s College London – where Mottram taught from 1975 until 1994, shortly before his death in 1995 – the conference provided a comprehensive overview of the life and work of the two poets, particularly of Rothenberg, who was in attendance. The programme covered some of the intersections between Mottram’s and Rothenberg’s practices, and the readings from their poetry provided an excellent introduction to the breadth of their work. What came across most prominently from the discussions, though, were vivid descriptions of Mottram as an inspiring teacher and Rothenberg’s influential work as an anthologist.

Jerome Rothenberg and Charlie Morrow opened the event with an engaging performance called ‘Poetry & Sound Poetry’, with Rothenberg noting their role in providing the ‘performed’ element of the conference and describing the session as an ‘homage to various poets and artists who made it possible for us to be here today’. The performance opened with Rothenberg reading his ‘Two Manifestos’ from the late 1960s, with Morrow playing a marching bass drum as a percussive accompaniment. Throughout the performance, Rothenberg’s text drew on and responded to a variety of literary and artistic schools from the avant-garde tradition, such as Cabaret Voltaire and Dada, as well as figures such as Jackson Mac Low (‘our contemporary,’ Rothenberg said of Mac Low), Gertrude Stein, and Kurt Schwitters. Rothenberg’s piece ‘5 Night Poems’, indebted to Mac Low, was accompanied by Morrow playing a chaotic ‘fantasy soundtrack’ from his laptop, with discernible string sounds augmented with a lush reverb effect. Indeed, throughout the performance, Morrow deployed a fascinating array of instruments, including a Caribbean sea horn (conch), pitched dinner bells, an Oxaca fire bell, and a pocket trumpet. These contributions were effective both as disjunctive counterpoints and harmonious accompaniments to Rothenberg’s reading.

The pair provided a tribute to Eric Mottram during this performance with an adaptation of the text from Mottram’s *Precipice of Fishes* (1979), read by an automated ‘female’ voice; Rothenberg highlighted the creative choice of selecting a voice with a British accent. The playback was increasingly disrupted as the piece progressed – stuttering and breaking down through Morrow’s manipulations – embracing the glitch and decomposition of the technological rendering. When Rothenberg read along to the disintegrating voice, it produced a fascinating duet, and was one of the

performance's highlights, with both Rothenberg and the automated voice repeating 'decomposition of the line'. Equally effective was a subsequent choral piece, barely a minute long, which Morrow described as a 'chant for balance in these wobbly times'. For this, Morrow produced ethereal sounds from a distinctive, red fire bell, while the two performers chanted deep tones in unison.

In the second session, Allen Fisher (Manchester Metropolitan University) read some selections from Eric Mottram's own works and poets who influenced him, beginning with a section from William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*: 'We know nothing and can know nothing | but | the dance, to dance to a measure | contrapuntally, | Satyrically, the tragic foot'. Highlights from the subsequent selection included 'Walled Garden' from Mottram's *Homage to Braque* (1976), the fifteenth and sixteenth sections from *Interrogation Rooms* (1982), 'Eleventh Legal' from *The Legal Poems* (1986) and a selection from *Limits of Self-regard* (1998). Fisher then introduced a video from Nicole Peyrafitte and Pierre Joris. Joris read from *Shelter Island and the Remaining World* (1971) while Peyrafitte read some of the poems from *Estuaries* (1992). The pair then embarked on a collaborative reading entitled 'Rothenberg Variation #3', composed using words from Rothenberg's first and last collections – a birthday tribute, as Rothenberg recently turned 90.

In the third session, Jeff Hilson (University of Roehampton) and Steve McGarty (King's College London) offered some recollections on Mottram's 'Radical Poetics' seminars, a weekly series which Mottram had been organising since the late 1980s, and even continued beyond his official retirement in 1990; Hilson and McGarty attended as post-graduates in autumn 1994. A key theme of this presentation was Mottram's understanding of 'poetics' as 'beyond poetry', with McGarty noting that poetry was 'barely mentioned' in the seminars. Despite Mottram's reputation primarily as a poet and writer on poetry, Hilson and McGarty stress that the expansive scope of the seminars was not even restricted to literary themes, with Mottram considering law as a form of poetics, a 'practice of human communication' – linking this theme to the *Legal Poems* that Allen Fisher had earlier excerpted. This session provided an account of Mottram's 'Open Field' approach to academia, in which all areas of thought were encouraged and all university departments were invited to the seminars. Hilson and McGarty related this cross-departmental approach to Mottram's desire to break down those disciplinary distinctions congealing in the 'canonization fetish' of burgeoning English Literature departments in the post-war period, offering an interesting historicisation of the discipline.

McGarty went on to discuss Mottram's approach to critical theorists, stressing that he read figures such as Adorno, Lacan, Foucault, and Kristeva from a 'lateral direction' – not 'through the academy' but as an autodidact. McGarty suggested Mottram read theorists 'for his own purposes, from his own angle, and he extracted things from them in spite of the way the academy was regimenting them'. (Mottram had a great admiration for Frances Yates, Hilson notes, partly because she ended her chapters with questions.) McGarty argued that this approach allowed him to pick up elements from his reading of these thinkers that you might not get from courses centered around post-structuralism. As an example, McGarty points towards Mottram's continual reference to Wilhelm Reich throughout his teaching, citing specific seminars in the early 1970s. McGarty suggested that Mottram was attuned to the influence of Reich, who had fallen out of fashion, on thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari (and works such as *Anti-Oedipus*). Another theme emerging from this session was Mottram's interest in 'inheritance' (*Inheritance* also being the title of a 1994 book by Mottram dedicated to students of 'the meetings') and 'spatial thinking'. When Hilson and McGarty presented a tape recording of one of Mottram's seminars, which was unfortunately inaudible, Valerie Soar – the conference's organiser – added that a large number of digitised recordings of Mottram's seminars are available in the Mottram Archive at KCL.

In the fourth session, Janette Cheong introduced an 11-minute experimental short film entitled 'The Question in the Village', for which Mottram wrote the screenplay. Cheong explains in her introduction that the original 16mm film footage was lost in the 1970s, rediscovered in her loft in 2019, digitised at the BFI, and then completed by Cheong over the pandemic lockdowns. As such, the short film is, as Cheong stated, '50 years in the making'. The stop-motion footage uses hand-carved and painted wooden figures made by Lyonel Feininger, a German-American expressionist and Bauhaus co-founder. Using 34 of these figures, which Feininger sent to his friends the Hess family in the early 1950s, the film is a charming story of otherness and acceptance, with Cheong suggesting it 'invites us to understand that wherever we are in the village of humankind, what matters most is the way we treat each other'. The film is narrated by High Quarshie, with music composed and performed by Jonathan Dove. Also in her introduction, Cheong discussed how her relationship with Mottram had been outside of a university context, highlighting that this was quite different from the more academic relations that the other conference attendees maintained with Mottram and his work.



'The Question in the Village' (1972, dir. Janette Cheong).

Robert Hampson (Royal Holloway) chaired a roundtable for the fifth session, featuring H el ene Aji, Ken Edwards, Amy Evans, Michael Hrebeniak, Matt Martin, Peter Middleton, and Gavin Selerie, as well as Jerome Rothenberg. The panel took turns to choose their favourite 'introductions' for new readers to Mottram and Rothenberg: Hampson suggested Mottram's poetry from 1922 *Earth Raids* (1976) as well as the fifteenth poem in the *Interrogation Rooms*. Hrebeniak (Cambridge) suggested 'Trains' from *Homage to Braque* (1976), describing it as a 'poem of memory' where the 'layers of the archival and the freshly produced might intermediate in active composition'; noting how Mottram 'loathed the notion of the cogent self' – and linking this to the modernist theme of 'dissociation' – Hrebeniak pointed to the poem's 'spatio-temporal transitions of consciousness without a consistent prepositional co-ordinate, and its switching between the internal and external worlds via dizzying displacements.' Edwards cited *Shelter Island and the Remaining World*, which was read from earlier by Joris, with Edwards noting it was one of the first small press publications he had encountered at the time. Edwards also cited the fifteenth poem from *Interrogation Rooms*, describing the collection as 'fierce' and 'full of tremendous political and poetic energy': 'Alive in parts of this century [...] | hypocrite double'.

Edwards talked about the scarce availability of Mottram's work today and expressed his desire for a collected volume of Mottram's writing, noting that this would be a large undertaking. Edwards said his first experience of Rothenberg was as an anthologist, mentioning *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968) which, for Edwards, brought together 'ancient and traditional poetries and contemporary practice' in a way that decentred the European poetic tradition, and referred to Rothenberg's remark that the 'avant-garde's allies are anthropologists and archaeologists'. Similarly, Matt Martin (Birkbeck) discussed the difficulties of accessing Mottram's work, and how he initially came to Mottram through anthologies, including those of Jerome Rothenberg. In an insightful overview of the difficulties of accessing avant-garde poetries in the 1990s in the UK, Martin described discovering Rothenberg's anthologies, such as *America: A Prophecy* (1975) and *Big Jewish Book* (1978), in York's secondhand bookshops, noting that these discoveries gave him the impression that 'exciting poetry may be possible in America', rather than the UK. Martin said that even after coming across Mottram's name in Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos: A Poetry Anthology* (1996), which was published the year after Mottram's death and dedicated to his memory, Martin still had difficulty finding Mottram's actual work, before eventually reading it in Rothenberg and Joris's anthology, *Poems for the Millennium, Volume Two* (1998). Martin also cited 'Against tyranny: Elegy 4 pt 2', from *Elegies* (Gallop Dog, 1981), noting that publication's distinctive A4 format, and quoted from the poem: 'This is the book I'd like to read, this is the moment I want my father to know, those fabled years of study, mountain amnesia [...] where to surpass yourself out of nature'.¹ Martin suggested this work shows Mottram's 'passionate ecological commitment [with] a sense of care', drawing attention to 'the need for continual learning, continual thought, and continual reevaluation of your understanding of the world', as well as Mottram's craftsmanship. Peter Middleton (University of Southampton) also cited Rothenberg's *America: A Prophecy*, which he termed a vital introduction to international poetics and highlighted Rothenberg as an important 'poet of the immigrant' – as well as the *Elegies* publication.

Hélène Aji (École normale supérieure) recommended Mottram's 'Peace Project #2' – noting the interesting formal characterisation as 'project' rather than 'poem', again referencing Mottram's drawing on different discourses.² She also noted Mottram's 'non-existent' reception in her native France, and suggested in that country, at the time, that there was a prevalent attitude of snobbishness towards poetry in English. Gavin Selerie discussed his introduction to Mottram being via the 'work-in-progress' that came to be *A Book of Herne* (1981) – noting that book's incorporation of Celtic and Classical Mythology. Selerie mentioned the 'interweaving of motives' in the

collection's first poem, 'Windsor Forest', and read 'Tristan's Tale of Madness' – a sonnet that, for Selerie, emphasises the lyrical nature of Mottram's work: 'she and I drank Brangain's drink [...] the Yseut Tristan roots pushed through again'. Selerie also noted the visual construction of *A Book of Herne*, with illustrations 'parallel to the text, rather than underpinning them.'

Rothenberg mused on Mottram's 'extraordinary presence', despite his actual books rarely reaching him in California: 'they did not come to me in great numbers.' Rothenberg said his introduction to Mottram was through the 'Riverside Interviews' conducted by Selerie, stating that these demonstrated Mottram's 'encouraging' approach, both as a teacher and poet. Rothenberg also highlighted 'Against tyranny: Elegy 4', which Rothenberg first published in the journal *New Wilderness Letter* 7 (1979), and which he would later adapt for the conference's closing performance.

The penultimate session of the day was a discussion chaired by Allen Fisher, with Selerie and Rothenberg returning, joined by Charles Bernstein (University of Pennsylvania). Bernstein told some engaging anecdotes about Mottram teaching in the USA and the differences between his and Bernstein's teaching styles; Mottram preferred to give a lecture lesson style with a blackboard that was specifically installed in the classroom for him, while Bernstein preferred a seminar environment. Bernstein also stated that he had had difficulty in retrieving Mottram material from the KCL archive for Pennsound, noting a reluctance on the part of KCL to sharing this work, and highlighting an interesting tension over the sharing of archival documents between institutions. Selerie then offered some reflections on the Riverside Interviews with Mottram.

Finally, Clive Bush's paper, 'Dark Times and Utopias in the work of Eric Mottram', was read by Allen Fisher; Bush was unable to deliver the paper himself. Bush's paper sought to situate Mottram's work in the context of recent turbulent political events, such as the storming of the Capitol in 2021, right wing populism, and climate emergency. Bush compared this political period to Mottram's early life in the aftermath of the First World War, and his navy service during the Second World War. Bush wrote of Mottram's reconciling his love of American literature with his being 'highly critical of the hypocrisies of the moral assertion and *de facto* behaviour of the United States' and American foreign policy during the twentieth century. Bush asserted Mottram's European political position of being between two superpowers (Russia and the US), as well Mottram's 'abiding love' of the French poet René Char, which Bush claimed gave Mottram a sense of how WWII had transformed the world. He noted the 'bleak pessimism' of *Interrogation Rooms*, highlighting the influence of Ginsberg and Burroughs on this work, and described Mottram as a 'militant atheist'

in the ‘atheist-Marxism of the Oxbridge ’30s’; Bush claimed that ‘anything vaguely spiritual was for [Mottram] a load of junk’ although he was simultaneously fascinated by ‘non-Christian beliefs, alternative ways of life, older civilisations’, noting Mottram’s fascination for early Irish-Christian Celtic Culture which had already been discussed in reference to the *Herne* work. Bush also referred to Mottram’s enthusiasm for ‘American utopian experiments’, such as Black Mountain College.

A very brief Q&A followed Bush’s paper, consisting of one question concerning how to engage a new generation of readers with Mottram’s work. I thought this was a pertinent question; throughout the conference I was aware that I was one of very few attendees who didn’t know Mottram or Rothenberg personally. I felt disappointed that the Q&A was brought to a sudden close before this question could be adequately addressed. The evening saw another engaging performance by Jerome Rothenberg, with another reading of his own work and adaptations from Mottram, such as the ‘Against tyranny’ piece.

The second day of the conference opened with a collaborative reading by Charles Bernstein and Maggie O’Sullivan, dedicated to the work of Jerome Rothenberg. In his introduction, Bernstein discussed Rothenberg’s ‘foundational’ influence on Language Poetry, mentioning that Rothenberg introduced Bernstein to Ron Silliman. O’Sullivan began by discussing her initial exposure to Rothenberg’s work via the workshops of Bob Cobbing, and expressed a particular admiration for *Technicians of the Sacred*, which O’Sullivan said should be ‘left by hotel bedsides’. O’Sullivan read ‘A Breastplate Against Death’ from that anthology, followed by the seventh and final poem of the *The Lorca Variations* (1993). The performance culminated in a joint reading of Paul Celan’s ‘Todesfuge’, with Bernstein reading Rothenberg’s translation with a bombastic style of delivery and O’Sullivan echoing lines (‘black milk of morning, black milk of morning’) as a dramatic, adjacent haunting – a welcome continuation of the ‘performed’ strand of the conference.

The next session saw H el ene Aji presenting the second academic paper of the weekend, entitled ‘Jerome Rothenberg Programmatic’.³ Like much of the conference’s engagement with Rothenberg, Aji focused on his work as an anthologist, developing a nuanced analysis of his anthologising practice. This began with a discussion of Mottram’s reading of Rothenberg in the essay ‘Where The Real Song Begins: The Poetry of Jerome Rothenberg’ (1986). Aji stated that

Mottram transitions from the inner and outer explorations that lead to the ‘vision emerging in the poem’. Playing with the diversity of Rothenberg’s inspiration

and influences, Mottram delineates a poetics that, we now know, informs many a development in American poetry, ‘as a passage & an act of desperation’.

Here, Aji quotes Mottram quoting Rothenberg.⁴ Reading Rothenberg ‘through’ Mottram in this way felt like an effective synthesis of the conference’s two subjects, with Aji claiming that Mottram saw Rothenberg as negotiating ‘the demands of transmittability, the eclectic sourcing for the poems and the demand for active erudition on the side of the reader’. Aji stated her project was to ‘move through the different dimensions of Jerome Rothenberg’s work as they come to embody configurations of memory relevant to the present, as effective poetic operations designed to respond to the present’s challenges.’ Linking this idea to reconfiguring memory – and how the past ‘informs and helps to navigate the complexities of the present’ – Aji considered Rothenberg’s anthologies as a ‘medium in which a variety of voices can make themselves heard’, suggesting that Rothenberg’s anthologies are ‘active – one might be tempted to say activist’. The anthology’s process of gathering the past, for Aji, is an ‘operational’ strategy that doesn’t stop at ‘collecting’ but proposes radical configurations that can make every text ‘become a little bit dangerous’. Aji opposed the term ‘configurations’ to ‘constellations’, with the latter suggesting a prefigured order. For Aji, Rothenberg’s anthologies are ‘poetic works in themselves’ that dissolve the boundaries between poetry and not-poetry: ‘The anthologies counter the will to power of imperialistic methods of citation by being seed compositions, consistently recognised as other and susceptible to reorganisation and expansion in unpredictable ways’.

On Rothenberg’s translations, Aji traced his intention that translations are ‘beyond replication’ when they are recontextualised in a new language; the translated poem is a new work that ‘works as a response to the source poem, inscribes itself within the context of present poetics, and exposes itself to the test of its relevance to the preoccupations of that new context.’ As an example, Aji discussed Rothenberg’s *Lorca Variations*, which used Lorca’s work as a vocabulary source, ‘a repository of words from which one will draw the words of new poems’. Like Maggie O’Sullivan, Aji quoted the final variation: ‘the end for Lorca comes | only when we let it helpless [...] no homage can repay what we have lost’.⁵ Finally, Aji developed a strand of Rothenberg’s compositional strategies in works such as *Poland/1931* (1976) and *Gematrias Complete* (2009), which she terms ‘transtemporal’; for Aji, this constitutes a type of haunting that often for Rothenberg is ‘tragically mediated through the internalization of the Holocaust and a succession of attempts to render the claustrophobia of impossible mourning.’

In the next session, the film-maker Colin Still showed a work-in-progress documentary about Rothenberg, *Vot Em I Doink Here?* While an early draft of the

documentary, it is an effective introduction to Rothenberg's life and work, weaving together various interviews with Rothenberg – as well as a number of insightful talking head reflections from others, including Bernstein. The documentary covered the early life of Rothenberg from his early family life in New York City, his Jewish neighbourhood in Brooklyn, and his secular-immigrant upbringing. The documentary featured Ian Tyson, a book artist, designer, and printmaker who frequently collaborated with Rothenberg, who died in October 2021. The later part of the documentary focuses on Rothenberg's notable collection *Poland/1931*, featuring readings from that book and reflections on Rothenberg's approach to the subject matter and visits to Europe.

In the final session of the conference, Jeffrey Robinson talked to Rothenberg about the *Poems for the Millennium* series; Robinson co-edited the third volume, *Romantic & Postromantic Poetry*, in 2008. This session further established some of the anthologising principles set out earlier in the conference. Following on from comments made in Still's documentary, Rothenberg elaborated on his anthologising practice and how it draws on 'ethnopoetic' ideas that incorporate work from a variety of cultures – not producing collections of 'masterpieces', but constituting a kind of 'experiment'.

Closing the conference, a group of musicians led by the trombonist John Kenny performed *Songs from A Book of Herne*, a piece written by Kenny adapting the poetry of Mottram. The ensemble, named the Scot Free Ensemble, featured Adaya Malka-Peled as soprano voice, Kenny on alto trombone, Cara Doyle on clarinet and bass clarinet, Emily White on violin, Adrien Brendel on cello, and Ben Smith on piano.

The conference was organised by Valerie Soar, who noted in her introduction to the event that it had been assembled remotely over the course of the pandemic, overcoming a number of difficulties along the way: 'I must admit there were times when I didn't think we were going to make it' and there were times when 'everything was going wrong'. Soar also announced the foundation of a trust at KCL to put on future events and look after the Mottram archive, which is chaired by Michael Hrebaniak.

Notes

- ¹ Originally appearing in *Against tyranny* (Poet & Peasant, 1975).
- ² Aji noted a reading of this can be found on PennSound.
- ³ A version of this paper has since been published on *Jacket2*, and is available here: <https://jacket2.org/commentary/helene-aji>.
- ⁴ Mottram in 'Where The Real Song Begins: The Poetry of Jerome Rothenberg', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 1986, Vol. 11, No. 2/4 (1986), p. 227.
- ⁵ Jerome Rothenberg, *Lorca Variations*, 87.

Competing Interests

The author is a doctoral student co-supervised by one of the editors.

