tween." "In the beginning is relation." "All real living is meeting." In his great *I and Thou* he distinguishes two basic types of relation: I-It and I-Thou. I-It is a subject-object relation of using or experiencing; the It (or He or She) is only a "thing among things," susceptible to comparison and categorization. The I-Thou relation is unique, mutual, total, and inevitably temporary. "Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos. Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons."[46]

Rexroth stresses that Buber's view is not a sentimental preaching of "sharing" or "togetherness" ("our current Togetherness is simply the massing of frightened cyphers"), nor an advocacy of collectivism as opposed to individualism. "Individualism understands only a part of man, collectivism understands man only as a part."[47] Both Buber and Rexroth sharply distinguish collectivity (a collection of units) from genuine community (an ensemble of persons in direct living relations with each other).

Rexroth criticizes Buber on three main points: when he becomes an apologist for Zionism (although Buber's Zionism at least was never belligerent: he worked arduously for a genuine rapprochement between Jews and Arabs); when he concludes his study of libertarian communalist currents (*Paths in Utopia*) with too much wishful thinking as to the promise of the early Israeli kibbutzim; and when, in the last part of *I and Thou,* he arrives at the notion of God as the "eternal Thou." Rexroth objects to the repugnant aspects of Buber's biblical God; but more generally he distrusts any sort of "metaphysical greed" for some absolute relation. "Any art which has a happy ending in reserve in Infinity is, just to that degree, cheating. . . . It seems to me that the fullest realization of the self comes in the acceptance of the limits of contingency. It is harder, but more ennobling, to love a wife as another human being, fugitive as oneself, than it is to carry on imaginary conversations with an imaginary Absolute."[48] More fundamentally, however, acceptance of ephemeral, contingent relations is the very essence of Buber's standpoint; the notion

The Relevance of Rexroth

Ken Knabb

1990

For the undeveloped heart,
The news or even the sight
Of the destruction of thousands
Of other human beings
May assume only the form
Of a distant cry . . . .
However, as the dual,
The beloved, is known and
Loved more and more fully, all
The universe of persons
Grows steadily more and more real.[43]

One of Rexroth's deepest influences was Martin Buber, the Jewish "philosopher of dialogue." Buber, he says, is "practically the only religious writer a non-religious person could take seriously today."[44] Religious he certainly is, but in a special way that has led his philosophy jokingly but not altogether inaccurately to be called "Zen Judaism." After an early occasion when he felt that his preoccupation with a special "religious experience" had led him to fail to respond fully to someone who had come to him for help, Buber wrote:

> Since then I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fulness but each mortal hour's fulness of claim and responsibility. . . . If that is religion then it is just *everything*, simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue.[45]

Buber sees the most fundamental reality neither in subjective experience nor in the objective world, but in the "realm of the be-

The future is long gone by
And the past will never happen
We have only this
Our one forever
So small so infinite
So brief so vast
Immortal as our hands that touch
Deathless as the firelit wine we drink
Almighty as this single kiss
That has no beginning
That will never
Never
End[41]

Kabbalism or Tantrism or the *Song of Songs,* he likes to invoke the mysticisms that play on the connection or parallel between human and divine love, that see sex as a sacramental communion, or even as a mode of contemplation:

Love is the subjective
Aspect of contemplation.
Sexual love is one of
The most perfect forms of
Contemplation, as far as it
Is without ignorance, grasping,
And appetite.[42]

This is what he means by "from the Dual to the Other":

Contents

Chapter 1: Life and Literature 6

Chapter 2: Magnanimity and Mysticism 26

Chapter 3: Society and Revolution 48

Abbreviations 71

Notes to Chapter 1 73

Notes to Chapter 2 76

Notes to Chapter 3 80

Bibliography 83

back to the primal realities, to restore the vital, organic connections; beginning with the most intimate one. Writing of Lawrence's love and nature poems, Rexroth says: "Reality streams through the body of Frieda, through everything she touches, every place she steps . . . everything stands out lit by a light not of this earth and at the same time completely of this earth . . . . Beyond Holy Matrimony lies the newly valued world of birds, beasts, and flowers — a sacramentalized, objective world. 'Look, we have come through' — to a transformed world, with a glory around it everywhere like ground lightning." And of his death poems: "Lawrence did not try to mislead himself with false promises, imaginary guarantees. Death is the absolute, unbreakable mystery. Communion and oblivion, sex and death, the mystery can be revealed — but it can be revealed only as totally inexplicable."[39]

Rexroth's own love poems manifest a Lawrencian reverence for sex as an ultimate, unfathomable mystery:

> Invisible, solemn, and fragrant,
> Your flesh opens to me in secret.
> We shall know no further enigma.
> After all the years there is nothing
> Stranger than this. We who know ourselves
> As one doubled thing, and move our limbs
> As deft implements of one fused lust,
> Are mysteries in each other's arms.[40]

Ever so delicately he evokes the fleeting timelessness of the communion of lovers:

> ever required such efforts at etherialization. . . . Why do people bother? If they must have a religion, the basic texts of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism need no such reworking. It may be necessary, particularly of the Buddhist documents, to trim off the exotic rhetoric, but it is not necessary to make them mean exactly the opposite of what they say.[36]

Whatever his personal taste in rituals, Rexroth's writings on religion are usually lucid enough. As always he is seeking what might be relevant, suggestive, exemplary. In his study of the nineteenth-century radical Catholic Lamennais, for example, it is Lamennais's "spiritual sensibility" that interests him, "not the details of his changing theology and philosophy." "His doctrines changed, his life did not, and so it is his life and the literary, one might say, poetic, expression of that life consistency which is important."[37]

One thing for sure, there's nothing puritanical or unworldly about Rexroth's mysticism. He says that the theme of his poems in *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* is

> the discovery of a basis for the recreation of a system of values in sacramental marriage. The process as I see it goes something like this: from abandon to erotic mysticism, from erotic mysticism to the ethical mysticism of sacramental marriage, thence to the realization of the ethical mysticism of universal responsibility — from the Dual to the Other. These poems might well be dedicated to D.H. Lawrence, who died in the attempt to refound a spiritual family.[38]

Like he said, there is a lot of bullshit in Lawrence — mushy rhetoric, corny primitivism, dated sexual polemics, even vaguely fascistic tendencies. What remains important is his struggle to get

Chapter 1: Life and Literature
Brief biography. What he was like in person. His poetry. Opposition to Pound, Eliot, and academia. Remarkable variety and liveliness of his essays. Views on Blake, Baudelaire, Whitman, Henry Miller, etc.

Chapter 2: Magnanimity and Mysticism
Magnanimity as central theme of his life and works. Mystical experiences. Views on Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, psychedelics, pseudosciences, D.H. Lawrence, Martin Buber, etc.

Chapter 3: Society and Revolution
His opposition to Bolshevism. His anarchist perspectives and activities. Views on the Beats, the sixties counterculture, ecology, underground songs, etc. Ambiguity of his position as public social critic. Limits of his social analyses and of his notion of cultural subversion.

Chapter 1: Life and Literature

> Church moved me because it echoes the most ancient responses to the turning of the year and the changing seasons, and the rhythms of animal and human life. For me the Sacraments transfigured the rites of passage . . . . In the rites of passage — the fundamental activities and relationships of life — birth, death, sexual intercourse, eating, drinking, choosing a vocation, adolescence, mortal illness — life at its important moments is ennobled by the ceremonious introduction of transcendence; the universe is focused on the event in a Mass or ceremony that is itself a kind of dance and a work of art.[34]

Needless to say, he was opposed to practically everything about the Catholic Church except its traditional rituals; but like many people he seems to have taken part in those religious practices that appealed to him and simply ignored the aspects that didn't. "Today we have large sections of our most literate population voluntarily adopting the religious behavior and beliefs of more primitive communities for purely pragmatic, psychologistic, personal reasons."[35] His Catholicizing was mostly within Anglo-Catholic communions, which offer the rituals while rejecting the central dogmatic authority of the Roman Church.

However that may be, it has always puzzled me how someone like Rexroth could have anything to do with any Christian church. It is one thing to practice some type of meditation or take part in some ritual or festival that everyone understands is simply an arbitrary form to focus one's life or celebrate communion; it is another to seem to lend credibility to repugnant institutions and to sick dogmas that are still widely believed. As Rexroth himself says in a different mood:

> For thousands of years men of good will have been trying to make Judaism and Christianity morally palatable to sane and civilized men. No other religions have

For Rexroth there is no question of believing in the objective validity of any occult or religious system; what he is interested in is the "interiority," the "values that cannot be reduced to quantities,"[31] which may find expression in such forms. Insofar as religion is an attempted explanation of objective reality, it is progressively outmoded by advances in mankind's knowledge; but it may, he says, have a continued relevance to inner, subjective realities:

> Ideally, religion is what would be left after man *knew* everything. . . . As the speculative constructions of religion fall away as explanations of "reality" they assume the character of symbolic masks of states of the soul. If they persist in the practices of a cult, we say they have been etherialized. It is precisely their irrationality which keeps dogma and ritual alive. If they can be reduced to "common-sense" explanations or denials they die away. Only the mysteries survive, because they correspond to the processes of man's internal life, outward visible signs of inner spiritual realities.[32]

Rexroth liked to say, "Religion is something you do, not something you believe." He had a fond interest in traditional folk-religious rituals and festivals of all sorts, to the point of extolling even their most threadbare modern vestiges. "I don't care if it takes Daddy a year to pay off the bills for the First Communion Party or the Bar Mitzvah or the wedding. For a moment there has been at least a token acknowledgment that even the poorest and most humdrum life is of transcendent importance, that no individual human being is insignificant."[33] In this spirit he himself participated in various religious communions — Buddhist, Vedantist, Quaker, and even Catholic.

> What attracted me [to Catholicism] was not its Christianity, but its paganism. . . . The liturgical life of the

> REXROTH (*before reading his poetry*): "Well, what would you like tonight, sex, mysticism, or revolution?"
>
> WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: "What's the difference?"

Kenneth Rexroth was born in Indiana in 1905, descended from a variety of abolitionists, socialists, anarchists, feminists and freethinkers. After an unusually enlightened upbringing he was orphaned at the age of twelve. He spent most of his teenage years in Chicago, where he worked as a newspaper reporter and helped run a jazz coffee house, mingling with the musicians, artists, writers, radicals and eccentrics who made up the bohemian world of the twenties. Almost totally self-educated (he had only five years of formal schooling), he read omnivorously, wrote poetry, did abstract painting, worked in avant-garde theater and began teaching himself several languages. In his late teens he hitched all over the country, spending summers in the Far West working as a cowboy cook and wrangler and at various farm and forestry jobs, and once worked his way to Paris and back.

He recounts these early adventures in *An Autobiographical Novel*. The first impression you get is that it is mostly about other people — Louis Armstrong, Alexander Berkman, Clarence Darrow, Eugene Debs, Marcel Duchamp, Emma Goldman, D.H. Lawrence, Diego Rivera, Carl Sandburg, Edward Sapir, Sacco and Vanzetti all turn up briefly, along with an Indian woman who introduces him to sexual yoga, a member of the Bugs Moran gang who later retires to Hollywood as a consultant for gangster movies, a talkative poet who says he has belonged to "the three most gossipy organizations in modern life, the Anglo-Catholics, the Trotskyites, and the homosexuals," and a multitude of others — anarchists, Communists, Wobblies, dadaists, surrealists, occultists, prostitutes, crooks, cops, judges, jailers, hoboes, hillbillies, lumberjacks, cowboys, Indians. . . . It's a fascinating book, not only for its account of Rexroth's own incredible range of experiences, but

for its evocation of a radical-libertarian American subculture that passed away in the early years of the century and for its glimpses of the 1920s bohemianism that foreshadowed the later worldwide counterculture. "What I was witnessing was the development in a few places in Chicago, New York, and Paris of a culture pattern that was to spread all over the world. In another generation all professional people of any pretense to bohemianism in Sydney or Oslo did the things we did, but back in those days we all knew one another."

An Autobiographical Novel leaves off in 1927 [a later edition brings the story up to 1949], when Rexroth moved to San Francisco. (He said he liked it because it was accessible to the Western mountains, remote from New York cultural domination, and virtually the only major American city that was not settled by puritans but by "gamblers, prostitutes, rascals, and fortune seekers.") In the thirties and forties he played an active role in a number of libertarian, civil rights and antiwar groups (during World War II he was a conscientious objector), and he was the leading spirit in the literary and cultural ferment that led to the postwar San Francisco Renaissance. During the fifties and sixties he wrote poems, plays, essays and social criticism, translated poetry from seven languages, presented book reviews and other programs over noncommercial radio KPFA, and pioneered the reading of poetry to jazz.

In 1968 he moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he taught courses in underground poetry and song. Apart from several extended visits to Japan, he lived there until his death in 1982.

* * *

I was fortunate enough to get to know him a little in the sixties, when I attended a class he was giving at San Francisco State College. He had been at odds with academia all his life (he called the universities "fog factories"), but by this time his stature was so undeniable and there was such a demand for "relevance" in education that he was allowed to create whatever course he wanted. His

> What did it all mean? Nothing. . . . This unvarnished hokum with which our society intimidates itself is far less effective — far less scientific — than the varnished hokum of other days and peoples. Any Sioux medicine man, any kind and attentive priest, any properly aged grandmother, any Chinese herbalist, could have found out more in a half hour than these people did in three days. . . . I for one would, if I had my rathers, far rather trust myself to the boys in horns and bearskins who painted the Altamira cave.[28]

Some of the traditional practices, he implies, may at least possess a kernel of intuitive insight into the basic human situations. Hokum or not, people are instinctively drawn to whatever seems to express the psychological or spiritual archetypes, the perennial inner conflicts and relations and aspirations. "What is sought in Alchemy or the Hermetic Books or the Memphite Theology, or irrational fads like flying saucers, is the basic pattern of the human mind in symbolic garb."[29] And that basic pattern is found there because it came from other basically similar minds:

> What the Gnostics projected onto the screen of their profound ignorance as a picture of the universe was in reality a picture of their own minds. Its mythology is a symbolic portrayal, almost a deliberate one, of the forces which operate in the structuring and evolution of the human personality . . . an institutionalized panorama of what Jung has called the Collective Unconscious. . . . (This notion, as Jung has pointed out, does not involve any mysterious undersoul shared by all men — it is a collective picture because all men respond to life in much the same way, because they all have the same physiological endowment.) We can operate upon our minds by the manipulation of symbols if not on the cosmos.[30]

had given many young people their first hint of the "interiority" repressed by middle-class American culture. In this context he often quoted St. John of the Cross: "Visions are symptoms of the defect of vision." For Rexroth the transcendent religious experience is not a vision of some different, supernatural world, but a reawakened awareness of this one.

> The real objects are their own transcendental meaning. . . . The holy is in the heap of dust — it is the heap of dust. . . . True illumination is habitude. We are unaware that we live in the light of lights because it casts no shadow. When we become aware of it we know it as birds know air and fish know water.[26]

People tend to describe such moments of awareness in terms of their own diverse religious beliefs, but the actual experiences seem to be pretty much the same, and are also found among nonreligious people. Though beyond rational conceptualization, they do not necessarily imply anything supernatural. Rexroth is quite clear about this distinction. He is refreshingly free of New Age gush and too perceptive to be taken in by the superstitions and pseudosciences so widely believed in even today. Recalling the otherwise intelligent people of his own generation who swallowed astrology or Reichian orgone boxes, he observes: "Anyone who had taken a course in high school physics would have known that this stuff was arrant nonsense but the trouble was that these people had lost belief in high school physics along with their belief in capitalism or religion. It was all one fraud to them."[27]

He is almost equally skeptical about the scientific pretensions of modern psychology and psychoanalysis. In his amusing article My Head Gets Tooken Apart he describes a time when he was paid by an Institute of Personality Assessment and Research to participate in a three-day investigation of "the creative personality." After a hilarious account of the battery of tests, interviews and questionnaires he is put through, he concludes:

"class," which was certainly more instructive than any other I ever took, consisted simply of open-ended discussions of anything and everything, along with occasional other activities such as group dramatic performances.

He was generally pretty sympathetic to the recent countercultural developments in which most of us were involved, but he tempered our naïve enthusiasms with a healthy dose of humor and skepticism, made us aware of larger perspectives — comparing Bob Dylan with underground French singers we had never heard of, or declaring that the greatest psychedelic artist was some medieval mystic who had painted her own visions, or heartily approving the most radical antiwar actions while cautioning us against the manipulations of bureaucratic leftists. Occasionally, aroused by some social atrocity or some instance of personal meanness, he would lash out with a withering attack. Usually he just genially bantered with people. He rarely harped on his own views, but amid the give and take of conversation he would slip in a joke or an anecdote that would subtly undercut our illusions and put in a new light whatever we were talking about. Sometimes months or years later I would remember some seemingly offhand remark he had made and suddenly realize what his point was, and appreciate how modestly and tactfully he had made it.

His drawling, gravelly voice recalled W.C. Fields's, and in his public appearances he sometimes adopted a sort of Fieldsian oratorical manner to go along with it. "That reminds me of a time [*eyes rolled back nostalgically*] when I was talking to Lewis Mumford — a man with whom I usually agree [*muttered out of the side of his mouth*] — and he said . . ." This ironic showbiz persona was very entertaining, but I think he used it primarily to get his points across without too much solemnity: to the casual observer unaware of the irony he might seem to be merely a slightly pompous, name-dropping old "colorful character" recounting an amusing anecdote. He was no doubt aware of his own merits, but to me he never seemed to be caught up with himself — writing or talking, he was

always dialoguing. So many writers call attention to every little finding they've come up with; Rexroth would toss off really original insights as if they were just well-known banalities, or attribute his own merits to others — many are the writers he praised for being mature, courageous, widely learned, at home in many cultures, etc., who were actually far less so than he himself. He was reputed to be pretty cantankerous at times, but to me what stands out is his geniality and magnanimity.

But I didn't know him well enough to say much about his personal life. This book deals mainly with his writings — and only with certain aspects of them. I wrote it for two reasons. I wanted to sort out for myself what I found valuable and what I disagreed with in a writer who has meant a lot to me; and I wanted to interest other people in reading him. I hope I succeed at least in the latter.

* * *

Some of Rexroth's earliest poems resemble the "cubist" poems of Gertrude Stein, Guillaume Apollinaire and Pierre Reverdy: they break up and restructure verbal elements like cubist painting does with visual elements. They also reflect his studies in primitive song and modern linguistics. He says that this sort of experimental eclecticism, which he shared with many other poets of the twenties, stemmed from the belief that "the current language of society had been debauched by the exploitative uses to which it had been put, and that it was necessary to find gaps in the structure of communication which were still fluent and through which the mind of the reader could be assaulted."[4] Eventually he came to feel that he could achieve the same effects within more accessible forms. Apart from those few early exceptions most of his poems are pretty straightforward and need little or no explication.

An academic critic once sarcastically referred to Rexroth, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen as "members of the bear-shit-on-the-trail school of poetry."[5] Rexroth, of course, took this as a compli-

a greater affinity with other forms of Buddhism. He lambasted popularized Western Zen as an irresponsible, pretentious fad, but he also criticized traditional Japanese Zen for its complicity with military regimes, from the samurai to World War II, and he seems to have had little taste for the cultism and guru worship too often found in Zen as well as in other Oriental religious disciplines. He would no doubt have granted that Zen meditation is one of the most effective ways to cultivate the peace of contemplation "until it becomes a constant habit in the background of daily life." But he seemed to feel that too urgent a striving for enlightenment may miss the point. Buddha's last words are said to have been: "The combinations of the world are unstable by nature. Monks, strive without ceasing." Rexroth, in a more Taoist frame of mind, advises:

> The combinations
> Of the world are unstable
> By nature. Take it easy.[24]

The truest illumination, he says, arises as a side-effect of a way of life, not as an experience sought for its own sake.

> I believe that an ever-increasing capacity for recollection and transcendence is developed by a kind of life rather than by manipulation. Buddhism is certainly pure religious empiricism. It has no beliefs, only the simply and purely defined religious experience which becomes for the experiencers an always accessible and ever-abiding present reality. The foundation for this is neither nervous-system gymnastics nor theological notions. It is the Noble Eightfold Path, whose culmination is the "unruffledness" — Nirvana — which underlies reality.[25]

He didn't think much of the idea of using of psychedelics as a short cut to mystical vision — at most he conceded that they

in many of the great Chinese and Japanese poems, a state of mind is conveyed through the lucidity of what at first appears as merely an objective nature scene. The outer landscape corresponds to the inner one, the macrocosm to the microcosm.

In a manner almost reminiscent of Whitman, Rexroth evokes the vastest connections and reflections —

> The immense stellar phenomenon
> Of dawn focuses in the egret
> And flows out, and focuses in me
> And flows infinitely away
> To touch the last galactic dust. . . .
> My wife has been swimming in the breakers,
> She comes up the beach to meet me, nude,
> Sparkling with water, singing high and clear
> Against the surf. The sun crosses
> The hills and fills her hair, as it lights
> The moon and glorifies the sea
> And deep in the empty mountains melts
> The snow of Winter and the glaciers
> Of ten thousand thousand years.[22]

In his last poems, mainly written in Japan, these moments of "cosmic consciousness" are expressed in increasingly Buddhist terms — above all in terms of the ultimate vision of the Avatamsaka (Flower Wreath) Sutra:

> the Net of Indra,
> The compound infinities of infinities,
> The Flower Wreath,
> Each universe reflecting
> Every other, reflecting
> Itself from every other . . .[23]

Rexroth's work seems to reflect a significant Zen influence, but actually he was quite critical of many aspects of Zen and professed

ment. He often spent months at a time in the woods and mountains, and quite a few of his poems reflect his experiences there. In one of the most beautiful he is lying beside a waterfall reading *The Signature of All Things* by Jakob Boehme, the visionary mystic who "saw the world as streaming in the electrolysis of love."

> Through the deep July day the leaves
> Of the laurel, all the colors
> Of gold, spin down through the moving
> Deep laurel shade all day. They float
> On the mirrored sky and forest
> For a while, and then, still slowly
> Spinning, sink through the crystal deep
> Of the pool to its leaf gold floor. . . .
> The wren broods in her moss domed nest.
> A newt struggles with a white moth
> Drowning in the pool. The hawks scream,
> Playing together on the ceiling
> Of heaven. The long hours go by.[6]

So many of his love poems take place in nature that after a reading he was once asked, "Mr. Rexroth, don't you ever make love *in*doors?" In this one he and his lover are lying in a canoe lodged in a waterlily bed in a Midwestern stream.

> Let your odorous hair fall across our eyes;
> Kiss me with those subtle, melodic lips. . . .
> Move softly, move hardly at all, part your thighs,
> Take me slowly while our gnawing lips
> Fumble against the humming blood in our throats.
> Move softly, do not move at all, but hold me,
> Deep, still, deep within you, while time slides away,
> As this river slides beyond this lily bed,
> And the thieving moments fuse and disappear
> In our mortal, timeless flesh.[7]

Back in the city, Rexroth emceed the famous 1955 gathering at which Allen Ginsberg first read "Howl." As a defense witness at the obscenity trial that soon followed he dumbfounded the prosecutor by remarking that Ginsberg was simply carrying on a venerable tradition, going back to the Biblical prophets who came forth to denounce the iniquities of society. This is equally true of Rexroth's own "Thou Shalt Not Kill," a bitter antiestablishment diatribe written a couple years earlier upon the death of Dylan Thomas, which somewhat resembles and probably influenced Ginsberg's poem:

> You are murdering the young men. . . .
> You,
> The hyena with polished face and bow tie,
> In the office of a billion dollar
> Corporation devoted to service;
> The vulture dripping with carrion,
> Carefully and carelessly robed in imported tweeds,
> Lecturing on the Age of Abundance;
> The jackal in double-breasted gabardine,
> Barking by remote control,
> In the United Nations . . .[8]

Besides these three main themes of "sex, mysticism and revolution," there are satirical epigrams (this one is on British cooking)—

> How can they write or paint
> In a country where it
> Would be nicer to be
> Fed intravenously?[9]

Elegies (this is from one in memory of his first wife, Andrée) —

> My body is asleep. Only
> My eyes and brain are awake.
> The stars stand around me
> Like gold eyes. I can no longer
> Tell where I begin and leave off.
> The faint breeze in the dark pines,
> And the invisible grass,
> The tipping earth, the swarming stars
> Have an eye that sees itself.[20]

Sometimes, as above, the experiences are described more or less explicitly. More often they are simply hinted at:

> When I dragged the rotten log
> From the bottom of the pool,
> It seemed heavy as stone.
> I let it lie in the sun
> For a month; and then chopped it
> Into sections, and split them
> For kindling, and spread them out
> To dry some more. . . .

Late that night, as he steps out of his cabin to look at the stars —

> Suddenly I saw at my feet,
> Spread on the floor of night, ingots
> Of quivering phosphorescence,
> And all about were scattered chips
> Of pale cold light that was alive.[21]

This was no doubt a real sequence of events, but at the same time it seems to suggest a parallel inner settling and illumination — and it does this in a manner truer to the "unselfing" character of the process than if he had said *I had* such and such experiences. As

> The peace which comes from the habit of contemplation . . . is not rare nor hard to find. It offers itself at moments to everyone, from early childhood on, although less and less often if it is not welcomed. It can be seized and trained and cultivated until it becomes a constant habit in the background of daily life. Without it life is only turbulence, from which eventually meaning and even all intensity of feeling die out in tedium and disorder.[17]

"At the core of life," he says in his essay on the *Tao Te Ching,* "is a tiny, steady flame of contemplation."[18] Even without knowing anything about it, people instinctively return to this "quiet center." It is always there, even amid the most turbulent situations; but some scenes are especially conducive.

> Whoever wrote the little psalms of the *Tao Te Ching* believed that the long calm regard of moving water was one of the highest forms of prayer. . . . Many sports are actually forms of contemplative activity. Fishing in quiet waters is especially so. Countless men who would burst out laughing if presented with a popular vulgarization of Zen Buddhism, and who would certainly find it utterly incomprehensible, practice the contemplative life by flowing water, rod in hand, at least for a few days each year. As the great mystics have said, they too know it is the illumination of these few days that gives meaning to the rest of their lives.[19]

Rexroth's nature poems are full of such experiences. In this one he is lying under the stars:

> I know that spring again is splendid
> As ever, the hidden thrush
> As sweetly tongued, the sun as vital —
> But these are the forest trails we walked together,
> These paths, ten years together.
> We thought the years would last forever,
> They are all gone now, the days
> We thought would not come for us are here.[10]

Family scenes (in this one, which may seem strange to people raised in our increasingly illiterate age, he is fishing while one of his daughters sits nearby reading Homer) —

> Mary is seven. Homer
> Is her favorite author.
> . . . She says, "Aren't those gods
> Terrible? All they do is
> Fight like those angels in Milton
> And play tricks on the poor Greeks
> And Trojans. I like Aias
> And Odysseus best. They are
> Lots better than those silly
> Gods."[11]

And a variety of other genres too numerous to quote — lyrics to music (folk tunes, Elizabethan tunes, Erik Satie, Duke Ellington, Ornette Coleman); Buddhist meditations in Japan, recited to koto and shakuhachi ("The Silver Swan," "On Flower Wreath Hill"); feminine mystical-erotic poems which he pretended he had translated from a young Japanese woman ("The Love Poems of Marichiko"); surreal Mother Goose rhymes and a subversive "Bestiary" for his children; reminiscences comic ("Portrait of the Author as a Young Anarchist"), erotic ("When We With Sappho") and nostalgic ("A Living Pearl"); memorials to repressed revolutions ("From the Paris

Commune to the Kronstadt Rebellion"); open letters ("A Letter to William Carlos Williams," "Fundamental Disagreement with Two Contemporaries" addressed to Tristan Tzara and André Breton); and translations from Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese and Japanese (including several volumes of Oriental women poets). [Many of these poems are online at this website.]

What I think of as especially characteristic of Rexroth's poetry is the way he interrelates even the most disparate and seemingly incongruous topics. However immersed in nature, he always remains aware of the human world, and the juxtaposition of the two realms cuts through both nature sentimentality and civilized pettiness. Watching the constellations, he envisions the Spanish Civil War ("Requiem for the Spanish Dead"). Climbing in the mountains, he remembers Sacco and Vanzetti ("Climbing Milestone Mountain," "Fish Peddler and Cobbler"). Erotic relations interweave with evocations of the elegant mathematical relations that order the universe ("Golden Section," "Theory of Numbers"). Elegiac reveries drift from poetry to history to nature to society:

> The centuries have changed little in this art,
> The subjects are still the same.
> "For Christ's sake take off your clothes and get into bed,
> We are not going to live forever."
> "Petals fall from the rose,"
> We fall from life,
> Values fall from history like men from shellfire,
> Only a minimum survives,
> Only an unknown achievement.
> They can put it all on the headstones,
> In all the battlefields,
> "Poor guy, he never knew what it was all about."
> Spectacled men will come with shovels in a thousand

He describes his point of view as "a religious anarchism" or an "ethical mysticism," and in one place, in lieu of elaborating, he refers the reader to some of his major influences: "For better statements, I refer you to the work of Martin Buber, Albert Schweitzer, D.H. Lawrence, Boehme, D.T. Suzuki, Piotr Kropotkin, or, for that matter, to the Gospels and the sayings of Buddha, or to Lao Tze and Chuang Tze."[14] This may seem a rather eclectic list, but it does give a good idea of the different facets of his "religious" philosophy. Which might be summed up in his lines:

> What is taken in
> In contemplation is poured out
> In love.[15]

In his autobiography Rexroth describes an experience he had when he was four or five years old, sitting on the curb in front of his house in early summer:

> An awareness, not a feeling, of timeless, spaceless, total bliss occupied me or I occupied it completely. I do not want to use terms like "overwhelmed me" or "I was rapt away" or any other that would imply the possession of myself by anything external, much less abnormal. On the contrary, this seemed to me to be my normal and natural life which was going on all the time and my sudden acute consciousness of it only a matter of attention.[16]

In their deepest and most enduring form such "mystical" experiences are often associated with meditation and spiritual discipline; but Rexroth implies that the same awareness comes to all of us at moments, though we may scarcely know what is happening, and it is strangely easy to forget as we once again become caught up in the compulsive turmoil of the world.

creators. Homer has it, but Dante does not. It is a kind of courage, like Johnson's famous "Courage, Sir, is the first of virtues, because without it, it is sometimes difficult to exercise the others."[9]

It is the courage to endure the inevitable "ruin of all bright things," to face the fact that "love does not last forever, friends betray each other, beauty fades, the mighty stumble in blood and their cities burn."[10] The "message" of Homer, as Rexroth approvingly paraphrases it, is that the universe has no inherent meaning, everything is ephemeral, the only values are those that people create in relation with each other. "The thing that endures, that gives value to life, is comradeship, loyalty, bravery, magnanimity, love, the relations of men in direct communication with each other. From this comes the beauty of life, its tragedy and its meaning, and from nowhere else."[11]

This may sound rather "existential," but nothing is more foreign to Rexroth than what he calls the "*angst* for *angst*'s sake" of the "paralyzed rabbit metaphysics of existentialism." "I do not respond to the 'existentialist dilemma' at all. Its inventor, Søren Kierkegaard, has always seemed to me a sick man who treated his girl friend wretchedly. A man 'badly in need of help' as the head-shrinkers say. . . . I do not look on my Being every hour as a dreadful meeting with reality. I like it."[12]

If Rexroth often evokes the "tragic sense of life," at other times his works reveal a more mystical consciousness. These two attitudes would seem to contradict each other, but he appears to treat them as complementary, equally valid perspectives — sometimes contrasting them, as in the dialectic of his philosophical reveries, sometimes combining them, as in his plays, which have tragic Greek themes but which, like Japanese Nô plays, culminate not in a dramatic climax but in a transcendent resolution of karmic entanglements.[13]

years,
Give lectures in universities on cultural advances, cultural lags. . . .
This year we made four major ascents,
Camped for two weeks at timberline,
Watched Mars swim close to the earth,
Watched the black aurora of war
Spread over the sky of a decayed civilization.
These are the last terrible years of authority.
The disease has reached its crisis,
Ten thousand years of power,
The struggle of two laws,
The rule of iron and spilled blood,
The abiding solidarity of living blood and brain.[12]

I quote this fairly typical passage at some length to give you an idea of the tone and flow of his poetry; but it is difficult to convey just how widely he ranges and how complexly he interrelates without quoting whole pages. You can see this especially in the "philosophical reveries" gathered in his *Collected Longer Poems*. In the longest and most interesting one, The Dragon and the Unicorn, which recounts a trip he took to Europe in 1949, the chronological narration of his travels and encounters is interspersed with pointed cultural and political comments and with more abstract philosophical or mystical passages. The latter act as a counterpoint to the narrative, sometimes moving independently with no apparent relation to it; sometimes seeming to comment on it (a description of a bohemian gathering is followed by a discourse on the dilemma of isolated persons in a world of reification); sometimes clashing with it (a denunciation of some miserable social reality is followed by a vision of universal community). Rexroth notes that these passages of comment should be taken with a grain of salt — they are part of an internal dialogue and are often juxtaposed with complementary or contrasting viewpoints. In one place, for example, he declares:

"The only Absolute is the Community of Love with which Time ends,"[13] but in another: "The Absolute as a community of love . . . I doubt if I believe it, but it seems to me a more wholesome metaphysical metaphor than most."[14]

To my taste Rexroth's philosophical reveries are much more interesting than the comparable works of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound — two poets he heartily disliked and whose influence he combatted all his life. At their best they may be "greater" poets (though even that is debatable), but Rexroth is certainly a saner and wiser one. He has none of Eliot's snobbery or neurotic prissiness, and even at his crustiest he is far less cranky, obsessive and self-indulgent than Pound. You can take his reflections seriously without having to make allowances for some absurd reactionary ideology.

During the reign of Eliot, Rexroth found most American poetry to be "dull academic stuff by petty people who lead dull, petty, academic lives. In the right circles it has been thought terribly unfashionable to write about anything so vulgar as love, death, nature — any of the real things that happen to real people."[15] Against this state of affairs he was constantly insisting on relevance, putting things back into perspective. Speaking of jazz poetry, he noted that despite its apparent innovativeness it simply "returns poetry to music and to public entertainment as it was in the days of Homer or the troubadours. It forces poetry to deal with aspects of life which it has tended to avoid in the recent past."[16] When Eliot pontificated on the need for "tradition" and disparaged William Blake as a naïve eccentric who made up his system from scratch, Rexroth observed: "Mr. Eliot's tradition goes back to Aquinas as interpreted in the pages of *L'Action Française*. Blake's goes back to the Memphite Theology and the Pyramid Texts."[17] While academic poets followed Eliot's pseudoclassical doctrine that poetry should be "impersonal," Rexroth was writing poems that are classical in the truest sense, mature personal responses to the real issues of life — right in the tradition of Sappho, Petronius, Hitomaro, Tu Fu and the other classic poets he translated so superbly.

In his essay on Julius Caesar's writings he says: "Masterfully concealed in *The Gallic War* and *The Civil War* is a philosophy of human relationships that only maturity can comprehend or even recognize. The masterful concealment, of course, is an essential part of the maturity."[8] The same thing might be said of Rexroth's own writings. For my purposes in this book I have tended to cite his most explicit pronouncements, but if you read him through you will see that he usually deals with the "big things" with a light touch, and often leaves them implicit, to be discerned between the lines.

But if ever he does reveal his life philosophy, and even sum up its central themes in a single word, it is in that essay on the Chinese novels. Which continues:

> During the Second World War I knew a little Quaker from a farm in Indiana who traveled around the country at his own expense and got up in First Day meetings to recite Webster's definition of magnanimity. He had "come with this concern to thee, because thee might find it helpful." This is the definition:
> "**magnanimity**, *n.; pl. ties. (F. magnanimité, L. magnanimitas.) 1. Quality of being magnanimous; that quality or combination of qualities in character enabling one to encounter danger and trouble with tranquility and firmness, to disdain injustice, meanness, and revenge, and to act and sacrifice for noble objects. 2. A deed or a disposition characterized by magnanimity. 3. Grandiose temperament; extravagance of soul. Rare."*
> Having said that the little old Quaker sat down and next week appeared at another meeting. It certainly did help me, probably more than any other words in those hideous years.
> No artist belongs in the very first rank who is the victim of his creations. Only this special kind of nobility guaranteed the independence of the primary

> Ford didn't label his thesis; he probably didn't know he had one in that sense. His characters didn't philosophize about it. He didn't snoop around in their minds with a lot of jargon. Nobody's consciousness streamed. It all just happened, like it does, and you were left with that — the brutal and the silly and the beautiful facts. It is so easy to be artistic. It is so hard to be mature.[3]

Variations on this theme recur throughout Rexroth's writings. In great drama, he says, "psychological and moral depth must be there, but there only to be discovered by those in the audience who themselves have such depth. These qualities cannot be written on the surface or they destroy the integrity of the action."[4] Whereas he agrees with Ford that "Dostoievsky was guilty of the worst possible taste in making his characters discuss the profundity of the very novel in which they were taking part."[5] "The troubled souls of Dostoievsky's novels are not grown men. They talk endlessly about things that adults learn it is better to keep quiet about. Tragedy ceases to be impressive when it is so garrulously articulate, and at last even to be believable."[6] Rexroth has a special fondness for certain writers who embody a quiet, modest, unselfconscious wisdom — the biographer-fisherman Izaak Walton, the amateur naturalist Gilbert White, the antislavery Quaker John Woolman — while he detests the vanity of artists who glory in their supposedly special role:

> Michelangelo was surely
> A noisy man, and terribly
> Conceited. After all, nothing
> Ever happened to him that
> Doesn't happen to all of us.
> If you have a tragedy to
> Portray, you should be humble
> About it, you are serving
> The bread of communion.[7]

Rexroth sometimes played down his essays as mere "journalism" written to pay the rent while he pursued his primary work as a poet, but that is one point on which I have never taken him seriously. He is certainly one of my favorite poets, but as an essayist I think he is in a class by himself. I don't know any other so lively and so sane, so large-minded, so pithy and so bracing. He titles one of his collections *Assays* to recall Montaigne's original sense of the word *essai:* trial, test, experiment, attempt to come to grips with reality. One of the essays in that volume celebrates another writer he resembles in more ways than one: "Those guffawing, tobacco-spitting travel books that made Mark Twain's reputation in the first place and that gave Van Wyck Brooks fainting spells are fundamentally right. Always Mark Twain points out the human meaning of St. Peter's or the pyramids or the Pantheon."[18] This is just what Rexroth does. He is more sophisticated than Twain, and less corny, but he has the same gusto, the same worldly-wise irony, the same wry, skeptical, down-to-earth outlook he sums up in his essay on American humor:

> These are the key words of great — classic — epic — Homeric — humor. A sense of the consistent principle of incongruity on which Nature, for all our science and philosophy, really operates. The realization that the accepted, official version of anything is most likely false and that all authority is based on fraud. The courage to face and act on these two conclusions. The appreciation of the wonderful hilarity of the processes of human procreation and elimination. The acceptance of the prime fact that nobody made it that way — it just happened. . . . Life is all a great joke — but only the brave ever get the point.[19]

I don't want to give the impression that he was merely a cracker-barrel philosopher. Most self-educated people have a lot of blind

spots, but Rexroth seems to have explored just about all the areas of human endeavor systematically, many of them deeply. The range of his reading was truly astonishing — histories, cookbooks, nature guides, geology surveys, ethnology reports, political polemics, theological treatises, the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica* . . . He reviewed several thousand books over KPFA alone, and that was only a public-service sideline (a half-hour program every week for twenty years).

Yet he does not seem at all bookish. Whether he is writing about ancient Chinese science or American Indian songs or Van Gogh's paintings or "Rimbaud as Capitalist Adventurer," all this erudition is digested, connected, and grounded in personal experience. His essays on jazz [see Some Thoughts on Jazz and Five More Articles on Jazz], for example, reveal a sound knowledge of its technical aspects (comparisons with classical music, etc.), but above all he zeroes in on its human history, its social roles, the lives of its creators, the conditions of its performance. He may reminisce about dancing at jazz clubs in the twenties, or recount a conversation with Charlie Parker or Charlie Mingus to debunk the Beats' jazz mystique, or (discussing the connection of music with the rhythms of sex and dance and work) throw in a passing remark like "Anybody who has ever worked on the range knows that not only does the true cowboy ballad swing in 'horse time,' but that you can change the pace of your horse by changing the rhythm of your song."[20]

Once in a while, particularly in the more ephemeral articles that he dashed off at the last minute, he will come out with some extravagant or even preposterous pronouncement. But by and large I think his opinions are pretty well founded. You won't agree with all of them (many are in any case just matters of taste), but what he says is almost always provocative. Criticizing the superficiality of Ionesco's satires, he says: "A satirical art which beats only dead dogs . . . leaves the audience with comfortable feelings of amused superiority."[21] Rexroth is more likely to puncture one of your own illusions and leave you realizing all you've still got to learn.

> HOFUKU (*pointing at mountains*): "Is not this Reality?"
>
> CHOKEI: "It is, but it's a pity to say so."[1]

If I had to pick out a single text to exemplify what I like about Rexroth it would probably be his essay on the classic Chinese novels. In this passage he is characterizing the virtues of those vast, marvelous books:

> What are these virtues? First, an absolute mastery of pure narrative. Second, humanity. Third, as the synthesis of virtues one and two, a whole group of qualities that should have some one name — reticence, artistic humility, maturity, objectivity, total sympathy, the ability to reveal the macrocosm in the microcosm, the moral universe in the physical act, the depths of psychological insight in the trivia of happenstance, without ever saying anything about it, or them — the "big" things, that is. This is a quality of style. It is the fundamental quality of the greatest style. It does have a name, although it is not a term we usually think of as part of the jargon of literary criticism. The word is magnanimity. The antonym, I guess, is self-indulgence.[2]

He goes on to deplore the self-indulgence in one form or another of virtually all twentieth-century writers, from Proust and Henry James to Kerouac and on down. Then he singles out one notable exception, Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End,* the only "completely adult major novel of my time":

Chapter 2: Magnanimity and Mysticism

He said he tried to write like he talked, and he did. His autobiography and many of his essays were in fact not really "written" at all, but spoken ad lib, recorded and transcribed with minimal editing. Yet however he seems to digress, to hop around spontaneously from topic to topic, when he is done you realize how unerringly he has gotten to the heart of the matter. In his essay on Marcus Aurelius he wants to convey how far philosophy has declined since it related to real issues of life. Look how he brings this home in one droll, unforgettable image: "If a college student's mother died, his girl got pregnant, he acquired a loathsome disease, or he decided to become a conscientious objector, would he go to his philosophy professor for advice?"[22] He always brings things back to basics. His gist can usually be understood at first reading, even if you are unfamiliar with the books and ideas and events to which he refers; but there is always plenty more to sink your teeth into, and lots of intriguing hints for further explorations. I've read some of his essays so many times I practically know them by heart, yet each time I go back I discover things I hadn't noticed before. Even when his topic is something in which I have no particular interest, I still find him hard to put down. It's not just that he has an engaging style, it's that his breadth of vision puts whatever he is dealing with in a fresh perspective.

But he does have an engaging style, always recognizable yet as variegated as his topics. He can be free and easygoing ("a lot of Mozart sounds like a country boy whistling along his way to the swimming hole")[23] or as hard-boiled as Hammett or Chandler, of whose work he says: "The secret of this kind of writing is that it isn't buying anything and it isn't selling anything."[24] In a phrase he can evoke the Yiddish world of Isaac Singer ("those passionate arguments that used to sprinkle the whiskers with sour cream")[25] or epitomize the mordant, cynical style of Tacitus ("a style like a tray of dental instruments").[26] But he knows that "style never is just a matter of style, but the outward sign and garb of an inner spiritual state."[27] If he discusses a poet's prosody, it is not a mere

academic exercise: he will show how it reflects a way of looking at things, a response to life. Denise Levertov's, for instance, is "a kind of animal grace of the word, a pulse like the footfalls of a cat or the wingbeats of a gull. It is the intense aliveness of an alert domestic love — the wedding of form and content in poems which themselves celebrate a kind of perpetual wedding of two persons always realized as two responsible sensibilities."[28] You never read very far in his aesthetic discussions without coming upon some worldly-wise social or moral or psychological connection. "The interiority of the characters [in Defoe's novels] is revealed by their elaborately presented outside. When they talk about their own motives, their psychology, their morals, their self-analyses and self-justifications are to be read backwards, as of course is true of most people."[29]

As a debunker of the imbecilities of mass culture Rexroth can be as entertaining as H.L. Mencken —

> This stuff [Maoist "proletarian literature"] is ridiculous and resembles nothing so much as nineteenth-century Sunday school stories of the little Roman boy who helped his sister escape from the lions, defied the minions of the emperor, ran errands for St. Paul and went to heaven.[30]

And just as scathing —

> Television is designed to arouse the most perverse, sadistic, acquisitive drives. I mean, a child's television program is a real vision of hell, and it's only because we are so used to these things that we pass them over. If any of the people who have had visions of hell, like Virgil or Dante or Homer, were to see these things it would scare them into fits.[31]

At his crustiest he in fact seems like nothing so much as a deeper and more radical Mencken. But while Mencken delighted

order whose essence is the liberation and universalization of selfhood." His people "all seem to be working for 'nothing,' participants in a universal creative effort in which each discovers his ultimate individuation. . . . Today we know that it is Whitman's vision or nothing."

Whether a work represents a turning point of the past or envisions a potential future, Rexroth's ultimate test is whether it remains true to the perennial human realities, whether it really "tells." Reviewing some new translations of the Greek tragedies, he says:

> They say our civilization is based on the Bible, Homer and the Greek tragedians. For my taste, the Bible is a dangerous book, because it can be, and with few exceptions has been, interpreted to give guarantees to life that life in fact never offers. Here in these plays, as in Homer, is life as it really is, men as we really are, when we beat our wives or cheat our grocer or plan our perfect societies or run for office or write our poems — but projected against the empty and splendid heavens, and made noble. Take away the costumes and the grand language, it is the same pride, the same doom haunting Orestes that haunts every Certified Public Accountant, every housewife, every automobile salesman. How much nicer people, and how much happier, they'd all be if they only knew it. Here is their chance to learn.[37]

unknown to Homer's Agamemnon or Proust's Swann." "Most of the great British ballads could be turned into Nô plays and vice versa." Baudelaire, of all people, arrives at a vision "not unlike Buddhism in its starkest form."

Part of the interest of these works is of course precisely their contrast to the present, the revelation of how people in other times and places lived and thought. But Rexroth always points out the things that remain the same amid all the differences: "Kerouac's *On the Road* differs vastly from *The Satyricon* in lack of insight, irony, and literary skill, but its characters are all drawn from the same unchanged class." Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* "assumes a world like our celebrities, our international Jet Sets. . . . It is a description of people we know."

Some writers directly foreshadow our present condition: William Blake "could diagnose the early symptoms of the world ill because he saw them as signs that man was being deprived of literally half his being. . . . He is in fact concerned with the epic tragedy of mankind as it enters an epoch of depersonalization unequalled in history." Baudelaire "is the founder of the modern sensibility . . . . Some learn to cope with this sensibility. He was at its mercy, because he embodied it totally. He lived in a permanent crisis of the moral nervous system. His conviction that social relationships were one immense lie was physiological."

In other cases there may be no direct connection, but an illuminating parallel: "During the long war with Sparta, Athenian life became widely neurotic. A new type of interpersonal sickness came into being. The organs of reciprocity were crippled. Words for human relationships lost their meanings and turned into their opposites. Thucydides describes this derangement of communication at length in one of his greatest passages, a diagnosis of the internalization of madness of war which sounds like a description of contemporary America."

On the other hand, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* ostensibly a celebration of the America of his time, actually envisions "a social

in virtually indiscriminate verbal assaults for their own sake, Rexroth's debunking is always in the context of a positive vision. However outraged or pessimistic he may sometimes be, he is a world apart from that modern glib cynicism that has gotten so out of touch with any human fulfillment that it has nothing left but a dependent love-hate relation to the most delirious manifestations of cultural alienation. Always he relates to the real human life that goes on behind the façade of the inhuman system:

> Every day all states do things which, if they were the acts of individuals, would lead to summary arrest and often execution. . . . Most people except politicians and authors work out for themselves, in secret, ways of living which ignore organized society as much as possible. . . . What is called "growing up," "getting a little common sense," is largely the learning of techniques for outwitting the more destructive forces at large in the social order. The mature man lives quietly, does good privately, assumes personal responsibility for his actions, treats others with friendliness and courtesy, finds mischief boring and keeps out of it. Without this hidden conspiracy of good will society would not endure an hour.[32]

Whether or not most people do this, Rexroth is clearly implying his own personal ethic. He's been around enough to see through what he calls the Social Lie or the Great Fraud — to know that the "official version of anything is most likely false and that all authority is based on fraud." "An appreciable number of Americans really do believe the Great Fraud of the mass culture, what the French call the *hallucination publicitaire.* They only know what they read in the papers. They think it is really like the movies. . . . The art of being civilized is the art of learning to read between the lies."[33]

This is one of Rexroth's basic touchstones. Those who do read between the lies are at least to that extent his allies, whatever

their other faults. "There is a lot of bullshit in Lawrence, Miller, or Patchen — but their enemies are my enemies."[34] He laughs at Henry Miller as a would-be deep thinker or visionary, but he appreciates him as a great picaresque autobiographer with an instinctive immunity to the Social Lie:

> Can you remember when you first started to read? Doubtless you thought that some day you would find in books the truth, the answer to the very puzzling life you were discovering around you. But you never did. If you were alert, you discovered that books were conventions, as unlike life as a game of chess. The written word is a sieve. Only so much of reality gets through as fits the size and shape of the screen, and in some ways that is never enough. . . . Most of the real difficulty of communication comes from social convention, from a vast conspiracy to agree to accept the world as something it really isn't at all. . . .
> Literature is a social defense mechanism. Remember again when you were a child. You thought that some day you would grow up and find a world of real adults — the people who really made things run — and understand how and why things ran. . . . Then, as the years went on, you learned, through more or less bitter experience, that there aren't, and never have been, any such people, anywhere. Life is just a mess, full of tall children, grown stupider, less alert and resilient, and nobody knows what makes it go — as a whole, or any part of it. *But nobody ever tells.*
> Henry Miller tells. Andersen told *about* the little boy and the Emperor's new clothes. Miller is the little boy himself. He tells about the Emperor, about the pimples on his behind, and the warts on his private parts, and the dirt between his toes. Other writers in the past have done this, of course, and they are the great ones, the real classics. But they have done it within the conventions of literature. They have used the forms of the Great Lie to expose the truth.[35]

I've never seen any other literary critic write anything quite like that. Rexroth is more knowledgeable and reliable than Miller, but he has the same innocent eye, the same lack of reverence for "Literature-with-a-capital-L," whether he is reviewing modern writers or reassessing key works of the past.

Most of his essays on the latter are collected in his two-volume *Classics Revisited.*[36] This is certainly a more relevant selection than most choices of the "hundred greatest books." To mention only one significant difference, most such lists are limited to Western works — a provincialism that is ridiculous in this day and age. Rexroth revisits most of the recognized Western classics, but he also introduces the reader to a number of others that are just as interesting, including basic Oriental works like the *Mahabharata,* the *Tao Te Ching,* and what he considers the world's two greatest novels, Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* and the Chinese *Dream of the Red Chamber.*

The ancient Middle Eastern story of *Gilgamesh* ("the first conscious self"), Herodotus's *History,* the *Bhagavad Gita,* the Finnish *Kalevala* ("the most ecological of epics"), the poetry of Tu Fu, the essays of Montaigne ("the inventor of the empiric ego"), *Don Quixote, The Tempest,* the memoirs of Casanova ("natural man living at the highest pitch"), Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* ("the first black comedy"), *War and Peace* and *Huckleberry Finn* are just a few of the other "basic documents in the history of the imagination" whose pertinence Rexroth reveals in these amazingly pithy little essays. East or West, ancient or recent, he cuts across historical and cultural distances to make the most far-ranging connections. Catullus's sensibility "is the material of the lyrics of Bob Dylan." The characters in *Njal's Saga* "are adult in a fashion

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Ken Knabb
The Relevance of Rexroth
1990

https://bopsecrets.org/PS/Rexroth.htm
Originally published in 1990, reprinted in 1998 in Public Secrets:
Collected Skirmished of Ken Knabb

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

of an "eternal Thou" is not really a necessary implication of his philosophy. "However Martin Buber might disagree doctrinally, take away his God and nothing important in his philosophy has changed. It remains a philosophy of joy, lived in a world full of others."[49]

A vital part of Buber's work is his presentation of Hasidism, a popular mystical movement that arose in the Jewish communities of eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. Rexroth discusses at length the history and nature of Hasidism, and how it differs in some ways from Buber's sophisticated reinterpretation of it; but what stands out regardless is a "holy good humor" and an affirmation of community all too rare in religious movements. Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* somewhat resemble Zen or Taoist or Sufi anecdotes, but they have a more communal and ethical character. Like the latter, they often reveal a decisive event in a person's life, but this is generally not so much an experience of enlightenment as a moment of inner moral "turning." There is no definitive spiritual attainment; each new situation, each new encounter, calls for one's whole being. The Hasidic tales take place in the context of a quite orthodox traditional Judaism, full of superstitions, antiquated social relations and unappealing religious forms; yet in spite of all this,

> what comes through most is joy and wonder, love and quiet, in the face of the continuously vanishing world. It is called God's Will, but the movement of the universe . . . is accepted on very similar terms to those of the *Tao Te Ching*. Song and dance, the mutual love of the community — these are the values; they are beautiful precisely because they are not absolute. And on this foundation of modesty and love and joy is raised a moral structure which heals and illuminates as hardly any other Western European religious expression does.[50]

Rexroth is always enthusiastic about these ethical or "world-affirming" mysticisms, always quick to praise and encourage any tendencies toward joining contemplation and community, toward integrating religious life with ordinary life in the world. Mysticism has, of course, more often been used to provide a justification for ignoring ethical responsibilities and social realities. The experience of transcendent unity has been taken to imply that all the suffering and turmoil in the world is only illusory and need not concern us. The paradoxical statements of mysticism (transcendence of duality, "All is one," etc.) may be appropriate figures of speech to hint at an indescribable experience, they may even be true in a certain sense, but it is confusing different levels of reality to conclude that they are also true in the ordinary sense. The simplest refutation of this sort of transcendental sophistry is to note that even those who preach it take some aspects of worldly life quite seriously (notably the money they charge).

Rexroth never falls for it. Whenever it appears he is quick to denounce it. "The real reason for the popularity of the Occult Ancient East was pointed out long ago by Kipling: 'Ship me somewhere East of Suez . . . where there ain't no ten commandments.' If your religion is just exotic enough, you don't need to bother about responsibility. You can get away with anything."[51] Nor does Rexroth buy the notion that one must first "heal oneself" before acting in the world. As he often noted, the great mystics of the past are virtually unanimous in insisting that the two go together. "The Catholic contemplative, the Sufi, the Buddhist monk, follow counsels of perfection — illumination comes as the crown of a life of intense ethical activism, of honesty, loyalty, poverty, chastity, and above all charity, positive, out-going love of all creatures. The good life creates the ambience into which spiritual illumination flows like a sourceless, totally diffused light."[52] A classic statement of priorities by one of the greatest Western mystics: "If a person were in such a rapturous state as St. Paul once entered, and he knew of a sick man who wanted a cup of soup, it would be far better to withdraw from

the rapture for love's sake and serve him who is in need" (Meister Eckhart).[53] The same is implied, but with a significant additional nuance that Rexroth especially appreciates, in the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva:

> A bodhisattva, in case you don't know, is one who, at the brink of absorption into Nirvana, turns away with the vow that he shall not enter final peace until he can bring all other beings with him. He does this, says the most advanced Buddhist thought, "indifferently" because he knows that there is neither being nor not-being, neither peace nor illusion, neither saved nor saviors, neither truth nor consequence. This is the reason for that benign, world-weary expression on the faces in Far Eastern religious art.[54]

But a farseeing compassion ultimately implies opposing the social system that prevents it from being fulfilled. Rexroth adds a modern supplement to the bodhisattva vow:

> While there is a lower class,
> I am in it. While there is
> A criminal element,
> I am of it. Where there is
> A soul in jail, I am not free.[55]

Chapter 3: Society and Revolution

pleted for several years. [This project seems to have been abandoned.]

Linda Hamalian has completed a biography of Rexroth and is preparing an expanded edition of his autobiography, which will incorporate *Excerpts from a Life* and other material on his later years. Rexroth's correspondence with James Laughlin is soon to be published by Norton. [All three of these books appeared in 1991. Unfortunately Hamalian's biography, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (Norton, 1991), turned out to be extremely hostile and uncomprehending. More recently, a *Chicago Review* special Rexroth issue (Autumn 2006) includes nearly 100 pages of Rexroth's letter to various American and British poets along with several essays about Rexroth.]

In addition to the out-of-print books — which should certainly all be reissued — completed manuscripts exist for two books that have never been published at all: *The Poetry of Pre-Literate Peoples* (an anthology) and *Camping in the Western Mountains* (a guidebook from the thirties). [The latter is now online at this site.] There also remains an enormous amount of uncollected Rexroth material — columns, articles, reviews, introductions, interviews, letters, radio tapes, paintings — much of which would be worth bringing out in book form. I have compiled a 200-page anthology of the *Examiner* and *San Francisco* columns, but have not yet found a suitable publisher.

End matter of Ken Knabb's *The Relevance of Rexroth* (1990). Reprinted in *Public Secrets*.

All Rexroth's poetry and plays and most of his translations are available from New Directions, along with the *Autobiographical Novel,* the *Selected Essays* and the two *Classics Revisited* volumes. Most of the other prose books are out of print. [For more detailed and up-to-date information, see the Rexroth Archive page.]

Fantasy Records issued two LPs of Rexroth's jazz poetry, *Poetry Readings in the Cellar* (with Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 1959) and *Poetry and Jazz at the Blackhawk* (1960). [Four poems from the *Blackhawk* record are now online here. His performance of "Thou Shalt Not Kill" can be heard here] *A Sword in a Cloud of Light,* a cassette of a 1977 reading with jazz and koto-shakuhachi accompaniment, is available from Watershed Tapes (P.O. Box 50145, Washington, DC 20004).

The most comprehensive study of Rexroth is Morgan Gibson's *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom* (Archon, 1986), which incorporates but substantially reworks material from his earlier book, *Kenneth Rexroth* (Twayne, 1972). Despite his title Gibson says relatively little about Rexroth's political radicality and social criticism; but his discussion of the poetry and plays, with particular emphasis on their Oriental aspects, is reliable and often insightful. His bibliography lists a large number of other writings about Rexroth. [Gibson's *Revolutionary Rexroth* is now out of print, but a revised and expanded version is now online (including a collection of his correspondence with Rexroth). The most detailed study of Rexroth's poetry is Donald Gutierrez's *The Holiness of the Real: The Short Verse of Kenneth Rexroth* (Associated University Presses, 1996).]

James Hartzell and Richard Zumwinkle's *Kenneth Rexroth: A Checklist of His Published Writings* (UCLA Library, 1967) is essential for those interested enough to search the larger libraries for Rexroth's hundreds of uncollected articles. (Nearly all of them can be found in the library of the University of California at Berkeley.) A much larger bibliography is in progress, but will not be com-

*

"It may seem absurd to talk of revolution . . . . But all the alternatives are even more absurd*, since they imply accepting the existing order in one way or another."*
(Situationist International)[1]

Rexroth grew up in the final years of the old revolutionary movement. World War I not only demonstrated the bankruptcy of the old social order, it revealed the superficiality of the movement against it, as virtually all the supposedly antiwar and internationalist leftist organizations rallied to their respective nation-states. The end of the war brought a wave of upsurges in Europe, but all were soon crushed or neutralized. The one apparent exception, the 1917 Russian revolution, ultimately turned out to be the most disastrous defeat of all. The Bolsheviks took over, repressed the libertarian forces that had made the revolution, and imposed a new variant of the old system: bureaucratic state-capitalism. The "Communist" bureaucracy became the new ruling class; the state became the sole, all-owning capitalist.

> Bolshevism is not communism or even socialism in any sense in which those words were understood before 1918. It is a very primitive form of state capitalism. It is a method of forcing a backward, semi-colonial country through the period of capital accumulation which the major capitalist nations went through in the early years of the 19th century.[2]

The Bolshevik counterrevolution was not only a disaster for Russia; its example poisoned and ultimately destroyed the entire

international revolutionary movement for decades to come. The Bolsheviks' power and prestige as the supposed leaders of the only "successful" revolution enabled them to dominate, manipulate and sabotage radical movements everywhere else "until there was no one left who was not completely centered on the Kremlin, either as a mindless Stalinist hatchet man or a psychopathic anti-Bolshevik." "Many thousands have turned to reaction, religion, or plain folly because to them Socialist revolution meant Bolshevism."[3]

Meanwhile in western Europe and America the system arrived at various accommodations with the reformist socialist parties and labor unions (New Deal, popular fronts, welfare statism).

> The socialist and trade union movements in the West have functioned in reality — not just as governors to insure that steam is let off when the pressure gets too high, not just as what are now called "fail safe" devices, though they certainly are that — but as essential parts of the motive organization of capitalism, more, in other words, like carburetors that insure there will be just the right mixture of fuel and air for each new demand on the engine.[4]

In certain countries where this did not work well enough social crises were repressed through the imposition of fascism (a hybrid of totalitarian state-capitalism and traditional monopoly capitalism). Caught between Bolshevism, reformism and fascism, the genuinely radical elements were isolated and in many cases simply wiped out. The last and greatest manifestation of the old movement, the Spanish anarchist revolution of 1936-1937, was jointly destroyed by all three.

> The generation of revolutionary hope was over. The conscience of mankind went to school to learn methods of compromising itself. The Moscow trials, the

Bibliography

19. SFM, July 1968. On the May revolt, which situationist theories and tactics contributed toward provoking, see *Situationist International Anthology,* pp. 225-256, 343-352 [revised ed. pp. 288-325, 435-457] [Beginning of an Era and May 1968 Documents].

20. "Back to the Sources of Literature," AS 164.

21. SFE, 9 January 1966.

22. C 30.

23. C xv, xvii-xviii.

24. C xi-xii.

25. C xii.

26. "Facing Extinction," AS 185-186.

27. SFM, July 1969.

28. "Back to the Sources of Literature," AS 153.

29. *Ibid.,* AS 160.

30. "The Poetry of the Far East in a General Education," in *Approaches to the Oriental Classics,* edited by William de Bary (Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 197.

31. Interview in *The San Francisco Poets,* edited by David Meltzer (Ballantine, 1971), pp. 42-44; reprinted as *Golden Gate: Interviews with Five San Francisco Poets* (Wingbow, 1976), pp. 52-54. This is vintage Rexroth: perhaps his best interview, certainly his funniest. [See the expanded reedition of the book: *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* (City Lights, 2001).]

32. "Poets, Old and New," A 208-209.

33. "Back to the Sources of Literature," AS 165.

34. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Paris, 1967; translation: Black and Red, 1977), thesis #4.

35. P. Canjuers & Guy Debord, Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program, in *Situationist International Anthology,* pp. 307-308 [revised ed. p. 390].

36. "For Eli Jacobson," CSP 244-245/SP 89-91 [CP 541-543].

> Kuomintang street executions, the betrayal of Spain, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the extermination of whole nations, Hiroshima, Algiers — no protest has stopped the monster jaws from closing. As the years go on, fewer and fewer protests are heard. The spokesmen, the intellects of the world, have blackmailed themselves and are silent.[5]

A whole generation of writers, artists and intellectuals was shell-shocked, mentally and morally maimed, and sunk into demoralization and compromise.

> How many stopped writing at thirty?
> How many went to work for *Time*?
> How many died of prefrontal
> Lobotomies in the Communist Party?
> How many are lost in the back wards
> Of provincial madhouses?
> How many on the advice of
> Their psychoanalysts, decided
> A business career was best after all?
> How many are hopeless alcoholics?[6]

Rexroth was one of the few exceptions. In the twenties he was an active member of one of the most exemplary organizations of the old movement, the anarcho-syndicalist IWW (Industrial Workers of the World); in the early thirties he carried on similar work independently. When there ceased to be any significant revolutionary movement, he set in for the long retrenchment — establishing contacts among persons who had maintained integrity and radicality, initiating reassessments of perspectives, continuing to speak out and act where possible. He had seen through the Bolshevik pretenses as early as 1921, when Trotsky and Lenin crushed the libertarian revolt of the Kronstadt soviet; but while clearly oppos-

ing all forms of "Communism" he did not, like so many others of his generation, react into supporting Western capitalism.

> I am far better aware of
> The evils of Stalinism
> Than you are, you ex-Trotskyite
> Warmonger. But it won't get you
> Anywhere to tell me I should
> Welcome the beast who devours me
> Just because a bigger lion
> Is eating somebody else on
> The other side of the arena.[7]

As for the limits of reformist politics: Hitching through Montana in 1927, Rexroth and Andrée get a ride with a well-to-do man of the world with an unusually cynical opinion of politicians. Rexroth asks if he doesn't think there are a few honest exceptions, such as Robert La Follette and Burton Wheeler (radical reform senators from Wisconsin and Montana). The man answers by describing the backstop in a baseball field: "It catches the balls the catcher misses, and all the fouls that go off in that direction, so that nobody in the box seats gets hurt. That's the function of guys like La Follette and Wheeler, and believe me, they know it if you don't."[8] The next day they find out that their companion is Senator Wheeler.

The failures of Bolshevism and reformist socialism to bring about a truly radical social change confirmed Rexroth's anarchism. It had become more evident than ever that capitalism cannot be eliminated by state programs and that any state bureaucracy, no matter how supposedly radical, naturally tends to perpetuate its own power. Capitalism and the state are simply interlinked aspects of the same system:

1. *Situationist International Anthology,* edited and translated from the French by Ken Knabb (Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 63 [revised ed. p. 84] [Instructions for an Insurrection].

2. SFE, 29 December 1966.

3. AN 128.

4. "The Institutionalization of Revolt, the Domestication of Dissent," SE 201.

5. "Kenneth Patchen, Naturalist of the Public Nightmare," BB 96-97.

6. "Thou Shalt Not Kill," CSP 272/SP 99 [CP 570].

7. "The Dragon and the Unicorn," CLP 235-236 [CP 474].

8. AN 355-356.

9. "The Dragon and the Unicorn," CLP 207 [CP 444].

10. "The Social Lie": interview in Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians,* pp. 293-294.

11. Introduction to *The New British Poets* (New Directions, 1949), p. xxvi.

12. *Excerpts from a Life,* edited by Ekbert Faas (Conjunctions, 1981), pp. 57-58. This small book, published in a limited edition, contains episodes from Rexroth's continuation of his autobiography into the thirties and forties. [It has since been incorporated into the expanded edition of *An Autobiographical Novel* (New Directions, 1991), where a slightly different version of the cited passage can be found on p. 518.]

13. "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," AS 2/SE 42.

14. "The Students Take Over," A 110-111, 102, 104/SE 123, 115-118.

15. BB vii.

16. "His Corner of the World," *New York Times Book Review,* 27 October 1957.

17. SFE, 21 July 1963.

18. SFM, December 1970.

Notes to Chapter 3

> Labor power on the market,
> Firepower on the battlefield,
> It is all one, merely two
> Aspects of the same monster.[9]

The state is basically a protection racket. The fact that it incidentally provides a few beneficial services merely camouflages its essential role as enforcer of the money-commodity economy, without which most of the artificially maintained conflicts of interest that now provide a pretext for the state would lose their rationale. "The state does not tax you to provide you with services. The state taxes you to kill you. The services are something which it has kidnapped from you in your organic relations with your fellow man, to justify its police and war-making powers."[10] Rexroth quotes Herbert Read to the effect that "anarchism possibly may sound impractical, but certainly less impractical than the modern capitalist nation-state would sound if described to someone in another civilization; and it is obvious that nothing else will work; any form of State is bound to fail from now on, and fail disastrously."[11]

During World War II Rexroth was a conscientious objector (doing alternative service as an attendant in a psychiatric ward). He was not an advocate of strict nonviolence in every situation, but he does seem to have been absolutely opposed to all wars between modern nation-states, considering them worse than any of the evils they claim to be fighting. During the war he formed the antiwar Randolph Bourne Council (named in memory of a libertarian writer who wrote on the theme "War is the health of the state") and worked to aid Japanese-Americans who were being harassed and sent to concentration camps. (He came up with scams through which many were enabled to escape incarceration altogether.)

After the war Rexroth and a few others organized the San Francisco Anarchist Circle (later renamed the Libertarian Circle).

> Every week we had an educational meeting, each time devoted to a single topic. The Andalusian Agricultural Communes, the Shop Stewards' Movement in revolutionary Germany, communalist groups in the United States, the Kronstadt revolt, Nestor Makhno and his Anarchist society and army in the Russian Civil War, the I.W.W., Mutualist Anarchism in America, and individuals: Babeuf, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre and the Anarchist Woman's Movement. . . . The place was always crowded and when the topic for the evening was Sex and Anarchy you couldn't get in the doors. . . . There was no aspect of Anarchist history or theory that was not presented by a qualified person and then thrown open to spontaneous discussion. . . . Our objective was to refound the radical movement after its destruction by the Bolsheviks and to rethink all the basic principles, i.e., in other words to subject to searching criticism all the ideologists from Marx to Malatesta.[12]

The ultimate influence of the Libertarian Circle seems to have been as much cultural as political. Flourishing from 1946 into the early fifties, it was perhaps the first major focus of the postwar ferment that came to be called the San Francisco Renaissance. Some of its participants went on to found Pacifica radio station KPFA, several experimental theater groups and numerous little magazines; others included many of the poets and artists who were to be influential in the Bay Area over the next two decades.

Rexroth was in the thick of all this. In addition to his vital role in the Libertarian Circle, he hosted weekly discussions, seminars and readings in his own home, and in numerous articles, interviews and KPFA broadcasts he lambasted the cultural and political establishments and heralded the new dissident tendencies. At a time when most commentators were complacently declaring that the age of ex-

44. "The Hasidism of Martin Buber," BB 106/SE 77.

45. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Macmillan, 1965), p. 14.

46. Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* translated by Walter Kaufmann (Scribner's, 1970), p. 112. The other two quotations are from the earlier translation by Ronald Gregor Smith (Scribner's, 1958), pp. 18, 11.

47. "The Hasidism of Martin Buber," BB 130-131/SE 93-94.

48. *Ibid.,* BB 139-140/SE 99-100.

49. *Ibid.,* BB 112/SE 81.

50. *Ibid.,* BB 141-142/SE 101.

51. *Ibid.,* BB 110-111/SE 80.

52. SFE, 30 August 1964.

53. Raymond Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (Harper, 1941), p. 14.

54. "The World of the Shining Prince," ER 143.

55. "The Dragon and the Unicorn," CLP 233 [CP 471] (adapted from Eugene Debs).

20. "The Lights in the Sky Are Stars," CSP 238 [CP 535-536].

21. "The Signature of All Things," CSP 178-179/SP 44 [CP 276-277].

22. "The Phoenix and the Tortoise," CLP 90-91/SP 23-25 [CP 268-270].

23. "On Flower Wreath Hill," MS 45 [751].

24. *Ibid.,* MS 41 [CP 747].

25. AN 338. Rexroth's most extensive discussion of Buddhism is in his Introduction to *The Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* (Ross-Erikson, 1977), reprinted in SE 303-319.

26. Introduction to CLP.

27. AN 119.

28. "My Head Gets Tooken Apart," BB 71-72.

29. "The Holy Kabbalah," A 43.

30. "Gnosticism," A 141-142/SE 141-142.

31. "The Bollingen Series," WEE 203.

32. "The Holy Kabbalah," A 42-43.

33. SFE, 25 December 1960.

34. AN 335, 252.

35. "The Hasidism of Martin Buber," BB 109/SE 79.

36. *Ibid.,* BB 136-137/SE 97-98.

37. "Lamennais," ER 186-187.

38. Introduction to *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* (New Directions, 1944).

39. Introduction to Lawrence's *Selected Poems*(New Directions, 1947; Viking, 1959), pp. 11, 14, 23; reprinted in BB 189, 192, 203/SE 16, 18, 25. Compare the later, more critical essay "D.H. Lawrence: The Other Face of the Coin" (WEE 34-39).

40. "Inversely, as the Square of Their Distances Apart," CSP 148/SP 32 [CP 215].

41. "This Night Only" (to Satie's *Gymnopédie #1*), CSP 338 [CP 626].

42. "The Dragon and the Unicorn," CLP 268 [CP 509-510].

43. *Ibid.,* CLP 178 [CP 413].

periment and revolt was over, he began to see new signs of hope. In his pioneer article Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation (1957) he wrote: "The youngest generation is in a state of revolt so absolute that its elders cannot even recognize it. . . . Critically invisible, modern revolt, like X-rays and radioactivity, is perceived only by its effects at more materialistic social levels, where it is called delinquency."[13]

Rexroth and the other San Francisco Renaissance poets are themselves sometimes loosely called Beats, but as he emphatically reiterated in numerous articles, neither he nor most of the others had much in common with the media-created beatnik stereotypes. His critiques of Jack Kerouac's sentimentality, self-indulgence and general mindlessness were particularly caustic. (In retaliation, most of the current spate of memoirs, biographies and histories of the "Beat Era" dismiss Rexroth with a few snide remarks or spiteful rumors; while academia generally continues to treat him as a nonperson contemptuously pigeonholed as "the father of the Beats.")

The emergence of the Civil Rights movement was more to his taste. In a 1960 article he praises the spontaneity and direct personal action of the first protesters, and warns them against attempts by bureaucratic "organizers" to take over and institutionalize them:

> The brutal reactionary tendencies in American life were being challenged, not on a political basis, Left versus Right, but because of their patent dishonesty and moral violence. . . . The programs are used up . . . . power and program are not the question: what matters is the immediate realization of humane content, here, there, everywhere, in every fact and relationship of society. . . . This means personal moral action. I suppose, if you wish to call it that, it means a

> spiritual revolution. . . . The Montgomery bus boycott . . . demonstrated something that had always sounded like sheer sentimentality. It is better, braver, far more effective and far more pleasurable to act with love than with hate. When you have won, you have gained an unimpeachable victory. . . . Furthermore, each moral victory converts or neutralizes another block of the opponents' forces.[14]

This spontaneous direct action was indeed a good beginning, to clear the air of decades of compromises and confusions. (The "Left versus Right" schema, for example, has long been a virtually meaningless pretense of opposition between virtually indistinguishable frauds.) But Rexroth's wholesale rejection of "programs" is obviously too simplistic. In the aftermath of the destruction of the old revolutionary movement this sort of attitude was understandable. People were rightly suspicious of mindless subservience to doctrinaire programs and organizations; it was necessary to reassess perspectives from scratch and remain open to diverse possibilities. During this earlier period Rexroth's strategy of fostering dialogue and creative community without worrying too much about a consistent theory did indeed prove very fruitful — no one else played such a vital role in laying the foundations for the San Francisco Renaissance of the fifties, which in turn was one of the pivotal points of departure for the more widespread contestation of the sixties. But that new contestation posed new tactical and theoretical questions which Rexroth, persisting in his previous empirical eclecticism, failed to address in any very coherent way.

In 1960 he accepted an offer to do a weekly column for the San Francisco *Examiner* (a Hearst paper). He seems to have had a policy of accepting virtually any congenial assignment as long as he was given complete independence — publishers had to accept a piece exactly as he wrote it or not at all. He said that newspapers and popular magazines offered him more freedom than the sectarian

1. Quoted in R.H. Blyth's *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (Hokuseido, 1942), pp. 79-80.

2. "The Chinese Classic Novel in Translation: The Art of Magnanimity," BB 215. [In case you're interested, what are generally considered the five greatest Chinese novels are now each available in both abridged and complete translations: *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (a.k.a. *The Story of the Stone*), a wonderful novel of manners with Taoist undertones; *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*The Water Margin* or *All Men Are Brothers*), a larger-than-life series of picaresque adventures; *Monkey* (*The Journey to the West*), a satirical Buddhist fantasy; *Three Kingdoms* (*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), a historical novel full of military strategy and political intrigue; and the erotic *Chin P'ing Mei* (*The Golden Lotus* or *The Plum in the Golden Vase*).]

3. *Ibid.,* BB 216

4. SFE, 10 July 1960.

5. "Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End,*" MCR 139-140/ER 127.

6. "Dostoievsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,*" CR 184.

7. "The Dragon and the Unicorn," CLP 185-186/SP 64 [CR 421]. See CR and MCR/ER for essays on Walton, White and Woolman.

8. "Julius Caesar, *The War in Gaul,*" CR 67.

9. "The Chinese Classic Novel in Translation," BB 216-217.

10. "The Hasidism of Martin Buber," BB 139/SE 99.

11. "Unacknowledged Legislators and *Art pour Art,*" BB 18.

12. SFE, 20 November 1960.

13. Rexroth's four plays are collected in *Beyond the Mountains* (New Directions, 1951).

14. Introduction to *The Signature of All Things* (New Directions, 1950).

15. "The Dragon and the Unicorn," CLP 157 [CP 390].

16. AN 338.

17. SFE, 13 September 1965.

18. "Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching,*" MCR 7/ER 10.

19. "Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler,*" CR 143-144.

Notes to Chapter 2

political journals and academic quarterlies: "They are interested in lively, engaging copy, and within reason, the more controversy the better."[15] This may be true as far as it goes, but what if what one has to say does not seem "within reason"? Even with a carte-blanche policy there are always subtle pressures to self-censorship. There is always the implied threat that one's contract could be discontinued (as, in fact, Rexroth's ultimately was after he wrote a controversial article on the American police in 1967).

But granting that he did accept this dubious position, he didn't do a bad job with it. The style of his columns is slightly adjusted to the more popular audience, but he is virtually as outspoken as in his other writings and his range of topics is if anything even broader. Reviewing a book about the San Francisco Bay, he says: "You can know all about what Henry James really meant, or the art of the fugue, but if you are not at home in the world under your feet and before your eyes, you are actually uncivilized."[16] In this sense his columns probably helped to civilize thousands of local readers. They certainly provide a wealth of material on the Bay Area scene of the time, including many topics not treated in such detail elsewhere in his writings, from the live arts to local politics, architecture and city planning.

Whatever his topic, he is always trying to foster the qualities of a vital, diversified community. In general he encourages local participation, experimentation and autonomy, though he sometimes urges centralized coordination in areas where consistent planning is needed. Of a free theater performance in the park he says: "Let's hope this is an entering wedge, and that eventually we will have all sorts of musical and dramatic activity in the parks. I can think of few better ways to raise the muscle tone of a flabby community. Sooner or later out of the spectators will come participants."[17] It is amusing to see how cogently he addresses different groups in their own terms — challenging those who claim to be Christians to emulate Christ and go to the poor, the outcast, the hopeless (to help them, not to convert them), or telling Chinatown merchants

they would make even more money if they turned Grant Avenue into a pedestrian mall, revived the Chinese opera and offered more authentic Asian goods, instead of going for the fast tourist buck.

There is, of course, a certain irony in some of his proposals. Within their limits they may be more desirable — and even in some cases more "practical" — than prevalent policies, but he knows that ultimately they are not enough. Some of them would face too much resistance from entrenched political and economic interests; others are "zero-sum" (an improvement in one area would be at the expense of another). "The brutal fact is that the real problems — ecological, economic, social, moral, ethical, religious, sexual, intersexual — cannot be solved within the context of this society or any society at present known."[18]

Most of these columns, however, are simply personal reactions to day-to-day issues, with only vague implications of a larger social critique. After being fired from the *Examiner* Rexroth shifted to a more explicitly political series of monthly columns for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* (1967-1972) and *San Francisco* magazine (1967-1975). In these increasingly pessimistic articles he blasts the corruption and collusion of politicians, governments, businesses and mass media, and bewails the mindless destruction of every vestige of human and ecological community. Most of his denunciations are only too justified; but they don't add up to a coherent analysis that goes below the surface to elucidate radical possibilities. As usual with merely reactive muckraking, the result is mostly oppressive, encouraging a retreat to the "personal" as the only terrain still partially free from the global madness.

Rexroth had perceptively discerned the first signs of a new revolt at a time when most commentators were blind to such a possibility; but he saw this revolt in largely cultural or spiritual terms. When more overtly confrontational struggles arose he tended to dismiss them as mere symptoms of social collapse and clung to his previous strategy of subtle moral and artistic subversion. This can

20. "Some Thoughts on Jazz as Music, as Revolt, as Mystique," BB 25-26. See also "What's Wrong with the Clubs" (A 75-81/SE 191-196).

21. SFE, 6 March 1960.

22. "Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations,*" CR 80.

23. "The Authentic Joy of Philip Whalen," WEE 211.

24. "The Younger Generation and Its Letters," *New Republic,* 15 February 1954.

25. "The Lost Vision of Isaac Bashevis Singer," WEE 192.

26. "Tacitus, *Histories,*" CR 76.

27. "Franz Kafka, *The Trial,*" MCR 141/WEE 21-22.

28. "Poets, Old and New," A 235.

29. "Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe,*" MCR 57/ER 60.

30. "Modern Chinese Literature," *Chicago Review* xvii:1 (1964), p. 169. [The original says "the *millions* of the emperor," but that is probably a typo for "minions."]

31. "The Social Lie": interview in Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* (Messner, 1959), pp. 295-296.

32. Introduction to Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), pp. v-vi; reprinted in MCR 124-125/WEE 160-161.

33. "Greek Tragedy in Translation," WEE 143.

34. BB viii.

35. "The Reality of Henry Miller," BB 156-157. Compare the later, more critical essay "Henry Miller: The Iconoclast as Everyman's Friend" (WEE 188-191).

36. The unreferenced quotations in these last few paragraphs of this chapter are from the respective essays in CR and MCR/ER, except for that on Thucydides, which is from the essay on Euripides's *Hippolytus* (MCR 11/ER 15).

37. "Greek Tragedy in Translation," WEE 143-144.

1. Rexroth often used this question (referring to his three main poetic themes) as an icebreaker when he was giving a reading of his poetry. The response quoted here was his favorite. [Many of the Rexroth poems mentioned or quoted here are now online at this website.]

2. AN 169.

3. AN 366.

4. ''Poetry and Society," *The Coast,* Spring 1937, p. 35. On cubist poetry see the introduction to Rexroth's translations of Pierre Reverdy's *Selected Poems* (New Directions, 1969), reprinted in SE 252258.

5. ''Smokey the Bear Bodhisattva," WEE 212.

6. ''The Signature of All Things," CSP 177/SP 42-43 [CP 275].

7. ''Floating," CSP 144/SP 29-30 [CP 210].

8. ''Thou Shalt Not Kill," CSP 268-269/SP 95-96 [CP 566-567].

9. ''Observations in a Cornish Teashop," CSP 331 [CP 619].

10. ''Andrée Rexroth," CSP 154/SP 34 [CP 220].

11. ''Homer in Basic," CSP 317 [CP 603]. [If you haven't ever read Homer, or if it's been a while since you have, please treat yourself to the superb Robert Fitzgerald translations.]

12. "August 22, 1939," CSP 97-98/SP 5-6 [CP 159-161]. (The date is the anniversary of Sacco and Vanzetti's execution in 1927.)

13. Introduction to CLP.

14. AN 152.

15. SFE, 17 July 1960. Rexroth's views on modern American poetry are summed up in his book *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Herder & Herder, 1971). [See also his essay The New American Poetry.]

16. "Jazz Poetry," SE 71.

17. "William Blake" in "Poets, Old and New," A 208. (*L'Action Française* was a fascist journal greatly admired by Eliot.)

18. "Mark Twain," A 97.

19. "Would You Hit a Woman with a Child, or Who Was that Lady I Seen You with Last Night?" BB 88-89.

be seen even in the one such struggle for which he does show a certain enthusiasm, the May 1968 revolt in France.

> Probably the most significant thing about the explosion in France is the revelation of the moral bankruptcy of the establishment. Neither the General nor the leaders of the Communist Party had the faintest idea of what it was all about. De Gaulle had no explanation except the sublimely comic one that it was all due to the Communists. The Communists, with just enough insight to be really scared, indiscriminately denounced the revolt — both of the rank and file leaders of the striking workers and of all the youth — with savage, unbridled abuse. . . . Whatever the temporary settlement in France, this rejection of the immense, deadly system of false values which has ruled the age of commerce and industry will not stop.[19]

This is true enough as far as it goes; the problem is that he does not go any farther. It is typical that he recognizes the May revolt as a rejection of a system of false values but scarcely examines it as an attempt to supersede a system of social organization. He never analyzes its origins, its goals, its innovative tactics or its conflicting tendencies — all matters of greater significance than the "revelation" of a moral bankruptcy that had long been obvious.

Rexroth rightly criticized the New Left for its lack of coherent strategy, but he himself hardly seems to have had any strategy at all beyond vaguely encouraging "personal moral action" or occasional ad hoc collective action on specific issues. After the demise of the Libertarian Circle he and his San Francisco Renaissance friends never seem to have developed their social critique, or even to have presented in any very sustained or explicit way whatever libertarian perspective they still had. Since these people were in many

ways deservedly influential, their failure to tackle the new theoretical and strategical issues contributed to the political naïveté of the sixties counterculture. In the absence of a coherent libertarian perspective, the old ideologies naturally returned to fill the void. Militant fractions of the New Left soon degenerated into the most dreary or delirious rehashes of old leftism; to which most of the rest reacted in disgust and turned in more reformist or apolitical directions.

The debacle of New Left politics in the late sixties in turn reinforced Rexroth's emphasis on the more cultural aspects of the movement. *The Alternative Society* (1970) reflects this slant. Although it contains articles on a variety of social topics, nearly half the book is about recent developments in underground poetry and song; the alternative society turns out to be the youth counterculture, or at least its most profound tendencies: the "subculture of secession." "It is a mistake to talk about protest songs, protest poetry. Protest assumes a possibility for correction. It occurs from within a culture. As the long tale of horror has gone by, protest has changed to alienation, alienation to total secession."[20] This is not so much a geographical secession (though it may include the formation of separate communities) as a fundamental reorientation of life values, a reorientation that has persisted, though less visibly, while superficial hippie fashions have come and gone.

> As they strive for a new community, honest morality, sane goals in life, and their passing fads and follies drop away, the youth who are seceding from our crazy, lethal social order are converging with those predecessors — Mennonites, Brethren, Amish, Hutterites, Quakers — who withdrew from the madness and horror of the Wars of Religion and the collapse of the society of the Middle Ages.[21]

In *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* (1974) Rexroth examines these and other previous alternative

Notes to Chapter 1

WEE — *With Eye and Ear* (Herder & Herder, 1970)

societies, from the early Christians through the heretical sects and millenarian movements of the Middle Ages to the secular utopian communities of the last two centuries.

Until we arrive at the latter, almost all of them are religious. In this regard Rexroth's book is a rich exposition of the social dialectic of religions, which have of course usually functioned to reinforce the ruling order, but which when pushed to their most radical implications have sometimes tended to undermine it. Even such apparently tame tendencies as lay monasticism may represent a potential threat: "Organized monasticism was a method of quarantining the Christian life. This is why the Church has always insisted that monasticism be celibate. . . . Lay monasticism, a community of families holding all things in common, living a life modeled on that of the apostles, unavoidably becomes a counterculture."[22] This threat becomes more obvious in the connection of heretical groups like the Brethren of the Free Spirit with millenarian revolts, and in the emergence of religiously inspired communistic groups like the Diggers in the English Revolution.

Nevertheless all of these alternative communities, even the later, more consciously radical and secular ones, have had an ambiguous relation to the dominant society. To a certain extent they may have provided refuges from it and exemplified different values and possibilities; but by coexisting with it they inevitably entangled themselves in compromises and confusions, and usually soon fell apart from their own contradictions. Rexroth's book is a very interesting account of the successes, failures, foibles and follies of these groups; but his analysis is too narrowly empirical. By treating the alternative communities mainly in terms of their internal organizational problems and individual survival (he regards the Hutterites, for example, as the most "successful" since they are the only ones who have maintained a fully communalist life for hundreds of years) he avoids facing their limited relevance to present-day contestation. Charismatic leaders, cohesive religious beliefs and hard work may, as he concludes, have been vital

factors for small utopian groups struggling to survive within a world of scarcity and hostility, but they hardly have anything to do with the project of a global postscarcity society.

Whether or not such a society is likely, he knows that we have reached a point where it is both possible and necessary:

> It is either utopia or catastrophe. . . . The symptoms of the collapse of the civilization are all about us, and they are far more pronounced than they were in the last years of the Roman Empire. Yet not all of these symptoms are necessarily pathological. The contemporary world is being pulled apart by two contrary tendencies — one toward social death, one toward the birth of a new society.[23]

But when he attempts to analyze the nature of this conflict he sometimes lapses into confusions and non sequiturs:

> It is in the freer areas of the social interpersonal relations of individuals, away from factory or governmental bureaucracy, that the revolutionary developments are most apparent. Effective attack on the State and the economic system requires power, and the State, which is simply the police force of the economic system, has, so far, all the effective power. Demonstrations or Molotov cocktails are equally powerless before the hydrogen bomb. This is why the important changes are taking place in what the youth revolt calls "life style."[24]

His treatment of "power" here is rather muddled. It is true that it is generally futile to fight the state on its own terms, but this does not mean that the only alternative is to limit oneself to changes in lifestyle and interpersonal relations. Where was all the state's power in France in May 1968? or in Portugal in 1974? or in Poland in 1980? or in East Europe in 1989? And of what relevance then was

Abbreviations

A — *Assays* (New Directions, 1961)

AN — *An Autobiographical Novel* (Doubleday, 1966) [The expanded edition (New Directions, 1991) retains the same pagination.]

AS — *The Alternative Society: Essays from the Other World* (Herder & Herder, 1970)

BB — *Bird in the Bush: Obvious Essays* (New Directions, 1959)

C — *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* (Seabury, 1974)

CLP — *Collected Longer Poems* (New Directions, 1968)

[**CP** — *Complete Poems*, edited by Sam Hamill and Bradford Morrow (Copper Canyon, 2003)]

CR — *Classics Revisited,* with Afterword by Bradford Morrow (New Directions, 1986)

CSP — *Collected Shorter Poems* (New Directions, 1966)

ER — *The Elastic Retort: Essays in Literature and Ideas* (Seabury, 1973)

MCR — *More Classics Revisited,* edited by Bradford Morrow (New Directions, 1989)

MS — *The Morning Star* (New Directions, 1979) [Later incorporated in *Flower Wreath Hill: Later Poems* (New Directions, 1991).]

SE — *World Outside the Window: Selected Essays,* edited by Bradford Morrow (New Directions, 1987)

SFE — *San Francisco Examiner* columns

SFM — *San Francisco Magazine* columns

SP — *Selected Poems,* edited by Bradford Morrow (New Directions, 1984)

We believed we
Would see with our own eyes the new
World where man was no longer
Wolf to man, but men and women
Were all brothers and lovers
Together. We will not see it.
We will not see it, none of us.
It is farther off than we thought.
. . . It does not matter.
We were comrades together.
Life was good for us. It is
Good to be brave — nothing is
Better. Food tastes better. Wine
Is more brilliant. Girls are more
Beautiful. The sky is bluer . . . .
If the good days never come,
We will not know. We will not care.
Our lives were the best. We were the
Happiest men alive in our day.[36]

Farewell, wonderful old mentor!

*

NOTES

[*Information added since the original 1990 edition is in square brackets.*]

the hydrogen bomb? In all these cases the system has survived not so much by physical repression as by cooption, by divide-and-rule tactics, by manipulating oppositional movements into reformist compromises.

> All over the world we are witnessing an instinctive revolt against dehumanization. Marxism proposed to overcome the alienation of man from his work, from his fellows, and from himself by changing the economic system. The economic system has been changed, but human self-alienation has only increased. Whether it is called socialism or capitalism, in terms of humane satisfactions and life-meaning it is the same East and West. So today the present revolt is not primarily concerned with changing political or economic structures but is a head-on attack on human self-alienation as such.[25]

The economic system may have been modified in various ways, but it has never anywhere been radically superseded as envisaged by Marx. (As Rexroth notes elsewhere, "Marxism" has about as little to do with Marx as Christianity has with Christ.) The debacle of "Communist" state-capitalism and the long-evident inadequacy of reformist socialism have demonstrated the obsolescence of statist leftism, but not of the original antistate-anticapitalist project of Marx and the anarchists. Modern revolt is rightly contesting every form of alienation instead of limiting itself to the narrowly political and economic struggles of the old left, but it can hardly hope to successfully attack alienation "as such" without sooner or later eliminating its political and economic foundations.

Rexroth sees his alternative society as a "new society within the shell of the old," but he never envisions just how it might break the shell and actually supersede the old society. He seems only to have a vague hope that a "saving remnant" of people quietly

practicing authentic community in the interstices of the doomed system might somehow keep the flame alive. Even if this offers little chance of averting thermonuclear or ecological apocalypse, he feels that it's the most satisfying way to live while you're waiting for it.

> If the alternative society becomes a society of ecological Bodhisattvas we will have reached the final confrontation — mutual aid and respect for life, full awareness of one's place in the community of creatures — these are the foundations for an alternative society. . . . They're not likely to win; the time is gone, but at least they can establish a Kingdom in the face of Apocalypse, a garrisoned society of the morally responsible which will face extinction with clean consciences and lives as happily lived as possible.[26]

Rexroth was speaking out on the threats to the ecology decades before most people had ever heard of the word, and it becomes more obvious every day that he was only too right about their seriousness. A viable global ecological balance is a delicate matter — once it is upset beyond a certain degree it becomes impossible to reverse the trend. There are now numerous well-known ecological abuses which if not promptly corrected could soon pass the point of no return. Even those that are stopped now may continue to have delayed effects for years. And of course most are still scarcely curbed at all, and are unlikely to be so as long as the system exists in which powerful interests can derive short-term profits from them.

> It is my opinion that the situation is hopeless, that the human race has produced an ecological tipover point and is rushing toward extinction, a species death that will be complete within a century. This is quite without

Basically he still accepts the traditional roles of art, he just wants it to fulfill those roles better and more widely, to be more authentic and relevant. He stresses the need for art to be vital communication, but this communication remains a special activity done only by certain people within certain forms and circumstances.

Even those avant-garde tendencies that have sought to overcome the spectacle aspect of art by encouraging audience participation (in Happenings, for example) do so within limitations of space and time and content that turn such participation into a farce. As the situationists concluded, the true fulfillment of art ultimately implies going beyond the boundaries of art, bringing creativity and adventure into the critique and liberation of every aspect of life; and first of all into challenging the submissive conditioning that prevents people from creating their own adventures. This does not mean that all literary and artistic works are totally irrelevant or reactionary; but it is doubtful if even the best of them are as intrinsically subversive as Rexroth seems to hope.

But if Rexroth's strategy of subtle cultural subversion is in some respects dubious, he is certainly right to encourage the fullest possible creativity and community here and now, to insist that "humane satisfactions and life-meaning" must not be postponed to some utopian future. The means may not be identical with the goal, but they must at least be consistent with it. The values that Rexroth stood for are vital to any genuine social liberation precisely because they are meaningful and satisfying for their own sake. As he put it in one of his most moving poems, written in 1952 for the funeral of an old friend:

any consideration of the hydrogen bomb . . . . But assuming there is a possibility of changing the society's "course in the darkness deathward set," it can only be done by infection, infiltration, diffusion and imperceptibly, microscopically, throughout the social organism, like the invisible pellets of a disease called Health.[27]

This brings us back to poetry and song, which Rexroth sees as among the most effective means of such "infection."

Underground song, he says, goes back at least as far as the medieval Goliardic lyrics of wine, women and satire (popularized in Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* and more recently recorded in the original versions). In France he traces its development from the sexual mysticism of the troubadours and the bohemian underworld of François Villon through the nineteenth-century *poètes maudits* and *cafés-chantants* to Georges Brassens and other post-World War II singers, who are "responsible for the greatest renaissance of song in modern times" and for "the replacing of the acquisitive appetite with the lyric sensibility." Brassens, he says, "speaks for the hard-core unassimilables with complete self-awareness. He knew that he and behind him his ever-growing following could not and never would be assimilated, and he knew why, and he said so in every song, whatever that song was about. With him the counter-culture comes of age."[28]

In America Rexroth traces a parallel evolution from the traditional ballads, folksongs and blues to the countercultural singers of the sixties. He distinguishes authentic folksongs — the "natural expression of an organic community"[29] — from pseudofolk protest songs, most of which he considers laughably corny, if not worse: expressions of the Social Lie. Some of his own poems, of course, contain explicit radical statements, but he always rejected the notion that the arts should be subordinated to "progressive" demands. He felt that lyrics that communicate genuine personal vision are ultimately more subversive than explicit propaganda. Poetry, he

chance to change history, he can think of nothing more to do than go on singing. There was more poetry in the act of taking over the Odéon than in whatever songs may have been sung there. In a situation like May 1968, where millions of people have been shaken out of their usual sleepwalking existence and are getting a taste of real life, the point is no longer to "present" visions of alternative human relations, but to fulfill them.

The whole organization of modern society works against this, not only the obvious political and economic constraints, but the subtler, all-pervading cultural pacification that turns people into addicts of passive consumption. Our lives are dominated by a constant barrage of spectacles — news, ads, stars, vicarious adventures, and even images of revolt. The situationists have shown that this is not merely a superficial feature of modern life, but reflects a qualitatively new stage of capitalist alienation. "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*).[34]

In this new context the role of the arts becomes more ambiguous — whatever their creative or seemingly radical aspects, they too tend to become part of the show, to reinforce the passivity of the spectator:

> The relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. . . . The spectacle-spectator relation is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order. The ambiguity of all "revolutionary art" lies in the fact that the revolutionary aspect of any particular spectacle is always contradicted and offset by the reactionary element present in all spectacles. [Debord and Canjuers][35]

Rexroth does not really confront this new development, which to a great extent weakens his case for the subversiveness of art.

says, "produces a deeper and wider and more intense response to life. The presumption is not that we will be better men — that's up to us — but that deeply familiar with poetry, we will respond to life, its problems, and its people, its things, objects, everything, in a much more universal way, and that we will use much more of ourselves."[30] His further presumption is that this deepened response to life, by running counter to alienation and conditioning, tends to undermine the established order:

> The counterculture as a culture, as a way of life — you can't catch up with it, it's in the bloodstream of society. You can't pin it down. Its effect is continuously corrosive. . . . Joni Mitchell's stuff . . . involves and presents a pattern of human relationships which is unassimilable by the society . . . . the kind of love it sings of can't exist in this society. The song gets out like a bit of radioactive cobalt. It just foments subversion around itself as long as it is available.[31]

If only it were so easy! It is hard to determine the ultimate effects of a work of art, but it seems doubtful to me if any lyrics, whether by Brassens or Mitchell or anyone else, are all that unassimilable. At most they have probably played a modest role in preserving a spark of human spirit amid the dehumanizing pressures around us. Rexroth's remark on William Blake's poems points to this salutary role while at the same time revealing its limits: "This is the art of providing the heart with images of its alienation. If the individual or society can project the dilemmas which reason cannot cope with, they can be controlled if not mastered. This was Blake's function. He saw the oncoming Business Civilization and prepared a refuge, a symbolic fortress or haven."[32]

Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish between the counterculture "as a way of life" and as simply a new style in the arts. Insofar as the sixties counterculture consisted of audacious experiments in

different modes of life and consciousness, it was indeed very "corrosive." But it is misleading to present its artistic expressions as its central factor. A few poems and songs may have had a significant influence, but for the most part they were merely diluted and belated reflections of the adventures that were really going on.

Rexroth's thesis seemed to be confirmed more in the "Communist" countries. He could point out how a mere visit of Allen Ginsberg to Prague or Joan Baez to East Berlin threw the bureaucrats into a nervous panic. But this was because virtually any sort of nonconformity threatened the ideological monopoly on which the Stalinist bureaucracies' power depended. In the more flexible Western systems a work of art can be extreme indeed and still be assimilated as part of the show — its very extremism may serve to support the system's pretension of offering total freedom of expression (as long as it is not realized in action, but remains a spectacle).

But here is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Rexroth's thesis:

> On the whole my own taste runs to poet singers who get to the root of the matter, who speak for fundamental changes in the sensibility in human relationships and therefore in language. Dylan at his best, Donovan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins when she sings her own things — there are countless people like this all over the world, more perhaps in France than elsewhere. Much of the entertainment that went on night and day in the Theatre Odéon during the 1968 May revolt had nothing overtly to do with the, after all passing, revolt in the streets, the evils of the regime, or the betrayals of the political Left. People sang songs that attacked the evil at its source by presenting an alternative kind of human being.[33]

Whatever subversive effect poetry and song may sometimes have, Rexroth's argument falls rather flat if, when a rare opportunity arises where everything is in question and people have a brief