

Modernism and Poetic Inspiration

Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics promotes and pursues topics in the burgeoning field of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetics. Critical and scholarly work on poetry and poetics of interest to the series includes social location in its relationships to subjectivity, to the construction of authorship, to oeuvres, and to careers; poetic reception and dissemination (groups, movements, formations, institutions); the intersection of poetry and theory; questions about language, poetic authority, and the goals of writing; claims in poetics, impacts of social life, and the dynamics of the poetic career as these are staged and debated by poets and inside poems. Topics that are bibliographic, pedagogic, that concern the social field of poetry, and reflect on the history of poetry studies are valued as well. This series focuses both on individual poets and texts and on larger movements, poetic institutions, and questions about poetic authority, social identifications, and aesthetics.

Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus By Carla Billitteri

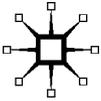
Modernism and Poetic Inspiration: The Shadow Mouth By Jed Rasula

Modernism and Poetic
Inspiration

The Shadow Mouth

Jed Rasula

palgrave
macmillan



MODERNISM AND POETIC INSPIRATION

Copyright © Jed Rasula, 2009.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-0-230-61094-1

All rights reserved.

First published in 2009 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-37658-2 ISBN 978-0-230-62219-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230622197

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rasula, Jed.

Modernism and poetic inspiration : the shadow mouth / Jed Rasula.

p. cm.—(Modern and contemporary poetry and poetics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Poetics. 2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.) 3. Poetry, Modern—
History and criticism. 4. Modernism (Literature) I. Title.

PN1042.R26 2009

808.1—dc22

2008051797

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: June 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Permissions</i>	xv
Introduction: Shadow Mouth	1
One The Murmur: Modernist Alchemies of the Word	13
Two Drawing a Blank: Episodes in the Poetics of Unworking	43
Three Poetry's Voice-Over: Techniques of Inspiration	97
Four Gendering the Muse	139
Five Medusa's Gaze: Deep Image, or Traveling in the Dark	159
Six "When the Mind Is Like a Hall": Places of a Possible Poetics	187
<i>Notes</i>	205
<i>Bibliography</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	241

Figures

1.1	Francis Picabia, <i>La Sainte Vierge</i>	19
1.2	Otto Nebel, <i>Unfeig</i>	36
1.3	Man Ray, <i>Space Writing (Self-Portrait)</i>	41
2.1	Microscopic Enlargement of Robert Browning's Voice	57
2.2	Alexander Melville Bell, "Sawing Wood"	59
2.3	Viking Eggeling, Sketch for <i>Diagonal Symphony</i>	66
4.1	Siegfried J. Schmidt, "original ist nur die kopie"	150
6.1	Friedrich Kiesler, <i>Horizontal Sky Scraper</i>	188
6.2	Fritz Kahn, "The Surface of One Man's Bloodcells"	196
6.3	Fritz Kahn, "The Work of the Heart"	198

Preface

The subject of this book is poetic inspiration, but this is not a trans-historical account. Most of the work I attend to is from the past 150 years. Yet much of the primary research involved concerns ancient Greek prototypes (Muse, Orpheus, Medusa). There is precedent: the sense of modernity in poetry I address here derives from Mallarmé, who characterized his aspirations in terms of an “orphyic explanation of the earth.” Orpheus—having suffered infernal descent in vain, subsequently torn apart and beheaded by the Maenads—has been astonishingly reanimated in the twentieth century (by Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* most famously, but also Cocteau’s films, and countless artworks and musical compositions).

Gramophones
Pianolas
Orgues
Tous répètent la musique d’Orphée

Le 11 septembre
Sur la Tour Eiffel
Il donne un concert T. S. F.
(*Lyrik I*, 218)

These lines from Yvan Goll’s “Le nouvel Orphée”—the title poem of his 1923 book—despite the uncanny premonitory date linking the inaugural radio broadcast in Paris with the attack on the World Trade Center eighty years later, attests to an Orphyic dissemination through modern mass media, which might seem as inimical to Rilke’s pastoral Orpheus as Baudelaire’s famous embrace of metropolitan vulgarity for its poetic nourishment. But the quotidian, the daily dross, he insisted, though half of “modernity” in art, was *only* half; so a host of mythological figures roam Baudelaire’s Paris like

the oldest homeless people on earth. If most of the poems cited in the following pages are modern, their authors felt (“in their bones” T.S. Eliot says) a mythopoetic silt underfoot.

Any book that appears to capriciously dart about from antiquity to modernity will seem peculiar, especially a work of scholarship. But as with a previous book, *This Compost*, this one tilts the application toward poetics. That’s to say, the writing itself is not an instrumental expedience; it vibrates to the sound waves of its subjects. Nearly every page portends a three dog night. I abide by Laura Riding’s supposition: “To go to poetry is the most ambitious act of the mind” (*Poems* 410), though there’s no denying the pretentiousness of speaking about “poetry” as such, and the abject lark of that pretence extends to all the other subjects thronging at the gateway here: muse, inspiration, voice-over, not to mention *murmur* and *blank* and all the country cousins given passkeys with such terminological abandon. Guilty on all counts, I offer this study as a plea-bargain with fellow travelers, those who know themselves in Riding’s sense as “equal companions in poetry.” The full context behind Riding’s salutary insistence on companionship between reader and writer is worth quoting, and heeding:

In poem-writing and poem-reading the stirring up of the poetic faculties has been a greater preoccupation than their proper use; the excitement of feeling oneself in a poetic mood has come to be regarded as adequate fulfillment both for the reader and the poet. Hence the frequent vulgarism “What is this poem *about*?”—when the reader feels that there is an element in a poem beyond that designed to evoke in him the flattering sensation of understanding more than he knows. . . . The trouble is that as poets have transferred the compulsion of poetry to forces outside themselves, so readers have been encouraged to transfer their compulsion to the poet: the poet in turn serves as muse to them, inspires the reasons of poetry in them. And the result is that readers become mere instruments on whom the poet plays his fine tunes. . . . instead of being equal companions in poetry. (408, 411)

Riding’s “companions in poetry” resonates with Robert Creeley’s dedication to what he called “the company” of fellow poets, artists, and readers *held in trust*; and these configurations in turn are picked up by Robin Blaser in his homage poems to “Great Companions,” Robert Duncan and Dante Alighieri.

The germination of material for this book goes back to the early 1990s when I gave talks at various conferences and institutions sparked by a question one panel organizer had posed: “What do we talk about when we talk

about poetry?” I welcomed the provocation, as it made me realize that “we” (in the public domain, in thrall to anthologies with titles like *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*—twisting the thematic screw of Wallace Stevens into the moral *agon* of nationalism) invariably presume that voice to be speaking about “us.” I wrote an exercise in literary sociology on that subject, *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, pondering the fractured, discontinuous, uneasy situation of poetry appropriated for some ostensibly universal but invariably parochial cause—poetry taken under the wing of a charitable institution, beneficently taken for granted, and neutered in the process. My term “poetry’s voice-over” made its debut in the model of the wax museum (cf. *Wax* 36–51), where it referred strictly to a *special effects* studio, a.k.a. the English Department of the New Criticism and the consequent intersections of reputation and expectation it engineered.

In *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration* I follow a completely different way of thinking and imagining voice-over, more honorary than onerous, but not without its perils and traumas. Literary history requires document, proof, but a work of poetics (stimulated all the while by every kind of evidence that comes to hand) really sails by the seat of its pants, takes nothing for granted. Where poetics is concerned, there is no risk assessment, nor any assurance of gain or predictable outcome. It’s more a matter of getting your head around something. The political term for this prospect is *anarchism*, and as this book elaborates, *an-archê* encompasses that which is ungrounded, without foundation, as well as what is *baseless* in a telling vernacular expression. It will seem paradoxical to cite a precedent for this unsecured vulgar locality, but that’s a role Mallarmé plays here, the poet of *Un coup de dés* with its typographic theatre of unmoored destinies. “For him,” Jacques Rancière observes, “every poem is a layout that abstracts a basic scheme from the spectacles of nature or of the accessories of life, thereby transforming them into essential forms. It is no longer spectacles that are seen or stories that are told, but world-events, world-schemes” (*Future* 94). To this disarmingly expansive prospect, I would balance the scales—and welcome the reader aboard—with Marianne Moore’s salient menu from “Picking and Choosing”:

only the most rudimentary sort of behavior is necessary
to put us on the scent; “a right good
salvo of barks,” a few “strong wrinkles” puckering the
skin between the ears, are all we ask.

(*Poems* 138)

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my gratitude goes to Rachel Blau DuPlessis for her longtime support, and most of all for the serendipitous invitation that conjured a book out of what had been a halo of expectancy hovering over some file folders. Earlier invitations by Dee Morris to contribute to *Sound States* and Charles Bernstein to contribute to *Close Listening* proved to be crucial premonitory nudges. The resources of the Helen S. Lanier endowment of the University of Georgia have done much to facilitate my work. Finally, Gabriel Lovatt's ability to fit the square pegs into the round holes (and vice versa) where permissions are concerned, has paved the way: I offer my thanks in partial compensation for a thankless task. Books like this don't happen without exemplary company.

Permissions

“The Black Plague” by David Antin from *Selected Poems 1963–1973*, Sun and Moon Press, Los Angeles, 1991. Reprinted by permission of David Antin.

Excerpt from “The Explanation” from *Houseboat Days* by John Ashbery. Copyright © 1981, 1984 by John Ashbery. Reprinted under fair use and with acknowledgment to Georges Borchardt, Inc.

Excerpt from “More Pleasant Adventures” from *A Wave* by John Ashbery. Copyright © 1975, 1977 by John Ashbery. Reprinted under fair use and with acknowledgment to Georges Borchardt, Inc.

Herbert Behrens-Hangelar, “Obibi” from *Het Oversight* Nr. 21, April 1924. Reprinted by permission of Margot Schubring.

Walter Benjamin, excerpt from *The Arcades Project*. Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *The Arcades Project* by Walter Benjamin, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, p. 462, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Originally published as *Das Pasagen-Werk*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Copyright © 1982 by Suhrkamp Verlag.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, excerpts from pages 233–234, 235–236, 289 from *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphrey House, Copyright © 1959 Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

Frederick Kiesler, *Horizontal Skyscraper* (1925). Copyright © 2008 Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna. Reproduced with the permission of the Austrian Frederick and Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation.

Otto Nebel, "Unfeig" reproduced from *Unfeig: Eine Neun-Runen-Fuge zur Unzeit gegeben*, ed. R. Radrizzani, Zurich: G. Blumer, 1960. Copyright © Otto Nebel-Stiftung, Bern. Reproduced with the permission of the Otto Nebel-Stiftung.

Michael Palmer, excerpt from "Q." By Michael Palmer from *The Promises of Glass*, copyright © 1999 by Michael Palmer. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Francis Picabia, "La Sainte Vierge." Copyright © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro." By Ezra Pound, from *Personae*, copyright © 1926 by Ezra Pound. Reprinted under fair use and with acknowledgment to New Directions Publishing Corp.

Man Ray, *Space Writing (Self-Portrait)*, 1935. Copyright © 2008 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / ADAGP, Paris.

Jed Rasula, "Poetry's Voice-Over." From *Sound States: Innovative Poetics And Acoustical Technologies* by Adalaide Morris. Copyright © 1998 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

Jed Rasula, "Understanding the Sound of Not Understanding." From *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, edited by Charles Bernstein. Copyright © 1998 Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

Jerome Rothenberg, excerpt from "The Ikon." By Jerome Rothenberg, from *Khurbn and Other Poems*, copyright © 1989 by Jerome Rothenberg. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Prof. Dr. Siegfried J. Schmidt, "original ist nur die kopie," 1993. Reproduced by permission of Prof. Dr. Siegfried J. Schmidt.

Kurt Schwitters, "Cigarren [elementar]." From *Kurt Schwitters, Das literarische Werk* © DuMont Buchverlag, Köln 1973. Reproduced by permission of the publisher Dumont Buchverlag.

Paul Virilio, excerpt from *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman, New York: Semiotext(e), 1991. Copyright © Semiotext(e). Reprinted by permission of the publisher Semiotext(e).