



# Jerome Rothenberg's Gematrias: The Hybrid Poems of Irreversibility

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**Jerome Rothenberg's *Gematrias*: the hybrid poems of irreversibility**

In *Gematrias Complete*, published in 2009, Jerome Rothenberg presented as a coherent whole poems composed over more than fifteen years, and published in installments since 1994. All of the poems expand from a method initially devised to compose the poems of *14 Stations*, a series based on the 14 names of 14 Nazi death camps, and their transcriptions into Yiddish. All of them are based on a complex compositional strategy that starts from the Hebraic transcription or translation of a word, often a name nor a noun, that is then processed as what we can call a seed word. The use of the Hebrew alphabet for transcription, and of Yiddish, rather than Hebrew, as the target language opens the door to a mystical world of Kabbalah whereby alternative modes of textual interpretation can be developed using the numerical value of Hebrew letters and the total value of words as additions of their letters' value. Words of identical value can then be hunted through the text of Torah, which works as a vocabulary or word repository. These words can be used to compose poems built on the links thus created, so that words are related to one another that would otherwise have remained unrelated. The numerical logics creates a web of signification that is counter-intuitive, divorced from the free association of lexical fields or poetic inspiration. In the specific case of the Nazi death camps, selecting the words of equal value to the name of the camp allows to build a vocabulary of "related" words of equal value in the Hebrew of the Biblical text, which once translated into English make up poems that speak to the original name but do not directly express individual affect or the subject's perception of the disaster of Holocaust.

It is this presentation's argument that the process of linguistic hybridization imprints on the poems the seal of estrangement, defamiliarization, and alienation in language as well as in the apocalyptic landscape of post-Holocaust poetics. It will attempt to show that when moving on from the names of death camps to the names of fellow-artists and poets, or to common nouns, the poet expands the purview of his initial intuition from a recognizable

historical disaster to the conditions of ordinary living: the complex modes of expression, and linguistic manipulations convey the difficult day-to-day survival of a consciousness. The potentially infinite poetic series unfolds texts that constantly remind their reader of the loss of the source text, and metonymically of the loss of original experience, through the hybridizing practices of iterated derivation and interpretation. Often analyzed through the prism of procedural poetry, these poems relate to the famous statement by Adorno about post-Holocaust poetry, but they also fall within the resistance patterns that hybridization stands for in the context postcolonial theory. In the same year as Rothenberg's first publication of gematria poems, 1994, Edward Said, for instance, defines it as the "new encyclopedic form" of modernism whose necessity derives from the disruption of ideological universals (Said 1994, 189). However the investment, according to him, does not imply the development of alternative orthodoxies, but rather "a particular sort of nomadic, migratory, and anti-narrative energy" (Said 1994, 279): "this movement resists the already charted and controlled narrative lanes, and skirts the systems of theory, doctrine, and orthodoxy" (Said 2002, 281).

As an import from Hebrew, and a practice of reading and interpreting texts in non-linear, paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic fashion, gematria upsets conventional modes of approaching texts, as well as provides hypotheses for post-deconstructive reconstructions. According to Jerome Rothenberg it is a "poetry of numbers"<sup>1</sup> based on the numerical value of words, and the relations that can be traced between words of equal numerical value as they appear in the text of Jewish Torah. The networks of signification thus outlined can be deemed subliminal, not so much in the sense of being perceived unconsciously but, quite on the contrary, in the sense of being imperceptible but through intense deliberate investigation and calculation.

While numerical gematria and coded temura come easily in a language like Hebrew which is written without vowels, the possibility of similar workings in English shouldn't be discounted. Gematria-generated poems can also be composed by translation from Hebrew [...]. The fact of translation may, in fact, add to the apparent "distance &

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. « The Poetry of Numbers » *Pre-Faces* 156.

power” of the combinations, a direct relationship that twentieth-century poets like Reverdy saw as the basis of the poetic image. (« Gematria » *Pre-Faces* 159)

For myself the numbers have been a presence beneath speech, but I have known them also, being Jewish, in the letters of the alphabet I work with. My father drew them with his finger on the kitchen table. And I have lain awake like him & counted numbers in sequences that play on mind & body until the rhythm of numbers, letters, shapes, & forms is inescapable—as still another source of naming. (« The Poetry of Numbers » *Pre-Faces* 157)

More than any other strategy maybe, gematria combines the mechanical techniques of depersonalization, that cancel personal choice and inspiration, and the highly idiosyncratic formal decisions, that generate tense poems reflecting a kind of verbal haunting. If tied to the idea that the Torah provides for a vocabulary to restore the un-narrativized, and possibly un-narrativizable complexity of human experience, the process of gematria-generated poems aims at producing infinite alternative discourses from a finite set of words, thus remetaphorizing both the potentialities and the limitations of expression in language.

On a level, Rothenberg’s gematrias are memorial poems, that send the reader back to a tradition, intrinsically linked to a collective Jewish textual world, to the patriarchal word, and to his personal initiation to the poetic. On another level, the poems function as models for the complexity of memory processes: they stand as monuments to a disappeared object, subject, or event that however return to inhabit the very texture of expression in its each and every word. The tension is thus figuratively inscribed in language itself between the autonomy of the single word, divorced as signifier from its signified, and its relational intensity, as objectively linked to an unexpected, and largely unsuspected lexical compound. This lexical compound may be seen as strongly disrupting the contiguous modes of Jakobsonian paradigms through the shift in the very rules of paradigmatic construction. Meaningfulness emerges through the numerical relation between words, weaving stronger, more factual links than the culturally-marked modes of association. Once disqualified, to a certain extent, as stable and universal, discourse does not indeed redefine itself as random-generated, and arbitrarily reconstructed, but rather as possibly inscribed deep into the very letter of the word. The recomposition may be construed, as Rothenberg claims it, as an

alternative way of “naming,” but this naming evidences, even as it is happening, the constraints that condemn it to imperfection and incompleteness. The duty to remember is somehow literalized as a duty to recombine whereby the provisionality of the combinations is foregrounded.

In the elaboration of several series of gematria-generated poems, the mathematical and mystical ritual of composition also comes to redefine the very nature of the poetic, stressing the diffuse qualities of signification. A single word radiates and resonates into several possible relational constructs that provide interpretive variations and alternatives.

THE VOICE (1)

will answer

THE VOICE (2)

A voice.

(*Gematria* 43)

In the two “voice”-based gematrias, voice is simultaneously defined as part of a communication system, and as existing not as abstract generic concept but rather as a singular instance. Doubly the mathematical links between the words (or within the word itself as a matter of fact) posit definitory statements, that can be seen as complementary, or as divergent: the gematria based on the adverb “enough” produces a numerical substitute that is “too much,” thus creating a tension and an assimilation between measure and excess (Rothenberg, *Gematria Complete*, 15). Making use of the concordance found in Gutman G. Lock’s work, *The Spice of Torah—Gematria*, Jerome Rothenberg converts the word into a cypher, in the sense of both a number and a code. The poet simultaneously and conversely ciphers and deciphers the poem, so that poetic creation becomes an act of reception as much as of production of a message. If one wants to prolong the kabbalistic parallel, the words are turned into semiotic dibbuchs that are inhabited by other words that have the same numerical value and thus haunt them to achieve re-embodiment and circulation. Other words speak through these words, sharing their materiality and possessing them.

So it is significant that the first experimentation with gematria as a compositional mode should have happened with “14 Stations” (*Seedings* 99-116). The poems occur as part of another series of poetic attempts to provide some modicum of poetic witnessing for the missing witnesses so eloquently evoked by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

Agamben reflects with Primo Levi on the witness by proxy that is the defective witness of the Holocaust: beyond the horror, one must confront the paradox of witnesses whose reliability is compromised by the very fact that they remain as witnesses. The “value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks” (34) says Agamben. The total witness cannot rise from the dead to bear witness; the testimony of the defective witness is threatened because it is mediate. It is threatened but not cancelled however, since it falls into the category of speech acts. According to Agamben following Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the testimony is valid as a verbal event, an enunciation that can be studied as a positioning of the subject, beyond the linguistic modes of text analysis, by focusing on the “taking place” of discourse (145). Moving away from the affect perceptible in a previous book of Holocaust poems entitled *Khurbn*, in which the poet retraced the fates of the deported, and heard their voices echoing over the empty fields of contemporary Poland, the haunting is enacted through the mathematics of language, producing an effective linkage of the name of the “crime scene” (to pick up a term used by Jean-Michel Rabaté about modernity) to the words of common language. The mathematics of language generate the discourse for the impossible witnessing, by imprinting the horror in the words themselves, and as a consequence, in all words, so that poems change in their very nature as they lose their claim for transcendence and abstraction, and are for ever bogged in disaster. The process goes as far as to contaminate the sacred word repository that does not contain them, since the names of the death camps are not in Torah: they are out of bounds in that sense, but the text does circulate their numerical equivalents. The words of the prayer, to extrapolate, are literally reinvested by death itself which they indirectly state rather than compensate.

Differently, *Khurbn* had been the book of poems resulting of travels through Poland, and a visit to Auschwitz, with the Yiddish title standing as emblematic of the linguistic manifestation of the massacre of millions. “*Khurbn*,” total disaster, had set the tone of the poems, and the motives for the shaping of fragments; it had also become the term that seals the fatal history of the Jews that perished in the camps. The choice of this term, disaster, as pivotal might make it disseminate and proliferate, but it remains the individual poetic decision that anchors the transition from the particular to the general. With “14 Stations,” Jewish history is translated into a plurivocal, hybrid, depersonalized textual projection that

imprints the traumatic past onto all of language, all its uses and all its users. Once the unspeakable has happened it may remain enclosed and be lost in the memory of the deceased, but it also remains vividly imprinted onto every word of a shared language through a system of linguistic equivalence.

The distressing side effect of this procedure is that the names of the camps do stay out of reach of the analytic voices, as well as of the poetic voices, but still make themselves heard everywhere: the event, and the words for it, are erased and activated at the same time. It is erased as other voices take over, with different experiences and their respective, plural “transvaluations” (Meilicke 26). These “transvaluations” seal the irreversibility of the process that does not allow for a return from the derived words to the original *via* the Hebrew of Torah, since these seed words are absent from the vocabulary. One cannot return to Dachau and Buchenwald to witness.

THE THIRD STATION: BUCHENWALD

deliver me

from them

your cattle

rising

your assembly

lords of fat

deliver me

from color

(Rothenberg, *Seedings* 103)

Rothenberg’s poems emerge from within the context of a poetics constantly preoccupied with the silenced voices of alterity, and the poet’s paradoxical duty to “other” himself and act as a medium for these voices. In this respect, they can be seen as pertaining to an impossible ethical imperative. In a large part, this impossibility finds itself modelled in the irreversibility of the gematria process as it exemplifies a practical possibility for Derridean “*différance*.” As Gayatri Spivak explains, “this inevitability of the differentiation (setting off)

from, and deferment (pushing away) of the trace or track of all that is not what is being defined or posited, as *différance*. It was a “necessary but impossible” move (Spivak 1999, 424)

This irreducible work of the trace not only produces an unrestricted economy of same and other, rather than a relatively restricted dialectic of negation and sublation, in all philosophical oppositions. It also places our selfhood (ipseity) in a relationship of *différance* with what can only be “named” radical alterity (and thus necessarily effaced). (Spivak 1999, 424)

It outlines the paradox of poetic forms that undermine themselves as they unfold, since their performance both enacts and deconstructs them. Since one cannot retrace the process from the results back to their premises, one is confronted to instances of the “structureless structure [...] where an item of a pair is both available and unavailable in an experience of the impossible” (Spivak 1999, 430). Through the use of the gematria-related modes of composition, Jerome Rothenberg brings in historicized components, as well as an organization that might temporarily narrativize them, but he also generates the conditions of “an impossible passage,” whereby irretrievable loss and endless mourning radically disrupt the logics of causality: “historicity is not changed into genealogy” (Spivak 1999, 431), as the poetic subject deals with the open-ended processes of hybridization and othering, and counter-intuitive paradigmatic potentialities that characterize a reconfigured rapport to language.

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